

The Eucharist: Ecumenical Preaching

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“LIMITED INTER-COMMUNION probably will not be allowed by the hierarchy in the immediate near future” (*The American Ecclesiastical Review*, CLXIII. [Dec . 1970]. 389). Few, especially the author, expected these words to be qualified so quickly. The "Instruction Concerning Cases When Other Christians May Be Admitted to Eucharistic Communion in the Catholic Church, issued on June 1, 1972, by the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity is another cautious and noteworthy step by the Holy See in promoting Eucharistic hospitality with Protestants.

Several developments over the past years make urgent an updated preaching to Catholic congregations on the topic of sharing the Eucharist with Protestants. This article proposes to examine several ways in which Catholic priests may instruct their people on that urgency. We shall propose material on two levels: one, facts which priests may use directly in their preaching Secondly, and often interwoven with the first, will be the background of these facts, background often technical which will help the preacher see the meaning and depth of these recent developments.

Hopefully by preaching and instructing in the pulpit, in conferences and in the schools, we will help American Christians¹ see that this latest docu-

¹ We are limiting this article to the Protestant-Catholic relationship. However, it must be noted that the July 8th Instruction distinguishes quite clearly between "the admission to holy communion of separated Eastern Christians, and of others" (#5). Especially important is the Instruction's quote of Pope Paul: "between our Church and the venerable Orthodox Churches there exists already an almost total communion, though it is not yet perfect" (#5).

ment gives us a unique opportunity to re-vitalize our Sunday worship, and through worship, our whole lives.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

There are several factors which make the Instruction peculiarly applicable to the United States. The Instruction presupposes that in predominantly Catholic areas, "non-Catholic Christians are scattered in Catholic regions" (#6). Since the non-Catholic Christians often experience the spiritual need of the Eucharist, and are "deprived of the help of their own communion and unable to get in touch with it except at great trouble and expense" (#6), the local bishop may consider each case. However, in the United States, we are confronted with a variation of this situation. Priests are discovering that a growing number of Protestants are simply coming to the local Catholic parish *on those Sundays when their own church does not celebrate the Lord's Supper* and receiving communion. This situation poses serious pastoral problems, both of scandal to Catholics and of "sheep- stealing" accusations from Protestant ministers. Sometimes, the Protestant visitors have been disgusted by the sloppy treatment of the Service of the Word (Scripture and Sermon) and have never returned to the Catholic Church. It is supremely important that Catholic priests and people understand what has been developing in the American Protestant Churches. For into this development, the Instruction may be a most significant leaven.

In 1961, the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (the so-called "Northern Presbyterians") produced a "Directory for Worship" which replaced the Puritan Westminster Directory of 1644. The new Directory took full advantage of the scriptural, liturgical and ecumenical renewal. It sought a better balance of Word and Sacrament; and in subsequent worship services, the United Presbyterians suggested that not only the preaching service, but also the Eucharist, be celebrated every Sunday. Many Presbyterians were shocked at this supposedly Roman Catholic recommendation. When one examines the documents of the ensuing furor, one thing is quite evident. The reluctance of many Protestant congregations (Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist) to celebrate the Lord's Supper every Sunday is due in part to the belief that in the Roman Catholic Church such a practice has led to a neglect of Scripture, a minimizing of the sermon, and ritualism.

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Time and time again, the reports of Presbyterian congregations mentioned the experience of members who were scandalized by attendance at Roman Catholic or much less frequently, Episcopalian) Masses, when the liturgy of the Word was a sham¹

However, a growing number of Protestants, especially among the young, feel the need for the Supper every Sunday. The liturgical movement promoted by groups such as the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission seeps into the average Protestant parish especially through the youth organizations and the younger ministers. When the parish votes through its elders or trustees to celebrate the Supper at the most monthly, then these younger Protestants are faced with a dilemma: to "put up" with the truncated service (Scripture and homily without the Eucharist) three out of four Sundays or to go to the nearest church celebrating the entire service usually this is a Catholic parish.

Thus for the first time Catholic priests in many areas are facing the prospect of celebrating Mass not only for Catholics but for a small and growing number of Protestants who are there because they feel "a serious spiritual need" (#11) of the Eucharist. The question we must ask of our bishops is this: does the monthly (or quarterly) communion practice constitute "a prolonged period" (#4b) during which our fellow Christians are to have recourse to their own minister? The question we priests must ask of ourselves is this: does our celebration of the Mass really show "that the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy make up a single act of worship" (#2b), "the twofold table of sacred Scripture and the Eucharist" (Vatican II. *Priestly Ministry*, #18). The question we must instruct our people to answer for their Protestant neighbors is this: when can I, a Protestant in good faith, receive the Eucharist at your parish *by way of exception*?

²*The centralization of the United Presbyterians, especially as regards their records, permits such documentation; for the Methodists and Baptists, such documentation is not as easily available. From conversations with Methodists and Baptists, I am sure many are reluctant to celebrate the Supper every Sunday because of Roman carelessness towards the Word, even though these two Churches did not undergo the Puritan emphasis on the sermon which the Presbyterians underwent.*

³*See for example my earlier study, "Preaching Ecumenically on the Eucharist," The American Ecclesiastical Review CLXIII (December 1970).*

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LITURGY OF THE WORD

We have two "types" of Protestants increasingly present at Mass. The first are those somewhat hostile to the celebration of Mass every Sunday and on every occasion. This Protestant comes to Mass, to weddings, to funerals, not so much because of spiritual need as because of friendship and civility towards Catholics. But it is this Protestant who in his own parish votes against a weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper, because he has sometimes seen how the Roman Catholic priest neglects the Scripture and homily of the Mass. He blames minuscule sermons and a casual attitude towards the Scripture proclamation on the fact that for Roman Catholics the really important part of the Mass seems to be the consecration. He probably still remembers hearing Catholic friends say, "If I get to Mass by the Offertory, I've fulfilled my Sunday obligation."

Especially on the occasion of weddings and funerals the witness of Catholic priests and parishioners in their respect for the Word of God will be a powerful aid in correcting such false notions. And the more quickly Catholic congregations demonstrate their love for the Scripture readings of the Mass, the more quickly will the possibility of a weekly Eucharist grow in the Protestant Churches, as Protestant visitors see that the Mass really is a twofold table.

There are several very concrete ways of helping Catholic congregations "come alive" for the first part of the Mass. Alfred McBride, in his talk on the "Jesus Experience" to the National Catholic Educational Association annual meeting (Spring 1972), reminisced about the way the kerygmatic movement in the early 1960's prepared American Catholics for Vatican II.¹ Kerygmatic preaching tends to view the proclamation of Scripture and sermon as an objective event comparable to the Eucharist. Unfortunately, like many themes preparatory to or included in Vatican II's renewal this one has not yet struck deep roots on the parish level. Yet it is a perfectly "Catholic" theme; Pope Paul teaches in *Mysterium Fidei* that Christ "is present in the Church as she preaches, since the Gospel which is proclaimed is the Word of God, which is not preached except in the name of and by

⁴ Alfred McBride, "The Jesus Experience," available on tape from the NCEA. McBride discussed the place of kerygmatic renewal in the U.S.A.: "The Catechetical Movement: A Recent History," *Origins* II (Aug. 10, 1972, #9), 143-45.

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the authority of Christ" (#36). Or as the *Constitution on the Liturgy* says: Christ "is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the church" (#7). And the *Decree on Priestly Ministry* states: the *primary* duty of the priest is the proclamation of the Gospel of God to all (#4).

It could be concluded that some priests and many congregations have never learned or been instructed in this very Christian love of the first part of the Mass. As we look at the faith statements scattered so generously through the New Testament, how can we help ourselves and our people appreciate that these are not dry formulas of the past? For example, when Peter proclaims: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," kerygmatic preaching insists on the following. First, this statement was preserved by the early community, not because it was past, but because it *is present*. When the community gathered and the sixteenth chapter of *Matthew* was proclaimed, Peter's confession became alive and operative *in the assembly* because of the power of God's Word. And secondly, not only did the Scripture do something in the assembly; it did something *with* the assembly. The proclamation of Christ's Sonship was made so that the community could respond and affirm its own belief in its own circumstances.

What is almost frightening in the recently developed Catholic attitude is the feeling that if the Scriptures are not dramatically proclaimed, the sermon flawlessly preached, and the hymns warmly sung, the whole Mass is a failure. One does not go away feeling good, so nothing was accomplished. The real Catholic view is rather that even in poorly conducted services, "God speaks to his people and Christ is still proclaiming his Gospel" (*Constitution on the Liturgy*, #33).

If the congregation really is instructed that the three Scripture readings and homily are "living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword,"⁶

⁵ *Hebrews* 4, 12, quoted in #21 of Vatican II's *Revelation*. One could very well meditate and reflect on the texts in the new lectionary "For the Spread of the Gospel." Y. Congar gives a good and brief updating on kerygmatic preaching: "Sacramental Worship and Preaching," in *The Renewal of Preaching*, *Concilium* 33, 51-63. In the light of Vatican II and recent developments, the classical works on kerygmatic preaching could be profitably re-read: Domenico Grasso's *Proclaiming God's Message* (U. of Notre Dame, 1965); P. Hitz's *To Preach the Gospel* (Sheed and Ward, 1963); Josef Jungmann's *The Good News* (Sadlier, 1962), and Otto Semmelroth's more theological *The Preaching Word* (Herder, 1964).

one could endure the stumblings of an earnest but untalented lector; one could accept the stumblings of a priest who prepared but was still ill-at-ease in the new style—for then priest and people would be listening to the Spirit of Christ, and expecting *His* action, not their own. As Paul wrote: "When you heard and received from us the word of God, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but, as it truly is, the word of God, who works in you who have believed (*I Thessalonians 2,13*).

It is somewhat ironic that Episcopalians and Presbyterians have snapped up the new three year lectionary produced by Catholics. *The Worshipbook*, approved for voluntary use by American Presbyterians, candidly states: while Presbyterians "are not required to follow a lectionary," the members of the Joint Committee on Worship, "like many other Protestants, discovered that the new Roman Catholic selections, and the manner of their organization, were remarkably in harmony with the teachings of the Reformation."⁶

We seem unaware, or at least again we are not conveying the message to our people, that this lectionary, in principle, is a tremendous improvement over the former readings, when certain key Gospel passages, such as the social action passage of *Matthew 25*, "Amen I say to you as long as you did not do it for one of these least ones, you did not do it for me," were never heralded in the Sunday liturgy. And the use of this text on Monday in the First Week of Lent was hardly calculated to impress social awareness on the vast majority of Catholics, who found their main contact with Christ's teachings in the Sunday Scripture passages.

The lack of priestly awareness concerning the importance of the Scripture and homily seems part of the problem regarding the general failure of Bible Vigils and services in the parish. Perhaps the increasing number of Protestants who attend Mass and their criticism of us is the only way to be alerted to what God has given us and to what He does in the Service of the Word. However, Catholics should be aware that this upgrading of the first part of the Mass and the emphasis on what God does there is not "borrowed" from the Protestants. It is something we both have recovered from the early Church. (Many evangelical Protestants are still afraid of a

⁶ *The Worshipbook*, prepared by the Joint Committee on Worship for Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Presbyterian Church in the U.S. ("Southern"), and The United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 7.

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lectionary, yet in their churches the sermon often literally consumes the Scriptures and the minister is exposed to the danger of choosing his favorite short passage.)

Thus a deepening of kerygmatic preaching will help several groups. It will show often hostile Protestants that Catholics do value the Word of God. It will thereby make these Protestants more tolerant of the plea for a weekly Eucharist by their fellow Protestants who are convinced of the need for the Supper every Sunday. It will help the evangelical Protestants and all who have shown signs recently of converging with Roman Catholics.⁷ And, of course, renewed kerygmatic preaching will enliven the faith of Catholic congregations.

EUCHARISTIC LITURGY OF PROTESTANTS

Between the two World Wars, several leading American Protestant liturgists discovered that Catholics really believed something happens at Mass whether the Catholic "felt" good or not. While deploring the magical side-effects sometimes accompanying such a belief, they pronounced the belief wholesome and healthy for worship and rejected the Protestant tendency to worship only when the preacher was moving or the hymns inspiring.⁸

After World War II, this liberal Protestant attitude was strengthened by solid biblical worship research especially in the area of "anamnesis." Both Catholics and Protestants, at least in their theological statements, profess that the Eucharist is not only past event; "God's reconciliation of the world to himself in Jesus Christ, true man and true God, is demonstrated and conveyed in the offering and faithful reception of the bread and cup . . . in the Eucharist as a present event, God makes available here and now the fruits of his past actions."⁹

⁷ The growing convergence of American evangelicals and Roman Catholics was sketched in *America* (August 5, 1972), 63-66.

⁸ Willard T. Sperry, *Reality in Worship* (Macmillan, 1925), drawing from James Bissett Pratt's "Objective and Subjective Worship," chap. 14 of *Religious Consciousness* (Macmillan, 1921). Both Sperry and Pratt influenced the Princeton theologian Andrew Blackwood in his *Fine Art of Public Worship* (Cokesbury, 1939), and the U. of Chicago philosopher of religion Bernard Meland in his *Modern Man's Worship* (Harper, 1934).

⁹#9-10 of "The Eucharist in the Life of the Church: An Ecumenical Consensus,"

It used to be true that few American Protestants, numerically speaking, viewed the Lord's Supper as more than a commemoration, a harking back to Calvary. However, the U.P.I. interpretation of the present situation is certainly erroneous when it reported on the July 8th Instruction that Protestants, as contrasted to the Orthodox, must make an individual declaration of belief in the Eucharist conformable to that of the Church's "since in their churches communion is often a commemoration rather than a sacrament."¹⁰

For a growing number of Protestants who decide to come to the neighboring Catholic parish to share in the Eucharist, it is obvious that the Lord's Table is more than a commemoration. These Protestants view the Lord's Supper in much the same way as the famous Roman Catholic "Prayer over the Gifts" of the 16th (9th) Sunday of the Year puts it: "each offering of this memorial sacrifice carries on the work of our redemption."¹¹ (Hopefully, the newer collects will show that the Service of the Word also helps to apply and make personal for each of us the life and deeds of Christ.)

The tendency for Protestants to believe in the Eucharist as making present now, Christ's past action has shown no signs of abating in recent years. In fact, it is growing stronger than ever. Significantly, when five Protestant observers professed such a belief at Medellin, Columbia, in 1968, it was partly on the strength of this profession that the Latin American Episcopal Conference admitted them to the closing Eucharist.¹² When the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission's "Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine" made page one of the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* (December 31st, 1971), it should be noted that according to commentators this was the first time "evangelical" Anglicans took a significant part in a Eucharistic statement.¹³ And the evangelicals are popularly

AER (Feb., 1971) with analysis in June, 1971. The best short summary of the Catholic-Protestant worship convergence, especially on "anamnesis" is the eight page Faith and Order paper by Max Thurian, April, 1968 (FO/'68:II), "The Work of the Consilium with Regard to the Application of the Constitution on the Liturgy."

¹⁰ U.P.I. Press Release, July 8, 1972. The *New York Times*, however, chose Paul Hofman's story (p. 3) which refrained from any such allusion and commented on the "fairly wide discretionary powers" of the individual bishops.

¹¹ Quoted in the *Constitution on the Liturgy*, #2.

¹² *One in Christ* documents this: 5 (1969), 465-66.

¹³ See, for example, J. M. Tillard O.P., "Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue," *One in Christ* 8 (1972), 242-63.

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considered the Protestant tendency within the Anglican Church. Finally, the five year Joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic Study Commission recently published its report on "The Gospel and the Church." The members concluded that Lutheran and Roman Catholic Eucharistic theology is already close enough so that church authorities "on the basis of what is already shared in faith and sacrament and as a sign and anticipation of the promised and hoped-for-unity, make possible occasional acts of intercommunion."¹⁴ A study document, and not a legislative document, it does, interestingly enough, bear the signature from the Catholic side of the usually cautious and diplomatic Cardinal Willebrands, president of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

Thus one can conclude that the situation among American Protestants has already gone beyond that envisaged by the July 8th Instruction. Rather than make each individual profess a faith in the Eucharist in conformity with that of the Church (#4b), it is theoretically possible for groups to profess faith in already existing statements such as was done at Medellin.

DIFFICULTIES

Naivete must be avoided, however. Many Protestants are still unaware of the newer eucharistic statements. Others have borrowed uncritically from whatever appealed to their aesthetic sense. Sometimes the more "catholic" sacramental tendencies have not been integrated with the more Protestant "reformed" tendencies. For example, in some Protestant parishes when the Supper is observed, the sermon is omitted or drastically cut short, which violates the normalcy of Word and Supper every Sunday.

Catholic priests may also have to prepare themselves to help Protestants answer a very difficult question: should I remain in my Protestant parish, working for a balance of Word and Sacrament there? Or is the situation so hopeless that I must join the Roman Catholic Church? The answer the priest gives will probably depend on how deeply he believes the Spirit is causing the Christian Churches to move on a course of convergence, not parallelism or divergence.

A third difficulty is even more acute: individual bishops will probably

¹⁴ Reported in the Washington, D.C. *Evening Star and News*, Sept. 2, 1972, p. A-10. For the text, see *Worship* 46 (June-July, 1972, #6), 326-\$ 1.

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vary in their willingness to grant that many Protestants are in real spiritual need of the Eucharist, and that they profess a sacramental belief in conformity with that of the Catholic Church. Can we prepare our people to believe that the Church is both divine and human, the latter trait meaning that she moves at times with hesitation or varying urgency from diocese to diocese? It is a truism, but with so many people of differing temperaments in our congregations, it needs to be said: this latest Instruction is neither a solution to all our problems, nor can its imperfections seriously harm the Church.

One large East Coast archdiocese has already anticipated, in its periodical "Memo for Priests," the fact that "if a general pattern of cases would emerge, then the National Conference [of Bishops] would set general norms." This points out the need for priests to keep petitioning the chancery according to the pastoral situation, even if the petitions are at first denied. Only by re-applying after denials do the pastoral needs become plain. The same archdiocese anticipated petitions involving marriages and funerals; it viewed the Instruction as not touching these occasions.¹⁵ Yet when I have preached on the Instruction, the one question people ask always involves an imminent marriage with a non-Catholic Christian. Hopefully the "general pattern of cases" will lead our bishops to look positively on the need for eucharistic hospitality at marriages, funerals and similar events.

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS

Ecumenically, it may be well to point out that few believed Rome would relinquish its control of the Eucharist, especially to individual bishops as contrasted with national conferences. Our over-centralization has been quite evident in liturgical matters. Thus the fact of Roman de-centralization is always viewed with interest and even enthusiasm by Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants. Yet often Catholics are unaware that such changes are taking place and fail to point them out to our fellow Christians.

The Instruction also benefits us by vindicating the wisdom of the Second Vatican Council in its liturgical reform. The attraction the Mass now exerts, for many of our Protestant brethren is due in great part to the elimination of Latin, the introduction of new Offertory and Eucharistic Prayers, and

¹⁵ Archdiocese of Philadelphia, "Memo for Priests," #14 (August 4, 1972), 94-95.

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the simplification of genuflections and rubrics. As voices are still raised for the Tridentine Mass, it might be well to point out this probably unforeseen benefit of the liturgical changes begun at Vatican II: the Lord's Table, as Catholics celebrate it, is now more readily accessible to many Christians.

This does not deny, however, that the sense of mystery has been eroded, and needs to be re-emphasized. For a starter, Catholics—priests and congregation—might ask themselves if they always develop this sense of the numinous and of awe which should be part of the Mass. Casualness in church can be overdone; not a few Catholics complain that priests casually preside at the Mass today. Certainly there is a need for informality and simplicity (*Constitution on the Liturgy*, #34). But historians of religion, such as Mircea Eliade, constantly point out the need for man to rope off part of his life as "sacred." If worship is the heart and culmination of all our lives, then by dress, by gesture, and by special symbol, the Mass must be awesome and mysterious at the same time as it is evident, intelligible, and the inspiration for the six days of the "secular" week.

CONCRETE SUGGESTIONS

By way of summary, a few concrete questions for preaching on the July 8th Instruction may help priests to organize their own sermons. First, why are Protestants increasingly attending Roman Catholic Masses? Secondly, do our parishioners appreciate the first "leaf" of the twofold table of Sunday worship: the Service of the Word? Thirdly, how do we simply present to the "average" congregation the fact that a growing number of Protestants want the Supper every week, since they believe that it somehow "makes available" what Christ did two thousand years ago?

Woven into such sermons should be the warning against indifference: we are not compromising, but converging through the power of the Spirit. And of course, the fact that Pope Paul has approved such up-dating guarantees at least a listening on the part of older Catholics who were brought up, often at great sacrifice, to maintain a reluctance for sharing the Eucharist.

Especially if the priest conveys the conviction that he believes these changes correspond to the pressing needs of our times—the need each Christian has for the Eucharist—then congregations will "buy" them. But

if the priest gives the impression of uneasiness and suspicion, no amount of preaching will change his people's hearts. Hopefully the Instruction will not be relegated to the dustbin of changes imposed by *fiat*, and never explained. The greatest need of Catholics today is instruction in the "why" of changes and renewal. Such instruction could vastly improve the climate of the Church, display the bounty of the twofold table of Sunday worship, and promote a spring-time of Christian life. Certainly challenges to Christians have never been greater; the Instruction is one way Rome has provided for us to respond to the demands of our times.