Sunday Worship in the Absence of Discernment

The Challenge of Non-Eucharistic Sunday Services

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The following essay was chosen by our panel of judges as the award-winning theological reflection essay for 2004. The author, an M.A. candidate, calls for ongoing evaluation of the non-eucharistic Sunday services that are becoming more a part of the lives of so many communities in our country.

Since the Second Vatican Council and its reform of the liturgy, increasing numbers of Catholic parishes and communities have found themselves in a difficult situation. While a renewed understanding and participation in the celebration of Eucharist as the “source and summit” of our lives (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [CSL], no. 10) was called for, communities around the world find themselves not able to celebrate the Eucharist on a regular basis due to diminishing numbers of ordained presbyters. Local communities, dioceses, and, more recently, the Vatican itself, have become involved in devising ways to respond to this situation, known variously as Sunday Communion services, Sunday Celebrations Without Eucharist, Sunday Celebrations of the Word and Hours, or as the Congregation for Divine Worship’s Directory (1988) calls them, Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest. A more recent unofficial title, and the one which I opt to use because of its fittingly memorable acronym, is Sunday Worship in the Absence of a Priest or SWAP.

The 1988 Directory approved the use of three different forms of SWAP: Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, or a Liturgy of the Word, with the option of pre-

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sanctified communion distributed as part of each of these celebrations. The latter of the three rites, the Liturgy of the Word, is by far the one most frequently used. However, it is the option for distribution of Communion that has occasioned the most lively discussion among sacramental theologians. Many of them question SWAP’s increasingly broad use in communities that lack a presbyter. Others are concerned about the indiscriminate use of SWAP as a convenient substitute for Eucharist. Still others see SWAP as a bold new pastoral effort that may reshape views on Eucharist and ordination in the church. This ongoing pastoral challenge of SWAP is the focus of this study. All references to SWAP are made under the generally accepted assumption that the ritual is usually celebrated with a Communion service. I will first look at the concerns of those who question the use of SWAP in the light of the conciliar reforms. Then, I will present the views of those who acknowledge SWAP as less than ideal, but who nevertheless see it as a legitimate response to pastoral need and a fulcrum for new theological developments.

As the title of the paper suggests, I hope to demonstrate that celebrations of SWAP need to be framed by a discernment that accounts for a postconciliar eucharistic theology, Communion ecclesiology, and an ongoing catechesis of communities who find themselves in need of celebrating non-eucharistic Sunday services. To consider SWAP in this context implies a moral duty on the part of church leaders to re-evaluate the current discipline on mandatory presbyteral celibacy and the “inability” of the church to ordain married men and women.

**SWAP-ing the Eucharist?**

Those who question the value of SWAP claim that, over the years of its use, preconciliar eucharistic piety and the view of priesthood as a cultic office are perpetuated and reinforced. Gabe Huck notes the link between preconciliar eucharistic piety, a failure to catechize and ritualize the full breadth of the Vatican II reforms, and the ease with which SWAP has come to be accepted as a ready substitute for a full Eucharist:

> For hundreds of years, the assembly at Mass has been an audience, praying and praying, but not praying the Eucharist. The piety of those centuries had great strengths, but it was not a piety flowing from this central deed of the baptized, the praise and thanks of God at the table set with our bread and wine. So if SWAP comes and Eucharist goes, who will miss it? Few of us, bishops included, have had the regular experience of the Eucharistic Prayer at Sunday Mass as the full, conscious, and active deed of both presider and assembly (Huck, 1997, 23–24).
The preconciliar eucharistic piety of which Huck speaks along with its associated view of the cultic priesthood are also present in some assumptions of the 1988 Directory of Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest, which have influenced the way SWAP has been experienced and led to the reassertion of dichotomous thinking with respect to the eucharistic elements and liturgical celebration. From the earliest days of the church, the key dimension of Sunday worship has been the gathering of the baptized to celebrate Eucharist (*Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*, nos. 8–17). However, it also notes that, when the assembly gathers for SWAP, the community’s celebration is deficient since SWAP is not a celebration of the Eucharist. Although the key theological deficiency is the lack of celebration of the Eucharist, a great deal of space is devoted to discussing the absent priest, which leads one to believe it is the absence of the priest that really makes SWAP deficient. For example, the Directory hopes that the communities affected will “realize that their assembly on Sunday is not an assembly ‘without a priest,’ but an assembly ‘in the absence of a priest,’ or, better still, an assembly ‘in expectation of a priest’” (no. 27). Instructions about what a lay presider at such a service may say and wear or where he or she may sit are also detailed so that no one gets the “impression that the lay person is a sacred minister” (no. 39). The leader (deacon or lay person) is also instructed to mention where the absent priest is celebrating the Eucharist so that “the assembly [can] unite itself in spirit with that community” (no. 42).

While the lack of the full eucharistic celebration and a presbyter are both deficiencies in these celebrations, the focus on the lack of the priest reflects an understanding of ordained ministry rooted in preconciliar theological developments that place the priest outside the context of the gathered assembly. The Directory’s view likewise perpetuates an object-oriented understanding of the Eucharist. If one views the celebration of Eucharist as solely the reception of Communion, then it would make sense that no one would notice if “SWAP comes and eucharist goes,” as Huck put it. If individuals are not aware of the Eucharist as a sacramental action in which we participate in the self-offering of Christ, they will not see the celebration of SWAP as lacking “Eucharist” because distribution of Communion is still offered.

A second set of concerns raised by SWAP celebrated as a Communion service has to do with developments of post-conciliar theologies of the Word and the
Eucharist as well as the value of the ordained minister in the context of communion ecclesiology. These concerns have been articulated well in the works of William Marréée, Kathleen Hughes, Gerard Austin, and James Dallen.

One claim is that SWAP diminishes the ability of participants to see the Liturgy of the Word as a genuine encounter with God. Making reference to SWAP, Marréée notes:

The Catholic community still has some way to go before it is entirely comfortable with the faith insight that God is effectively speaking in the proclamation of the scriptures. Evidence of discomfort is displayed in the need to have the Liturgy of the Word followed by holy communion. . . . How important, then, the distribution of communion becomes can be read from the fact that the entire service is identified as a communion service. What does this say about the Liturgy of the Word that precedes the actual communion rite? (214, emphasis added).

This insight draws upon Vatican II’s understanding of the Liturgy of the Word as one of the modalities of Christ’s presence in the gathered assembly (CSL, no. 7). The council also saw this service as a legitimate way in and of itself for the community to celebrate on Sundays when no presbyter is available (no. 35, §4). However, the efforts of Pope Pius X in the early twentieth century to encourage frequent reception of Communion has created a type of mental buffer in Catholic consciousness: the mere reception of Communion is the fullness of the sacrament. This approach prevents Catholics from responding to the presence of Christ in the Liturgy of the Word. Marréée wonders if this is “yet another indication that what the community does around the Word is perceived as merely preparatory to the real thing,” that is, the reception of Communion (215).

From a different perspective, Austin wonders if celebrating the Word with a Communion service causes people to forget (or fail to realize) that the Word and the action of Eucharist are intimately related. In the eucharistic celebration, the Liturgy of the Word serves as the anamnesis (memorial) of the activity of God in history that prepares us for the sacramental celebration of the Eucharist (211).

Austin’s insight is linked to another concern that SWAP’s increasing use as a substitute for the full celebration of the Eucharist is hindering the efforts of the liturgical reform with respect to appreciation of the Eucharist as an obligatory action constitutive of the church’s identity. Marréée indicates that a Sunday communion service such as SWAP is a “treacherous undertaking”:

It obscures . . . what the community does not simply have the right to do, but must do on the Day of the Lord, namely celebrate the eucharist with which its very identity as Body of Christ is inherently bound up. It is the sacramental
celebration of the Lord’s death and resurrection from which the Church . . .
lives, and not the presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine [alone]
. . . [E]very attempt must be made to avoid giving the impression that the com-
munion service is a readily available substitute for the celebration of the euca-
rist (212–13).

Despite Marrévé’s warning, there are concrete indications from various quarters
that SWAP is rapidly becoming an acceptable substitute for regular celebrations
of Sunday Eucharist. There is further evidence that the distinction between the
two is often lost on a number of Catholics. Anecdotal comments of parishioners
from across the United States actually indicate a preference for “Sister’s Mass” or
the “Deacon’s Mass” over the usual eucharistic celebration. I have a hard time believing that
members of the assembly are so uneducated that they think SWAP is a “Mass.” My concern,
similar to that of the sacramental theologians quoted here, is that many think SWAP is “just
as good as a Mass.” But why has this preference developed? Huck believes these SWAP celeb-
trations may be more carefully planned and the presiders may be more capable preachers.
Therefore, SWAP services are often more mean-
ingful for the assembly than the less well-
prepared Eucharist with a presbyter (Huck,
1989, 38). In other words, a lack in the full, ac-
tive, and conscious participation in the Eucha-
rist occasioned by the inattentiveness of some
presbyters to their responsibilities of presiding
and preaching, claims Huck, may be a key cause
of this shift in preference.

Despite this confusion, increasing numbers of
communities using SWAP offer a thanksgiving
prayer following the general intercessions “in
which the faithful praise the glory and mercy of
God” (Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a
Priest, no. 45, §1). While some theologians support this innovation (particularly
F. J. Van Beeck as discussed below), Marrévé feels that a thanksgiving prayer
that recalls the acts of God for our salvation is, for all intents and purposes, a
Eucharistic Prayer without the words of consecration (217). This prayer further
blurs the distinction between SWAP and Eucharist and can “too easily lead to
the perception that a communion service can stand on its own” (Ibid.). Hughes
notes that the inclusion of the thanksgiving prayer at the point in the service

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where a Eucharistic Prayer would normally be spoken has led “many people who participate in a SWAP celebration [to] believe that it is a Eucharistic celebration or a close facsimile” (47).

This confusion is unfortunate because SWAP is not Eucharist. Because it lacks certain key elements of Eucharist, it remains deficient. One of those elements is the assembly’s participation in the sacrifice (self-offering) of Christ to God. Dallen notes that “[t]he assembly actualizes its participation in Christ’s sacrifice . . . by its celebration of the full eucharistic ritual” (94). This entails all actions associated with Christ’s at the Last Supper as recorded in the Scriptures and in the earliest of liturgical traditions: taking bread and cup, blessing God, breaking the bread, and sharing bread and cup (95). Thus, “[t]he reception of communion . . . is not enough to express the assembly’s role in offering the sacrifice,” even when that reception is accompanied by a “non-eucharistic” thanksgiving prayer. (Such a title for the prayer is an oxymoron since the word eucharistia is the Greek word for “thanksgiving.”)

Particularly in light of the perception that SWAP is a substitute Eucharist, the last concern to be considered here is the loss of the importance of the presbyter to the community’s Sunday gathering. The presbyter is someone from among the baptized who is officially recognized and appointed by the church to pastor a community, gather the assembly, and preside at Eucharist. This role is to be exercised from within the local community. As the number of presbyters declines, more and more communities are being empowered to celebrate SWAP. The increasing use of SWAP is not allowing the pastoral role of the presbyter to come to its fullest and best expression. Priests have become increasingly identified as sacramental ministers, circuit riders, and “supply” priests (Hughes, 53) as they “pass through” various communities without full-time presbyter-pastors. The notion that such priests can lead the assembly’s participation in Christ’s sacrifice can be tenuous when there is little connection with the assembly. This trend has also served to reinforce the cultic model of priesthood (among both presbyters and assembly) by defining the role of the presbyter as “confecting” the Eucharist. A clericalism may be present in the naming of these non-eucharistic Sunday services with respect to the absent priest. Hughes comments that the tendency to name these services based on the absence of a priest (or as Services Animated by Lay Presiders) defines worship “by who leads it rather than by who is led” (49). The latter should be the real focus.
On the other hand, the fact that a community does not have an officially recognized (i.e., ordained) leader does have a significant impact on the community. Dallen comments that a parish that does not have a presbyter available to it is not able to celebrate the Eucharist and is therefore not able to “realize itself fully as church.” Such a situation also “indicates the community’s lack of ecclesial reality in relation to the broader church” (108). At first glance, these claims might be construed as further examples of the clericalism of the Directory or preconciliar theologies of priesthood. In fact, though, Dallen is claiming something quite different. Whereas the Directory frames the discussion about SWAP in terms of the community’s lack of an ordained presbyter, Dallen frames the issue in terms of the denial of ordination to those individuals who are the de facto pastors of these communities (108–9, 122–23). This denial of ordination to the community’s leaders on the part of those in church leadership is what is preventing these communities from having access to the Eucharist and from expressing their identity as church. Dallen makes the point bluntly:

That the pastoral leaders of communities are not ordained is not unsettling because they lack the “power to confect” [the Eucharist]. . . . Rather, the denial of ordination logically operates as a refusal to recognize pastoral leaders as fully competent ministers; a refusal to recognize the communities that they lead as being capable of celebrating the eucharist; and, thereby, a refusal to recognize these communities as “church” in a full sense (122).

The “separation of pastoral and liturgical leadership” that results from this state of affairs is doubly problematic. First, “[i]t demoralizes the [lay] pastoral minister who is not considered ‘worthy’ of ordination . . . even when that minister consciously chooses not to seek ordination” (123). Second, as more presbyters find themselves needing to make themselves available for the sacramental needs of multiple communities, “they necessarily will be removed from the context of a pastoral relationship” with these communities (124). Not only is this demoralizing and a depersonalizing form of ministry for the presbyter, but Dallen also notes that it invites the return of the cultic model of priesthood (124). In turn, this can affect anger in a community, resulting in a devaluing of the legitimate role of the ordained presbyter (125).

Marréée also wonders if larger questions are ignored in the effort to promote SWAP to fill the void left by a lack of ordained presbyters. In particular, he makes the case that instead of fostering a deficient alternative to the Eucharist, communities should have the chance to experience directly the negative impact a lack of an ordained minister can have (218–19). This will help to raise questions within the community about why an ordained minister is lacking or why “certain juridical and socio-culturally conditioned restrictions on who can be ordained” continue to exist in a situation of such need (219).
In light of these considerations, it needs to be seriously considered whether SWAP is doing more harm than good in the context of the reforms of the liturgy expressed by Vatican II. The ease with which SWAP is used to fill the void left by a lack of access to the full celebration of Eucharist indicates that a piety emphasizing reception of Communion over eucharistic celebration is still a strong influence in Catholic spirituality. This preconciliar piety seems to be augmented by the approach to SWAP celebrations which the Directory encourages. Simultaneously, the theologies of Word, Eucharist, and Orders expressed by the council are each undermined in some way by the uncritical and uncatechized approach with which SWAP is implemented in more and more communities. But is there anything that may be said in defense of these celebrations? Are they contributing something positive to the church?

**SWAP: From Pastoral Need to Eucharist Without Walls?**

Theologians who offer support for SWAP do not do so in a way that suggests they are enamored of the ritual. In fact, the theologians presented here—Jean Leclercq, Ton van Eijk, F. J. van Beeck, and Richard Fragomeni—offer their support for the pastoral goal of SWAP which is to provide access to Communion to those communities without a full celebration of Eucharist. However, they all recognize that SWAP’s use as a quasi-permanent ritual in the life of the church is problematic. In this respect, they even agree with some of the critiques of SWAP noted above. Nevertheless, they also maintain that SWAP’s disadvantages do not necessarily endanger the liturgical reform, but instead they offer the possibility of new developments in the tradition with respect to understandings of the Eucharist and ordination.

The first claim is that the tradition of “eucharistic” celebrations without priests has warrant in the tradition because such celebrations were done throughout history when necessary. Leclercq notes that texts of liturgical services from medieval monastic communities of men and women have been discovered that point to non-eucharistic celebrations that included elements of the eucharistic liturgies of the era (161–66). However, these texts, while explicitly mentioning the eucharistic sacrifice, do not attempt to copy the eucharistic liturgy in their form. Leclercq notes:

> There is no prayer of a sacerdotal type. . . . Nor is there any Liturgy of the Word. . . . The aim here was to have something other than the Mass but still related to it. What we have here is incorporation of communion in the Body and Blood of the Lord into a celebration during the course of which the eucharistic mystery, such as it was conceived by the piety of the tenth and eleventh centuries, is evoked in all of its fullness (166–67).

It is clear that the contemporary development of Sunday Communion services, despite their deficiencies, and the 1988 Directory have exactly the same desire as
these medieval services: to develop a liturgical service related to the celebration of the Eucharist but distinct from it.

In addition to this liturgical tradition, it can also be argued that while not ideal, the reception of Communion has become a significant part of the lives of Catholics. Although such reception outside the context of the eucharistic celebration is incomplete, there is a legitimate pastoral concern raised when Catholics might be completely denied access to Communion because of the unavailability of a full Eucharist. This is a particular concern for those Catholics who, through no fault of their own, have not been adequately catechized about the liturgical reforms of Vatican II and contemporary eucharistic theology, and who still feel a spiritual need to receive Communion on Sunday. This is the position of Ton van Eijk who indicates that he modified his strong rejection of Sunday Communion services after experiencing this pastoral need firsthand (246).

In arguing from this context, van Eijk responds to some of the concerns about SWAP noted above. For example, he does not believe that holding a Communion service attached to a Liturgy of the Word undermines the value of the Word in the assembly. He argues that the desire seems to be to avoid separating “the presence of the Lord in the sacrament from His presence in the word” (238). He also notes that those who object to SWAP do not (and cannot) do so on doctrinal grounds, but on the grounds that such practices may undermine the liturgical theology of Vatican II. However, citing the 1988 Directory, he states that SWAP services are only to be held in emergency situations when it is not possible for the people to go to the celebration of the Eucharist in a nearby church (240). Further, in an effort to avoid confusion or equation of the eucharistic celebration and SWAP, the Directory also states that

a gathering or assembly of this kind [SWAP] can never be held on a Sunday in places where Mass has already been celebrated or is to be celebrated or was celebrated on the preceding Saturday evening. . . . Nor is it right to have more than one assembly of this kind on any given Sunday (no. 21).

Van Eijk thus argues that if these directives are implemented with proper catechesis and follow the outlined structure and are done only in emergency situations, people would avoid either substituting or equating SWAP with the celebration of the Eucharist. This would, in turn, prevent the undermining of post-conciliar teaching on the full eucharistic celebration (240–42).

At the same time, Franz Jozef van Beeck notes the significant gains that the liturgical reform has offered to all Catholics, even those who do not have access to a full Eucharist on Sundays:

What these Catholics have gained as a result of the Council is enormous. Even when no priest is present, they have holy communion available to them, and
they have it in the setting of a community celebration. The connection between community and Eucharist, even when there is no full eucharistic celebration, has been reestablished (426).

While not wishing to downplay the deficiencies of non-eucharistic Communion services, he notes that “[t]he heart of all Christian worship . . . is eucharistia, that is, praise and thanksgiving to God for the great things accomplished in Christ” (427–28). In this way, he seeks to argue in favor of one of the elements about which Marrévée and Hughes express concern: the thanksgiving prayer offered during SWAP. Van Beeck argues that such a prayer must be a central element of these services. To exclude it is to introduce “a needless curtailment of the integrity of Christian worship available to priestless Sunday congregations” (428). Nevertheless, he cautions that while these prayers should be “unmistakably eucharistic,” they should also be “unmistakably nonsacramental” (428–29). He thus seems to articulate a positive view of SWAP. It also provides the community with an opportunity to engage in thanksgiving (eucharistia) in a different, though deficient, manner.

This view is also reflected and expanded by Richard Fragomeni. He views the liturgy as the privileged place where we not only engage in sacramental action but also where we also receive the gift of God in Christ through the power of the Spirit (see Huck, 1997, 24; although Huck and Fragomeni have different views of SWAP, Huck’s presentation of Fragomeni’s position is helpful). This gift, Fragomeni claims, is still offered to us even when we assemble in what he calls a “dis-ordered way,” such as in SWAP (Huck, 1997, 24). It is dis-ordered because it lacks the full ecclesial reality of a full Eucharist presided over by an ordained presbyter. Yet, he also sees within SWAP the potential for “a significant evolution in the ever evolving understanding of what ordination means, of how the ordering of the church gets done, and of who can be given orders to preside at the parish Sunday eucharist” (24).

In addition, he views the current ritual used to appoint people in parishes without a presbyter to preside at these services as the initial steps church leaders are taking to addressing this situation of dis-order. Even though the SWAP service reflects this dis-order, Fragomeni sees ways that SWAP could be used to ritually draw attention to the problematic dimensions highlighted by Marrévée, Dallen, Austin, Hughes, Huck, and others. For example, he envisions a rite that would have the parish without a presbyter send bread and wine to a neighboring church that does have a priest. Then, the following Sunday, the first parish could receive back the consecrated bread and wine and use them for SWAP (24). Such a rite, he notes, “would capture the tension, the imperfection, and the pain of the present moment” and allow SWAP, originally designed to maintain the status quo with respect to ordination, to be transformed into a ritual that brings a new view of ordination to the forefront of Catholic consciousness (24).
Assessment and Conclusion

In reviewing the claims about SWAP presented here, the diversity of opinion is actually encouraging. It indicates that a great deal of discussion is occurring about SWAP's use and about the Eucharist itself, since it is the latter's lack that has resulted in the increasing use of SWAP. The dangers posed by SWAP becoming normative and eroding advances in liturgical theology are very real. SWAP is causing difficulties in this regard because of a continuing lack of awareness about the depth of the Vatican II reforms among large segments of the Catholic population, including some of its leaders. It can all too easily be interpreted as a ritual structure that emphasizes the individual's reception of Communion as the “source and summit” of Catholic life instead of the assembly's celebration of a full Sunday Eucharist.

Moreover, the very fact that SWAP was created as a way for a Catholic community to worship when a presbyter is not available is ironically contributing to a re-emergence of a preconciliar theology of cultic priesthood. The Directory issued to regulate these services is overly clerical in its presentation of the service. The reactions of communities to this clericalism could be the development of the view that the ordained presbyteral role is dispensable, particularly when SWAP is seen as an adequate substitute for the celebration of Eucharist. These developments have allowed church leaders to place themselves in the unenviable position of having crafted what is, by their own admission, a deficient Sunday service that has the potential to reinforce problematic theologies of the Eucharist, the Church, and Orders, while simultaneously hindering the development of the postconciliar reform and renewal. Given the increasing shortage of presbyters, SWAP is becoming more normative than temporary and viewed as sufficient unto itself rather than theologically and sacramentally lacking.

At the same time, those who have expressed less critical views about SWAP have noted the way it offers a legitimate pastoral response to the needs of people to experience Communion in some sacramental form, even if a deficient one. The tradition indicates that services such as SWAP have had a meaningful history and have served to provide individuals and communities with no access to the full Eucharist with a way to participate in the celebration indirectly. There is also a strong case to be made that, even in the midst of a reoriented eucharistic theology and communion ecclesiology, the reception of Communion is still very important in Catholic spirituality. As long as this is so, SWAP serves a legitimate pastoral need. If it is implemented properly, and those who experience it are properly catechized, many difficulties that SWAP may cause can be restricted or eliminated.

SWAP can also serve as a real avenue of positive theological and sacramental development. As congregations continue to express prayers of thanksgiving in SWAP, the concept of what eucharistia is can be expanded, particularly by drawing upon the council's view of the liturgy as the action of the assembled commu-
nity. This development may serve to counteract the clericalism inherent in the Directory. It may also allow the official recognition of the de facto leaders of these communities, resulting in new theological developments around a more inclusive discipline of ordination.

In reviewing these myriad possibilities, it is clear that both the problems and possibilities noted here have the potential to develop from the way SWAP continues to be implemented. It is equally clear that this implementation is dependent on two interrelated components: catechesis and discernment. For Catholics to have a proper understanding of SWAP, the Vatican II theologies of Eucharist, Church, and Orders must be accessed and made available. Catechesis will teach that SWAP is a deficient Sunday celebration because it is not Eucharist, and this needs to be known before a community finds itself in an emergency, without the time to properly catechize. It is also necessary to catechize on the positive emphases that can be drawn from SWAP. Communities will not automatically see SWAP as a way to give thanks as a worshipping assembly, nor will they necessarily be well-disposed to new developments in ministry that could conceivably flow from the lived experience of SWAP. Without catechesis grounded in a Vatican II view of liturgy and ecclesiology, any Sunday worship in which the assembly engages will be Sunday worship in the absence of discernment.

Discernment in the face of these challenges thus becomes crucial. Catechesis will enable Catholics to do what they have heretofore been unable to do, namely, to discern for themselves the value and ultimate fate of SWAP. Up to this point, SWAP has been something imposed on Catholic communities from without. No opportunities for discussion had been provided. Communities without presbyters were told either to go elsewhere for Eucharist or to embrace SWAP. This development demonstrates a form of paternalism. Communities are presently not even permitted to address the issue through a comparative process similar to the one undertaken here. The assumption seems to be that the pope, the Congregation for Divine Worship, or the bishop can make a better judgment about the value of SWAP than an informed local community. Perhaps a concern is that properly catechized communities may begin to discern, as many theologians already have, the deficiencies of SWAP. Such communities may then begin to ask why they are asked to “make do” with SWAP instead of

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having their deacon or lay leader ordained to celebrate the full Eucharist. These developments would, I believe, lead to a serious reappraisal of SWAP and the central issue that birthed it which is the discipline of a male celibate priesthood and a massive shortage of priests.

Discernment is thus the key to the future of SWAP, and, more importantly, to a fuller understanding of what the church celebrates in its Eucharist. However, the need for such discernment is not new. St. Paul chided members of the church in Corinth for not discerning the needs of others in the community before participating in the Lord's Supper. He claimed that those who partook of bread and cup without discerning the body, i.e., the needs of the poor, would eat and drink judgment against themselves (1 Cor 11:29). If church leaders continue to avoid addressing the root causes of the lack of access to the full celebration of Eucharist, then the developments that flow from the increasing use of SWAP—either negative or positive—will likely point to their own neglect in responding to the needs of Christ's body. Thus, in the end, it is perhaps not the worshipping communities without full eucharistic celebrations that find themselves in a difficult situation, but rather those whose responsibility it is to care for them.

References


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