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Eucharist as Worship: Journey to Identity

The renewal in the Eucharist of the covenant
between the Lord and his people
draws the faithful into the compelling love of Christ
and sets them on fire.

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 10

Paragraph 10 of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy is a doctrinal summation of the place and power of the celebration of the Eucharist as an act of public worship. Intimately flowing from initiation, the celebration of the Eucharist is the radically necessary element in the process of personal identity formation for the sake of participation in the mission of Christ. And yet, years of experience as counselor and spiritual director have led me to realize that there is a vast gap between this noble truth and the conceptual knowledge and affective experience of many Catholic Christians.

The following reflection is a modest attempt to bridge that distance through an exploration of worship and its indispensable role in identity formation. To that end, the first part of this work points out significant aspects of our social order and culture, which highlight the need for worship in finding our true selves and fulfilling our vocations in life. The second part explores the claim that the doing of Eucharist is worship. In other words, the celebration of the Eucharist is “the worship without fear all the days of our lives,” as Zachariah announced at the name-giving of John; the worship in “Spirit and truth” that Jesus foretold to the unnamed Samaritan woman met at Jacob’s well and that is underscored by the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. The third part describes the indispensable place of public worship in—and the contribution it makes to—human growth in general and to “Christian identity formation” in particular. The final part of this essay offers a pastoral vignette that yields some insight into

the power of former catechetical images to inhibit authentic Catholic worship and concludes with some suggestions for the healing of the Christian imagination.

THE SOCIAL ORDER AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

At a time in history when interest in spirituality is soaring, 90 percent of the population profess belief in God, and two-thirds of the population claim membership in a religious organization, investigation of the place of and contribution of public worship to the spiritual life of the individual and the community could seem unnecessary and uninteresting. Certainly, the above data suggest that religious sensibilities are doing well. But on closer examination, several significant phenomena recommend concerned attention.

Proliferation of Small Groups and Communities

The proliferation of small groups for the purposes of prayer, spirituality, support, or self-help is modifying, and in turn impacting, understandings of community and God (Wuthnow 1994). That is, the attitudes, expectations, and perceptions necessary to enter into corporate worship as Roman Catholic Christians are, in many cases, seriously undermined by the escape to “small groups” alone. For example, some new understandings of community include a stress on affective knowing, emotional intimacy, and intentional membership.

These sensibilities are manifest in a widespread conviction that “norms” for membership are un-Christian, resulting in the thought that anyone may be included, without regard for their personal convictions, likes, or dislikes. Similarly, most (but not all) groups tend to over-emphasize the approachability, availability, and unconditional acceptance of God without, at the same time, acknowledging the authority, power, and transcendence of God. To be sure, the community that the Roman Catholic Church is—and desires to more fully become—does presume some affective knowing and might, on occasion, be marked by emotional intimacy. Intimacy is clearly necessary for worship. But, as will be shown later, intimacy is an ability of the person that may or may not be accompanied by warm feelings about God or other members of the assembly.

In short, the overstresses on boundary-less membership and a notion of God as solely accepting render genuine community and authentic worship impossible, because the otherness of both persons and God has been tamed. The dynamic of taming otherness is a preferred strategy of persons who are unable or unwilling to be genuinely intimate (Erikson 1959). Further comment follows in greater detail below.

Church Attendance

A second problematic phenomenon is that, on average, only 20 percent of a parish gathers on a weekly or regular basis. Concretely this means that while people are searching for the spiritual and consider themselves believers and somewhat religious, at least for Catholics, they are cut off from a worshiping community that shapes and directs the spiritual journey. It might be remarked that since 80 percent are not regularly present for worship, energies might be better directed to exploring the reasons for their absence and strategies for outreach. The focus on worship, however, does not obviate concern for these and the untold number of people who have never heard the gospel and are, thus, deprived of coming to know Jesus Christ and his revelation of Abba. Indeed, public worship is inextricably related to the task of ongoing evangelization, which is the nature of the ministry to and with these groups.

Individualism

I join my voice with the chorus of other voices who recognize some of the many negative contributions of individualism. From my perspective as a clinical psychologist, I am particularly concerned about its impact on growth into Christian adulthood. As Christians we are called to become responsible selves (Niebuhr 1963) before God within the community. But with a Kantian understanding of and emphasis on a kind of crass autonomy, we have made and continue to make ourselves into gods. This "self-deification" forgets the basic experiential insight (Macmurray 1961) that we always exist in relationship, and thus need conversation or dialogue partners who call us out of isolation and shape who we are. These partners are our fellow human beings and the God who loves us into and sustains us in existence.

Self-absorption and the Culture

Narcissism, self-absorption, and/or egocentrism are further frequent indictments of modern Western culture. Unfortunately, in general conversation, these three very different psychological states are conflated into a single category to which a psychodynamic explanation is attributed. That is, narcissistic/self-absorbed/egocentric people are understood to have been so traumatized or wounded that they are preoccupied with their own pain and, therefore, cannot look outward toward others. To be sure, remediation of this condition requires some type of therapeutic intervention. However, when distinctions are made among the three terms, it is evident that only narcissism is the psychological condition requiring therapeutic intervention. Egocen-

trism is an age-related phenomenon; that is, infants are born egocentric and only with the physical and emotional maturation that accompanies the growth into adolescence are we capable of moving beyond an egocentric stance toward others and life. Self-absorption, on the other hand, is a description of the condition of narcissism and the stage of egocentrism.

Each culture provides interpretive frameworks for experience. That is, the culture presents messages and images to the psyche that open up and give direction to the inner experience. Largely absent from our cultural scene are images that suggest self-transcendence and/or self-forgetfulness. Thus, our Western culture, rather than assisting people to transcend the egocentrism of childhood and adolescence, presents messages through its media, advertising images, and therapeutic worldview that reward and reinforce self-absorption and self-indulgence. Christian worship, by its very nature in the telling and the doing of the Christian story, offers images that not only confirm, but also critically challenge our experiences of ourselves. This particular contribution of worship to self-understanding will be picked up later in the section on identity.

Consumerism and Advertising

Like individualism, consumerism characterizes our social order. In effect, consumerism can dull us to the point that it is difficult to hear the message of the gospel; it has the potential to recast the American psyche and self-understanding. The advertising that fuels the engine of consumerism preys upon and exploits the fears, anxieties, dreams, and hopes of people. Exploitation occurs precisely when basic, existential anxieties, desires, and aspirations are aroused, and then, a specific car, bank, diet program, etc., is suggested to assuage the anxiety or quench the longing. Thus, the constantly repeated message is that who you are and what you desire are resolvable in the tangible object, the here-and-now, and immediately. The removal of all traces of existential fears or hopes and transcendent yearnings from the public discourse spawns one-dimensional existence and persons, obscures the need for worship, and is responsible for the significant increase in depressive disorders that characterize our times.

EUCHARIST: PRAYER OF THE WORSHIP OF GOD

Worship and the Average Catholic

Conversations with Catholics from all walks of life and levels of education revealed the fact that even though the Church sees the

celebration of the Eucharist as the central act of worship, and indeed of the whole of Christian life, most Catholics talk about going to Mass or to church. Even in places that describe themselves in language that has been shaped by a reclaimed understanding of who we are as God's people, there is the same tendency to describe doing Eucharist as going to Mass or perhaps going to liturgy. Further, most Catholics consider worship to be a Protestant word. It would seem, then, that most Catholic Christians do not see or make the internal connection between the celebration of Eucharist and public worship. One reason for not linking Eucharist and worship is the underdeveloped ability to see the "we" in worship. Over thirty years have passed since the Second Vatican Council, and even though Catholics understand that the Eucharist should nourish and sustain them in living their faith in the world, many continue to deeply value the Eucharist as an object of private devotion in a communal setting. I find that this personal-in-the-communal behavioral pattern is similar, in many respects, to the parallel play that one observes among toddlers. Small children have not yet developed a sense of a "we" that is made up of different players; they are incapable of acting as one in the pursuit of a common goal. But I have more interest in another reason: untrained sensitivities and expectations and, therefore, lack of ways to enter into this type of prayer.

Yet another element needing to be addressed is the "why" of worship. In the past, Catholics' motivation for Sunday Mass was almost solely influenced by the extrinsic motivator of external law. Now this sense of duty has lost its power to motivate, and I submit that the real intrinsic reasons have to be awakened. The search for subjective meaning in what one does is exemplified in the comments of Catholics who do not celebrate Sunday Eucharist. Two very frequent responses are, "I don't get anything out of it" and "I find more support and meaning in my community." In response, I would follow Evelyn Underhill's (1936) lead and respond that true worship is essentially disinterested. It does not exist for what the worshiper can get out of it. Rather, one's attention is focused on God. This other-directed gaze, in return, benefits the worshipers in ways that exceed their most extravagant dreams and hopes: the transformation and fulfillment of one's deepest desires are accomplished.

Eucharist and Worship in the Past

Two recent events brought home to me the inspired genius of the Roman Catholic Church for safeguarding the faith of the Christian community. Both centered on worship and our Eucharistic faith. In the

first, the presidential manner of the priest clearly manifested his theology of Eucharist. His over-attention to saying the words of institution, rather than to the entire Eucharistic Prayer, communicated that the body and blood of Christ were being made present as a reality simply outside of us and for our worship. The second event, the manner of exposition and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, developed this emphasis on the Christ solely outside of us. Clearly, these practices preserved the connection between Eucharist and worship, but the surrounding behaviors expressed a truncated understanding of our worship, which derived its inspiration from a medieval piety and a defensive posture of the Church following the Reformation. In short, the celebration of the Eucharist is a corporate act of worship in which the word of God interprets our lives, we respond in praise and thanksgiving, consume the Christ and his members, and reaffirm the new covenant made with us by drinking from a common cup. Ministers have this as the norm for their verbal and gestural language.

Worship and Eucharist in the Present

The post-Tridentine defensive posture, which facilitates neither growth into healthy adult identity nor genuine communication, was abandoned at the Second Vatican Council. Moved by the Spirit, the Church reclaimed its rich past and proclaimed the Eucharist to be the central act of worship of the whole Christian life (*Eucharisticum mysterium*, 1967). The council declared that in the celebration of the Eucharist the assembled Church brings to expression Christ's own stance before Abba (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 2, 1963), and that there must be a congruence between interior attitudes and external expression. As Peter Fink (1990b) has observed, the celebration of the Eucharist is true worship only when those who enact it express in ritual form the heartfelt movements of reverence, honor, willingness, and obedient giving over of one's life to God. To understand these claims a closer examination of worship, the human journey, and their connection is required.

WORSHIP AND IDENTITY FORMATION

As a universal phenomenon, the sentiment of worship is most often described as a response of awe, reverence, and surrender as one encounters the mysterious presence of God. It can be accompanied by fear and/or unselfconscious love, depending upon how God is imaged. As understood and used in this article, sentiment is to be understood primarily as an attitude rather than a feeling state. The attitude of worship and its accompanying affective tones will be

considered only in the context of ritual, but is not intended to exclude or minimize the many other situations in which human persons encounter the living God. Further, the focus is not the ritual per se, but the interactions between God and the community, and God and the individual that are taking place through the ritual. As Christians we recognize that our religious worship is shaped and motivated by love. We believe this because Jesus Christ, who is both God's self-communication and the pattern of our worship, is the basis for our worship. Because of its ecstatic movement, worship functions to lead us out of our chronic self-preoccupation and our narrow self-definitions. Our belief is that God draws near and speaks the divine word. This encounter, if we are open to it, purifies, enlightens, and transforms us and the community.

Images in Worship and Identity

The address of and encounter with God occur through the entire ritual celebration of the Eucharist—including the proclamation of the Scripture, the homily, the collects, and the entire Eucharistic Prayer. These constitute privileged times to hear and be touched by God's view of who we are, of creation, and of our purpose in life. God's word can pierce through our cultural blindness and psychological defenses to address our hearts with God's images. In this juxtaposition of God's views as revealed through Jesus Christ and us, we are confirmed in who we are, "loved sinner," and at the same time, opened, invited to embrace God's view, "disciple in the community of disciples." A vibrant dissonance is created in us by these two views, and conversion is possible. And yet, for the dissonance to be present, one has to be able to be intimate with God.

Human Journey

Although their departure points into the mystery may differ, both psychology and theology use the metaphor of *journey* to explore and describe the unfolding of human persons from infancy to death. Whereas psychology frequently starts with the identity of the person as it takes and is given shape through significant relationships and events, theology more often begins reflection upon identity by considering the vocation of the person. Regardless of which window is used initially, in the end the notions of both identity and vocation are needed to understand human persons in their "profound human journey into the mystery of God which is at the same time the mystery of God made human and the mystery of human life transformed into the divine" (Fink 1990a, p. 65).

The works of Roger Gould and Erik Erikson can be especially helpful for understanding the process of identity formation, as well as for seeing the intrinsic relationship between it and worship. For Gould (1978), identity functions much like a license, giving permission to choose and act in certain areas and denying it in others. In the course of negotiating transitions at different life stages, cherished illusions about “who one is” have the possibility of being discarded and a larger identity embraced. Movement occurs through the presence of some reality factor that contradicts one’s illusions. A corollary of this larger identity is a wider arena for choices and actions. For Erikson (1959), identity silently integrates the disparate dimensions of one’s experiences and is marked by seeming opposites. That is, identity is at one and the same time conscious and unconscious, stable and fluid, individual and communal. And at this point in our reflection on identity, Erikson’s description of intimacy is pertinent to asserting the role of public worship. Contrary to the popular use of the term, intimacy is an *ability* of the person to be up-close to another and not be threatened by the otherness of the person or thing. The development of this ability is dependent upon having successfully resolved the fundamental questions as to “who one is” and of making a commitment to integrity.

Walter Brueggemann (1991) rightly observes that a dynamic conspicuously absent in contemporary lives and journeys is a sense of vocation, that is, a sense of being called to praise, obedience, and mission. I am in agreement with this observation, but I want to suggest an even more fundamental deficiency. Largely absent from contemporary cognitive and affective consciousness is the awareness of having been invited into a love relationship with the mysterious other whose Word has become flesh and opens new life to us. Before persons are able to respond to a call, they need to know who they are. Psychotherapeutic experience and Christian faith corroborate this position.

In clinical work one sees, time and time again, that self-acceptance, a *sine qua non* for identity, is possible only in the climate of other-acceptance (acceptance by an other). And in the *Spiritual Exercises* (Fleming 1978), the theologically and psychologically astute St. Ignatius recommends that persons in “Week One” do not move on to “Week Two” until they have prayed through and found themselves in week one. That is, persons must come to know, both cognitively and affectively, that they are, indeed, loved sinners before they can fruitfully contemplate the life of Christ and hear the call to discipleship.

A PASTORAL VIGNETTE

In a class on adult faith formation for ministerial students, I developed an exercise using pictures from the *Baltimore Catechism*. Working in groups, the class was asked to describe the underlying image or images that were being used to express the faith. The second step required their asking the question, "Do these images speak to my present understanding of my faith?" In the last step they searched for images that would better express their faith. A not altogether unexpected finding was that the earliest images in our faith formation have a hold on our imaginations that are resistive to change. Only with intentional catechesis can these images be relinquished and newer, more adequate ones found to take their place. Pertinent to these reflections is the picture that introduced the section on the "Sacrifice of the Mass." It depicts a priest, with arms outstretched to the appropriate width, standing at the altar with his back to the two altar servers. Above his head is Christ on the cross, above him a dove (Holy Spirit), and above the dove, an elderly man (God the Father). Before considering this drawing, we must make the role and contribution of images or imaginative templates to identity formation more explicit.

Although we frequently are not conscious of it, the imagination supplies us with schema or templates that assist in organizing the data in our field of experience. These templates give shape and direction to experience and give access to meaning. For example, without the template of "tennis is a game," the activity might simply be understood to be persons shooting yellow balls at each other over a net for the purpose of seeing who would tire or get angry more quickly. But with the template, the contest is recognized, the importance of silence on the court is understood, the skill of the players appreciated, and the proper time for applause is known. In short, I am suggesting that templates play an important role in one's being able to enter into and fruitfully participate in the celebration of the Eucharist.

The pictorial image in the *Catechism* and a Eucharistic theology that correlated and emphasized an understanding of the sacrifice of the cross as merely in the past, and of the sacrifice of the Mass as the unbloody representation of the sacrifice of the cross by the priest, conspired to produce an imaginative template for understanding what one was doing when going to Mass. With some minor variations, that template suggested to people that they could imagine themselves standing at the foot of the cross while Christ, in the person of the priest, offered his sacrifice to the Father through the Holy Spirit. In this theology and associated pastoral practice, the action of the Mass is

observed, the graces are passively received, and the entire experience offers no ready encouragement to see one's entire life involved in the action. Another template and a more expansive Eucharistic theology are needed if the connection between Eucharist and worship are to be grasped in a manner that speaks to the hearts of people and connects with their experience.

Our Eucharistic theology has, for too long a time, been focused on trying to pin down the mystery of Eucharist to "the words of consecration." That is, we have looked at the mystery of our God, the Abba of Jesus Christ, who graciously draws near, inviting responses that will transform us and make of us a new creation, and have asked the questions "how" and in "what specific moments" do these interchanges occur. It is my belief that they are troublesome, divisive, and simply the wrong questions. As Fink (1985) insists, the focus on the "how" and "what" or on things removes consecration from the realm of the personal, where God acts and transforms with faithful love everything that is placed with Jesus Christ. Thus, taking the view popularized by Odo Casel that the whole Eucharistic Prayer is consecratory rather than arguing over the *epiclesis* or the words of institution (Senn 1990), and Fink's (1985) insight that the true consecration of the Eucharist is a "meeting place," we have a new a template, if you will, for understanding what it is that is happening when we are doing Eucharist. Understanding the entire Eucharistic Prayer to be consecratory expands or enlarges our sacred space and time. In this view, we are no longer idle by-standers at the foot of the cross. Rather, the Eucharistic Prayer, voiced in the hearing of the assembly, becomes the account to God, in praise and thanksgiving, of those saving deeds God has wrought from the beginning of creation. And in this doing, the gifts of bread and wine that we offer—images of the ages-long people to whom we belong and of the new covenant in Christ—become for us the source of transformation of identity: of Christ, together, by the fire of the Spirit to the glory of God.

PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

If individual persons and the Christian community are going to become who God has called them to be in Jesus Christ, authentic public worship must be a weekly or regular commitment. If there is to be growth into mature identity as Christians who are sent as Jesus was sent by his Father, in a number of instances, the content of preaching will need to be addressed. In many Catholic churches, though the preaching has become more scripturally based, thereby making our story more available, the lens that is used for the understanding of

Scripture is moralistic. Certainly, I am not suggesting that the encouragement to right behavior be omitted. Rather, the preeminent word that needs to be proclaimed is the one that speaks of God's love, compassion, and desires for creation. Thus, rooted in our true identity as "loved sinners," we are able to respond to the transformative invitations of God who calls us to be sister or brother to Jesus Christ for the world.

For a complex of reasons, there exists a distance between the teaching on the Eucharist set in motion by the Second Vatican Council and vast numbers of our people; indeed, such a distance seems to be the case between the orientation of the conciliar liturgical reforms and the current magisterial ethos. This situation constitutes a profound challenge for religious educators and catechists. However, as therapist and educator, I would suggest that our regularly over-burdened clergy are in need of transforming catechesis. For, even though much of the language of newer theology is used, the force of the template from former experience and theology of the Eucharist continues to be manifest in the manner of presiding. Indeed, the communication of the operative theology of the presider always occurs on conscious and unconscious levels; that is, the presider on both conscious and unconscious levels is communicating to both the conscious and unconscious of the assembly. If presiders do not perceive what they are doing as worship in the reclaimed sense, then they communicate this to the people.

CONCLUSIONS

In the light of these observations, it seems clear that catechesis of both clergy and laity needs to address three especially important issues. First, my personal experience and psychoanalytic training conspire to put images from formative years at the top of the list. Unless time is taken to bring these images to conscious reflection and appreciative critique, they constitute an inhibition to richer catechesis and further education. Second, perceptions and attitudes appropriate to worship must include a sense of the communal subject acting in praise and thanksgiving of the mysterious other. As Richard Gaillardetz has aptly demonstrated (1994), skewed expectations have developed to the effect that a dichotomy has been drawn in much of our culture between a sense of transcendence and a sense of community. Indeed, many Catholic communities have a deeply developed appreciation of the fact that they are community, but their celebration of the Eucharist lacks an appreciation of the fact that we are involved in the worship of the mystery whom we name Abba. And finally, the new template for imagining what we are doing in the celebration of the Eucharist needs

to be consistent with that set in motion by the Second Vatican Council. This template accomplishes a number of things that need to be done if we go to be true to the fullness of our Eucharistic faith. The template recognizes that God draws near to us with invitations the responses that are transformative, and possibilities of a magical mentality are diminished. From personal experience I find this template helpful for yielding myself over to God's word and activity when we do Eucharist, but others will need to be explored.

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