

## REPORT ON SUNDAY

### WHY SETTLE FOR COMMUNION?

#### A TREND IN THE WRONG DIRECTION

**A**n argument is raging. It is about how many Sundays can dance on the point of a needle without a priest to lead the dance. It is the result of the declining number of priests available to preside at Sunday liturgy, and leads to a further consideration: How priestless will our Sundays have to become before the rules about who gets into the presbyterate are changed by the presbyters? The growing ex-

tent of frustration with the failure of church leaders to respond to the crisis has led some people to call for ecclesiastical "civil disobedience." "The rules are wrong," they say, "and in the circumstances, we must make our own, for this is always how things change" (see, "The Eucharist: Who May Preside?" *Commonweal*, September 9, 1988). But beneath all these flash points lies an even more weighty and essential issue. At base, it has to do with our understanding of the Eucharist itself.

Here is the situation. Circumstances that have long prevailed among Catholics in much of the second and third worlds are being increasingly felt in the first (which is why the volume of the argument has been so amplified): Many Catholics have no access to the celebration of the Eucharist on Sundays. In itself the problem is not new. Catholics have always (the word is probably not too strong here since it is almost a matter of definition) held together three things: the Lord's Day, assembly, and Eucharist. We have also held to a discipline that recognizes Eucharist only when the Sunday assembly has in its midst as presider a bishop or one whom the bishop has ordained.

What then is new? Quite simply, since Vatican II it has become possible for Catholics to have Sunday and to assemble without a bishop or presbyter and to celebrate a communion service. Prior to Vatican II, when only the priest could touch the consecrated bread, priestless Sundays consisted of lay-led prayer services of one kind or another. Now, however, the absence of a priest seems to mean only one thing: no eucharistic prayer. Everything else can be as when the priest is present. And that is generally what has been happening since the rites of Holy Communion outside Mass were reformed and lay persons became authorized ministers of Holy Communion.

Rome itself seems to have acquiesced in this subtle but significant breakdown of the ancient triad, Sunday/assembly/Eucharist. Last June, in one of his last acts as prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship, Cardinal Paul Augustin Mayer (in whose prefecture the case of liturgical renewal has languished for years) authorized a *Directory for Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest* (*Origins*, October 20, 1988). This directory reaffirms the ideal of Sunday/assembly/Eucharist and perhaps even reinforces it in a distorted fashion by encouraging bishops, when they have no presbyter to assign to a parish, to send in visiting presbyters or to encourage the people who make up that parish to go to other parishes for Mass. (All of this raises larger questions about the identity of the assembly itself—obviously not a priority for the Vatican congregation.) The directory provides an order of service for the duly authorized Sunday liturgy in the absence of a priest. This service has the following recognizable structure: introductory rites, liturgy of the Word, thanksgiving, rite of Communion, and concluding rites. Local conferences of bishops, including the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, will be issuing their own versions of this service over the next few years.

So what we have here is the delight of the long-denied laity, right? Wrong. What we have is an attempt to say that our ancestors had it wrong about Sunday and assembly and

Eucharist. What has become obscure to many Catholics (an obscurity that the Roman congregation and some local bishops' conferences now seem quite happy to live with and silently encourage) is the distinction between Eucharist and Holy Communion. You priestless folks can have Holy Communion for ever and ever, but you can't have Eucharist until we find a lot more candidates for ordination. And the priestless folks reply: Great! Bring on the deacon or the pastoral administrator and the hosts from another time or place. These liturgies seem often to mean more to us anyway.

But the question might be better put: If you are going to upset a longstanding discipline, which one will it be? On one side is the discipline that says we ordain only baptized, celibate males of which there are too few asking for ordination. On the other side is the discipline of Sunday/assembly/Eucharist. The battle was joined and over before news of trouble got out.

We care about the "who can get ordained part"; at least a few do. But even here the ground has been cut away. Imagine going forth on a crusade that says: "They are trying to make you be content with this all-male, celibate clergy. To arms! Don't rest until they let us have Sunday Eucharist again, but this time with Ms. Smith or Grandpa Jones ordained to preside." Yet as long as Ms. Smith or Grandpa Jones are there to lead a communion service, the fact is the more fundamental call will go unanswered.

Why don't we care about the other part? It says you can have your Sunday and your assembly but without Eucharist. Several things are at work here, but they come down to this: In practice, we have said that Eucharist and Communion are the same thing and all that is up for discussion is when the bread gets consecrated. One way in which this is said can be observed any Sunday in perhaps 75 percent of our parishes. After a subdued few moments for the eucharistic prayer, the pace will pick up with the Lord's Prayer and the peace greeting, then someone will make a trip to the tabernacle for most of the Holy Bread that actually will be shared in Communion. It will be this way because for twenty-plus years now we have been willing to neglect instructions and rubrics that make it quite clear: first, that the eucharistic prayer is a central deed of assembly and presider together and should be so celebrated that this is our common experience; and second, that the bread and the wine over which presider and people give thanks in the eucharistic prayer is the bread and wine that all are then to share in Holy Communion. When the common practice of the liturgy, Sunday by Sunday, neglects these principles, we have already gone quite a way in making even Sunday with a priest into a communion service.

William Marvee, in a 1988 article, "Priestless Masses—At What Cost?" (*Église et Théologie*, no. 40, pp. 207-22), speaks of what is at stake:

One can only maintain that a communion service, whatever form it takes, is a treacherous undertaking. It builds on a development in eucharistic practice that, while legitimate in some respects, is fraught with potential pitfalls, for it forces the taking of Communion into an even more isolated position. *It obscures, moreover,*

*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, in the final analysis, lives and not the presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine, however much the latter is an integral part of the former. Because the presence of Christ in the bread and wine is a constitutive element of the more comprehensive 'sacramental celebration of Christ's paschal mystery and not an independent entity, every attempt must be made to avoid giving the impression that the communion service is a readily available substitute for the celebration of the Eucharist.... There is an intimate link between the Eucharist and the ordained minister. This is so true that the absence of the latter leads inevitably to the community's inability to celebrate the Eucharist. We are not addressing that fact and the resulting problem by seeking a solution to it in the form of communion services. These must be exposed as a frontal attack on the reality that has an integrity of a unique kind, namely the Eucharist of the community and the community as a eucharistic community [emphasis added].

Here it is: To date, the liturgical renewal and the ecclesial renewal of which it must be the core have in practice not shaped a eucharistic people. We have not been doing whatever it is we are to do when we do our eucharistic prayer. That communal deed of every Lord's Day between "Lift up your hearts" and the Lord's Prayer is definitive of the baptized life, a pattern for the words and deeds that constitute all the rest of life. Yet the eucharistic prayer slips by with such passivity that no one even raises a ruckus when the very bread and wine we have together blessed—the very tangible bread and wine that have become for us the Body and Blood of Christ, the holy bread and wine that have been the amazing focus for our astounding words and acclamations—this bread and wine are all consumed by the presider and a few others. No one shouts: "Hold on there. Didn't we just together—this assembly right here—say Amen over this bread and this cup? And now we are going to be given something that was in the tabernacle, all along? Doesn't what we just did have any relation to this Communion?" No ruckus, no shouts of protest, no sense that anything unusual has happened. Thus the reform, in practice, has neglected the eucharistic prayer and what baptized people need to do—and have the right to do—each Lord's Day in their assemblies.

In the article quoted above, which seems to me the finest piece available on this matter of priestless Sundays (an unfortunate and impossible term), Marvee asks the central question:

For what purpose does the community assemble on Sunday: Is it to attend or participate in what the priest does or is it to celebrate a Eucharist over which the ordained minister presides? In the final analysis what needs to be resolved is the question of who is the integral

subject of the celebration of the Eucharist: Is it the priest or is it the community? If one maintains that it is the community, it does not mean the actual exclusion of the ordained minister, because in that case we work with an either/or proposition that is fatal. Maintaining the community as the integral subject of the Eucharist presupposes a community that is not exclusive, but inclusive, of the ordained minister. What is really at stake is not Sunday-without-priests, but

Sunday-without-Eucharist. We seem ready to accept placidly such a condition largely because we have not treasured, have not drawn our Catholic life from, the very deed we are now foregoing. But Eucharist should be missed, not efficiently replaced. We don't like to miss things, of course. We'd rather get things humming along again. But something is missing, something is broken.

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