

Theology Symposium

6–9 June, St Patrick's College, Maynooth



The End of the Mass for the Masses? Secularism as a Challenge to Celebrating the Eucharist

There seems to be a gap between what the Church says about the Eucharist in official documents and corresponding theologies on the one hand and Eucharistic practice of many ordinary Catholics on the other hand. Vatican II famously said that 'the Eucharistic sacrifice is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life' (*Lumen gentium*, 11). Elsewhere, the Council applies the same Latin terminology of *fons* and *culmen* to the liturgy in general. It considers the liturgy 'the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed' and 'the font from which all her power flows' (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, 10). These statements imply at least two things. First, the Eucharist occupies a peculiar place in the (liturgical) life of Christians. Second, the life of the faithful has something intrinsically to do with actions performed by the Church. It is very questionable, however, whether these implications somehow correspond with reality.

One could argue about the nature of similar official statements promulgated by ecclesiastical authorities. And indeed, it is not their purpose to describe reality as it is. Instead, one could also underline the many beautiful examples where the Eucharist actually constitutes the centre of the lives of a community's members. Nevertheless, I take it that it is not untrue that there is something deeply problematic with regard to the relationship between high theological ideas about the Eucharist and the real role it plays in the life of many Christian believers. I think, moreover, that this is particularly the case in Western countries. Maybe it is no coincidence that this is precisely the region where secularism is generally assumed to have taken on its sharpest shape. Therefore, if we are to think about the nature and the future of the Eucharistic celebration in the West, we have no choice but to intensively deal with secularism.

Secularism is usually connected with the emergence of modernity. In its own turn, modernity is the result of intellectual and cultural developments in fifteenth-century Europe. Science, politics, religion, art, society and culture changed drastically. The religious symbiosis which had held together all these domains definitively broke asunder. This was an evolution which literally took hundreds of years and scholars disagree on whether it has already come to an end or not. Be that as it may, secularism can be defined as the 'space' in life and culture which distanced (or alienated) itself from faith and religion. This distancing can be done in an aggressive way, but also patiently, indifferently, unconsciously and even frivolously. Without any doubt, secularism has been a phenomenon with many different faces, each of which are valued and evaluated in many different ways. In addition, it penetrated deeply into the flesh and bones of religious people and religious institutions. It is not as if the latter remained untouched by secularisation. Therefore, it is a big problem that there are Church leaders and theologians who do not see or do not want to see this or, worse, blatantly ignore it.

Today we probably stand at a decisive turning point. On the one hand, it has become clear that secularism is not only irreversible but also possibly positive. It is simply part of Western culture. On the other hand, it has turned out that the much-debated secularisation hypothesis is incorrect. It is not true that continuing processes of modernisation and secularisation cause religion(s) to disappear. The underlying idea that the more one is 'modern' the less one becomes 'religious', rests on false presumptions. Hence, also the rhetoric that one *should* become more secular to finally leave religion behind or that one *should* abandon religion if one wants to adapt to modern life has shown its very limits. As a matter of fact, the insight that religion is not primitive, faith not stupid, rites not obsolete and worship not meaningless carries an

important liberating potential. If one thoroughly realises this, then it makes no sense to combat modernity and secularism by virtue or in name of one's religious convictions. The time has come to deal differently with modern societies and secular cultures. In any case, there is no reason to be nervous, mistrustful, cautious, unsure, let alone to be hostile. Christian faith and secularism can be each other's complements and must not be mutually exclusive.

What Christians ought to do, however, is truly testify of the joy the Eucharist gives. If its celebration is really the source of everything they undertake as well as the highest thing they (can) do and long for, then they have to give evidence of this. Christians should not deplore the fact that others don't go to Mass but bear witness of the fact how much the celebration of the Eucharist affects and inspires them in everything they do and think. Such an attitude requires that we dare to move from a traditional *sacramental minimalism* to a *liturgical maximalism*. We must not first try to demonstrate that our convictions about the Eucharist are true but live our liturgies in such a way that they radiate the power and the joy of the Risen Christ. For it his body that, through receiving it in the Eucharist, makes us into Church. All we need is the courage not to be disappointed by what surrounds us and what happened in the past. Rather, Christians should adopt a profoundly Eucharistic, future-oriented and hope-filled vision and, in accordance with it, radically change the situation of their faith in secular cultures. Secularism is not a threat but a given and a challenge. Christians are called not to fight against but to transform the secular both around and within them. Maybe, in that sense, we are not facing the end but a new beginning of the Mass for the masses.

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Eucharist in the Domestic Sanctuary

Celebrations for a Missionary Church

If asked what the single, leading idea shaping the Second Vatican Council is, a number of possibilities might be identified. I have heard it argued that Vatican II was primarily about a new way of understanding Baptism, and that its major concern was with the universal call to holiness. More particularly the explicit themes of *aggiornamento*, or the 'promotion of the laity', or a renewed ecclesiology can be mentioned. The person in the pew who has lived through the changes of the last fifty years is perhaps most likely to speak of the changes in liturgical practice, or the rise in ecclesial lay ministries. There is some truth in all of these ideas – and the many others we could name. My concern is to re-establish the idea of mission – evangelisation – as the fundamental charism of this Council.

This is hardly a novel idea. And it is significant that, both in the Synod following the Council, and throughout the long pontificate of John Paul II, it is precisely evangelisation which is held to be central. But whilst the idea is not a new reading of Vatican II, it remains, for large swathes of the Church (in the global north at least) an idea which has failed to inspire the energies and commitment of people. Liturgical reforms, lay ministries, catechesis and arguments around the ways in which Church governance is carried out often consume resources in our communities far in excess of those made available to mission and outreach. Yet if we are truly to receive and appropriate the wisdom of Vatican II we need to re-receive it as a pastoral Council of missionary call.

This has a particular bearing on how we understand and celebrate the Eucharist. The liturgical reforms of the Council were extraordinary in their grass roots impact, and their effects are still heatedly debated today. The pity is that too rarely do these debates focus on the real inspiration for the reforms – enabling better the missionary vocation of the people of God. As Enda McDonagh points out, we must not allow our right sense of 'the centrality of the Eucharist' to lead us into an over concentration on internal, Church matters: 'The formal *domus Dei* must lift its eyes to the gifts and needs of the whole world about it, the *mundus Dei*, if it would truly worship God.'¹ Whatever 'the centrality of the Eucharist' means, it cannot only be about going to Mass. In

a missionary church we are called to 'live Eucharist' beyond liturgy, to recognise that Eucharist is a mystery not only to be believed and celebrated, but to be lived in the world.

This is an understanding – recognisable by many Eastern Christians through their tradition of 'the liturgy after the liturgy'² – which is a formative idea in *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007). This Apostolic Exhortation concludes with a section on the Eucharist as a mystery 'to be lived'. It describes the 'eucharistic form of Christian life', based on the conviction that 'There is nothing authentically human... that does not find in the sacrament of the Eucharist the form it needs to be lived to the full.'³ The challenge is how we might better appropriate this missionary and *ad extra* vision of Eucharist, in the face of the massive 'success' of the liturgical focus on Eucharist since the Council.

I want to suggest another, less obvious, conciliar theme as a response to this difficulty. It is a theme which has been taken up in very specific ways in relation to evangelisation since the Council – both in Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, and throughout the missionary teachings of John Paul II. It is the 'domestic church'.

For all its promiscuous use in John Paul II's writing, the 'domestic church' can hardly be claimed as a leading idea of Vatican II. It appears only one and a half times in the Council documents, explicitly in *Lumen Gentium* 11, and by allusion in *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 11. The fascinating thing about it is the way in which it subsequently captured the imaginations of many as an authentic way of speaking of the Christian household.

The implications of this idea of 'domestic church' are yet to be fully spelt out.⁴ Here there is certainly not room even to begin this task. But certain observations might be made about the Christian household as 'domestic church' which recommend it as a key idea in opening up the Eucharist to its being lived in the world, beyond the preoccupations of liturgy.

Naming the Christian household as 'domestic church', a place in which we find embodied 'the various aspects of the entire Church', and 'from which the gospel radiates',⁵ has the potential to shift our ecclesiological attention. It reminds us that Church is not something solely – even primarily – lived in the institutional centres of organised ecclesial

life, and relocates church realities to the institutional margins. The domestic Church offers an ecclesiological – and so eucharistic – vision which re-centres Church on its margins. It is from here that a more missionary account of church can be given and lived, informed by the experiences of domestic discipleship, with their necessary integration of the 'worldly' and cultural with the faith tradition.

We can then begin to reflect on what 'the centrality of the Eucharist' might mean in this centred-on-the-margins Church. Such reflections draw us both into the Eucharistic theology and spirituality of the theological tradition, and into the real lived experiences of domestic discipleship. My suggestion is that when we attend to what Christian households have to say about sacrifice, nourishment, food shared, presence, self-giving, and the transformative power of thanksgiving – then we may begin to unlock something of the missionary potential of the Eucharistic theology of Vatican II. Connecting in living and dynamic ways the celebrations of the parish sanctuary with those of the 'domestic sanctuary of the Church'⁶ is an urgent need for the present Church, as it continues to struggle to appropriate Vatican II's profound commitment to the centrality of Eucharist specifically as a fundamental commitment to evangelisation, to becoming, ever more deeply, the sacrament of salvation for the world.⁷

NOTES

¹ Enda McDonagh 'Fruit of the earth, work of human hands: a prophetic theology of the Eucharist.' in Mary Grey et al. (eds) *The Candles are Still Burning. Directions in Sacrament and Spirituality*. (Geoffrey Chapman 1995) p 23.

² Ion Bria *The Liturgy after the Liturgy. Mission and witness from an Orthodox perspective*. (WCC Publications, 1996)

³ *Sacramentum Caritatis* 71.

⁴ See Florence Caffrey Bourg *Where Two or Three are Gathered. Christian Families as Domestic Churches*. (University of Notre Dame Press, 2004); and Clare Watkins 'Traditio – The ordinary Handling of Holy Things.' in *New Blackfriars* 87 (March 2006) pp 166-183.

⁵ Paul VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 71.

⁶ *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 11.

⁷ See *Lumen Gentium* 1.