

Eucharist

I prepared the talks I'm giving to you this week almost two months ago. I've been making several references to my parish, St. Anthony's. What I haven't told you is that last month my bishop, James Johnston, sent me a letter of appointment to a different parish. I am leaving St. Anthony's and becoming the pastor of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. A lot of people have said to me, "Congratulations." I tell them, "It's the same salary." The appointment becomes effective today. I just hope they're not looking for me. The reason their new priest is not celebrating the eucharist there this morning is that he's talking to other priests about how important it is to celebrate the eucharist.

Perhaps the most famous of the introductions to liturgical books is the General Instruction on the Roman Missal. People rightly consult it for the proper execution of the rubrics of the mass. Its section on the duties of different ministers sweeps through the hierarchy, explaining principal duties and the theology beneath them. The section opens with paragraph 91:

"The celebration of the Eucharist is the action of Christ and of the Church, namely, of the holy people united and ordered under the Bishop. It therefore pertains to the whole Body of the Church, manifests it, and has its effect upon it. Indeed, it also affects the individual members of the Church in a different way, according to their different orders, functions, and actual participation. In this way, the Christian people, 'a chosen race, a royal Priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession,' expresses its cohesion and its hierarchical ordering. All, therefore, whether ordained ministers or lay Christian faithful, in fulfilling their function or their duty, should carry out solely but totally that which pertains to them."

Here you can see more clearly the impact of the citation from the First Letter of Peter that I mentioned in the baptism presentation. All the people of God by their baptism are called into service as a royal priesthood. The very first line of this section shows how the eucharist is the action of Christ and the church, and it defines the church as a people united and ordered under its bishop.

We don't always feel united and orderly, but perhaps this is why we have the eucharist, which reminds us that we really are. The people who gather for daily and Sunday mass are quite diverse, yet somehow the eucharist brings them together for one hour of thanksgiving in an action that touches them to the heart. At St. Anthony's daily mass I had twenty people from three different language groups who literally could not speak to each other. But they worshiped together.

The individual members of the church have different orders, functions and participation. These express their cohesion and ordering. This makes the diversification of ministries at mass so important. One of our pastors, who years ago resisted the assistance of permanent deacons, once asked, "Why should I have a deacon proclaim the gospel? I can proclaim it perfectly well and better than he can." I wanted to ask, "Why stop there? Why not proclaim the first reading and the psalm as well?" The mass better expresses its purposes when a variety of ministers exercises their duties. I tried to accomplish this at daily mass. Those who helped included a sacristan, a server, a reader, a cantor, gift bearers

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and communion ministers. It did not always work out this way, but my daily mass group may have had ten of them performing some ministry. It expressed the diverse gifts of the people of God.

The eucharist sets the example for all of parish life. The organizations, committees and volunteers in any parish show the diversity of the gifts and the complexity of the parish's mission. Ideally, this fits under an umbrella of organization, but sometimes it does not. In my first pastorate, I managed seven key committees, each headed by a different staff member. Everything we did as a parish connected to one of those groups for supervision. At St. Anthony's I inherited a system that was not so orderly. Some individuals did terrific work, but without much direct supervision from anyone on our small staff or much interaction with other parishioners for vision and advice. It can work either way; one size does not fit all in parish organization. The key is to find ways to enliven the many gifts of the Spirit that flourish among the people of God.

Paragraph 92 moves into the ministry of the bishop: "Every legitimate celebration of the Eucharist is directed by the Bishop, either in person or through Priests who are his helpers." [This photograph is of the cathedral in Kansas City.]

We pray for the bishop by name at every mass. He is always present to us when we gather for the eucharist. One reason the rite of election has become so popular is that it has brought many people to see the cathedral for the first time. A cathedral is rightly a pilgrimage spot in any diocese. During this year in which we observe the 500th anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation, I received a request from a local Presbyterian Church for a gathering at our cathedral with our bishop. (I am also the ecumenical / interreligious officer for our diocese.) On their initiative they wanted to see the building and have an informal dialogue with our bishop. He agreed because he sees himself as the bishop of all the souls in the diocese, not just the Catholics. Another idea for the use of the cathedral comes from the RCIA, which recommends that during the period of mystagogy the newly baptized gather with the bishop for the celebration of the eucharist at the cathedral. In my view, this would actually be more theologically significant than the rite of election because it gathers the newly baptized with their bishop at their cathedral during Easter Time for the eucharist. That is a much fuller expression of who we are as church than a liturgy of the word during Lent.

Almost every diocese experiences tensions between parishes and the chancery. A common barometer is the annual diocesan campaign. People in the parishes more easily grasp the importance of contributing to the parish than contributing to the diocese. It is symptomatic of the struggle we have to unify all the efforts of the diocese under a common vision.

Paragraph 92 continues, "When the Bishop is present at a Mass where the people are gathered, it is most fitting that he himself celebrate the Eucharist and associate Priests with himself in the sacred action as concelebrants. This is done not for the sake of adding outward solemnity to the rite, but to signify more vividly the mystery of the Church, 'the sacrament of unity.'"

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Concelebration was a new concept at the time of the Second Vatican Council. It has resolved some difficulties while it has created others. We have some priests who choose not to concelebrate for what appears to be quite different reasons. Some feel that concelebration overly clericalizes the liturgy, so they prefer to sit with the faithful in pews. Others apparently weighing the values of presiding and concelebrating choose choir dress as a middle path. This paragraph underscores that concelebration has a different purpose when it takes place with the bishop than when it takes place without him. Without the bishop, concelebration among priests establishes a uniformity among their rank in the hierarchy, and sometimes is simply an expression of convenience, but concelebration with the bishop shows an important dimension of the people of God gathered at the eucharist in different ranks in the sacrament of unity. At the chrism mass in particular the rubric that calls for its concelebration says that the practice shows priests as witnesses and coworkers with the bishop. That rubric can be traced all the way back to the tenth-century Roman-Germanic Pontifical. Even though concelebration was not much practiced prior to the Second Vatican Council, it did exist, and the chrism mass was its point of origin.

Paragraph 92 concludes with another situation: “If, on the other hand, the Bishop does not celebrate the Eucharist but has assigned it to someone else to do this, then it is appropriate that he should preside over the Liturgy of the Word, wearing the pectoral cross, stole, and cope over an alb, and that he should give the blessing at the end of Mass.”

This addresses a situation in which it may be appropriate for another priest to preside; for example, at his mother’s funeral. Yet the presence of the bishop is key. It’s the exception more than the rule, and it allows some flexibility in the sharing of ministry, which augurs a flexibility in pastoral ministry as well.

Paragraph 93 pertains directly to priests. It’s a paragraph that does not get much attention because most people are rifling through the General Instruction to figure out how many candles to light and how many swings of the censer to make. The minutiae of the rubrics sometimes keep us from seeing the big picture of the mass, a vision that this paragraph admirably holds aloft.

“A Priest, also, who possesses within the Church the sacred power of Orders to offer sacrifice in the person of Christ, presides by this fact over the faithful people gathered here and now, presides over their prayer, proclaims to them the message of salvation, associates the people with himself in the offering of sacrifice through Christ in the Holy Spirit to God the Father, and gives his brothers and sisters the Bread of eternal life and partakes of it with them. Therefore, when he celebrates the Eucharist, he must serve God and the people with dignity and humility, and by his bearing and by the way he pronounces the divine words he must convey to the faithful the living presence of Christ.”

“The sacred power of Orders” is a phrase that says a lot about the authority of priests within the church. It comes at the head of this paragraph because this section not only deals with responsibilities but also with hierarchy, and how these are expressed in the celebration of the eucharist. I can remember

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when I was appointed pastor for the first time, it felt as though I was being ordained all over again. I was finally put into the position that I had long envisioned as I was discerning my vocation.

Yet this “sacred power” is into a ministry of service. When we serve as pastors, for example, we are managers. Not only do we preside at the eucharist; we supervise parish life as well.

What is this power for? Paragraph 93 says that it is given to us “to offer sacrifice in the person of Christ.” People often express this with a shortcut that is not at all accurate: “the priest has the power to change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.” Paragraph 93 does not express it that way. We are not making this change; we invoke the Holy Spirit to make this change. Our job is to offer sacrifice in the person of Christ. That sacrifice is the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross, into which we enter every time we approach the altar. It is also the sacrifice of our own life and work. We’ll return to this paragraph in a few minutes.

A prayer that unfailingly touches me when I celebrate mass is the one we say just before the washing of the hands: “With humble spirit and contrite heart.” It’s based on a prayer offered by one of the three young men in the fiery furnace in the Book of Daniel. They have remained faithful to God, refusing to apostatize. It is costing them their life. Their action of self-offering is one of the noblest expressions of sacrifice in the bible. Yet hovering above this prayer lingers doubt. They do not doubt that there is a God; they do not doubt that God hears prayers. They doubt whether their sacrifice has been enough, whether the life they have lived really has been pleasing to God. There is no braggadocio in this prayer, no sense that God owes them big time for the sacrifices they are making. Quite the contrary: “With humble spirit and contrite heart may we be accepted by you, O Lord, and my our sacrifice in your sight this day be pleasing to you, Lord God.” I find this a stunning prayer. Those three young men, they don’t know. They don’t know - at what they are sure is the end of their lives - if the sacrifice of their entire lives is pleasing to God. They hope it is.

When I bow down to make this prayer at daily mass, especially when mass is in the morning, I think of the day ahead. I recall the plans I’ve made and the sacrifices that they represent. I hope I’ve made the right plans. I hope that the service I’ll be rendering will please God. I think it will. But in the end, I really don’t know. I have to approach my entire day with humble spirit and contrite heart. There have been days when I’m sure God was not at all pleased with my sacrifice. Yikes. I hope that this won’t be one of those. Then I wash my hands asking God to cleanse me of my sins, and I invite the people to pray. Their response indicates their uncanny awareness of what I’m thinking: “May the Lord accept this sacrifice at your hands.” They don’t know either how acceptable my life will be, but they are praying for me that all will go well this day.

Returning to paragraph 93, one of the responsibilities we have is to preside over the people gathered here and now. I am their shepherd. I use the presider’s chair. I am to guide them through this hour that they have set aside this week to

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offer their sacrifice to God. If I'm to preside over those who are gathered here and now, I need to practice that every day. By my example and my advice, I need to be their shepherd.

A priest also "presides over their prayer." I find this one of the most challenging parts of the mass - to get people concentrating on the whole mass every step of the way. There are certain moments when people tune out: the collect, the second reading, the eucharistic prayer, to name a few. Ask people after mass what the second reading was about today, and you will see blank stares. They were thinking about something else. Heck, sometimes I'm thinking about something else during the second reading or during the eucharistic prayer. Prayer demands attention, and it is hard. Some people argue that attention spans are diminishing in an age of sound bites, headlines and video clips. Yet there are other activities that demand attention, and people give it, whether it's a child's baseball game or a performance of Beethoven's Fifth. People can concentrate once they understand and love the object to which they are present. But many of us - even when presiding - do not give good examples of this. Some priests do not sing the congregational hymns or quietly fume if the music goes on too long. Some of us chat with the deacon or give instructions to the servers during mass. Some of us look disengaged when someone else is reading or listing petitions. Every moment of every mass demands full, conscious, active participation, no matter the ministry that a person holds. We know the importance of paying attention when driving a car. The same is true of mass. And not just for us, but for everyone. When our people answer email, search web sites, and text during mass, it's as dangerous as texting while driving. They create a distraction in their own prayer and in the prayer of those around them. We have to keep our head in the game. When we recite prayers, we are presiding over the prayer of the people. We are called to say those prayers in a way that they make sense to us, make sense to the people, and make sense to God.

The priest also "proclaims to them the message of salvation." We do this especially in the homily, which obviously demands great preparation. Each priest possesses different skills for public speaking, and each priest presents homilies in his own unique way. But this is a skill we need to practice as faithfully as any professional athlete or musician practices their sport and art. It demands private prayer, sincere reflection, creative composition and focused presentation. You don't have to do it my way, but I write out my homily each Sunday and practice it enough so that it sounds more spoken than written. I also record it and post it on my web site. Some priests feel that their homilies are not good enough for the world wide web. Well, then they're not good enough for the people in the pew either. Besides, nothing can stop one of them from streaming your homily to the public on Facebook live. There is no privacy anymore. We'd better know what the message of salvation is and proclaim it with intelligence and faith.

The priest also "associates the people with himself in the offering of sacrifice." This was big news at the time of the council because the custom had been for the priest to recite the eucharistic prayer with his back to the people in Latin and in a low voice. For him now to associate the people with himself

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required a different kind of presiding and a different kind of relationship with the people. Going back to the First Letter of Peter, this presumes that the people are a royal priesthood. They have come to offer their sacrifices as well. We are placing their offerings upon the altar and praying to God for their benefit.

I learn a lot about what people expect of me by making myself available to them before mass. Even more than the time after mass, before mass I'm likely to hear from parishioners who is in the hospital, who has died, who has concerns about a job interview this week, and what's going on with their kids. I have concluded that people think the reason to see me before mass is to come up and tell me bad news. I think they expect me to carry their concerns inside and to offer them to God as their sacrifice. I need to associate the people with myself in the offering of sacrifice.

The paragraph continues, saying that the priest "gives his brothers and sisters the Bread of eternal life and partakes of it with them." Communion is why we have come. Giving communion is an expression of God's mercy, sharing with our brothers and sisters the body and blood of Christ, in whom we believe, and in whose presence we are.

Finally, paragraph 93 says this about a priest's ministry: "he must serve God and the people with dignity and humility, and by his bearing and by the way he pronounces the divine words he must convey to the faithful the living presence of Christ." Priests are in the limelight a lot. The secular media have high expectations of us, and when we fail, they expose us as hypocrites. Our best recourse is dignity and humility, confessing our sins yet striving to convey the living presence of Christ.

The world needs us. Our country needs examples of leadership to emulate. We may not be the subject of history classes in years to come, but we just need to be faithful to the people we serve.

On a recent trip to Rome, I brought my brother Mike around to see some of the principal shrines and sites of the city. He was seeing examples of Michelangelo's work for the first time. Raphael too. And da Vinci. Mike was making connections. He never realized that the Italian artists inspired everything from the Renaissance to the names of the Ninja Turtles. At dinner one night he asked the question that frequently comes up. "What about today? Who are the great artists today that are the equivalent of Michelangelo?" I told him, "There are great artists alive today, just as there were other great artists in the sixteenth century. But Michelangelo was unique. Just having one Michelangelo in the history of western civilization is enough. But think about this. There was a brief time when Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Rafael were all three living in the same city, Florence. Together they launched the Renaissance. The only comparison I can make closer to home is 1776: Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson all living at the same time and place, and creating the country we have today. We don't have statesmen like that any more. Nature is stingy with brilliance."

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The ministry we give from day to day enlivens the eucharist. Few will note nor long remember the words we say and the deeds we do. But the measure of our success is not in the longevity of its memory but in its devotion to the people of God at every eucharist.