

The presidency of the  
eucharist according  
to the ancient  
tradition essay  
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Jesus said ' Do this in remembrance of me'[i]. Simple words that have over many centuries developed in the Roman Catholic Church into a formalistic sacerdotal act performed only by celibate, in most cases, ordained men. This has value in itself, but is not the only way in which the Eucharist has been, can be and is celebrated. The title Eucharist ( from the Greek *eucharistia* ) means a celebration. The Catholic Encyclopaedia [ii]defines it as a sacrament and therefore it is ' an outward sign of an inward grace instituted by Christ'. It was always seen as a blessing. Ephrem [iii]of Syria in the 4th century urged Christians to ' Drink of the wine of his blessing' and likened the Eucharist to a wedding feast – imagery that can get lost in the formality of some Eucharistic gatherings. .

The majority of Christians participate in a ceremony as a remembrance of Christ and his sacrifice on a regular basis, although they may refer to it by some other name – communion, the Lord's Supper etc. Having said that, officially the Roman Catholic Church does not agree that ceremonies such as ' Holy Communion' are in fact the same as what the Catholic Encyclopaedia refers to as ' the True and Proper Sacrifice'.[iv] In the early church it would have been referred to by a number of names, each of which serves to convey something of its meaning – The Lord's Supper, the Sacrifice, the Mysteries, the Broken or Breaking of Bread and the Gathering Together. From the time of Augustine it was referred to as ' the Sacrament of the Altar'. The term ' Mass' comes from ' missa est' a term of dismissal from the ordinary language of the day, used for instance after a soldier had been given his orders for the day, though in churches it was used to mean that prayers were over, go out into the world. It came into general use during the

time of Gregory the Great in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The Eucharist consists of the consecration of bread and wine by a priest and then the distribution of these elements among the worshippers.

In his article Legrand asks important questions such as ‘ Who presided at the Eucharist in the pre-Nicene period?’ He goes on to ask how this presidency, resulting from an ordination, appears as a liturgical dimension of a pastoral charge, how the entire group celebrates and the meaning of the presidency of the Eucharist by ordained ministers.[v]

The New Testament does not concern itself with the matter very much. In fact surprisingly little when one considers the central place of the Eucharist in much of modern church life. We are told of very few occasions when the church broke bread together e. g. Acts 20 v 7-12 although this passage may or may not refer to the Eucharist as we know it , but possibly, and somewhat more likely at that stage of church corporate life, to the sharing of a meal in common, the Love Feast. The gathering was considered as a time when justice was dispensed in that the church quickly developed ways to ensure fair distribution. They were generous to each other and careful to take care of all. In Acts 2 v 42 ff. and Acts 6 and elsewhere there is mention of holding goods in common, of the distribution to widows and other such acts of Christian kindness. Legrand mentions a something akin to a Eucharistic celebration in Acts 13 v 1-2, but here it is prophets and teachers who preside. In 1 Corinthians 12 v 28 talking of various roles in the church and prophets and teachers come second to apostles. In Jude 12 a communal

gathering is described as ‘ a love feast’ i. e. a full meal for believers rather than a merely symbolic one.

There is no evidence that a woman presided in Acts 13 or elsewhere, but at the same time Priscilla is described elsewhere as being a teacher[vi] so it is not impossible that women took part. There is too the fact that at this time church meetings were often held in homes, in some cases in the home of Jewish widows. As in Judaism women take an active part in religious meals, such as the Sabbath dinner, it is possible that a woman would take part in a gathering of the church whether to enjoy a meal together or partake in something akin to our modern Eucharist. Without either positive or negative evidence this is speculation.

Legrand makes the important point that priesthood in the New Testament [vii] applies only to Christ himself or to the church members in general [viii] although all would not agree with this interpretation. Also we have in John 21 the commands of Jesus to Peter – ‘ Feed my lambs’, ‘ Take care of my sheep’, ‘ Feed my sheep. Surely he was being given a pastoral role rather than a priestly one.

How can the above be reconciled with the words of Pope John Paul II in ‘ Ordinato Sacerdotali’ ( 1994),[ix] which is concerned with reserving priestly ordination only for men and where he says that from the beginning the priesthood has always been reserved for men alone? While it is accepted that Christ chose the original 12 apostles of his own choice John Paul seems to be saying that only these were intimately involved in the ‘ mission of the incarnation’ yet there were many others involved, including many women.

When Christ was resurrected he could have appeared anywhere he chose - he chose first of all to do so close to Mary Magdalene. It was to her that Christ said ' Go to my brothers and tell them.' [x] There seems to be evidence from ancient art that women took part or presided at the Eucharist,[xi] but as we will see this does not necessarily mean that they were ordained as priests, although they had a prominent part in church life as can clearly be seen in the list of women workers in Romans 16. In Romans 16 v 7 we have a husband and wife team whom Paul describes as ' eminent among the apostles.'

The Pope goes on to say that it is to the holiness of the faithful that the hierarchical structure of the church is totally ordered and goes on to say that the greater gift is love. He says that reserving the role of priest to men alone is the constant and universal habit of the church, yet there is some evidence that this has not been entirely so according to the evidence of Pope Gelasi's letter of 494 which says :- We have heard to our annoyance that divine affairs have come to such a low state that women are encouraged to officiate at the sacred altars, and to take part in all matters imputed to the offices of the male sex.[xii] This statement seems to be saying that in Gelasi's opinion the priesthood should be the province of males only, but that in practice other things happened. There is also the question of the word priesthood as opposed to presidency. For Tertullian, born C. E. 160, the presidency of the Eucharist was based upon being the person in charge of the community and not exclusively on a priesthood according to Bénévot.[xiii]

Tertullian is also quoted by Legrand [xiv] as saying :- Where there is no body of ordained ministers in residence, you celebrate the Eucharist, layman, you <https://assignbuster.com/the-presidency-of-the-eucharist-according-to-the-ancient-tradition-essay-sample/>

baptize and you yourself are your own priest, for where two or three are gathered, there is the church, even if these three are laymen.[xv] This was by no means a universal idea – Augustine for instance would not have agreed, but the practices described presumably reflect more than Tertullian's personal opinion. Legrand mentions [xvi] for instance how in 4th century Ethiopia lay evangelists celebrated Eucharist.[xvii] As the movement spread ever wider worship became no longer centered on an actual meal table. It also became less Jewish in nature as Gentiles became the majority. Specialized patterns of ministry developed and other happenings changed the nature of both the Eucharist and love feasts. For instance early in the second century C. E. Roman law outlawed the meals of all fraternities.[xviii] [1] These early meals seem to have combined both formal and freer forms of worship in contrast to the often more formal celebrations of modern times. Justin Martyr, other known as Justin of Caesarea, wrote in 2nd century C. E. Rome ' We offer God in spirit solemn prayers and songs of praise.'[xix] and in the following century Origen said ' the sign of our gratitude to God is the bread called eucharist.'[xx] These were joyful occasions shared by everyone- note the use of ' We'.

There is no conception here of one person celebrating mass alone. Gradually there was change. John Chrysostom in Constantinople in the 4th century complains that the people are fenced off from the table. [xxi] By this time a theology of ordination had developed and the congregation was kept away from the altar. A book of instructions for bishops, the Apostolic Constitutions[xxii], gives instructions for such things as the removing of people sitting in the wrong places. Yet it is Christ who calls us to the

celebration and, although there obviously must be order as we are told in passages such as Colossians 3, this need not necessarily mean rigidity. In the 3rd century C. E. Cyprian said ‘ Certainly the priest fulfills the part of Christ’.[xxiii] This idea has been taken up, perhaps with the wrong emphasis, by those who would continue to restrict the presidency of the Eucharist. But in Galatians 3 v 28 we are told that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’. Can any one person then be considered as more fit than another to have the presidency of the Eucharist, providing that they are seeking to extend the kingdom of God?

Hippolytus, in the 3rd century C. E. speaking of those in chains for the sake of the gospel said:- A confessor, if he was in chains for the name of the Lord, shall not have hands laid on him for the diaconate or the priesthood, for he has the honor of the priesthood by his confession.[xxiv]Legrand quotes from the canon of Hippolytus[xxv] to prove that slaves, although never apparently ordained and so not priests, when punished for Christ’s sake becomes ‘ presbyters of the flock’ and would therefore, at least in many areas of the Christian world, be entitled to preside at the Eucharistic feast. In early medieval times there was a strong emphasis on the Mass as a means of grace. There also developed the rule of a priest needing to say Mass every day. This led to two things – the mumbling Masses in side chapels by an individual with no group activity at all and to the saying of private Masses on behalf of rich individuals. The simple table had become a fixed stone altar cut off from the people it was meant to serve.

There was an emphasis upon sacrificial language in the western church. The Council of Trent in the 16th century described the Mass as ‘ a sacrifice possessed of its own powers of atonement and petition’[xxvi] . though in the east prayer for the Spirit to descend, salvation, intercession and other aspects seem to have been more important or at least as important. Even aspects such as the doctrine of transubstantiation, which though described by Paschasius Radbertus in 831 C. E..[xxvii] (Although he but did not use the term itself), was not formally adopted by the church until as late as 1215 at the 4th Lateran Council, so we see that what is seen as tradition does not always go right back to the time of the apostles. Eleanor Kreider entitles the final chapter of her book[xxviii] ‘ Unity, One in Christ, One at the Table’ . She describes how the act should be a coming together to receive forgiveness and daily bread as signs of the coming of the kingdom. It is a meeting with other people whom Christ has invited, both saints and sinners. This is how it began and this is surely how it ought to be. This is the true tradition that was first handed down to us. Yet it is all too often not what happens.

In the past the celebration of the Eucharist became central, as it still is in the Roman Catholic Church, but even fathers of the church such as Augustine of Hippo had, according to Augustinian News[xxix], neither a systematic theology of the Eucharist or a fixed approach to it. What members of the modern church may often judge to be authentic tradition is rather the accumulation of many ideas and practices over the centuries. Legrand speaks of the way in which, in the early church, which should surely be our model, Christians in a local church would provide themselves with a president[xxx]. He asks does it not then follow that:- ‘ as soon as ‘ Christians



are competent to preside over the upbuilding of their local church they are likewise competent to receive the ordination which entitles them to preside at the Eucharist. [xxxix] Today the church faces a decrease in the number of those coming forward for ordination.

Whatever the reasons for this, it is a fact that must be dealt with by the church of the 21st century. A look at world wide statistics reveals that Mass attendance is increasing in many countries, both in the numbers of people attending and in the frequency that they do so.[xxxix] If we consider that Christ's words ' Do this in remembrance of me' as a command then we have to take them alongside this the fact that vocation today is considered to be the choice of the individual and his response to God's call, rather than the recognition by the church of a chosen individual, as it seems to have often been in earlier times. This change in part explains why fewer men are responding to this command by offering themselves for the priesthood. Also there is the fact that though some chose and choose celibacy it was not a necessity and was not insisted upon in every case until the 12th century. [xxxix]

In a July 1953 audience, the young priest Karol Józef Wojtyła, who later became Pope John Paul the Second, said:

Celibacy does not belong to the essence of the priesthood. Jesus didn't make a law, but proposed an ideal of celibacy for the new priesthood that he was establishing.[xxxix]

Of course since that date we have had the admission of many married men, former Anglican priests, as priests of the Roman Catholic Church. They and <https://assignbuster.com/the-presidency-of-the-eucharist-according-to-the-ancient-tradition-essay-sample/>

thousands of others, of both sexes, in other parts of the universal Church of Christ, by their ministry and lives, prove that it is perfectly possible to combine marriage and the priestly/pastoral role. This is also a period when there is much experimentation in the way worship is conducted, while at the same time remaining true to essential elements. Too often this goes on in isolation to the act of the Eucharist.

In a homily given in his native Germany in 2006, Pope Benedict XVI expressed the need of the church for priests, ' people are waiting for heralds to bring them the Gospel of peace, the good news of God who became man.'[xxxv]

Pope Paul VI stated at Vatican II on December 7, 1965 :- The Lord Jesus, " whom the Father has sent into the world" (John 10: 36) has made His whole Mystical Body a sharer in the anointing of the Spirit with which He Himself is anointed. In Him all the faithful are made a holy and royal priesthood; they offer spiritual sacrifices to God, through Jesus Christ, and they proclaim the perfections of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light. Therefore, there is no member who does not have a part in the mission of the whole Body; but each one ought to hallow Jesus in his heart, and in the spirit of prophecy bear witness to Jesus.[xxxvi]

This statement, which fits in so well with scripture as might be expected, seems to well reflect true ancient tradition and includes all who confess the name of Christ. If the church is to live out this statement it needs to carefully consider its implications. The congregation cannot be placed in an inferior position, but must be allowed to fully partake. It implies too that wherever

Christians gather in worship, whether or not food is partaken and in grand cathedral or humble kitchen, whether or not a priest is present, this a true remembrance of Christ if they truly gather in Christ's name. This is not to say that it is legitimate, as Legrand emphasizes[xxxvii], if done in refusal to have communion with the wider church. Therefore it is not to be ' instead of' but where it happens it is a part of the ministry of the church as a whole. The sacrament is of course a sign of unity and as such must be a matter of the most careful consideration. It should surely be possible that when Christians from different branches of the church gather together, as for instance during the Week of Christian Unity, or at Taizé, they should be able to celebrate together.

Legrand concludes his essay by reintroducing the words with which he began. ' Because they preside over the church they preside over the Eucharist' – many of us have been in services where the Eucharist did not take place because a priest, for whatever reason, was not available. The early church offers a solution to the church of the 21st century if it will embrace it. Augustine of Hippo told his communicants [xxxviii] to ' be what you see and believe what you are ' that is to say believe and live as the body of Christ.'[xxxix] He seems too to be talking of the doctrine, as yet unformulated, of transubstantiation, when he says :-

You are looking at bread and cup. This is the evidence before your physical sight. But your faith must be instructed concerning it- this bread being Christ ' s Body and the cup containing His Blood. Though perhaps these words may be enough to initiate faith, faith must be further instructed in

accordance with the Prophet's words: ' Believe that you may understand'( Isaiah 7: 9).[xi]

Not all early church leaders took the same view. Ephrem of Syria [xli]for instance describes the bread and cup as the outward form of his body and blood, which is not quite the same as saying that it is the body and blood of the Savior. This is not a matter of proof, but of belief.

Legrand [xlii]urges us to look at the meaning of the Eucharist and its interrelation with the meaning of the ordained priesthood i. e. that those who preside in the church should preside over the Eucharist as the symbol of the churches unity. Even more than just an examination of the ordained priesthood it is time to examine the role of the church and the Eucharist as a whole or there will be even more separation from the tradition as handed down by Christ, and it is after all his table. The church with strong Eucharistic pattern, but one that has room for flexibility and one that is not tied up in fixed formulas and codes of practice, but which is led by the Spirit of Christ, will be better able to feed the whole church and after all isn't that the role that Christ gave to Peter and his other followers. Can their successors do less?

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