

## Regaining A Sense Of The Parish

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### Origins of the Parish in the Plan of God

As the number of active priests in Britain continues to wane, the debate on the structuring and restructuring of our parishes rages on. And with the, sometimes necessary, closure and amalgamation of parishes one senses increasingly a tendency to belittle the role of the priest which, for many, is no longer considered an imperative component of a viable parish. Indeed, across the country, recruitment of lay parish workers appears to be more of a priority than ensuring the availability of priests. Amid the confusion that exists among laity and clergy alike, and the endless series of studies relating to the sociological nature of parishes, we suggest that a look at the theological perspective on the meaning of the parish might shed some necessary light on the subject - after all, without this theological dimension, the parish is meaningless in any case. Immediately after Peter's address at Pentecost we read: "They were convinced by his arguments, and they accepted what he said and were baptised. That very day about three thousand were added to their number" (Acts 2:41). Perhaps we sometimes forget that the Church started as a parish in Jerusalem, that only about fifty days after Our Lord's Ascension into heaven and following the crucial event of Pentecost, the newly baptised were incorporated into the first parish, which Luke goes on to describe in more detail: "These [the newly baptised] remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the 'communion' [Koinonia], to the breaking of bread and to the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Although there are several points of note here, what strikes us most about this text is surely its description of the Eucharistic Assembly and the fact that, from the very beginning, the Eucharist was absolutely central to the embryonic Church.

### "The Teaching of the Apostles"

Bearing in mind that the Gospels as such had not been written down at this stage, we may speculate that the kind of teaching involved would have been similar to that of Peter's address after Pentecost (Acts 2:12-26), in which he spoke of the Death and Resurrection of Christ and referred to the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning Him. At various times a narrative of Christ's teaching and miracles would probably have been added, which would later be edited and evolve into the four Gospels or reappear in letters from Peter, James, John and Jude, thus forming part of the New Testament. In other words, we have something very like our Liturgy of the Word and Homily. This "teaching of the apostles" was the seed of the Magisterium of the Church of Christ that, guided by the Holy Spirit, would be normative for the whole Church throughout history.

### "The Communion"

The Jerusalem Bible translates the second element in the first parish as "Brotherhood", the Revised Standard Version as "Fellowship", but both of these are poor translations of the Greek word Koinonia. The word does indeed mean

"solidarity", "communion" or "fellowship" with each other but its more profound meaning refers to the mutual "Communion" that comes from the Eucharist. It is expressed in a key text from St Paul:

"The blessing-cup that we bless is a communion (Koinonia) with the blood of Christ, and the bread that we break is a communion (Koinonia) with the body of Christ. The fact that there is only one loaf means that, though there are many of us, we form a single body because we all have a share in this one loaf" (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

In other words, it is through Eucharistic communion with the Body of the Lord that our unity as a community comes about and the Church is built up - "the Eucharist makes the Church"

#### "The Breaking of Bread"

To confirm this Eucharistic perspective, the expression "the Breaking of Bread" is used. It is an early Christian expression for the Holy Eucharist, which is familiar to us from the episode of the two disciples who encounter the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. He starts to teach them by giving them His own "Liturgy of the Word" - "Starting with Moses and going through all the prophets he explained to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about himself" (Lk. 24:27) - and then, in the inn, there follows the "Liturgy of the Eucharist", when Jesus "took the bread and said the blessing; then he broke it and handed it to them" (Lk. 24:30). We are told that the disciples "had recognised Him at the breaking of bread" and immediately we see the truth of the statement that the Eucharist makes the Church. Further confirmation of the use of this expression is seen in the short passage in Acts 20:7 about the early Christians at Troas during St Paul's first missionary journey there, where we are also reminded of the custom, even at this very early stage, of "Sunday Mass", of celebrating the Eucharist on the "first day of the week". (Actually it appears to have been a Vigil Mass on this occasion, since it began in the evening and went on till the middle of the night - testimony to Paul's lengthy preaching as well!)

#### "The Prayers"

Although we are not given any details concerning the prayers said by the early Christians, we can nevertheless speculate that the "Lord's Prayer", the Our Father, which we today always recite at Mass, would almost certainly have been included. There would have been Psalms, with which all Jews were familiar, especially as they saw in them the prophecy of the Messiah, the Christ; and there would have been something akin to the "Prayers of the Faithful" that we have at Mass today. Paul would later remind the disciples: "With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms and hymns and inspired songs to God" (Col. 3:16). We can be left in

no doubt that the first parish was essentially a praying community. The obvious conclusion in all of this, and the point which today cannot be reiterated enough, is that, of its very nature, the first parish was profoundly Eucharistic. What we now call "the Mass" was at its very heart. Pope John Paul in his recent Encyclical on the Church and the Eucharist has referred to Acts 2:42:

"The Church was born of the paschal mystery. For this very reason the Eucharist, which is, in an outstanding way, the sacrament of the paschal mystery, stands at the centre of the Church's life. This is already clear from the earliest images of the Church found in the Acts of the Apostles ... The 'breaking of the bread' refers to the Eucharist. Two thousand years later, we continue to relive that primordial image of the Church." (Ecclesia de Eucharistia, 3)

### Jesus the New Temple Among Us in All Our Parishes

The episode of Jesus cleansing the Temple in Jerusalem is followed by the Lord saying: "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up" and St John comments: "He was speaking of the Temple that was his Body" (Jn 2:19, 22). The word for Body here is soma in Greek, the same word used at the Last Supper by Jesus for his Eucharistic Body - "This is my Body (soma) which is given up for you." Gradually, therefore, as Christians began to comprehend Jesus as the New Temple, the daily practice recorded in Acts of going to the (Jewish) Temple began to decline. Today, after many centuries of development, we can understand that the practice of placing the Tabernacle in our churches is a genuine development of doctrine and liturgy - the Tabernacle contains Jesus the New Temple among us, not just in Jerusalem either, but in every Catholic church throughout the world. In parishes up and down the country people go "to the Temple every day" to visit the Lord Jesus, the centre of parish life, truly present among us in our churches, as Pope John Paul reminds us: "A Christian community desirous of contemplating the face of Christ ... cannot fail also to develop this aspect of Eucharistic worship, which prolongs and increases the fruits of our communion in the body and blood of the Lord. 'In the course of the day the faithful should not omit visiting the Blessed Sacrament, which in accordance with liturgical law must be reserved in churches with great reverence in a prominent place. Such visits are a sign of gratitude, an expression of love and an acknowledgment of the Lord's presence" (Paul VI), (Ecclesia de Eucharistia, 25).

If Jesus really is the New Temple among us, it is difficult to see how He could ever be placed anywhere other than the centre of the church. Can we imagine a 'reform' of the Temple in Jerusalem such that the Holy of Holies would be relegated to the side? There would have been riots in the Holy City. Yet we have known young priests who have been positively discouraged and even forbidden by authority to relocate the Lord to his rightful place in their churches.

### New Temple - New Priesthood

If Jesus claimed to be the New Temple then we should expect a New Priesthood, and this He gave us at the Last Supper - in giving us his Body, the New Temple, in the Eucharist, He also simultaneously gave us his new priests, his apostles. The priestly vocation and ministry is therefore, by its very nature, fully centred on the Person of Jesus in the Eucharist - in the Mass and in the Tabernacle. The heart of a priest's life is the celebration of the Priestly Prayer of Jesus every day in the Holy Eucharist, in which he offers himself with Christ to the Father in the Holy Spirit. And when priests pray the Divine Office with Jesus in the Tabernacle, they offer it through Him, with Him and in Him for the parish, and in union and communion with the whole Church and with all its parishes. But it is Jesus Christ in Person in the Tabernacle who continues His Priestly Prayer day and night at the heart of our parish life. We need to restore the sense of the priest's life and vocation as essentially a love of Jesus but a love of Jesus incarnated in His living Presence in the Eucharist. This is where the priest will find his true fulfilment: in communion and prayer with the Eucharistic Jesus, not in endless sociological and psychological analyses, although these may indeed have value of a secondary nature.

### The Synagogue Also Prepared for the Parish

It was not only the Temple and its liturgy that prepared for the first parish, but also the synagogues, as we see from the episode of Jesus returning to the little synagogue in Nazareth where he had been brought up (Lk. 4:16-30). We are told that he went there every Sabbath Day as was his custom and, on this occasion, He gets up and reads from the prophet Isaiah. In fact the synagogue service was very similar to the Liturgy of the Word as we have it at Mass today with prayers, blessings and readings from the Scriptures and an address from the Rabbi. The synagogue as well as the Temple foreshadowed the parish, so much so that Alfred Edersheim the great Jewish Christian convert could write: The synagogue became the cradle of the Church. Without it, as indeed without Israel's dispersion, the Church Universal would humanly speaking, have been impossible, and the conversion of the Gentiles have required a succession of millennial miracles. ( The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Hendrickson 1993, p. 298). Edersheim also points out that the festal Sabbath Lamp was lit in the synagogue to remind the Jewish people of the perpetual light in the Temple of Jerusalem, the light which symbolised the presence of God Himself within the Holy of Holies. Do not the sanctuary lamp and the lighted candles at Mass in our parishes represent a continuous tradition and link with both the synagogue and the Temple now fulfilled in the Eucharistic presence of Christ? It is recorded that around the year 230 AD in Alexandria in Egypt, the great preacher Origen, in his sermon at Sunday Mass, addressed this same event in the life of Christ (Lk. 4:21): "Here too in this present Assembly you can at this very moment fix your eyes upon your Saviour if you wish. Whenever you direct your inward gaze toward wisdom and truth and the contemplation of God's only Son, your eyes are

fixed upon Jesus. Blessed was that congregation of which the Gospel says, 'All eyes in the synagogue were fixed upon him.' When you look at Jesus your own faces will become radiant with his reflected glory, and you will be able to say - 'The light of your face has shed its brightness upon us, O Lord.'" To Jesus be power and glory forever (On Luke's Gospel 32, 2-6: SC87, 386-392).

#### Every Parish Is of Apostolic Origin

If we follow the progress of the Church after Pentecost, we now begin to appreciate how it grew from the first parish, since the apostolic mission not only entailed preaching Christ but also setting up other parishes to replicate the original parish. At first these were located in cities which they oversaw as "Bishop" but after a while the workload became too great and further true "Eucharistic Ministers", or "presbyters" were appointed, priests who would bring the fullness of the life of Christ in the Eucharist to the growing communion - thus new parishes replicated the first parish, and continue to do so until today, now within a canonical legal framework. We can truly say therefore that each parish is of apostolic origin and is an extension and imitation of that first parish in Jerusalem where Jesus Christ continues to be with his people, his Body: the norm for all teaching in our parishes remains the "teaching of the apostles", the Magisterium of the Church and, in every Eucharistic Prayer, in order to show our universal "Communion" through "the Breaking of Bread" and "the Prayers", we manifest our communion with the apostles by reference to "N. our Pope and N. our bishop and for all who hold and teach the Catholic faith that comes to us from the apostles" (Eucharistic Prayer I).

#### "The Eucharist Makes the Parish"

If "the Eucharist makes the Church", we can therefore truly say that "the Eucharist makes the parish", always in union and communion with its bishop and with the one who holds the office of Peter in the Church. Cardinal Ratzinger has written:

"The parish community, in receiving the Eucharistic presence of the Lord, receives the entire gift of salvation and shows, even in its lasting visible particular form, that it is the image and true presence of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church" (Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion, Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, 28th May 1992, Para. 11). And Pope John Paul has recently echoed this teaching in his Encyclical Letter on the Church and the Eucharist: "If the Eucharist builds the Church and the Church makes the Eucharist, it follows that there is a profound relationship between the two, so much so that we can apply to the Eucharistic mystery the very words with which, in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, we profess the Church to be 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic' (Ecclesia et Eucharistia, 26). Therefore we may affirm that, although the Church is greater than her priests, the principle that was there from the beginning remains today - "no Priests - no Eucharist - no Church". Sometimes one hears discussion among priests about what sort of parish they have. Some parishes are "juicy plums"; others are "dreadful", the "Siberia of the

diocese" etc ... Let us not forget the basic truth in all this, that Jesus Christ, the living and true God, Creator of the universe and Saviour of the world, is with us every day in Mass and present next door to us. Perhaps some of us priests need a reality check, and who better to give it to us than St John Vianney, who could rightly claim to be sent to the "worst" parish in the diocese. Forgetting the injustice of his placement and the treatment meted out to him by the diocesan authorities, he immediately focused his whole life and ministry where it should be - on Jesus in the Eucharist. He stayed in that poor remote parish, carried out a remarkable ministry and is now the patron saint of parish priests. John Paul has recently emphasised the point that Christ is present through the Eucharist in all our churches: "When I think of the Eucharist, and look at my life as a priest, as a Bishop and as the Successor of Peter, I naturally recall the many times and places in which I was able to celebrate it. I have been able to celebrate Holy Mass in chapels built along mountain paths, on lakeshores and seacoasts; I have celebrated it on altars built in stadiums and in city squares. "This varied scenario of celebrations of the Eucharist has given me a powerful experience of its universal and, so to speak, cosmic character. Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation. "The Son of God became man in order to restore all creation, in one supreme act of praise, to the One who made it from nothing. He, the Eternal High Priest who by the blood of his Cross entered the eternal sanctuary, thus gives back to the Creator and Father all creation redeemed. He does so through the priestly ministry of the Church, to the glory of the Most Holy Trinity" (Ecclesia et Eucharistia, 8).

#### Mary our Companion in Parish Life

Just as the Acts of the Apostles assures us that the Mother of Jesus was also present in that first parish in Jerusalem (1:14), so her memory, example and prayers should be present in all our parishes, and not only through the permanent reference to her in every Eucharistic Prayer. In all our churches there should be a prominent image of the Mother of Jesus, in recognition of the integral role she played and continues to play in God's plan of salvation. As Pope John Paul reminds us, Mary and the Eucharist are inextricably linked: "Certainly Mary must have been present at the Eucharistic celebrations of the first generation of Christians, who were devoted to "the breaking of bread" (Ac. 2:42). But in addition to her sharing in the Eucharistic banquet, an indirect picture of Mary's relationship with the Eucharist can be had, beginning with her interior disposition. Mary is "a woman of the Eucharist" in her whole life. The Church, which looks to Mary as a model, is also called to imitate her in her relationship with this most holy mystery" ( Ecclesia et Eucharistia, 53).

#### Jesus at the Heart of Every Parish

Our parishes then are centred on Jesus in His Sacraments, giving new life to us in Baptism, forgiving our sins in Penance and Reconciliation, sealing us with the Holy Spirit in Confirmation, anointing us when we are sick and, above all, being

with us and feeding us with Himself in the Holy Eucharist. Here Jesus calls his priests to pray and to build up communion with Him, with his Mother and with all the saints, and with each other. The parish is not a closed communion but an open one, designed to bring all to Jesus Christ and to communion with his praying Church. Every parish, therefore, no matter how humble, is the place where the Church in its fullness is present because Jesus, our Master, Lord, God and personal Friend is present, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. The vocation of priests is to know and to love Christ personally in his Eucharistic Body and in the Body of His People, the Family of God. It is in the parish that the Lord Jesus calls all of us to Him - to share His Life, His Teaching, His Truth and His Love in its fullness and in each other. Without priests in our parishes, we will not have parishes at all, for their very essence is Eucharistic.

### Loving Our Parishes

Sometimes our churches are not in the most salubrious places - often in poor and deprived areas, spiritually and materially - but then we are reminded that this is where Jesus, through his priests, wishes to be. We would do well to remember that Jesus the Bread of Life was born in Bethlehem (the "City of Bread"), not in a "top parish" or in a palace, and He died the most bitter and painful death outside the Holy City in the most humiliating circumstances. However, in Bethlehem and on Calvary the Redemption of the world was taking place. So too in our parishes. Whether they be large or small, rich or poor, country churches or magnificent basilicas, Jesus is there in Person in the Eucharist. So let us love our parish churches as the place where God, in His providence, has chosen to remain in our midst, and let us thank God for them. They are part of God's Unity-Law of Control and Direction, working through history to provide for us as individuals and as a People. They have a divine pedigree in the synagogue and in the temple, which, we must remember, had its roots in the Tent of Meeting in the desert, and ultimately on Mount Sinai. As long as we continue on the path of priestless parishes, no amount of restructuring of parishes will ever bear fruit, either in the holiness of her members or in vocations to priesthood and religious life. Without the Eucharist, it will not, properly understood, be a parish at all.