

The Eucharist as Presence: Thoughts for a Contemporary Synod
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Part One
The Reality

Enfolded in the safety of our Catholic faith in Ireland lies the mystery to end all mysteries, the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. This true human and divine presence neither repels nor confuses. Jesus neither debates nor demands. Jesus Christ simply radiates love to all who encounter him therein.

Our Catholic Church, as an Institution, could be viewed as a protective edifice which surrounds the Eucharist as its central focus. The love of Christ radiates out to every person born. There are no limits to the love of Jesus, his acceptance, and his compassion and mercy. All of these things move out from each tabernacle. Within these four actions – love, acceptance, compassion, and mercy - lies the purest reality of the Gospel message which can renew and reform the Catholic Church in every member, most particularly those of us who feel no need for either renewal or reform.

Possibly, those of us who think we are doing well possess the most urgent need for renewal. We can all agree that the mere practice of religion does not ensure communion of heart with Christ. Thus, the call for renewal is a universal one, pleading out from us all.

We recognise many aspects of our Church. Each aspect, perhaps simply summarised within the commonly identified models of the Church, could be summarised again in one more model, perhaps something we might call the Church in the Individual. The Church as Institution, Community, Sacrament, Herald, Servant, must obviously give way to each small potential unit of mission: each person. Each person, possesses within him or her, a craving to be loved. We might say that God, himself, hopes for love for every person ever born. All aspects of Church must bow before that divine reality first. The true, living, radiating presence of the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, surely desires most to express his limitless love out from the Eucharist to all. Jesus expresses his love through acceptance of people in all conditions of life, with compassion in suffering and in perfect understanding of each of us in that dreadful state when we become confounded by our fallen natures. Jesus exhibits mercy, always, at the collective and individual residue of humanity's negative contributions to ourselves, others, to the very earth itself, and to the Kingdom of God.

Where Jesus is recognised in the Eucharist, where mankind is humble before him, virtue develops. Within the beauty of virtue lies the renewal of each one of us and also our Church. We, in our admittedly broken and struggling faith communities, have always had the answer. We have always possessed the correct response to our human failures and our hunger for wellness and spiritual health. The answer lies in the Eucharist.

Lest anyone begin a legal dialogue about who is worthy to receive the Eucharist, Jesus Christ, in his eternal state of perfection, lest we continue to 'protect' or perhaps 'over-protect' the all-powerful Jesus Christ through our sometimes flawed tribunals and our even more unkind and unfounded human judgments, we may agree to offer the presence of Jesus Christ in the

Eucharist visibly, as widely as possible, as often as possible, as determined by our Church leadership. We can offer Eucharistic Adoration and presence in our Churches, yes, but also in our public squares for brief and simple Eucharistic visits. We can humbly make the offer to our fellow people. If the offer is accepted, we can bring Christ wherever people mourn, grieve, rejoice or give thanks, reminding all that we, Catholics, believe that nobody will be forgotten or abandoned by our loving, merciful God.

Let us, Catholics in Ireland, turn to what we profess to believe and come to believe it more fiercely and forcefully, that is, the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. Let us claim our Catholic identity with decisive passion and action. As our nation and culture adjusts itself to a worldly global identity, divesting itself of the religious chains that some people feel constricted it, let us, too, divest ourselves of what is unspiritual. As a faith community, let us determine our wellness, not through large numbers or acceptance and approval from the wider culture. Like Christ, we must learn to be without that acceptance. We expect to stand out from secular culture. Perhaps it is time to evaluate our wellness through the Spirit of love we hold for every person in the name of Jesus Christ. We can determine our wellness through our love for each other. Comparing ourselves to the merciful example of Jesus Christ in Scripture, not the wider culture, will direct our eyes toward Heaven, where we should regularly gaze.

Irish Catholicism, for better or worse, gave form and courage to a new Republic. Yet, the Catholic Church is no longer needed to strengthen a young nation. People may have different opinions about the separation of Church and State but perhaps we can agree that neither state nor religion develops properly when harnessed together. Two entirely different contributions, when enmeshed, seemed to produce purity in neither.

We, as Irish people, will disagree about much, but we, as Irish Catholics, can agree about that which cannot and will not change, the presence of Jesus Christ, true man and true God, in the Eucharist. No more than some feel the Church overly effected the Irish state to its detriment in its early phases of development, we must discern whether those prevailing social realities, with their heady mix of new statehood and burgeoning powers, distorted our growth and direction as a Church. The answers we seek and require, in our current state of need, should be asked of Jesus Christ, who possesses still, an unchangeable and keen desire to lead us. We go into battle not against our fellow Irish who reject the contemporary Church, but against the evil of complacency in our own hearts. We must allow Jesus to lead us quickly, without delay, to a more pure distillation of the Gospel Message of love.

Part Two

Christ as Presence

Perhaps a Eucharist-centered Catholicism in Ireland will remind people that they are loved by perfection, regardless of religion.

In each diocese, we may establish an invitational practice of holding monthly Eucharistic Holy Hours with our bishops and priests. Silence, quiet and contemplative music, can be offered with an individual blessing by the priest with the monstrance for each person who desires such a blessing. This represents a true invitation, where nobody need worry about whether or not they are married, divorced, practicing, or indeed, even Catholic. All will be welcome to sit before perfection, plead their needs, and be blessed by Christ.

We must find a way to offer Jesus Christ in the Eucharist to our brothers and sisters who are suffering the isolation of incarceration, imprisonment, addiction, poverty, homelessness, refugee status, or violence. Small groups of humble Catholics with a priest or deacon when available can bring a simple monstrance out into the places where God's children find themselves and offer him to them for a simple blessing. Before we begin to list the reasons this is not possible, let us list the ways it can be done.

Regarding obligations to the Church by people who have left it or stopped faith practice, is obligation an appropriate or helpful word to use? Perhaps not. People may never attend a Mass or other Church liturgy and still be nicely meeting their divine obligations to love. We, however, who find ourselves in direct service to the Catholic Church, possess the true obligation, which is to transform interiorly so as to represent Jesus Christ with greater and greater accuracy. That is the only obligation we should discuss. Our own. Otherwise, we risk 'tying up heavy burdens, hard to carry, and laying them on people's shoulders, but not lifting a finger to move them' (Matthew 23:4).

What can we do quickly? We can beseech God for renewal and bring the Eucharistic Jesus everywhere he is welcome, wherever people laugh or cry, live or die. We can remain in humble attendance to him, assisting at Mass and placing daily all of our hopes in his power to claim renewal through personal holiness. Thus we will continue to harness the living Spirit which pulses hope out into the world.

Part Three

A Caution

Peril can be located in the belief that if only people would conform to a rigorous practice of teachings, we would have a healthy Church. All evidence is, indeed, to the contrary. Even the simplicity of the plan above requires a commitment to updated human and spiritual formation. Each person, to stand in any Eucharistic assembly, process in one, or point to one, must first be encouraged to accept that they are loved infinitely. Without this knowledge, we will be prone to the recreation of former edifices of human glory, which, at the very least, lack spiritual magnetism.

There is no point in looking back nostalgically, even though much of what we offered from the Irish Catholic Church was good. If we are to look back, let us do so with a kind but critical eye, to examine carefully the root cause of the spiritual 'damp' that crept into our hearts and communities and caused disrepair, injury, and dishonour. Who among us would like to be in a yesterday of our life? That could signal unwillingness to live and serve in the reality that is today, always making earnest and hopeful plans for tomorrow.

We acknowledge that we walk among the ghosts of past mistakes. We are human, yes. But we also walk among countless examples of virtue and clarity of purpose which inspire us and draw us forward. The most effective renewal attitude will not be a legal one but an attitude of personal holiness and personal evangelisation. How do we present ourselves to Christ for renewal, first, as followers of the Word? Without a deep, committed, contemplative prayer life, it would seem to be impossible. Contemplative Prayer, as defined by St. Teresa of Avila, is "nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us." Intimacy with Jesus, our personal guide, will lead us toward the loyalty of Peter, following the example of Mary, the Mother, Disciple, and Queen of the

Church. Indeed, it is her strength, determination, and selflessness which is needed now from all of us.

Yes, we lay down with relief our heavy burden of pleasing the wider culture. For to please the wider culture, we must guarantee the death of faith and the extinction of the mysterious presence among us of the living Spirit emanating out from the Scriptural Christ and the Eucharist.

Perhaps, though, we also lay down the burden of unreasonable expectations from human beings, whatever their vocations. We know that unreasonable expectations do not represent Jesus Christ. Therefore, who are we representing when we offer the most severe consequences, for example, to lay people, at the most vulnerable moments of marital failure and later in the possibly happy outcome of a more suitable life relationship? We decry the cruel practices of shunning and ‘subversive person’ status in religions we call cults. But some would say we resemble these religions when we exclude people from the reception of the Eucharist for actions we decide, via human tribunal, simply must be mortal sins.

Many observe that we have treated the subject of mortal sin in such a cruelly casual way that we have blocked the reality that Jesus died to absorb our guilt and dead-end any shame. Shame statements include both ‘I am a bad person’ and/or ‘you are a bad person.’ Either one dashes hope. More accurately, we are all human and we will all makes mistakes. Hence the beauty of the sacramental graces of healing. Jesus did not choose to allow himself to be killed for each of us because he hated us or our sins. Hate does not bring forth life, but death, as his story showed. Jesus was willing to die for us because the extent of our innocence and vulnerability quite literally pierced his heart. He died for us so that we would walk resiliently in the world, not in lockstep, like slaves, but freely, with the potential for virtue and transformation always beckoning us forward.

If Christ died to end shame, to free us for ongoing hope of virtue, why do so many Christians feel so badly about themselves, sometimes to the point of self-loathing and even scruples? Healthy acknowledgment of failure, even sin, is quite different than shame and self-hatred.

This brings us to the next urgent need.

Part Four **The Pillars**

The Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, identified four necessary areas of formation for priests: Human, Spiritual, Academic, Pastoral.

“The basic principle of human formation is that the human personality of the priest is to be a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of humanity” PDV, n. 43).

Clearly, priests act as bridges to Christ through the Sacraments they bring about for each other and for lay people in the Church. Equally clear, the priest needs to work ongoingly to insure that he is humanly accountable to the priesthood he embodies and to the lay people in whose parishes he is placed.

We, lay people, cannot spare our priests and deacons the obligation of personal transformation and accountability. Neither can we excuse ourselves from it.

In another Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*, we read that “*Lay people must no longer be viewed as collaborators of the clergy but truly recognised as co-responsible for the Church’s being and action*” (Pope St. John Paul II).

If the Bride of Christ, the Church, is to continue in her development, then lay people and religious, like clergy, must also be formed in those four areas to insure the necessary transformation which will allow others to encounter them as bridges, too, in their meeting with “*Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of humanity*”.

This is not an equality issue. Each person and each role in the Church is unique, regardless of vocation, and will have unique challenges and demands according to role, yes, but also according to individual temperament and unique psychological reality. This formation issue is one of mercy, but also of holiness and authenticity. We must avoid the worldly demands of the ego and transcend the selfish demands of the body. After all, ‘self-mastery is a long and exacting work’ (CCC 2342). This presupposes process. We, Catholics, are intended to be continually straining forward in holiness, not because sin is so ugly, again, but because virtue is so beautiful. To stare outward and state that the Church is not holy enough is something we do collectively. But we must not do so to the degree that we become distracted from the hard work needed to improve our personal and collective conditions or miss our many virtuous contributions.

The exquisite interior journey to intimacy with the Saviour of humanity is a journey we are each invited into and drawn toward. That journey is a private one, assumed to be in a continual state of incompleteness until the very moment we advance from this life into the next. But a path must be lit, a true direction indicated. People need a heading which will lead them to greater love and respect for themselves and greater confidence in their Christianity.

Closer union with Heaven, intimacy with Christ, can be acquired through direct contact as occurs in human and spiritual formation, in deep contemplative prayer, through direct contact with the Eucharist, if not through reception then through proximity and Adoration, and through ongoing participation in the Sacraments.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

Part Five

Mystery Embraced

In an age where information is readily available, wisdom feels elusive. Information, facts, science, these things can be googled. Wisdom, however, must be acquired through experience over time.

True spirituality is similar. It is not theology. It is not religion. Spirituality cannot be willed, googled, or purchased. Like wisdom, it must be acquired over time and, in the right circumstances, can be informed and enhanced by either or both theology and religion. Erroneous expressions of either theology and religion can do damage, causing wounds of the

soul. Soul wounds are those which cause (seemingly) unbearable psychological pain and are so serious that at times it possibly takes Heaven to heal them.

The movement of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, can come like the softest of healing breezes on a quiet day and like the wildest of winds in a gale force storm. These mystical movements can be so strong that it feels as though one could be knocked back or so gentle as to prompt moments of silent wondering. What is at play? What is happening? One quiets the soul to better identify and hear God. This is spirituality. This is intimacy with God. This circumstance informs, consoles, and instructs with precision.

From his home in the substance of the consecrated bread and wine, the Eucharist, Jesus Christ pulses powerful movements of the Spirit, as stated. The presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, human and divine, is a mystery. We could leave it at that. But should we?

Mystery has never hampered Christians. We hold a relationship with all that we know and also with that which we cannot know in our current state. Yes, we thrive on mystery. And yet, God continues to further enlighten us through religion, true science, nature, and the arts. The invisible reality all around us is full of presence, not absence. Even when looking through a microscope, the energy that animates our body is mostly invisible, moving in and out of view. Jesus Christ both surrendered his life for us on Good Friday and then picked it up again or resumed it on Easter Sunday at the moment of his resurrection. He chose to surrender fully, to the point of death. He then chose to return to life. Which of us can do that? We should not believe this half way. None of us could do what he did in the power of his divinity.

What is happening in the Mass? How is Jesus Christ present in the Eucharist? We know that miracles of the Eucharist occur. They are real. Other miracles, too, occur. We are a people of belief, of faith, of God. We are an Easter people. The Eucharist, primarily understood as food, must also be understood as presence. In this time, perhaps we should offer Christ, truly present in the Eucharist, as an uncomplicated manner of approach to people who are, as stated, lonely, lost, and forgotten. Of course this includes each of us on given days. The presence of Christ in the Eucharist will, no doubt cut through a lot of details to bless people, if they are helped to encounter him there.

We must try harder to connect people directly to God. Offering a simple Holy Hour highlighting the presence of Christ in the Eucharist with an uncomplicated invitation is a beginning. We thus invite people, all people, not only to a human structure with its visible and well-advertised flaws, but also to a divine presence, with its mystery and perfection and timeless invitation. This, along with the assumption that each person is capable of and called to his own contemplative prayer life, his own mysterious and private relationship with God, will become the bridge back to the richness of the sacramental life.

When we direct ultimately to the Sacraments, we are directing to mystery in those *visible signs of invisible grace* (St. Augustine, CCC 1131).

In other words, we cannot embrace mystery in the Sacraments and ignore it in the Eucharist. We must be consistent and confident. We must recognise that while we do not fully understand the true presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist today, Jesus is truly present. We will later rejoice at the wisdom and power of God that we utilised for renewal. We will marvel at our courage and be grateful for our fidelity. If we begin with the Eucharist, proceed with the Eucharist, and rely on the Eucharist, we will not put a foot wrong, nor refuse to become a

humble, holy home for the Son of Man who so faithfully waits to lead us into a robust and healthy spirituality.

Final note

There are many specific and passionately held concerns from Catholics. There can be an understandable instinct to end anguish by taking action, any action, to change conditions. However, wrong action will take us further away from spiritual wellness and authenticity.

Nano Nagle, an Irish woman in County Cork in the late 1800's, felt great pain at the plight of Catholics in her time. She knew that their voices needed to be heard and heeded but that those voices were unedified by education. She started schools, at great personal risk. We can resemble those Catholics, without the correctly informed voices, when we burst into opinion without deep, prayerful, personal reflection. Our submissions should not read like newspaper headlines, even while our concerns may include valid points and deeply experienced sufferings.

Perhaps the familiar and similar themes of the submissions can prompt us to muse. Are we transforming in our faith or have we, believers and non-believers alike, become ensnared in contemporary identity politics?

Before we can reform the Catholic Church, something many Catholics desire, indeed, something God, himself must desire, we must submit to personal transformation and renewal for ourselves and for our communities. Only then can we insure that the needed reformation is taken directly from Jesus Christ, who is not the king of popular culture, after all, but the eternal King of his Church. Just as vocation by force is not true vocation, neither is religion by social pressure or default. As we move gently and respectfully away from cultural Catholicism, let us move into renewal through human and spiritual formation, personal contemplative prayer, and a new, deep and abiding recognition of the presence of our true leadership in the Eucharist. In this way, we will best protect our sacramental life and advance the most quickly into the holy and humble assemblies that await us.

Yes, enfolded in the safety of our Catholic faith in Ireland lies the mystery to end all mysteries, the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. This true human and divine presence neither repels, nor confuses. Jesus neither debates, nor demands. Jesus Christ simply radiates love to all who encounter him therein.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:7).