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Aidan Ryan

First Eucharist
Revisited

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The weekends of May each year in Ireland bring with them a burst of celebration centered on children aged about 8 receiving the Eucharist for the first time – and for some, it seems, possibly the last time until Confirmation four years down the road. The hotels are full of family groups of parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins and in-laws, some of whom are well under the weather by the time the day is over. Large bouncing castles, festooned with bouncing children, can be seen in many gardens, often with relatives relaxing nearby on garden furniture and consuming quantities of tasty finger food and cholesterol-packed desserts.

Earlier in the day, there will have been a liturgy in the local church, marked by maximum participation by the children concerned, with a ‘job’ or role for as many as 25 or 30 children, all carefully drilled to almost military perfection by the teachers in their local Catholic primary school. The church will be decorated with elegant art-work done in school, the school choir will put in an impressive performance, and people will comment on how lovely it all was. The occasion is an opportunity for the school to display its work in a variety of ways, and there is some resistance to change in this regard, even from teachers who are a bit ‘iffy’ both in their personal faith and in their teaching of religion.

AN EMPTY RITUAL?

But lurking underneath all of this, there will be a question. What does it all mean? Given the undeniable fact that hardly any of these children or their families will be at Mass the following Sunday, or are likely to be, at best, sporadic attenders in the years ahead, is it all a meaningless show, an empty ritual with nothing much at its core, a pretence of faith that in fact is non-existent? There is the related issue of the place of money in the celebration of the day. There are two aspects of this. Firstly, there is the expense of the

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day and the pressure put on some families who can ill afford it to spend large amounts in relation to the days. Secondly, the amounts of money collected by the children from relatives and neighbours, with comparisons of total 'takings' in classrooms the following week. This, and the more basic issues of the link (missing?) between faith and the days celebrations are questions that preoccupy many priests, some teachers and an occasional reflective parent, evoking disappointment, annoyance and some cynicism. They wonder is there any way we can do better than this.

The *roots* of the problem are deep, and they are at least *three-fold*. The three underlying issues are ; the cultural reality of a widespread forgetfulness of God, the continuance in Ireland of at least nominally Catholic schools that cater for the large majority of the population, and the decision of Pope St. Pius X in 1908, with the decree 'Quam Singulari', to lower the age for First Eucharist thus changing the traditional order for the sacraments of initiation, with Eucharist now coming before Confirmation. The interplay of these three factors lie at the root of the ever-increasing gap between the faith –vision of what the Eucharist is about, and the manner in which first participation in it has been surrounded in the culture of 21st century Ireland. Finding a way forward on this issue will involve addressing each of these issues and this will not be easy, nor will it be done swiftly – it may well take decades.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS?

In the meantime, it would be a lazy option just to sit back and wait for a long term solution to be found (presumably by somebody other than ourselves). The following is the reflection of one recently retired rural pastor about this question.

The first thing I wonder is – if we could find someone well versed in the art or science of evangelization, or someone who really has a thorough understanding of how the good news of the gospel is most effectively shared, what would such a person have to say about the opportunities and possibilities offered by the present situation in Ireland regarding the preparation and celebration of First Eucharist?

As I understand it at present, there at least four basic elements in evangelization – *firstly*, there is friendship or the creation, maintenance and deepening of warm personal relationships between the subjects and objects of evangelization. *Secondly*, service, meaning an attentive listening to the culture in which those to be evangelized are living, and which forms minds and attitudes. *Thirdly*, there is the gospel message, and an ability to communicate it in a language and manner which is both easily

understandable and attractive. *Fourthly*, there is the sacramental life of the church, in an atmosphere of thanksgiving and prayer. Effective evangelizers, if we could find them, would be able to help us greatly in finding ways to interweave these four elements in our approach to preparing families, not just children, for participation in the Eucharist and in the sacramental life of the church

First of all, they would want to know what we have been doing up to now. In this context we would look at the ‘Do this in Memory’ program, in use in some form or other in most Irish parishes for some years now. The experience has been somewhat uneven – in some places it has worked well, in others less so. It can achieve its stated aim, which is to familiarize children with the church and the faith community, in a worship setting as part of the parish element in preparation for the sacramental celebration. It can invite parents and families who are not usually church-going to at least some level of participation in the faith and worship of the parish community. However, one comment that one often hears is that many parents see it as another series of church-imposed hoops through which they must jump in order for their child to be part of the all-important Big Day in May.

It seems desirable that we be more invitational in our approach to all this. For example, what if we were able to invite parents of prospective First Communicants to a series of one-hour gatherings (e.g. once a month from September to Easter) in which the content of the *Grow in Love* program being covered in school – or sometimes not covered - that month would be explained and explored, with a view to the parents covering the material at home with their children. This might help parents to become familiar (again?) with some basic elements of Catholic faith. If they were genuine in their efforts to communicate this to their children it would certainly have an effect on their own faith. Ideally, these monthly gatherings would be more than just instructional lectures or classes. They would be interactive, having elements of dialogue between parents and those leading the gatherings, and among parents themselves. They would be relaxed, informal and enjoyable in a manner that parents would be happy to participate in regularly. They would, in fact, be an exercise in community building and friendship. Above all they would be optional, although a good effort would be made to invite warmly, without any element of coercion. For all of this a fairly high level of skill in adult catechetical methodologies would be needed.

Another form of the same basic approach might be provided by the *Alpha programs* that are now a familiar element in the life of some Irish parishes. This would have the advantage of a clear proven structure, clear content, and the addition of a social

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element involving the sharing of food. Parents would have the Alpha program introduced and explained to them at the customary September meeting held in most parishes to initiate the school year of preparation for First Communion, and they would be invited to consider doing this program later in the year (e.g. during Lent). A warmly phrased letter of invitation could be issued some weeks prior to the program, encouraging them to participate, but without any suggestion of coercion. This more invitational approach might be difficult for priests, since we have been able to ‘call the shots’ for so long. But in different times, different methodologies and mind-sets are needed.

One way of encouraging continued attendance after First Eucharist might be to invite the children, in the September following the ‘Big Day’, to become altar-servers. If some effort could be made to make the Mass-serving experience a happy one, with a tolerance for sporadic attendance and for some moments of minor liturgical chaos, then it might be an encouragement for some children and their families to come to Mass more often than they might otherwise do. In some parishes, especially in towns or cities, a special ‘Children’s Mass’ tries to go some way towards encouraging attendance in the years immediately after First Communion.

TACKLING THE ROOT CAUSES

However, none of these possible approaches will really address the three underlying issues outlined above i.e cultural forgetfulness of God, the continuation of nominally Catholic schools where ‘making First Communion’ is considered the norm in second class, and the detaching of the Eucharist from the traditional stages of Christian initiation, which saw it as the culmination of that process. So how might these issues be addressed in the longer term.?

The *first issue* – the widespread forgetfulness of God now prevalent in the popular culture of western Europe and now pervading Irish culture also – raises what is really the core question for the church at present in Ireland and further afield. How can we best proclaim the gospel in a way that has good chance of being heard? How can we communicate the message of Jesus to the people of this time and place? How can we create the conditions and contexts in which the seed of the gospel message can find receptive and fertile soil? This is a huge question but one thing at least seems clear. In the dominant culture, where God is missing but not missed, we need to find ways to create sub-cultures of intentional Catholicism into which people opt freely, and within which they find the support of people who share their faith, their

values and their hopes for the handing on of a spiritual heritage to their children.

The *second big issue* is the continued predominance of at least nominally Catholic schools in the Irish educational landscape at primary level. There are strong indications that the present situation cannot, and will not, continue much longer but it is not at all clear what kind of arrangement might be sustainable and agreeable to both church and state in the future. The ideal is that there would be much more choice for parents. That parents who wish a genuinely Catholic education for their children will have their rights as parents respected, while equal respect is given to those whose wish is for an alternative form and philosophy of education. This will be difficult and tortuous to work out in practice and will inevitable have an effect on the way First Communion (and Confirmation) is celebrated.

During 2019, a landmark decision was made in the Archdiocese of Dublin regarding preparation of children for First Penance and First Eucharist. In principle it is envisaged that responsibility for the preparation and celebration of these sacramental moments will be taken on by the *parishes* rather than by the schools (even the Catholic schools) in the future. Presumably the Catholic schools will continue to teach the Catholic religious education curriculum as heretofore, including the sections in the Second Class program that deal with Reconciliation and the Eucharist. But the specific preparation for the celebration of the two sacraments will be undertaken by the parish. It would be desirable, in this context, that parents themselves would decide when their child is ready for each sacrament and that arrangements would be made for children to celebrate them with their families. Parents would bring their child to any weekend or weekday Mass in the parish at any time after Easter of the year in which their child is in Second Class, having celebrated Reconciliation in somewhat the same way sometime previously. One effect of such an approach would be to eliminate the ‘Big Day’ when the children are marshalled together for a school-based and school-organized liturgy on May weekends and about which there is such increasing scepticism. Much of the desire for First Communion among families that are not in touch with the life of the church is the desire to have the child participate in the ‘Big Day’ and not to have them excluded from a big moment in the life of the school and of their particular class. It is not uncommon, in many Catholic schools, to have parents, especially those who are recent immigrants to Ireland, requesting to have their 7 or 8 year old child baptized with the main (or even sole) motive of enabling him/her to participate in the ‘Big Day’ with their classmates. This is surely a most unsatisfactory way to approach any sacrament. A

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move away from the 'Big Day' will surely meet with opposition from several quarters. But a move *towards* an approach which brings the sacraments more into the mainstream life of the parish community and more into the circle of family life is surely a step in the right direction

The *third issue* is the order and process of sacramental initiation. Some dioceses e.g. in the USA and the UK, have found ways to restore the age-old practice of the church in which the Eucharist is seen as the *culmination* and completion of the process of initiation into Christian discipleship. It usually involves celebrating Confirmation and First Eucharist in the same ceremony. This has involved moving away from thinking of Confirmation as a sacrament of Christian maturity and more as a part of the process of initiation into Christian life. In Ireland little thought has been given to the way in which this process works out in practice in our faith communities and parishes. We need to think long and hard about what exactly we wish to achieve regarding the faith and discipleship of the children and young people growing up among us and about the methodologies that might better achieve this.

CONCLUSION

While we await the addressing of these issues, the 'Big Day' will continue be part of the Irish landscape every May. The families will gather, the young faces will shine with innocence, the photographs will capture those happy young faces, there will be a lot of family love around, the children will enjoy the bouncing castles, and the adults will enjoy the tasty food. And what's so bad about that? Can God be present there, too, as well as in the heart-warming ritual of the morning? This raises the whole issue of the influence and presence of the Holy Spirit outside the parameters of the explicit faith community and what happens when we gather in our churches to celebrate our rituals. There is also the related question about the criteria by which we might assess the success or failure of our efforts to communicate our faith. Is regular Mass attendance the only yardstick or might our efforts to share the joy of the gospel have other less measurable effects? But perhaps these are questions for another day and another context.