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Fiona Lynch

Eucharist,
Priesthood,
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– *Some Ideas
for Discussion*

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The prompts for these very diffident observations are a talk given by Professor Vincent Twomey under the auspices of the Iona Institute in January of this year, and his subsequent interview with the *Irish Independent*; and the remarks with which Bruce D. Marshall concludes a recent article in *Communio*.

Professor Twomey’s lecture is entitled “The Church in Ireland: the Present State and the Path Ahead.” His script is rich and diverse; in what follows, I shall focus on what he has to say about the celebration of the eucharistic sacrifice, a celebration which, he argues, has become “uninspiring”, boring to the “disenchanted”, and with the priest cast in the role of “entertainer.”¹

I quote now in full the final paragraph of Professor Marshall’s article, “Effects of the Eucharistic Sacrifice: a Brief Commentary on Trent’s *De Missae Sacrificio*, Chapter 2”:

“That the Mass is a true sacrifice, the very sacrifice of Christ, offered even by us in propitiation for the sins of the world, the sacrifice that pleases almighty God and that with utter surety calls down the boundless blessings of Christ’s own charity on those for whom we pray – none of that, so far as I can see, is much on the minds of many Catholics. The Church needs evangelisation and catechesis to open up much of the richness of the faith to Catholics today, to say nothing of those outside the Church. On none of the faith’s riches do we more need to be taught than on the reality, and the effects, of the eucharistic sacrifice”.²

1 The talk, co-hosted by the Iona Institute and the Notre Dame – Newman Centre for Faith and Reason, was given on 29 January 2020. The text can be found on the Iona Institute website.

2 *Communio*, XLIV, Spring 2017, p24.

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I.

For those of us old enough to remember them, the small rituals attaching to the ordinary believer's participation at Mass were impressive and quite beautiful, even to those who did not share the faith. The person attending Mass would, upon entry to the church, genuflect quite unselfconsciously before the altar, in acknowledgement of the Real Presence (how often do we now hear those words?) of Christ in the tabernacle. He would then immediately kneel down, often covering his face with his hands, and spend a few moments in recollection, signifying, at least apparently, the interiority of his own relationship with Christ. There was no mistaking the climactic moment of the Mass: shepherded (ideally) by the Liturgy of the Word towards the consecration, the believer would, at the elevation of the host and chalice, look up at the saving reality of Christ made present upon the altar and then, in adoration, bow his head. Upon returning from Communion, he would engage again in private prayer of thanksgiving, adoration and supplication.

What was striking about this unostentatious, democratic, and endlessly revivifying experience? Pre-eminently, I would say, its easy interplay between objective reality and subjective response. There might not have been much to-ing and fro-ing of lectors or extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, but few outsiders could have missed a strong sense of the deep involvement of the faithful as they responded to the familiar, timeless drama unfolding before them.

Marcel remarks somewhere that the order of meaning follows upon the order of being: a thing has meaning because it is. We do not create truth, but rather enter into it. Far from being an "entertainer", the priest is charged, not with creating an atmosphere (of "community", or of a rather sentimental and often self-serving spirituality) but rather, through the power vested in him by the Church, with unveiling the reality of redemption.

The Church believes that the Mass and Calvary are a single reality; to be present at the Mass is to participate in the eternal sacrifice of the Cross and joyously to receive its saving effects. How can this be? The answer reposes, as the theology of the Mass reposes, upon the anterior truth of the Incarnation: God's assumption of human nature in Jesus of Nazareth; the taking-flesh of God in the human nature of the Divine Son, eternally begotten of the Father; not just godlike, but God. As the solemn preface of the Christmas Mass has it: "In him we see our God made visible, and so are caught up in love of the God we cannot see." The entire work of the Church is loudly and jubilantly to proclaim in all ages

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the truth of God incarnate, the source of man's hope and joy; were she to cease so to do, she would lose all her *raison d'être* and so betray the mission entrusted to her.

Because Jesus is at once fully human and fully divine, the sacrifice of Calvary is transitory under the aspect of his humanity and trans-historical under the aspect of his divinity. "The dense and the driven passion, the frightful sweat"³ are mercifully over now, something that once happened on a faraway hill outside Jerusalem. But because he is the Divine Son, the acts of Christ are eternal. Julian of Norwich puts it thus: "The love that made him suffer passeth so far above all his pain as heaven is above earth. For the pain was a noble, precious and worshipful deed done in time, by the working of love. But the love is without beginning, is and shall be without end."⁴

In the Mass, the eternal actuality of redemption is unveiled: the once-and-for-all of Calvary is the right here, right now of the present moment, our moment. When the priest, *in persona Christi*, says the efficacious words of institution, in which Jesus prefigures, at the Last Supper, his saving death on the Cross, something happens in the objective order: the bread and wine are now bread and wine in appearance only; in reality they are his body given for us, his blood shed for us, so that sins might be forgiven. The eternal is made manifest in time, and it is that objective manifestation which elicits the subjective, adoring, excited response of the faithful.

II.

Just a couple of generations later, a present-day observer at Sunday Mass would gaze upon a very different scene from the one I have described above. Many of those attending will, if at all, perform a slightly embarrassed and wholly perfunctory half-genuflection before immediately taking up a sitting position. Perusal of the parish bulletin generally occupies the time before the entrance of the priest, whose folksy "Morning, everyone!", an absurd but much-favoured "chat-show" addition to the scriptural salutation of the liturgy, tends to evoke a rather more audible and enthusiastic response than does the communal recitation of the Gloria or Creed. "Good morning, Father!", the congregation cheerfully replies, and so the scene is set for what Professor Twomey correctly calls a form of entertainment, sometimes hinted at in the strange expression "dialogue Mass." Because of the little flurry of movement involved

3 Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Wreck of the Deutschland", W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie (eds), *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1967), p67.

4 James Walsh S.J. (trans.), *The Revelations of Divine Love of Julian of Norwich* (Wheatthampstead-Hertfordshire: Penguin Books, 1961), Chapter 20.

in the appearance of lay readers in the sanctuary, the “weight” of the celebration tends to fall upon the Liturgy of the Word. Distraction, I suspect, sets in again until it is time for Holy Communion, at which point, often gazing abstractedly to right and left, members of the congregation proceed towards the altar, whence they return to their seats as if, Eamon Duffy remarks, “they have just come back from the bathroom.”⁵ Then, without much evidence of recollection but no doubt buoyed up by the priest’s fulsome expression of gratitude for their attendance, and his exhortation to “have a good day”, they depart homewards, leaving the church amid a buzz of conversation more appropriate to a shopping centre.

Although to a large extent accurate, this is, I accept, a rather cruel parody of that part of the Mass which is observable, and one which is unfair to many people; just as my earlier representation was, no doubt, an idealised and nostalgic one. We do well to remember that it is not those who say “Lord, Lord” who will enter the Kingdom (Mt.7:21); whereas man judges by appearances, God sees the heart (1 Sam.16:7). The bewildering and indefensible clerical scandals which have caused so much grief and “disenchantment” among lay Catholics should make us fear more than ever people who honour God with their lips, but whose hearts are far from him; we do not have long to search for examples of those whose show of devotion, far from being an outward sign of an inward grace, was, in fact, an outward sign of an inward depravity. And even though, as Pope Francis remarks, while everyone is a sinner, not everyone is corrupt, every true believer must be uncomfortably aware of the disparity between his pious demeanour at Mass and the impiety that characterises much of the rest of his life and that, wrestle as he might with his intractable human substance, he seems so incapable of overcoming.

Moreover, as Professor Twomey suggests, the “cultural artefact” that Irish Catholicism once was had many shortcomings, some of which have happily been eradicated by the loss of that particular expression of the faith. For a long time in Ireland, an undue and unhealthy emphasis was placed upon religious observance, whence regrettable expressions such as “getting Mass” or “daily communicant.” Nowadays, when no-one attends Mass under social duress, faith-commitment is likely to be more authentic, the product of clear, unillusioned choice. In a strange reversal, “going to Mass” has, as the saying goes, become quite counter-cultural, a brave, radical gesture in an uncomprehending and often disdainful social milieu.

5 *Faith of Our fathers: Reflections on Catholic Tradition* (Continuum: London, New York, 2004), p49. “Discerning the Body”, the essay from which I have quoted, is highly relevant to my argument.

III.

Such has been the intensity and duration of Ireland's widely-acknowledged "crisis of catechesis" that it is debatable whether what has been lost (a lively sense of the Mass as the eternal sacrifice of the Cross, as real communion with Christ, as entry into the very life of God) can be restored in our lifetime. Not only in Ireland, but in the universal Church, the obliteration of the numinous from religious faith has been widespread. Compounded by the spirit of ecumenism, and under the influence of scientific naturalism, the post-conciliar project of de-mystification has been so successful that many, even most, Catholics expect nothing other from the Mass than that it should be a pious gathering of a community of believers, a Protestant-style act of worship, rather than the bestowal, in the present moment, of the salvation won for us on the Cross, and an encounter with the mystery of Christ: consider how many Catholics erroneously now refer to the Mass as a "service." Likewise, many of them view the priest as, at Mass, a "communicator", effective or otherwise and, in his pastoral role, little more than a social worker with a clerical collar. Crucially, and with the unwitting connivance of the entertainer-priest, this obscures the fact that the Mass is not something we do, but something God does.

Just how might the crisis of catechesis begin to be addressed? And who might begin to address it?

A couple of years ago, the Pope delivered a number of catechetical talks on the Mass during his Wednesday audiences. He stipulated at one point that sermons are not to be lectures in theology. Although I agree with this in principle, it seems to me that the new evangelisation of which Bruce Marshall speaks in *Communio* must, in fact, take place within the context of the Mass itself, with the priest in the role of catechist.

The feature of the "typical" celebration of Mass today that I find most striking, even among intelligent, eloquent and devout priests who could in no sense be considered aspiring entertainers, is the failure to make any connection between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

There has always, of course, been a disjunction between the Mass of the Catechumens and the Mass of the Faithful: in earliest times, those undergoing instruction could be present for the proclamation of scripture and for the homily, but, until they were received into the Church, had to withdraw for the consecration, the most sacred part of the Mass. Vatican II saw a large, ecumenically-inspired and very successful endeavour to invest greater significance in the Liturgy of the Word, traditionally downplayed in favour of the eucharistic canon. Preachers were urged to devote their homily

fairly exclusively to an exegesis of the scriptural texts and an unfolding of their significance for the life of the believer.

Sometimes this can be very banal; sometimes it can be inspiringly well done. Even when it is done well, however, the homily tends to repose upon a largely exemplarist Christology. Scant and unemphatic reference is made to the divinity of Christ, and there is rarely any reference to what is still to come at the moment of the eucharistic sacrifice – which itself draws meaning only from the incarnation of the Second Person.

Would it be so very difficult to construct a sermon in which the faithful are reminded every Sunday that the Christ of the Gospel they have just heard proclaimed is the very crucified and risen Christ who will shortly become present under the appearances of bread and wine and whom they will receive in all their soul's intimacy in Holy Communion?

Sadly, we can, at least for the moment, forget about Catholic schools as *loci* of faith-formation; even when, and this can no longer be assumed to be the case, they are themselves believers, teachers are now the product of a couple of generations of ignorance of the faith of the Church. Yet, quite incredibly, it remains the case that the celebrant at Mass seems still to presume among the faithful a prior understanding of what happens at the consecration, and how it is in turn related to the real presence of Jesus (body, blood, soul and divinity) in the consecrated host. This presumption has proved catastrophic for the transmission of the faith in its integrity. If the preacher does not return, explicitly and again and again, to the fundamental truths of the faith –and these are not ossified truths, but inexhaustible and endlessly revitalising, “springs of living water” which slake our thirst at the same time as they augment it – then they will be obliterated from Catholic consciousness. If the divinity of Christ, the mystery of the Trinity, the sacrificial reality of the Mass, the real presence of Jesus in the sacrament, the efficacy of the words of absolution are not spoken of, who will know about them? And will the Son of Man find any faith on earth?

IV.

Benedict XVI's central understanding of the term “clericalism” is rather different from that promulgated by Pope Francis, who does, however, employ it in a way very similar to its use in Benedict's Pastoral Letter to the People of Ireland, drafted in 2010 in response to the revelations of clerical sex abuse.

For Francis, as for Benedict in that letter, “clericalism” evokes an attitude of undue and misplaced deference to the priest, an attitude which is both cause and consequence of the priest's own

understanding of his place within the Church and, the two being coterminous in Catholic Ireland, within the community at large. (A vestige of that clericalism remains today in the still surprisingly widespread tendency of older people, when speaking of him in the third person, to refer to the priest simply as “Father” - as in, “Father says ...”). There are, of course, complex historical reasons for this deference, none of which can be rehearsed here. Sometimes it resulted in an unedifyingly high-handed and authoritarian manner on the part of the priest, and an ill-concealed impatience with the lay faithful, who enjoyed only a diminished status within the Church. The tenor of Benedict’s letter and, subsequently, Francis’ analysis of child sexual abuse, would seem to suggest that, much less frequently but of course quite scandalously, it also gave rise to a form of antinomianism which, in its worst excesses, led to sexual transgressions in the commission of which the priest saw himself as being somehow above the moral law.

It is extremely difficult to find a formulation of words which can do justice both to the sacral nature of the priest’s office and to his continuing, ordinary, flesh-and-blood humanity, the persistence in him of the same doubts, weaknesses, fears, temptations and, sometimes, sins which beset us all. (I suspect that most priests would breathe a great sigh of relief if we were to give them space to acknowledge these.) The use of the word “ontological” to describe the change effected in him by the sacrament of Holy Orders is, in this regard, perhaps rather unhelpful. All the sacraments have an “ontological” effect, in that they bring about a change in the order of being: that is why Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage and Holy Orders cannot be rescinded or repeated; Penance, the Eucharist and Extreme Unction also bring about a real, though invisible, change in the order of reality. Ordination in no way changes the human nature of the priest: it is not his person, but the office conferred upon him by the Church which is sacral. That is why, as St John Paul pointed out in his 1992 Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, seminary programmes should include a strong emphasis on the integral human formation of priests, in which, among other things, the importance of rich and meaningful, though entirely celibate, relationships is given some prominence. It has to be questioned whether the model of the priest as mixing socially only with his confrères and engaging only in a series of unequal, pastoral-style relationships with laymen and laywomen can be considered desirable for our time.

I turn now to Benedict XVI’s idea of clericalism, to his deep intuition that the priesthood derives its essential significance from the liturgy, and to the concomitant idea that it is with the liturgy that the “crises” of catechesis and of the priesthood begin and end.

In, for example, his scholarly contribution to Cardinal Sarah's recent book *From the Depths of Our Hearts*, Benedict provides an analysis of the Old Testament roots of the idea of priesthood, which prefigure the supreme high priesthood of Christ, in his self-offering on the Cross at once priest and victim. This self-offering initiates the new and eternal covenant, sealed in the blood of Christ, which speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel (Heb.12:24). In the new dispensation, the Church, which is the New Israel, with Christ as her head, makes available until the end of time the graces won for us by the self-same eternal sacrifice; the priest, with the authority of the office bestowed upon him by the Church, continues to offer that sacrifice, infinitely pleasing to the Father, *in persona Christi capitis*. This is the central meaning of the Mass and, since "every ... priest is appointed to offer ... sacrifice" (Heb.8:3), of the priesthood.

Elsewhere (for example, in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*), however, Benedict writes of the blurring of the clear contours of that understanding of the eucharist and of the priesthood, an obfuscation ironically consequent upon the new kind of clericalism attendant upon some erroneous but widespread implementations of the conciliar documents. He speaks of a certain "clericalisation" of the Liturgy after Vatican II.

By this he alludes to the assumption by the priest of a central and highly-personalised role in the celebration of Mass. This involves a strong tendency to depart from the prescribed forms, an edgy desire to go "off-script", which in fact deprives the faithful of the right to receive the liturgy as it is, already complete and entire. Examples are numerous and quite shocking, extending even to playing fast and loose with the liturgical texts, for instance in substituting for the ancient words of the Creed a more "user-friendly" piece of discourse. More innocuously, there seems to be an obsession with *explaining* everything, which is not at all the kind of catechesis to which I have alluded, but which rather tears apart the delicate fabric of the mystery. It indicates also that many of our priests are slow to learn that the days when the clergy could presume themselves to be educated to a much higher level than the public at large are long since gone: this kind of condescension, often augmented by personal anecdotes and inappropriate and inevitably puerile jokes, is immensely irritating to many people.

What is happening here is that the priest is, quite arrogantly, placing his own judgment above the judgment of the Church. (This sometimes extends to other sacraments: it is, for example, not uncommon for a priest to give absolution without any prior confession of sins, thereby blithely taking it upon himself to remove from the sacrament of penance one of its essential elements.) What

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is to be done? Everyone, of course, views with distaste the idea of a “belt of the crozier”, but the fact remains that the bishop is the custodian of faith in his diocese. When he is made aware of such abuses, is there not a case for sympathetic but firm intervention?

Above all, there is a need for clear instruction about the celebration of Mass. The personality of the priest is subordinate to the liturgy; he is its servant, not its master. To the entertainer-priest, we might say with respect, “Dear Father, you are trying too hard. You are crowding Christ out. You are blocking the light. Please stand aside, so that we may see.” The priest does not preside at Mass to make an impression, or to win for himself friends and admirers. In the beautiful, crystalline words of David Jones, “he does what is done in many places ... / What did He do other, recumbent at the garnished table? / What did He do yet other / Riding the Axile tree?”⁶

V.

Much of what I have said here may seem unduly pessimistic, and I am aware that it would by no means command universal assent. I would also wish to nuance it by paying tribute to the highly effective pastoral work carried out by many of those whom I have rather scornfully dubbed “entertainer-priests”: to their selfless, uncomplaining and unsparing ministry to the sick, to the alienated, sometimes to the querulous and uncongenial.

To counterbalance the gloomy diagnosis, I would like to finish by returning to Professor Twomey’s lecture, with its strong emphasis on restoring a spirit of festivity to Catholic culture.

That emphasis is deeply embedded within the Mass itself. Although the eucharist is not a sacrament of eternity, but rather the pilgrim’s bread which gives us life, it is nonetheless a foretaste of the beatific heavenly banquet. It has what Schillebeeckx calls a “threefold historical signification”:⁷ the memorial of Christ’s passion, the bestowal of its saving effects in the here and now of this Sunday morning, and the promise of the life to come, the endless sabbath of, in Abelard’s beautiful phrase, “souls in holiday.”⁸ This threefold signification is given expression in St Thomas’s *O Sacrum Convivium*: O sacred banquet, in which Christ is received, the spirit of his passion is renewed, the soul is filled with grace, and the promise of future glory is given to us.

6 *The Anathemata* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), p243.

7 *Christ the Sacrament* (London and Melbourne: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p74

8 Helen Waddell’s translation of *sabbatizantium* in Abelard’s “Vespers: Saturday Evening” in her *Medieval Latin Lyrics* (London: Constable, 1929), p163.

Now there's a good catechetical resource for the eucharist. Is there any chance that we might substitute it for the rather vacuous, thrice-intoned "O Sacrament most holy"?

Finally, there is in the life of the believer a kind of insouciance which also erupts in an irrepressible spirit of festivity. The believer knows what Abraham learned so long ago, just as he prepared to sacrifice Isaac: God will provide. We should not engage in too much hand-wringing over the future of the Church. Drawing on Augustine's famous polemic against the Donatists, in which he reminds them that the darnel will continue to grow among the good seed, just as there will be bad as well as good fish in the net until the end of time,⁹ Benedict reminds us that "the field is still God's field, the net God's net."¹⁰ The Church is God's Church, and his to preserve. It is his gift to the world, and his pearl of great price, for which, in Christ, he has already and irreversibly given all he has.

9 See also his Sermon 23 on the New Testament.

10 See his April 2019 article, "The Church and the Scandal of Sexual Abuse."

Anthropology. Anthropology is a highly contested area right across a range of disciplines in contemporary thought: ecology, ethics, economics, education, feminism, gender studies, philosophy and theology. Once you go below the surface of any of these areas, you will find underlying assumptions at play about what it means to be human. To illustrate the point, in 2016, Jeffrey Sachs, US economist and UN advisor, gave a keynote address to the London School of Economics on 'Subjective well-being over the life course'. In his opening remarks, he pointed out that 'economics went wildly off the track by a profoundly flawed model of human nature and a flawed model of human purpose.

– DERMOT A. LANE, *Theology and Ecology in Dialogue: The Wisdom of Laudato Si'*. (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 31.