

## Lay Liturgical Leadership in the US Catholic Church: Popular Advances, Official Retreat

I have been asked to provide an American perspective on lay leadership of Roman Catholic liturgy as the last of six such presentations from a variety of North Atlantic countries.<sup>1</sup> In listening to the historical descriptions and pastoral-theological analyses by colleagues from Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and France, I have discerned a remarkably common narrative of evolution from local experimentation in the early 1970s to restrictive universal policies by the end of the 1990s, with the fate of parish communities' weekly Sunday sharing in the Eucharist tethered to the official theology yet precipitous numerical decline of Roman Catholic priests. If I have heard my colleagues' reports accurately, then it would seem that an earlier priority for assembling the local community of the faithful (highly valued by many clergy and laity alike) ceded to the Vatican's concerned support, perhaps even defense, of the centrality of the priest for the realization of the "full Eucharist."

Let me begin my American contribution on an autobiographical note. I can honestly report that, having been born in 1959, I grew up with the language of "vocation crisis" in the American Catholic Church always swirling around me. Although memory (an utterly

Jesuit Father Bruce Morrill, the Edward A. Malloy Professor of Catholic Studies at Vanderbilt University, was an invited speaker at a conference on laity-led worship in the Roman Catholic Church (*Laien leiten liturgie – Aufgabe und Herausforderung für eine moderne Ekklesiologie*) hosted by the Theological Research College of Erfurt University, November 4–5, 2011. We are pleased to share with you an edited, expanded version of his presentation. His latest book is *Encountering Christ in the Eucharist: The Paschal Mystery in People, Word, and Sacrament*, published by Paulist Press.

<sup>1</sup> The program for the two-day conference in Erfurt, Germany, including a description of the project and the schedule of speakers, is available at [http://www.uni-erfurt.de/fileadmin/public-docs/Theologisches\\_Forschungskolleg/Flyer\\_Tagung\\_LaienLeitenLiturgie2011.pdf](http://www.uni-erfurt.de/fileadmin/public-docs/Theologisches_Forschungskolleg/Flyer_Tagung_LaienLeitenLiturgie2011.pdf) (accessed on June 28, 2013).

social and subjective construction) can be deceiving, I am quite sure in my recollection that since the late 1960s the rhetoric about vocations to the priesthood and religious life has continuously borne a sense of urgency and crisis. This is something to ponder at the outset of a report on the state of liturgical leadership in the United States: For more than four decades both hierarchy and laity—at least the many strongly committed to the vitality of the church—have lived in an ongoing state of anxiety over the relentlessly declining number of priests. Such a psychosocially unhealthy state of affairs is due, in no small part, to the Roman Catholic hierarchy's intransigent resistance to entertaining the notion of a married diocesan clergy or women priests. While official church documents, bishops' letters, *and* scientific surveys of the laity all indicate a universal identification of the Eucharist as singularly important to the mission and identity of the church as a social body and in each of its members, the policies of the bishops have made celebration of the Eucharist on the Lord's Day increasingly scarce in many parts of the country. The reduction in the number of Sunday services, and the accompanying expectation that more and more Catholics should travel farther to participate, is the result of the hierarchy's severe restriction on use of Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest,<sup>2</sup> coupled with the policy of closing and consolidating smaller churches into larger regional parishes. Thus, I must state bluntly at the outset of my response to your invitation to report on non-ordained liturgical leadership in American Catholicism that only a very small percentage of parishes practice liturgies with laity presiding on either Sundays or weekdays.

Earlier this year a joint project of five Catholic national ministry organizations published an extensive report entitled "The Changing Face of US Catholic Parishes," based on survey data that Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate collected in 2010 from more than 5,500 Roman Catholic

<sup>2</sup> Based on the International Committee on English in the Liturgy's translation of the Latin typical edition of the 1988 Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy published the official text for dioceses in the United States in 1996. A revised edition accommodating changes in the *Roman Missal, Third Edition*, was published on January 1, 2012.

parishes in the country. One of the study's major findings was that over the past decade the average size of a US parish has grown by a remarkable 45 percent, from 2,260 individual registered members in 2000 to 3,277 members in 2010. The causes for such astounding increases in the size of parishes, according to the report, are the growth in the national Catholic population, especially the Hispanic/Latino population, but also the widespread strategy since 2004 of closing and consolidating parishes, mostly smaller parishes. Yet the report immediately goes on to state: "Smaller parishes have a higher proportion of parishioners attending Mass than larger parishes."<sup>3</sup> Theologian Richard McBrien (University of Notre Dame) has commented on the irony and dangers in the bishops' strategy: "Smaller parishes generally collect more per registered household in the offertory collection than larger parishes. But it is the smaller parishes that are being closed or merged with larger ones, and it is the larger, standing-room-only parishes [notably in Florida, fraught with retirees and vacationers] that give some Catholics the wrong impression that all is well with the Catholic Church in the United States."<sup>4</sup> The research data show that more Masses are being celebrated per weekend at increasingly larger parishes, with 15 percent of parishes offering Mass at two or more church buildings (evidence of consolidation), a phenomenon that cannot but increase as the trend of consolidation continues. As we shall see later in this presentation, when faced with the possibility of having to close and merge into larger parishes US Catholics consistently articulate their valuing of personal relationships, intimacy, and community<sup>5</sup>—not least as experienced in Sunday liturgy.

Allow me to place a human face on this American data, a narrative I can recount on the basis of my firsthand experience as a priest in the Archdiocese of Boston. Over the past few decades Boston,

<sup>3</sup> Mark M. Gray, Mary L. Gautier, and Melissa A. Cidade, *The Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes*, The Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project (Washington, DC: National Association of Lay Ministry, 2011), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Richard McBrien, "The State of US Parishes Today," *National Catholic Reporter* (September 12, 2011), accessed at: <http://ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/state-us-parishes-today>.

<sup>5</sup> For a development of these concepts, see "Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Foundations of Community," chap. 3 in William A. Clark, *A Voice of Their Own: The Authority of the Local Parish* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 69–105.

one of the oldest, largest, and most powerful (internally and in the wider political culture) archdioceses in the United States, has, nonetheless, experienced declines in membership, clergy, and religious, along with closures of schools and parishes—all under official leadership that clings to a conventional ideology of the ordained priesthood linked to the exclusive clerical presidency over Sunday worship. Attendance at Mass, which has been steadily falling since the 1980s, dropped drastically during 2002, as the extent of clergy sexual abuse, the coddling of perpetrators, and the cover-up of cases by archbishops and bishops came to light. In 2004 the archdiocese publicly launched its plan to close 25 percent of its more than 600 parishes. A diocesan staff member later confided to me that this drastic need for closures was due not primarily to the fiscal crisis caused by the abuse cases but by Archbishop Bernard Law's staunch refusal over his nearly twenty-year reign to face the hard realities of declining clergy, shrinking Catholic populations in many areas, and steadily diminishing rates of Mass attendance. To close and consolidate parishes apparently did not align with Cardinal Law's triumphal image of the Catholic Church. Once he resigned from office in disgrace, diocesan officials found themselves forced to make up for the delayed cuts in an acutely short period of time.

I myself experienced the decline and results of closures and consolidation through my part-time pastoral-liturgical service to a suburban parish during my tenure at Boston College over the past fifteen years. By the end of 2002 one could see at all four weekend Masses a great increase in the number of empty seats in the pews. The emptier condition continued until a few years later when four other area parishes were closed, such that by 2006 the average attendance in our parish was back to "normal." But this was what one must call a "new normal," for the empty seats had been refilled not by the return of disaffected members but, rather, by people from the other closed churches. These were all new faces in front of me. In the second half of the past decade, while even those numbers dwindled further, the pastor announced his retirement, as well as the archdiocese's inability to replace him. The parish was merged with the other one across town, under the care of one priest, with the saints' names for both churches eliminated so as to create canonically one new parish under a new name (Good Shepherd—still a

further irony!). At this point a total of half as many Masses are celebrated in the two church buildings than were ten years ago—but, sadly, seating capacity is not a problem. Over the past decade, six affected parishes have been replaced incrementally by one that operated out of two church buildings, of which one will soon be sold.

There is, not surprisingly, much anxiety and argument over which of the two churches is to be sold. For the lay faithful, these are not merely what we Americans would call “physical plants” but, rather, the physical site of the *parish*, the community of faith. People feel deep attachments to their houses of worship, citing the life-passage events and/or habitual communal liturgies they have experienced there. This makes the parish church—as well as its community hall and classrooms—powerful symbolic spaces not only or primarily because of their canonical status as sanctioned locations for the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament or the celebration of the Rite of Marriage but rather (people’s comments largely indicate) because of their affective bonds to these buildings as houses peopled by living memories of personal, interpersonal, and communal life. In 2004 a dozen Boston area parishes made national news when some of the lay membership began occupying their church buildings, keeping twenty-four-hour vigils so as to prevent their closure and sale. A few such vigils still continue—one, in fact, in the “cluster” area of the parish I have been describing here—with small numbers of parishioners assembling daily and on Sunday to celebrate a Liturgy of the Word and communion service (with consecrated hosts supplied by sympathetic area priests). *The Boston Globe* has reported on this phenomenon since it began some seven years ago, often making the vigil-occupations their (customary) feature “religion” story for Christmas or Easter. These reports are full of quotes by laypeople describing the strengthening of their communal sense of being church, of their investment in the celebration of the word and Holy Communion, and their greater sense of engagement with what goes into liturgical celebration. Still, their numbers are small in comparison with the staggering numbers of Catholics in that area who have simply stopped going to Mass regularly.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Author’s note: One year (to the month) after my delivering the original version of this article as my address to the conference in Germany, the Archdiocese

Similar stories abound throughout the northeastern states. For example, in my native region of Bangor, Maine (250 miles/400 kilometers northeast of Boston), seven parishes over an area of hundreds of square miles have been merged into one newly named mega-parish, with a team of three priests (for now!) driving between the seven sites to celebrate one or, in a couple of cases, two Masses at each church building per weekend. Just a dozen years ago my home parish had four busy Masses per weekend. Now there is only one Saturday evening vigil Mass, and it is sufficient! The people are encouraged to drive to whichever church site in the region they wish, according to the time of Mass that suits them. But this, of course, breaks down any sense of community and personal relationships among the faithful. The Diocese of Portland, Maine, has an extensive web site outlining all the reconfigured, consolidated parishes throughout the state, detailing the times Mass can be found from one church building to the next.<sup>7</sup> The assumption, of course, is that people will drive past their own and even another church building, many miles, to get to Mass. The results are reduced participation everywhere. In fact, scientific polling data has found that the northeastern United States, once a bastion of both Catholicism and Protestantism, now has the lowest percentage of people reporting active engagement in religion.<sup>8</sup> In the case

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of Boston on November 14, 2012, announced finalized plans to merge their remaining 288 parishes into 135 clusters. In making the announcement, Archbishop Sean O'Malley said the staff of the newly configured cooperatives "must refocus on outreach and evangelization" to lapsed Catholics, given the fact that regular Mass attendance by people who identified themselves as Catholic had dropped to just 16 percent, or half the national average. Monica Brady-Myerov, "Boston Cardinal Approves Archdiocese Reshuffle," WBUR, <http://www.wbur.org/2012/11/15/boston-parish-cluster-plan> (accessed June 28, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> See, [http://www.portlanddiocese.net/parishes\\_main.php](http://www.portlanddiocese.net/parishes_main.php), accessed, October 24, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> The six New England States—Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont—ranked among the seven (out of a total of fifty) states with the lowest percentage for whom religion is very important in their lives. Neighboring New York ranked tenth from the bottom. The Pew Forum's 2007 *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* included measuring frequency of worship service attendance, frequency of prayer, and certainty of belief in God. See, "How Religious Is Your State?," Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (December 21, 2009), <http://pewforum.org/How-Religious-Is-Your-State-.aspx>.

of the Catholic Church, one may reasonably conclude that one important factor in this abysmal decline has been the hierarchy's insistence on maintaining a male celibate priesthood and, with that, binding the form of Sunday eucharistic celebration to the person of the priest. The decades-long exhortation to "pray for vocations" has come to ring hollow for most and left many of the devout, such as my ninety-year-old aunt, deflated, if not disillusioned.

I want to add this note: This sweet aunt, a longtime communion minister, wrote a strongly argued letter to the bishop fifteen years ago when he announced his plan to sell off the parish church, community building, and rectory. I was proud of her argument for how she and so many others had invested not only their lives but great amounts of money in the upkeep and renovation of the church, not to mention the rather new (ten-year-old) community hall they had just paid off. She was telling the bishop that what mattered was their community of faith, even if it meant not having a residential priest as pastor. My father, a daily communicant, was stunned to learn in a meeting about consolidation of the area parishes that the bishop of Portland, not the local community, controlled the buildings and assignment of clergy. Dad had proposed that the parish recruit and finance a religious-order priest on their own, which in itself would be a futile effort insofar as the decline of religious in the United States has been even greater than that of diocesan priests.

Given these few examples, nonetheless, of bishops' widespread policies of closing and consolidating parishes, it is not surprising to learn the following from the 2011 "Changing Faces of the US Church" report:

Most parishes, 94 percent, do not report any Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest annually. These are most commonly celebrated in PLC parishes [parishes led by a Pastoral Life Coordinator]. More than a third (35 percent) of parishes entrusted to a PLC report at least one of these celebrations in 2009. However, even here most indicate celebrating fewer than ten a year.

Weekday communion services occur with some frequency in more than four in ten parishes (42 percent). However, there is a bimodal distribution with 15 percent of parishes indicating they celebrate fewer than ten of these per year and 16 percent indicating they

celebrate 40 or more. As with Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest these are most common and most frequently available in parishes entrusted to a PLC.<sup>9</sup>

A few comments for interpretation and clarification: First, even among the 6 percent of parishes with some practice of this service, extremely few would have the deacon- or lay-led Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest as their regular form of Sunday worship. Only 16 percent appear to have a communion service on weekdays (i.e., more than forty such celebrations per year). Lay-led liturgy remains quite rare in the US Catholic Church. Furthermore, the "Changing Faces" report indicates that 80 percent of the paid lay ministry staff in parishes are *women*. With Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest most commonly celebrated in parishes coordinated by a layperson, the bulk of such liturgies are obviously led by women.

Second, I wish to note the neologism "Pastoral Life Coordinator" (PLC).<sup>10</sup> The arrival of this conventional term in American Catholicism, as opposed to the language of "pastoral associate" or "pastoral minister," indicates that the US church is wrestling with the first of the "Practical Provisions" in the 1997 instruction on non-ordained ministry issued jointly by eight Vatican offices, namely, the "Need for Appropriate Terminology."<sup>11</sup> The overarching concern in that document is the protection of the distinct status of ordained ministry. The language of "ministry," then, "becomes doubtful, confused and hence not helpful for expressing the

<sup>9</sup> Gray, Gautier, and Cidade, *The Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes*, 30.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed description of the responsibilities, desired qualities, educational formation, term appointment, and evaluation of the pastoral life coordinator in one archdiocese with numerous priestless parishes, see Archbishop Thomas Murphy, Seattle, Washington, "Priesthood Shortage and the Pastoral Care of Parish Communities," appendix 6, *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 24, no. 44 (April 20, 1995), accessed on the *Origins* web site.

<sup>11</sup> "Some Questions Regarding Collaboration of Nonordained Faithful in Priests' Sacred Ministry" (Vatican City, August 15, 1997), in *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 27, no. 24 (November 27, 1997): 398–409. The first article among the "Practical Provisions," arrives at the following conclusion: "It is unlawful for the nonordained faithful to assume titles such as *pastor*, *chaplain*, *coordinator*, *moderator* or other such similar titles which can confuse their role and that of the pastor, who is always a bishop or priest" (403).



doctrine of the faith whenever the difference 'of essence and not merely of degree' between the baptismal priesthood and the ordained priesthood is in any way obscured."<sup>12</sup> The Vatican's clear concern from the outset of the instruction is to "safeguard the nature and mission of sacred ministry," which they say is founded upon "an essential point of Catholic ecclesiological doctrine."<sup>13</sup> The rhetoric of *collaboration* in the title and throughout the text attempts to correct any notion that the laity *substitute* for the ordained in leading the parish, preaching, or presiding, thereby signaling an "ambiguous 'advancement of the laity,' etc."<sup>14</sup> For Vatican officials, ambiguity in thought and practice among many laity (and even, it seems, some clergy) concerning the dependence of the Eucharist, other sacraments, and preaching upon ministrations by those in holy orders threatens the very apostolicity of the church.

And what of the Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest, which the Vatican instruction describes as "this useful and delicate service"? Bishops should give a special mandate (with term limit) for laity to preside over these only in cases where "distance or physical conditions" comprise a genuine "obstacle" to people's fulfilling "the obligation to attend Mass on Sunday and holy days of obligation [which] is satisfied only by attendance at holy Mass."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the Vatican finds Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest "delicate" on several counts: who may preside at such services, under what auspices and for what duration, and what constitutes an inordinate distance substantiating dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass (which such lay celebrations in themselves do not obviate). The hierarchy constantly find themselves combatting "error" and "confusion" on many fronts.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, one finds pastoral letters by various American bishops

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Here the instruction quotes from John Paul II's speech to the symposium on lay participation in priestly ministry, April 22, 1994.

<sup>13</sup> "Some Questions," 399, 401.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 404.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 405

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. See also, Bishops of Wisconsin, "Sunday Worship without a Priest: A Letter," *Origins* 24, no. 17 (October 6, 1994); Bishop Michael Sheehan, Lubbock, Texas, "Sunday Worship without a Priest," *Origins* 21, no. 39 (March, 5, 1992), both accessed on the *Origins* web site.

prior to 1997 fretting over confusion in eucharistic theology and “blurring”<sup>17</sup> of ministerial statuses as they explain their refusal to authorize any widespread practice of Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest in their dioceses. Some even rationalize that the American trend toward driving substantial distances for shopping, entertainment, and sports events relativizes what should be considered a burdensome distance to fulfill the obligation to attend Mass.<sup>18</sup> The American bishops’ priority is to preserve as normal practice the “fullness” of the Eucharist as celebrated under a priest’s presidency.<sup>19</sup> Yet these American bishops’ pastoral letters and other sources also give evidence that the people’s concern is not exclusively or even necessarily so much about driving distance as their desperate desire to retain their local parish communities.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> A 1995 letter by the archbishop of Kansas City and the bishops of the three other dioceses in the state of Kansas itemized in detail what one finds in numerous other American bishops’ letters restricting use of Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest:

- A blurring of the distinction between a priest and a deacon or a nonordained minister presiding over communion service.
- A blurring of the relationship between pastoral and sacramental ministry.
- A blurring of the connection between the eucharist and the works of charity and justice.
- A blurring of the need for priests and therefore a blurring of the continual need for vocations.
- A blurring of the linkage between the local church and the diocesan and universal church that is embodied in the person of the parish priest.

Kansas Bishops, “Policy Restricts Sunday Communion without Mass,” *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 25, no. 8 (July 13, 1995): 122–24, here, 123.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Bishop Leo O’Neil, Manchester, New Hampshire, “The Staffing and Structure of Parishes,” *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 24, no. 18 (October 13, 1994), accessed on the *Origins* web site.

<sup>19</sup> “Pastoral efforts should have this aim above all that the sacrifice of the Mass on Sunday be regarded as the only true actualization of the Lord’s paschal mystery and as the most complete manifestation of the church.” Congregation for Divine Worship, “Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest,” no. 13, *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 18, no. 19 (October 20, 1988). See also, Bishop Howard Hubbard, Albany, New York, “A Vision for Parish Planning and Restructuring,” *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 25, no. 4 (April 11, 1996), accessed on the *Origins* web site.

<sup>20</sup> Nearly a decade ago sociologist Ruth Wallace, author of *They Call Him Pastor: Married Men in Charge of Catholic Parishes* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), described members in parishes without priests heading their administration “scared to

I would argue that the laity's need for the authoritative official leadership of the ordained priest is at least equally balanced with the value of the communal bonds—theologically, the *communion*—experienced in the parish. More anecdotal evidence comes from my time as a visiting professor at Seattle University in 2007, in an archdiocese where numerous parishes lacked a resident priest/pastor. When I made myself available for Sunday Masses, I found people exuberantly grateful for my circuit riding into their churches. They want to be together. Sure, if I could drive out to these relatively remote places from the city, so goes the argument, those parishioners could make the trek into Seattle. But in fact, Catholics in that type of situation largely do not. It would be numerically unreasonable to expect that a couple hundred people would commute into the city instead of me alone going to them. But the deeper issue is community.<sup>21</sup> This is not about just getting to any Mass possible but about celebrating together as a community. Both the anecdotal and statistical evidence bears this out. And yet my documentary research indicates that the bishops refuse to deploy their official Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest except in what they define as emergency situations. They may see this strategy as avoiding confusion and responding to their fear about “blurry” practical theologies of ministry in relation to Eucharist, but the people's concerns lie elsewhere.

The bishops' own documents are confusing insofar as they largely begin with passionate theologies of the Lord's Day, of the local church (parish) as the successor to the primordial Christian communities, and communal dimensions of the Eucharist as body of Christ, only, inevitably it seems, to cast all those values aside to assert the necessity (indeed, canonical obligation) for all to assist at

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death that the parish is going to close.” Joe Feuerherd, “Just How Bad Is It? Priest Shortage Worse Than Experts Predicted; Foreign Priests Filling the Gap,” *National Catholic Reporter* (October 17, 2003). See also National Federation of Priests Councils, “Priestless Parishes: Priests' Perspective,” *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 21, no. 3 (May 30, 1991), accessed on the *Origins* web site.

<sup>21</sup> For a social-scientific study of this value among US parishioners, see Jerome P. Baggett, “Community: Narratives for Belonging,” chap. 5, in *Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholics Live Their Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 125–68.

Sunday celebrations presided over by a priest.<sup>22</sup> In these letters the bishops often take pains to explain why the priest's recitation of the eucharistic prayer is essential to the "fullness" of eucharistic celebration. That these pastors find themselves thus compelled to teach so explicitly and repeatedly is indicative of their awareness of the extent to which the laity, despite Vatican II's priority for full, conscious, active participation in the liturgy, have largely not come to appreciate the theological structures and content of the entire eucharistic prayer (or anaphora).<sup>23</sup> One document stunned me with its honest admission that Catholics have been conditioned to identify Eucharist not with the entire ritual celebration but, rather, with the individual host she or he received in the communion rite (and, secondarily, the elevation of that host in the act of consecration).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See, among others, Bishops of Wisconsin, "Sunday Worship Without a Priest," and Bishop Hubbard, "A Vision for Parish Planning and Restructuring."

<sup>23</sup> This lack of popular priority for the entire eucharistic prayer may contribute to bishops repeatedly condemning the terminology of "Sister's Mass" or "John's Mass" or "deacon's Mass" that consistently emerges in parishes where Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest is practiced regularly. For worried condemnation of these neologisms, see, among others, Kansas Bishops, "Policy Restricts Sunday Communion without Mass"; Bishop Hubbard, "A Vision for Parish Planning and Restructuring"; and Bishop Sheehan, "Sunday Worship without a Priest." One commentary on the phenomenon warrants quoting: "[S]ome people are saying they like 'Sister Ann's Mass' better than they like 'Father's Mass.' This is, in part, because often non-ordained parish leaders are better prepared and more excited about what they are doing than the priest. . . . Notwithstanding the need for priests to prepare for and act interested in the liturgy, notwithstanding the zeal and fervor of the newly appointed non-ordained presider at the communion service, the fact remains that the proliferation of communion services in place of the Sunday eucharist can blur the distinction between the two and can, and often does, lead to the diminution of people's appreciation for the need of the Sunday eucharistic celebration" (National Federation of Priests Councils, "Priestless Parishes: Priests' Perspective").

<sup>24</sup> The 1991 National Federation of Priests Councils' report on the phenomenon of priestless parishes included the following analysis: "Popular piety, as well as a particular theological emphasis that the church has engendered for the past few centuries, is a contributing factor to the present popularity of communion services. . . . It is easy to see how people formed by an emphasis on the real presence as the heart of the matter of the eucharist could understand 'going to communion' as the essence of our worship. The step to assuming that as long as one 'goes to communion' one is 'doing' the eucharist is an easy one to take."

I have long ruminated over this phenomenon myself, forming the opinion that the retention of a change in celebrant's posture (lowering arms from the *orans* position), coupled with the change in the "voice" of the prayer text itself (from a thankful, vocative address to the Father to a prosaic narrative account of the Last Supper), followed by elaborate medieval-originated elevation and genuflection gestures with host and chalice (now increasingly accompanied by bell-ringing once again) altogether perpetuate a practical theology of Christ's presence in the host that is quite independent from the rest of the long prayer. What matters is that consecrated hosts are distributed at the climax of the service. The members of the assembled community thereby process to receive the Christ really present to them from a vessel made of precious metal. *That* the hosts distributed at the Sunday celebration have been transformed into the sacrament of Christ's body is essential to the laity. *When* that consecrating transformation actually took place is not nearly of equal concern. In fact, even when attending a "complete" Sunday Mass, the odds are extremely high that the assembled people will see a ciborium of previously consecrated hosts brought from the tabernacle to the altar during the communion rite. Thus, most are accustomed (and this is important for understanding how ritual works<sup>25</sup>) *without thinking about it* to receive Communion from a vessel containing hosts that were not consecrated at the current liturgy. It is a repeated ritual pattern deeply inscribed in their bodies, individual and collective.<sup>26</sup>

The ritualized body of the majority of American Catholics, I am arguing, is shaped not by the details of verbal content in the prayers of the priest (let alone, related theological arguments) but rather by symbolic gestures most directly related to their part in the action—in this case, adoration of consecrated hosts in sacred vessels on the altar table and, then, a procession together to each receive the sacramental Body of Christ offered to them from a sacred vessel by a designated minister in front of the sanctuary.

<sup>25</sup> See Adam B. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7, 41–47, 118, 129–30.

<sup>26</sup> For development and implications of the concept of the ritualized body, see Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 94–117.

Herein appears a key reason for why many American Catholics, when faced with the elimination of communal Sunday worship in their home parish, are not too disturbed by a service in which a Liturgy of the Word leads into a ritual for distributing Holy Communion. Put bluntly, the people do not miss the eucharistic prayer. They have so little affective or intellectual appropriation of it as not to be disturbed by its absence or, therefore, to be persuaded by the hierarchy's exhortations about the value of the "full Eucharist" (their neologism for the Mass, as distinct from a communion service).

If my (theoretical) analysis is at all adequate to this (practical) ritual-symbolic phenomenon, then some irony appears to be in play: Contemporary concern for community melds with a popular medieval practical understanding of Christ's real presence in the sacred host. I would argue that this is precisely because multiple affective and ideational values are at play in this complex, power-laden situation. The American Catholic laity value the symbolic bonds of community that assembling in their (homey) parish church for liturgy affords, and they value the ritual-symbolic power of the ordained clergy presiding at rites and, especially, confecting the Blessed Sacrament. Yet the latter value is relative to a more primary affection for Christ really present in the consecrated host that is placed on the altar and then distributed in the familiar ritual pattern of a climactic communal procession to some minister(s), who perform the ritual trope of presenting a consecrated host from a dignified vessel to the communicant, saying, "The Body of Christ." That an ordained priest confected the Blessed Sacrament remains of value, but that a priest actually be present for the communion rite—adoration of the real presence in the hosts contained in a ciborium brought from the tabernacle to the altar and distributed as Holy Communion—may well be of secondary importance to whatever percentage of US Catholics at this point value assembling regularly in their local church on the Lord's Day.



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