

EUCCHARIST AND ENCLOSURE: PROBLEM OR OPPORTUNITY FOR CONTEMPLATIVE NUNS IN TODAY'S CHURCH

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This paper is based on (but does not entirely reproduce) a meeting at Ilkely, West Yorkshire, in November 2002 of the Association of British Contemplatives, a forum for nuns of many traditions to consider issues of interest and concern to themselves and to the Church. Represented at this meeting were Carmelites, Poor Clares, Bernardine Cistercians, Redemptoristines, Benedictines and Canonesses of St Augustine (Sayers Common), all members of the Catholic Church, and also sisters from the Anglican communion. One day was given over to discussing Eucharist, in particular to the question of what contemplative communities bound by enclosure should do when there is no longer a priest available for daily mass. Shortage of priests is a difficulty increasingly affecting parishes; apostolic sisters also are now used to attending the local church, either daily or on Sundays, rather than celebrating Eucharist in their own convent; and it is only a matter of time before enclosed communities are faced with the same difficulty. The purpose of this day in November was to explore the range of aspects affecting the question, so that contemplative nuns would be informed about the issues at stake and be able to contribute to the decisions to be made. The decision is not theirs alone, of course: individual communities have their own charism and tradition; they are also part of a congregation or order which has its own hierarchy; there is the local, diocesan and national church to consider; and within the universal church, if the community is Roman Catholic, the authorities in Rome will have a determining hand. In this paper I hope to show that the shortage of priests and the effect this will have, or indeed already has, on enclosed communities of contemplative nuns is not just of limited interest to a small minority, but is of significance to the Church as a whole.

Legal Perspectives

Contemplative nuns take solemn vows and are subject to strict rules of enclosure - papal or constitutional (VS13). The strictness varies according to the legal form adopted or required by law, and that in itself is determined either by the order (Carmelites and Poor Clares are usually bound by papal enclosure), or by the form chosen by each community or congregation: Benedictine nuns, for instance, can now adopt either papal, constitutional or monastic enclosure. (The nuns of the EBC are subject to papal enclosure). For present purposes, it is the *fact* of enclosure which is important, not the details of its form. Enclosure is a charism to be valued and nurtured, a discipline and gift to be faithfully maintained for, as *Verbi sponsa* says, it protects the foundational charism of monasteries (VS9). The contemplative life which enclosure fosters is “a unique grace and a precious gift within the mystery of the Church’s holiness” (VS1), “a sign of the entire Christian community’s intimate union with God” (VS6). So important is contemplative life to the Church that *Perfectae caritatis* guarantees “no matter how urgent may be the needs of the active apostolate, contemplative communities will always have a distinguished part to play in Christ’s Mystical Body” (PC7), although the possible need to modify is recognised (PC16). For *Verbi sponsa*, the most recent instruction from Rome on contemplative life, *papal* enclosure is subject to special protection: “the participation of the faithful in the liturgy is not a reason for the nuns to leave the enclosure...permission to enter and to leave the enclosure always requires just and grave reason (VS14.2; 15); “enclosure itself entails a grave obligation of conscience (VS14:3c)”

Set this against what the Church has to say about the Eucharist, and what we know from personal experience, and you will see the difficulty for contemplative nuns. The Eucharist is the “summit and source of all worship and Christian life” (LG11, Can 897), in which “each day members (of religious communities) are to make every effort to participate” (Can.663:2); the faithful are to receive it “frequently” (Can. 898). Sunday, the primary holy day of obligation (Can. 1246), “lies at the heart of the Church’s life” (CCC 2177); all are obliged to participate in Sunday mass (Can.

1247); failure to do so is a grave sin (CCC 2180;2181). The liturgy document stresses that “communities obliged to choral office are bound to celebrate the Office in choir every day *in addition to the conventual mass*” (SC95). Christian life as a whole, and contemplative life in particular, is unimaginable without regular, if not daily, Eucharist.

Faced with this series of conflicting pronouncements I once asked, indirectly, two students of canon law how the problem should be resolved. One, studying for a doctorate, said “there is absolutely no possibility of nuns subject to papal enclosure leaving the enclosure even for mass; canon law simply does not provide for the situation where no priest is available for the Eucharist.” The response of the second student, studying for a licentiate, was diametrically opposed to this: “all the faithful have right of access to the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and this takes precedence over rules of enclosure”. Could it be that these students typify the approach of the two curial dicasteries chiefly involved, the Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship on the one hand, and the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life on the other? If so, here perhaps lies the crux of the problem: two curial departments tackling their own sphere of concern without reference to the other. Worse than that: two gifts of life in the Church, Eucharist and enclosure, are in conflict with each other, or rather, enclosure, in the absence of a priest, works against Eucharist which is the source of life.

Is there any way forward with this *impasse*? Certainly the Church is always evolving; renewal and aggiornamento, bringing-up-to date in the light of the needs of the times, was the purpose of the Council in the first place. The distinctions between papal and constitutional enclosure are specific indications that legislation even on enclosure is subject to development. *Verbi Sponsa* now permits superiors of women’s communities to authorize short-term exits (which had not been permitted before), and this could perhaps be used to allow Sunday attendance by a community at the parish Eucharist, if this was thought desirable and could be managed - but it is not a very satisfactory solution. We - and I speak, I believe, on behalf of contemplative communities of women - would want the solution to lie at a deeper level.

Our attention at the meeting was directed to two documents which, if they do not exactly resolve the issue, do at least throw some light on it. *Eucharisticum mysterium* s.26 (1967) states:

It is preferable that small, religious, non-clerical communities, especially those that work in the parish, should take part in the parish mass on these days (Sundays and holy days).

This was quoted as the source for s.43 of the later (1988) *Instruction on Lent and Easter*:

It is fitting that small religious communities, both clerical and lay, and other lay groups should participate in the celebration of the Easter Triduum.

Both documents originate from the Congregation of Divine Worship (or its predecessor in the case of *Eucharisticum mysterium*), so the divergence between the two curial congregations described above remains; both pre-date *Verbi sponsa*, so do not take precedence over the prescriptions on enclosure. But it is surely significant that the flow of development is towards greater participation by religious communities, even, by 1988, of clerical ones, in the parish Eucharist. Monks, it seems, are not excluded, although nuns are; a footnote specifically refers to them:

In monasteries of nuns every effort should be made to celebrate the Easter Triduum with the greatest possible ceremony, but within the monastery church.

This underlying trend towards greater participation by all sections of the Church in the local eucharistic community (contemplative nuns notwithstanding) is in keeping with that critical section of *Lumen gentium* - s. 26, which emphasizes the importance and legitimacy of the local church as a real manifestation of the universal Church. What is not resolved is our present issue: what if the nuns’ “every effort to celebrate” proves fruitless because no priest is available, either for the Triduum or for Sundays and holy days? There is then the paradoxical situation of a section of the Church, a section consecrated to a life of prayer, actually excluded from the celebration of

the Easter Triduum - and regular Eucharist - by Church law.

Practical matters.

Within enclosure, nuns' communities have to make practical decisions about Eucharist similar to those which parish communities have to make when there is no priest:

- X Should communities hold communion services? This, after all, is what is expected in parishes; Rome has issued several directives on the subject.
- X If there are to be communion services, how often should they be held? Daily? Or on Sundays only? What are the reasons for deciding one way or the other?
- X Is a weekday communion service acceptable, with an exeat from the enclosure to the local parish church for Sunday Eucharist? (This draws on the authority given to superiors by *Verbi sponsa* mentioned earlier). It could be said that this maintains, at least to some degree, the spirit and practice of enclosure, while recognising the pre-eminence of Sunday. The practice of the desert hermits who lived in their cella during the week and met together on Saturdays and Sundays for the liturgical synaxis could be an ancient parallel.
- X Section 7 of the Constitution on the Liturgy speaks of the differing modes of Christ's presence - not just in the Eucharist and, during a liturgical celebration, in the priest, but also in the Word and in the assembly of God's people. Nuns celebrate in community the Liturgy of the Hours, which is almost entirely based on scripture. Is a communion service in addition to this necessary? Christ is present, after all, in two modes - word and liturgical assembly.

These are important questions. The focus, it is clear, is on communion services - whether they should be held at all and if so, how often. There is little doubt that Rome favours them: although they are not mentioned in the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law, shortly after, in 1987, the pope addressed the Congregation for Divine Worship in *Sundays in Priestless Parishes* and said: a communion service

- X does not and cannot replace mass, but it does increase desire for it
- X it maintains the bonds of the people of God with the whole Church
- X it is a means, though an imperfect one, of preserving a community's cohesion and vitality. (Presumably 'community' here can apply not just to the parish community but also to the religious one.)

The 1988 *Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* speaks at some length on the subject. The strength of this document lies in its recognition of and emphasis on the special character of Sunday *per se*, and on the assembly as God's people. "Priest or no priest, mass or no mass, Sunday is the Lord's Day and ... it must be celebrated and lived according to Christian tradition", comments Withey.¹ This is in accord with the spirit of the Constitution on the Liturgy, with its emphasis on Christ's presence through word and assembly. In some respects, though, it is an ambiguous document: on the one hand it allows for flexibility with regard to communion: "celebration of the Word of God or of the Liturgy of the Hours *may* be followed by communion" (20, 33) - while elsewhere it states that "Sunday assemblies when mass is not celebrated consist of two parts: the celebration of the Word of God, and the distribution of communion" (35). The Directory sees it as important that the structure of the celebration is in line with history and tradition (nos. 8 - 11). This is worth further consideration.

Tradition

There is no doubt that the practice of communion outside the Eucharist goes back to the very early

¹Withey "On the Directory" *Liturgy: Lay-Led Sundays II, Dec 1988 - Jan 1989*

days of the Church. Eoin de Bhaldraithe has written comprehensively on this in *American Benedictine Review* (although, it should be noted, his purpose here was to trace the development of daily mass and, by extension, the private mass, not specifically of communion outside Eucharist).² As early as AD 200 Tertullian tells of a Christian woman who takes the eucharistic bread secretly (to hide the fact from her pagan husband) before eating any other food, an indication that Eucharist was reserved in the home and taken daily outside of the liturgical synaxis.³ Hippolytus, a little later (c. 215) in *Apostolic Tradition*, points to something similar when he says that care should be taken lest a mouse eats the Eucharist.⁴ Indeed Martimort gives a list of references which suggest that retaining and taking communion outside the Eucharist was certainly frequent, if not positively casual: Novatian censures a Christian who took the Eucharistic bread to pagan games; Ambrose relates how his brother Satyrus, fearful of shipwreck, asked fellow sea-travellers for the Eucharist which he knew they had with them; and Augustine tells of a mother who cured her blind child by using the Eucharist as a poultice.⁵ So common and so careless was the manner of using and retaining the consecrated species that it was soon felt necessary to legislate: the council of Saragossa in 380 forbade surreptitious reservation.

² De Bhaldraithe, O.C.S.O. "Daily Eucharist: The Need for an Early Church Paradigm" *American Benedictine Review* 41:4 Dec. 1990

³ Tertullian *Ad uxorem* 2.5

⁴ Hippolytus *Apostolic Tradition*

⁵ Martimort *L'Eglise en Priere II*, Chapitre 11 La Reserve Eucharistique pp451 - 46. It may be of interest that even Benedict, according to Gregory's *Dialogues* (XXIV.1-2), engaged in this sort of behaviour: a fugitive monk who died while visiting his parents without leave would not remain buried. His desperate parents asked Benedict's help. He gave them a consecrated host telling them to place it on the monk's breast and bury him again. After this the body remained buried!

Directly relevant for our present topic is early monastic tradition. Pachomian monks initially attended the local parish church for Eucharist on Sundays, until numbers increased so much that it was more practical to have priests come to the monastery. The Rule of the Master legislates for daily communion outside mass within the monastery, distributed by the abbot, a layman, before the community meal at the end of either Sext or None. Communion following an Office, of course, follows the liturgy of word - liturgy of Eucharist pattern mentioned in the Directory. Sunday Eucharist was celebrated in the local church.⁶The communities of Pachomius and the Master were non-clerical, a fact which makes their arrangement significant for nuns today. Less certain are the prescriptions in the Rule of Benedict. There were priests in the community, but scholarly opinion is divided on whether even the phrase *missas tenere* (RB 60:4) refers to celebrating full Eucharist. (RB 1980 p273, pp411-412), let alone the other ambiguous references. Despite having priests in the community, however, Benedict probably followed the Rule of the Master, with full Eucharist on Sundays and feast days, and a communion service on other days. The key question is *why* Benedict accepted priests, in contrast to the Master who did not, and did not use them, apparently, for daily Eucharist. Is it simply because he saw no reason not to accept them, provided they were not puffed up with pride - priests, after all, have as much right to search for God in monastic life as anyone else! - or for more positive reasons. It soon became the custom to choose monks from the community and have them ordained so that they could exercise their priesthood for and within the monastery, and Benedict's practice of admitting priests may have been an anticipation of this. But does this reflect practical expediency or a developing understanding of Eucharist? (Does the difference matter?) Pachomius had found that monks sometimes misbehaved when they went to the local church, and Benedict's strictures on baths, on how monks are to behave when out of the monastery and on return, may suggest an effort to counter a similar deviating tendency. Evidence of Benedict's theology of Eucharist is surprisingly and frustratingly sparse; what is certain is that the increasing clericalization of the Church, and of monasteries as a prominent group within the Church, lead to the development of daily Eucharist, although paradoxically, until relatively recently (Pius X), this very practice led *away* from frequent communion for lay people. The significance of early eucharistic practice for the present predicament of nuns, however, is that for a long period in the early church communion services were common and, within monasteries at least, developed the very structure of liturgy of word followed by communion which the Church is recommending today for priestless liturgies.

Theology

Practice, however, no matter how ancient or established needs to be based on good theology. Is this the case? Early material gives two reasons for communion outside Eucharist. Justin says that those not able to attend the Sunday assembly share in it through receiving a portion of consecrated bread brought by the deacon.⁷ Basil makes a similar point: he who partakes of daily communion ought to see himself as receiving it from the priest at an earlier Eucharist. Communion here is an extension of and participation in full eucharist.⁸ Cassian takes another line: daily communion is medicine and healing for the wounds of sin.⁹ *Eucharisticum mysterium* and the 1988 Directory on Sunday Celebrations build on both these principles.¹⁰

⁶ RM 21 - 22; 45:15; 75:5

⁷ Justin *Apologia* I.67

⁸ Basil *Letter* 93

⁹ Cassian *Conferences* 23.XXI.1

¹⁰ EM 40; Directory 20, 22, 27, 42, 47

Communion services may indeed be an acceptable and necessary expediency to the problem of shortage of priests: it is argued that they are consistent with and in continuity with ancient tradition; pastorally acceptable, they seem a modern expression of *sensus fidelium*, a point noted by s.11 of the Directory; they offer scope to lay ministry in a way that is not possible with regular Eucharist, and this in itself is probably creating other areas of lay involvement in the Church which can only be a positive development. All this applies as much to communities of nuns as to parishes. Indeed, in so far as enclosed nuns are thought by some to be removed from the ordinary life and difficulties of the Church, their problem in this area brings a certain ‘solidarity’. Incorporating an Office as part of the communion celebration draws attention to the inherent orientation of the Liturgy of the Hours towards the Eucharist as ‘the centre and culmination of the whole life of the Christian community’ (GILH 12). As Gerard Austin OP says: all liturgy of the Word is anamnesis of the works of God, of which Eucharist is the greatest.¹¹ An alternative, and perhaps better, way would be to use the mass readings of the day. This ‘mass of the presanctified’, so valued in the Orthodox Church, brings out clearly the relationship of the communion service to the Eucharist.¹² If there is room for improvement, it may lie in recovering a sense of the broad ecclesial dimension of Eucharist of which the New Testament and early Church was so aware. Less focused on ‘having communion’, we need to concentrate on the paschal mystery in full Eucharist of which a communion service is but a limited extension.

All this may be true, but there is one significant way in which modern communion services differ from the ancient model: early Christians *prolonged* the sabbath Eucharist by taking communion during the week; the relationship between the two was real and evident. Today, the communion service acts as a *substitute* for the eucharistic sacrifice which is not available, increasingly so for more and more Christians, and this is a tragedy.

There is no need to rehearse the often-heard arguments for extending the boundaries of priesthood - although the recent discussion in the Tablet on Pauline and Corinthian models is an interesting and potentially fruitful contribution to the debate.¹³ But the question ‘who can be a priest?’ is secondary and derivative of the question ‘who and what is a priest for?’ While communion services have good credentials in history and tradition, the ‘having communion’ attitude which these services can foster definitely does not. Nuns can be as susceptible to this weakness as others, perhaps even more so. At the meeting in Ilkley we were introduced to the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas. Building on de Lubac’s restatement of the classic ‘the Church makes the Eucharist, the Eucharist makes the Church’, Zizioulas presents a vision of Eucharist which is breathtaking, one which supersedes the restricted world of the communion service. Essentially it is based on I Corinthians: the local church is communion, *koinonia* (1:9), the Eucharist is communion, *koinonia* (10:16); both the Eucharist and the local church are Christ’s body. The Body of Christ, the body of the Church, the body of the Eucharist becomes (sic; notice the singular verb) the supreme expression of community.¹⁴ Zizioulas spells out the consequences:

The eucharistic community is the body of Christ *par excellence* simply because it incarnates and realizes our communion within the very life and communion of the Trinity, in a way that preserves the eschatological character of truth while making it an integral

¹¹ Austin, O.P. “Communion Services: A Break with Tradition?” in *Fountain of Life*

¹² Directory 33, 35

¹³ Lobinger & Zulehner *Priests for Tomorrow* The Tablet 15 February 2003 and subsequent correspondence

¹⁴ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p.64

part of history.¹⁵

The work of Christ and the Church is to universalize this communion through Eucharist. The “most anti-individualistic act of the Church”,¹⁶ the Eucharist “accepts and sanctifies all of creation ‘recapitulated’ in the one body of the ‘first-born of creation.’... In the Eucharist man acts as a priest of creation in the name of Christ”¹⁷, for Eucharist is “the single reality of nature and creation to the point of identification.”¹⁸ The weakness of the communion service is evident. It *locates* Eucharist in a ‘thing’, rather than *realizes* it as an action which penetrates the whole of history and creation. For Zizioulas, as for de Lubac on whom he builds, the Presence is assuredly ‘real’ because it is ‘realizing’.¹⁹ In a communion service there is ‘real presence’; in the Eucharist there is realizing presence.

Where does this leave contemplative nuns struggling (in this context) with enclosure in the absence of a priest to celebrate the Eucharist within the monastery? Practically, unless the problem of priests is resolved (however this comes about) I see no alternative to communion services during the week, and even on Sundays if the local church itself has no priest; but with an exeat on Sundays to the local church otherwise. Sunday Eucharist *must* take precedence over enclosure, however it is legitimized. The words of Jesus in John 6 cannot be downplayed: “Truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you”, and the context for this is the Eucharist. The attitude to communion services must be that of Justin and Basil: we are sharing in the community’s full Eucharist; engaging in an ecclesial act, we are not just satisfying personal devotion.

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¹⁵ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* p.114

¹⁶ As quoted in McPartlan *Eucharist*, p.138

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 132

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.135

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.80

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