

Communion in church from the reserved sacrament has been commonplace in Scotland in recent years. One of the arguments for this has always been that it is an ancient practice.

The Rt Rev John Mantle, Bishop of Brechin - in a personal article - asks if he's making too much fuss over his unhappiness with Communion from the Reserved Sacrament.

For many years, and long before I returned to Scotland, I was a strong advocate of Communion from the Reserved Sacrament, even though it wasn't happening in England. Since 1986, with others, I had been visiting France where the practice was commonplace. The ADAP (or Dominical Assembly in the Absence of a Priest) was practiced in the Nord de Calais region. Visit any village church in that area in the 80s and 90s (as we did) and you might find the laity conducting a Sunday morning service - distributing the sacrament to the faithful from the tabernacle.

Communion in church from the reserved sacrament has been commonplace in Scotland in recent years. One of the arguments for this has always been that it is an ancient practice. It is indeed true that early Christians took the sacrament to their homes and sometimes distributed this to the sick. And we have maintained the same practice: communion taken to the housebound to those in hospital or care homes has always been a feature of our pastoral care and it must continue. But that is quite different from turning this into a frequent service in church, sometimes when the very clergy who consecrated the elements weeks before, are present in the pews.

I'm now persuaded that we should reconsider this practice. I think we are in great danger of flying in the face of what Eucharist is really about. In England there has been little enthusiasm for this practice, and in parts of France it is now completely abandoned. I want to own up and say, 'I think I made a mistake'. Why have I changed my mind? The Eucharist, or, Thanksgiving - has been at the heart of Christian worship for centuries. In the catholic churches it has been the ordained priest only, called by the whole community to this ordained ministry and presidency, who presides. It is then a gathering of People and Priest together in an act of communal celebration.

The Reformation had changed practices. In the Church of England, and by the late 18th century Morning Prayer or Matins was often the norm, and even in the Scottish Episcopal Church right up to the 1960s and early 70s this might sometimes be the pattern. It was the Oxford Movement of the 19th century and

the Parish and People Movement of the 20th that successfully returned the Eucharist to its central position as the main Sunday morning service.

But this was difficult to maintain. We into the 1970s and 80s there was a downturn in the number of ordinands (despite a growing army of non stipendiary clergy) and occasionally people advocated Communion from the Reserved Sacrament. In the Roman Catholic Church in France the problems were so acute in the Nord de Calais region in the 1990s - there was said to be at least one priest with 30 churches under his care! The ADAP was created, and laity, carefully trained, met together weekly to discuss and prepare the Sunday service in detail .

In England there was always less enthusiasm, and the Bishops of the Church of England restrained themselves. In Scotland however, things took a different direction. I get the impression that Communion from the Reserved Sacrament has been a 'winning formula' that has helped Local Collaborative Ministry to succeed. Indeed, several laity in my own diocese claim there would have been a 'total collapse' of community worship if it had not been introduced.

However, it seems to me that we have moved this on to another plane by elevating Communion from the Reserved Sacrament to the position of a kind of alternative communion service because of the frequency of use, and apparently entirely appropriate even if clergy are present! Rather, I would plead for a recognition of the full celebration of a Eucharist, in real time, with priest and people together, as the norm to which we should all inspire. To those who say, 'But you'd be depriving us of the Eucharist' I would say, 'Yes, you may be 'deprived', and this is what happens when there are not enough ordained clergy. That's the issue to be tackled, not the appropriation of what a Dutch theologian has described as a 'pseudo - Eucharist'.

Despite what so many people say, it is clear from the evidence that some members of some congregations can make no distinction between a celebration (with priest) and a distribution one). Despite the efforts of the Scottish Episcopal Church, the authorised book on Communion from the Reserved Sacrament has sometimes been ignored, and services have been compiled and punted, in what seems like a deliberate attempt to 'recreate' a celebration of the Eucharist. In the end, and in my heart, I'm the sort of radical who believes that Lay Celebration might be defended theologically. Indeed this has now been agreed in the Diocese of Sydney, and even advocated by Catholic Dominicans! But I still believe myself a catholic Christian who wants to maintain order. I would certainly support communion from the reserved sacrament for two or three major festivals if no priest was available. But primarily, I would want to uphold the celebration of the Eucharist, as the communal gathering of priest and people together as the norm,

not in addition, an occasion for the 'stocking up' on the sacrament for the weeks that follow.

In the meantime I am aware that the Liturgy Committee is considering a new non-Eucharistic service for use in church. What I would like to do at this stage is encourage discussion. My hope is that we will replace our reserved sacrament communions with a Service of the Word, while maintaining our catholic understanding of the Eucharist as a Celebration of President and People together.

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