

Further Reflections on the Use of the Reserved Sacrament

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David Fuller offers some carefully considered and pastorally sensitive thoughts on the use of the Reserved Sacrament in public worship (Issue 98, Summer, 2011), in an article written in tribute to the late Bishop John Mantle. Mr Fuller is certainly right that Communion from the Reserved Sacrament has become an integral part of the liturgical and spiritual life of many congregations, and also that the concerns raised by Bishop Mantle need to be addressed.

The issues surrounding Communion from the Reserved Sacrament are pastoral and theological - and practical. They are also complicated by the legacy of issues which divided the Church at the reformation, and by the complex relationship of the SEC with the Church of England. The controversies at the reformation regarding the Eucharist and reservation of the elements had nothing to do with, and did not envisage, any form of public worship at which elements consecrated on another occasion would be distributed and consumed. If anything, measures taken during the Anglican reformation were concerned to encourage the consumption of Eucharistic Elements - rather than regarding the host as a visual aid to devotion. It was in frustration at his failure to persuade the laity of England to make their Communion more regularly that Archbishop Cranmer adapted the monastic Offices to create what were inadvertently to become the bedrock of Anglican worship - Mattins and Evensong. To what extent these issues were relevant in Scotland, or are relevant anywhere today, is another matter. The fundamental issue is that the Eucharist has, during the past century, increasingly become the principal form of Sunday worship for Anglican congregations, replacing Mattins. Declining clergy numbers have left many communities without the regular services of a priest, creating a sense of deprivation for congregations wishing to sustain frequent Eucharistic worship. This in turn generated a mistaken sense that the Ministry or the Word is somehow inferior to that of the Sacrament, a substitute to be used when a celebration of the Eucharist is not possible, rather than being an essential aspect of Anglican worship. In a recent study, I have divided the variety of approaches to the perceived Eucharistic deprivation into

broadly seven, not mutually exclusive, categories.¹ One of these, the ordination of non-stipendiary priests, once novel and controversial, is now taken for granted. Another, revival in services of the Word, has been encouraged by the recent authorisation of a new rite by the College of Bishops, which should enrich our worship and revive aspects which may have been neglected. Other approaches have found greater or lesser acceptance, but none is entirely without merit, with the exception of the theological and pastoral abomination of ‘cyber-communion’ - downloading a service from the internet and consuming elements placed strategically in front of the computer screen. Nor is any approach without theological, pastoral, and practical problems. In this respect at least the use of reserved elements is no different.

Mr Fuller eschews lay presidency at the Eucharist, an option which Bishop Mantle raised, and it would perhaps be instructive to compare this approach with that of using reserved elements. It is a widely held fallacy, or at least an over-simplification, that the latter option is favoured by catholic Anglicans, and the former by evangelicals. One of the earliest and most uncompromising, Anglican proponents of lay presidency was the Anglo-Catholic Canon Frank Synge, in a presentation to the 1963 Anglican Congress in Toronto. The first parish in England to use the Reserved Sacrament in public worship on an official and regular basis was the evangelical benefice of Ulverston in the Diocese of Carlisle in 1979. Similarly, concerns and objections to both these practices have been raised from across the Anglican spectrum, so the debate clearly cannot be reduced to one of churchmanship. Both are attempts to make participation in the Eucharist more widely available without ordaining to the priesthood men and women who do not meet stipulated criteria. These criteria have of course changed over time: residential Theological Colleges, a nineteenth century innovation, for a time became all but essential to priestly formation, until recent decades when more varied and more accessible patterns of theological education and ministerial formation have been devised; women, divorcees, and those whose vocation is to a non-stipendiary pattern of ministry, are no longer excluded from ordination.

¹ *Lay Presidency at the Eucharist? An Anglican Approach* (Affirming Catholicism) London: Continuum, 2009), 152-76.

This expansion of the ordained ministry has made regular celebration of the Eucharist possible in many more congregations, but there remain those dependent on infrequent visits from their bishop or other priests, or on alternative forms of worship.

Neither the newly authorised Service of the Word, nor any traditional form of the Daily Office, is likely to prove satisfactory on its own. However valuable ‘spiritual communion’ may be as a form of private devotion, it is unlikely to be sustainable in public worship. ‘Agape’ meals are fraught with difficulties, theological, pastoral, and practical, and their distinction from celebration of the Eucharist is problematic, both in ancient tradition and in contemporary experience.²

Communion from the Reserved Sacrament is likely to remain all but normative in many congregations for some time, but hopefully not apart from a revival in Services of the Word. The problems surrounding this rite therefore need to be addressed. The practical issues surrounding transportation and storage of reserved elements, particularly to remote and isolated communities, are real enough, but whether or not the bread and wine are consecrated has no bearing on their durability (unless the wine has been mixed); any limitations imposed on the period of reservation have to do with the inevitability of physical decay, not any sense that the consecration wears off over time. There are issues to do with reverence and security in the case of consecrated elements, which need to be addressed locally.

Bishop Mantle is not alone in emphasising a need to distinguish clearly between Communion from the Reserved Sacrament and celebration of the Eucharist. If this need is to be perceived other than as to do with preserving priestly prerogatives, then the distinction is going to have to be understood and expressed liturgically very much for clearly than seems often to be the case. Mr Fuller makes reference to the potential value of Communion from the Reserved Sacrament in expressing the unity of the local congregation with the wider Church. This is particularly important for isolated communities. The Roman rite of *Fermentum* to which Mr Fuller refers is not a true

² Paul F Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins*, (London: SPCK, 2004).

precedent for use of reserved elements apart from a celebration of the Eucharist, as this involved the token presence of elements from a Eucharist at which the bishop had presided at another celebration, at which a priest is presiding. Nevertheless, some appropriate expression of unity with the Catholic Church, and with the bishop of the diocese as the representative thereof, needs to be devised. The Eucharistic Prayers of many Anglican provinces evoke quite explicitly the presence of the whole Church, living and departed, in the celebration. This is not the case with the SEC rites. The 1970 and 1982 Liturgies both evoke only the ‘company of heaven’, as do the older Prayer Book rites. Communion from the Reserved Sacrament includes the optional prayer expressing unity with what used to be known as the Church militant. In fellowship with the whole Church of God, with all who have been brought together by the Holy Spirit to worship on this day, and who have celebrated the Eucharist, let us rejoice that we are called to be part of the body of Christ.

Perhaps this union with the Church, universal and local, i.e. the diocese, earthly and heavenly, needs to be given stronger emphasis in future revisions of the rites both of the Eucharist and of Communion from the Reserved Sacrament. The prayer at the Epiclesis in the 1970 Liturgy, that ‘all who shall receive the same may be sanctified both in body and soul ...’ could usefully be restored in future rites, and our catholic heritage will certainly include other material which can be adapted for contemporary liturgical and pastoral needs.

It is difficult to envisage how the SEC can provide for Eucharistic worship in many of its congregations without authorised distribution of reserved elements, at least for the foreseeable future. Any practical obstacles need to be overcome, and the rite administered, with due emphasis on ministry of the Word as well as of the Sacrament, so as to give it the fullest expression to the unity of the gathered congregation with the Catholic Church - as a pastoral and theological imperative.

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