

Is it a fuss over nothing?

Bishop John Mantle is right to raise the subject of Communion from the Reserved Sacrament. But, it is not a fuss over nothing.

As he rightly says in his article in *inspires* (April 2009), this form of service has become commonplace in Scotland in recent years. In my opinion this is quite proper and long may it continue. It is transparently obvious, especially in remote places with small populations, that the days when a local priest ministered to the people on a regular basis are long gone, probably never to return. The combination of falling pew numbers and the increasing costs of maintaining stipendiary clergy are of vital importance. I heard recently that it costs over £70,000 per year to keep a priest in office, when taking into account stipend, housing, insurance, transport, pension and administrative costs. Even spread over ten charges, these costs are prohibitive.

There are a number of choices. The church can rely for its sacramental life on a coterie of retired clergy, and this applies and works well in many places. No one would deny these clergy a continuing role in retirement. But, surely, they have run the course and, while willing, should not be depended upon for a never-ending duty. We could, as Bishop John suggests, ordain more to the sacred ministry, but where are the candidates, who will pay for their training and who can afford them? The third option is to rely more on properly trained, lay volunteers to offer Eucharistic worship.

It is crystal clear that there are some uniquely, priestly roles that must never be assumed by the laity, but they are surprisingly few. I have referred to them in other writings on this important subject as the ABC of Priesthood.¹ These comprise: Absolution, Blessing and Consecration. These facets of priesthood are mandated to ordained clergy through the Apostolic Succession and are, for all good Episcopalians, sacrosanct. Thus, provided that members of the laity do not absolve, bless or consecrate, they may perform all other parts of a Eucharistic service. I was amazed to read that Bishop John could even begin to countenance lay presidency of a Eucharistic service, regardless of what some Australians and a few Dominicans may have been led to believe.

¹ My trilogy of papers on this subject may be found at: <http://www.grulinechurch.org.uk/Report%20List.html>

The Scottish Episcopal Church is a sacramental church; its members demand and deserve regular Eucharistic services. For Bishop John to suggest that these should only be made available, in the absence of a locally available, ordained priesthood, two or three times a year, at major festivals, is entirely inappropriate and inexcusable. If congregations want a diet of Services of the Word (as yet undefined) then they can attend any one of a number of Presbyterian churches which offer just that. Is Bishop John really trying to empty our churches?

I can understand his focus on Thanksgiving (*Ευχαριστοσ*) and his perceived need for priest and people to come together for this. However, it is not just the celebrant who can say, 'I give thanks (*Ευχαριστοσ*)', every member of the congregation can concur and none more so than a lay leader of Eucharistic worship.

I know that Bishop John has some reservations (no pun intended!) about suitable training for lay persons who lead Eucharistic worship. He has spoken, for example, of wine being poured back from chalices into flagons at the end of the service and other abuses. This is surely the result of a lack of training and instruction. As an altar server I have suffered at the hands of many incompetent, poorly trained, episcopally ordained clergy over the years. One of these read the whole of the Eucharistic Prayer to the congregation with his back to the altar and the elements; another was so keen to get to his sermon that he 'forgot' to proclaim the Holy Gospel; and a third conducted no final ablutions and probably assumed that the remaining hosts and wine would be simply thrown away after the service! (It is curious to report that all three of these peculiarities occurred on Easter Days!) Everywhere training is needed. There are surely enough priests and lay people in the SEC to provide necessary tuition for the laity who are called to lead this special form of worship.²

The reception of any sacrament is a matter of faith. From my experience of offering lay led Eucharistic worship, members of my congregations attend because they wish to receive the Body and Blood of their crucified and resurrected Saviour. They do not seem to have any undue concerns about the service during which they receive these consecrated elements; it is the receiving, and the consequent spiritual uplift that is important. They are not bothered by the absence of a priest. That the service they attend is conducted in a suitably 'priestly' way and the

² My own small monograph may prove useful in this respect, at <http://www.lulu.com/content/paperback-book/the-lay-led-eucharist---a-practical-handbook/251617>

knowledge that the elements are duly consecrated is sufficient for them. The length of time during which the elements have been reserved is equally of no consequence. They believe, as I do, that God's consecrating power, through the words and actions of his priests, does not have any time limit – there is no 'sell-by date'.

Finally, Bishop John is concerned that lay led services are conducted when there are ordained clergy in the congregation. During the summer months the many holiday visitors to this island inevitably include clergy of all ranks. They come for a holiday, away from the rigours and burdens of busy dioceses and parishes. They come to be ministered to, not to minister. I have had any number of priests in my congregations and a few bishops and deans (including an SEC Primus) and none of them has expressed anything but gratitude that they could come to church on Sunday or a Feast Day and receive the Blessed Sacrament.

Lay led Eucharistic worship is, to use Bishop John's words, 'a winning formula'. I believe that therein lies the future of our church, and perhaps of others. Of course it is vital for lay led services to be conducted to the very highest of standards and for all who attend them to be made aware of exactly what they comprise. Lay leaders are not masquerading as Eucharistic Presidents – but they do have a vital role to play in satisfying the sacramental needs of many of our congregational members, without whom our church will die.

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