

First, the Assembly Gathers

(the theory)

BY EUGENE WALSH

The most important thing that people can do at a parish Sunday Mass is to take the trouble to gather with each other. The reason is deceptively simple. If there is no real gathering, there is no real assembly, just so many individuals in the same room. If there is no real assembly, there is no real church.

"The church makes the eucharist; the eucharist makes the church," says Yves Congar, one of the truly great theologians of this century. What he is saying is that the assembly makes the parish Sunday Mass and the parish Sunday Mass makes the assembly. He is saying also that the parish assembly is the first and primary minister of the parish Sunday Mass.

The full, life-giving sacramental sign of the eucharist is the life-giving assembly gathered, listening, responding. Bread and wine are only a partial sign of the sacrament. People eating bread and drinking wine are only a partial sign of the sacrament. The full, life-giving sacramental sign of eucharist is the parish assembly, the body of Christ, fully aware of itself as God's people, deliberately and consciously sharing themselves through the sacramental actions of gathering, hearing God's word, and responding through eucharist and mission.

To the degree that the sacramental sign is life-giving, the Sunday Mass is life-giving. To the degree the sacramental sign fails, so, to that degree, does Sunday Mass fail to be life-giving. Dull, feeble, half-hearted signs make dull and feeble and half-hearted sacraments. Dull and feeble and half-hearted sacraments are not life-giving. In fact there comes a point where they begin to be death-dealing. It is only a fully life-giving assembly that makes a fully life-giving sacrament of eucharist. No matter how hard they try, all the other ministers cannot make it happen.

The developed theology of Vatican II about church and sacraments demands that we speak in the terms I have used in the opening paragraphs of this article. The reform and renewal called for by Vatican II is not superficial, a matter of rearranging furniture. It calls for radical changes in our way of thinking and doing. We are just beginning to realize how radical these changes are.

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I believe future historians will hail as the most radical of all the changes called for by Vatican II, the demand that we understand the church again, before all else, as the people of God.

By designating the church as people of God, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church rescues from near oblivion and restores to life a long neglected dimension of the church, an essential dimension of the church.

Before it is anything else the church is a people called by God to be specifically a priestly people and to exercise all rights and privileges of a priestly people. All God's people are called back from an exile of more than a thousand years. *All* God's people are aliens and strangers no more, second class citizens no longer. *All* God's people are called back to their rightful inheritance in the church: first-class citizenship.

If this is true, then the first task of all specially designated ministers is to serve the assembly. Their conscious and deliberate target is to help the assembly bring itself to life, to help it understand and claim its primary ministry for making Sunday Mass a life-giving celebration. When ministers of Sunday Mass lose sight of this target they fail in their ministry.

If ministers are to do the task of serving the assembly effectively, they have got to understand precisely what the task is, to understand its implications for worship (and for all other areas of church life as well), to take it seriously and to make it happen.

It is precisely through the "experience" of making Sunday eucharist that the people of a given parish get to know themselves for what they really are: God's priestly people. There is no other way. You can talk about it forever, but people will never really get to realize what it means until they experience it.

They must get to feel what it means to gather by actually gathering, to listen by actually going through the experience of listening, to respond by actually sharing the eucharistic action and the mission that flows from it.

In this article I want to focus on the energy of gathering, because gathering is the first action of the parish assembly. Gathering is not only first in order of time, gathering is the most important action by which a roomfull of individuals get transformed into an assembly.

Gathering is something that people do. Gathering does not happen. Gathering takes place only to the

degree that the members of the assembly "go out of their way" to pay attention to each other. People really gather only when they "take the trouble" to gather. True gathering demands that all members of the assembly "give of themselves" to each other. Gathering is the beginning of the sacrificial action of loving one another. Gathering is the first and indispensable step of Christian love, the first movement in fulfilling God's commandment to love one another.

Those who take the trouble to gather are the ones who are most ready to listen with greater care and intensity to God's word proclaimed in the midst of the assembly. They begin to share the word, realizing that God's word is proclaimed primarily to the assembly, not to individuals in the assembly. Those who take the trouble to gather are ready to enter more deeply into the energy of responding to God's love through the eucharistic action and, afterwards, in the way they try to live.

Gathering is the energy that has the power to transform a passive people into a consciously active people. It is precisely by means of gathering that members of the assembly begin transforming themselves from passive receivers to active doers.

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Full, active, consciously deliberate participation of the entire assembly has been the constant, stated goal of all the reform and renewal of worship called for by the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II. So far we have not succeeded very well in the task of bringing the people to genuine, active participation. By everyone's admission it is the least successful of all renewal efforts. There are a number of reasons for this.

One of the reasons is that we have not really grasped the genuine meaning of truly active participation. Genuine, active participation can mean one thing and one thing only. It can mean nothing less than having an active part in "making the eucharist."

The longtime and still prevailing notion of active participation is very much like our understanding of what it means to eat a meal that someone else has prepared. When we eat, we do participate actively but only as part of a larger process. Our active eating of the meal has nothing to do with making the meal. Such participation is active only to a degree. It is really more passive than active. People at Mass on Sunday are asked for the most part to "have some" of what others are preparing for them. That is not good enough. Full, active, conscious, deliberate participation means nothing less than having

a genuinely active part in all of the eucharist, in making it happen.

Members of most assemblies are unaware that they have an important and essential part in the making of a life-giving celebration of the eucharist. Very few Mass-going people have a sense that the life-giving quality of Sunday Mass depends very much on what they do and how actively they engage themselves in doing it.

Only in the last couple of years do we see emerging a growing consciousness. In all the flurry of developing the "new" ministries for worship during the past fifteen years or so, the assembly never got so much as a mention. We never even used the word, let alone designated the assembly as having any kind of specific and unique ministry. Now we are speaking boldly of the primary ministry of the assembly. Now we are speaking of the responsibility of the assembly for life-giving worship for which there is absolutely no substitute.

Now we know. Only when the assembly and all the specially designated ministers of Sunday Mass consciously work together as a team under the leadership of the priest-celebrant do we get a truly life-giving celebration of Sunday Mass. Only then do we bring to full life-giving splendor the sacramental sign of the eucharist.

When members of the assembly put out the energy of gathering they release the powerful, transforming energy of hospitality. When people take the trouble to make room in their lives for each other, they begin to make strangers feel welcome. They begin to make lonely people feel needed and wanted. We will never know how much healing of hurt and pain takes place in the lives of people as more and more members of the assembly reach out to one another in the embrace of hospitality.

Gathering also releases the main energy of the faith experience, the faith experience by which God touches us and we touch God. Faith is ignited from flesh to flesh, from person to person. God comes to us through us. Jesus comes to us through us. When people open themselves to each other through the hospitable action of gathering, they release in that moment the life-giving real presence of the risen Lord into their midst. If people do not open themselves to each other, Jesus remains captive and imprisoned by the alienation and isolation of an ungathered and inhospitable people.

There is much more to say, but we must stop here. In this article I am making one single point: gathering is the absolutely indispensable energy by which and through which a parish Sunday assembly brings itself alive, understands itself as assembly, and claims itself as the first and primary minister of Sunday eucharist.

I am making the additional point that the main task of all other ministers of the eucharistic action is to help the assembly achieve its full potential as the greatest living sign and symbol of a life-giving eucharist. All ministries are in service to help the assembly bring itself to full, conscious, deliberate, intelligent, active participation.

Now we can get on to discovering how to make it happen.

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