

THE RESERVED SACRAMENT – SOME THOUGHTS

(WRITTEN AS A MEMORIAL TO BISHOP JOHN MANTLE
FORMERLY BISHOP OF BRECHIN)

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of the Reserved Sacrament is almost as old as Christendom. Gregory Dix made it clear in his book *The Shape of the Liturgy* that the principal reason for reservation was to symbolise the liturgical presidency of a bishop within his church. As the church grew and bishops were perforce required to warrant their presbyters with authority to consecrate the sacramental species, deacons carried portions of the Eucharistic bread (the *fermentum*) from the bishop's celebration to be included with that of the presbyters.¹ This action was undertaken as a token that they were in communion with their bishop and to demonstrate that the bishop remained the high-priest of the community and its principal, liturgical minister, whether he was present or not. This use was attested at least thirty years before reservation was employed in providing daily communion (by about AD120). Dix explained that it was also a common practice in the pre-Nicene church for the communicating faithful to take portions of the consecrated bread home with them so that they could make their communions on mornings when the liturgy was not celebrated.² By the third century, deacons carried the sacrament to those who could not get to the Sunday service; this activity was later assumed by acolytes or assistants. Dix described the basic use of the reserved sacrament as being essential for the daily communion of the faithful, not necessarily for the communion of the sick.³

2. DEVELOPMENTS

At the time of the Protestant Reformation a completely different view was taken of the Eucharist. The 'consecrated' bread and wine were seen merely as vehicles whereby communicating Christians could receive the grace of God, through individual faith (*sola fide*). The 1637 Scottish Order contains a rubric that makes it clear that:

if any of the Bread and Wine remain, which is consecrated, it shall be reverently eaten and drunk by such of the communicants only as the Presbyter which celebrates shall take unto him, *but it shall not be carried out of the Church* (my italics).

¹ Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, (London: Dacre Press, 1945), 134.

² *Ibid*, 105.

³ Gregory Dix, *A Detection of Aumbries*, (London: Dacre Press, 1942), 19.

The 1637 Order for The Communion of the Sick required a celebration, albeit a somewhat (and maybe necessarily) truncated liturgy, in the home and at the bedside. In extreme conditions the order could be reduced to the Prayer of Consecration, the Administration and the Blessing. By the time of the 1929 Order for the Communion of the Sick there is a rubric which requires:

immediately after the Blessing any of the consecrated Elements that remain shall be reverently consumed, *or else taken back to the church* (my italics).

This is followed by a rubric that begins:

When the sick person is communicated from the consecrated Gifts reserved for that purpose...

This seems to imply that the sacrament was reserved for the use of the sick although there is nowhere any indication in the 1929 Communion Order as to when or how this should be done. It is clear that procedures arose that allowed the Blessed Sacrament to be reserved for the use of the sick but it was no longer taken home for domestic use, as in the post-Apostolic church. The liturgical and doctrinal developments engendered by the Oxford Movement in the first half of the nineteenth century saw the Reserved Sacrament also become a focus for prayerful adoration and worship (as has been seen in the growth of services such as Benediction). Only in recent years has the Reserved Sacrament been used as a source for administration during lay led Eucharistic worship.

3. TODAY'S CHURCH

Our church today is seriously different in structure from that in Dix's world (first half of the twentieth century). Much has been written about the increased costs of maintaining stipendiary clergy in post and the concomitant result of more and more charges sharing fewer and fewer resources. The current financial recession has only exacerbated these problems and there seems little likelihood of improvements in the foreseeable future. Our churches, especially those in remote locations, or with small congregations, have been left in the hands of retired clergy, where these exist, or are the responsibility of lay readers and leaders. While these latter can and do provide a regular framework of worship there is often difficulty with the provision of sacramental services. Some of these lay leaders have been given authority by their bishops to conduct Eucharistic services, administering consecrated elements reserved for that purpose. However, there is much disquiet about this practice, not least in the College of Bishops. The late Bishop John Mantle initiated a debate on this complex subject, initially in the pages of the SEC *inspires* magazine. In general he criticised the practice of lay-led Eucharistic worship, not least because of the abuses that he had observed. A

lunchtime meeting, chaired by Bishop John, during the 2009 General Synod was so well attended that there was standing room only. Despite many points of view being raised, not conclusions were reached. Yet, it proved to be an important issue, demanding weighty considerations in another forum.

4. THE PROBLEMS

The most serious contention is raised by those who believe that the Blessed Sacrament can only be properly administered during a celebration of the Holy Eucharist presided over by an episcopally ordained priest. This is, of course, a very valid argument and, given the necessary resources (both financial and human), is the obvious solution. However, as we have seen, these resources are not always available. Should we expect our remote and clerically impoverished congregations to rely on a diet of Services of the Word until some passing cleric happens upon them? We are a sacramental church and to make such a suggestion, however well intentioned and fulfilled, will not satisfy our members' craving for 'the bread of life'. Indeed, such a practice would drive many into the arms of our Presbyterian churches which, essentially, offer just that style of worship. Do we want our churches to close?

Given that some of our lay leaders are trained and given episcopal sanction to conduct Eucharistic services there are still many questions to answer and problems and difficulties to overcome. Many of these revolve around where the sacrament is consecrated and when. Can the Reserved Sacrament be taken from one place, perhaps the cathedral, if that is not too far distant, for use in a remote church? Alternatively, if, as some suggest, the sacrament can only be reserved in the place where the consecration takes place, how is this to be accomplished, bearing in mind the difficulty of getting a priest in the first place. Can it be reserved in one church and taken to another, perhaps equally remote, location for a Eucharistic service there? Then there is the question of how long the sacrament may be reserved in one place. In some remote locations this may be weeks or months – but some of our clergy, those who are sensitive to the need for this practice, say that the limits are, quite arbitrarily, two weeks, or three weeks, or a month.

There is a serious question of what actually constitutes Eucharistic worship. Some have argued that 'Eucharist' is a translation of the Greek word for 'thanksgiving' and it is only through the presence of the priest at the celebration that the people may properly give thanks to God for the ultimate sacrifice made by Christ at Calvary.

4. SOME SOLUTIONS

A serious debate needs to take place in our church to air all points of view on this complex issue. Our bishops and clergy, who may feel threatened by these changes, need to appreciate the differing understandings of what constitutes reception of the sacrament. It seems to me that most of our congregational members understand reception of the sacrament as just that – they receive the sacrament from whosoever offers it to them, provided, of course, that this reception takes place within a service order that is very similar to that which a priest might celebrate (we are not yet ready for the Eucharistomat!). The person in the pew does not seem to mind, or care about, how the sacrament that they receive came to be consecrated, where this action took place, or when (although I think it is important to make this clear at the commencement of the service). I have conducted Eucharistic worship for many years now and have had bishops, priests and deacons in my congregations (including an SEC Primus!), as well as numerous lay folk. I have never known anyone refuse to receive the Reserved Sacrament at any of the services that I have conducted.

I have come to the conclusion that earthly time scales are unimportant in the things of God. Consecration is a one-off event. Things that are consecrated include churches, chapels, altars, chalices (and patens), graveyards and the Blessed Sacrament. There is never a requirement to re-visit this consecration – it is for all time. So it is with the elements of bread and wine. God imposes no time limit on the things he uses in his service. Time constraints are entirely illogical and have no meaning, other than, perhaps, to satisfy the qualms of some of the clergy. The question about ‘thanksgiving’ is best answered by suggesting that there is no occasion when a congregation together with its leader cannot give thanks to God for his mercy and providence, even when no ordained priest is present; each and every one of us can say ‘*Eucharisto*’ – I give thanks!

5. CONCLUSIONS

Had he lived, I am sure Bishop John would have welcomed a serious debate on this necessary development of Eucharistic practice, a change that is being recognised as vital to the future of his church. He observed lay led Eucharistic services in France many years ago and initially thought them a good thing; a transformation that was deemed necessary for the needs of the times. For some reason he altered his mind, perhaps under pressure from conservative members of the priesthood. I have no doubts that the church will have to modify its thinking on this vital topic. The rank-and-file members will demand their sacramental rights – they have been led to believe that they belong to a church that cherishes its sacraments, they are Anglicans not Presbyterians. Already I have witnessed lay led Eucharistic worship in remote and rural dioceses of the Church of England. The Roman

Catholic Church is allowing some of its lay Eucharistic ministers to offer Reserved Sacrament services. We have experienced it on our island for many years, with great success and total acceptance by our local congregation and our many visitors.

Please may we have that serious debate so that all may understand what the few are doing? It must be made clear that we are not undermining the office and work of our priests; we desperately need them to allow this type of service to continue. We are not planning to emulate the Diocese of Sydney and demand lay presidency of the Eucharist. We believe that lay people have an increasingly important part to play in the sacramental life of our church. We need the approval and encouragement of Diocesan Synods and the College of Bishops. The pressure for change grows. Please put lay-led Eucharistic worship on your agendas for discussion – soon!!

David Fuller

Lay Chaplain – Saint Columba, Gruline, Isle of Mull

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