

A Eucharistic Dis-Service: A Personal Reading of 'Redemptionis Sacramentum'

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# A Eucharistic Dis-Service

– a personal reading of ‘*Redemptionis Sacramentum*’

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Kevin T. Kelly

I have recently read the full text of the Congregation for Divine Worship Instruction, ‘On certain matters to be observed or to be avoided regarding the Most Holy Eucharist’. I came to it after reading *Vatican II: A Matter of Style* by Professor John O’Malley, SJ, of Weston Jesuit School of Theology, and a talk by Timothy Radcliffe to Catholic Peers and MPs.

O’Malley, a distinguished Church historian, pin-points five essential features of the ‘spirit of the Council’, focused on ‘how’ questions rather than ‘what’ questions. *How* is the Church to be – ‘what kind of procedures does it use, what kind of relationships does it foster among its members, what is its *style* as an institution?’ His five essentials are: (1) *horizontal* – ‘the Council called the Church from what had been an almost exclusively vertical, top down style of behaviour to one that took more account of the horizontal traditions in Catholicism.’ He highlights such horizontal words as co-operation, partnership, collaboration and especially collegiality; (2) *servicing* – the Council’s style and mentality is ‘more consonant with serving than with controlling’; (3) *changing* – though Vatican II never used the word ‘change’, its use of words like ‘development’, ‘progress’ and even ‘evolution’ were precisely about change and implied that its own provisions were ‘somewhat open ended’; (4) *inclusive* – a move from ‘exclusion’ to ‘inclusion’ marked by ‘friendship words like sisters and brothers, and men and women of good will’ and extending this friendship far beyond fellow Christians to ‘anybody wanting to work for a better world’; (5) *participative* – a move from ‘passive acceptance’ to one of ‘active participation and engagement’ – not just in the liturgy but actually as ‘a norm for the way we behave, that is constitutive of our style as Church’.

Timothy Radcliffe reminds politicians how the ‘truthfulness of our talking’ plays a major part in the ‘quality of political life’. He

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develops a 'spirituality of truth', stressing that 'telling the truth is our human vocation'. Rather than being reduced to mere exactitude, telling the truth is about giving life to people and helping them become free. As he puts it: 'Our words can give life to another or they can kill. We can share in speaking God's word, which builds people up, and makes them strong and alive. Or we can squash people like flies.'

There are ways of speaking which belittle or denigrate: 'If we talk about human beings as if we are above all consumers, then we unmake the children of God. If we talk about schools and hospitals as if they were profit-making businesses, then we undermine civilization; if we talk about killing civilians as "collateral damage" then we rubbish our victims.' Truth telling is also about building community. Our society is threatened by a 'crisis of suspicion' which thrives on accusation and creates mistrust and insecurity. Radcliffe insists: 'For a Christian, we never see the truth of another person unless one has first seen a glimpse of their goodness.' It means seeing people with God's eyes, with the eyes of mercy and love. 'It means having a prejudice in their favour.' He ends his talk with Paul's words in Eph 4:29: 'Do not use harmful words in talking. Use only helpful words, the kind that build up and provide what is needed, so what you say will do good to those who hear you.'

All this was in my mind as I began reading the Instruction of the Congregation for Divine Worship. I must confess that my heart sank and I was deeply saddened by what I read. It seems far from the 'spirit of the Council'. There is little 'horizontal' about it, no empathy with those in parish ministry struggling to make the liturgy an inspiring and life-giving experience for people. Its emphasis seems more on control than on 'service', on uniformity rather than on healthy evolutionary 'change'. Its tone is hardly friendly, tending more to the exclusive rather than the 'inclusive'. Though it uses the Council language of 'participation' at times, its heart does not seem to be in it and there is little enthusiasm for 'full and active participation' as a distinguishing feature of Church life today.

In terms of Timothy Radcliffe's talk, it does not come over to me as a life-giving document in line with his criterion for truth telling. Some of its ways of speaking are denigrating. For instance, terms like 'abuse' and 'reprobated practices' runs like refrains through the text with little appreciation that some deviations from the letter of the law might possibly be obedient and faithful responses to God's call coming through the particular needs of specific groups or situations. The tension between liturgical prescription and pastoral theology is a creative tension and

can provide the spark for new life. To try to extinguish this spark by dictate from above is hardly 'sharing in God's work of creation', which is how Radcliffe speaks of telling the truth. As for today's crisis of suspicion, the Instruction actually ends by encouraging people to make accusations of 'liturgical abuses' to their bishops or even to the Holy See, a sure recipe for mistrust and insecurity.

I am a fairly typical parish priest, struggling to be faithful to the spirit of Vatican II at a time when, rightly or wrongly, many people are feeling alienated from formal institutions, including the Church. Against the odds I try to do what little I can so that our parish Masses are prayerful and participative celebrations involving all the basic ingredients of adoration, wonder, instruction and reflection. Like most other priests I do not find this easy. It involves a lot of work in terms of preparation, reflection and prayer. Yet it is also a wonderful privilege and can be a very grace-filled experience. In my preaching, inadequate though it is, I try to be open to God speaking to us in the readings and in our personal and social lives, as well as in current events, both positive and negative. I read the Instruction carefully but, in all honesty, found little in it which gave me any positive help in my priestly ministry. It failed to answer my need for encouragement and inspiration. It seemed to come from a different spirit from what O'Malley portrays as the 'spirit of the Council'.

What authority has this Instruction? It carries the necessary signatures to give it 'external' authority. However, to me it is lacking in 'internal' authority'. It does not seem to carry the signature of the Spirit according to the mind of Vatican II. It lacks the authority of truth in the sense outlined by Timothy Radcliffe.

I was very struck by the fact that the Instruction has 295 footnotes! These refer to Church documents from various levels of authority. That suggests that this Instruction is simply repeating things that have been said before. It is not saying anything new. At least that should be a comfort to those of us involved in parish ministry, including priests and bishops. If we have already been using the principles and insights of pastoral theology to ensure that we are true to the spirit of the law rather than over-subservient to its letter, there is no reason why this new Instruction should alter our practice in any way. Our priority must always be the full and active participation of the people of God in a life-giving celebration of the Eucharist.

Since composing this personal reflection, I have read in a Catholic News Service report (10/5/04) that the topic for the October 2005 Synod of Bishops is the Eucharist. I hope and pray that the bishops attending the Synod will be as open to the Spirit

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as were the world's bishops at Vatican II. That openness led them to take the momentous step of breaking free from the very limited and limiting vision of the preparatory curial draft documents. It is possible that the Synod bishops might face a similar challenge, since, according to the Catholic News Service report, the preparatory *lineamenta* for the Synod seem to reflect the style and spirit of *Redemptionis sacramentum* rather than Vatican II itself.

Going back to O'Malley's article, I found myself wondering what would an Instruction look like which is written according to the spirit of the Council. I suspect it would be one which is based on a lot of listening. It might offer us a whole variety of examples of best practice which have been tested on the drawing board of experience at local level. It might also encourage us and our congregations to be prudently creative in our patterns of worship. It could even ask us to share our experience with the Congregation so that we and others might benefit from such a sharing of best practice. As well as being truer to the spirit of the Council, such an instruction would better respond to our shared vocation of telling the truth in a life-giving way.

**Self-protection.** Implied in these stories [of St Brigit] is that when we find ourselves dropping or mislaying things, when we are feeling pulled apart in all directions, when our heads ache or our stomachs are upset, it is precisely then that we should listen to our instincts of self-protection and self-defence. Disorientation, irritability, tiredness, and other physical pains can remind us that if we don't care for ourselves we will lose the ability to care adequately for others. Such symptoms of stress can reveal to us, if we listen, our need for prayer and relaxation – even though people (whether one works for church or corporation) might have exceptionally high and sometimes totally unrealistic expectations of us – or we ourselves may be operating under the illusion that we should be either perfect or indispensable.

—EDWARD C. SELLNER, *Stories of the Celtic Soul Friends*  
(Paulist Press, New York/Mahwah, NJ) p. 221