

"A PLACE AT THE TABLE?"

It is the nature of institutions that, no matter how innovative or flexible they were at inception, they eventually become preoccupied with self-maintenance, self-perpetuation and self-preservation. Early in the 1970s¹ new terminology emerged in an effort to reframe the meaning of 'Church'. Contrasted with the 'inherited' or 'traditional' church, these were variously defined as 'emerging church', 'new ways of being church', 'fresh expressions', 'future church', and 'church next'. Key themes of the emerging church are found in the language of reform, and 'praxis-oriented' lifestyles, placing a high value on social activism. A diversity of 'emerging churches' evolved as 'bottom up' initiatives rather than being planned centrally within the established denominations; many did not intentionally plan to become churches, but as they became more engaged with the communities they were serving, they took on more structured forms 'emerging' into church. Most have taken advantage of the more modern forms of communication to develop their 'bonds of affection' (e.g., blogging, websites, podcasts, networking, videos).

The forms of church which have evolved are not restrained by institutional expectations, and the emphasis has been on 'both-and' rather than the polarization of 'either-or'. For generations the church has divided itself into camps: Protestants and Catholics; high and low church; clergy and laity; social activists and contemplatives; liberals and conservatives; sacred and secular; believers and non-believers. The 'emerging church' tries to bring together the most helpful of the old and the most exciting of the new: theological grounding and contemporary context; faith and reason; continuity and conversion; worship and activism. There is emphasis on blending the dynamic of one's spirituality and discipleship with social compassion for the whole human family. Interfaith dialogue is favoured over 'verbal evangelism'. It encourages a ministry of inclusive participation by the whole people of God, where the distinction between clergy and laity will become one of function, not of structure or hierarchy.

Over the past year, Richard Rohr has been exploring some of the common elements of 'Emerging Church' and has contributed to the debate putting his reflections on CD and YouTube². He identifies the emerging church as having four essential elements:

1. There is an honest, broad and ecumenical Jesus scholarship. *"We are reading what theologians of all denominations are saying. And the amazing thing is, at the level of scholarship at least, there is a strong consensus emerging of what the Gospel might be about."* In the past, seminaries tended to teach one to be a minister of a particular denomination with little reference or relationship with those in training in other denominations. Additionally, nearly all of the scholarship had been done by predominantly white, North American/European, educated males. However, there is now a new willingness, with humility, to see with different lenses that are more inclusive of 'other voices': feminist, poor, oppressed, African, Latin, Asian, Jewish. There is a desire to focus more on teaching the life of the Gospel rather than merely the life of the Church; to be a 'minister of the Gospel' rather than be a 'Catholic or Anglican priest'; to heal people now rather than merely saving people for later. There is a growing awareness that there has been too much preoccupation with the 'container' - the Church - rather than the contents - the Gospel; and on trying to prove 'whose container was better than the other!' The assumption that if you were good in languages (Hebrew, Greek, Latin) then you were good in Scripture is being challenged, and the focus is turning to cultural anthropology and how one thinks inside of a culture in order to understand Scripture within the context of Jesus' time. There is also a willingness to take off the myopic 'churchy lens' and begin to see through the lens of 'sincere secular seekers' and acknowledge all they have to offer.

¹ B Larson, R Osbourne, "The Emerging Church" (London, 1970)

² "What is the Emerging Church?" (CD) http://www.cacradicalgrace.org/Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Product_Code=ST-C-20&Category_Code=&Store_Code=CFAAC

2. The emergence in human consciousness of a contemplative mind, "*This is a different kind of eye that perceives that scholarship; and it's not a dualistic mind. It receives a whole field and simply lets the whole field—what I understand and what I don't understand—teach me*". This is a mind that emerges when one prays rather than thinks; it opens the field beyond fear, judgment, analysis by moving outside the 'oppositional mind.' He notes that this was how the mind used to be trained in monasteries prior to the 14th C, but that since the Reformation the thinking became more adversarial and dualistic: better/worse or right/wrong. This is a mind that does not need to prove/disprove church protocols because it is looking for wisdom by "*letting the moment be what it is and wondering what it asks of me?*" This is a mind that discerns, with humility, a 'Third Way' that is neither fight nor flight, but is able to stand in the middle holding the paradox: holding what I do not know with what I know. It takes a holistic approach to the present moment using both sides of the brain - the 'intuitive' as well as the 'knowing' - without needing to eliminate the 'unknowing' or the mysterious; without needing to have the whole 'truth'; without needing to always have 'resolution.' It is to be wholly present in prayer with the body, soul and mind.

3. It challenges the 'non-negotiables' of Church which are at variance with Jesus' teaching. "*This consensus has come to some conclusions that many of the main concerns of Jesus are at major variance with what most of our churches have emphasized...how did we get this far away from Jesus?*" The teachings of Jesus are so clear: "blessed are the peacemakers", "love your neighbour as yourself", and "love your enemy". Jesus' work was social critique, social justice, healing of human shame and low self-esteem. But he suggests that "*the Church became more interested in an evacuation plan for the next world than changing this world.*" Justice towards those on the fringes of society and the 'bias towards the poor' have tended to get lost in the Church's drive to amass wealth and fortune to fuel its heavy maintenance cost. Rather than healing guilt, the Church has become the chief purveyors of guilt, measuring worthiness and unworthiness. "*Even the Eucharist is used to define the worthy, the pure, the true members at the expense of true inclusion... Jesus ate with the 'wrong people' and was crucified because of it... he re-did the social order and it upset the Church and the State.*" He argues for consistency between the pre- and post- resurrected Jesus; for greater promotion of ortho-praxis or 'right relationships' and less of ortho-doxy or 'right beliefs.' But he emphasizes that this should not be done in an adversarial or angry way. There is no need to "kick out the old guys" or reject the old, or it will appear threatening to many clergy within the Church. Recognising that we all perceive our reality differently, it is important that we build on the old with a new kind of humility.

4. It recognizes that new structures and new community mechanisms are needed to make this new transformed consciousness possible. Once again he emphasizes that what is important is "*practice of the better... not being 'against' all that came before, or in opposition to existing Church structures.*" Whereas the Church has created 'belonging structures' what has all too often occurred is that they hold together by being 'against' something; they have become 'identity politics' rather than transformational structures. He argues for a new kind of Reformation that does not hate or reject or oppose; he suggests creating parallel and symbiotic relationships to the current structures; and advocates forming new ministries with lay leadership where 'competence' is the criteria... "*is it working? is it changing lives?*" It is important to stress to those within the Church that it is not a 'group vs group' but a desire to 'be in conversation with.'

Whilst acknowledging that many people have become disillusioned with organized Church and Religion, he cautions against the tendency to become too highly individualistic because then the advantages of accountability and community get lost. The notion of community is very important because it is that need for others within community that enables us to broaden our learning; critique our thinking and develop our spirituality. Leadership within the emerging church is likely to come from men and women who are 'elders'. He notes that in the first half of our lives creating and forming our identity and ego is the main motivating force,

and that there is a need for this. However, in the second half of life we tend not to need as much validating; we are more secure and are freed up to move beyond 'what is in this for me?' These 'elders' are people who have been raised beyond questions of prestige, salary, looks and status. Their gifts and wisdom should be harnessed as mentors, spiritual soul-mates, and lay leaders in the emerging church.

He also encourages a return to the good, helpful religious practices rather than simply having belief systems. He suggests that these can include Hindu, Buddhist and Jewish practices such as meditation, fasting, yoga, and rituals at mealtime that provide a structure on a daily or weekly basis to ask: 'where is my energy really going?' If we can answer positively to the question 'does it transform my heart, mind, and soul?' then it is 'true' and it is from the Holy Spirit.

Personal Reflection and a Challenge for the Third Order?

Wow! I thought after listening to my podcast the first time. What a marvelous opportunity AND challenge for the Third Order! On the 'opportunity' side of it is that the relatively new TSSF structure of the 'local group/community' - at least the way it is supposed to work - seems to 'fit' that last element of "*new structures and community mechanisms*". The difference is that the local groups as set out geographically, are not always a 'coming together' of people who are on the same wavelength in terms of ecclesiology, and this creates its own tensions. However, some areas like Scotland operate a looser structure, with more of an 'open house' in terms of which local group you belong to: there is an open invitation to participate in any local group if you happen to be in the area and able to attend.

On the challenging side is that we still operate with some 'non-negotiables' of the old container Church, and exclusion on the basis of not being a 'regular communicant' is one of these. For the past couple of years I have been struggling with the first rule of my Personal Rule of Life. So, as it directs me to do, I have been praying for a deeper understanding of this Sacrament which I do believe is central to my life. But, contrary to the way I have understood this in the past (as an obligation to participate in 'The Eucharistic' at church on a regular - weekly? - basis) I am coming to a clearer understanding that for me, it is about a way of life, not a weekly ritual.

For some time I have struggled with what I sometimes sense as a 'dis-connect' between the Eucharistic Liturgy as practiced within the Church and Eucharistic Living. I grew up in a church where the priest said 'This is the Lord's Table, not our own: all are welcome'. But how many churches are so inclusive... really? For many the invitation to the Table is qualified with 'confirmed Christians' or 'baptized Christians' or 'members of any church with whom our Church is in communion'.

Father Tissa Balassuriya, a Sri Lankan Catholic priest who was giving the first Dietrich Bonhoeffer lecture at the Queens Foundation in Birmingham said:

"A billion Eucharists take place where we share bread - but we still refuse to share our bread with the world. We share Eucharistic bread but not the bread that the world needs. Perhaps there is a need to call a moratorium on Eucharists until we come to share our bread with the world's hungry and thirsty. Who controls the world's food and water - and how does this affect the way we share Eucharist? How could our Eucharists become a real sign of sharing in the world?"³

I echo his concern and wonder at his challenge to us. My deeper understanding of this Sacrament has been helped by the writings of Gerry Hughes and Donald Eadie. Gerry Hughes, a Jesuit priest writes:

"Creation is the sacrament, the Eucharist, the self-giving of God. Our sacraments are, in Ivan Illich's words, 'celebrations of our awareness of God at work in all things, in all people. Creation is not God, but a sacrament of God. The Eucharist is a sign signifying a reality, in which creation lives and loves and has its being.... Whenever the Eucharist is celebrated we are not creating something, producing something which does not exist before; we are remembering a once for all happening, a once for all sign of a continuous reality. We celebrate our awareness

3 As quoted in "Eucharistic Living" by Donald Eadie, The Coracle, December/January 2007/08 Issue 4/32

of the reality that the love of God informs, sustains, gives life and being to everything, a love without limit, which does not discriminate even between the good and the wicked... If in the sacrament of the Eucharist we are celebrating the limitless and continuous love of God in Christ for all creation, how can we dare to exclude anyone who approaches to receive the Eucharist in good faith, without implying that we can control and put limits on God's love."⁴

Donald Eadie defines what he calls 'Mass at the heart of both creation and humanity':

"Eucharistic living is about being open to receive the gifts of God through dark and light, the creative and the destructive, through our essential otherness, our differences within World Faith communities, sexual orientation and culture. It is an openness that lays itself wide open to the possibility of transformation. Eucharistic living is about expressing gratitude. And about sharing. 'The unshared remains unredeemed.' Eucharist is about being caught up in the essential 'we-ness of God,' being held within the inter-relatedness of all things, the interconnectedness of past, present and future. And prayer? Prayer is a way of engagement, of being alive, alive to God who is present in all things. And companionship? Companions are those, as the root of the word shows, who share with us the bread of life."⁵

So, for me, Eucharistic living is being attuned to a daily pattern of receiving, thanking, and sharing. It does not exclude; it does not judge; it is about being 'in relationship with'. It is a living sacrament of healing and forgiveness, of reconciliation and unity between human beings as well as between God and humankind. It is a daily acknowledgement that life is offered to all, and that our lives are for sharing. It understands 'Agape' as a form of love that is both unconditional and voluntary, and it embraces 'Agape' as a meal shared by all, recognising that we are all in need of God's abounding unconditional love: "God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous..." It is a way of seeing 'Eucharist' through a different lens.

So what are the implications for us in the Third Order? What if we, in the Third Order, were to begin to see 'Eucharist' through a different lens too? How might it transform the way we interpret the first rule of our Rule of Life? How might it transform the way we make decisions about who is eligible to be a member of the Third Order, and who is not? How might it transform the way we are in relationship with each other? How might it transform us? Is there 'a place at the table' for all of us... as children of God?

In conclusion, I offer you a poem on 'The Eucharist' which Gerry Hughes gave me a few months ago together with a paper he wrote on "Neglecting Eucharist". This was after a discussion we had about the dilemma 'Eucharist' presents for our churches today. He noted in his article that he is not

"questioning the centrality of Eucharist in Christian life... but the manner in which the 'Eucharist' has been taught and is still being taught... a teaching which diminishes the mystery, fosters division in the sacrament of unity, causes ill-feeling and disillusion among the committed, excludes the needy, 'thingifies' the Eucharist, treating it as a sacred object, a far cry from St. Augustine's instruction in the 6th C, when he told those receiving Holy Communion to respond to the priest's 'This is the Body of Christ' with the words 'I am'. What a wonderful world of difference - the significance of the sign is in the transformation being effected in us, a new identity, a truth that led the mystic, Catherine of Genoa, to say 'My God is me', adding, 'Nor do I recognize any other me, except My God Himself!'"⁶

Nancy Adams, May 2009

4 "Listen to the Music" by Gerard Hughes, sj in The Tablet, 22 January 2000

5 "Eucharistic Living" by Donald Eadie in writing on "Eucharistic Living" in the Iona Community's magazine, the Coracle, (Issue 4/32 Dec/Jan. 2007/08)

6 "Neglecting Eucharist" by Gerard W Hughes sj, written for the Pastoral Review Edinburgh 2008

The Eucharist (by R Voight)⁷

He was old, tired, and sweaty, pushing his homemade cart down the alley, stopping now and then to poke around in somebody's garbage.

I wanted to tell him about EUCHARIST

But the look in his eyes,

the despair in his face,

the hopelessness of somebody else's life in his cart,

Told me to forget it.

So I smiled, and said 'Hi' - and gave him EUCHARIST.

She was cute, nice build, a little too much paint, wobbly on her feet as she slid from her barstool, and on the make.

"No thanks, not tonight," - and I gave her EUCHARIST.

She lived alone, her husband dead, her family gone,

and she talked at you -- not to you--

words, endless words, spewed out,

So I listened - and gave her EUCHARIST.

Downtown is nice, lights change from red to green, and back again,

Flashing blues, pinks and oranges.

I gulped them in, said,

'Thank you, God', - and made them EUCHARIST.

I laughed at myself and told myself,

'You, with all your sin, and all your selfishness,

I forgive you,

I accept you,

I love you'.

It's nice, and so necessary too... to give yourself EUCHARIST.

Tired, wear, disgusted, lonely, go to your friends, open their door, say, "Look at me," ... and receive their EUCHARIST.

My God, when will we learn that you cannot talk EUCHARIST

you cannot philosophise about it...

You DO it!

You don't dogmatise EUCHARIST.

Sometimes you laugh it,

sometimes you cry it,

often you sing it.

Sometimes it's wild peace,

then crying hurt,

often humiliating,

never deserved.

You see EUCHARIST in another's eyes, give it in another's hand held tight,

squeeze it with an embrace.

You pause EUCHARIST in the middle of a busy day,

speak EUCHARIST with a million things to do and a person who wants to talk.

For EUCHARIST is as simple... as being on time

and as profound as sympathy.

"I give you my supper,

I give you my sustenance,

I give you my life,

I give you me,

I give to you....EUCHARIST."

⁷ R Voight, writing on the Eucharist as a member of the Metropolitan Community Church, San Francisco