



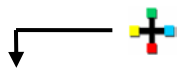
Lay Presidency at the Eucharist

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During the years from 1919 to 1947, when the churches in South India were wrestling with the call to full unity, one of the much debated questions was that of the lay presidency at the Eucharist. Some whose background was in the English Congregationalist or Methodist traditions, insisted that provision must be made in the united church for 'lay celebration'. The urgency of this matter arose from the fact that Christians in South India were mainly in small village congregations scattered over wide areas. Because ordination was tied to fairly high standards of education, because, therefore, pastors had to be paid at levels far above that of their congregations, and because financial self-support was a much desired goal for all the churches, it followed that pastorates in rural areas consisted of ten, twenty or thirty small congregations. If the Eucharist was to be more than a very occasional experience it was necessary that unordained village teachers and catechists would have to be authorized to preside.

This practical need was, however, not the only argument advanced in the debate. It was affirmed by some, especially English Congregationalist missionaries, that the doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers' would be compromised if presidency at the Eucharist should, in the united church, be confined to the ordained clergy.

The debate was conducted over many years at a high level of theological seriousness. Several substantial booklets were published in the course of the debate. For me, in my own thinking about the matter, the most important word was spoken by Edwin James Palmer, the saintly Bishop of Bombay, who was the main architect of both the fundamental statutes of the Anglican province of India, Burma and Ceylon (CIBC 1927) and of the Church of South India (CSI 1947). As I remember them his words were as follows: 'I will defend to my last breath the affirmation that it is a rule *of order* that the person presiding at the Eucharist should be a person who has, by ordination, received authority thereto.' 'A rule of order', for order is one necessary expression of love.

In the event the CSI Basis of Union affirmed the rule but allowed exceptions in cases of clear pastoral necessity. In other words, if the choice was between no Eucharist at all, and a Eucharist presided over by a properly authorized layman, then the decision should be for the

latter. But since it was clear that situations in which such a choice has to be faced are evidence of failure on the part of the diocese to make proper provision for ministry to all its congregations,

it was natural that almost immediately after the inauguration of the union, the CSI began to work on provisions for a non-stipendiary ministry. In my own thinking and practice, this was already a clear implication of the missionary principles of Roland Allen who had powerfully drawn attention to the incompatibility of our missionary methods with those of St Paul.

The discussion of lay presidency at the Eucharist requires attention to at least three questions: the nature of priesthood in the Church, the nature of the Eucharist, and the nature of ordination.

Priesthood

A biblically grounded doctrine of priesthood in the Christian Church must begin from the priesthood of Christ himself, the one High Priest who is the mediator of the new covenant between God and the human race. All our thinking about priesthood must have its point of reference here. From this starting-point we can go on to consider those passages in the New Testament in which the Church is described as a holy priesthood, called to fulfil the two-fold ministry of a priest – to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God, and to declare his mighty works (1 Peter 2.5, 9). Here the priestly language is applied to the Church as a whole and not to individuals. It would therefore seem that to speak of ‘the priesthood of all believers’ is a departure from the biblical language. The use of the word ‘priest’ to designate the minister who presides at the Eucharist is, as we all know, a development later than the biblical material. This, of course, in no way invalidates it, but it is generally agreed that this and other later developments must be understood and evaluated in the light of the canonical text. As I shall argue in the two following sections, the difference between the priesthood of the one who is authorized to preside at the Eucharist and the priesthood in which all share through their incorporation into the body of Christ is not an ontological one but a relational one, not the difference between two different kinds of priesthood, but a difference of role within the ordering of the body. I am therefore puzzled by the statements of the ARCIC ‘Final Report’ on this matter, which states that the priesthood of the ordained and that of the whole body are ‘two different realities which relate each in its own way to the high priesthood of Christ’, and this relationship is not one of participation but of ‘analogy’ (p. 41). It is, of course, acknowledged (p. 35) that this has no warrant in the New Testament, but is something which ‘Christians came to see’. Vital doctrinal statements need better grounding than this. As I understand it, the primary priesthood is that of Christ himself. Into this priesthood all the baptized are incorporated by their baptism and are called to exercise it in the

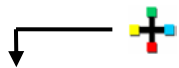
power of the Holy Spirit. This priesthood is exercised by the baptized in the course of their daily life in the world. The one who is described as ‘a priest’ is part of this same priesthood and is called to a special responsibility to cherish, nourish and enable the priesthood of the whole body. If this is a different kind of priesthood from that which all are called to share in Christ, one has to ask exactly what this difference is.

One thing seems to me to be of decisive significance. In all eucharistic liturgies, as far as I know, the one who presides and speaks the words of the eucharistic prayers uses the first person plural, not the first person singular. Plainly the president speaks these words not as an individual priest, but in the name of the entire body of the baptized—not only of those who are present at this moment, but of the entire catholic Church. It is the whole body which remembers, gives thanks and prays for the consecrating action of the Holy Spirit. It is the whole body which is exercising its priestly function in and through the one who is called to lead.

The Eucharist

Why, then, is it important that the president should be ordained? Why is it not sufficient that he or she be authorized by a local manifestation of the Church – a congregation or a synod – to preside? The answer lies in the nature of the Eucharist itself. If in the Eucharist we are partaking of the body and blood of Christ, then it is in the whole Christ that we are partakers. We are not an autonomous body. We are not a ‘branch’ of an entity whose centre is elsewhere. It is the one holy catholic Church which is present in this local happening. Where Christ is, there is his Church. What we are doing is not an event in which we – the local congregation – alone are involved.

But this holy catholic Church is also a body of sinful human beings among whom love may fail, and faction, jealousy and schism take over. How, when we are considering the local gathering for the eucharistic celebration, do we distinguish between the local presence of the universal Church, and a faction? Paul faces this question in his dealings with the factious Corinthians. Paul does not raise the question of presidency in his words to the Corinthians, but it was by settling the question of presidency that the matter had to be dealt with. A ‘valid’ Eucharist, one which is truly the manifestation of the one universal Church and not a schismatic faction, will be a Eucharist presided over by the bishop or one appointed by him (Ignatius). And – another early and logically necessary development – the bishop will be one committed to his office not just by the local congregation but with the consent and participation of the bishops



of at least three congregations. This is a matter of order, and order is love in regulative operation among people who know that they are sinners and liable to become victims of faction and jealousy.

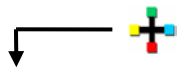
Order is needed to protect a society which is called to live by the law of love but is always liable to fall into faction. It is a necessary safeguard for the Church, but not a limit on the grace of God. In all our ordinals the presiding minister uses the first person plural and the prayers addressed to God are in the name of the universal Church. None of us intends to ordain merely for one of the separated Christian communities. We claim to ordain to the ministry of the universal Church. If God were bound by our rules of order no Eucharist in the world would be ‘valid’ for all are presided over by persons whose ordination did not carry the assent of the universal Church. The Church exists by the grace of God to sinners who have constantly violated good order. The recognition of this is the key to any advance towards unity among Christians. God continually bestows his grace on bodies of Christians who – in one way or another – have violated good order. We should not draw the conclusion ‘Let us continue in sin that grace may abound’. We have every reason to seek and cherish good order, and therefore acknowledge the rule that the person presiding at the Eucharist should be one who has by ordination received authority thereto.

But how do we understand ordination?

Ordination

Those who advocate the view that, as a matter of general principle, persons not ordained should be free to preside at the Eucharist, must address one question. What, then, is ordination? If, without ordination, a person is to do all things traditionally reserved to the ordained, what is ordination? If, in ordination, we are not authorizing a person to do what he or she would not otherwise be authorized to do, what are we doing? I fear that the answer (concealed or expressed) will be that we are conferring on the ordained a status. The long, long history of clericalism in the Church makes this an almost inevitable conclusion. The identification of ordination with admission to a certain kind of professional and social status – the status of a ‘clergyman’ – makes this almost inevitable, especially in churches of a Protestant type which have no strong doctrine of priesthood. But if we leave these aside and consider the implications of ‘lay celebration’ for a Church with a strong doctrine of priesthood, what conclusions must we draw? We have come

back to the point I made with reference to the ARCIC report. Does ordination to the priesthood give to the one ordained not merely an authorization to act in certain ways for the whole body, to be priest for the priestly



people, or does it make the ordained a different kind of being? Is the distinction of the ordained from the rest an ontological one or one of relation? Is a priest (or a bishop) to be understood in terms of what he or she is, or in terms of his or her relationship to the whole body of the baptized? I would want to affirm the latter position, that priesthood is to be defined in terms of a set of relationships between the priest and God on the one hand and God's people on the other. I do not know of any 'higher' doctrine than this.

Consider the most fundamental of all Christian doctrines, the doctrine of the Triune being of God. This teaches us that the being of God is not to be defined in terms of an inner substance but in terms of a pattern of relationships, the ceaseless mutual indwelling of Father, Son and Spirit. The point is sharply put in the fifth chapter of John's Gospel where Jesus is accused of 'making himself equal with God'. In his reply Jesus completely bypasses the question of equality and speaks only of the mutual relation between the Son and the Father. The presence of *homoousios* in the Nicene Creed was absolutely necessary to counter the Arian heresy and cannot be dispensed with. But its necessity is a product of the struggle to interpret the Gospel in terms of Greek thought. The biblical language concerns not substance but relationship. It is more congruent with fundamental Christian doctrine to understand priesthood in terms of relationship to God and to the Church than to seek to understand it in terms of a distinct 'substance' – something which exists apart from those particular relationships in which a priest or a bishop is called to exercise ministry.

I conclude that the Church should continue to honour the good rule of order that the one who presides at the Eucharist should be one who has by ordination received authority thereto.

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