

## **How can we make the way we celebrate the Eucharist more appealing to young people and not so young?**

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In this talk I want to open up a conversation on how we celebrate the Eucharist and how we might do better and how we might make it more attractive.

I don't have all the answers and you don't have all the answers, but together in a spirit of a constructive conversation we can improve our worship of the one God.

It is a good thing for a worshipping community to engage in some form of self-examination, even self-criticism, on how we perform the liturgy together. So I welcome very much Fr. Jim's initiative in setting up this 6 week course for all of us in the parish.

Let me begin my talk by putting our question **into context**.

Over the years, here in Balally Parish but also before I came to Balally, parents would often confide in me that they were worried about their children, about the fact that they do not go to mass on Sunday, or that that they have given up on the church.

And their children offer all kinds of good reasons for no longer going to church which can be summarised in the following way.

The first set of reasons what I would call **institutional reasons**. Here they mention

- the scandals in the church,

- such as clerical sex abuse
- The mother and baby homes
- the failure of some bishops to be just and compassionate with the victims of abuse,
- the exclusion of women from full participation in the life of the church,
- the teaching of the church around areas of sexuality and gender.

And then there is a 2<sup>nd</sup> category of reasons which I would call **“personal reasons”**.

Young people point out that

- they find the mass boring,
- the priest goes on and on,
- It is very patriarchal
- The unforgivable and inexcusable sexist language,
- it is irrelevant to my life
- It does not reflect my interests

So **MY BASSIC THESIS** is this:

The Eucharist, the way we celebrate the Eucharist, has become isolated, **isolated from the values of younger people**, issues around social justice, concern about climate change, the lack of fairness within society, homelessness, access to healthcare and so on

But it is also culturally isolated from the performing arts and developments in classical and contemporary music.

There is probably more participation, more communion, and more awareness of the sacred going on in the **National Concert Hall** than in the average celebration of the Eucharist.

And another isolation of the Eucharist is that it is removed from the personal spirituality of young people. I frequently meet young people who say to me “I’m spiritual, but not religious”.

This statement has many layers of meaning. For some it is about disaffection from the institutional church. For others, it can be a *cri de Coeur* for a deeper spirituality, and perhaps for contact with the gift of the spirit.

Many people are now drinking from other wells such as courses on mindfulness, contemplation, yoga, well-being et cetera.

One need only glance at Maureen Gaffney’s new book on the search for spirituality in the life of so many people, young and not so young

So this evening I am going to focus on 2 distinct areas in which the Eucharist has become isolated:

1. the Eucharist and social justice.
2. The Eucharist and creation, especially the care of creation

So here is the question for us this evening.

How do we reconnect the Eucharist with social justice issues

How do we reconnect the Eucharist with the world around us, that is with creation.

### **VATICAN II ON THE LITURGY : Basic principles.**

A good place to start is the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council.

When the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council met in 1962 the first question they sought to address was the much needed renewal and reform of the liturgy. Here are some of the principles they came up with:

1. It is the people of God, the whole community, that celebrates the Eucharist. The role of the priest, of the ministerial priesthood, of the ordained, is to preside over the action of the community and to order and structure and summons the community to worship.
2. The liturgy constitution, coming from Vatican II, calls for **the full, conscious and active participation** of all in the celebration of the Eucharist.
3. The Eucharist is “the source and summit ”of Christian life ( LG 11)
4. The Eucharist is the sacrament of the real, personal presence of Christ and the source of our communion with God in Christ.

5. The Eucharist makes the church and the church makes the Eucharist infidelity to the life of Jesus
  
6. Though they differ essentially, and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood are **nonetheless interrelated**, each shares in the one priesthood of Christ (LG,10)
  
7. All have a part to play in the liturgical action of the Eucharist.

Building on Vatican II, Pope Francis said back in 2013: “the Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak”

The big shift at the Council was that of a movement

- from being passive observers to being active participants,
- from being onlookers to being contributors to the celebration of the Eucharist.
- From ‘getting mass’ to being an essential part of mass

We must move from **having add-ons**, or **extras added** to the liturgy, to the adoption themes that can be integrated into the structure of the liturgy.

So now, let us see if we can apply those principles of Vatican II to the question in hand

## **THE EUCHARIST and SOCIAL JUSTICE**

There is a consistent emphasis throughout the Bible on the essential link between worship and justice.

The prophets of Israel are very outspoken in their critique of those who worship God and neglect the work justice within society

Let me give just 2 examples from the Jewish Bible

The book of Amos puts it like this:

the Lord says

I hate your religious festivals.

I will not accept them.

Stop your noisy songs.

I do not want to listen to your harps.

Instead let justice flow like a stream

and righteousness like a river that never goes dry.(Amos 5:21-25)

Equally strong is the prophet Isaiah who says:

I am disgusted with the smell of incense that you burn.

Your Sabbaths, and religious gatherings.

They are all corrupted by your sins

Yes, stop doing evil and do right.  
See that justice is done  
help those who are oppressed  
give orphans their rights and defend widows (Is 1: 13ff)

This prophetic tradition is prominent in the preaching and teaching of Jesus.

Remember that Jesus began his public life, by describing his mission as one of

- bringing good news to the poor,
- release to captives,
- sight to the blind,
- and freedom to the oppressed.

It should be noted that he began to implement this mission by reaching out to those on the margins of life **by bringing them into a new kind of table fellowship.**

The purpose of this table fellowship was to free people from oppression, to bring release to captives and to give people confidence to realise that they don't have to be oppressed.

This meal-ministry of Jesus was about empowering people, helping them to realise that poverty and oppression and marginalisation, go against the plan of God for humanity, against what he described as the Reign of God. The reign of God offers an alternative vision of life vision, the vision of liberation and freedom.

The religious leaders of the day did not like what he was doing. The scribes and Pharisees Criticised him for 'eating and drinking with tax

collectors and sinners', and then went on to describe him as a drunkard and a glutton-- not nice language.

This meal-ministry is essential background to the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper.

Note that the Last Supper is the last in a series of suppers.

He went out of his way to make sure that the apostles understood the full meaning of the Eucharist by enacting a highly symbolic and prophetic action that we call the washing of the feet:

- He got up from the table,
- He took off his outer garment.
- He poured water into a basin.
- He began to wash the feet of his disciples.
- He wiped their feet with a towel
- he put back the outer garment
- and he said to them
- you ought to wash each others feet
- and then declared: I have given you an example
- that you should do to others what I have done to you.

And then at the end of the Last Supper he said to his disciples:

**Do this in memory of me.**



The word memory has a very specific meaning within Judaism.

**It is not a sentimental looking back at the past; it is not a trip down memory lane as it were.**

Instead for the Jews, memory is

- about bringing the past into the present as if you were actually there at the event;
- it is about reliving the past as a participant in the present;
- it is about making the past present in the here and now.
- It is about allowing yourself to be changed in the way disciples were after encountering Jesus

Jesus as a Jew knew exactly what he was saying when he invited them to do this in memory of me.

When we look at the practice of the early church as portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles there is a clear link between the breaking of the bread and the work of justice

In the Acts of the Apostles we read in chapter 2:

And they devoted (themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship),

to the breaking of the bread and the prayers...

And all who believed were together and had all things in common;

and they sold their possessions and goods;

and distributed them to all as had any need.

And so now, I invite you to fast forward to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the year 1971, when the church issued an important document entitled **Justice in the World** which said and I quote:

**Action for justice is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel and the mission of the church.**

This was regarded as a major statement concerning the importance work of justice. Incidentally it came from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Synod of bishops in Rome back in 1971

Fast forward further from 1971 to 1981 and you have significant Eucharistic Congress in Lourdes and the theme of the conference was:

**“Jesus Christ, bread broken for a new world”**

Note that the role of the Eucharist, breaking of the bread, is to bring about a new world, a world of justice and liberation.

So, the question we must face today is

how can we re-establish the link between the Eucharist and social justice.

How do we give greater visibility to the linkage between the breaking of the bread and the and the issues of justice that are on the minds of young people.

How can the celebration of the Eucharist inspire a commitment to justice today,

and how can the work of justice feedback into the celebration of the Eucharist.

How do we reconnect the Eucharist with the passion found among young people for social justice in our world ? Justice in the world is a huge issue at the moment:

Think of climate justice, social justice, vaccine justice, global justice, and intergenerational justice .

In fairness to the current practice, there is a link between Eucharist and justice in terms of the 2<sup>nd</sup> collection at mass, and the monthly Vincent Paul collection, and the annual contribution of 0.7% of parish income to the work of Trocaire.

### 3. **The Eucharist and Creation**

I now want to look at a 2<sup>nd</sup> challenge facing the way we celebrate the Eucharist

How can we today in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century overcome the isolation of the Eucharist from God's creation, the isolation of the Eucharist from the care of our common home

Since the time of the Industrial Revolution, some 3 to 400 years ago, we have seen what is commonly called "**the disenchantment of the universe**", that is the removal from the universe of **any traces** of the sacred.

This happens in and through what is known as the “mechanisation of nature”, or the “**industrialisation of nature**”. The natural world is treated as an inert object, a lifeless lump of stuff, to be exploited and dominated by humanity for its own self centred purposes.

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, the world was seen as an enchanted place, teeming with life and creativity, summed up in the words of Gerald Manley Hopkins:

**the universe is charged with the grandeur of God.**

In other words, the universe was experienced as **the bearer of the divine presence**.

A powerful expression of this can be found in Paul’s letter to the Romans:

**ever since the creation of the world,  
his eternal power and divine nature,  
invisible though they are,  
had been understood and seen through the things he has made  
(Rom 1: 20-21)**

Going back further into the Jewish Scriptures, we find creation described as

The Temple of God  
the Throne of God  
the Sanctuary of God  
in the different stories of creation.

For example, Psalm 95, is explicit in linking creation and worship.

That Psalm says:

In his hands are the depths of the earth,  
the height of the mountains are his also.

The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which is hands have  
formed

And then the Psalmist says:

come let us worship and bow down  
let us kneel before the Lord our master.

Notice here that it is the depth of the earth, the height of the mountains, the dry land that have evoked and inspired the worship of God by the people. Another example can be found in Psalm 104, available in the handout

In other words, what we today might call the beauty, and complexity, and sheer abundance of nature, evoked praise and adoration and thanksgiving among the Jewish people of God.

Transferring that to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, some of the programs on BBC by **David Attenborough** can have the same effect.

In the last couple of weeks, we had a dramatic presentation of forests and last Monday we had an equally striking presentation on the oceans.

In other words what I am trying to say is this:

Unless you experience God in creation, unless you have some sense of a divine **presence permeating the world** around us, it will be difficult to experience the presence of God in the breaking of the bread.

One commentator puts it like this:

if God is to be met in the temple made by human hands, this will only happen because God is first met in the temple of divine making, namely creation itself.

This link between the Eucharist and creation has been lost in our modern, urbanised world. We are cut-off from the creative life of nature and the footprints of the Creator within creation in our modern cities.

One of the outstanding features of the encyclical by Pope Francis is that he seeks to recover the isolation of the Eucharist from creation.

All I can do is give you a flavour of what he has to say in the following quotes:

- In the Eucharist we discover the divine centre of the universe
- In the Eucharist heaven and earth are joined together, in other words we have a link between heaven and earth in the Eucharist

- In the Eucharist the whole of creation is embraced
- in the Eucharist the whole Cosmos gives thanks to God

In brief, the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love.

How can we make sense of these deep, poetic and mystical statements about the Eucharist by Pope Francis

These statements will only make sense if first of all we remember that everything in the universe is interconnected, interrelated, and interdependent.

And secondly, these statements by Pope Francis will only make sense if we realise that we are part of a much larger story, often called the cosmic story, going back 14 billion years ago, with the emergence of biological life some 5 billion years ago, and the appearance of human life some 200,000 years ago.

So as you can see we are very young in the greater scheme of things.

And in a very important sense, each one of us is a child of the cosmos.

When we gather celebrate the Eucharist, we bring the earth and all its creatures to the altar in our praise of God.

In the Eucharist, the whole Cosmos gives thanks to God, or as it says in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Eucharistic prayer:

**all you have created rightly gives you praise**

More specifically, the Eucharist is the outcome of the relationship between sun and the soil, which produces grapes and grain, which become bread and wine, which are changed into the body and blood of Christ. All are interrelated.

And again, we can refer to the words used in the Eucharistic prayer,

namely **the bread and wine are the fruit of the earth and the work of human hands**. When we worship we bring all of the earth into our prayer. When we worship God, we worship in communion with God creation

Within this larger picture we can begin to overcome the isolation of the Eucharist from creation.

We One way of summing up the relationship between worship and creation can be found in Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

*Earth's crammed with heaven  
And every common bush afire with God,  
But only he who sees takes off his shoes  
the rest sit around and pluck blackberries.*



