

Living Eucharistically in a Time of Scarcity

Paper delivered to the SCP Conference 2010 by the Revd Prof Alison Milbank SCP

First, I hope you will forgive someone who works at a cathedral, albeit a parish church cathedral, for daring to get up and speak about scarcity in a conference full of priests stretched in all directions, often working alone and with multiple churches. My own experience of scarcity is more in relation to my own self. I have a day job here full-time at Nottingham University, in a secular theology department where I would never dare show my collar, though with my colleague Simon Oliver, I do help shape Eucharistic community among the graduates of the department through a weekly Eucharist. I live in the little market town of Southwell, and after a curacy in rural Nottinghamshire, I am based five minutes' walk from home, as priest vicar in Southwell Minster, doing a bit of everything as I can, with a special brief for adult education. My life is so busy that I constantly feel torn between competing demands, and although the Minster has three full-time clergy and one shared with the local comprehensive, supporting traditional cathedral worship with these numbers is challenging in itself.

Coming new to cathedral ministry from having lived and worked in parishes all my life where there was a central mass has been a shock. There are Eucharists daily, sometimes more than one, three on a Sunday all with separate congregations, not to mention all the various other Communion services we assist at put on by organisations ranging from Cursillo to the Prayer Book Society. Furthermore, there are congregations for evensong, and other offices, all of which are different again. I am put down randomly for one service or another, and might never return to that same service or community for weeks on end. After the village this felt and feels completely weird, especially since I am no longer working in a straightforwardly Anglo-Catholic setting with a shared conception of priesthood, and with a congregation so eclectic that I was strongly attacked for preaching the divinity of Christ one Sunday. The mainly middle-class congregation is also strongly concerned with co-operative and lay ministry and after a year I am still unclear about the structure of the community life of the place.

I struggle with all this, so unlike the unity of the one mass and the coherence of working in one community. There is not the moving from place to place of the rural vicar but it is as if the varied congregations of a multiple incumbency all come one after the other, and often without the embodied strength that comes from inhabiting their own parish church building. In Lambley where I served my title the church was cleaned by the congregation themselves; here all is done by professionals. It gives a different feel to how the laity and clergy alike inhabit the space: it is less of an exo-skeleton.

It is a setting that has, paradoxically, led me to realize the central importance of priesthood as a holding presence, bearing and offering up the complexity and fragmentation. In the early morning Eucharists, attended by a faithful two people every day and even two school children once a week, there is the opportunity to offer the whole community in prayer and intention. The ancient building seems to echo and even breathe with us, and we have space and time to hold everything together. It feels like being a tiny Russian doll nested in a series of increasingly larger figures, but with God both at the heart and holding them all from outside. I give as an example the image of the Virgin of mercy, holding the people under her cloak but in this example, herself enclosed by the rounded span of a church arch and with the Christ Child in her arms. (She also seems to be holding one hand in a priestly blessing!)



(Virgin of Mercy, c. 1480, Prague)

Indeed, for me the great hulking Norman building of Southwell Minster herself is the unifying factor, speaking in her architecture of the ongoing life of the eucharist in this place, in her carvings and glass of the holy Pelican feeding her young from her own blood. The Church of our own day, Protestant and Catholic alike, is defined primarily as the people, and the building is downplayed. But as I ascend the steps to the high altar I consciously rest in the sense of feet that have stepped here before me, in the feel of wood and stone that have been offered in a stony Eucharistic offering that lasts to this day. In the space shaped by the arches I consciously feel held by the prayers of those who have gone before and those of the future. Any Eucharistically ordered church has this same effect, of leading the imagination deeply into the material world and then launching us heavenward at the altar. I well remember taking my children on holiday to Scotland for the first time and their gasps of horror and amazement at finding a great big pulpit in front of the holy table, which they experienced as an actual blockage to transcendence and ran out quickly. The open hospitality of the centrally-placed holy table is something we take for granted. Whether or not the Eucharist is to be celebrated in ten minutes or as many days, the careful articulation of space and light, the care keeping sanctuary lamp alight, maintains Eucharistic presence in itself. You can tell in a second or two whether a church, new or old, is loved and prayed in and whether it is serious.

So presence begins with the building itself, which is our communal prayer. And the irony of our present situation is that we have no scarcity of actual church buildings. In ex-mining villages shorn of all social utility, the church is still there to say, 'you matter'. It speaks of the stability and ongoing love of God when people fail. So, while we have buildings as witnesses and we order them towards their articulation as such, we have a fullness worth celebrating.

The priestly presence is less ubiquitous. We can see that as a problem in terms of putting on enough Eucharists: how can the priest be present in nine parishes in a diocese like this that officially does not allow extended communion? But if we move towards extending the meaning of Eucharistic presence itself, we can begin to move from an understanding of presence as shadowed by lack and

limit to one of gift. For the presence of a priest in priestly clothes, cassocked in the street, for example, is a gift. It immediately announces the existence of the sacred in the mundane and in the same gesture makes that place holy. One SCP priest in this diocese appeared in his local fish-and-chip shop in full cloak and biretta one night and was immediately greeted as Darth Vader. Even in a town like Southwell I can be eyed with suspicion and even viewed as an affront. But by now the assistants in my local One-Stop are used to me rushing in for milk at all hours, cassocked and cloaked, and all the workmen give me a wave. And my colleague is all the more valued for his visible presence in a part of Nottingham without any other professional residents.

This walking the streets is the tradition many of us grew up with – it was enforced in the great training parish of St Mary Portsea of my childhood - but scarce time and resources keep clergy in their cars, as they hurtle – the worst, fastest drivers I know are all clergy – from one meeting to another. But the power of presence is huge. I have a friend, an SSM priest who can offer just one morning during the week to her parish. She arrives from a distance in her bright yellow beetle car and parks it by the church, in which she just sits – there is no office – and talks to people who come in. But even those who don't actually go in to see her are aware of her presence and she has the reputation all over the town, unlike her full-time, hard-working incumbent, for always being present and available, despite the fact that she is there for only three hours. Her presence is not scarce but a fullness.

So what does this have to do with the Eucharist? It is one element of the rite: the making present of Our Lord. And long ago at the Anglo-Catholic Congress of 1923, Bishop Frank Weston declared: 'Come out from before your tabernacles. You cannot claim to worship Jesus in your tabernacle if you do not pity Jesus in the slum'. It was not an either/or of the later social gospel proponents. It was an understanding that the Eucharistic presence of Christ renders the whole earth and its inhabitants a holy grail. The priest's Eucharistic activity does not end with the 'Go in peace' but continues as he or she goes about daily life marking and witnessing to the sacred quality and the indwelling of Christ through the Holy Spirit in the world. The priest is set aside by the Church as a living marker of the sacred and the real presence. Here the real presence of Christ is both in the priest and in those he or she passes, encounters and acknowledges as holy. My second image, Christ in the streets of Cookham shows this as the journey to the cross is casually part of the daily life of the village. Even the crossed ladders of the workman are given a holy meaning as an image of the cross.



Stanley Spencer, 'Christ in the Streets of Cookham'

This means that no time spent walking the streets or in encounters with people is lost time, or even non-eucharistic, although it must be fed from the sacrament. It is the priest's time as gift, and if we have the confidence to dwell in the moment as given, it will bring blessing. In this way we bring out another element in the Eucharist: the gift of God in the Incarnation and Atonement, which calls forth our giving back of the bread and wine and ourselves in an endless cycle of reciprocity. In the Eucharist we are given Christ and we are given back ourselves, clothed and in our right mind, made holy. One of the things I like about the priest in Rev is the way he has a real capacity to inhabit the moment: he settles down with a cigarette to talk to his unemployable parishioner, Colin, in every episode at least twice.

So far, I have been talking purely in terms of the ordained priesthood, since we have the symbolic role of the sacred. But of course all God's people are gift and can be so received: religious like Sister Rosemary actually live a life of utter giftedness. We are all, lay and ordained, the bread for the world, and can live as those who have been given and also those who like Christ, become gift. Fr Claudio Barrija calls this 'living eucharistically':

We call this "living the Eucharist" because it unites us to Jesus' way of life, which was always Eucharistic. He lived giving his life to others. He was completely unselfish. His death was the fullest expression of his giving of himself to us, for us. He represented this self-giving in the words and gestures of the Last Supper: "Take this all of you, and eat it: this is my body, which will be given up for you" (Luke 22:19). Then he invited us to do as he does: "Do this in memory of me." Do what? Make in each Eucharist an offering of our own lives for others. Each time you offer your life to God for others you express the Eucharistic spirituality.

Barrija addresses his words to all of us, urging us to unite ourselves to the Eucharistic sacrifice of Christ as a daily offering, wherever we are, at mass or in bed or at work.

The laity indeed, as part of the royal priesthood of Christ can image another aspect of the Eucharistic liturgy: transformation. In the liturgy the bread and wine are no longer just that. Nor are we the people the same ones who walked in. The Eucharist is the site of utter transformation, as the kingdom is made manifest, bread becomes body and we are all changed. The laity particularly image this in their daily lives by the way in which they work: bathing children, putting a car engine back to rights or completing an audit. Human activity is to take the stuff of creation and make something new with it. 'We make still by the law in which we're made' as Tolkien puts it in his essay, 'On Fairy-stories'. To turn scarcity into fullness, we need to help the laity recover their calling. Our contemporary idea of lay ministry concentrates on what is done in church. We do very little to resource our congregations in their family or work lives, which is where they primarily exercise their lay ministry. They are not second-class priests-manqués but those for whom the psalmist speaks: 'For thou, Lord, hast made me glad through thy works: and I will rejoice in giving praise for the operations of thy hands' (Psalm 92:4). As we take the bread and break it in the mass, so they take the fruit, figures, concrete and dirty washing and transform them. As priests presiding at the table our words and actions should be done so as to clarify their calling, reveal its virtues and empower their actions of recreation and transformation. In the Velasquez painting of Martha and Mary, the food being prepared by Martha has all the qualities of positive transformation and religious resonance: fish, eggs and garlic are all accorded an amazing degree of presence. The pointing hand of the woman to her right suggests that Martha's is as important an activity as that of the rabbinic circle to which Mary is made welcome in the background.



The best time for me so far in my present ministry at the Minster has been Holy Week, when there were over 40 services but somehow they all fitted together within a greater liturgical frame. Suddenly our disparate congregations would turn up for the same evening mass, or to Stations of the Cross. We ceased to be a melange of separate groups and became a true worshipping community. The highest point for me was the evening of Holy Thursday and the procession to the altar of repose, most beautifully set up under the stone pulpitum, blowsy with flowers, and blazing with myriad candles in the darkened church. At one point I was alone there, and suddenly felt an enormous sense of peace and rightness. There was a blazing heart beating almost palpably in the thick smoky air. The real presence of Christ in the host drew me to himself. I tell you this not as a personal story so much as because it suddenly made me remember Eamon Duffy's and John Bossy's work on late-medieval spirituality. Unlike post-Vatican II Catholicism and our own modern Anglican stress on participation and reception as the only true experience of the eucharist, Duffy and Bossy believe that there was much value in the seeing of the host whether in the elevation or in extra-eucharistic devotions, such as the Holy Week Easter Sepulchres in parish churches, like the one down the road from here at Hawton, in which the host was placed until Easter morning. Olivier-Thomas Vernard's recent work on Aquinas takes a similar position. In Southwell on Maundy Thursday evening I was not just personally blessed but I experienced through the exposition of the host the unity of the Eucharistic community of that place. It was not so much in us as in Christ himself, and the sacrament was our guarantee.

You may feel that I am going backward in stressing the value of Benediction, and adoration of Christ in the reserved sacrament. If, however, we see in that presence something that draws our lives, our souls and bodies to be transformed, as Mary Magdalene did in the garden, despite being told not to cling but to *look* at Christ, then we are not idolators, not frozen by an objectified gaze, but participants. In that wafer lies reality that questions us, calls us and unites us: 'types and shadows have their ending/ For the newer rite is here' as Thomas Aquinas's hymn tells us. And the biblical warrant is there in St Paul: 'All of us, gazing on the Lord's glory with unveiled faces, are being transformed from glory to glory into his very image by the Lord who is Spirit' (2 Corinthians 3.18).

The Beatific Vision is traditionally expressed in terms of seeing, and yet this seeing is participatory. After all, in our own relationships, we do not always want to have sex but sometimes just to sit peacefully and look at our beloved.

So in times of infrequent Eucharistic celebration, it seems to me not inappropriate to cultivate patterns of piety and devotion to Our Lord in the reserved sacrament, not separating our Eucharistic life of presence, gift and transformation from its origin, but emphasizing the everyday ongoing nature of living sacramentally. And to see, as I did, the unity of God's people there expressed, as it was in the days of the civic Corpus Christi procession, in which representatives of all the trades followed the host as it was processed around the town.



My last image is a delicate drawing with watercolour by the catholic artist, David Jones. The central chalice is both the womb of Mary, 'Flora', and the holy grail. The Eucharist is both the centre of attention here and yet lets the light through. The whole of life is illuminated by it but it is not separated out: everything in the picture, natural and supernatural, is in communion, and the cup holds, gives and overflows, expressing most truly what it is to live Eucharistically.



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