

“*Ours Is An Altar and a Pulpit!*”

Bishop Joseph N. Perry

Here and there we hear the popular complaint that *our traditional Catholic rearing and catechism instruction was not sufficiently focused on the Bible*. This is said most often when comparing the Catholic Church with our Protestant neighbors who by rubric have the pulpit in the center of the sanctuary.

The *comment* is fair highlighting the model of our religious education prior to the 1960s. Even before that time, Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) already launched a new era of biblical scholarship that opened the doors to ecumenical sharing whereby Protestant scholars joined with Catholic scholars in a reexamination of the origins and science of the Scriptures.¹ There were and still are certain Christian traditions that reject a scientific study of the Bible. Since then we Catholics have, in the last forty some years, reapplied the Scriptures as a rubric outside of Sunday worship in the spiritual lives of the faithful. Citing some examples:

We witness routine bible study groups in parishes. Bible translations from the original Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic have brought us closer to the Word. There are even special English language translations for children, teenagers and adults. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) reworked the assignment of Scripture readings we hear each Sunday and holyday of obligation giving us a three-tiered cycle of Scriptural texts for Sunday Mass where we hear the largest portion of the Bible in the course of three years. And, of course, throughout Catholic tradition, the individual Sacraments and all public worship are infused with a proclamation of Scripture.

But the *comment* as voiced by some may betray a lack of insight into what defines Catholic identity, namely, that catholic life and worship from the beginnings of Christianity, have featured the Eucharist at its center. Before the arrival of the printing press we could only *hear* the Word proclaimed in churches. The Reformation proffered a hearing of the Scriptures in the vernacular languages instead of Latin.

Catholics are among the sacramental or ritualistic churches together with the Orthodox, Anglican and Episcopal churches. Catholics and Orthodox, especially, cite seven sacraments whereby the gestures of Christ are illuminated for us while grace with Christ is communicated for the sanctification of the faithful through the medium of each sacrament's sign and symbol and anointing. Sacraments are not human inventions. Something takes place with each Sacrament that only God can do.

The 16th century Reformers took exception to the sacramental definition of the Church and its priesthood and raised up the Bible and the preaching moment as central to the act of worship for the churches of the Reform. Therefore, the true and genuine presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharistic species is not understood nor appreciated in the churches

¹ Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943)

separated from us who title themselves Protestant or Evangelical. Scripture, preaching, prayer and praise form the template of worship for these latter traditions.

Adults who request full communion with the Catholic Church (converts) will most often cite their hunger for the sacrament of the True Presence of Jesus in Holy Communion and the consolation and sanctification offered by the other sacraments – Baptism, Reconciliation or (Confession), Confirmation, Anointing of the sick and dying, Matrimony, and Holy Orders. Each of these sacred signs is rooted scripturally in the gestures and words of Jesus Christ and by Catholic doctrine form the outline of the church established by Christ.

The scriptures give us the words of Jesus. The sacraments provide Jesus' healing, commissioning, nourishing touch to our bodies. Christian faith from the beginning has provided both. Unfortunately, the church split and church traditions formed solely around his words but without his touch.

The *comment* is of particular concern also as regards evangelization in the African American community, where historically legalized segregation and discrimination spilled into the churches and thereby aided the rise of a variety of “free churches” premised in the Word but unfortunately bereft by Protestant ethic of the nourishment of the body and blood of the Lord and the priesthood which effects this Sacrament. Some of these churches commemorate by pageant merely the action of the Lord at the Last Supper, but without a valid priesthood their communion service is lacking sacramental efficacy, by their admittance.

*Ours is an altar and a pulpit.*² The liturgical norms place these two in proper balance. Hence, any liturgical action where the balance is lost Catholic worship takes on someone else' makeup.

Around the country clergy and people speak of this balance being disturbed here and there in an attempt at enculturation or making Catholic worship palatable to African American sensibilities or by certain genuine efforts to reconcile Euro elements of worship with indigenous black worship styles. This translates sometimes in a message that might

² *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1373-1375: “Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us,” is present in many ways to his Church: in his Word, in his Church's prayer, “where two or three are gathered in my name,” in the poor, the sick and the imprisoned, in the sacraments of which he is the author, in the sacrifice of the Mass, and in the person of the minister. But “he is present... most especially in the Eucharistic species.” The mode of Christ's presence under the Eucharistic species is unique. It raises the Eucharist above all the sacraments as “the perfection of the spiritual life and the end to which all the sacraments tend.” In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist “the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really and substantially contained.” This presence is called ‘real’ – by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be real too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a substantial presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present.” It is by the conversion of the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood that Christ becomes present in this sacrament. The Church Fathers strongly affirmed the faith of the Church in the efficacy of the Word of Christ and of the action of the Holy Spirit to bring about this conversion.

mistakenly give guise that Catholicism does not quite speak to African American worship culture with its rubric of black improvisational style.

Nevertheless, one million African American Catholics find meaning in the Seven Sacraments that helps to sanctify their lives and their families and has all along helped black Americans interpret the black saga in this country. Our task is to carry out the ministry of the sacraments as the Church directs for this necessary evangelization and to be true to all things catholic.

The presiding priest must be, in all instances, a genuine communicator and leader of worship. We want to avoid the Eucharist appearing to be merely tacked on to the Mass following some embellished delivery of the Word. If this is the case then liturgical balance is not achieved as the Church conceives of this balance. Certain charismatic preaching and cults of personality can serve to obfuscate the balance of altar and pulpit in the Catholic tradition. In our Catholic tradition it is the Lord in his Word and in His Eucharist which are center to the act of worship, not the personality or the arts of the presiding minister.

Today, we Catholics are more comfortable reading the Word of God and praying with the Bible outside formal worship. Modern liturgy affords us a greater hearing of that Word.

We bear respect for all the churches and the black church tradition in particular which has provided the food of inspiration and rationale for the black struggle in this country. But it remains a sad reflection that most of our brothers and sisters lack the privilege of receiving the divine food of the Eucharistic body and blood of the Lord (John 6) meant to nurture us in grace until He returns for us – together with the Word - the full menu of the Christian life.

The Lord addresses an invitation to us, urging us to receive him in the sacrament of the Eucharist: *“Truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”* (John 6, 53). •