

Missionaries in a changing landscape: Emerging from Lockdown

9th June 2020

Over the past ten weeks Churches have remained closed and the Eucharist has not been celebrated publically. Mass has been celebrated via social media and parish web-links. We are now moving towards the time when it will be possible to resume the public celebration of Sunday Mass following the COVID-19 crisis. Because of the need for social distancing and the need to limit the number of people gathering indoors many are wondering how the situation might be managed. One of the options being mentioned is to increase the number of Sunday Masses in order to limit the attendance at any one Celebration. Before choosing this or any other option I would suggest we need to take some time to think and to discuss.

I would suggest that that we go back to the Theology behind the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist before choosing a way forward. My understanding has been that the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist is part of our response to the commandment “keep Holy the Sabbath Day”. The Sabbath is a day of rest, a time for family a time to share a meal together. We recognise this day as special. I also understand that as a Christian community we come together in response to the words of Jesus at the last supper, “do this in memory of me “. We remember his sacrifice for us and celebrate his continuing presence with us under the sign of bread and wine. When we come together we also share the Word of God and we experience fellowship with one another. We know that the experience of being a Eucharistic people is a lot more than fulfilling a particular obligation. How in the days ahead will we continue to be a truly Eucharistic Community if we cannot have Sunday Mass as we have been used to having it? We need to think about this, talk about it and pray about it. It would be a mistake to opt for the easy answer without first taking the time to reflect on what we are doing.

In deciding the way forward there are other important matters to consider. One such matter is the availability of priests. Many priests are active beyond retirement age. Placing further expectations and dependency on this group of people is avoidance of collective responsibility and points to the clear need to find other ways to celebrate our Eucharistic fellowship. Creating increased demand on some of the most vulnerable in the present crisis is not the right way to go. We are at risk of exploiting the generosity of this group of people in order to avoid a responsibility which challenges us to find other ways of being a Eucharistic community. The demand for new ways has come to the local church quicker and sooner than expected.

For priests, who are able to do so, taking on an increased workload without considering the long term possibility of sustaining that commitment should be questioned. The present instruction for Priests is only in very exceptional circumstance to celebrate more than two Masses on a Sunday. This instruction is there to ensure the spiritual integrity of each celebration and to avoid the Eucharist becoming a function as opposed to a genuine experience of communion and prayer.

Multiplying the number of masses celebrated by the same priest risks devaluing the celebration of the Mass.

The Missionary Church lives with the reality that the celebration of the Eucharist in the traditional way is not possible every Sunday. As a Missionary Congregation do we need to find new ways for the Christian Family to celebrate its Eucharistic identity? This can only happen through a greater involvement of the faithful in the leadership of the faith community. Lay people can call the community together, share the Word and provide the leadership that is needed.

Can we rethink the role of the Priest? Can he move from being the provider to being the enabler? Rather than providing all that is required can he enable the faithful to take responsibility for the local Church through the provision of formation and training?

The following are some possibilities for the days ahead:

1. Invite people to discuss the issues before decisions are made. Such discussions should aim towards the possibility of taking collective responsibility in light of all the facts.
2. A greater focus on family as the celebrating worshipping community. Leadership and resources would be needed to enable this to happen on a long term basis.
3. People who live alone or who do not have family support can form small basic communities in which they express their faith.
4. A greater use of services of Word and “Word and Communion”. Leadership and training will be important.
5. Deal with immediate issues in a way that suits the local circumstances:
 - a. Encourage people, particularly the elderly and vulnerable to come to a weekday Mass rather than a Sunday Mass.
 - b. Raise the possibility of attending a Sunday Mass on a monthly rather than a weekly basis.
 - c. Train people to lead funeral services.

For the Local Church to move forward dialogue is needed. For dialogue to take place awareness of all the issues concerned is also needed. Well formulated theological input is important in order to ensure that the right decisions are made. As Missionaries we can provide that input. The theological input needs to inform the dialogue not replace it. The dialogue that takes place is part of the

theological process. The present situation provides us with the opportunity to do some thinking so that we can do some forward planning. To by-pass the thinking in order to get to the planning would be a mistake. The prayer, the reflection the dialogue are all important so that we make the right decisions in responding to these changing and challenging times.

Now is the time to move forward in what we have been talking about for so long, the discipleship of all the baptised faithful in the Mission of the Church. Lay leadership needs to be supported and encouraged and enabled. We can move forward in the spirit of the early disciples:

“With one accord they continued to meet daily in the temple courts and to break bread from house to house, sharing their meals with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people.”

We can respond to the words of Pope Francis:

“ We need well-formed lay people ... who take risks, who get their hands dirty, who are not afraid of making mistakes, who go forward. We need lay people with a vision of the future... “

Pontifical Council for the Laity June 2016

I offer these reflections to stimulate some conversation and reflection at a local level. I hope they help us as we live out our Mission at the present moment in each context of the Province.

Oliver Barry OMI