

Non-Communicating Attendance (and Beyond)

Last paper by Michael Silver

Whilst all the sacraments (however they are enumerated) are for the greater glory of God and for His children's re-adoption, the matter of their uniqueness versus their repetition calls for scrutiny. A popular saying about certain attention-seekers runs: "there are those who want to be the bride at every wedding, the corpse at every funeral and the baby at every baptism." The sacred liturgy precludes such aberrations, be they metaphorical or otherwise. Those who have received Holy Baptism-Chrismation (Confirmation) are precluded from receiving it again at any subsequent administrations. Nevertheless, we may be integral non-recipients – as Godparents (sponsors), assistants, supporters, or as the minister of the sacrament itself. All attendees, in fact, must benefit from public baptism precisely because God is there personally acting as Father, Son and Holy Ghost. "We would see Jesus" [Jn. 12:20]. Baptism's layers of meaning call for extensive meditation and study (Schmemmann's *Of Water and the Spirit* is still in print).

Baptism's derivative, the Sacrament of Penance, *as now practiced*, is of an entirely different order. Whilst everyone within the Church (perhaps beyond it?) benefits from the reconciliation of penitents, anyone else who happens to be in the building should be excluded from the process (despite its once more public features). [One recent controversial exception to privacy was St. John of Kronstadt's innovation of preceding Communion (during the Liturgy) with a confession of particular sins within the congregation, culminating in the priest's general absolution. In care-homes and hospitals a far less regulated (and unsolicited) practice obtains, but the *Power of the Keys* cannot be brought to bear where there is no priest.] In nearly all other cases, however, confession has long been confined to the priest and the penitent only. Some blessing should be derived from seeing (but certainly not from hearing) these exchanges. We need to be reminded, whenever possible, that the mark of the true God is that He ever responds to our most imperfect repentance, "till seventy times seven." [Mt. 18:22] Confession-absolution can be repeated frequently.

Similarly, with the rite of anointing for healing; everyone should benefit from attending it, although only those who are its direct recipients will receive its full potential. This rite, too, can be repeated, although it would not be expected to be of frequent occurrence. For many centuries it had become so closely associated with preparation for death that its original purpose was overlaid, although, additionally, it certainly is an appropriate rite of passage. Turning to Ordination, the rite cannot be repeated over the same person, although he can be ordained to different orders, but never to the same one again. The ordained are the direct recipients, everyone else benefits proximately. Likewise, marriage cannot be repeated, unless a spouse dies. There is now a tendency to have more than one ceremony (especially where the first is primarily a matter of a civil procedure rather than God's intervention). Another innovation is to renew vows, which rather detracts from the solemnity of the first profession? Despite the ignoble English tradition of 'wedding punch-ups,' a marriage is essentially a *communal* blessing (the account of Christ at Cana, in fact, has no mention of the *couple*).

Then there are other ceremonies that have been classed as sacraments that are not necessarily accepted as such now: the taking of the monastic habit, burial of the dead, coronation of a monarch, and various rites. Again, participation in such events is more than merely interesting and instructive.

With the Holy Communion/Eucharist, however, repetition is commanded. It is not so much a ‘little bit of history repeating’ as a large chunk of eternity scooping us up! Moreover, all the baptized are required to receive this sacrament. One supposes that from even before the 1281 *Synod of Lambeth* (that authorized withholding the cup from the laity) non-communicating attendance was almost invariable in Britain. Without having to administer the cup, Communion could the more readily and conveniently be separated from the celebration as such. Reception, in one kind, was from the reserved sacrament. [Before the *Novus Ordo*, the faithful had been communicated from the reserved Sacrament at mass itself, possibly a hang-over from what had once been an entirely separate ceremony at a minor altar?] The absolute necessity of Communion at the Eucharist, however, was something strenuously maintained in the (re)emerging Church of England during the C.16, and thereafter. Ironically, accenting Communion led to widespread and enduring neglect of the celebration (rather like the popular avoidance of unction). The Communion is not, actually, the rite’s climax (possibly the sacramental element in the mass has no climax, only its unique sequence?). Yet more ironically, in the C.17 at least, celebrations were commoner amongst many of the Puritan bodies than in the Established Church.

The issue of the Eucharist’s efficacy, in either non-communicating or communicating observance, raises that of *validity*. There is an allusion to the issue as early as c. A.D. 110 (Ignatius to the *Smyrnaeans* 8). Impotent celebrations may be instances of ‘*anti-grace*,’ a form of idolatry (worsened by accompanying sectarian teaching). This is probably a more sensitive point for Anglicans than for any other Christian tradition, especially since Leo XIII’s condemnation of Anglican Orders. Moreover, Anglican claims relied heavily on a mechanistic idea of *Apostolic Succession* and historical arguments about Archbishop Parker’s consecration at Lambeth Palace. The underlying assumptions in such apologetic were indirectly satirized in A. N. Wilson’s *Unguarded Hours*, in which the retired electrician, Mr. Skegg, reveals himself as Mar Sylvestrius. One morning, as the milkman deposits the bottles, Skegg suddenly imposes his hands. The milkman arises a subdeacon! [From my experience of irregular bishops a strong tendency to confer orders is common to a great many of them.] Probably the ugliest thing about this spiritual sub-culture is the desire to ‘collect’ successions, and, contrary to all order, to be ordained to the same office multiple times from different lines of succession.

Some Anglican clergy, such as Joy Fynes-Clinton (St. Magnus, London Bridge) held irregular episcopal orders. Despite this, Fynes-Clinton was a serious figure in Anglican relations with the Eastern churches, as well as an advocate for corporate reunion with the Apostolic See. If invalid Eucharists can be remotely beneficial, this can only be from a spiritual *placebo effect*. Obviously, in church history, there have been manifold falsehoods: bogus relics, forged documents, mis-attributed authorship, variant readings, absurd iconography, mistaken miracles, (to say nothing of poor zoology!) poisonous preaching and delusional priests and people. Grace still gets through. God has provided His Church with an immune system. A brittle absolutism can be found in e.g. Augustine, and other great figures, that errors are impossible within the Church, as this would topple the entire edifice. Church history, however, suggests that this is an overstatement (and probably accounts for a distaste for history amongst some traditionalists)? Often enough, the Church has substantially self-healed through new religious foundations, detailed research, and serious revivals.

Article XXV (unsurprisingly) overstates the invariability of Communion: “In such only as worthily receive the same [does the Holy Communion have] a wholesome effect or operation” i.e. there is *only* reception or unworthy reception, no other form of participation is so much as possible. The

English Coronation Rite is a conspicuous exception, Communion is confined to the celebrant, monarch and spouse. From this, we cannot automatically conclude that – in post-Reformation periods – those in attendance were held to receive derivative graces. [Incidentally, the first Coronation in English was that of James I/VI, whilst the last in Latin, a century later, was for George I. The reversion to Latin was solely because George had no English. The prospect of rendering the whole into German was too distasteful a prospect!] The greatest instance of non-communicating attendance possible is in the role of the faithful departed! Whilst from the earliest records it is clear that the Eucharist was believed to benefit them, there had been no comprehensive early articulation of masses for the dead. After the Reformation, the offices of the dead and the requiem mass were suppressed, robbing our collective consciousness of their indispensable part in the Eucharistic scheme.

Moreover, the frequency of reception has varied considerably throughout Church history. It appears that in the first three centuries, reception was simply presupposed, but we have little information about temporary abstentions and the reasons for them. Thereafter, people received most days, or four days a week (St. Basil, *Letter 93*); or every Sunday, one Sunday each month, one Sunday each quarter, once a year (Easter). The obvious rejoinder to infrequency is that if one is unworthy to receive every Sunday what can make that soul fit for it once a year? We cannot simply “keep out of God’s way.” So far so good, but crude psychological manipulation was brought to bear. Non-communicants were accused of rejecting Christ, or withdrawing from Him. Would they have been present at all, had that been their intention? Instead of being *supported* to explore sacramental riches, the false guilt of ‘ingratitude’ was imposed upon their consciences. Reasoned abstention is no rejection of Christ!

Correspondingly, the push for automatic communions since *Vatican II* (and, earlier, in the Anglican *Parish and People* movement) has produced mixed results. Invariable Communion appears, in fact, to have furthered laxity, are we not now sleep-walking into the Sacrament? The abandonment of *Communion Preparation* was an obvious casualty (whilst the 1969/71 *New Missal* included an oddly truncated Preparation, this was no longer promoted, nor was it inspiring). Prayers for a worthy reception had long been appointed in most bodies, even amongst Scottish Presbyterians. Unfortunately, in all traditions, these came to be seen as private piety rather than essentially communal. In Restoration England such devotions became quite elaborate, if rather repetitive. They were used throughout the week before a *Sacrament Sunday*. Contrastingly, in the old missal, five psalms were appointed, followed by seven beautiful prayers pertaining to the Holy Ghost. The form actually implies a communal recitation. The office continued with prayers, sadly, mis-attributed to St. Ambrose (in fact, by Jean de Fecamp). Jean’s compositions pale beside those from the Byzantine Rite, although they are not unworthy. For the priest, there were vesting prayers (yet more for a bishop) although these were rather insipid. Corresponding forms of thanksgiving follow, but a drop in spiritual temperature is discernable (and there were no corresponding divesting prayers).

It would, nonetheless, be false to insist that such prayers are indispensable. That runs the risk of making the preparation as important as the Sacrament. In the Russian tradition, furthermore, it is widely believed that priestly absolution before reception is essential. Possibly only in the cases of the gravest sins should reception be postponed, so long as genuine repentance is evident? Approaching in a state of disgrace is a far more serious matter than a sin against one’s self-image!

The only preparation that had been thought invariable, however, was that of the Eucharistic Fast (abstaining from all *refreshment*, N. B. not from the Eucharist itself). There was remarkable unanimity about this – which points to extreme antiquity. Usually the Roman reckoning of the day, as starting from midnight, formed the baseline for abstention. If the Mysteries *began* at midnight, a six hour fast was commonly observed. In the Coptic Church, however, the rule seems to be to refrain from all refreshment (liquid and solid) for the preceding nine hours, irrespective of timing. This fast is not ascetic but anticipatory, it is not a personal but a collective endeavour. Trying to explain this, over the years, has caused me appreciable aggravation. One priest insisted that there was nothing to stop *me* from fasting – completely missing the point. Another joked at my expense that in missing their favourite soap operas for an evening mass (a pre-play-back era) his people were *giving up* more. This is frankly absurd, fasting communion is not a punishment but a promise. A few people might still admit that they are not supposed to eat for an hour before mass. After the innovation of evening masses (against which traditional Anglicans had long prayed!), increasingly sweeping papal dispensations from the Eucharistic Fast were rolled out. I would not hesitate to endorse Dr. Keet’s verdict that such *wholesale* accommodations were mistaken. Nevertheless, equally, an over-absolutist attitude had once prevailed. Technically (sometimes practically) medications were forbidden. Dispensations, of course, applied (in all churches where dispensations were used) but the principle of ‘mercy not sacrifice’ is seldom more relevant than with regard to physical health (and with safety, if driving an appreciable distance for worship)? Spiritual health, on the other hand, appears to have suffered from neglect of the fast, as well as from declining confession-absolution and from ignorance of preparation. Attendance at Vespers/Compline, on the previous evening, is another solid practice.

Whilst this subject benefits from a calm historical overview, our ultimate concern is with the most august and adorable act of Almighty God. A sense of purpose is all too easily lost whenever we try to assess any liturgical rise and fall in exclusively academic or, alternatively, sentimental terms. The full wealth of collective experience is needed here. Moreover, neither the liturgy nor piety can be ends in themselves, we are called to be in Christ, not in a Ninian Comper interior. To lapse into autobiography, in all my 71 years of life, I have *never* known stability in the Church. Although a cursory glance at church history reveals disconcerting alternations in faith and worship, reinterpretation and dispensation ran riot. It was not just that we ‘dispensed’ God from minding about things, our views of humanity itself became progressively distorted.

With characteristic ‘Oxford understatement,’ E. A Livingstone wrote: “The period since...1957 has seen changes in the outward practices of the Christian Church unparalleled in any similar time-span in modern history.” (1974 ed. Preface to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*). >Granted, but surely *71 years* is a touch melodramatic?< Certainly, there are not many five year olds going round saying “there never was when the Son was not, so don’t tell me otherwise.” Throughout my childhood, nevertheless, chaos had been sending me *postcards*, so-to-speak. Aged seven, the *New English Bible’s* New Testament appeared. Upon hearing but one passage, I recoiled. Another 2-3 decades would pass before I learnt ‘the whys and wherefores’ behind my intuition. Comedy would make the point more wrenchingly than any fulminating traditionalist could. [In the episode *The Day the Saints Went Marching Out* – 13th. October, 1969 – the middle aged Bunjy’s domineering mother has hysterics upon learning that a company of saints have been removed from the Church Calendar. Too late Bunjy realizes that the statue that he has just bought for her birthday is of one of these disenfranchised souls! Despite the slapstick, a terrible sense of loss permeated the plot!]

Having smuggled in their experiments in plain sight, the liturgical boffins were emboldened, and re-presented Christ's Sacrifice as the Church's family meal. By my 16th year, my search for stability was on. The Byzantine tradition held out greater consistency. Equally, I took refuge in exemplary ecclesiastic art and architecture, an emblematic anchor amidst this – wholly avoidable – sea of faith. My discovery of past monuments, e.g. the abbeys of Dorchester and Tewksbury, Kempey's Byzantine frescoes; to say nothing of the (unfulfillable) aspirations of Pugin, Pearson and Comper* ("a church prays of itself") coalesced to form a flickering beacon of hope – "The present moment of the past." T. S. Elliot.] Without *consistency*, there is no 'holy ground' whereon to meet God [Exod.3:5]. This is not to say that the Holy One can only act in just one way, but, clearly, He has appointed certain things, and not others, in order to accomplish redemption. We are not to cast ourselves down from His Temple just to see what happens. [Mt. 4:6-7; Lk. 4:9-12] Throughout my life the terrible imposture of a widespread loss of faith and fervour was represented as an actual recovery of simplicity and genuineness – was this sliding-scale really *Honest to God*, or insightful for ourselves? Churches were reflagged under false colours. Yet, it is insufficient merely to reinstate earlier practices because, additionally, we need an accompanying *antidote* for the damage already sustained. This is where the traditionalist movements have yielded, at best, but partial results. Moreover, the 'tradition,' in such cases, seldom transcends what was done in 1964 (or – as it were – a 'borrowed' collective memory confected from e.g. archive footage of Fulton Sheen celebrating mass).

[* Comper, for instance, totally failed to understand how an ancient organ had been constructed. His organ cases are merely decorative, no historically designed instrument could be accommodated within such gilded chests, only pneumatic and electric actions could render the instrument, so accommodated, playable. Pugin had a slightly better grasp than other revivalist architects. His cases at Jesus College Cambridge and South Pickenham comfortably allow for pure mechanical action.]

To return to technicalities, non-communicating attendance is to be distinguished from a mass said by a priest alone. The latter is far less justifiable, and yet, even this had 'a moment' during the Covid restrictions. The merit, or otherwise, of those restrictions is not a present concern, but a new reason was for solitary celebration had been found. It is also a moot point as to whether a mass is strictly *solitary* if it is being broadcast in some way. Sometimes an entirely new situation arises for the Church, although it might be fleeting. Generally, however, it would seem that a solitary celebration should be avoided where possible. The Carthusians restrict participants because theirs is an order of hermits, but the priest must be assisted by a deacon or lector, or both. Sometimes a modest congregation can be accommodated behind a screen. This, therefore, is distinct from a solitary celebration. Liturgical logic demands that responses be made to the Eucharistic actions.

Solitary celebration and non-communicating attendance, however anomalous, witness to an intrinsic merit in the objective celebration. All the leading reformers and disrupters are now dead – Annibale Bugnini died as early as 1982 (having fallen from grace earlier still). The disrupters' confabulations bequeathed some tenacious after-history, ruinously representing the mass as *family meal*. Firstly, it is an odd family meal that excludes children, more dinner party! Eastern Rite churches are free from such strictures (yet the Eastern rites happen to be the least supper-like). All other traditions severely limit the engagement of the very young. Again, what of the unseen and unconsuming faithful departed? That this error should appear in a tradition that had never suppressed the requiem mass is all the more astounding. Can we really rest content with meal imagery when two significant companies are – according to the modern interpretation – are unable to participate?

It is also paradoxical that any supposed recovery of corporateness came at the expense of existing 'family customs and memories' (e.g. the corporate fast, submission to penitential discipline,

conventions of communal reverence, and established prayers and melodies). Despite the many limitations of mere custom, expunging collective memory was ruthless, and what, exactly, has been its replacement?

Elsewhere, I have examined aspects of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, so repetition would be redundant. It may be worth reiterating, however, that the Sacrifice radiates an incomparable influence. Non-Communicating attendance is not on the same level as prayers made before the reserved Sacrament, Benediction, Holy Hour, or processions of the Host. However valuable, they are not universal, whereas even bodies with the most attenuated claims to Apostolicity retain Eucharistic celebration. All forms of assent to the Eucharistic action far surpass such (local) *extra liturgical* practices, collective or personal. Notwithstanding the Lord's command to "take and eat," there are further elements in the Supper. There may be any number of reasons for us to offer the Sacrifice without consumption. Incongruously, general communions had, fairly recently, been forbidden at Holy Thursday's Chrism mass. More reasonable abstention might arise from: not being in communion with the locals, having received earlier in the day, being under instruction, being unreconciled with someone, [Mt. 5:24] or from confusions of conscience. We might include here the impracticality of communicating vast numbers. Today's large scale celebrations resort to 'communion stations,' served by multiple ministrants (some of whom are not ordained), in order to facilitate everyone's communion. Such provision can lead to accidents in administration, to say nothing of risking unreclected and unedifying meandering. The imagery is also inappropriate. To move towards a 'Communion Station' (if set up in an imageless vacuum) is a negation. To surrender the visible altar (as the locus of Communion) belittles the fullness of Sacrificial solemnity.

In each one of these instances, therefore, non-communicating attendance is actually preferable. Non-reception should reinforce grace and stability, since Christ's Sacrifice in and of itself – as with its partial typical images – is essentially unifying. This immeasurable grace may be 'measured,' firstly, from the sacramental types: "Manna illud e coelo, hoc supra coelum/That manna (of Moses) was from Heaven, *this* is above the Heavens." (St. Ambrose, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. xvi, col. 405A). Christ is the centre and the goal of our *haggadah* (the 'telling') as well as worthy consumption. Moreover, attendance should lead us further into the Mystery (i.e. God's Self-disclosure and act); so, inevitably, that entails actual reception, the entire fulfillment of life lived in the Sacramental-Sacrifice. We should never rest content with half-measures, even where those half-measures are grace conveying, we are ever driven forward [Mk.1:12].

Any recommendations that I could make would amount to little more than a subjective ideal, a paper piety! There must be a collective re-cultivation of repentance and attentiveness, although *this is a gift to be shared* (i.e. not a preserve of devout people). In practice, for any number of reasons, we may not be sufficiently prepared, or, as we approach, we may even be diverted by someone's attractiveness [Cf. John Betjeman's verse *Lenten Thoughts*: "How elegantly she swings along/in the vapoury incense veil"]. Without the least fatalism concerning our capacity and resolve, we recognize that we are yet in the flesh, our 'devices and desires' will not just evaporate. We must never become complacent about imperfection, but God's strength in our weakness is one of His most remarkable mercies [2 Cor. 12:9]. Principally, we should not hesitate to thank God for His spiritual warriors who, even today, battle against the demons and their own passions (again something in which we do not actively participate but from which we benefit). In the words of a conspicuously low church bishop (of Sydney) we must be mindful that at Communion "we approach as beggars and offenders." True as that is, we approach as so much more. We "go unto the

altar of God, even unto *the God of our joy and gladness.*” [Ps. 43] It is always home-coming. To lose sight of such truth would be ruinous. It was for this that we were made, and re-made. “...That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the fair beauty of the Lord, and to visit his temple.” [Ps. 27:4] “We love thine altar, Lord;/ O, what on earth so dear!/For there in faith adored,/We find thy presence near.” [Bullock/Baker, *English Hymnal* 508] This is both the route and the destination.

Lastly, we should be approaching the Eucharistic Sacrifice not only with a conscience as clear as possible but also with a *clear head*. This is far easier said than done as (I would suggest) there have been many misperceptions throughout history. If the mass-as-meal has proved misleading, so too the Reformation and Counter-Reformation fixations about the dead Christ. In taking the broken Body of Christ, we are not receiving a dead-alive Presence. So far did such notions gain ground that they even extended to Christ’s Body in the heavenly state. Robin Ward has pointed out that Charles de Condren (1588-1641) “goes so far as to describe Christ as being in heaven in a state of death.” (Westhaver/Vince ed. *Christ Unabridged*, 2020, SCM, p. 153) Such un-Biblical, un-Patristic, un-liturgical exposition, understandably, has also proved a disincentive to making one’s communion. Partly this has come from common misreadings of the nature of sacrifice itself, partly from an exaggeration of 1 Cor. 11:26, and partly from medieval iconography. Again, for a fuller discussion of this issue, I refer to my study *Sufficient Sacrifice*. Any truth can be mis-represented. What Christ accomplished wholly, He also extends fully. His finished offering to His Father, in the Holy Ghost, was accepted once *and* radiates still. Finality and continuance, here, are *allies*. Yes, “what [Christ] never can repeat He shows forth day by day...” but this is not just represented but *implanted*. His Sacrifice is seeded in us so as to constitute His kingdom of priests [Exod. 19:6/ 1 Pet. 2:9] we are, essentially, an offering people. *We all offer*, although this is act confided to the hands and voice of His ministering agent – the temporal bishop (or the bishop’s appointee, the priest assigned to a congregation). As an offering people, therefore, we make this Sacrifice in union with Christ our God and consume His own all-consuming love. Thereby it is we who are consumed. We can only be a self-offering people because, first we are a Christ-offering people in this Eucharistic Sacrifice.

Non-communicating attendance, unquestionably, is something from which we aim to graduate (whilst acknowledging its circumstantial necessity). Shorter forms of preparation, therefore, are allowable in place of those current until the late 1960s. Dr. Pusey concedes that: “God does not look on the length of the prayers, but on the desire of the heart.” (Sermon xx, *Parochial Sermons*). It is worth noting that many preparatory prayers are in the first person (which usually betrays a late composition). It would be entirely mistaken to reject them on that account. Nevertheless, we should be aware that, as we communicate, it is from within the entire Church; “we are saved together, we perish alone.” The Psalms, conspicuously, alternate between the single and plural constructions; therein lies their further potency. The difficulty with the Psalms, however, is that passages might be uncertain (and that is another problem with inherited preparatory orders). Nevertheless, it would be worth seeking out old devotional manuals in second-hand book shops. Should these prove unhelpful, however, I can customize shorter texts, upon application, (according to personal needs). It might be added, nevertheless, that bespoke piety must not become a hobby.