How many priests do we need?

Thomas O'Loughlin

Current Statistical Trends

One does not have to be a keen student of the Catholic Church to know that today there is a shortage of ordained ministers relative to the numbers that were available only a few decades ago, and that as a consequence there is no diocese or episcopal conference that is not facing painful choices in the coming decades.[1] However, when this question of numbers is discussed a curious contradiction appears. On the one hand, there is the obvious decline in numbers: 'the priests' shortage'; 'the vocations' crisis'; the fact of parishes being closed, communities left without the Eucharist on the Lord's Day, and various expedients to find additional human resources given the canonical requirements for presbyteral ordination within the Latin Church. On the other hand, when confronted with the number of priests available in a present-day diocese in the developed world some bishop will point out that this is 'a state of luxury' and people should not complain if their parish is left without a priest because the status quo is wholly exceptional either by contrast with other parts of the contemporary world (e.g. in the Diocese of X [in the developed world] there is a ratio of 1 priest to every 1000 Catholics; while in the Diocese of Y [in the developing world] there is a ratio of 1 to every 10,000 Catholics) or in the recent past (e.g. it is not today's shortage that should be explained, but the abundance of clergy between the Second World War and the 1970s). That this is more than a verbal contradiction, i.e. something that could be explained by noting the contexts within which the speakers were speaking, is demonstrated by the fact that we have many missionary institutes seeking to find clergy to go an work in mission territories and the developing world, while we have the increasingly common phenomenon of parishes in Europe and North America being staffed by priests from the developing world. If the shortage is an absolute one, then there should be an immediate redistribution of priests, and then there would be a massive outflow from Europe/North America to other places without any backflow. While if the shortage

[1] See D.R. Hoge, *The Future of Catholic Leadership: Responses to the Priest Shortage* (Kansas: Sheed and Ward, 1987)

© The Author 2005. Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2005, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00118.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

is a relative one, then still there could not be a redistribution from the developing world to the First World until their own needs are met – this is no more that the demands of distributive justice of any commodity in short supply.

Restructuring the Question

I have formulated this complex human situation in terms of a formal contradiction in order to expose a fundamental confusion in the thinking that generates much of the debate regarding numbers of Catholic priests today. In any contradiction one of the alternates must false and the other true; or if both can be verified, then it must indicate a fundamental flaw within the paradigm that has generated these particular 'facts' – in which case they cry out for a re-examination of the whole basis of the enquiry and the assumptions upon which it proceeds.[2] It is a fact that there are not enough priests in the First World today: the evidence is readily quantifiable and can be seen by the provision being made across the world for Eucharistic Services (which are not the Eucharist) on Sundays so that Christ's faithful can gather when there is no priest present. Equally, it is a fact that if one counts up the number of those who declare themselves 'Catholics' or who regularly could come to the Sunday Eucharist in a First World and a Third World country and divide that by the number of available priests, then a much higher ratio will be found in Europe/North America than in Africa/South America. Similarly, if one counts the number of priests in Britain/Ireland in 1900 (when a smaller proportion of the Catholic population received the requisite secondary education to enter seminary than in the mid-twentieth century) and divides that number into the overall Catholic population, then one has a smaller ratio than if that calculation was done for 1950, 1960 – or even for today in some places. Therefore, the contradiction must be being generated by some confusion within the framework of assumptions being used by those concerned with the problem.

The root of this confusion – and it can be found in any number of 'staffing situations' in large organizations – lies in the combination of two distinct acts of comparison – each legitimate – which create the illusion that one has an appreciation of the either the level of service needed or else the bare minimum below which it is impossible to operate. The first comparison is between real number of operatives available and the present designed establishment. In effect, the bishop

[2] This mode for approaching apparently contradictory phenomena is that of T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, second edition 1970), pp. 52–76.

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00118.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

(a) counts the parishes/churches on the map, (b) counts the priests, while (c) perhaps making allowances for the fact that a parish used to need three clergy while it now is served by just one, and then divides (a) + (c) by (b), and notes that the quantum of (b) is declining steadily over the years. However, there are two hidden problems here: first, the assumption that there was a time when the number of places for clergy was identical with the actual need; and that if there were still that number that the problems of providing pastoral care would be solved. Second, that the arrangements made when there was a higher number of priests were actually made in response to the needs for priests and not for some ulterior motive (e.g. the number of clergy a particular area could support for it should not be forgotten that in the period after the industrial revolution inner city areas with large numbers of slum tenements were often starved of clergy in comparison with the more well-to-do suburbs). Therefore, the needed number is not simply the number of gaps on a diocesan map. This situation might appear to argue that one should do a comparison across regions or periods, and so the second comparison is between priests : Catholics in Europe/North America and elsewhere. This is a valuable exercise in itself as it shows up inequalities, and just how great is the need for priests, but it does not answer the question of just how short are those dioceses who are facing staff shortages, a greying clergy, and people left without the Eucharist in their communities on Sunday. Comparatives figures may reveal much, but they cannot supply any basis from which an argument about a shortage or abundance as such, can be answered. Logically, this is no different to saying to someone who is ill that they should not so declare themselves, because there are others yet more ill!

When these two comparisons are combined one has the illusion – partly based on the sheer volume of figures that have been generated – that one has an adequate handle on what is happening in the world-wide Church today. This is then plotted as predictions for the next 10, 20, and 30 year horizons, compared with more general demographic forecasts, and linked to other resources such as the number of seminarians, predictions about having clergy from other sources, and then the whole complex is presented either formally as the diocesan 'strategy' or informally as proof that we are living in a moment of 'crisis' and that we should not forget Matt 9:37–8. However, the fatal flaws within each comparison remain and vitiate all such projections as no more than figures which simply make comparisons of possible future conditions with those which existed in the past. Any real assessment must not idealise a single past or present moment, but must begin with an abstract question: what is the number of priests that is needed for this diocese or the Catholic population of this area now; and this is not a search for a 'bare minimum' (i.e. 'we can keep the show going somehow with this

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00118.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

number') nor a 'maximum possible' (i.e. this is the number of priests we could house or support), but for an optimal number (i.e. given the nature of the ministry provided to fellow Catholics by a priest, what is the best ratio both for the whole body and the life of the individual priest). Only against such an optimum number can the actual state of a diocese's staffing be assessed or a comparison made between the relative shortages of different parts of the Church. However, to my knowledge, there has been no concerted effort to establish such an optimum ratio anywhere in the Church; and certainly no such figure is used in any of the predictions that are currently being made.

Seeking an Optimum Ratio

So we have a new question: how could one establish an optimum ratio of priests : Catholics. At the outset we should note two limitations in this quest. First, one cannot generate any absolute answer either from some 'authority' or from some quantitative approach to ministry. It is significant that there are no canonical prescriptions as to numbers: the sole concern is that there be sufficient support within the area for the cleric. Moreover, no calculation of 'parishes' (these were/are not primarily pastoral units but fiscal units designed to provide clergy with their support) can be used to attempt a determination of this ratio, as those divisions are themselves responses to demography/geography/financial abilities rather than a direct response to how to provide optimum pastoral ministry to Christ's faithful. Likewise, there is no body of information within the *magisterium* (decretals, local councils, the tradition of theologians) which can throw light on the topic: the notion that there could be a shortage of people willing to take on the desirable work of a being a cleric hardly crossed their minds; while the concern of most clerics was that 'their patch' would not be overgrazed by having too many clergy upon it and impoverishing them (a situation similar to that among GPs today who seek to regulate the number of other medics in their area so that the existing group have a sufficiently large client list to provide them with their income) – hence the long-standing dread of the friars and their 'cheap Masses' among the seculars.

A *simple* quantitative approach is also impossible. For example, one could calculate how many tax accountants are needed in a particular place by noting how long it takes to assess one tax-payer's tax, multiplying that by the number of tax-payers in the region, and then diving that by the number of hours in a working week. The result would be an optimum number of accountants that could then be modified by other factors such as location, distribution, and patterns of working practice. However, one priest can be found ministering successfully to a large number, while another is

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00118.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

unsuccessful with very few. Ministry involves the whole of a person, their skills, personality, unique talents, and also groups have diverse needs: a community with many young children demands far more than a settled middle-aged suburban group which, in turn, will need more attention as they become older and house bound. However, if this difficulty is not itself bounded, then *any* attempt to answer the question is doomed to failure. While the amount of care, or indeed love, that any particular church can receive cannot be quantified; given that the priesthood supplies a *specific* service within the Body of Christ which is common to the range of communities, it should be possible to find some manner of quantifying an optimum ratio.

Second, since we cannot be certain of the factors that led to a particular ratio in any place in the past, nor a priori be certain that the conditions today are similar to those in the past, we cannot simply invoke a particular era or situation as setting a standard. This sort of appeal to antiquity or longevity of use may be applicable in some questions, but not here for that would canonise one moment's praxis as somehow ideal. However, there was never such an 'ideal' moment: every moment is animated by the Spirit and Christians in every moment are getting some parts of their following right and in others are going astray. This does not mean that the experiences of the past may not throw light on the question for that which one actual church could not abide might be the standard practice of another (e.g. Clement of Alexandria was hesitant about ordaining unmarried men, Cyprian of Carthage had hesitations about ordaining married men; for most of its history the Roman church condemned usury, many bishops today boast if their investment portfolio does well). This past experience is often most useful in reminding us of aspects of questions which are not to the fore today but which may offer solutions to our impasses.

Given that every Christian is called to ministry in some way or other, then it is the specific ministry that is offered to a community by the priest that is our specific concern here, and on this the tradition offers us a loud and clear answer: to preside at the Eucharist. Within the Catholic tradition, only a male Christian who has been ordained by a bishop can preside, and without such presidency there cannot be a valid celebration of the Eucharist. Indeed, while there are one of two other actions which follow on from ordination (absolving sins and anointing the sick[3]), it is this task that is seen as central to the

[3] Although in these cases there is a long debate as to whether they belong to the 'power of orders' or the 'power of jurisdiction' since they flow from the Power of the Keys which could be given to anyone with the suitable papal legated authority; however, because this sort of canonically driven systematics has its own specialist adepts who always know even more arcane rules governing their movement of theological objects I feel I should say no more about this.

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00118.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

group's specific identity such that to be 'a priest' and 'to be a president at the Eucharist' are interchangeable terms. Of the all the ministry needed within a community, only the ministry of eucharistic presiding needs someone specifically empowered/authorised/designated by the laying on of episcopal hands. This is a major help with our question for now it is no longer the unquantifiable question of how much ministry do we need by how many celebrations of the Eucharist can one priest supply. This can be quantified given that the key need is to celebrate the Eucharist on a Sunday, although the calculation is hardly worth doing except as an exercise to demonstrate the stupidity of viewing the ministry of presiding in that manner. One could calculate (assuming that there was no travelling involved) like this: a priest could celebrate twice or three times on a Saturday evening, three or perhaps four times on Sunday morning, perhaps once during the afternoon, and then twice again on the Sunday evening – this workload, divided over several priests, would not be unlike the number of Masses usually celebrated in large city parishes until recently. One could of course take it to absurdity in each direction and say umpteen Masses in the manner the old 'three Masses in a row with last cruets only at the last Mass' were said on All Souls' Day until a decade or two ago; or one could have just one Mass and hire busses so that even a large population centre would be covered by one Mass. The example of papal Masses might offer a way out of the problem: have in any city only a handful of priests and devote resources into transport officers who would arrange the logistics of assembling thousands for one big community Mass. While I hope you will giggle at the idea, one should remember that the current interest in having fewer large population Masses 'to foster a sense of community' is usually a response to the fact that there are not enough priests for many masses rather than a practice based on evidence that larger gatherings are better at fostering a sense of Christian community or a sense of celebrating the encounter with Christ's body in community that is the Eucharist. Experience has taught most priests that one cannot quantify the number of priests from how many Masses they could possibly celebrate. The fact is that presiding in the manner appropriate to the contemporary rite demands a great deal of personal involvement by the presider and while this can be done twice on a Sunday, it is difficult to celebrate three times without 'running out of steam.' Moreover, those who regularly say more than three Masses are very often showing the classic signs of burnout, and their ministry while performed with courage is often only perfunctory. The priest as the simple possessor of sacral powers ('hands that can consecrate') reduces the image of Eucharistic presidency to the level of cultic official. And, whether that official is exhausted or not, he is less than the image of Christ welcoming all to his supper and therein sharing will all his companions his life.

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00118.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Is There an Optimum Size for the Eucharist?

Since our quest here is not for a maximum possible (i.e. how much productivity can one get out of one ordained Christian) but for an optimum, then we really must examine the question otherwise. The Eucharist is intended to be the ritual summit of the week for all who celebrate it. It is to be a unique banquet within our week that draws us forward towards the Eschatological Banquet in hope. This being the case, the priest can only preside at one celebration each Sunday. Any deviation from this must be seen – even where bination has been endemic for decades – as a expedient of the moment which will be remedied in a matter of weeks or months; and, if the celebration of several Masses on a Sunday is taken as a norm then this must be viewed as evidence of a corrupt understanding of the place of the Eucharist in the life of the Church. An individual can only have one centre to his religious week, and if he regularly welcomes fellow Christians to such a centre more than once, then his words are not a true statement but merely a piece of formalised teaching wherein the teacher is exempt from the teaching. This conclusion, one priest = one Mass = one Sunday, is, moreover, amply supported by even the most brief examination of the experience of Christians. The present Code of Canon Law establishes the norm as not more than one Mass per day (*non licet sacerdoti plus semel in die celebrare*), but then adds an exception which is alas the experienced norm for most clergy: but if there is a scarcity of priests the Ordinary may allow a second celebration or even a third on Sunday or Holydays.[4] Here the wisdom of only one Mass per day is preserved as an ideal, but the reality is the scarcity of priests. The very phrase, *sacerdotum penuria*, heightens the importance of our question of knowing just how many priests are needed in a given area. However, the canon does reflect a continuous desire to expunge or limit the practice of priests celebrating several Masses per day, either out of private devotion or to fulfil promises with stipends, that reaches back right to the time (late eighth – early ninth century) when celebrating a Mass became a practice of personal priestly devotion.[5] While the reasons have changed, there has been a constant awareness that any more frequent celebration than once per day is abnormal, exceptional, and even if permissible, somehow improper.[6]

If, therefore, we cannot determine the optimum ratio of priests to other Catholics by looking at the workload possibilities of priests in relation to their specific service of Eucharistic presidency, we must turn

[4] Canon 905.

[5] See C. Vogel, 'La Multiplication des Messes Solitaires au Moyen Age: Essai de Statistique,' *Revue de Sciences Religieuses* 55(1981) 206–213.

[6] See A.B. Meehan, 'Bination,' *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), vol. 2, pp. 568–9.

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00118.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

our attention to the Eucharist itself to see whether there is any optimum size for the Eucharistic gathering. If we had such a figure, and we already have established that in an optimum environment each priest would only celebrate one Mass per day, then we have the answer to our question: it is one priest to the optimum size of Eucharistic gathering. However, at first sight this approach looks even less likely to yield an answer than the priestly workload approach. On the one hand, for more than a thousand years in the Latin churches there has been an acceptance that a single other person – a server or someone else to answer the responses[7] – was all that was needed to form a congregation that could justify the celebration of Mass which was understood as an essentially public act.[8] On the other hand, there are the numerically massive celebrations that were such a feature of the pontificate of Pope John Paul II on his travels where there were tens if not hundreds of thousands of people present at a single Eucharist. And if, quite reasonably, these are seen as wholly exceptional from the normal experience of Christians, then there are still the vast urban church buildings of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that can accommodate well over 1000 people in pews and even more standing. It is noteworthy that these are parish buildings and not diocesan buildings nor the special buildings found at shrines[9]: such large parish church buildings are a wholly modern phenomenon. However, most priests are more than familiar with such large congregations and do not see this as in any way exceptional as a eucharistic practice so long as the practicalities for this number are properly provided for: a suitable sound amplification system, sufficient ushers to ensure that people can move around at communion time and exit without a complete impasse of people, sufficient additional clergy or 'extraordinary ministers' such that the distribution of communion can be accomplished without undue delay, while printed missalettes allow such large groups to have a ready and inexpensive guide to the liturgy. Moreover, the long established western practices of (a) unleavened, pre-cut small roundels to provide communicants with their sharing in the eucharistic loaf, and (b) seeing communion under one species as the norm (and even where communion under both species is found, the most commonly noted limit is the number of people to be communicated), facilitate these large assemblies to such an extent that many bishops today see these large gatherings as the way to deal

[7] The rubrics always assumed that the server would carry out the actions required and answer, however, since a woman could never carry out the actions but could answer 'from the rails' this possibility was allowed by the canonists and rubricians as emergency exception; cf. J. O'Connell, *The Rite of Low Mass* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1942), pp. 212–3.

[8] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 3, 83, 5 ad 12.

[9] For example, the great church of St Sulpice in central Paris is not a normal parish church but the home church of a great religious congregation, and like other large centre city churches was conceived as having a special role within the whole of the city.

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00118.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

with the declining numbers of priests. Certainly, these very large gatherings are the most efficient use of priestly energy today and clergy who have to travel on Sundays to various locations seem to praise the idea of one large gathering highly. The only limit that is commonly seen for such gatherings is geographical: from over what distance can one expect people to assemble for the Eucharist. Because the Eucharist is both possible and regularly celebrated at both these extremes of congregation size the notion of an optimum number seems irrelevant or unascertainable in practice.

Natural Sizes

However, the quest can be pursued in another way. While the religious significance of the Eucharist has varied enormously over the centuries, its basic form has remained constant: it is a meal. Moreover, this meal is seen to have essential characteristics and ritual shape. The characteristics are (a) that it is to be considered an intimate affair – those who gather are to see it as a family affair of brothers and sisters (e.g. the prayer *Orate fratres*) who share the intimacy of being friends of the Lord (e.g. Jn 15:15), and (b) that they are to be welcome at the table of the Lord (e.g. Mk 2:15; 7:28: 14:3; 14:18: 16:14). The notion of a meal itself suggests limits to the number that can be present, while the additional notes of sharing a common table – a most significant notion in any socially stratified society as witness Lk 14:8–11 – and considering those around it to be one's intimates, literally one's companions, further limits the size of any meal for size now becomes a constitutive factor lest these characteristics be lost. With regard to ritual shape, the key features distinguishing this meal from others is not some theological abstraction or religious intention (although these may be present), but the action of blessing God/thanking God while sharing a single loaf of bread[10] and sharing a single cup.[11] It is this religious ritual of a single shared loaf and a single shared cup demonstrating a single body, i.e. Christ's, that sets this meal apart from all others.[12] Once again, these ritual characteristics can be seen as having an optimum size for one cannot scale-up a loaf and cup to any arbitrary size without loss of meaning. Since these four elements, namely (a) intimate meal, (b) one table, (c) one loaf, (d) one cup, are size sensitive – given our human nature – they should collectively allow us to suggest an optimum number of participants at the Eucharist.

[10] See T. O'Loughlin, 'Translating *Panis* in a Eucharistic Context: A Problem of Language and Theology,' *Worship* 78(2004) 226–35.

[11] See J.P.Meier, 'The Eucharist at the Last Supper: Did it happen?' *Theology Digest* 42(1995) 335–51.

[12] See 1 Cor 10:17 and 11:25–7.

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00118.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Any genuine meal of a group that is more diverse than the nuclear family must exhibit an atmosphere of hospitality, a sense of participation by everyone present so that no one feels that they are 'just there', and a feeling of intimacy that all are there out of a genuine connection with one another – these are the very opposite values to those of the cafeteria or even the restaurant. Interestingly, they are also the values that many modern writers on church architecture believe should animate church building design.[13] So when we carry forward this way of thinking we should note the various group sizes that share food together with a sense of shared community. Up to a dozen people suggests that people will be seated for a proper 'sit down' dinner. While some households might already consider this as more than their catering capacity, many could cater for this number but would treat it as the upper limit. Then if one was catering for up to 25 people one could opt for the buffet, while once the number had gone above 40 most people would not term it a meal or an invitation to a meal but rather a party at which there are 'nibbles and drinks.' The key point here is that when it comes to communal eating: size matters.[14] For most people when it comes to elaborate 'sit down' affairs – whether it is a wedding banquet or a formal reception – over a basic number, around a dozen, it is necessary to get in expert caterers and for the hosts to concentrate on the hospitality. However, even in this case of the banquet – which is clearly more closely relevant to the eucharistic meal than the intimate dinner party – there is still a certain size one cannot exceed without people losing any sense of sharing a common meal and the group breaking up into distinct networks. A banquet of more than a 100 people rarely works and usually it means that those involved no longer can really see themselves as one genuine group and they tend to break down into smaller networks. We have all seen this at big wedding receptions: two family groups with a little overlap, one or two groups of work colleagues with little overlap with other groups, and a number of people that are clearly without a network. The sense of true community – what some students of ritual call *communitas*[15] — which a meal can create like no other human event, and which is hinted at so often in words put into the mouth of Jesus in the gospels,[16] really does not work when there is more than 100 people present. One simple way of demonstrating that there is an upper limit beyond which

[13] J.F. White and S.J. White, *Church Architecture: Building and Renovating for Christian Worship* (Akron, Ohio: OSL Publications, second edition 1998), pp. 2–3.

[14] I am indebted to J.-P. Audet for the notion that each form of eating is related to the size of the group, and that in turn is linked to hospitality (*Structures of Christian Priesthood*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1967, pp. 167–70).

[15] See V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995 [first published 1969]), pp. 131–65.

[16] Cf. J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 334–7.

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00118.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

one cannot go without destroying any human-sized sense of intimacy is to note that once one is trying to 'create intimacy' while using a microphone and an amplification system one is in the world of show-biz not in the world of genuine human intimacy and communication which should characterise the Eucharist. There will be times when there are especially large groups and a microphone is needed, but if that is the norm so that people can hear the Scriptures and share in the prayers, then already the scale is too big. So a hundred is an upper limit and for the purposes of our question that is a sufficient parameter. However, we should note that some have argued that even this size of group is too large for a proper meal-based intimacy – and we should remember that the fundamental meal structure of the Eucharist is a 'non-negotiable element' as this was the will of Christ – and have argued for a group size of fifty and have seen in Lk 9:14 a basis for this number in early Christian practice.[17]

To be gathered at the table of the Lord is a further element defining the meal-structure of the Eucharist. To have a place at the table is the essential dignity given to every disciple who is invited by the Lord into friendship. His disciples eat at table with him, and he is condemned for those at whose table he is prepared to sit: in the new kingdom there will be places set at table for those whom we might reject as sinners. Hence a noble table is a basic element of our meals – and when we refer to this as an 'altar' we are not using the word as a descriptive noun for a thing but as a theological interpretation for one way the eucharistic table can be interpreted. But even if a very large table, large enough that it becomes a symbol of its very 'table-ness,' there is still a limit on the number of people that can stand around a table and still experience that they are at table – not simply looking at a table at which the priest stands. Far too often in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council it was thought that it was sufficient for the congregation to see clearly what was happening at the table so that the priest looked as if he were a scientist working at demonstration table in a lecture theatre. But bringing the table among the people is not a matter of visibility, but that all the table companions can be around the table at their banquet. However, even a large table such at the long narrow tables used in some specialist liturgy spaces rarely allow more that sixty to eighty people to gather around them – and this assumes that the table-fellows of the Lord gather in concentric circles around the table.

The other two basic elements of the eucharistic meal are even more decisively size-sensitive. The basic sharing is of a single loaf of which each person can receive a share: thus they part-icipate in the one loaf which is Christ. Now while this is meaningless to most western

[17] See M. Abeti, *Un'architettura cristiana: per una nuova assembea celebrante* (Naples: Luciano, 1998), pp. 61–82.

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00118.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Christians – especially Catholics – who become insensitive to the basic symbolism through the use of unleavened bread (a practice which began in the ninth century for reasons of convenience and economy,[18] and which is still disputed[19] by the east as a break from the basic tradition of the Church[20]) in pre-cut roundels, we cannot use that argument here because we are attempting to find an optimum ratio of priests : Catholics – and so must assume optimum conditions. In an optimum environment there would a single loaf with a real fraction to provide a particle (literally something that is part of a whole) for each person gathered for that Eucharist. However, this need for a single large loaf – leavened or unleavened – means that one cannot really provide at a normal Sunday Eucharist for more than seventy or eighty people. This number can be obtained by assuming that each person gets a portion that is barely 15–20 mm square – which would, roughly and we are entitled to calculate roughly as it is a series of breakings that is involved, require a round loaf of approximately 40 cm in diameter. Any loaf larger than that is really too large to be a basic food symbol for our sacred meal.[21]

While sharing a loaf is a symbol of basic human community that has been made a central symbol among the community of Christ, the sharing of a single cup is a practice that is distinctive of our baptismal fellowship. Can we drink of his cup? (cf. Mt 20:22); we are one because we share one cup of blessing (cf. 1 Cor 10:16), and we imitate his taking a cup and sharing it with his companions (cf. Mt 26:27), and in drinking the cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (cf. 1Coe 11:26). Sadly, again, this is a fundamental practice of Jesus with his followers to which we have become insensitive through a mixture of false economies, lazy practices, and confused theologies. However, in an optimal eucharistic situation – which is now

[18] Cf. R.M. Woolley, *The Bread of the Eucharist* (London: A.R. Mowbray and Co., 1913).

[19] J.H. Erickson, 'Leavened and Unleavened: Some Theological Implications of the Schism of 1054,' *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 14(1970) 155–76.

[20] Whether or not the western introduction of azymes for the Eucharist was a departure from the tradition is a matter of theological judgement – and the Latin church has used its highest authority to declare on this matter: see Canon 926; however, that introduction was historically without precedent – notwithstanding the 'historical' clause in Canon 926; *secundum antiquam Ecclesiae latinae traditionem*.

[21] It should be noted that while many clerics think the idea of a single loaf being actually broken at a celebration is a meaningless suggestion because it would be (a) impractical and (b) that if people had an adequate 'theology' of the Eucharist they would not worry about 'mere symbols'; it should also be noted that a very large proportion of baptised Catholics consider the eucharistic ritual so meaningless as not worth their regular attendance – hence it is at least arguable that it is the separation between the symbolism chosen by Christ and the actual use of those symbols by the church that is part of the problem.

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00118.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

envisaged as within the grasp of the Latin church today[22] — at every Eucharist each participant would be able to share the one cup. It is important to recognise that the key symbolic action involved is not simple drinking the species of wine, but the action of sharing the fruit of the vine from the one cup over which a blessing has been offered to the Father. Thus the use of many cups – for the sake of speed or convenience – is as destructive of the basic action as using only one species and a 'doctrine of concomitance' to justify it. Thus the use of several chalices (which can have an effect on the number that can participate), or individual little glasses, or spoons, or tubes, or intinction are all equally inappropriate.

However, if one is going to use one cup there is a maximum manageable size beyond which a cup cannot be 'scaled up' without it becoming impossible to handle without spillage. That size is that of a large bowl with two handles capable of holding approximately 1.5 litres of wine. Since the minimum that can be sipped from any cup in a single sip is a function of the diameter of the cup (hence the need for various brim diameters in the glassware used for various drinks), a cup that can hold that amount of wine will be exhausted in approximately seventy to eighty mouthfuls. Hence, in an optimum Eucharistic meal that number sets to upper limit to the number than can share one cup.

Convergence of Approaches

These various approaches to the question of whether there is an natural and optimum size to a normal celebration of the Eucharist seem to converge on an upper limit of one hundred people and the ideal number somewhere around seventy-five. However, before using 100 as the ratio of Catholics to priests, it is worth observing that that number is, de facto, congruent with the historical experience of the churches to a far greater extent than recent practice in the west might lead us to suspect. We know that the Eucharist emerged within a domestic setting and even after the Eucharist had migrated to special buildings, these were for the most part tiny by modern standards – and would have only accommodated 100 people with difficulty. Clearly this is the case in the villages in the countryside where difficulties of travel required many small chapels close to each cluster of houses. The tiny medieval churches that can still be seen in the landscape, or witnessed in places names such as 'san' or 'santa' in the romance language areas or 'kil' or 'llan' in the Celtic language areas,

[22] See J.M. Huels, 'The New Instruction of the Roman Missal: Subsidiarity or Uniformity?' *Worship* 75(2001) 482–511 at 494 and 499–501; this article presents the canonical situation regarding Communion *sub utraque specie*.

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00118.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

show that most people celebrated the Eucharist close to this optimum number not because it was recognised as an ideal but simply as a function of topography. Even in the pre-modern city where people could have travelled to a single large church – covering far less distance than the average church-goer today – they actually did not do this but went to numerous smaller, more local or more specialist (e.g. the church of a guild or of an order), churches within the city. While the cathedral may have had a unique status, it was not the normal place of eucharistic experience. So in a medieval city like Siena there was the great world-renowned duomo, yet there is a little church on almost every street where the locals went each Sunday. Likewise in Salisbury one has the great minster, yet only a few hundred yards away is the local parish church with its great late medieval arch painting of the Last Judgement. While in Rome in the year 1200 there were no fewer than seventy-two churches/chapels dedicated to the Virgin Mary.[23] The contemporary Eucharist with so many people that they could not possibly know one another is a wholly post-Tridentine, if not more recent, phenomenon.

History also provides a perspective on the notions of one table, one loaf, and one cup. In Eucharistic Prayer I we still pray for all those who are 'standing around' the table – a verbal pointer to the situation in which the prayer was first put together.[24] While until 1970 the regulations on the construction of altars insisted that they have four pillars (either real or pilasters) at the front: a curious rubrical legacy – meaningless to generations of clerics and architects who faithfully followed it – of the time that the altar was an actual table with four legs! Until the rise of pre-cut unleavened roundels, the whole normal practice of the western church was to use a single large loaf on a large paten and then have a real fraction during which a special sequence of verses was sung known as the *confractorium*.[25] A practice still echoed in the repeated Agnus Dei at Mass despite the fact that the current fraction is only such a token affair that some priests break the 'large host' during the institution narrative as a simple piece of dramatic mimesis without any awareness of its true meaning within our symbolic world of liturgical action. Lastly, when it comes to chalices we find that the actual examples which have survived from the period when all received from the cup all have large bowls with handles to ease lifting and drinking.[26] This historical matter is not

[23] See R. Kieckhefer, *Theology in Stone: Church Architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 22.

[24] *Memento, Domine, famulorum famularumque tuarum . . . et omnium circumstantium . . .*

[25] See T. O'Loughlin, 'The Praxis and Explanations of Eucharististic Fraction in the Ninth Century: The Insular Evidence,' *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 45(2003)1–20.

[26] See T. O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology* (London: Continuum, 2000), pp. 135–6.

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00118.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

presented to establish any one moment in the history of the churches as some ideal but merely as collateral evidence from which two points can be drawn: (1) that the actual experience was often closer in scale – for whatever reason — to the optimum set out above than we generally imagine; and (2) if the scale suggested as an optimum situation is thought to be an impossibility, that is disproved by the fact that so much of our experience took place within exactly that scale, i.e. of Eucharists rarely having more than 100 participants.

Conclusions

So we can conclude as follows:

For every hundred Catholics, there should be one person who has been authorised, i.e. ordained, within the apostolic tradition to act as the president of the Eucharist. And, any lesser ratio is indicative of an insufficient pastoral care for the communities due, in all likelihood, to a confused understanding of the intimate nature between the need for the Eucharist and the life of the Church, a confusion of the relationship of the priest and the Eucharist such that the celebration of Mass is seen as a function of the priesthood rather than the very existence of the priesthood be seen as a function of the need of the churches for the Eucharist, and lastly an inadequate understanding of the basic structure of the activity of the Eucharist which imposes its own intrinsic scale.

Given this ratio of 100 Catholics: 1 priest, it is obvious that there has been a serious crisis of under-ordination not just since the mid-twentieth century but since the mid-sixteenth century when as an effect of the Reformation debates the full-time, professionalized, seminary-educated cleric became the norm. Bringing the number of clerics up to quota would initially be a great shock to the churches: the education system of clerics would have to be altered radically, the expectation that this particular ministry would be funded by others Christians (who, incidentally, are expected to offer their ministry to the church usually without payment) would have to be swept aside, along with discriminatory canonical restrictions on who can be appointed presbyter within a given community. However, the renewal in the life of the churches that could follow on this renewal of their Eucharistic practice – if we do believe with the late Canon Drinkwater that the whole message of the Church is to get people 'to go to Mass' or with Vatican II that the Eucharist is the 'centre and summit' of the Christian life – might more than off-set the shock of the new. And, we might find the early advice on the selection of bishops, presbyters, and deacons found in I Tim 3:1–13 and Tit 1:5–9

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00118.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

could provide a check-list for the selection of these one in one-hundred figures in the household of God!

Dr Thomas O'Loughlin
School of Humanities
University of Wales, Lampeter
Wales SA48 7ED
Email: t.o.loughlin@lamp.ac.uk

© The Author 2005

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2005.00118.x Published online by Cambridge University Press