The Ministry of the Word
by Brian Wicker

The phrase 'ministry of the word' is still an unfamiliar one even to Catholics who are fairly well instructed in the traditional theology of the eucharist. By comparison with talk about the 'sacrifice of the mass' the phrase seems odd, and even perhaps quasi-heretical. Historians of the liturgy can tell us a good deal, of course, about the way in which the ministry of the word, as an original and necessary part of the eucharistic celebration, fell into comparative decay, and indeed became almost entirely forgotten as an object of theological reflection for centuries. But here I want to point to an aspect of this subject somewhat different from that which is given to us by the liturgical historian. There is, I think, an important philosophical truth which needs to be dug up from the liturgical rubble in which we have all been poking around for the last few years, before we can give an adequate definition of the 'ministry of the word' as part of the whole eucharistic act, and therefore before we can begin to realise once more in practice what it means.

It can be taken as agreed, to begin with, that the eucharistic celebration has to do with the real presence of Christ. It is the permanent sacramental means by which Christ is made present to us and, indeed, in us. But, notoriously, the notion of the presence of Christ has been very variously interpreted.

One might put the point by saying that, in the past all the emphasis, in discussion of the real presence, has been upon the *reality* of the presence, whereas what we need to explore today in order to restore a balanced theology of the eucharist is the *presence* of the reality. Or, to put it another way, we have tended in the past to think that once we have established that the bread really is Christ, the problem of his eucharistic presence to us is settled. Whereas I want to say that until we have established what it is for Christ to be present to us, we cannot properly understand what it is for the bread to be really Christ. And it is here, I am arguing, that the ministry of the word is crucial.

The presuppositions of the theology on which we have been brought up are (to put it very crudely) these. The objective world, as it is in itself, is wholly external to us, not just physically but metaphysically. Our contact with it comes through a mechanistic system of physical effects by which it is possible for these external objects to transmit messages to our brains, which then decode them so that we

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get a mental picture, or impression of them. This is our primary contact with external reality. Language does not come into this primary contact at all; nor does the fact that there are other people in the world. These secondary facts, it seems, are important only when we wish to communicate our knowledge. Then we have to create our own system of physical signs, which we transmit to others, who in turn decode them and so manage to understand the meaning of the signs we have transmitted. So, in order of metaphysical priority, we first of all have objects in themselves, then the impressions they make upon us, then the concepts we form by abstracting certain features of these impressions, and then finally we have words which stand for these concepts and which can be used as a signalling system by which we share them with other people.

I excuse myself here from arguing out in detail what is wrong with this theory. I shall merely say that it is not the only possible way of thinking about the presence of objects, and that it is radically inadequate as an account of human experience. What I want to pose as an alternative – and here again I shall merely assert without substantiating in detail – is the view that what we have as the basic element in experience is precisely the *presence* of the objects, and that it is only secondly that we can begin to speak about either the wholly independent existence of objects in the world, or the existence of impressions in our minds. These latter are abstract rationalizations from our primordial experience which is always in terms of *presence*. This view emphasizes the fact that all our experience is *ours*, and that it is therefore always, and inevitably, experience from a certain point of view – that of our own bodies. One of the errors of talking about the existence of objects simply as they are in themselves, is that it tends to suggest that we can have a kind of knowledge which in fact belongs to God alone: that is a knowledge which embraces simultaneously all possible perspectives. But to accept that in the order of knowledge the presence of objects comes before their existence as such, is to accept the limitations of being human: for it emphasizes that all our experience is based upon our bodiliness, that is of our bodily presence *to* the world. The presence of objects is necessarily a presence to our bodies. Now we understand the notion of the presence of external objects because we first of all understand that we are ourselves objects as well as subjects: or rather that to be a subject, to which something can be present *is* at the same time to be an object among objects, having a commerce with them which is prior to any *conscious* conceptual recognition of their existence as external to ourselves.

But to speak of the presence of objects is precisely to *speak*. This is a further element which we cannot escape. Language, as well as bodiliness, is part of the human perspective from which and to which all objects are present. Now, here once more, I shall have to be dogmatic rather than philosophical, and say that the role of language is that it

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is the form of the human community. That is to say, it is language which makes objects present to a community, in the first place, and not just to the individual. It is by virtue of our linguistic capacity that the presence of an object is a sharing of the object, so that it makes sense to speak of the *same* object being present to many people despite the fact that they all have a different physical point of view from which the object is presented. Language transcends the limitation of bodiliness. If bodiliness is the possibility of having a pre-reflective commerce with objects, language is the possibility of having a community with other people, and hence the possibility of sharing the presence of objects. The presence of objects is inextricably bound up with our capacity to speak about them. Thus any presence is, first of all, to a community, and only through this is it presence to the individual person. The reality of a presence can finally be verified only in the community to which it is first of all given. And this community is structured, in the first place, by the word.

Therefore the eucharistic community is structured by the ministry of the word. The word is not just a preface to set the scene, so to speak: it is that which constitutes, and reconstitutes at every particular eucharistic assembly, the community into which the real presence of Christ is to be inserted. Just as the assembly of the Jews was constituted as a community by the word of God to Moses on Sinai, so too, each eucharistic assembly is constituted a community of God's people by the proclamation of God's word to those gathered around the celebrant. By the retelling of Christ's mighty acts, and of the acts of the God of Israel which led up to them, and of the mighty acts performed by the Church which has been built upon them, the community reminds itself of its own internal structure as a people called to the presence of Christ. The retelling makes possible the presence. This is why there can be no eucharist without the ministry of the word. (Perhaps it is one of the most important evidences of the Church's divine foundation that, despite the almost total disregard of this fact over a long period of history, the actual practice of the liturgy of the word has never been abandoned. The need for the constitution and reconstitution of the eucharistic community has been met, despite the fact that hardly anyone recognized there was such a need.)

But this much is mere theory. To say that the ministry of the word constitutes, or continually reconstitutes the eucharistic community seems oddly irrelevant, when we consider the inaudible muttering, amid the coughing and scraping and the hanging round doorways, which characterize that community as we know it in practice. It is essential that what is true as a matter of theological fact be made true as a matter of experience too. And this requirement means certain things of a very obvious kind in relation to the ministry of the word. I have said that language is the form of the community, both at the level of natural human society and at the level of the super-

natural community of the People of God. It is this fact which lies behind the assertion that without the ministry of the word there can be no community and no presence of Christ. But the word of the liturgy, it must also be said, is the word of God, calling us together. It is this word, and not any merely human utterance, which constitutes us a divine community. But to say this is nevertheless dangerous. For it seems to suggest that God's speaking to us, in the inspired language of scripture, and in the words of the celebrant who expounds its meaning to us, is only indirectly related to the language that we use to create our ordinary community life. The liturgical word, in this sense, is not itself felt to be the bearer of the divine meaning, but is only an occasion for the miraculous infusion of a meaning transmitted secretly by God to man. Human words are, so to say, just a telephone link through which God sends some deeper, interior meaning to each of us. The *hearing* of the word, on this view of the matter, is not really necessary, for this hearing is not itself the communication of God's meaning. It is only the occasion for it. As long as the occasion is provided, the meaning will somehow get across.

Now I think that this conception of what the ministry of the word is for, is more than untheological; it is literally senseless. I do not think any valid meaning can be given to the idea that the words that are spoken and heard do not themselves bear the meaning God intends for us, but are just the occasion for some ulterior meaning to get across the barrier between man and God. For there can be no meaning except that which is articulated. God speaks to us precisely in the language with which we speak to each other and hence in so far we speak to each other. It is just in our speaking to each other that the divine meaning appears. And to say this, is to say that it is in our speaking to each other that the real presence of Christ appears. This presence, like the meaning of the words, is possible only in an articulated context, that is within a structure of meanings which constitutes a community. Only within this articulated structure can God address us, or can we address God. (This is why all prayer, public or private, is necessarily conducted within a community, and is part of the liturgy in the sense of being the work of the whole people. It is the foothills of the same mountain of which the eucharist is the summit. Cf. Vatican Council's Liturgy Constitution, para. 10.)

But of course in the modern world, this speaking together does not occur naturally. The congregation is no longer a community of people living together. Today the congregation is but a miscellaneous collection of individuals and families who happen, more or less accidentally, to be present together at the same celebration. In such a situation, the need for the ministry of the word, as the dialogue which reconstitutes, out of this amorphous collection, a true community is even more evident than it was in the old close-knit rural environment. And indeed, the modern situation makes more explicit than before the fact that the eucharistic community is not a miniature of the

local community and its culture, but a miniature of the whole church. That is to say, it reflects the unity of mankind, and the unity of the Church which aspires to embrace the whole of humanity, not just the cultural unity of the locality in which it is set. Just because we are today often more aware of the needs and goals of nations or groups in other continents than we are of people on our doorstep, this ultimate unity of the human race, which is sacramentally shown forth in the eucharistic community, is graspable in the truly Christian way. This is not, of course, to deny that charity begins at home. It is rather to raise the question of what 'home' means in our kind of world. Home can no longer be confined to the place where we reside. In an important sense we have become first of all citizens of the world, and only secondly, citizens of this or that town or village, or nation.

Another consequence of the theory of the role of the ministry of the word which I have tried to outline is that the liturgical word must be really shared and understood. It is essential to the very idea of the eucharist that the people should speak to each other, and so create that articulated structure of meanings within which God can speak, and make himself heard (and therefore present). Where the people do not speak to each other, the structure within which God is to make himself present is necessarily defective. God cannot, so to say, make himself heard in the deafening silence of the passive non-participating liturgy; for there is almost a vacuum at the heart of it, and nothing much can get across this almost empty space. I think we must not shirk the consequences of this fact. We have to say that there can be degrees of intensity of Christ's real presence in the eucharistic assembly, according to the degree to which the assembly has succeeded in constituting itself a true human community by the exchange of words. This does not affect the reality of this presence, but it does affect the degree to which this presence is of any use to the lives of the people concerned in it. In the renewed liturgy envisaged by the Vatican Council, Christ will, so to speak, be closer to us, and He will be able to share our abode more completely with us, than was possible under the old dispensation. The liturgical reforms do not just make clearer the structure of something that was, in essence, already complete: they actually make it to be more complete, and therefore capable of a greater receptivity towards the real presence of Christ.

In saying that the creation of a community is essential for the eucharistic celebration to happen, I might easily be misinterpreted as suggesting that we need to recreate the old ideal of the closely-knit rural community, or something of that kind. But I do not mean this. Indeed, I think it is a real question whether there is any longer sense in talking about community in these terms, at any rate in urban conditions. It is very doubtful whether there is any point in trying to compete with what community-life there is in a large city, by trying to foster within it a special community of Christians (let alone

of Catholics) by all the usual devices – youth clubs, bingo, dances, street wardens, newsletters, and streamlined modern churches. Personally I believe that all of this will have fairly soon to be written off. The 'service station' eucharist is here to stay. It is futile for a parish priest to try to insist to me that my primary loyalty is to his particular establishment. It is perfectly reasonable for the modern Catholic to want to go to mass where it suits his timetable.

This is a point of great importance. I am not, of course, suggesting that we can or should ignore the needs of those round about us in the immediate neighbourhood, or that we only have a bond of Christian unity with those with whom we happen to get on well or who share our social, political or cultural interests. The story of the good Samaritan is still completely valid. But I *am* saying that the very notion of 'community' has to be rethought. In the old closely-knit parish, which many liturgical enthusiasts still hanker after, one belonged to a single community. The people with whom one worked were the same as the people with whom one played, lived and worshipped. It was possible to speak of 'the community' to which a man belonged – and it was primarily a local group. Today, however, we all belong to a multiplicity of communities. We work with one set of people, we live with another, we worship with yet another, and we choose our friends from a fourth. There is no such thing any more as 'the community'. There is only a network of groups each with its emotional ties, solidarities and cultural interests. Each of these is held together by some common purpose, or function, and not by any localised contiguity. The very term 'community' in our world refers to a union of purposes and goals and interests, and not to a locatable and permanent geographical setting.

Obviously the eucharistic community can only be given relevance to our needs if it is conceived in a way which corresponds to this new situation. We have to understand that a 'sense of community' is not achieved simply by 'getting together'. The attempt to recreate a sense of community in a city suburb, by the various devices already mentioned, is doomed to failure as long as it rests upon the supposition that my first communal tie is necessarily with my geographical neighbour – with whom, in fact I may have little consciously in common.

For in order to achieve any genuine significance, a community requires some content, some distinctive purpose or orientation towards the world. In the pre-industrial world this orientation existed naturally within the local community itself. But in the industrialized world it exists only within the functional community based upon a specific interest or purpose. And this means, among other things, that any functional community necessarily stands opposed to those objectives, and even those people, who pursue goals contrary to its own. That is to say, the functional community is partly defined by what it is against. This is simply the consequence of its having a specific function to fulfil. Thus the old solidarity of the English work-

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ing class was built upon an agreement, not just about what it stood for, but also by what it opposed. Similarly the 'ghetto' mentality, which the modernisers of the Church want us to get rid of, drew its strength from being against something well-defined. Again, there is a discernible and valuable community even in such a body as a pilgrimage to Lourdes, in which, behind the commercialism and the trivial superstition there lies the deep common bond of a visible battle against the forces of disease and despair.

By comparison with the strength of these familiar functional communities, the attempts at 'togetherness' in the modernised suburban, streamlined, liturgically progressive parish, admirable though they are in themselves, are feeble in the extreme. And this is because such a local community has no distinctive social function. There is certainly nothing which it is manifestly *against*. And the fundamental reason for this is that such a parish is just a typical cross section of a whole society which has lost its sense of worthwhile *social and political objectives*. Consider for example the characteristic slogan of the ecclesiastical moderniser – namely 'consulting the faithful'. The 'progressive' priest, it is felt, is one who has developed genuine two-way communication with his people, who asks for their views and considers their opinions. Here is the democratic principle at work in the Church. This is the basis of a new sense of community togetherness and mutual understanding, in which everybody is able to appreciate everybody else's point of view. It is in other words, the ecclesiastical equivalent of the industrial moderniser's faith in 'joint consultation', productivity committees and works councils. And just as the Trade Unions are suspicious of these, in so far as they can be seen as substitutes for the genuine community of the working-class which brought the Unions into being, so Catholics will soon see (it is to be hoped) the inadequacy of the synthetic modern substitutes for Christian radicalism. The new streamlined parish mass, performed in chromium-plated churches under disposable plastic rubrics, is in real danger of becoming a substitute for any distinctive Christian orientation towards the modern problems facing the Church. The 'consensus fidelium' needs to be seen as something more than an agreement to sink differences, a papering over of cracks in the ecclesiastical walls, and certainly as more than an abstract theological concept in the mouths of ecclesiologists. It must become a distinctive tone, style and orientation towards such things as peace, race-relations, private affluence and public squalor in the contemporary world. Only when this distinctive and radical Christian consciousness has been achieved (by growth and not by artificial imposition) can we hope to recover the communal dimension of the liturgy in its full value and richness, and so make full use of the ministry of the word which brings it into being.

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