

On Celebrating Mass with Reserved Hosts Alone

It sometimes happens that a priest will arrive at church to celebrate Mass and will find that everything has been prepared for him. The lectionary is turned to the correct reading for that day. The wine and water are ready at or near the altar. The candles are lighted. All that the priest has to do is to vest and Mass can begin.

Indeed, that is usually my own experience when I arrive to celebrate Mass. But sometimes one thing seems to be missing, namely, a number of small hosts to be consecrated so that those coming to Mass can receive them. Instead there is one large host for the priest and nothing else. It is presumed that when Communion time comes, the priest will go to the tabernacle and take the hosts reserved there in order to give them to those attending Mass.

That simple fact does not seem to be so important in itself. What is the difference between consecrating a number of small hosts for the use of the congregation or using already consecrated hosts reserved in the tabernacle? No difference at all, it would seem. We Catholics believe that the hosts in the tabernacle retain their reality as the body of Christ. We do not believe, as some other Christian churches do, that the bread and wine are the body and blood of the Lord only in the context of the celebration of the Liturgy, which is a making present of the Lord's Last Supper with his disciples. Therefore, whether the hosts are taken from the tabernacle or are freshly consecrated at the Mass presently being celebrated, they are the same reality, the body and blood of the Lord. And that fact should therefore mean that it does not really matter whether the hosts used are consecrated at the Mass now being celebrated or were consecrated at a previous Mass.

But that is not in fact the case for me. It matters a great deal to me. I insist that if there are twenty or so people who have come to celebrate Mass with me, there should be twenty or so hosts consecrated for them to receive. Why am I insisting on this? Why can I not be content to use reserved hosts? Both the reserved hosts and the hosts to be consecrated at this Mass, we believe, are the body of Christ. Why then do I insist on consecrating new hosts?

Perhaps my reaction is an unconscious defense of my own role in the celebration of the Mass. For if I fail to appear to celebrate Mass, the congregation can take it upon itself to have a communion service in which it will use the hosts reserved in the tabernacle. Therefore, in insisting upon fresh hosts, I am making sure that I still "have a job," for the congregation cannot "consecrate" new hosts.

What then is the difference between a communion service and a Mass? It cannot be in the presence of the Body of the Lord under the form of bread, for we are agreed in acknowledging this presence in both cases.

Let us start with a simple question: How did it come about that there are reserved hosts? And here I will make some assumptions which are based on a more general knowledge of church history and are therefore subject to correction by those who are scholars in this field. Let us presume that when the early followers of the Lord gathered together to pray, they read from the Jewish scriptures and then perhaps from Paul's Letters (the Gospels did not emerge until the seventies or later) and then recalled what the Lord did at his Last Supper as it had been reported to them. In faith they accepted the bread and wine of their supper as the Lord's body and blood, for his words reported to them had identified them as such. Perhaps rather early on they might have saved some of the bread for those who could not be present because of work or sickness. And perhaps they also sent some of the consecrated bread to fellow congregations near to them as a symbol of their unity in the body and blood of the Lord.

As the centuries rolled on the faithful became so impressed by the Lord's presence in the consecrated bread and wine that they began to feel unworthy of receiving it. They would come to Mass to look at them as they were held up to be seen but they would not receive them. But they also took care to keep consecrated hosts present in the church which could be given to the sick and the dying.

Thus the thoughts of the faithful became more concentrated on the mystery of the Lord's presence in the consecrated hosts and less on the reality of the supper in which they emerged. Hence the emergence of a piety centered on the consecrated host itself. We associate this piety with the beautiful hymn attributed to Thomas Aquinas, "O Sacrum Convivium." And those of us of a certain age are consoled and proud when we attend the Holy Thursday Service of Holy Week which concludes with the transferal of the Consecrated Host to a temporary altar of repose while this hymn is sung because we can sing it in Latin, at least for a few lines. Thus this devotion to the presence of the Lord in the consecrated host continues to this day. In fact, today some churches have a special place for people to come to pray before the Blessed Sacrament, available to them for most of the day and sometimes even at night. And it is not just older people who like to do this. Recently college freshmen approached me and asked when and where they would be able to pray in the presence of the exposed Blessed Sacrament in our church which is adjacent to their university.

We have then two forms of piety: that of the celebration of the Lord's Supper and that of devotion to the Lord's presence in the consecrated host. The second depends on the first in the sense that it is the bread consecrated at Mass which is the source of the hosts which will then be reserved and adored. And perhaps my discomfort emerges when these two forms of piety are joined together by giving already consecrated hosts to the congregation rather than the hosts consecrated at the Mass itself. Something tells me that this mixture is not good. Something tells me that they should be kept separate. When Mass is celebrated, the hosts consecrated at this Mass should be given to those taking part in this Mass. And there is more to this separation of these two forms of piety than merely the protection of my own turf as the one recognized by the community as able to consecrate hosts.

But the Mass, that is, the commemorative celebration of the Lord's Last Supper, came first. Only later did the devotion to the consecrated hosts emerge. And it emerged because of a realization of the sacredness of the consecrated hosts as the body of the Lord. Then emerged the task of explaining how the Lord is present in the consecrated host. And the explanations offered seemed to prescind from the host's original setting, the Lord's Last Supper, and were given more and more in terms of philosophical models available in the philosophy of the medieval period.

But at the time of Vatican II a rediscovery of the communal nature of the Mass placed the consecrated host once again into the context of the Last Supper. For centuries many priests celebrated Mass alone, not taking notice of the many reminders of its communal nature given during its celebration; e.g., the dialogues between the celebrant and the presumed present congregation. Indeed, this practice continues today because many priests prefer to celebrate alone rather than not at all.

But when the consecrated host is again seen in its original context of the Last Supper, the understanding of the Lord's presence in it does not call for philosophical explanations. Rather we listen to the words spoken by Jesus as he gave the bread and wine to his disciples. He tells them that this bread is his body given for them and this wine is his blood poured out for them for the forgiveness of sins. The giving of bread and wine to his disciples to be eaten and drunk is an apt symbol of the surrender of his life for them.

This understanding of the consecrated bread and wine should also accompany the adoration of the consecrated hosts by themselves alone. That is their meaning. We are not worried about how the bread and wine can be at the same time the body and

blood of the Lord. We believe that they are such because of the Lord's identification of them as such. This is how he has presented them to us, and we in faith accept his presentation of them as such.

But does this understanding of them help to bolster the argument that the hosts offered to the congregation at Mass should be hosts consecrated at this Mass and not those taken from the tabernacle? It does in this sense. This placing of the hosts in the context of the Last Supper and the Lord's words spoken there provide us with a more dynamic understanding of them. We can now see them as the Lord's giving of his life for us. They are symbols of his surrender of his life for us. They are also a call for us to do the same for each other.

Do we understand them as such when we celebrate Mass? Or is the reception of the consecrated host at Mass simply Jesus' presence to us in a physical way? Do we forget that the consecrated host symbolizes Jesus' giving away of his life for us? And when we worship him in the consecrated host outside the context of the Mass, do we remember that this host symbolizes the Lord's giving of his life for us? Or is it simply a concentration on his presence in the consecrated host without any relationship to its original context?

I suspect that many Catholics who attend Mass on a weekday, that is, freely and not to fulfill any kind of ecclesial rule, do so in order to receive the consecrated host which is Jesus' presence for them in this physical reality. Therefore, it does not matter to them whether the host received has been taken from the tabernacle or has been consecrated at a Mass they are attending. But if that is the case, then we need not be so concerned to find a priest to celebrate a daily Mass in the parish. It is enough to have a communion service led by a member of the community.

However, if the effort is made to have a daily Mass, then it makes sense to use the hosts consecrated at this Mass. And then the meaning of the host presents itself more clearly to us. We are receiving the Lord in the bread which he has identified for us as his body broken for us. We are recognizing the commitment he has made to us. And now we are committing ourselves to live in this same way. We are promising to break open our own lives for one another as he did for us. Given this awareness, we might then be more careful about attending Mass on a daily basis. We have to ask ourselves: Do I really want to live in this way? Maybe I should be content with the communion service and a concentration on the Lord's physical presence in the host? And maybe when I attend the Sunday liturgy, I can shelter myself among the crowd, relying on the strength of their commitment to this way

of life rather than mine own. Or my own, but enhanced by that of the Church, itself the living, physical body of the Lord.