A SUPERB ARTICLE ON BEING A EUCHARISTIC MINISTER FROM A '*TABLET*' OF A FEW YEARS AGO

JUDY ROBLIN - IN AWESOME WONDER

Who should be a eucharistic minister? One reader, worried about her selection, discovered the answer is a very simple one.



In his prayer, "*Lord, help me to say yes*", Michel Quoist speaks of being it afraid of that "*Yes"* which involves others saying *"Yes"* in other ways. Becoming a eucharistic minister is one of those requires a response both to a parish priest and to God and is not something to be taken on lightly.

Some years after my reception into the Catholic Church, our priest invited me and a couple of others to take on this ministry. After an initial battle with my own sense of inadequacy, I began to see that if the role required someone who was worthy of it, the position would never be filled - and to refuse would in fact be saying "*No*" to Christ and the grace he was offering. So, after some instruction, we went through a very simple ceremony of blessing, and one Sunday morning I found myself standing at the altar with the parish priest and facing our congregation. Being the first woman in our church to find herself in such a position, and with a good Anglican heritage, I thought no one would come to me; they would all go to Fr John, and I'd be left standing there. But they did come, and what is more, after Mass, apart from a couple of close friends, nobody mentioned a thing, and they have not done so to this day.

Thankfully, it really is of no great significance to the majority of communicants who it is who puts the amazing gift of God into their hands, as long as it is done in a reverential manner. Certainly, it seems to me that it is of no consequence to the validity of that gift. Having said that, I am reminded how often in the mental health circles where I used to work, we would come across people who unconsciously take on the label of "patient" and use it to shelter from the responsibility of being a person. Similarly, being a eucharistic minister is not simply a question of the actions that this service demands. There is also a deeper demand that is to do with "being" and "becoming".

The actual act of participating as a minister at the Eucharist has always filled me with awe and amazement. We are at the heart of the mystery, and being right there beside the altar makes one feel so close to it. From here I see especially the vulnerability of God and the great risk he takes in putting himself in my hands. Every morning I say the Prayer of Abandonment: "*Father, I abandon myself into your hands; whatever you may do I thank you.*" And here is God giving himself into my hands. Theologians may write and speak at great length about this, but I arm reduced to silence at the immensity of such trust.

As the people come to the altar, they seem to me a stream of humanity carrying its lives and loves, personal pains and wounds. They come in all shapes and sizes, ages and temperaments; they are not far off, distant people but loved and familiar faces. Each one is different; each has a place in

God's plan that can be filled by no other. It is the greatest of privileges to be able to say, "*The Body of Christ"* and to place him in the hands of another. I see dimly here that the way of Christ is the way of weakness and powerlessness and, just as in his earthly life Christ carried out his purpose in this way, even now in the Eucharist he is the ultimate vulnerability. The contemplative and writer Carlo Carretto says: "*The Eucharist is the weakness of God, the silence of God. One needs really strong faith to understand the impotence and defeat which the Eucharist represents and which is today what the impotence and defeat of Calvary was yesterday. And yet, this powerless Jesus, nailed down, is the God of the Impossible, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end*."

It is the act of faith to recognise Christ here in this bread. When I offer him to another in this guise, God is giving me the grace of allowing someone else to say "*Yes*" to him. And as they go, they each carry Christ to their homes, places of work, schools and to myriad different environments and relationships. In this way the parish members become a series of eucharistic ministers themselves. As Sr Paula from the Anglican community of Ty Mawr in Wales used to say: "*Every least encounter is a gesture of his, a means of giving and receiving Christ himself."*

To return to the notion of being and becoming in this ministry of the Eucharist, I find that the experience of being a eucharistic minister means that you are not the same person as you are when you stand quivering at the altar for the first time. Perhaps fundamentally you become less important in your own eyes, and personal inadequacy looms less large. There is a paradox within this experience: it involves more and more bringing to this service the whole of what you are, including all those you carry and are carried by in prayer and life.

I retired recently from community psychiatric work because of ill health and now I am discovering the gift of a life of prayer within the "enclosure" of this illness. It is essentially a hidden life, and serving as a eucharis-tic minister becomes its outward expression as well as giving that grace which feeds prayer. I bring all that I am and receive back the whole of myself.

This thought took on life as a parable recently when I sat with a much-loved contemplative nun, on the brink both of death and her hundredth birthday. After receiving a drink from me, Sr Jeanne told me she had lived in that room for 75 years, and, as I then sat listening to her laboured breaths, the room was so full of Christ I hardly dared breathe. A eucharistic moment indeed, and eucharistic ministering where I personally received back one thousandfold.

There is always a special intimacy akin to this when called to take Communion to a sick person at home - scarcely a greater privilege known to someone who is not a priest. Moreover, at Mass the intimacy of this moment between God and the individual becomes more and more palpable. It is grace to see the faces of people gathered round Our Lord's table. At that moment most appear vulnerable as they hold out their hands to receive in simple trust.

Much is talked in our midst about "making community" but I see from this vantage point our eucharistic community already in existence, waiting sometimes for us to receive what we already are. Br Gildas from Caldey Island in Pembrokeshire tells a wonderful story of when he was a novice on the island, wanting to become like John of the Cross in six months! One evening after dark, his novice master beckoned him to get his cloak, and they walked together up the long road to the lighthouse. On arrival, Br Gildas was asked to give his thoughts on the lighthouse.

Failing miserably, he was instructed: "*That lighthouse saves the lives of hundreds of people it does not even know exist, and its only responsibility is to keep the glass clean*!"

Transparency like that, in life and in eucharistic ministry, will for most of us take many lifetimes. Meanwhile, my own experience tells me that we can let go of our fear of saying "*Yes*" when we dare to take on such privileged roles. For myself, I simply feel more and more affinity with, and belonging in love to, the people of our congregation. And it is from within this congregation that I turn my face to God with ever-grateful thanks for the gift of Eucharistic ministry.

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