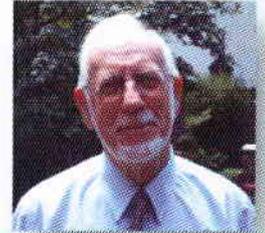


TONY MCSWEENEY'S COMMENTARY ON NUMBER 30 OF THE RULE OF LIFE

Placing the Number

After having presented our adoration as a “response to the presence” in No 29, the Rule in the present Number provides us with a brief guide to the practice of our prayer, drawing on our Founder’s heritage; our prayer is characterized as a prolongation of the dynamism of the eucharistic celebration and we are reminded that it can assume a variety of forms. The Rule also recalls to us that our prayer is a gift to be developed together with our brothers.



Commentary

“Our response to this presence of Christ is to enter into the dynamism of the eucharist... as church and for the world.” We can begin with this latter statement, asking: What does it mean to say we are to pray “as church?”

To pray “as church”

Paul uses the expression in the letter to the Corinthians, when he reminds the community that when they gathered for eucharist, they did so “as church” (*en ekklesia*, 1 Cor 11,18). The great orthodox liturgical theologian, Alexander Schmemmann, commenting on Paul’s phrase notes:

For [the apostle Paul], as for all of early christianity, these words refer not to a temple but to the nature and purpose of the gathering. As is well known, the very word ‘church’ - *ekklesia* - means ‘a gathering’ or ‘an assembly,’ and ‘to assemble as a church’ meant, in the minds of the early christians, to constitute a gathering whose purpose is to reveal, to realize, the church. This gathering is *eucharistic* - its end and fulfillment lies in its being the setting wherein the Lord’s Supper is accomplished, wherein the eucharistic ‘breaking of bread’ takes place.²

Fr. Eymard had an acute awareness of this ecclesial dimension of the sacrament. He wanted “adorers” to be deeply conscious that, choosing to pray in the presence of the sanctified Bread, they no longer acted simply in their own name. That which concerns the eucharist can never be appropriated by us as something private, to use as we wish; it cannot be made the object of our purely subjective ‘devotions’ based on personal tastes or whims. The eucharist is God’s gift *to the church* and always retains its essentially ecclesial character. In consequence, Eymard called his religious to transcend purely personal interests and to take on the concerns of the whole church as it makes its laborious way through time.

He knew very well that when the church celebrates the eucharist its interest is not just for itself, but “for the world,” according to the intention of Jesus who described himself as “the bread of life... for the life of the world” (Jn 6,33.51). For this reason, the criteria that guide our mode or praying must transcend purely personal and subjective goals or even narrowly confessional concerns. It was this awareness that led our Founder to propose the Good Friday intentions as a guide. In a word, our prayer must be shaped by the nature of the sacrament as the church understands it.

This same awareness, furthermore, led him to see that prayer made in the presence of the sacrament had to be determined in its form and content by the directives of the church intended to protect the character of the sacrament and order behavior towards it accordingly. He wanted our every approach to the sacrament to be respectful of the church’s directives and laws, in regard, for example, to behavior, dress and attitudes. He opposed exaggerated forms of pomp (such as the multiplication of candles) and singularities of personal behavior, because they denoted the intrusion of personal emotion and tastes; he wished to abide by the simplicity and dignity of the liturgical directives.

² Alexander SCHMEMMANN, *The Eucharist*. New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988, p. 11. Cf. idem, Chap. 1, “The Sacrament of the Assembly.”

Our Rule picks up this same concern of our Founder when it describes our “response to this presence” as one of entering into what it calls “the dynamism of the eucharist.” What does the Rule mean by this expression?

The “dynamism” of prayer and its fundamental attitudes

In speaking of the “dynamism” of the sacrament, the Rule situates our prayer in relation to the “action” that is constituted by this sacrament. It is worth noting that one of the early terms for the Eucharistic Prayer was precisely this: the “*actio eucharistiae*.” Such action takes place on different levels:

- On the *ritual or liturgical* level, it is constituted by the movements, postures, gestures, and the words of the assembly, representative of the church gathered in this place and time under the leadership of its liturgical minister, to celebrate its hope in obedience to the Lord’s command to “do this in memory of me.”
- A second level of the action is constituted by the succession of *internal acts* expressive of spiritual attitudes corresponding to the words of the prayers and the bodily postures and movements – specifically, of thanksgiving with praise, of confession and adoration, of invocation and offering, of intercession and doxology.
- On a more profound level, that is strictly inaccessible to our scrutiny yet no less real for all that, there is the *divine action* of Christ realizing the Memorial in the power of the Spirit and in union with his church, and directing it all to the Father as worship and to us as sanctification.

These three levels are obviously interconnected; yet the movement of the *actio eucharistiae* is a single unitary and coherent one, even though the first two levels are obviously going to be subject to the variations and inadequacies to which the human actors are necessarily prone.

The concern of our number is with the second level, namely with the set of spiritual attitudes and acts and their succession embodied in the liturgical prayers. These are described in terms which the Founder drew from the Council of Trent,³ known as “the four ends of sacrifice,” namely, “a prayer of adoration, of praise and thanksgiving, of reconciliation and intercession” as our Rule describes it. In this, the Rule is simply repeating the teaching of the Founder:

Since the form of our prayer becomes a rule of life, our religious shall pray in this manner. They shall studiously apply the Four Ends of Sacrifice in their Adorations, in preparing for and in thanksgiving after Holy Communion, in Confession, in the hearing of Mass and in mental prayer, each according to his own personality, the ministry in which he is engaged (*pri operis*) and the inspiration of grace... They shall recommend this form of the church’s prayer to all, explaining its meaning and its efficacy, such that its integrating power and its ability to bring about holiness is uncovered.⁴

In reminding us of this part of our heritage, the Rule is affirming the continuing validity of Eymard’s insights. This may surprise some religious, who may perhaps have concluded that, in the light of the conciliar vision and reform, the idea of “the four ends” had by now lost its actuality. This point perhaps needs to be nuanced. What matters most here is not so much the formula as such as what it represented. It was the best – because guaranteed by church teaching – means by which the Founder in his time could focus the attention of his congregation on the *integral vision* of the eucharist. He did not want a partial approach to the mystery such as that adopted in the reparation movement, and he was perfectly explicit about the matter.

³ Session XXII, Canon 3. See *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Translated and Introduced by Rev. H. J. Schroeder, O.P. Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publisher, 1978 (1941), p. 149.

⁴ *Notes personnelles*, Saint Bonnet, A.P.SS. O.6, pp. 49-50. Translation from Donald Cave, *An Eymardian Spirituality*. Rome: Blessed Sacrament Fathers, 1995, p. 38.

The purpose which we are setting for our little Society, is to honor our Lord Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament by the four ends of the Sacrifice: adoration, thanksgiving, reparation and petition — or a perpetual mission of prayer. *We take the whole Eucharist*. That is why I cannot accept the idea of mere reparation .. nor an exclusively contemplative life.⁵

For Eymard, then, the value of the formula was as a means of guaranteeing a comprehensive approach to the sacrament within the parameters of the theology of his time. The recalling of it in the Rule is a reminder to us but it does not bind us to the formula as such.

To understand correctly what the Rule is proposing we must also establish a clear distinction between the *insight* of the Founder into the principles that guarantee an integral view of the eucharist on which to found adoration, on the one hand, and the various *methods* by which that insight might be translated in practice, on the other. For it is precisely this distinction that stands behind the phrase that follows: “Though our prayer finds its inspiration in the celebration, it is not limited to any one form” (the word *form* is being used here in the sense of *method*); his insight, in other words, can find expression in a variety of methods of prayer.

A variety of possible methods

This distinction is important. It means that to take up and recommend to us the Founder’s teaching on the “four ends” as a guide to our adoration is *not* to propose any specific prayer method as such - for example, the method of the four quarter-hours or fifteen minutes dedicated to each of the four ends. It is one thing to say that these four fundamental attitudes are intrinsic to the eucharistic action and therefore that they should give shape to our prayer; it is quite another to say *how* in practice we might go about this.

In regard to the way we seek to structure our prayer, a person may well, indeed, choose to divide the hours of prayer into four fifteen minute segments, dedicating each segment in turn to the corresponding attitude. Though some may find this approach congenial and helpful, to others it may seem altogether too artificial and mechanical.

Another person might prefer a quite different approach altogether, for example, to follow the pattern that we find in the church’s Eucharistic Prayers. These prayers do indeed enshrine these self-same four attitudes, but they do so in conformity with their own dynamics and unfolding. The advantage of such an approach would be that of substituting, for the more abstract and static schema just mentioned, a pattern nearer to life and one that corresponds more closely to the flow of the eucharist itself.

Still another approach might be to pray in a more spontaneous fashion, starting perhaps from a scripture passage or an event of life, and seeking to draw out one’s responses in a freer way that, in some manner, leads the person to incorporate the four fundamental attitudes mentioned, but according as the Spirit guides the person.

Numerous other methods could be used or adapted, provided they are at the service of the needs of the praying person and of the goal of adoration, namely to draw the one praying more deeply into the eucharistic mystery. For example, the classical method of the *lectio divina*, with its four stages: *lectio* (reading or study), *meditatio* (reflection), *oratio* (prayerful dialogue with the Lord) and *contemplatio* (silent presence of love), is easily adapted to the setting of eucharistic adoration.

In the end, methods are relative; they are no more than guides or props to help us enter into relation with the Lord. Many of us may find that, over the years, we use a method that helps us for a time but then look for another more adapted to our changing needs. Some methods are well suited to the needs of beginners while others are better adapted to persons who have gained a certain proficiency in praying. In any case, as one grows spiritually, prayer usually becomes more contemplative and hence simpler.

⁵ Letter to Mme. d’Andigne, August 24, 1857, p. 85. In his refusal “I cannot accept...” he alludes to the suggestions of Mother Dubouché and of Fr. Hermann Cohen (emphasis mine).