

# In Communion with Christ

## 2. Gathering

'I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Mt 28:20). This promise of Christ never ceases to resound in the Church as the fertile secret of her life and the wellspring of her hope. As the day of Resurrection, Sunday is not only the remembrance of a past event: it is a celebration of the living presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of his own people.

For this presence to be properly proclaimed and lived, it is not enough that the disciples of Christ pray individually and commemorate the death and Resurrection of Christ inwardly, in the secrecy of their hearts. Those who have received the grace of baptism are not saved as individuals alone, but as members of the Mystical Body, having become part of the People of God. It is important therefore that they come together to express fully the very identity of the Church, the *ekklesia*, the assembly called together by the Risen Lord who offered his life 'to reunite the scattered children of God' (Jn 11:52). They have become 'one' in Christ (cf. Gal 3:28) through the gift of the Spirit. This unity becomes visible when Christians gather together: it is then that they come to know vividly and to testify to the world that they are the people redeemed, drawn 'from every tribe and language and people and nation' (Rev 5:9). The assembly of Christ's disciples embodies from age to age the image of the first Christian community which Luke gives as an example in the Acts of the Apostles, when he recounts that the first baptized believers 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers' (2:42).

### *The Eucharistic assembly*

The Eucharist is not only a particularly intense expression of the reality of the Church's life, but also in a sense its 'fountain-head'. The Eucharist feeds and forms the Church: 'Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread' (1 Cor 10:17). Because of this vital link with the sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Lord, the mystery of the Church is savoured, proclaimed, and lived supremely in the Eucharist.

This ecclesial dimension intrinsic to the Eucharist is realized in every Eucharistic celebration. But it is expressed most especially on the day when the whole community comes together to commemorate the Lord's Resurrection. Significantly, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that 'the Sunday celebration of the Lord's Day and his Eucharist is at the heart of the Church's life'.

### *The day of the Church*

The *dies Domini* is also the *dies Ecclesiae*. This is why on the pastoral level the community aspect of the Sunday celebration should be particularly

A few years ago there was an episode on the television series *thirtysomething* in which Michael was anxious about what religious tradition he and his wife, Hope, would offer their new baby. When Hope asked him if he believed in God, Michael blurted out: 'Sure, I believe in God but God *who?* God *where?*'

There are many important questions homilists must ask themselves about their particular assembly, the biblical pericopes, the liturgical season, their listeners' 'habits of the heart'. But foundational to all of these are the questions, God *who?* God *where?* In other words, authentic preachers must always struggle to construct a convincing theology of revelation. People who come to church on Sunday believe in God, but like Michael they are asking the preacher, God *who?* God *where?*

Robert P. Waznak.

*An Introduction to the Homily.*  
Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998. p93

### **Key Texts**

#### **General Instruction of the Roman Missal**

46-54; 120-127

*Mass with Deacon:* 172-174

*Concelebrated Mass* 199-217

#### **Celebrating the Mass**

21-51; 139-151

stressed. As I have noted elsewhere, among the many activities of a parish, 'none is as vital or as community-forming as the Sunday celebration of the Lord's Day and his Eucharist'. Mindful of this, the Second Vatican Council recalled that efforts must be made to ensure that there is 'within the parish, a lively sense of community, in the first place through the community celebration of Sunday Mass'. Subsequent liturgical directives made the same point, asking that on Sundays and holy days the Eucharistic celebrations held normally in other churches and chapels be coordinated with the celebration in the parish church, in order 'to foster the sense of the Church community, which is nourished and expressed in a particular way by the community celebration on Sunday, whether around the Bishop, especially in the Cathedral, or in the parish assembly, in which the pastor represents the Bishop'.

The Sunday assembly is the privileged place of unity: it is the setting for the celebration of the *sacramentum unitatis* which profoundly marks the Church as a people gathered 'by' and 'in' the unity of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. For Christian families, the Sunday assembly is one of the most outstanding expressions of their identity and their 'ministry' as 'domestic churches' when parents share with their children at the one Table of the word and of the Bread of Life. We do well to recall in this regard that it is first of all the parents who must teach their children to participate in Sunday Mass; they are assisted in this by catechists, who are to see to it that initiation into the Mass is made a part of the formation imparted to the children entrusted to their care, explaining the important reasons behind the obligatory nature of the precept.

At Sunday Masses in parishes, insofar as parishes are 'Eucharistic communities', it is normal to find different groups, movements, associations and even the smaller religious communities present in the parish. This allows everyone to experience in common what they share most deeply, beyond the particular spiritual paths which, by discernment of Church authority, legitimately distinguish them. This is why on Sunday, the day of gathering, small group Masses are not to be encouraged: it is not only a question of ensuring that parish assemblies are not without the necessary ministry of priests, but also of ensuring that the life and unity of the Church community are fully safeguarded and promoted.

It is also important to be ever mindful that communion with Christ is deeply tied to communion with our brothers and sisters. The Sunday Eucharistic gathering is an experience of brotherhood, which the celebration should demonstrate clearly, while ever respecting the nature of the liturgical action. All this will be helped by gestures of welcome and by the tone of prayer, alert to the needs of all in the community. The sign of peace - in the Roman Rite significantly placed before Eucharistic communion - is a particularly expressive gesture which the faithful are invited to make as a manifestation of the People of God's acceptance of all that has been accomplished in the celebration and of the commitment to mutual love which is made in sharing the one bread, with the demanding words of Christ in mind: 'If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift' (Mt 5:23-24).

Love bade me welcome;  
yet my soul drew back,  
Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love,  
observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'  
Love said, 'You shall be he.'

'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,  
I cannot look on Thee.'

Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord, but I have marr'd them:

let my shame

Go where it doth deserve.'

'And know you not,' says Love,

'Who bore the blame?'

'My dear, then I will serve.'

'You must sit down,' says Love,  
'and taste my meat.'

So I did sit and eat.

George Herber.

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## *Gathering*

## Starting points

What particular points struck you from your reading of GIRM and/or CTM; from the People's leaflets; or from the other reading material?

In what ways do these particular points challenge or affirm your present practice?

In what ways are the people of the parish invited to prepare themselves for the celebration of Sunday Mass?

How would you describe the mood in the church before Mass begins? How does this effect the celebration of the Introductory Rites?

What are the signs of hospitality in your parish?

What are the main points you wish to continue to explore?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

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## *Gathering* Homily notes

How is the action of gathering represented or described in

- today's readings and psalm?
- the Mass propers?
- the preface and Eucharistic Prayer?
- the Ordinary of the Mass?
- the music and songs chosen for use in the Mass?

Where does this action of 'gathering' take place in the daily life of your community? What is there to learn from this?

What are the major events in your parish/town at present?

What stories/experiences connect with the 'gathering' theme?

Main points to be carried forward into homily

1.

2.

3.

What are the major national/international events at present?

And what songs, plays, films, paintings etc.?