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Of Concelebration

Definitions

In the introductory rubrics to the Holy Eucharist in the Book of Common Prayer (pp 322 and 354) occur the following paragraphs:

At all celebrations of the Liturgy, it is fitting that the principal celebrant, whether bishop or priest, be assisted by other priests, and by deacons and lay persons.

It is appropriate that the other priests present stand with the celebrant at the Altar, and join in the consecration of the gifts, in breaking the Bread, and in distributing Communion.

The joint consecration of the gifts is commonly known by the word *concelebration*. This word, which does not appear in the Book of Common Prayer, is one of those less-than-satisfactory shorthand terms, not unlike the word *celebrant* itself (which while normally restricted to the one who presides at the liturgy could well be applied to any of the worshipers present). Nonetheless, we will use the term here as a convenient way to refer to the phenomenon described in the rubric, when one or more priests join the *principal* celebrant at the consecration of the gifts. In this brief article, we will explore the modern revival of this custom and offer some suggestions about when and how it might best be implemented.

Changes in liturgical fashion

In the early church, when the weekly celebration of the Eucharist was normally confined to one church in each locality gathered around its bishop, concelebration was the norm as the presbyters stood with the bishop at the altar, in some places stretching forth their hands towards the gifts at appropriate points during the eucharistic prayer. Liturgical scholars refer to this as “ceremonial concelebration” — as opposed to “sacramental concelebration” in which the additional presbyters also joined in pronouncing portions (or all) of the eucharistic prayer, a custom that appears in some traditions (and only on certain occasions) but was not universal. As time passed and the principal celebrant at the Eucharist came to be more and more the parish priest rather than the bishop, the opportunities

for concelebration of any kind became less frequent. It was retained at such events as the ordinations and consecrations.

During the liturgical revival in the mid-20th century, scholars noted the significance of concelebration in the early church and commended its revival. This is reflected both in the revisions of the Roman Catholic liturgy following Vatican II, and in the rubrics cited above from the Book of Common Prayer.

Enthusiasm for concelebration (particularly verbal concelebration) has waned over the years in the Roman Catholic Church (note the passage quoted below from Aidan Kavanagh). Few Episcopal parishes have the luxury of extra priests in the sanctuary, and will only find concelebration possible at such times as the bishop’s visitation; we will address both circumstances below.

What is being communicated

The present usage of “verbal co-consecration” in the Roman Rite is, if not an abuse, an anomaly. Restored by the Second Vatican Council in order to “manifest the unity of the priesthood” rather than, as one might have hoped, the unity of the Church, its theory is flawed, its form verbally obsessive, its practice clericalizing, its use too frequent, and its numbers of concelebrants often gratuitously large. Many clergy seem to feel that they cannot participate in the Eucharist unless they verbally consecrate the sacrament, even if they must do so in suits from the pews... Such people forget that their ordination ... does not nullify their baptism, which they share at all times with the rest of the liturgical assembly. The fact is that concelebration is a gesture of ministerial respect for the assembly, especially as the assembly observes events of special significance in its life, e.g., great feasts, visits of its bishop, ordination days, and the like. It should never be done merely as a convenience for supernumerary clergy without respect for the day or the size of the assembly. Nor should concelebrants usurp the functions of other liturgical ministers such as acolytes, readers, cantors, and deacons. All they rightly do is share discreetly the presidential role in the liturgy, supporting the one who presides without obscuring his function.

— Aidan Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite: A Handbook of Liturgical Style*.
(Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982), pages 61-62

As Roman Catholic liturgical scholar Aidan Kavanagh notes in this passage, the intent behind revival of the practice of concelebration in his tradition had to do with manifesting the unity of the priesthood and the hierarchical nature of the church. Anglicans traditionally, while not ignoring the roles of the various orders of ministry, have rather emphasized the communal or collaborative aspect of our worship, and the concept of the priesthood of all believers. (This also appears to be the direction of more recent liturgical thought among Roman Catholics as well.) Liturgical actions often speak louder than words. It would appear that concelebration should be carried out in a manner which will express what it

is that we intend to say. Clearly concelebration is a matter of degree: from a rite in which all concelebrants vest in similar or identical vestments and say portions of the eucharistic prayer together or divided among the co-consecrators; through a form in which the concelebrants are vested similarly but more simply than the principal celebrant, and, remaining silent, perform only manual acts such as extending a hand at points in the eucharistic prayer; to a form in which the concelebrant might be vested in cassock, surplice and stole while the principal celebrant wears a chasuble, and stand near the altar without making any additional particular manual or verbal act. Given this variety, what may we be saying in the various circumstances in which concelebration takes place?

For most parishes it will be the bishop's visitation that provides the regular opportunity for concelebration; and here as elsewhere the symbol can speak in different ways. When the bishop is the principal celebrant, priests who serve in a parish rightly join the bishop at the altar as a sign of their shared ministry. However, it might also be good somehow to express the concept that the priest serves as the bishop's deputy. While it is clearly appropriate for the priest to concelebrate in the "full" style at ordination and the Celebration of a New Ministry, at other parochial visits by the bishop one might make a point of concelebrating in the more subdued form, standing at the altar without additional manual or verbal acts, as a reminder to the people of the bishop's role as chief pastor, and as a sign of one's deference to the bishop in exercising that role.

In the parish with multiple clergy, concelebration may be a way to emphasize the collegial nature of the priests' work together for and with the people of God. If other ministers (deacons and lay ministers) are also taking their roles in the chancel, this may well present a picture of participation and unity. Care should be taken, however, that the chancel not become a "performance space" or send an "us vs. them" message. All who are present at the celebration, whether in chancel or nave, should be able to consider themselves fully involved in what is happening. The old tendency to reserve the word "participant" to those carrying out a liturgical function as priest, deacon, reader, intercessor, acolyte, and so on, tends to tell those who are worshiping through joining in the prayers, hymnody and psalmody that they are somehow *not* "participating" — and casts an undue focus on the sanctuary and chancel at the expense of the bulk of the church!

A special case of concelebration is the annual Holy Week "Liturgy of Collegiality." Here, as the consciousness of the presbyters' relation to each other and their bishop is a dominant note, concelebration by manual acts may be most appropriate. This may also be true for regional meetings,

clergy conferences, or similar events in which those gathered wish to express priestly collegiality. However, even in these cases it is possible to fall into making the liturgical statement that only those "doing something" in the liturgy are participating in it.

Finally, a brief comment on "verbal concelebration." It is important to note that the Book of Common Prayer does not mention it, either to commend or forbid. Experience has shown, however, that verbal concelebration, either simultaneous or serial (that is, with different persons saying different portions of the eucharistic prayer) may be more confusing than edifying. Practical considerations alone (sound systems, the concelebrants' positions at the altar, and so on) often make for difficulty in execution, and obscure rather than clarify. If concelebrants speak any of the words of the eucharistic prayer along with the principal celebrant, it is probably wise if they do so in a subdued tone, listening carefully and matching the rhythms of the principal celebrant.

In conclusion

Clearly concelebration is not a major issue. It is an important one, however, for how we celebrate says a great deal about who we are and how we understand ourselves. This paper is not meant either as a prescription or a proscription, but simply as an aid to thinking about the implications of our liturgical actions, and what we are communicating thereby.

For further information

Howard Galley's *The Ceremonies of the Eucharist* (Cowley, 1989) provides a useful chapter "Of Concelebrating Presbyters" which provides some additional detail on ceremonial. A similar work from a Roman Catholic perspective is Peter J. Elliott's *Ceremonies of the Modern Roman Rite* (Ignatius, 1995) which provides advice and cautions on the practice. (The present official Roman Catholic guidelines are available on the web at <http://www.nccbuscc.org/liturgy/current/concel.htm>.)

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