CELEBRATING THE EUCHARIST WITH MY WIFE

In recent weeks a number of articles in the Irish newspapers have spoken about the declining number of active priests in Ireland and that today there are very few seminarians studying for the priesthood to replace retiring priests.

The articles project what the situation will be like in 15 to 20 years and lead us to ask the question: "Will the Sunday gathering of the faithful become a rare event in this or that parish if there is going to be so very few priests to celebrate the Eucharist"? This may happen if we continue with the same model of church that we have had for so long, not that this model was wrong but we need to plan and take action for a new kind of church in the future.

Archbishop Francis Duffy of Tuam has said he is "very conscious of the declining number of clergy in the Irish church and the drastic decline in the number of men studying for the priesthood. I think it is important to face it, address it in whatever way we can and plan for the future" (Irish Times - 9 - 1 - 2022).

If we believe that the Eucharist is necessary for the building up of a christian community then we need to plan for the future if not then the words of the Archbishop of Dublin may become a reality when he said in February the 2nd 2021: "Sunday Mass in every church will become a thing of the past".

In every parish we have couples who give witness to their stable married life and who are actively engaged in pastoral work in their church. They have lived through 15 to 20 years of married life or more which is double the time a young man spends in the seminary preparing for the celibate priesthood. These couples have experienced a different kind of seminary, the seminary of life. They understand from their own married life, from the ups and downs of life, from rearing their children the challenges that life brings them and the struggles that most families go through to live out their faith. They have organized their family and professional life to the extent that they are able to devote time to church work. These couples could go by the name of "Pastoral Agents" and be responsible for the spiritual growth of the families in their neighborhood. Among their pastoral responsibilities they could gather together families in homes and celebrate with them the Eucharist for them. Cardinal Mario Grechi, the leader of the Synod has said: "The great community of the church is made up of small churches who meet in homes, if the domestic church fails, the church cannot exist, if there is not a domestic church, then the church has no future".

The parish church will of course retain its important and singular place for the celebration of Baptism, Confirmation, First Holy Communion, Confessions, Weddings, Funerals, Community Masses, it will always continue to be the Mother Church of the area.

Since returning to live in Ireland three years ago and due to Covid 19 restrictions I am now celebrating the Eucharist in my own home as my wife has a serious health problem and must avoid mixing with large crowds in the parish church. In the past it was said that when a priest gets married he leaves the church, he becomes an ex-priest. I worked for almost 50 years in Brazil as a missionary priest, 18 years as a celibate priest and 32 years as a married priest, when I got married I did not leave the church and I am not an ex-priest.

The church in Brazil gives great importance to the formation of Basic Christian Communities. These are small groups of families who gather together in their homes to pray with the Bible and to reflect on the human, social problems in their area and to work for a better world. In Brazil my wife and I worked with these Basic Christian Communities and occasionally I would celebrate the Eucharist for the group in their homes. I believe that the same Lord Jesus that called me to the Sacrament of Orders also called me to the Sacrament of Matrimony. Now my wife and I are a couple, we do things together, she is my companion, my helper, my partner(Genesis 2, 18). In Brazil my wife and I did this pastoral work with the knowledge and moral support of the local parish priest and our pastoral work was never in conflict with his. As we both had our own secular jobs we did not depend on the parish for financial support.

In former times Ireland sent many missionaries to foreign lands to spread the Gospel and they did heroic work. Has the time now come to reverse the situation and call foreign priests to come here as in the case of the diocese of Meath which is reliant on priests from Romania, Africa and Poland (The Irish Examiner  13 - 12 - 2021) or could we not open up the priesthood to married couples who are giving witness to their faith as missionaries in their own local neighborhood? In the Latin American and Caribbean Conference in Santo Domingo the Brazilian Bishop Mauro Morelli said: "Women or married men who are distinguished in their faith and excellent in charity should be ordained priests".

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