



EDITORIAL

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From Holland, a refreshing notion

American Catholics should take note of what is happening in the Netherlands. Not that it will result in sudden, dramatic change in the church, or that it needs to, but because it reveals a different, much freer way of being church than American Catholics are normally used to. Dutch Catholics have been facing all the same church issues we find here: a priest shortage, a leadership vacuum, an official preference for the temple priesthood over the pastoral, while the world races toward an unknown future like a crowded bus without brakes or headlights. They have some ideas.

Ah, those postmodern Dutch, so far ahead of us, with their eclectic and chaotic social liberalism, their blunt talk, bold experiments, utopian impatience with rules and tradition. What a refreshing notion they have: that because the Eucharist is the essence of Christian community, that community therefore has a right to it. And if the hierarchy fails to bestow that right from above, local communities can claim it from below: "Where two or three gather in my name," share scripture, break bread, pass the cup, there is Real Presence, holy Communion, the freedom of the Holy Spirit to give charisms with or without official permission.

How generous and even true this all seems, yet how different for us, loyal American Catholics, waiting patiently for the hierarchy to give us Communion and the other sacraments only they can bestow. The logic goes like this: "No male, celibate priests -- no Eucharist; no Eucharist -- no church." The vocation crisis threatens the existence of the church, we are told: Give us your sons or we will be forced to close or merge your parishes, substitute Communion services for Mass, crowd you into regional megachurches.

The Dutch aren't buying it. There is no vocations crisis and no priest shortage if you count married men, women, former priests willing to serve. There is ample historical and theological precedent for models of ministry other than the one tied to clerical celibacy. Even the Vatican's emphasis on the original Twelve as the only template for priesthood edits out the fact that most were probably married, that Jesus included women in his inner circle, and that Paul's house church Eucharists were presided over by women.

If it is true that without Eucharist there can be no church, then how does Rome justify making preservation of the current clerical model more important than the survival of thousands of otherwise viable parishes? Where is the crisis of conscience among individual bishops, vicars of Christ and shepherds? How will they give an account of their stewardship of a church in which the baptized were increasingly denied the Eucharist, except on their rigidly limited and theologically unjustifiable terms, why the faithful died without confession and anointing because there was no priest who could come, and why other sacraments were by appointment only and often unavailable to the flock? What were they thinking?

Our Dutch Catholic brothers and sisters have been thinking long and hard about these questions. They know that for our church to be relevant, it must exist in the real world, the modern world it is committed to engage and serve. Serious problems challenge us: rapidly changing technologies, global demographic patterns and economic shifts that both enrich and despoil, wars and rumors of war, generational rifts that are fueling both religious fundamentalism and rootless secularism.

They are seeing the future with courage and welcoming it as eucharistic people. And we can learn from them about how to be church from below, with or without permission from above.

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