

## The experiment of the substitutability of the sacrament of the Eucharist with the Liturgy of the Word for the good of the community: the price of Synodality?

The diocese of Modena, after the story of the pictorial exhibition in the smell of the blasphemy<sup>1</sup>, is once again in the limelight in the national news due to a controversy, involving the parish of San Celestino I of Castelnuovo Rangone, which focuses attention on delicate issues at the center of the canonical theological debate. The fact dates back to 22 April of this year, when the parish Pastoral Council<sup>2</sup> of the parish of San Celestino I meets, with the presence of the diocesan bishop Monsignor Erio Castellucci, who approves two singular decisions which generate, within the most traditionalist of the ecclesial community, perplexities and polemical movements. The first decision is to replace the weekday mass, on Tuesdays and Fridays, with Liturgy of the Word meetings entrusted to the lay faithful and not to the parish priest, who is a fairly young person and expert in these issues as a teacher of Theology of the ministries and Theology of the Laity at the Higher Institute of Religious Sciences of Emilia, in the city of Modena. With the second decision the Council goes further and establishes that Sunday Mass can also be replaced, in the absence of the parish priest, by the Liturgy of the Word. The latter is preferred to the possibility of having the faithful parishioners move to a nearby church; or to proceed, in any case, with the celebration of the Mass in the, parish of belonging, by welcoming any substitute priests, not having acquaintances or acquaintances with the community, whose ultimate good is indicated as the fundamental inspiration of these undoubtedly divisive deliberations. Any relations of the celebrant with the community, or, in any case, the preferences of the latter towards the sacred ministers are not taken into consideration by canon law as validity requirements for the purposes of a Eucharistic celebration<sup>3</sup>. Faced with the request presented to Bishop Castellucci, by some of the faithful, to justify these provisions, deemed to be in conflict with a plurality of provisions of canon law, the high Prelate, once again at the center of conflicts with some members of his community<sup>4</sup>, responds forcefully that it is necessary to promote the change desired by the current Papal Magisterium and

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<sup>1</sup>Allow me to refer to the comment published in this magazine, news section of the previous issue.

<sup>2</sup> The Parish Council is an institute of the Catholic Church, the result of the renewed ecclesiology of communion expressed by the Vatican Council in the two Decrees *Christus Dominus* and *Ad Gentes*, and subsequently canonized in can. 536 - §§1-2. Cfr. VATICAN COUNCIL II, Decree On the Pastoral Mission of Bishops in the Church, *Christus Dominus*, 28 October 1965, n. 27, in [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651028\\_christus-dominus\\_it.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_christus-dominus_it.html), Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*, 7 December 1965 n. 30, in [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651207\\_ad-gentes\\_it.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_it.html).

<sup>3</sup> Canon 903 "establishes that a priest is admitted to celebrate even if he is unknown to the rector of the Church, provided that he exhibits the letter of recommendation from his Ordinary or his Superior, dated at least within the year, or it can prudently be assumed that he is not prevented from to celebrate".

<sup>4</sup> An event similar to the one examined above takes place in a parish of the Diocese of Bologna, and has as its protagonist the parish priest of Santa Maria della Carità, the young Don Davide Baraldi, who is prevented for health reasons from celebrating Sunday Mass, without apparent reason of necessity, allows the Deacon in accordance with canon 1248 paragraph 2, to prepare a liturgy of the Word which effectively becomes a substitute for the Eucharistic celebration, and evades the obligation to look for a substitute who guarantees the faithful the fulfillment of the Sunday precept (can. 1247), from which they would implicitly, and perhaps not licitly, be exempted by virtue of the aforementioned substitution.

expressed in the synodal inspiration<sup>5</sup> of the life of the Church. Both resolutions of the Parish Council, although with different gravity, seem to oppose some fundamental theological and juridic principles of the Catholic Church about the role of the Eucharist: “source and summit of all Christian life”<sup>6</sup> where “the sacrament of the church manifests itself fully”<sup>7</sup>, and of Sunday Mass, the perfect memorial of the passion of Christ<sup>8</sup>. It is necessary to “maintain the pre-eminence of the Eucharistic celebration over all other pastoral actions”<sup>9</sup> and since “participating in Mass is an obligation for the faithful, unless they have a serious impediment, the Pastors are required to have the corresponding duty to offer everyone the effective possibility of satisfying the precept”<sup>10</sup>. The effect of community participation in Sunday mass is, as John Paul II reminds us, to create communion and educate to communion<sup>11</sup>. Given this, it is not conceivable to make a commutation of the Sunday precept with participation in the mere rite, in this case considered alternative to the Eucharist, of the Liturgy of the Word. The two components of the Mass are considered, however, by the magisterium as “a single act of worship”<sup>12</sup>. In the position taken by the Parish Council with the tacit consent of the local Ordinary, I believe we can read a certain desire to prefer comfortable solutions that favor the deep-rooted habits of the community of the faithful at the cost of sacrificing respect for fundamental legal norms, such as those concerning the Sunday precept, the right of the faithful to receive the sacraments, first of all the Eucharist and the duty of the sacred minister to celebrate mass, with the exceptions expressly provided *ex lege* (see can. 1248 § 2) and the duty not to transform the attribution of the faculty of preaching to lay people from an exceptionality to an ordinary fact<sup>13</sup>. This story is, however, first of all, an expression of the attempt to revive a tepid

<sup>5</sup> About the Bergoglio magisterium on the subject of synodality and its canonical reflections, see the studies of: CARLO FANTAPPIÈ, *Metamorfosi della sinodalità. Dal Vaticano II a Papa Francesco*, Marcianum Press, Venice, 2023; AA.VV., *La sinodalità nell'attività normativa della Chiesa. Il contributo della scienza canonistica alla formazione di proposte di legge*, edited by Ilaria Zuanazzi, Maria Chiara Ruscazio, Valerio Gigliotti, Mucchi Editore, Modena 2023; Andrea Micciché, *La sinodalità nella Chiesa: dinamiche di partecipazione alla luce del recente magistero pontificio e della fase preparatoria della XVI Assemblea Generale del Sinodo dei Vescovi*, in *Ius Canonicum*, vol. 62, no. 123, June 2022, pp. 317-3

<sup>6</sup> SANCTUS THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, II, q. 83, a. 4, ad. 3: “Ad tertium dicendum quod Eucharistia est sacramentum totius ecclesiasticae unitatis. Et ideo specialiter in hoc sacramento, magis quam in aliis, debet fieri mentio de omnibus quae pertinent ad salutem totius Ecclesiae”, in <https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/sth4083.html>; CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, The celebration of the Christian Mystery, sec. II. Chapter I, art. 3, no. 1324. “The Church has lived from the Eucharist since its origins. In it he finds the reason for his existence, the inexhaustible source of his holiness, the strength of unity and the bond of communion (...)", thus expresses the SYNOD OF BISHOPS, XI Ordinary General Assembly, The Eucharist: source and culmination of the life and mission of the Church, *Instrumentum laboris*, 2005, Preface, in [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20050707\\_instrlabor-xi-assembly\\_it.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20050707_instrlabor-xi-assembly_it.html).

<sup>7</sup> *Ivi*, sez. I, art. 1, n. 1142, in [https://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism\\_it/p2s1c2a1\\_it.htm](https://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism_it/p2s1c2a1_it.htm).

<sup>8</sup> SANCTUS THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 75, a. 5 ad 2: “The Eucharist is the perfect sacrament of the passion of the Lord, as it contains Christ himself who suffered”,

<sup>9</sup> Directory for Sunday celebrations in the absence of a presbyter, n. 25, p. 385, in <https://www.cultodivino.va/content/dam/cultodivino/documenti/Direttorio-per-le-celebrazioni-domenicali-in-sistenza-di-presbitero.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, 5 July 1998, n. 49, in [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/apost\\_letters/1998/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_05071998\\_dies-domini.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/apost_letters/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_05071998_dies-domini.html).

<sup>11</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 17 April 2003, nn. 40-41, in [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_20030417\\_eccle-de-euch.htm](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_eccle-de-euch.htm).

<sup>12</sup> CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, cit., n. 1346.

<sup>13</sup> CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS, Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 25 March 2004, n. 162, in

Christianity by returning to fill the Churches through a pastoral care of the sacramentality of the Word. Second this affair is an expression of the effort, not always harmonious, of a part of the Church to follow up on Pope Bergoglio's exhortation to create models in local communities that are different from the "traditional" ones, perhaps perceived as "self-referential" or "clericocentric", in compliance with the renewed spirit of synodality which lives in the dimension of dialogue and mutual listening which involves the base of the lay faithful. The theological foundation of synodality is indeed "the fundamental equality between all the baptized, even if in differentiation and complementarity (...)", but the insurmountable distinction is always represented by those activities which require the reception of the sacred Order, such as the celebration of the Mass, the fulcrum of the Catholic faith and cannot, in any way, be delegated to lay people or replaced with activities assigned to them, such as the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word. The fundamental precepts, as well as the two constitutional pillars of the rights of the faithful and hierarchical communion<sup>14</sup>, cannot be diluted in the name of the *sensus Ecclesiae*<sup>15</sup> and/or the most eclectic interpretations of the new instances of synodality, to please a community of faithful who cannot exist, as a Catholic Church, if not in continuous communion with its sacred pastor and in the celebration of the sacraments, first of all the Eucharist. "No Christian community is built if it is not rooted and hinged on the celebration of the Most Holy Eucharist"<sup>16</sup> which "gives shape to synodality", whose grace must be honored "with a celebratory style worthy of the gift and with authentic brotherhood"<sup>17</sup>. The Church is a *realitas complexa* (LG n. 8) but not rigid; its intimate nature, Benedict XVI reminds us, is expressed in a triple task: "proclamation of the Word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebration of the Sacraments (*leiturgia*), service of charity (*diakonia*). They are tasks that presuppose each other and cannot be separated from each other"<sup>18</sup>. The dynamic element of the charism operates in her, *semper reformanda*, by virtue of which she moves in history between the certainty of the paschal mystery and the eschatological "not yet" of final salvation<sup>19</sup>, in the continuous search for the balance between fidelity to past and any utopian projections about the future.

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[https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccdds\\_doc\\_20040423\\_redemptionis-sacramentum\\_it.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20040423_redemptionis-sacramentum_it.html).

<sup>14</sup> JAVIER HERVADA, *Diritto costituzionale canonico*, Giuffrè, Milano, 1989, pp. 85-268.

<sup>15</sup> Pope Bergoglio himself reminds us that *sensus Ecclesiae* is think according to the Church, according to its doctrine t: "The *sensus Ecclesiae* (...) saves us from the «absurd dichotomy of being Christians without the Church» (...)", FRANCIS, *Tra Cristo e la Chiesa nessuna dicotomia*, Meditazione mattutina, 30 gennaio 2014, in [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/cotidie/2014/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie\\_20140130\\_sensus-ecclesiae.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/cotidie/2014/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20140130_sensus-ecclesiae.html). See also the reflections of SALVATORE BERLINGÒ, *Sensus fidei, carismi e diritto nel Popolo di Dio*, in *Ius Ecclesiae*, 7, 1995, pp. 155-198, in particular pp. 192-193.

<sup>16</sup> Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, cit., n. 162.

<sup>17</sup> XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, First Session (4-29 October 2023), A Synodal Church in Mission, Introduction, n. 3, K, in <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2023/10/28/0751/01653.html>.

<sup>18</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est*, 25 December 2005, n. 25, in [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/it/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/it/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html).

<sup>19</sup> SANT'AGOSTINO, *De Trinitate*, 15, 28, 51( PL 42): "Tu da quaerendi vires, qui inveniri te fecisti, et magis magisque inveniendi te spem dedisti", in <https://www.augustinus.it/latino/trinita/index2.htm>.

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