

The place of the Eucharist in Catholic public schools

By Michael Dallaire

Is it theologically, pastorally, and liturgically correct to compel all students in Ontario Catholic public secondary schools that include students from various and no religious affiliation to attend the celebration of the Eucharist? The most immediate response is a definitive no. Yet, this is precisely what is happening in many Catholic high schools in Ontario today. In order to better understand this practice we need to appreciate the larger context and the three horizons of concerns from which to view this problem: the political, the educational, and the theological.

First, the horizon of politics. Catholic education in Ontario today is being carried out in a secular society. It is fully funded by the province, which drives the curricular concerns of schooling. In exchange for full funding Catholic schools have an open access policy in which they must accept non-Catholics. It varies from school to school, but there are non-Catholics, non-Christians, and atheists/agnostics who attend our schools. At present, attendance at Eucharist in many schools is not optional. In these schools all students must attend Mass just as all must take a religious education



course each year. This poses specific pastoral challenges, not the least of which is the proper celebration of the Eucharist.

A marker of institutional identity

From a political perspective, mandatory attendance at Mass makes sense. The Eucharist is central to the life of a Catholic Christian. Therefore, celebrating the Eucharist is a marker of our institutional identity. It is part of what sets Catholic education apart from purely secular schools. However, often the motivation for pursuing a politics of identity

formation is rooted in a fear of the 'other', in this case, a fear of secularism that prevails within our culture. Administrators, specifically vested with the responsibility to maintain the identity of the institution and to encourage a sense of belonging to the institutional, are generally unwilling to relinquish the practice of compulsory attendance at the Eucharist because of its political, identity shaping power. Politically, then, the Eucharist holds significant power within the school as a learning location and for the maintenance of Catholic schools against the pressures of

secular culture. Educators, however, must resist the manipulation of the Eucharist for political goals no matter how worthy the motivation. In some ways, compulsory student attendance at Eucharist moves too closely into the direction of politicization of the sacrament to support an agenda of Catholic education. This is not what the Eucharist is for.

Teaching the significance of religious symbols and rituals

Viewed from the horizon of education, a clearer justification can be made for the compulsory attendance of all students at Eucharist. Schooling by its socialization function requires compulsion. Students do not have the choice whether or not to go to school. Except for those whose parents engage in home schooling, students are legally obliged to be in school until the age of 16 in Ontario. In Ontario Catholic schools all students are required, compelled, to take religion each year and to participate respectfully in co-curricular, religious activities like morning prayer, retreats, social justice actions, and liturgies. Ontario Catholic schools, like all schools, operate under a fair degree of legal compulsion.

Moreover, Catholic schools in Ontario exist in order to inculcate the Gospel of Christ. That is its core and essential mission and purpose. Therefore, teaching students the significance of religious symbols and rituals is part and parcel of its mission. There can be real benefit

in this. Students today do need an appreciation of religion and need to be religiously literate. Not only does our multi-faith world require religious literacy just as much as science, math, and grammar, but our world needs citizens who are cognizant of their own religious identity. It is important to know who you are, inclusive of one's religion. There is tremendous value in teaching students the meaning of the Eucharist and how to be active and reflective participants. I often tell students that if they learn the ritual of the Eucharist and know how to behave and participate they

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can participate in the Mass anywhere in the world because the Eucharist is essentially the same throughout the Catholic world.

In light of the educational benefits one can see the value of compelling students to attend the celebration of the Eucharist. In particular, compulsory attendance can make sense for those who are taking a religion course as part of their course load. Certainly, if sacraments are part of the curriculum it makes sense that students be given the chance to take part in the Eucharist. The use of 'teaching' masses can have good

educational value. But, this does not necessarily validate compulsory attendance at Eucharist held for the entire school population.

So, we see that politically and educationally there can be real benefits, within limits, to compelling students to attend the Eucharist throughout their secondary school experience. It helps to form a cohesive school community, helps students develop a sense of belonging, helps to shape students' sense of identity, contributes to students' religious literacy, and equips them to be global Catholics. Within the political and educational dimensions then the compulsory attendance of students at Eucharist can be seen as valuable and commendable. However, viewed from the dimension of pastoral theology, such value crumbles.

From the perspective of pastoral theology

The celebration of the Eucharist is pivotal to the life of the Church for it is both the source and the summit of what constitutes an ecclesial community. Since Vatican II two differing theologies of the Eucharist have predominated within our school communities, as in much of the Church.

The first theology, which re-emerged due to Vatican II, gives priority to the communal understanding of the Eucharist.



The communal understanding the Eucharist includes four distinct yet interdependent components: the priest, the bread and wine, the Scriptures, and the believing community. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy teaches that Christ is present in the priest (who represents Christ), in the transformed bread and wine that become the body and blood of Christ, in the Word proclaimed, and in the assembled people of God (SC, 7). When these four components are present we recognize the full celebration of the Eucharist. From this Eucharistic celebration participants are then sent into the world to be Christ's witnesses through their conscious life of action. The highlight of such a sacramental theology is the active participation of Christians in the ongoing conversion of self and in their participation in the transformation of society. Such a celebration of the Eucharist presumes a significant degree of faith on the part of the community gathered.

The second sacramental theology is rooted in an understanding of Eucharist that predominated before Vatican II. It focuses less on the communal reality of the Eucharist and more on the redemptive, sacrificial significance of the Eucharist. In this understanding the primary concern is with the memorial of Christ's saving gift of his self-sacrifice and the redemption of the world that resulted from this propitiatory sacrifice. Here the emphasis is on the priest who, standing in persona Christi, leads the sacrifice of the Mass on behalf of the believing community gathered and on the transformation of the sacred elements. Scripture and the assembly hold a secondary role. There is minimal appreciation of the assembly's role in offering "the immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him" (SC, 48). The assembly's role is one of passive recipient. Like the first Eucharistic theology this view requires a believing community, but this theology highlights faith in the

propitiatory function of the Eucharist more than the communal dimension of the sacrament.

These different theologies of the Eucharist create and attest to different Christian anthropologies. The first sees Christians as continually saved and actively engaged in the world as salt, leaven, and light. The second sees Christians as redemption-seeking creatures over and against the world. These two differing theologies of the Eucharist circulate in contest within our church today as individuals within the church seek to influence liturgical practice in our post-Vatican II era. Regardless of which sacramental theology one prefers the common denominator to both is the presumption of the faith dimension of the assembly. Whether it is an understanding of Eucharist as propitiatory action or as the memorial action of a religious, world-embedded community, faith is required. The celebration of Eucharist requires and presupposes a faith community today as it has since the inauguration of the Eucharist by Jesus.

Given the fundamental requirement of faith, as a constitutive component of Eucharist, the absence of such faith by a substantial part of a school community today becomes a reason to question compulsory attendance at schools Masses. Moreover, not only the absence of faith on the

part of some, but the presence of some who hold non-Christian beliefs or even anti-Christian beliefs, provides further grounds for questioning the practice of compelling students to take part in the Eucharist in some of our Catholic schools. Indeed, with the open access provision that accompanied the full funding of Catholic schools in Ontario and the presence of non-Christians, non-Catholics, and non-believers in our schools, the practice of compulsory attendance at school-wide Eucharistic celebrations stands on weak theological foundations.

We need not confuse the question of the compulsory attendance at school liturgies with the legitimacy of requiring students to take religious education courses. Catholic schools by their institutional nature are mandated to educate: to bring students through a course of study consistent with the faith teachings of the institution, in this case, Catholicism. Religious education should be subjected to the same degree of compulsion as other subjects that go to make a well-rounded education. However, compelling students to take part in religious practice, in this case the Eucharist, exceeds the legitimate mandate of schooling. Compelling students to take part in religious celebrations that require faith for their true efficacy violates the best of educational practice and is tantamount to liturgical and pastoral malpractice. Most certainly, compulsory attendance at school Masses should not be considered a requirement of effective Catholic education or a marker of Catholicity.

However, arguing against compulsory attendance at school Eucharist for liturgical reasons does not mean that Eucharist should not be celebrated in Catholic schools. Students who find their theological home of meaning within the Roman Catholic tradition ought to be encouraged to attend Eucharist as a constitutive component of their formation in that faith tradition. Those who locate their faith lives in other traditions should be given permission not to attend such celebrations. Of course, they should be encouraged to attend and welcomed if they choose to come as interested observers who wish to understand the faith practices of their fellow students. However, they should not be compelled to attend religious functions for it would violate their religious freedom and be disrespectful of the proper function of religious services.

Moving towards optional attendance at school liturgies would require a very different approach than compelling attendance. It would require diverting the time, talent, and treasure of the school community towards the creation and celebration of vibrant, meaningful, and prayerful Eucharistic celebrations. Thus, schools would need to free up students and teachers to rehearse the music, readings, and dance that make up the participatory action of the community. Such celebrations would require meeting well beforehand with the homilist to prayerfully study the scripture and its application for the school community. It would require a discerning style of leadership that

calls forth the talents of the students and staff and encourages them to contribute to the liturgy. It would require the creative use of timetabling and the allocation of finances so that music, sound, technologies, and the environment for the celebration are appropriate and fitting to the celebration.

The marshalling of the time, talent and treasure towards the best celebration of the Eucharist, done prayerfully and intentionally, can result in Eucharistic celebrations that liturgically meet the spiritual needs of the young. Such work could eventually create an experience where the young may willingly choose to attend school Eucharist as part of their faith formation. Free of compulsion, the band of Christian believers that presently walk halls of today's publicly funded Catholic schools might then feel communally supported in their journey towards adult discipleship. Such support would bode well for the future of Catholic education and assist in the formation of disciples able to engage the world with a deep Eucharistic spirituality. An invitational approach rather than a coercive approach would ultimately yield fruit for the Church, which today is in need of believers who are personally committed to their faith journey within the Church.