

10-3-07 - In Holland, They're Inventing Their Own Mass – Copyrighted by the Dominicans

by Sandro Magister, Chiesa, IT

The experimentation is already underway. In place of the priest are men and women selected by the faithful. And all together pronounce the words of consecration, which are varied as desired. In the view of the Dutch Dominicans, this is what Vatican Council II wanted

ROMA, October 3, 2007 – In restoring full citizenship to the ancient rite of the Mass, with the motu proprio "Summorum Pontificum," Benedict XVI said that he wanted in part to react to the excess of "creativity" that in the new rite "frequently led to deformations of the liturgy which were hard to bear."

In view of what happens in some areas of the Church, this creativity affects not only the liturgy, but also the very foundations of Catholic doctrine.

In Nijmegen, Holland, in the church of the Augustinian friars, each Sunday the Mass is concelebrated by a Protestant and a Catholic, with one presiding over the liturgy of the Word and the sermon, and the other over the liturgy of the Eucharist, in alternation. The Catholic is almost always a layperson, and is often a woman. For the Eucharistic prayer, the texts of the missal are passed over in favor of texts composed by the former Jesuit Huub Oosterhuis. The bread and wine are shared by all.

No bishop has ever authorized this form of celebration. But Fr. Lambert van Gelder, one of the Augustinians who promote it, is sure that he is in the right: "In the Church there are different forms of participation, we are full-fledged members of the ecclesial community. I don't consider myself a schismatic at all."

Also in Holland, the Dominicans have gone even farther, with the consent of the provincials of the order. Two weeks before the motu proprio "Summorum Pontificum" went into effect, they distributed in all the 1,300 Catholic parishes a 9,500-word booklet entitled "Kerk en Ambt", "The Church and the Ministry," in which they propose to make into a general rule what is already practiced spontaneously in various places.

The proposal of the Dominican fathers is that, in the absence of a priest, a person chosen from the community should preside over the celebration of the Mass: "Whether they be men or women, homo or heterosexual, married or unmarried is irrelevant." The person selected and the community are exhorted to pronounce together the words of the institution of the Eucharist: "Pronouncing these words is not thought to be the sole prerogative of the priest. The words constitute a conscious declaration of faith by the whole community."

The booklet opens with the explicit approval of the superiors of the Dutch province of the Order of Preachers, and its first pages are dedicated to a description of what happens on Sundays in the churches of Holland.

Because of a shortage of priests, the Mass is not celebrated in all the churches. From 2002 to 2004, the overall number of Sunday Masses in Holland fell from 2,200 to 1,900. At the same time, there was a rise from 550 to 630 in the number of "services of Word and communion," meaning substitute liturgies, without a priest and therefore without sacramental celebration, in which communion is distributed using hosts that were consecrated earlier.

In some churches, the faithful clearly understand the distinction between the Mass and the substitute rite. But in others they don't, and the two ceremonies are thought to be equal in value, entirely interchangeable. Even more, the fact that it is a group of the faithful that selects the man or woman who leads the celebration of the substitute liturgy reinforces among the faithful the idea that their selection "from below" is more important than the sending of a priest from outside of the community, and "from above."

The same is true of the formulation of the prayers and the arrangement of the rite. It's preferred to give creativity free rein. The words of consecration are often replaced during the Mass by "expressions easier to understand and more in tune with modern faith experience." In the substitute rite, it often happens that non-consecrated hosts are added among the consecrated hosts, and all of them are distributed together for communion.

Within these practices, the Dutch Dominicans distinguish three widespread expectations:

– that men and women be selected "from below" to preside over the Eucharistic celebration;

– that, ideally, "this choice would be followed by a confirmation or blessing or ordination by Church authority";

– that the words of consecration "could be pronounced both by those who preside in the Eucharist and by the community from which they take their origin."

In the view of the Dutch Dominicans, these three expectations are well grounded in Vatican Council II.

The decisive action by the Council, in their judgment, was that of placing the chapter on the "people of God" before the one on the "hierarchical organisation built up from top downwards by the pope and the bishops" within the constitution on the Church.

This implies the replacement of a "pyramidal" Church with an "organic" Church, with the initiative belonging to the laity.

And this also implies a different vision of the Eucharist.

The idea that the Mass is a "sacrifice" – the Dutch Dominicans maintain – is also connected to a "vertical," hierarchical model in which only the priest may validly pronounce the words of consecration. A male and celibate priest, as prescribed by "an antiquated view of sexuality."

But the model of the Church as the "people of God" produces a more liberal and egalitarian vision of the Eucharist, as a simple "sharing of bread and wine by brothers and sisters, in which Jesus is in our midst," as "a table which is open also for people from different religious traditions."

The booklet from the Dutch Dominicans ends by exhorting the parishes to choose "from below" the persons who are to preside over the Eucharist. If, for disciplinary reasons, the bishop does not confirm such persons – because they are married, or because they are women – the parishes should continue along their way regardless: "They should know that in any case they are able to celebrate a real and genuine Eucharist whenever they come together in prayer and share the bread and wine."

The authors of the booklet are fathers Harrie Salemans, a pastor in Utrecht; Jan Nieuwenhuis, the former director of the ecumenical center of the Dominicans in Amsterdam; and André Lascaris and Ad Willems, former professor of theology at the university of Nijmegen.

In the bibliography that they cite, another more famous Dutch Dominican theologian stands out – Edward Schillebeeckx, 93, who during the 1980's came under the scrutiny of the congregation for the doctrine of the faith for ideas similar to the ones included in the booklet.

The Dutch bishops' conference is refraining from making an official reply. But it has already let it be known that the Dominicans' proposal appears to be "in conflict with the doctrine of the Catholic Church."

From Rome, the general curia of the Order of Preachers reacted feebly. In a press release on September 18 – which was not posted on the order's website – it described the booklet as a "surprise" and took its distance from the proposed "solution." But it said it shared the "concern" of its Dutch confreres on the shortage of priests: "It may be that they feel as if the Church authorities have not dealt adequately with this question, and as a result they are pushing for a more open dialogue. [...] We believe that this concern must be answered with theological reflection and a prudent pastoral approach between the entire Church and the Dominican order."

From Holland, the Dominicans have announced that the booklet will be reprinted soon, after the first 2,500 copies quickly ran out.

The complete text of the booklet, in an English translation:

http://ncronline.org/mainpage/specialdocuments/The_Church_and_the_Ministry.pdf