

Robert Taft
Ex Oriente Lux?
Some Reflections on Eucharistic Concelebration

The following notes on concelebration do not pretend to offer a complete study of the Eastern tradition, nor definitive solutions to the growing dissatisfaction with the restored Roman rite of Eucharistic concelebration. But they may help to clarify the *status quaestionis*, rectify misinterpretations of early Eucharistic discipline, and dispel misconceptions concerning the antiquity and normative value of Eastern usage.

It has long been a theological device to turn eastwards in search of supporting liturgical evidence for what one has already decided to do anyway. Something like this was at work in certain pre-Vatican II discussion on the possibility of restoring concelebration in the Roman rite. The underlying presupposition seems to be that Eastern practice will reflect a more ancient- indeed the ancient - tradition of the undivided Church.

1. Concelebration in the Christian East Today

The information on contemporary Eastern forms of Eucharistic concelebration given by McGowan and King is generally accurate, with a few exceptions that will be corrected here.

The *Armenians* practice Eucharistic concelebration only at Episcopal and presbyteral ordinations, a custom they may have borrowed from the Latins.

The *Maronites*, also influenced by the Latins, probably owe their practice of verbal co-consecration to scholastic theology of the (P.81) Eucharist. Before the seventeenth century, concelebration without co-consecration was in use.

In the *Coptic Orthodox* Church several presbyters participate in the common Eucharist vested, in the sanctuary. Only the main celebrant (who is not the presiding celebrant if a bishop is present) stands at the altar, but the prayers are shared among the several priests. Some prayers, but not necessarily the "consecratory" part of the anaphora, are the preserve of the main celebrant at the altar. *Catholic Copts*, like the Maronites, have adopted a type of verbal co-consecration. This could represent the revival of an older usage. In several ancient Alexandrian manuscripts, diaconal admonitions at the words of institution exhort the concelebrants to join with the main celebrant at this solemn moment of anaphora. Though not necessarily a proof of *verbal* co-consecration, this certainly implies "concelebration" even in the narrow modern sense of the term.

Among the *Syrian Orthodox* it is customary for several presbyters to join with the bishop in the celebration of the liturgy. Only the bishop is fully vested. The assisting presbyters wear just the stole over their clerical gown; a garment similar to the Byzantine *raeson*, but at the beginning of the anaphora one of them puts on the *phaino* (Greek *phainolion*, the principal outer vestment) and joins the bishop at the altar for the anaphora. However, the bishop shares the various prayers of the anaphora with the presbyters, he alone recites the words of institution and the epiclesis up to and including the blessing of the gifts, at which the point he retires to his throne while the presbyter in the *phaino* takes over at the altar to complete the epicletic prayer and share the rest of the anaphora with the other presbyters. At the end of the anaphora, the bishop again takes his

place at the altar, and the assisting priest retires to remove the *phaino*. It is necessary only for the bishop to communicate, but of, course the concelebrants may if properly disposed. Though this form of concelebration is not mentioned in most descriptions of the *West-Syrian* rite, on inquiring was assured that it is common usage. In addition, both Orthodox and Catholic Syrians practice a rite of "synchronized masses," each celebrant having his own bread and cup.

The *Ethiopians* have a similar rite of "synchronized masses," as well as a form of Eucharistic celebration in which several presbyters - ideally, thirteen - take active part with various functions and prayers (P.82) distributed among them, that is, not done simultaneously by all as in verbal co- consecration. Indeed this is the normal form of Eucharist among the Ethiopian Orthodox, and at least five presbyters, and preferably seven, are considered essential if the Eucharist is to be celebrated at all. These presbyters must all communicate at celebration.

In the traditional *East Syrian* Eucharist, the bishop surrounded by his presbyters presides over the liturgy of the word from the bema in the middle of the nave. When the time for the anaphora approaches, one of the presbyters is selected to read it. He alone "consecrates". In this tradition, all services and sacraments are "concelebrations" in which all the various orders of ministers participate according to their rank: singers singing, lectors reading, deacons proclaiming, presbyters sharing the prayers. But they do not all say the same prayers. Distribution is the principle.

Apparently, the early *Byzantine* tradition followed a similar rite in which only one celebrant recited the anaphora, but later we see, as in the West, the inexorable growth in the verbalization of Eucharistic concelebration, with the same prayers being said by all concelebrating ministers. In this as in other traditions one must distinguish Orthodox from Eastern - Catholic practice. Many Eastern - Catholic priests, under Western influence, say mass daily out of devotion, even when there is no pastoral need for them to officiate, so for them concelebration is much the same as for their post - Vatican II Latin confreres: a means of satisfying their private devotion, their desire to "say mass" everyday, while avoiding the dissolution of Eucharistic *koinonia* represented by that curious counter symbol of ecclesial communion, the so called "private mass".

Among the *Byzantine Orthodox*, concelebration is normally practiced only when a bishop is celebrating solemnly, or to solemnize a festive presbyteral liturgy. Thus in a monastery on an ordinary day, one priest would celebrate and the others assist *modo laico*, unvested, in the nave or in the sanctuary. On feasts a few concelebrating presbyters would join the principal celebrant. A bishop is usually joined by numerous concelebrating presbyters, and even by other bishops.

Byzantine Catholics and those Orthodox that follow the *Russian* usage in this matter practice verbal co-consecration. This was once thought to be the result of Western influence in the sixteenth (P.83) century, but recently scholars have challenged successfully this theory. Besides A. Jacob has shown that verbal concelebration was in use in Constantinople by at least the tenth century, and it is hardly possible to postulate the adoption of Latin usage there during that period of growing estrangement and ritual dispute between the Byzantine and Latin Churches.

Among the *Greek Orthodox*, however, there appear to be conflicting usages coexisting in peaceful competition. One priest whom I questioned assured me that all concelebrants should say all the priestly prayers, including the words of institution and

epiclesis; another informed me that only the main celebrant consecrates. The 1951 Athens *Hieratikon* contains a rubric for the beginning of the anaphora that "all the priests read the Eucharistic prayer", but the same edition gives the impression later in the text that only the main celebrant says the institution narrative and epiclesis. H. Brakmann, however, has shown that these rubrics refer to the main celebrant's role, and cannot be interpreted restrictively as excluding the recitation of the consecratory prayers by the concelebrating presbyters. Nevertheless, the 1962 *Apostolike Diakonia* edition of the *Hieratikon* makes it quite clear that only the first priest consecrates. Here we seem to have a case where verbal Concelebration is in use except for the consecration! But we must not immediately conclude that this practice is in direct continuity with ancient tradition. It may be the result of the teaching of Nicodemus the Hagiorite, who held that in order to preserve the unity of the offering only one priest should say the prayers.

It is worth noting that in the Byzantine, as in other traditions, Concelebration is not limited to the Eucharist. The same norm applies to the other services (p.84).

2. Eucharistic Celebration in the Ancient Church: Celebration or Concelebration?

In I Corinthians, our earliest witness to the Eucharist, St. Paul presents the ideal form of this service as one fraternal banquet which the whole community celebrates together (11,17-34; 10,16.17). I presume that one community leader presided over the celebration and said the prayer of table blessing, after the manner of Jewish repasts. Paul seems to imply this in I Corinthians 14,16.17. And his insistence on unity in I Corinthians 11 would seem to demand one blessing of the shared food.

To speak of Concelebration in this context would of course be tautological, implying a clergy-laity division that had not hardened so early. Paul does speak of a variety of roles and ministers at the common services (I Cor 12 and 14), and of the need for order in the community (I Cor 12,27-30) and in its assemblies (ICor 14,26-40). But one certainly does not get the impression of a community divided into celebrants and congregation (p.85). Ignatius of Antioch at the beginning of the second century is the classic witness:

Take care, then, to use one Eucharist, for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup of union in his blood, one altar just as there is one bishop together with the presbytery and the deacons, my fellow servants...(*Philadelphians* 4; 6,2).

....All of you to a man... come together in one faith and in Jesus Christ... to show obedience to the bishop and presbytery with undivided mind, breaking one bread... (*Ephesians* 20,2; 5,1-3).

.... Strive to do all things with harmony with God, with the bishop presiding in the place of God, the presbyters in the place of the Council of the apostles and the deacons... entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ ... Love one another at all times in Jesus Christ, let there be nothing among you that could divide you, but be united with the bishop and those presiding Just as the Lord did nothing without the Father, being one with Him..... so neither should you undertake anything without the bishop or presbyters. Do not try to make anything private appear reasonable to you, but at your meetings [let there be] one prayer, one supplication, one mind, one hope in love, in the blameless joy that is Jesus Christ, above whom there is nothing. Come together all of you as to one temple of God and to one altar, to one Jesus Christ.... (*Magn.* 6-7; *Smyr* 8).

Barnabas and the Clement of Rome reflect the same concern. But in this literature we see more than a continuation of the Pauline preoccupation with unity at Corinth. By the end of the first century, a more articulate ministerial structure has emerged to serve the unity, and is reflected in the order of services. The presiding minister or "high priest" is joined in the celebration by other ministers. They are distinguished from the "layman" - the term first appears at this time - by role and seating in the assembly. If such a system cannot yet be considered general, the Letter of Clement testifies to it at least for Rome and Corinth by around AD 96:

40,1... We should do with the order all that the Master has prescribed to be accomplished at set times. 2. Now he ordered that the offerings and public services be done not haphazardly or irregularly, but at fixed times and hours. 3. And he has himself determined by his supreme will where and by whom He desires this to be done.... 4. Thus those who make their offerings at the appointed times are accepted and blessed.... 5. For the High Priest are assigned the services (p.86) proper to him, and to the priests has been designated their proper place, and on the Levites [i.e. deacons] have been imposed their proper ministries. The layperson is bound by the regulations for the laity. 41,1. Let each of us, brothers, be pleasing to God in his own order... without infringing the prescribed rule of his service....

Here we see at least an adumbration of the system that emerges in documents of the third century: presbyters other than the assembly president cannot be set to have participated in the service simply "as laity". They were not just "in attendance" at the service, albeit with "reserved seats"; they also performed liturgical actions. But any attempt to interpret this participation as "concelebration" in the sense of consciously exercising in common some sort of sacramental "power" proper to their order, seems to go beyond the evidence.

Since the fourth century, Eastern evidence generally concurs that the full-blown Eucharist involved the bishop surrounded by his presbyters, who were not merely "in attendance" in the presbyterium but actively participated in the ritual in a manner reserved to their order. This is clear from the canonical literature such as the canon 1 of the Council of Ancyra (c.314) or the Second Council Letter of St. Basil (c. 379), which envisage the case of a presbyter under ecclesiastical sanction preserving his seat in the presbyterium while suspended from all ministerial functions, including the right to "offer" the Eucharist. Here a clear line is drawn between presbyters in attendance at the Eucharist and those who "offer". But one cannot press the theological significance of this for concelebration. A similar situation was envisaged for laity in the final stages of penance: they were *consistentes*, allowed to "attend" the whole liturgy without, however, participating in the "offering".

So it is not easy to know what theological meaning should be attached to such evidence without seeming to read history backwards. Where the evidence is clear, as in the Syrian traditions, it favors the conclusion that only the main celebrant "consecrated" the (p. 87) gifts. But by then sacrificial theology is in bloom, and we find texts which say that concelebrating ministers of at least presbyteral rank "offer", even "as priests" the common Eucharist. Now though we must be wary of reading our later theological presuppositions into texts that seem to affirm what we hope to find, we must also avoid giving a minimalist interpretation to texts just because they do not meet modern Roman

requirements for "true, sacramental" concelebration. The homilies of Theodore of Mopsuestia, for example, make it quite clear (1) that the concelebrants "offer" the Eucharist, (2) that this involves the exercise of a ministry proper to their order not shared with the laity, (3) that only the bishop says the Eucharistic prayer

Two conclusions seem obvious: (1) From the fourth century we see a growing consciousness that presbyters celebrating the Eucharist together with the bishop are doing something that the laity cannot do, something only they have the mandate to perform. (2) This cannot be interpreted without further evidence, to mean that they were "co-consecrating" verbally, that they recited in common the prayer of blessing of the gifts. Such a presumption would be anachronistic, based on the later identification in scholastic theology of the "essence" of the Eucharistic sacrifice with the "consecration" of the gifts. This theory is coherent and may even be true. But it is not primitive, and that is the point at issue here.

G. Dix thought this growing consciousness that "concelebrating" presbyters "co-offer" the sacrifice with the bishop reflects the extension to the presbyters of what had once been the preserve of bishops. When the Episcopal system of Church order described by Ignatius of Antioch first appears on the scene, it seems that only the bishop presided over the Eucharistic assembly, except when he would depute a presbyter to preside in his name over the assembly of some outlying community. But I would suggest that the origins of our "concelebration" are to be sought elsewhere, not in this expression of the *koinonia* of the local church, celebrated by the bishop together with the presbyters, deacons, deaconesses, widows, virgins and so on, but rather in the "Eucharistic hospitality" accorded visiting bishops as a sign of communion among sister churches. There are several clear historical instances of this in the case of visiting bishops or bishops in synod. On the local level the same privilege was allowed "chorbishops" (i.e., suffragan, country bishops) (p. 88) by their superior, the town bishop. It is precisely in the latter instance that we first see the term "concelebrants", and it is this that canon 13 of the Council of Neocaesarea (c.315) explicitly forbids to country presbyters. But as it became more and more common for presbyters to be assigned the Eucharistic presidency, perhaps a consciousness grew that even at the bishop's liturgy they too could "co-offer", just as visiting bishops were wont to do.

What is certain is that however it happened, this consciousness indeed grew, to the extent that a few centuries later the Eastern "*sylleitourgein*" had become, for the Latins at least, "co-consecrate", and we are on the threshold of "concelebration" identified as the verbal co-consecration of the same Eucharistic elements by more than one minister of at least presbyteral rank. In the West we find it in a seventh-century passage of *Ordo romanus* III. Our earliest Eastern evidence is a rubric from a tenth-century Byzantine diataxis or rubric book incorporated into Leo Tuscan's version of the Chrysostom Liturgy.

Interestingly enough, this latter text witnesses to another innovation previously unheard of: a Eucharistic concelebration *of presbyters alone*, without the presidency of the bishop. Just what ecclesiology such a service is meant to represent has been questioned by the late Russian Orthodox ecclesiologist N. Afanasev in his slender but valuable study, *The Lord's Table* .

3. Reflections

The above evidence reveals at least this much: that there is no one "Eastern" tradition to turn to for support, nor, as both Jungmann and Dix showed a generation ago, can one simply presume that "Eastern" equals "ancient". The presbyteral, co-consecratory concelebration practiced in most Eastern Catholic traditions has nothing to do with ancient usage, but is derived from more recent developments and is colored by later scholastic sacramental theory of individual priestly sacrifice and the "special grace" (plus stipend) accruing therefrom. And this is what was instituted for the Roman rite at Vatican II. What is ancient about Eastern Eucharistic practice is not its various modes of concelebration, some quite admirable others less so, but its (P. 89) preservation by and large, of the ancient ideal of Eucharistic unity: one community, one altar, one Eucharist. This is the crux of the matter as I see it today: the Eucharist as sacrament of the *koinonia*, that is the Church. This is the real issue and it is an ecclesiological one.

The Council Fathers, in restoring concelebration at Vatican II, were aware of this issue (OE15; PO 7). But they were more concerned with the secondary question of concelebration as a manifestation of the unity of the ministerial priesthood (SC 57). From that standpoint, the restored rite must be declared a marked success. Catholic priests have learned once more to pray together. No longer are religious communities of priests faced with the supreme irony of a community prayer life in which everything is done in common except the one thing Christ left them as the sacrament of their unity in him.

It was to such largely clerical concerns that much of the pre-Vatican II preparatory literature on concelebration was dedicated. Re-reading some of this material, I was struck by how totally foreign the concerns of these authors are from those of the present. Much of their discussion is focused on whether a presbyter who does not verbally co-consecrate can be said to "offer the sacrifice" by intending to "exercise his priestly power" in gesture and intention, through the voice of the main celebrant. Even Rahner's articles, among the most sane interventions in the whole pre-Vatican II debate are overly concerned with the celebrant and what he gets out of it.

I see the present crisis as a healthy sign that, having benefited immensely from the priestly unity in prayer fostered by the restored rite of concelebration, we are now ready for a broader perspective. Excessively narrow clerical concerns are now rejected as irrelevant, and the actual rite is more and more perceived as a celebration of division - no longer the Eucharistic division among priests caused by the private mass, but the division of the community into those "celebrating" and those who "attend". I do not think that concelebration necessarily manifests *division* rather than the *hierarchical structure* of the ecclesial community. But when one thinks of those top-heavy mob concelebration that have become common coin; of the confusion of roles created by having the laity join the concelebrant around the altar for the anaphora and even recite it with them; or worse, when one suddenly sees a hand shoot out from the pews, and (P.90) a priest attending mass with the faithful begins to mumble the words of institution - when one has been subjected to such aberrations, it is difficult not to share the growing malaise.

A 1980 commentary on "interritual concelebration" - ordained ministers concelebrating at a Eucharist celebrated in a rite other than their own - issued by the congregation for the Eastern Churches shows, I believe the official Catholic thinking on concelebration is beginning to move in this direction. Respect for the integrity of the tradition of the local worshipping community as the concrete expression of ecclesial

communion is the leitmotif of the document. The rite to be used is preferably that of the host church, contrary to previous legislation that always gave precedence to the rite of the celebrant. And the document shows a far better sense of the basics than is usual in discussions of clerical concelebration: namely that the eucharist is a *communio*, a celebration of unity, not a ritualization of division; that any liturgy is the service of a local church, not a private clerical devotion; that, consequently, its norms are determined by the broader ecclesial and pastoral demands of this *communio*, not by the devotional needs of the ministers, who are there to serve the church, not themselves.

As sacrifice, the Eucharist is effected by the priest in the consecration. Even if done privately, it is still said to be "public", offered, like offering of Christ on the cross, for the salvation of the whole world. The mass is the sign of this offering, and as such shares its impetratory and satisfactory value. Further, the priest offers acting *in persona Christi*, and every priestly offering involves a "separate act" of Christ the High Priest (Pius XII). Since this is true of five private masses, or of one verbal (P.91) co-consecration by five priests, but not true (Pius XII) of mass said by one priest with four others attending or only "ceremonially concelebrating", not "sacramentally", then the conclusion for Catholic priests formed in this theory is ineluctable: everybody should "co-consecrate". Helping to sustain this is the notion that somehow, "more sacrifice", "more glory", is thus offered to God, and more grace acquired for the co-consecrator and those for whom he offers. For someone who believes that this is what the Eucharist is all about, I see no way around the problem.

What history shows us is that the external shape of the Eucharistic celebration changed according to what people thought the Church and its service were all about. When the Church was a somewhat amorphous society, the eucharist had a less structured shape. As orders and structures emerge and harden, these quite naturally find expression in the assembly: elders and deacons have special places and ceremonial roles at the worship presided over by the bishop, and visiting ministers are invited to take the place befitting their rank. Those who today are distressed by the presence of numerous vested presbyters in the sanctuary will find little comfort in history!(P.92)

But somewhere along the line a turn in the road is taken, and the service begins to appear less the common celebration of all, each according to his or her rank and role, and more and more that which is done by the ministers for the rest. From high priest (bishop) presiding over a whole priestly people as the model, we have shifted to high priests/priests/ laity. I suspect that the breakup of effective Eucharistic unity through the fourth century decline in communion and division of the community into several non-communicating categories were at the origins of this process. The eucharist was no longer able to sustain an ideology of *koinonia* which the service in fact no longer expressed, so the ideology collapsed and the rite was forced to find ideological support elsewhere.

This occurred in both East and West. The West alone, with that inexorable logical consistency with which it drives everything into the ground, took the next step of concluding that the *laos* could be dispensed with, and private mass was off and running. But even before that, we see a growing consciousness that "concelebrating" ordained ministers" co-offer" the Eucharist in a way different from that in which the whole Church can be said to offer, a consciousness that eventually finds its liturgical expression in co-consecratory concelebration.

Let me stress that the above remarks are not to be construed as an attack on the theology of the Eucharist as sacrifice. My concern is liturgical: whose sacrifice of what, offered by whom, for what purpose and how expressed? Some years ago Aelred Tegels expressed were the answer to what should be the form of concelebration lies:

God is worshipped in the liturgy to the extent that the worshipping people are sanctified, and they are sanctified to the extent that "conscious active and full participation" is procured. Liturgy is essentially pastoral. The ideal form of celebration is that which will most effectively (P.93) associate this congregation, at this time and in this place, with Christ's own acts of worship.

Such a norm provides little justification for visiting priests who would simply use the worship of a local church as a convenient way of "saying their mass" with no concern for wider issues. This is not to exclude the legitimate demands of clerical devotion: priests are also people, and should be able to ritualize significant realities of their religious life. But this cannot be isolated from the ecclesial norms governing concelebration and, indeed any liturgy: "*Nisi utilitas fidelium...hoc impedia*F - "unless the good of the faithful stands in its way". Before this norm all discussion of how this or that priest gets more or less devotion, how many "acts of Christ" or "sacrifices" are offered, who does or does not "exercise his priesthood", whether one or more "masses are said", becomes totally secondary.

But even if one were to prescind from all ecclesiastical and pastoral questions and simply accept the fact that Roman Catholic priest must "exercise their priesthood", one can hardly consider the present Roman rite of Concelebration ideal from a liturgical point of view. According to the present discipline of the Roman Catholic Church, no presbyter can be said to "validly" concelebrate the eucharist unless he recites the prayer of consecration, regardless of what else he might do in gesture or symbol to show that he clearly intends to participate in - that is, concelebrate - the Eucharistic liturgy according to his presbyteral rank. Though one may reject the presuppositions of medieval Latin Eucharistic and sacramental theology that have led to such a conclusion, one can hardly question the right of Roman Church to determine the concrete praxis of her ministers in the discipline of concelebration. But to raise such particular disciplinary exigencies to the level of a universal dogmatic principle, and then apply it in judging the practice of other churches or other epochs, is an unjustifiable procedure. If we approach our early and Eastern Sources with such presuppositions, we are forced either to conclude that no "real" concelebration ever existed in ancient Christendom, or else to invent for the ancient period a new form of concelebration, never heard of then: "ceremonial" as opposed to "sacramental" concelebration, which is the only one held to be "real". (P.94) To maintain that "verbal" concelebration is the only "real" one is also to question much of Eastern tradition.

In fact this whole problematic is foreign to a sane liturgical mentality, in which the whole body of presbyters is the moral subject of the common ministry performed by them in *solidum*. To demand that they all recite certain words together manifests an ignorance of the hierarchical and symbolic nature of sacrament expressed in presence and gesture and witness, as well as in word. Concelebration even in the narrow clerical sense is the common act of a *collegium*, not the synchronization of the sum of the acts of several individuals. Hence, even for one with purely clerical concerns, the present Roman

rite of verbal co-consecration seems more a denial than a manifestation even of the collegial unity of the presbyterium.

And for one with broader pastoral concerns for the liturgical expression of the unity of the whole church -*koinonia* in the Eucharistic rite, presbyteral concelebration in some of the forms presently in use leaves much to be desired as a symbol of our unity, and not of what separates us.

Robert Taft, *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding*, Washington, D.C. 1984, pp.81-99.

Summary

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the anaphora approaches, one of the presbyters is selected to read it. He alone "consecrates". In this tradition, all services and sacraments are "concelebrations" in which all the various orders of ministers participate according to their rank: singers singing, lectors reading, deacons proclaiming, presbyters sharing the prayers.

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Taft's observation

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Robert Taft, "Ex Oriente Lux? Some Reflections on Eucharistic Concelebration",

The ancient ideal of Eucharistic unity: one community, one altar, one Eucharist.

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