

How Bono tops the bishops

Our Eucharistic celebration is hollow without a concern for the poor

Bruce Duncan

Many observers have been keenly disappointed with the October Synod of Bishops in Rome, particularly in missing the opportunity to issue a resounding call to tackle the great problems of world hunger and poverty. Many of the bishops did speak strongly on these issues, but the impact of their interventions was obscured, partly by those arguing for a return to 'traditional' devotional practices.

This must have been deeply galling to bishops from countries immersed in a desperate struggle against poverty and hunger. The gap in the religious consciousness between those struggling against poverty and others focusing on a return to piety could hardly have been more stark.

As the Australian theological expert at the Synod, Fr Frank Moloney, noted, the standard of many speeches revealed a 'very mediocre' level of theological understanding, particularly in Scriptural foundations and the history of Church practice and doctrine.

Moloney has been dean of the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America, but was recently elected provincial superior of the Salesians in Australia. He lamented that some bishops wanted "to canonize the fact of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist by use of the term 'trans-substantiation'".

It is astonishing that at such a high-level meeting some should be so unaware of theological developments about the term 'transubstantiation'. This term came into use during the 13th century as an explanation of how bread can be transformed into the body of Christ. Aquinas in his *Summa* has a brilliant logical exposition of how this can be, based on presuppositions from Aristotle's theory of matter and form. Only if one accepts such a theory does the doctrine make any sense.

Yet how many Catholics today would be prepared to die for such an abstruse Aristotelian theory? It was quite unknown to Christians of earlier centuries. And who today would want to insist that Aristotle's theories be accepted in the name of faith? In other words, we need a better approach than simply insisting on transubstantiation.

While falling short of the curious claim made by some elsewhere that Christ is 'physically' present in the Eucharist, some bishops pushed language to the limit in asserting the 'real Presence' in the Eucharist, and called for a return to medieval or post-Tridentine practices like Benediction, Eucharistic processions and Adoration.

I have no problem with praying before the Blessed Sacrament, and indeed do so every day. But the point is that the reserved Sacrament must always be understood in the context of the Mass, and as the Second Vatican Council insisted, needs to be seen within historical developments from the early Church. Hence the Council directed that tabernacles be set to the side of the Church.

In the early centuries of the Church, the Eucharist was celebrated in people's homes in the context of a meal commemorating the Last Supper. For centuries vestments were not used nor altars, because they were seen as pagan devices used in temples. The Eucharistic bread was kept not for adoration, but so it could be distributed to the sick or those not able to attend Mass.

According to ancient tradition, Christ was present in the assembly of believers particularly gathered in the commemoration of the Last Supper and listening to the Word of Scripture. Christ is present not only in the elements of the bread and wine, but in the sharing of the bread, which was meant to result in what we would today call solidarity with those in need, the widows and orphans, the sick, hungry and distressed. Indeed the Acts of the Apostles recounts how the early Christians spontaneously shared their goods in common.

This is what the Church needs to bring into balance once more: that Christ is present in the face of the poor, and that any Eucharistic devotion that neglects this is deficient. This is precisely the message implied in the Last Judgment scene from Matthew 25: God spurns and rejects piety that neglects the social needs of our neighbours. How surprised are the people in the parable, demanding to know "when did we see you hungry, sick, in prison"?

One can understand why some bishops at the Synod were anxious to encourage a return to older devotional practices since it has long been recognised that many Catholics have experienced a 'piety void' in recent decades. The problem is that many of these older devotions were developed to meet particular needs in cultures and times vastly different from ours, and in my view at least, cannot simply be resurrected without feeling unnatural and contrived.

Moreover, they flourished at times when the Church in many countries was denied a wider engagement with the social and political issues of their day. Hence these pious practices generally did not encourage the expanded cultural and social activity that the Vatican Council called for.

What we need are fresh and renewed forms of spiritual sustenance: such as reading Scripture (pre-eminently so); good, contemporary spiritual reading; prayer and meditation; small groups using empowering techniques like Cardinal Cardijn's YCW methods of 'see-judge-act'; adult education and discussion groups; improved music and the new media of communications. But all must embrace a strong commitment to social responsibility and concern. What is most appropriate for different people will vary of course, according to their circumstances.

The world is crying out for leadership from the Church on the great contemporary social issues of hunger and poverty, environment and peace. At a Synod on the Eucharist, what could be more obvious than Christ's call to share our bread with the hungry? Christ is not to be reified or excessively identified with the bread of the Eucharist. The whole setting of the Last Supper meal emphasises his presence in the sharing of the bread. Indeed, the ancient phrase, 'the body of Christ', referred not to the Eucharistic bread, but to the body of believers.

How ironic that it is pop singers like Bono and Bob Geldof elevated these issues of hunger and poverty into the mass popular consciousness. Where are our stirring Church leaders and intellectuals willing to invest themselves in promoting this message? Certainly Pope John Paul II was an outstanding advocate for peace and social justice, yet the message has not been taken up strongly enough by others.

The noted US Catholic social commentator, Fr John T. Pawlikowski, wrote after attending the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in early 2005: "I kept asking myself where are the religious leaders that are currently addressing the issues of global poverty, AIDS, ecology, etc. with the gusto and force of some of the political leaders who addressed Davos."

Yet the call of the United Nations to support the Millennium Development Goals to eradicate hunger and the grossest forms of poverty within 20 years is surely one that amplifies magnificently the core of the Christian message. It is deeply disturbing that every hour 1200 children die as a result of poverty, especially as eminent economists assure us that hunger can be eradicated if nations are prepared to put in the needed resources.

Fortunately, spurred by Caritas Australia and other aid and development agencies, schools and churches of all denominations have been pursuing the 'Make Poverty History' campaign, and this is beginning to have an effect on Australian Commonwealth policies.

Many of those who have been champions of Catholic 'orthodoxy' and touted most loudly their loyalty to the Pope and the Church have been conspicuously silent or unenthusiastic about the great social issues of our day. Instead they seem to want to 'circle the wagons' and encourage a return to the 'ghetto'-style of Catholic culture.

If Moloney, who has been nearly 20 years on the International Theological Commission and well known to Cardinal Ratzinger, is right, Pope Benedict will have been very disappointed with the standard of discussion in the Synod, and will produce a much better reflection. Some of the Synod propositions highlighted the social significance of the Eucharist, but Benedict is likely to link the Eucharist more closely with our obligations to feed the hungry and care for the afflicted.

As Pope Benedict wrote in his final message to the Synod on 23 October, the sufferings of the poor "cannot remain extraneous to the celebration of the Eucharistic Mystery which summons all of us to work for justice and transformation of the world in an active and conscious fashion". Indeed, he added that our care for those in need is "the criterion that will attest the authenticity of our Eucharistic celebrations". Amen to that.