

an abridged excerpt from

LOSS OF STATUS MAKES CLERGY CLING TO EUCHARIST

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I never cared much for the word priest, especially since there are no Christian priests in the Bible, *i.e.* no special caste so named, except for those of Judaism, Jesus as "high priest," and then the "priesthood of all believers." But it was the beginning of a church-related career that ended only in 1979. At that point, I voluntarily decided to resign the "active use of holy orders" - being under obedience to a bishop - because of a conflict of interest between my journalistic duties and pleasing the archbishop. ... The final parting was amicable and we remained friends. It had nothing to do with any loss of faith. Life had led me into a different kind of ministry and a much wider "parish."

Once that step was taken, however, the question most asked by my fellow clergy was how I could endure the loss of standing at the front of the church to preside over the "blessed sacrament" of the Holy Communion or Eucharist. That, they affirmed, was the one thing they'd miss most. I can honestly say that it was something I missed, if not least, then certainly far down the list.

Although it was a privilege in some ways, the theatrical flaunting of the clerical robes always seemed an attempt to appear holier than others, and not long ago the whole "show" was overly male and run virtually single-handedly. True, there's much more lay participation now than then and women, too, can today officiate in some churches. But Rome still bars women's ordination and seems about to forbid anyone female even approaching the handling of "holy things" as it seeks to bar altar girls from being servers.

In the last few years, the Anglican Church has increased its frequency of Holy Communion, becoming more like the Roman Catholic weekly, or even daily, Mass. You wonder why. My answer may not please but here goes anyway.

I think it has much to do with the diminishing status and role of the clergy in society and in the church itself. There is no longer the aura of saintliness and/or shamanic power that used to envelop and attend the "reverend father" on his way. Also, most of the clergy's tasks have been taken over by social workers, psychiatrists, and therapists of every school. There's very little "father" can do that's unique. So, he (or she) clings to the Eucharist like a drowning sailor to a mast. It necessitates very short sermons, too!

The problem with this is that it excludes the genuine seeker, the stranger, the outsider to the faith. The Eucharist or Mass is a "mystery" or family rite. It seems foreign to any casual onlooker hoping for some light. There's a reason that, in the early church, the celebration of the heart of the sacrament was preceded by the deacon's call: "Let the catechumens (the uninitiated) depart."

The real crux of the matter is that the church has taken the lines about the "Last Supper" in the Bible far too literally and mounted a heap of unwarranted dogma and verbiage on top. The earliest rite was extremely simple and was meant to symbolize the basic truth that we each live on the divine energies which God pours out to sustain us both spiritually and physically- a sharing of "one loaf and one cup" that illustrates how deeply one all humanity really is at its core. It wasn't about sacrificing anybody again!

But the whole Bible is taken far too literally. Take the miracles. We miss their entire relevance and thrust for our lives because we ignorantly assume they were meant as descriptions of actual, historic "events" back then instead of as parables or metaphors of transformation for today.

Their meaning? The (spirit of) God ... can make our deafness to the Spirit's voice whole again; it can cure our blindness to another's need, our own stupidity, selfishness, or lack of love.

The casting out of demons is not about Hollywood-type exorcisms but about this same reality being called upon to rescue us from anxieties, jealousies, hatreds, or bitterness in our lives. ...

This will mean a new kind of approach to old but, let's face it, problematic "miracles." But, I promise you this, the Bible will come alive in an energizing way.

Theologian and author Tom Harpur's books focus on spiritual growth.