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Maybe it's time to bring the church to the people

Pat Perriello | Mar. 18, 2014 NCR Today

In recent years, it seems there has been an effort to make it harder for the faithful to participate and receive the sacramental actions of the church. One example would be the denial of Communion to politicians with certain views as well as the denial of Communion to divorced and remarried Catholics. Another example would be the refusal to provide general absolution for parishioners even during the Christmas and Easter seasons.

I might add that even to contact a priest these days is not always an easy task. When I was growing up, if you called the rectory, the priest answered the phone and was always available for hospital visits or emergency sick calls. Today, you go through the parish office and a host of voice messages and extensions. Clearly, this represents another casualty of technological progress, yet I do believe priest availability is a concern.

Two issues have recently arisen that seem to confirm this trend. It appears that some episcopal churches have found creative ways of distributing ashes on Ash Wednesday. One way: going to subway stations in New York City [1] with ashes for those who want them. I'm sure if a Catholic priest tried a similar strategy, there would likely be a letter on the archbishop's desk promptly. Yet Pope Francis reminds us of our need to reach out to people and not sit in our churches waiting for them.

Also, Isabella R. Moyer wrote an interesting blog post for *NCR* [2] concerning eulogies in the Catholic church. Actually, the blog post is about the lack of eulogies in the Catholic church. Moyer speaks of an ongoing discomfort in the practice of eulogies. The funeral Mass is about the Eucharist and not the person who died. I'm sure there is liturgical logic for such a position, but once again, it fails to account for the people who are in the church that day and what their needs may be. Could there also be some distaste for allowing a layperson to have such an important role in the liturgical event?

I believe there is a pattern of regulations and decisions that are moving the people further and further away from the sacramental life of the church. There are, no doubt, erudite reasons for each of these circumstances, but it begs the question: Who is the liturgy for? Who is the church for? If the church is for the clergy, well, OK. But if the church exists for all the people, it needs to be able to meet people where they are and operate in ways that connect with the people. The church needs to connect with the poor, the suffering, the sad, the lonely -- in other words, all of us. We will never be able to do that effectively as long as we remain hamstrung with rules that somehow protect the sacraments that don't need protection but fail to provide the consolations of the church to the people for whom the church exists.

Let me add one final note. I didn't even get in to the question of a priest shortage. There are a growing number of parishes without priests, which have little or no access to the sacraments. There are fairly simple solutions to such a concern, but when will we begin to act on these solutions?

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[1] http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/busy-church-new-yorkers-ashes-ash-wednesday-article-1.1710819
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