

HELEN MARQUIS

One between two

In many dioceses, parishes are responding to the shortage of priests by allowing one priest to serve two parishes, and reducing the number of Masses. But at the Easter Triduum, problems arise which must be dealt with thoughtfully and sensitively

We live in challenging times in the Church today in England and Wales; there are no longer enough priests for every parish. Four years ago, we were told that we were going share our parish priest with a parish six miles away. Faced with the choice between one of the parishes having to close down or finding ways to share our resources to secure the future of both parishes, we set about working out ways to cope.

Both parish communities were in agreement about the importance of keeping the Sunday Mass of each community at the centre of everything we do. We knew that meant we would each have to reduce the number of Sunday Masses and that Mass times would have to change, and we knew that this would be painful for many people. Each Mass in a parish seems to develop its own atmosphere and distinctive style – each with a particular type of music, some attracting older people and some attracting young families – and all of us have had to accommodate to the changes entailed in combining some of these celebrations.

The loss was not restricted to Sunday Masses; both parishes knew that we faced losing some of our daily Masses. The neighbouring parish experienced the loss of their much-loved priest and they had to adjust to the idea of not having a resident priest in their parish. We had to adjust to sharing our parish priest; and, of course, our parish priest had to adjust to being with two different communities.

Although we all knew that a certain generosity of spirit and some sacrifices would be called for to face the changes, initial consultations were difficult and it took a while before parish life settled down and people began to get used to the reduced Masses and more challenging Mass times. Each parish saw a little less of its parish priest but we began to manage well enough as two neighbouring communities sharing one priest.

Our first big challenge came, however, at the Easter Triduum. We had to consider what

it was going to be like for our priest to serve both communities. In a desire to be fair to both parishes, our priest divided himself between the two and he found a supply priest to preside at alternative liturgies. This meant that we had the supply priest for Holy Thursday and for the Easter Vigil and we had our parish priest for Good Friday.

It is hard enough (under normal circumstances) to convince people that the Triduum is one single celebration of this Paschal Mystery; they are one complete action – with the hour of death the hour of triumph and the Eucharist at the Easter Vigil the climax of the Triduum. Sharing the liturgies between the two priests did not work; we found that it broke the sense of the single celebration.

Last year, our parish priest celebrated the whole of the Triduum in our sister parish and we had to decide how we would celebrate in ours. The church is not normally full for the Mass of the Lord's Supper so we travelled from

our church to the other church. Earlier in the day, we had stripped the altar, emptied the holy water stoups, and prepared the altar of repose. We took with us two ciboria filled with hosts to be consecrated for the Good Friday celebration. Following Communion, two of our extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist went to the altar to receive the ciboria from our priest. He transferred the Blessed Sacrament to the altar of repose in that church, we did

it in our church and there was a watch in both.

Our church is usually full for Good Friday and we knew we would not all fit into our sister parish's smaller church so we planned a lay-led liturgy in our own. The plain Cross was already in place on its stand in front of the altar before the liturgy began. We succeeded in creating an atmosphere of solemnity, and feedback from parishioners was very positive. People did not feel that the service fell short in any way; in fact, one person made the point that the absence of our priest had a powerful resonance which underlined the meaning of Good Friday.

A member of our parish was being received into the Church at the Vigil, a baptised

woman, who had been an active member of the parish with her family for some years. It seemed appropriate that she should be received in the church where she had been catechised, and among her fellow parishioners. Fortunately, the other parish wanted their Vigil to start late, so our priest decided he would be able to celebrate the Vigil in our parish as well, at an earlier time.

There was an air of excitement in the celebration; we knew we could not take our time – as we normally do. But we were determined to celebrate the Vigil fully with light, word, water and with the Eucharist. We used all the options in the rite. The Easter candle was prepared beforehand, and instead of all assembling outside for the new fire and processing into the church, we assembled in the church and experienced the drama of the fire blazing on the sanctuary as the priest processed in with the candle. Instead of having all the readings, we had only the obligatory ones. The instructions allow a period of silence instead of the responsorial psalms, but as we have a wonderful choir, we did take the time to sing them. We used the shorter blessing of water, followed by the reception into the Church of our parishioner.

Many of the older generation commented on how they appreciated the earlier time; they said that the climax of the celebration, the Eucharist, was greeted with exultation – whereas in previous years they were exhausted by the time we reached that point. An added bonus was that, as it was earlier than usual, there were more children present.

The reality is that there are fewer priests than there were in the past. Our communities have grown through trying to find the best way forward, through encouraging each other to be generous where we have needed to be, through making little sacrifices and through creative and positive thinking. It has invited greater collaboration between our priest and the laity and has offered the opportunity to share the responsibility of leadership in our communities.

■Helen Marquis became involved in liturgy and adult catechesis in the parish of SS Joseph and Teresa, Wells, after completing a BA in Theology for Ministry at the Missionary Institute, London.

TO DO

Remember that the Sunday Mass is at the centre of everything we do

Have a generosity of spirit and make little sacrifices when you need to

Invite greater collaboration between the clergy and the laity