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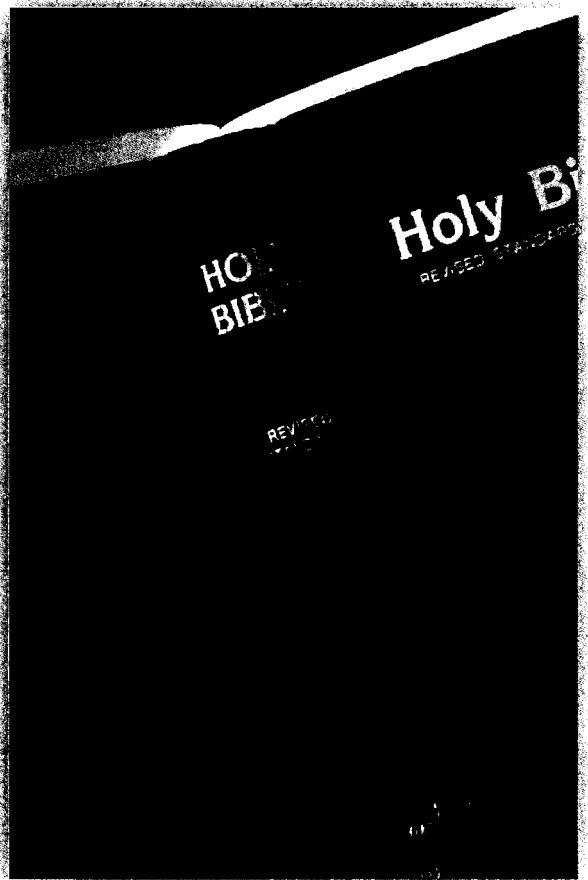
*The Bible
and
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WORD AND WORSHIP

Rodica Stoicoiu

Consecration or Communion Identifying Ourselves as a Eucharistic People

A glance at any community gathered for the Sunday Eucharist confirms the idea that parishes come in all shapes and sizes. Rich, poor, black, white, the constitution of the contemporary parish community is as varied as the physical, cultural, and economic landscapes in which the Church resides. And yet we are called by our shared baptism to be one people, one body in Christ. The symbol of our unity, the celebration of our oneness in the Lord, is the Eucharist. So it is legitimate to ask, given the diversity among communities today, how do we identify ourselves as a eucharistic people and how does this resonate in a multi-cultural society?

We know from scriptural accounts of the Last Supper that Jesus gave to his disciples a way to express how Christ had called them to live. This new way of being is captured by Paul when he writes, "[t]here is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ" (Gal 3:28). To be baptized into Christ is to receive a new identity which calls one to be human in a radical way, a way which follows Christ and the cross of Christ. Paul captures this eloquently: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal

2:19-20). In Christ our relationship with one another is not set by family ties, or by ties of race or class. Instead, we are called to rise from the waters of baptism as new creation, expressing our lives in Christ through our actions as Church, as a communion of persons. Indeed, the Church finds its deepest expression of this radical way of being when it gathers to celebrate the Eucharist. Augustine expresses the formative power of the Eucharist when he states, "[t]herefore if you yourselves are the body of Christ and his members, then your own mystery lies on the altar . . . Be what you see, and receive what you are" (Sermon 272). The Eucharist is the focus for the Church's self-identity. No less today than in Augustine's time, the contemporary community is called to live out this commitment to Christ and to one another. The manner in which the Eucharist is celebrated expresses both the self-understanding of the community and also exercises an essential formative power in its ecclesial identity.

Consecration

Developing a sound eucharistic theology at the popular level still faces many stumbling blocks, even though it is nearly forty years since Vatican II's reforms. Edward

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Kilmartin in his final text, *The Eucharist in the West*, argues that the influence of scholastic eucharistic theology remains strong and indeed constitutes "the average modern Catholic theology of eucharistic sacrifice." This theology, the central focus of which is the institution narrative, has played an influential role in determining ecclesial identity in many communities. If we compare this theology with The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL) we see that the latter contains a eucharistic theology which, though still centered on the institution narrative, complements that emphasis with increased focus on communion and on the assembly's oneness with the priest in the offering of the eucharistic sacrifice. The Constitution clearly calls for a revision of the liturgy to bring out the unified nature of the eucharistic celebration, balancing word, offering, consecration, and communion to form "one single act of worship" (Vatican II, 7, 56 and Fink, 439). However, the reality in many communities today belies this call. Indeed the current situation suggests there is still a narrow focus on one aspect of the eucharistic ritual.

This "average" understanding carries with it ramifications for how a community identifies itself as a eucharistic people. Indeed, when the focus is placed on consecration the importance of communion as an essential element of the eucharistic action is diminished (Kilmartin, 365). When the emphasis is upon the words of institution, then the actions of the priest may be seen as set apart from those of the assembly. Distancing the action of the eucharistic prayer from the action of the assembly has negative consequences for the community. These consequences are two-fold.

First, given the understanding of the role of the priest implied by emphasizing consecration, the level of ownership of or engagement in the eucharistic prayer by

the gathered assembly appears to be diminished. Second, in emphasizing the consecration the community might conceive of communion as an action of personal devotion rather than an action constitutive of the community's identity as the living body of Christ. This is certainly not necessarily the case, but the risk of misinterpretation is indeed present under these circumstances.

These broad strokes show the effect that a stress upon one aspect of the sacramental life of the Church may have upon the self-perception of the entire community. It can depreciate other aspects of the Eucharist as called for in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. The Constitution clearly calls for the full, conscious, and active participation of the whole community in liturgical celebrations. Undue focus upon consecration does not allow for the adequate expression of these essential eucharistic principals.

Communion

The blessing prayer for the waters of baptism calls to mind the history of our ongoing relationship with God. This relationship, entered into at baptism, calls us to a new way of being in which our very person is transformed by Christ. Through baptism we are called to express our most intimate nature as creation of God not as isolated individuals but as members of a community. Paul in Galatians describes this radical reorientation of our being from self to God and to one another as a relationship that finds its ultimate manifestation in the gathering of the community around the eucharistic table.

In this perspective communion not consecration is the high-point of the Eucharist. This is in accord with The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. The unified nature of the sacrament is maintained, for the culmination of the Eucharist in com-

munion requires a balanced celebration of the entirety of eucharistic worship. Thus communion draws the Church together as the body of Christ and reveals the nature of the Church both as an eschatological reality expectantly waiting the fulfillment of the kingdom, and as a body which bears responsibility in the world. A key point here is to see the Eucharist as an *activity*. That is what communion so strongly exemplifies. Whereas undue focus on consecration can lead to objectification of the Eucharist, communion is clearly communal action. The Greek Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas notes that emphasizing communion reveals the self-identity of the Church as relational and ourselves as persons-in-relation (Zizioulas, 1994).

Taking this one step further, emphasis upon communion creates the central point of the eucharistic identity of the Church. With relationships come responsibilities, and the responsibility of the Church is both to strengthen itself as a communion and also to reach outside itself in mission. In expressing our identity as one body in and through eucharistic communion we commit ourselves to manifest that the Church is a sign of God's love and it calls the world into this relationship.

Beginning with the new set of relationships forged through baptism, built by the gifts of the Spirit carried in the waters of new birth, the Church fully manifests itself in the Eucharist. Through eating and drinking the Body and Blood of Christ, the Church reveals itself as a communion.

Hospitality and Solidarity

"Who is my neighbor?" This question asked of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke leads us to examine what Brendan Byrne in *The Hospitality of God* calls "the extravagance of God's love." We are familiar with the story of the Good Samaritan and the compassion which moved the Samaritan to aid

the victim of violence, left lying on the side of the road. The demand of this story is driven home by the question which Jesus asks the young man at the end. "Which of the three proved neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" Here is the challenge which Jesus presents. Neighbor is not a label we apply to another, but rather, it is a quality which we take upon ourselves. In Jesus the "extravagance of God's love" is offered to all humanity and we as Church are called to offer that same love, that same compassion to all human beings.

As Church we witness to this extravagance, this hospitality in the Eucharist and our eucharistic community should reflect this fundamental nature of our being as Church. Yet for many communities this challenge remains unfulfilled. David Power observes this when he argues that "[w]e need today to challenge the rather homogeneous character of many of our assemblies and the tendency for assemblies to draw apart, or at least to exist apart, from each other" (Power, 105). This tendency is evident in many ways. The composition of some communities reflects simply the ethnic or cultural influences found within the parish boundary, while the make-up of others reflects a deliberate choice of like-minded individuals (and of course there are many permutations in between). In any case the question must be raised, how does the self-identity of these communities reflect the challenge of the Eucharist?

From our previous discussion it is evident that the Eucharist calls us into relationship with God and through God with one another. There is no expectation in this theology that these relationships will necessarily be comfortable ones nor does it offer the option of choosing with whom we will establish this relationship. To eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ is to manifest a new way of being, one which

establishes our relationships with one another even perhaps in the face of serious disagreement, bias, or prejudice. We are called to worship with an openness to the differences which surround us, differences which include those of culture, language, race, and social status. This is the challenge of the Eucharist. To answer the question "who is our neighbor?" we must demonstrate our willingness to en flesh this quality within our own eucharistic communities. This may take various forms. One approach is to reach out to other parishes whose structure or composition may reflect a different social, cultural, or economic composition. Such relationships would not only serve to further issues of social justice but would also establish shared community in the Eucharist (Power, 105).

This challenge may also be met in our communities through a heightened sensitivity to the rhythm and dynamics of our liturgical celebrations. The use of common body postures to establish a sense of the oneness of the community is one example of this sensibility. An increased awareness of the riches of diversity within a parish may lead to the challenge of "moving, thinking, feeling and having being" in a way different than that called for by our familiar social and cultural parameters (Power, 106).

Conclusion

This reflection began with the question: how do we identify ourselves as a eucharistic people and how does this resonate in a multi-cultural society? The answer, which is suggested here, identifies eucharistic people as people in relation with God and one another. This arose from an examination of communion versus consecration as the focal point of the eucharistic action and as the action which manifests the reality to which all the baptized are called. That is, to live as Christ called us to live and as Paul states "[t]here is no longer Jew

nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free . . . for all of you are one in Christ." These words challenge us today, given the multi-cultural context of our society. If we live as we are called to by our baptism, then our actions at this most central of sacramental events should be nothing less than the actualization of our baptismal promises.

The challenge which awaits us in our eucharistic celebration demands an authenticity of action reflective of our faith. This means re-examining the constitution of our communities, reaching outside our self imposed comfortable boundaries, and exposing ourselves to the danger of our beliefs. We must ask ourselves if our eucharistic gatherings reflect the "extravagance of God's love" as reflected in our willingness to reach out to others. If we are not willing to lay ourselves open in this manner then we must accept that our actions in the Eucharist are instead a hypocrisy to our belief and a betrayal of our baptism.

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