

LET US PRAY - REFLECTIONS ON THE EUCHARIST

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Article #10, Eucharist and Mission

This article focuses on the relationship of the eucharist and our church's mission.

Obviously, I've been making references to this all along in the articles, speaking of the implications of eucharist for service and outreach and justice making.

I'll sum that up broadly in four observations:

- Eucharist leads necessarily to mission.
- Eucharist has an evangelizing dimension; it's the sacrament for the whole human race.
- Eucharist has a cosmic character.
- Eucharist liberates.

Clearly, eucharist leads to mission. Vatican II, in its *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*, noted that "the mission of the church...is not only to bring men and women the message and grace of Christ but also to permeate and improve the whole range of the temporal. The laity, carrying out this mission, exercise their apostolate therefore in the world as well as in the church, in the temporal order as well as in the spiritual. These orders are distinct; they are nevertheless so closely linked that God's plan is, in Christ, to take the whole world up again and make of it a new creation. (No. 772)

As there is no church without eucharist, there is no eucharist without mission.

First of all, this means embracing the world: not as evil, but as good. I was raised in a spirituality that said the world was bad, and you needed to flee it by getting to a monastery. Eucharist is not intended to create a community closed off from the world, but to sustain one that fully embraces the world of all human experience, charged with grandeur and folly.

Nathan Mitchell speaks of the eucharist as "eating the world". He reminds us that newly initiated christians are not being welcomed into a separatist cult that views itself as a community of the pure, appointed by God to judge and

condemn the world. No, the newly baptized are led from the murky and unfamiliar waters of the font into a room ablaze with light, where the assembly offers them the culturally familiar and humanly comforting signs of table and meal.

"If death in the baptismal waters took the neophytes out of this world," he says, "eating in the eucharistic hall returned them to it – to its labor, its abundant produce, its ripeness, its weariness and need, its plenty. ... Neophytes have not been asked to

reject the world - but to reject *sin*, the glamour of *evil*, *Satan's* works and empty promises. (*Eucharist as Sacrament of Initiation*, p. 112)

Eucharist, then, leads not to the world's rejection, but to its recovery. It involves carrying out the mission of all of God's people for the transformation of the world.



To quote Mitchell again: eucharist “*renders visible, names, claims, and celebrates* the divine depth that sustains ordinary life – even when that life seems wearisome, vapid, meaningless, cheap, loveless, and altogether too painful to bear.” (*Eucharist as Sacrament of Initiation*, p. 116)

Eucharistic spirituality thus commits us to a mysticism of every day life...and this is another consideration of eucharist and mission. Our church's liturgy cannot be experienced “as a life-giving encounter with Mystery until we first touch ‘the experience of God hidden in the midst of our daily lives.’” (*Ibid.*, p. 117, quoting Michael Shelley).

Karl Rahner was convinced that every human experience – no matter how mundane, ordinary, or limiting – has the potential to bring us to the threshold of

Mystery. Now, arguably, most people today don't experience God in ways that are explicitly religious or spiritual. They experience God in moments of wonder, beauty, goodness, grace, peace, doubt, fear, limitation, loathing, loneliness, pain, resentment, anger.

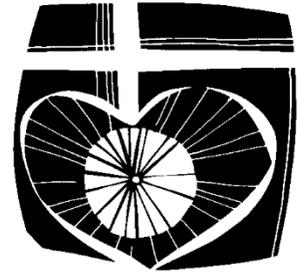
Eucharist leads us to discover the Holy One in such moments. It leads us to live out our faith in these ordinary, human experiences.

“Only when we recognize the rich network of connections between the Eucharist and our life in the world,” Nouwen says, “can the Eucharist be ‘worldly’ and our life ‘Eucharistic’.” (*With Burning Hearts*, p. 13)

Then, there's this aspect about mission: it involves receiving, as well as giving. Nouwen speaks to this: “We are sent to the sick, the dying, the handicapped, the prisoners, and the refugees to bring them the good news of the Lord's resurrection. But we will soon be burned out if we cannot receive the Spirit of the Lord from those to whom we are sent.” (*Ibid.*, 89)

Without this mutuality of giving and receiving, mission and ministry easily become manipulative or violent. Without it, the giver will soon become an oppressor and the receiver, a victim. Doing eucharist well fosters and deepens this capacity for mutuality.

To sum up: from the earliest days of the church, as John Paul says, the church has been committed to make the Eucharist the place where fraternity becomes practical solidarity, where the last are first..., where Christ himself – through the generous gifts from the rich to the very poor – may somehow prolong in time the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves. (*Dies Domini*, No. 71)



The celebration of this mystery of faith, the pope writes, increases, rather than lessens, *our sense of responsibility for the world today*. [I hope that Christians will]...feel more obligated than ever not to neglect their duties as citizens of the world..., to work for peace, to base relationships between peoples on the solid premises of justice and solidarity, to defend human life from conception to its natural end.

“And what should we say of the thousand of inconsistencies of a “globalized” world where the weakest, the most powerless, the poorest appear to have so little hope! ... The Lord wished to remain with us in the Eucharist, making his presence in meal and sacrifice the promise of a humanity renewed by his love.” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, No. 20)

Yes, eucharist leads necessarily to mission.

The second observation is a twist on this: eucharist has an evangelizing dimension, and becomes a sacrament for humanity.

In his Letter on the Lord’s Day, John Paul reminded us that “the Eucharistic celebration does not stop at the church door. Like the first witnesses of the Resurrection, Christians who gather each Sunday to experience and proclaim the presence of the Risen Lord are called to *evangelize and bear witness* in their lives.” (*Dies Domini*, No. 45)

We, the People of the New Covenant, become ‘a sacrament’ for humanity, John Paul says, “a sign and instrument of the salvation achieved by Christ, the light of the world and salt of the earth, for the redemption of all.” (No. 22) From our eucharistic celebration, we draw the energy we need to carry out our mission.

Fr. Don Senior, former president of CTU in Chicago, gave a talk fifteen years ago at Rome’s Lay Centre about mission. The recovery of the depth and beauty of our mission, he suggested, is implied in the New Testament, especially in the life of Christ. ‘Mission’ in the biblical sense, means nothing less than the salvation and conciliation of the human family.

“It’s spirit is not imperialistic or domineering,” he said. “Even as the gospel is proclaimed with confidence and with gratitude for its proven beauty, evangelization is done in a spirit of respect for others and their sacred traditions and the integrity of their cultures.” (*NCR*, 4/24/04) Nathan Mitchell’s words are that we are servants, not czars, of this transformation.

Senior characterized Jesus’ sense of mission as twofold: a reaching out, and a drawing in. Christ’s outreach shattered religious and cultural boundaries. Jesus was, in the

words of Matthew 11:18 “a lover of tax collectors and those outside the law.” It was, then, natural for Paul and other early church leaders to extend this saving mission to non-Jews.

But having reached out, Jesus drew people into a loving community, both a sign and an anticipation of communion with God. That’s what Senior calls the ‘inner meaning’ of all those meals that punctuate the New Testament.

And the very good news is: Everyone is welcome to dine with Jesus. Eucharistic dining leads us to invite all to the table. We, the people of the table, become a sign, an instrument of such inclusion...a sacrament for the whole human family.



Yes, there is an evangelizing impact of eucharist for mission.

A third dimension of eucharist and mission is this: eucharist has a cosmic character; that is, it touches all creation. The Orthodox church has a very strong sense of this; we could learn from them. As celebrants of eucharist, we become co-creators of a transformed cosmic world, a world whose earth we respect profoundly!

Eucharist is a small sign proclaiming that the *entire* world belongs to God – that the presence of grace is limitless, that the world is constantly and ceaselessly possessed by God in its innermost elements. Doing eucharist leads us to that vision.

Teilhard de Chardin had such a vision: a vision of all history, of all the universe being transfigured in the Spirit of the risen Christ. Rahner wrote theologically about this vision. Poets like Emily Dickinson and Richard Crashaw and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and poetic writers like Annie Dillard have described this transformation wherein earth’s ordinary elements are recognized as bearers of God’s transcendence.

Mitchell maintains that recovering this vision “means reclaiming the ability to see the world as precisely the place which is ripening toward a final destiny in the presence of God. ... The transformation of the bread and wine becomes the embodied symbol of that still greater transfiguration that waits the whole creation.” (*Eucharist as Sacrament*, p. 123)

He says that in the assembly’s eucharistic prayer, “every created being and every historical event ... is returned to its Source as praise and thanksgiving.” And “all this comes to an ecstatic climax in the crashing chorus that concludes the opening portion of the eucharistic prayer: Holy! Holy! Holy!

In less in less poetic, but equally forceful words, John Paul II speaks of this mystery: “...Even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always celebrated *on the altar of the world*. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation. ... It gives back to the Creator all creation redeemed.” (*Eucharistic de Ecclesia*, No. 8)

Pope Francis' writings, addresses, homilies, and papal audiences regarding Eucharist disclose his Jesuit style of discernment, prayer, and belief leading to mission. So much so that what emerges is Francis' eighth sacrament: creation.

Eucharist has a cosmic dimension.

My fourth, and final observation is that eucharist liberates. Tissa Balasuriya is a Sri Lankan theologian and expert in interreligious dialogue, who has tried to understand the gospel from the perspective of his Asian culture and world. Interestingly, he was excommunicated in 1997, only to have the excommunication rescinded by the Vatican a year later, under enormous pressure from the Asian church and others.

In his challenging book, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation*, Fr. Balasuriya, makes this affirmation: because eucharist is at the center of christian life, it must affirm and promote the biblical imperative of human liberation.

He laments the frequency with which the eucharist has been used in cooperation with, and support of, colonizing powers (for example, in Asia and certainly in Latin America). The question, he says, must inevitably be asked: how is it possible to celebrate eucharist if it is not molding a faith that liberates from all enslavements?



In this regard, the French pastor and liturgist, Joseph Gelineau, has given us a helpful thesis: "My thesis is that the celebration of the risen Christ by the assembly of believers is one of the most effective political actions that [people] can perform in this world – if it is true that this celebration, by contesting any power system which oppresses [the human family], proclaims, stirs up and inaugurates a new order in the created world." ("Celebrating the Paschal Mystery," *Politics and Liturgy*, Concilium, p. 107)

Walter Burghardt wonders what Gelineau means by "political action" in this thesis. He suggests that "political action" does not mean introducing political themes into the liturgy, which only results in highly politicized celebrations used for specific political ends. That, of course, is the manipulation of liturgy.

Rather, Burghardt says, Gelineau's statement means this: the temporal order can be changed by conversion, and for Catholics the primary source of conversion is the sacrifice of the Mass, which extends through time and space the sacrifice of the Cross through which the world is transfigured.

"The Mass should be the liberating adventure of the whole Church," he writes, "the sacrament that frees men and women from their inherited damnable concentration on themselves, loosens us from our ice-cold isolation, fashions us into brothers and sisters agonizing not only for a Church of charity, but for a world of justice." (*Liturgy and Social Justice*, pp. 44-45)



Eucharistic signs and symbols don't change social, political, and economic structures, Burghardt argues, but they should change our minds and hearts, grace us to address our oppressors, and inspire us to work with others for the coming of a kingdom characterized by justice and love.

The problem, he concludes, is not whether there's a link between liturgy and liberation. "The problem is that we do not allow liturgy to liberate – even to liberate us." (*Ibid*, p. 45)

You see how doing eucharist commits us to renew the face of the earth.

Eucharistic dining leads necessarily to mission. It has an evangelizing aspect, becoming a sacrament for the redemption of everyone. This dining has a cosmic character, as well, permeating all creation. And it truly liberates us to bring about God's reign of justice and love in a world aching for justice and love.

Pope Francis' conviction about eucharistic dining and mission is found in his attentiveness to the poor, his work for unity and peace, and his message that God is always calling us to an encounter with the risen Christ for the transform-ation of the world in love. He calls us to missionary discipleship, rooted in the baptismal awareness of ourselves as God's People, exercised in a 'synodal' church: one that values accompaniment and dialogue, one that discerns communally God's will in service of one another and especially of the least in our midst.

David Phillipart describes this in poetic imagery: "We become Christ's body, bread broken for a world that is obese with materialism and still dying of malnutrition. We become a leaven in the world's bread, an agent of change that helps the reign of God rise. We become Christ's blood, wine poured out in sacrifice and celebration, poured out for the sake of a world drowning in division and still dying of thirst, a thirst for union and communion. We become the brewer's yeast, the zest that unlocks the extraordinary in the ordinary, the tingle that makes sober people giddy with joy, the sweet smell and taste of the vintage." (*Saving Signs, Wondrous Deeds*, page unknown).

You and I, my friends , are chosen for such dining, for such mission!

May we live that call with fidelity, with passion, with non-violence, and with joy.



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