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The Eucharist, Womb of the Church

The Ecclesiology of Communion
at the Heart of the Congress

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1. THE ROOTS OF THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF COMMUNION

The theme of Eucharistic ecclesiology, or the ecclesiology of communion, has been recovered only in recent decades by Western theology. In speaking of the Eucharist, emphasis is often laid on the words of transubstantiation, on the “real presence” of Christ and on the sacrificial nature of the Mass. But if we open the sacred Scriptures, or consult the Church Fathers and the great scholastic theologians, we find a much broader vision. Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist, as well as the sacrificial nature of the Mass, naturally are a part of his vision, but they are set in the wider context of the *Ecclesia* which gathers to celebrate the Lord’s supper.

The biblical basis of the ecclesiology of communion is found in Saint Paul’s admonition to the Corinthians:

« *The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ (κοινωνια του αιματος του Κριστου)? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ. (κοινωνια του σωματος του Κριστου)? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread* ». (1Cor 10:16-17)

Eucharistic communion is not seen here as personal union with Jesus Christ in an individualistic sense, but in the sense of communion in the Church. Partaking of the Lord’s Eucharistic body is the basis of our participation in Christ’s ecclesial body.¹

This Eucharistic ecclesiology was developed in both the Greek and the Latin Fathers – here here we need but recall the names of Chrysostom and Augustine. Citations from their writings fill the pages of theology texts and magisterial documents.²

Patristic reflection led to the doctrine of the three bodies of Christ: his temporal or historical body; his Eucharistic body, which the Fathers called his “mystical body” (from the Greek μυστήριον; Latin, *sacramentum*); and finally his ecclesial body.

In the eleventh century the controversies with Berengar of Tours led to a significant shift in terminology. Berengar’s teaching on the Lord’s Supper, judged spiritualistic, made the expression “mystical body of Christ” as a designation for the Eucharist suspect, as hinting at a purely spiritualist interpretation of the Lord’s Eucharistic presence. To avoid

1 Cf. H. LeGRAND, *L’inseparabilité de la communion eucharistique et de la communion ecclésiale. Un axiome chrétien et ses différences d’interprétation*, in JEAN-MARIE VAN CANGH (sous la direction di), *L’ecclésiologie eucharistique*, Paris, 2009, pp. 35-38.

2 Cf. J.-M.R. TILLARD, *Carne della Chiesa, carne di Cristo. Alle sorgenti dell’ecclésiologia della Comunione*, Magnano (BI) Quiqajon, 2006.

this, the Eucharist began to be called the “true body of Christ”. The denomination of the “mystical body” of Christ could then be freely attributed to the Church, which was no longer seen as a “mystical” body in the sense of being “mysterical” (i.e., sacramental), but rather spiritual, transcendent and “mysterious”.³

The rich legacy of the Fathers was not totally lost in the second millennium, since the Eucharistic dimension of the Church remained clearly evident in great theologians like Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure. For example: Thomas Aquinas holds that the *res*, the ultimate reality and meaning of the Eucharist, is not the real presence of Jesus Christ or the union of souls with Jesus Christ. This is only the intermediate reality (*res et sacramentum*), while the true *res sacramenti*, its ultimate meaning and *raison d’être*, is the unity of the Church.⁴ Similarly, at Lateran IV and later at Trent⁵, the Augustinian definition of the Eucharist as “*sacramentum unitatis*” continues to appear.

In the modern period, only with Henri de Lubac’s *Méditation sur l’Eglise* do we find once more that “*the Church makes the Eucharist*” and “*the Eucharist makes the Church*”. It would be the same great French scholar who would also set forth the rich development of patristic thought on the Church in his book *Corpus Mysticum*.⁶

All this, together with the work of the liturgical, biblical and patristic renewal movements of the last century, prepared the fertile soil from which – in the context of the return to the sources and Tradition sanctioned by Vatican II – a Eucharistic ecclesiology would once more flourish.

2. THE TEACHING OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

In the documents of Vatican II⁷ the notion of the Church as a communion grounded in the Eucharist was developed primarily in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*. A quick glance at the conciliar document reveals from the very beginning important statements like that contained in number 3: “*In the sacrament of the Eucharistic bread, the unity of believers, who form one body in Christ*”, which makes reference to the

3 For the entire question, the study of H. DE LUBAC, *Corpus mysticum. L’Eucharistia e la Chiesa nel Medioevo*, Milano, 1982, remains fundamental.

4 ST III, q. 73, a. 6.

5 For Lateran IV, see Denzinger 1635; for Trent, Denzinger 1635.

6 H. DE LUBAC, *Méditation sur L’Eglise*; id., *Corpus Mysticum*, op cit.

7 W. KASPER, *Ecclésiologie eucharistique: de Vatican II à l’exhortation Sacramentum Caritatis*, in *L’Eucharistie don de Dieu pour la vie du monde. Actes du Symposium international de théologie. Congrès eucharistique, Québec, Canada, 11-13 juin 2008*; CECC, Ottawa, 2009, pp. 194-215.

Pauline text of 1Cor 10:17. The same statement reappears in number 7, from which the theme of the Dublin Congress (*“The Eucharist: Communion with Christ and with One Another”*) is taken: *“Really sharing in the body of the Lord in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with him, and with one another. ‘Because the bread is one, we, though many, are one body, all of us who partake of the one bread’ (1Cor 10:17). In this way, all of us are made members of his body (see 1Cor 12:27), ‘individually members one of another’ (Rom 12:5).”*.

The same concept is expressed differently in number 11, where it is stated that the Eucharist not only signifies the Church’s unity but also effects it: *“Strengthened by the body of Christ in the Eucharist, the faithful manifest in a concrete way that unity of the people of God which this most holy sacrament aptly signifies and admirably realizes”*.

But the most important statement regarding our theme is found in number 26, in the section which reshaped the understanding of the episcopal office. After making it clear that a Eucharistic ecclesiology leads to new theological understanding of the particular Church⁸, the document goes on to say that *“in any community of the altar, under the sacred ministry of the Bishops [cf. Ignatius, Ad Smyrn. 8,1], a manifest symbol is to be seen of that charity and ‘unity of the mystical body without which there can be no salvation’ [Thomas, STh III, q. 73, a. 3]. In these communities, though they may often be small and poor, or dispersed, Christ is present, through whose power and influence the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church is constituted [Augustine, Contra Faustinum, 12, 20: PL 42, 265]. For “the sharing in the body and blood of Christ has no other effect than to accomplish our transformation into that which we receive” [Leo the Great, Sermo 63, 7: PL 54, 357C].*

Despite the fact that a Eucharistic ecclesiology is present in numerous passages of the conciliar texts, Vatican II did not develop the Eucharistic ecclesiology of communion in any systematic way; indeed, it remained relatively isolated amid a profusion of other images and conceptions: the Church as People of God, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, a sheepfold, God’s field, the heavenly Jerusalem....⁹

3. AFTER THE COUNCIL

Immediately after the Council the Magisterium had to deal with issues that were perhaps more urgent than those of Eucharistic ecclesiology. There was above all, for example, the

8 *“This Church of Christ is really present in all legitimately organized local groups of the faithful which, united with their Pastors, are also called Churches in the New Testament”*.

9 Cf. LG 6

need to defend Christ's real presence in the Eucharist. Paul VI did this in the Encyclical *Mysterium Fidei* (1965) and with his *Credo of the People of God* (1968).

A decisive step forward in the promotion of the ecclesiology of communion, and with it a Eucharistic ecclesiology, was the 1985 Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which made the Church as a Communion a central theme of its labours. This turning point was nicely synthesized by the principal declaration of the Synod: "*The ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents ... What does the complex word 'communion' really mean? Fundamentally, it is a matter of communion with God through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit. This communion is had in the Word of God and in the sacraments. Baptism is the door and the foundation of communion in the Church. The Eucharist is the source and the culmination of the whole Christian life (cf. LG 11). The communion of the Eucharistic Body of Christ signifies and produces, that is, builds up, the intimate communion of all the faithful in the Body of Christ which is the Church*".¹⁰

It is also true that in this same text Eucharistic ecclesiology appears adapted and directed to the traditional baptismal ecclesiology, since, according to Saint Paul, we become members of the body of Christ not by the Eucharist but by Baptism (1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:27ff). The decision to make Baptism its starting-point (since Baptism, which while taking place in a particular church nonetheless incorporates one into the universal Church) highlights an approach centred on the universal Church, yet this is in turn balanced by Eucharistic ecclesiology on the local level. The question is also presented in similar terms by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which, while listing all the elements of Eucharistic ecclesiology (cf. Nos. 1396, 1398, 790 and 1118) does not set them in the foreground but situates them alongside other elements¹¹.

A further step towards the positive reception of Eucharistic ecclesiology was taken by Blessed John Paul II who in his Address to the Roman Curia for Christmas 1990 stated that "*Koinonia is a dimension which defines the very constitution of the Church and accompanies her every expression: from the act of faith to the witness of its practice, from the passing on of doctrine to the articulation of Church structures. Therefore the teachings of the Second Vatican Council rightly insist on it and make it the inspirational ideal or the main supporting beam of its documents. We are speaking of the theological and trinitarian communion of each of the faithful with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, a communion poured out effusively upon the communion of believers, gathering them as one*

10 *Relatio Finalis*, II C 1.

11 Cf. W. KASPER, op. cit., p. 206.

people ... with essential visible and social dimensions. The Church thus appears as the universal communion of charity, rooted in faith, the sacraments and the hierarchical order, in which pastors and faithful nourish one another personally and in communion from the springs of grace, obeying the Lord's Spirit, which is the Spirit of truth and love".¹²

Once again it was Blessed John Paul II who provided for the systematic reception of the Eucharistic ecclesiology of communion in his 2003 Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, whose programme is already completely contained in its opening words: "The Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates the heart of the mystery of the Church".¹³ This statement is bolstered by an appeal to a whole series of texts which, beginning with the Fathers of the Church, leads to the statement of De Lubac that "If the Eucharist builds up the Church and the Church celebrates the Eucharist, it follows that there is a very close connection between the two."

The process of refocusing on an ecclesiology of communion, in which "a causal influence of the Eucharist is present at the Church's very origins"¹⁴, is no mere abstract exercise, but one fraught with pastoral, ecclesiological and ecumenical consequences. It would fall to Benedict XVI to discuss these in the third part of his 2007 Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, whose title already points both to the ecclesial dimension of the Eucharist and the Eucharistic dimension of the Church.

In his homilies and catecheses, Benedict XVI has often returned to this point. Here I would simply quote an extract of his homily for the *Statio Orbis* in Québec: "It is by receiving the Body of Christ that we receive the strength "of unity with God and with one another". We must never forget that the Church is built around Christ and that, as Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Albert the Great have all said in following Saint Paul (1 Cor 10:17), the Eucharist is the sacrament of the Church's unity because we all form one single body of which the Lord is the head. We must go back again and again to the Last Supper of Holy Thursday, where we were given a pledge of the mystery of our redemption on the Cross. The Last Supper is the locus of the nascent Church, the womb containing the Church of every age".¹⁵

12 AAS 83 (1991), 742.

13 *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 1.

14 *Ibid.*, 21.

15 *L'Osservatore Romano*, 23 June 2008.

The Eucharistic ecclesiology of communion is also a significant theme in recent theological reflection, which sees it as an indispensable aid in dialogue with the Churches of the Orthodox world.

4. PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES

A renewed understanding of the relationship between the Church and the Eucharist naturally brings in its wake many opportunities as well as some fundamental theological problems which presumably can be discussed in the theological symposium which usually precedes every Eucharistic Congress. But reflection and study can also profitably take place in the various particular Churches under the impulse of the National Delegates or on the occasion of national meetings or congresses.

4.1. The relationship between Baptism and the Eucharist

One fundamental theological issue remains that of the relationship between Baptism and the Eucharist for the Church's essential structure or constitution. I have already alluded to this problem and cannot dwell on it here¹⁶.

In a word, it involves the relationship between the particular Church and the universal Church, and consequently between a "Baptismal" ecclesiology characterized by universality and a Eucharistic ecclesiology which is grounded in the particular Church. It is evident that a Eucharistic ecclesiology more clearly values the dignity of the particular Church. But a Eucharistic ecclesiology, properly understood, also helps us to realize that it is always one and the same Lord who is present in the one Eucharist in all the different particular Churches, in such a way that the Eucharistic celebration of one particular Church includes communion with all the other Churches and with the universal Church. When this does not happen, the ecclesial "countenance" of the particular Church itself is ultimately obscured.

4.2. The relationship between Word and Eucharist

A second issue concerns the relationship between the Word and the sacrament of the Eucharist. Its implications directly affect our dialogue with the Reformed Churches and the Lutheran understanding of the Church as *creatura Verbi*.

¹⁶ For the issues, W. KASPER, op. cit., p. 209.

The profound unity between Word and Eucharist, between the table of the Word and the table of the Bread, is rooted in the scriptural account of the disciples journeying to Emmaus (Lk 24) but also the sixth chapter of John's Gospel.

John fashions that magnificent page of the Gospel which is Jesus' discourse in the synagogue of Capernaum on the bread of life (Cf. Jn 6:22-69) by evoking the manna in the desert, which is actually the Torah, the life-giving Word of God¹⁷. Jesus fulfils the ancient foreshadowing: "*the true bread of heaven is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world ... I am the bread of life*" (Jn 6:33-35). The Torah becomes a person and in the encounter with Jesus we truly eat "*the bread of heaven*". We might say that the Capernaum discourse expands and deepens the Prologue of John: there the *Word* of God became "*flesh*"; here this flesh becomes "*bread*" given for the life of the world (cf. Jn 6:51), with a clear reference to the gift that Jesus will make of himself on the Cross. Thus the Eucharist assures us that the true manna, the true bread come down from heaven, is now the incarnate Word of God, who in his passover has given himself up for us.

From the sixth chapter of John's Gospel and from the account of the disciples journeying to Emmaus we see the inseparable bond between Word and Eucharist, or, in concrete terms, the intrinsic unity of the Eucharistic celebration. Consequently, not only "*must one avoid giving the impression that the two parts of the rite are merely juxtaposed*"¹⁸ – rather, the liturgy of the Word and the Eucharistic liturgy "*are so closely connected as to form one act of worship*"¹⁹. At the same time it must be constantly kept in mind that the Word of God which the Church reads and proclaims in the liturgy leads to the Eucharist as to its connatural end.²⁰

Here can recall the words of Saint Jerome:

"We are reading the sacred Scriptures. For me, the Gospel is the Body of Christ; for me, the holy Scriptures are his teaching. And when he says: Whoever does not eat my flesh and drink my blood (Jn 6:53), even though these words can also be understood of the (Eucharistic) Mystery, Christ's body and blood are really the word of Scripture, God's teaching".²¹

17 Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 54.

18 *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 44.

19 *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, No. 28.

20 This dynamic linkage between the two tables is brought out more than once in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, which states in No. 55 that: "*Word and Eucharist are so deeply bound together that we cannot understand one without the other: the Word of God sacramentally takes flesh in the event of the Eucharist. The Eucharist opens us to an understanding of Scripture, just as Scripture for its part illumines and explains the mystery of the Eucharist*". Cf. also the conciliar Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 21.

21 *In Psalmum* 147, CCL 78, 337-338.

For this reason, the Church, in celebrating the Eucharist, has never neglected to proclaim “*all the things in the Scriptures that referred to him*” (Lk 24:27).

Nowadays the theme of the relationship between the table of the Word and the table of the Eucharist in the celebration is also linked to the concern for a more incisive presence of sacred Scripture in great ecclesial meetings: “*Among a variety of possible initiatives, the Synod suggested that in meetings, whether at the diocesan, national or international levels, greater emphasis be given to the importance of the word of God, its attentive hearing, and the faith-filled and prayerful reading of the Bible. In Eucharistic Congresses, whether national or international, at World Youth Days and in other gatherings, it would be praiseworthy to make greater room for the celebration of the word and for biblically-inspired moments of formation*”.²²

Within the whole Church’s work of evangelization, International Eucharistic Congresses continue to be a resource – together with the other great global gatherings of young people and pilgrimages to places of devotion old and new – for the revitalization of a religious sense which is still present, and for the spread of the Gospel. The proclamation of the Word “*means to create in every place and time the conditions for this personal encounter of individuals and Jesus Christ. The faith-encounter with the person of Jesus Christ is in relationship with him, “remembering him” (in the Eucharist) and, in the grace of the Spirit, having in us the mind of Jesus Christ.*”²³

4.3. The practice of Eucharistic devotions

To the above issues we can add another, no less important, which concerns the practice of Eucharistic devotions.

If we were to take an aerial photograph of the Eucharistic landscape, viewing both practices and theologies on the ground from the earliest centuries of the Church up to modern times, we would note a rather clear contrast between an area where communion dominates during the celebration while devotional practices are less prominent, and an area where this relationship is reversed. Overall, the first area corresponds to antiquity, where the relationship between the Eucharistic body of Christ and his ecclesial body clearly stands out. The second area, on the other hand, has two main concentrations: first, on the relationship between the Eucharistic body of Christ and his personal body, born of the

22 *Verbum Domini*, 76.

23 SYNOD OF BISHOPS, XIII ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY, *Lineamenta*, 11.

Virgin Mary; and then on personal and even individual salvation. Naturally between these two main areas there are also broad transitional sectors.²⁴

The Holy Father spoke directly to this issue in his Address to the Plenary Session of this Pontifical Committee on 11 November 2010: “*Since the Eucharistic celebration is the centre and culmination of all the various manifestations and forms of devotion, it is important that every Eucharistic Congress be able to involve and integrate in accordance with the spirit of the conciliar reform all the expressions of Eucharistic devotion “extra missam” rooted in popular devotion, as well as the associations of the faithful inspired by the Eucharist in various ways. All the Eucharistic devotions recommended and encouraged by the Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (Nos. 10; 47-52) and the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* should be harmonized in accordance with a Eucharistic ecclesiology oriented to communion. In this regard too the Eucharistic Congresses are a help for the ongoing renewal of the Church’s Eucharistic life*”.²⁵

In speaking of Eucharistic worship *extra missam* and of associations which in various ways draw inspiration from the Eucharist (movements of perpetual adoration, nocturnal adoration, confraternities of the Blessed Sacrament, etc.), we are speaking of a considerable ecclesial movement, even numerically. All the practices of Eucharistic devotion recommended and encouraged by the documents cited by the Holy Father must therefore be “*involved*” and “*integrated*” in accordance with the spirit of the conciliar reform and “*harmonized*” in accordance with a Eucharistic ecclesiology directed towards communion. Properly understood, these practices ought to be recommended and encouraged, as was rightly done by the Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* and the post-synodal document *Sacramentum Caritatis*.²⁶ The problem is simply to know what theological form this should take.

Generally speaking, our traditional Eucharistic devotions developed out of an individualistic Eucharistic theology. Now we are being encouraged to give them new life and to integrate them into the broader perspective of a Eucharistic ecclesiology directed towards communion.²⁷

24 L.-M. CHAUVET, *Communion et dévotion*, in *Maison-Dieu* 204 (1995/3), pp. 7-38.

25 *L'Osservatore Romano*, 12 November 2010.

26 *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Nos. 10 and, in particular, 47-52; *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Nos. 66-68.

27 W. KASPER, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

This could very well be done by following an indication of Saint Augustine which is also cited by *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*: “If you are his body and members of him, then you will find set on the Lord’s table your own mystery. Yes, you receive your own mystery”²⁸.

The National Delegates and to the International Eucharistic Congresses are thus entrusted with the task of striving to preserve the traditional forms of Eucharistic worship while at the same time renewing them and promoting them in the spirit of the conciliar principle that: “*the Eucharistic celebration should be the true centre and high point of the various expressions and forms of piety*”.²⁹

In this overall context, and by way of conclusion, I would like once more to emphasize the centrality of the liturgy in the Church’s life.

Eucharistic piety and devotion developed in the course of centuries when there was a lessened theological appreciation of the liturgy. The liturgy now needs to set out from the place assigned it in the conciliar reform and to recover its central role in shaping the entire life of the Church: for “*the liturgy is the summit to which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the source from which all its power flows*”.³⁰

In our day, working to promote the liturgy means planting seeds in the rich ground of the *ecclesia* as she makes her way through history: words and gestures which can be understood by all who long that they may bear fruit and offer humanity, in way which God alone knows, the new wine of communion.

28 *Sermo 272*.

29 *De sacra communione et de cultu mysterii eucharistici extra missam*, 21 June 1973, No. 112.

30 *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10.