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Review Essay

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Sharing the Eucharistic Bread: The Witness of the New Testament

Xavier Léon-Dufour, S.J.

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Comprehensiveness and clarity in argument mark this "biblico-theological" reexamination of "the scriptural foundations of the Eucharist" (2) by the well-known French Jesuit, Xavier Léon-Dufour (hereafter "L-D"). Drawing on his extensive publications over the last thirty years, he writes with a sensitivity to problems of language, including symbolism, as well as with a mastery of exegetical techniques. The resulting synthesis reflects his own deepened faith from years of study and celebrating the Eucharist (1, 4) and a concern for fellow disciples on route "to the other shore" (300).

There is a "totality" (his term) in the approach to which non-Roman Catholics will also be attracted and with which they ought to wrestle but by which L-D also intends to "engage in dialogue" with "the dogmatic theologians" of his own church (4-9, 13, 135). For often there has been a tendency on the part of systematicians to regard Scripture scholars as "mere exegetes" (this occurs among Lutherans too). As a "theologian of the Bible," L-D confesses how his own "relation to the Eucharist was distorted due to an excessive concentration on the nature of the change that takes place in the bread and wine" (6). *Le Partage du Pain Eucharistique*, as the French original was entitled, is an account of discoveries in exegesis and beyond, which put an attitude of service and love to others on the part of Christians alongside the cultic rite in the Eucharist as the other half of the total picture.

At the outset it should be observed that L-D is aware of ecumenical discussions on the Lord's Supper (320-321). Of Lutheran-Catholic documents he lists the 1978 statement from the international dialogue, *The Eucharist*, and a Lutheran-Reformed statement in France from 1981, but there is no reflection of North American bilaterals or of the Faith and Order statement *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, which appeared only after his book was written. Where comments are offered on "transubstantiation" or how long the "real presence" perdures, it is the French "Group of Les Dombes" that is cited (134, 135). L-D's monograph can, then, only in part be compared with my own book, *The Supper of the Lord* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), which surveyed the biblical foundations but briefly (1-52) as a background for examination of ecumenical statements. More pertinent and sometimes in sharp contrast to L-D is Markus Barth's *Das Mahl des Herrn* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1987), where there is also a sharp critique of *BEM*. Occasional reference will be made below to the abbreviated translation of Barth, *Rediscovering the Lord's Supper: Communion with Israel, with Christ, and among the Guests* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988). M.B. makes much more of the Jewish background and treats especially Paul and John 6.

Léon-Dufour characteristically begins in Part I with eucharistic practice among early Christians. Their assemblies for the Lord's Supper are, quite rightly, seen as gatherings with a social dimension (so also Barth, with vigorous emphasis). Though contrary views exist, the "breaking of bread" in Acts (2:42,46 20:7; 27:35) is taken eucharistically by L-D (23). It is argued that Jewish practices like the blessing (*beraka*) and the *tôdâ*-sacrifice meal, joined with proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection, marked by prayers and joy, led to the eucharistic rite (32-45). A "first reading" of the last supper texts—synchronically, as a composite, in contrast to later diachronic or evolutionary development—gives opportunity to sketch certain categories that will appear throughout the study. The constitutive elements fall into a "structure," for example, with "vertical" and "horizontal" axes as well as a "temporal" flow of time. Vertically, Jesus is said to be united with God (via the blessing), the kingdom (in the eschatological saying of Mark 14:25 and parallels) and the creation (bread and cup); horizontally, with the disciples and (through them) to "the

many" (the multitude) (55). Jesus' gestures and the theme of change or transformation (in Jesus, as "absent-and-present"; of the disciples, to "a paschal condition"; of the bread and wine) are emphasized (73-75). Though all this comes "through the word of Jesus" (74), it can be said that "the Eucharist 'makes' the Church" and "the Church 'makes' the Eucharist" (H. de Lubac; 76).

Part II is a diachronic analysis of the New Testament traditions about Jesus' final meal (72-179). While L-D will eventually ask "What happened?" he has little optimism about scholarship's ability to recover the original form of the account about the upper room or Jesus' *ipsissima verba* (cf. 182; 263; 343 n.30; 368 n.59; 369 n.71). Instead he stresses the *two* literary forms in which the traditions have come down to us. Most modern analysis would agree on one that he calls "the cultic tradition," i.e., the word spoken by Jesus over the bread, the word over the cup, and an emphasis on "remembrance," and that there is one version of this tradition in Mark and Matthew, and another (called by L-D the "Antiochene") in Luke and Paul (1 Cor. 11). More singular is L-D's other form, the "testamentary tradition," found in Luke and John, where Jesus' words are akin to the farewell discourse or testament of a dying patriarch. This latter genre L-D has argued for since a 1960 article in the French *Dictionnaire de la Bible: Supplément* 6:1456-57. More striking is his contention that the cultic tradition shows how Jesus would be present in his absence, namely, through the eucharist, and that the testamentary tradition stresses "an existential attitude of service and love that reflects the way Jesus himself had lived..." (95). While the two intertwine, the former corresponds to what in later theology was called the *sacramentum* or "rite" and the latter to the *res sacramenti* or "the life which the rite signifies." The testamentary tradition, for which Acts 20:17-38 provides the outstanding New Testament example, is found in Mark 14:25, Luke 22:15-18, and John.

For the "cultic tradition" it is noteworthy that L-D begins with the remembrance theme (102-116), although "Do this (each time you drink) in memory of me" occurs only in Paul (twice) and Luke (once). Here Jesus' offering of himself is connected with an action of his disciples in future assemblies. It is "exhortation to the Church to renew its contact with its

source," God at work (115), and means "actualization, or operative presence... through the proclamation of a *story* or account of a divine action" (106; cf. Exod. 12:14; 20:22,24). With regard to "This is my body... for you," L-D emphasizes ordinary food functioning as heavenly food and the performative character of Jesus' word. The *hyper hymōn* he seeks to take not as a reference to expiatory sacrifice (Isa. 53:11-12) but "so that you may live" (117-136). With regard to the cup-word (137-156), the "blood which is shed" shows the fuller meaning of the bread-word: Jesus' death exhibits his fidelity to the covenant, into which you enter by drinking the cup. "Life is given to those who accept the risk of death in fidelity to the covenant" (138). A danger long has been concentration on the wine and a move from "the existential" back to the cultic (155), illustrated by retroversion of "the priests of the new covenant... into 'new old priests' " of Israel's temple cult (356 n.67). But in the Antiochene tradition the "new covenant" of Jeremiah 31 is fulfilled through the Servant of Isaiah 53, who also fulfills the Mosaic covenant (149-154).

As a hypothetical reconstruction of "what happened," between the extremes of Bultmann and Jeremias, L-D opts for the following (175-176):

In the season of Passover, when evening had come, Jesus ate a final meal with his disciples. At the beginning of the main course Jesus takes bread and says the blessing; he breaks it and gives it to his disciples, saying: "This is my body for you." At the end of the meal, having taken the cup and given thanks (and having said: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for you"), he says to them: "Never more shall I drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I shall drink it new in the kingdom of God."

If, as many critics hold, the cup-word was added later (and the parentheses above indicate), the account fits with the term in Acts, "the breaking of bread."

In Part III L-D takes up separately the presentation on the last and the Lord's Supper in the four chief New Testament writers who deal with it. Particularly helpful here is the attention to the fuller context in each book. Mark (183-210) was the first to set an account in the biographical context of a gospel book, with the whole passion, and at Passover. But we must take all the first-person personal pronouns in Mark 14:14,15 ("*my* guest room, where *I* am to eat") to point to

“the Passover of Jesus,” who reworks and fulfills the rites of Israel in his own way (193, cf. 303–308). Matthew receives no separate treatment (cf. 148).

Paul (203–229) provides no biographical setting for the words of institution, no synthesis on the eucharist as he does for baptism. The emphases L-D finds in 1 Corinthians include congregational unity, the ethical norm of service to others, covenantal union with Jesus, and proclamation of the Lord’s death. The phrase at 11:26 he takes as an indicative: you (pl.), the assembly, are authoritatively announcing the Lord’s death by dying to everything that divides (225–227). (Barth, 43–49, who prefers the imperative here, likewise stresses how all in the congregation are heralds in the missionary body of Christ.)

For Luke (230–247) we have already noted the testamentary genre in 22:15–18. This setting in Luke’s historicizing presentation colors even the words of institution in the long text (vv. 19–20): here is the new mode of Jesus’ presence to his disciples. But fraternal service is also stressed (vv. 24–27), though nothing is noted of F.W. Danker’s proposed “divine Benefactor” theme. Even the seeming “communion of Judas” (derived from the fact that the verses about the traitor come after the reception of the bread and wine) is explained by the testament form: the group of sons must be present to hear what the father says before death.

“The Eucharist according to John” (248–279) is a difficult topic because the upper-room account has no words of institution. But chapters 13–16 are a farewell discourse; if “covenant” is lacking, nonetheless Christ’s presence, the gift of life in bread, and the goal of mutual love are Johannine themes and (so L-D) the *res sacramenti* (252). The acid test is the discourse in John 6. This is taken as a eucharistic catechesis, following an analysis L-D did in 1958. Exegetically he makes (the disputed verses) 6:48–58 his starting point. Any notion of sources and later redaction (in vv. 51b–58) is rejected as “pointless” (257). Instead there is first a “spontaneous reading” such as “Christians who regularly celebrate the Eucharist” might give; then comes a “critical reading,” where L-D seeks to show that even 6:51–58 can be read *non-eucharistically*, along sapiential lines. Finally there is a “symbolic” reading which seeks to show how all of chapter 6 can be read sacramentally and all of 6, including vv. 51–58, can be read non-sacramentally as a discourse about believing (“appropriation

by faith of the saving sacrifice of Jesus," 270–271). The net result is in ch. 6 a simultaneous assertion about sacrament and faith throughout. This approach then encourages L-D to take 2:1–11; 15:1–5; and 21:9–13 as eucharistic.

Barth (83–84) has suggested that four schools of interpretation exist for John 6. One takes vv. 27–51a "spiritually" and vv. 51b–58 eucharistically; the second takes all of vv. 27–58 to be about the sacrament. The third group, with which L-D may be classed, takes all the verses as both spiritual and sacramental. The fourth group, going back to Augustine, takes vv. 32–58 "as a description of the faith relationship to Christ" (84); this Barth develops, along christological lines (87–100).

Instead of "conclusions" such as the exegete usually is expected to supply for the dogmatician to work with (13), L-D in an "Overture" and "Envoi" (279–302) lays out his own findings and some implications. The *verba* must be seen in a relational setting, and the eucharist as a *communal* activity (281–283). (On the latter point Barth argues with a vengeance: "Boldly formulated, the Lord's Supper is a human work that God has told us to *do*... a 'work of faith' " (48), not involving any "real presence," for that will come only at the parousia (52). The table of the Lord calls for a community that is "sharing, serving, and loving," concerned for justice (56). "Christ is present in the person of the little and weak brother and sister at the Lord's table and in daily encounters" (69); compare L-D's "testamentary" theme.)

For L-D the call is to a life marked by a rhythm of the cultic (eucharistic rite) and service to others. We must enter into a symbolic world that integrates more fully than the old idea of the sacrament as an "effective sign of salvation." "Our encounter with the God of the covenant" through bread and wine must lead not only to God but also to action, in the world. The term "synergy" is borrowed by Eastern Orthodoxy, combining active presence with effective service. Covenant "remembering," the "shed blood," and gift and sharing in the Eucharist help us "approach the... Eucharist in the right way," so that "sharing bread" becomes through us justice, fighting against hunger, and delivering the oppressed (299). So, L-D.

It is not easy either to summarize or assess so finely argued a volume. *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread* represents the work

of a lifetime, yet replete with newer literary, narrative criticism (as in the diachronic and synchronic readings). Yet first of all, it must be observed, it is a Roman Catholic book. As L-D himself says, "by a man and not a woman, a monotheist... , a Christian... , a Catholic and not a Protestant, a priest and not a lay person, a Jesuit and not a Dominican" (4). The stance can lead to quite specific judgments, such as the claim that "a 'synergy' makes its dwelling within me" is what "distinguishes me from a Jewish believer" (302). If any of L-D's existential categories were different, would the outcomes be changed? Probably. I cannot help but think his initial "synchronic reading" of the last supper texts (46-76) and the first reading of John 6 "by Christians who regularly celebrate the Eucharist" are both revealing and determinative. Likewise with details. While Mark is conceded to reflect a Christian form of the annual Jewish Passover and to have connected the account of the Supper with the Christian feast of Easter, this, of course, cannot in any way be against frequent, indeed (for L-D) daily, eucharistic celebration (194; 293; 362 n.21; Acts 2:42-26 proves decisive).

A second area of observation concerns exegesis. Here L-D proves a master of argument, well acquainted with the literature and decisive in his opinions. The following points, among others, however, seem, in my judgment, dubious or at least open to discussion. (Many of these points which I raise would be shared by some Catholic scholars.) (a) The starting point in the Lucan "breaking of bread" references as eucharistic. L-D himself notes the phrase is rabbinic (22-23). Why not a reference then to *all* meals as non-eucharistic ones of eschatological joy (*Supper of the Lord*, 16-17; cf. Barth, 71-74)? Acts 20, incidentally, looms large in L-D's whole approach: 20:7-11 encourages him to think that in 2:42,46 Luke "created a name for the Eucharist out of one of the gestures in the rite that began Jewish meals" (23), and 20:18-35 provides the testamentary genre (though without any meal).

(b) Source and form criticism are woefully underplayed. One can grant there is a "book level" at which John 6:51-58, Mark 14:22-24 and 25, or 1 Cor. 11:23-25 should be treated in their present contexts. But L-D gives almost no attention to the pre-Pauline or pre-Markan forms. Even when Antiochene or Markan (-Matthean) units are isolated, they are

regarded as intertwined with the testamentary tradition, and the synchronic reading has already set the stage for minimizing the import of such oral tradition as entities in themselves. Hence L-D, who generally opposes any concentration on "elements" or "species" in the New Testament, refuses to allow (with Marxsen) a tendency already in the Markan tradition toward such sacramentalism (195; cf. *Supper of the Lord*, 10-11).

(c) Eschatology, which some like Eduard Schweizer see (as in Mark 14:25) to be the historical core (*Supper of the Lord*, 24-25), seems less emphatic in L-D. Perhaps it is minimized because the amen-saying of 14:25 (parallel Matt. 26:29) is absorbed within the testamentary theme and because of L-D's constant polemic against Jeremias's theory of a "vow of abstinence" by Jesus (164-168, 308). It may also arise out of the "temporal axis" of a time-flow from the past to an open future (69-72). The muting of the primitive aspect of "drinking it new on that day in the kingdom of God" is the more striking when L-D allows that "these words give the historian access to the mind of Jesus of Nazareth in this final hour" (166).

(d) Of L-D's proposals that assume a high profile, I reckon the testament hypothesis worth ongoing consideration; the attempt with *hyper* in the bread-word to avoid a note of expiation, not convincingly shown; and the inclusion of the cup word in the oldest forms of the *verba* and therefore likely from Jesus as possible.

(e) John 6 warrants particular notice. While I miss attention to recent efforts to locate the debate reflected in this passage within the struggles of the Johannine community (Raymond E. Brown; cf. *Supper of the Lord*, 20-21), L-D has shown, in a way that will be eye-opening for many, how for 6:51-58 and, indeed, the entire discourse, "a non-sacramental reading of the text is possible"; it is about "faith in the saving value of his death." Lutherans may wish to compare the *Formula of Concord*, Epitome VII.6; Solid Declaration VII.64, on spiritual eating, by faith; cf. *Supper of the Lord*, 18. Barth carries this line further (87-102), citing Augustine ("Do believe—and you have eaten"; "to believe in him—that is to consume the living bread") and Luther in connection with his own view that vv. 51-58 "are *eucharistic* only in the sense that they provide ample reason to give thanks to God [for Christ's incarnation

and sacrifice] and to live a life of gratitude" (94). The Word and the Holy Spirit bridge the gap to us (cf. Large Catechism, Apostles' Creed, 38). Thus Christ, particularly in his death on the cross, is the one sacrament for the church (M.B., 101-102).

Thirdly, L-D's reading of the New Testament and his determination to function as a theologian of the Bible results in positions that may be strange both to Catholic and non-Roman Catholic ears. Indeed they may sometimes seem like "both/and" conclusions. As indicated above, he can explore, yet still hold on to traditional terms, even "transubstantiation" (133-135). The Mass, though not completely resembling the Last Supper (16), "repeats over and over again the gestures of Jesus as received by the first Christians"; what is the real ecumenical issue—the magisterium—may be signalled, with regard to the way the priest pronounces "the words of Jesus... with variations," in the comment, "Ecclesial tradition alone is empowered to alter these words so as to make them more pregnant or more explicit" (287). But there is also a tendency to say "the Mass *is and is not* the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross" (297); "the Church *is and is not* the body of Christ" (293); "the eucharistic action *is and is not* the mystery of Jesus..." (290). Each point is explained, but the paradoxical method of expression will be new and to some unacceptable in one pole or another.

For what it's worth, I record, in connection with this last point, a tendency to invoke themes from Eastern Orthodoxy in moving towards solutions. Cf. pp. 1 (in art history, a mode of illustration found also in Roualt's painting, p. 189, cf. 187); 290 ("mystery" for "sacrament"); 293, 296 (synergy); 350 n.47 (criticism of views that boys not scrape their knees while playing after receiving Eucharist, or menstruating women or brides not commune, lest the blood of Christ, in our blood, be profaned); 380 n.9 (priest as icon).

Fourthly, among themes missing or not much discussed by L-D may be noted discernment and judgment in 1 Cor. 11:27-34 (367 n.50 dismisses references as "rhetorical") and communion by children (Barth, 11, 26, favors it).

Finally an observation. Some reviews of *The Supper of the Lord* (most recently J. Puglisi in *Religious Studies Review* 14 [1988] 232) faulted it for not taking seriously the work of liturgiologists (though I did speak of their tendency to make Hippolytus the norm, pp. 13-14, 186-187). There are two reasons

for a lack of references. (a) Ecumenical statements do not often cite liturgies (cf. *Supper of the Lord*, 106, for an exception). (b) By and large, discussions by *Neutestamentler* do not refer to them. Does L-D fare better? While his bibliography refers to such texts (319) and authors like Bouyer and Ligier, it cannot be said current liturgy-making colors his treatment of the New Testament, unless through the synchronic overview and reading by those "who regularly *celebrate* the Eucharist." All this raises two questions. Is there a *de facto* ecumenism by liturgiologists at work, apart from that of dialogues, dogmatic theologians, and biblical scholars? Are we to read the New Testament in line with later patristic developments *or* as a development from origins to canonical expressions, with the church fathers as a later step or sometimes misstep (cf. 356 n.67 and 380 n.9, on priesthood)?