

The Linacre Quarterly

Volume 73 | Number 3

Article 4

August 2006

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Recommended Citation

Martis, Douglas (2006) "Who Is Worthy to Receive Communion?," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 73 : No. 3 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol73/iss3/4>

Who Is Worthy to Receive Communion?

by

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The following address was delivered to the 2004 Annual Meeting of the Catholic Medical Association. The author is Director of the Liturgical Institute, University of Saint Mary of the Lake, Mundelein, IL.

Introduction

Let me begin by expressing both gratitude and trepidation: I am grateful for the opportunity to address the question, "Who is worthy to receive communion?" However, the question is politically charged.

It is thus necessary to set some parameters for this discussion. First, regarding my perspective, it must be said that I am neither a moralist nor a canon lawyer. Nor do I believe that you were looking for a moralist to discuss with you the Holy Father's Encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. My training is in sacramental theology, in the sacramental rites. Thus, the filter through which I consider this topic will be sacramental. As a sacramental theologian and believer, I can simply answer the question of who may receive by suggesting that none is worthy. Having answered the question directly, we might move on to the next topic, but sometimes the short and direct answer does not satisfy. And I am sure that that comment would receive a great deal of nuance and explanation by the eminent moralist who serves as chaplain to your guild, Bishop ListECKI.

To the Encyclical, then.

I. The Occasion of the Encyclical

Ecclesia de Eucharistia is the fourteenth Encyclical of Pope John Paul II; its promulgation on the threshold of the Sacred Triduum (17 April, 2003, Holy Thursday) marks an essential connection between the Eucharist, Holy Thursday (on which we celebrate the institution of the Eucharist) and indeed the entire Paschal Mystery.

Pope John Paul II, in fact, begins his letter with a resumé or a summary of the events of the Triduum; those three great days which celebrate the essence and culmination of our faith. By recounting the celebration of Mass in the Cenacle of Jerusalem in the year 2000, he reminds us

The Upper Room was where this most holy Sacrament was instituted. It is there that Christ took bread, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying: "Take this, all of you, and eat it[...] Take this all of you and drink from it. [...]" (cf. Mt 14:24, Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). I am grateful to the Lord Jesus for allowing me to repeat in that same place, in obedience to his command: "Do this in memory of me" (Lk 22:19), the words which he spoke two thousand years ago.

The Holy Father connects his experience with the voice of the Lord at that very first Eucharist and in doing so he associates himself with the first Apostles, and carries us back to that day and that place. His words challenge modern readers:

Did the Apostles who took part in the Last Supper understand the meaning of the words spoken by Christ? Perhaps not. Those words would only be fully clear at the end of the *Triduum sacrum*, the time from Thursday evening to Sunday morning. Those days embrace the *mysterium paschale*; they also embrace the *mysterium eucharisticum*.¹

Thus the Holy Father links the paschal mystery with the Sacred Triduum and with the Mystery of the Eucharist.

It is necessary to linger over these words, to let their full meaning blossom in our minds. Like oenologists who, when sampling fine wine are able to discern all of the different layers and characteristics of the fruit of the vine, as Christian disciples, we must also become specialists of Christian language. (The Belgian Benedictine Bernard Botte (1893-1980) maintained that the language of liturgy is not Latin, or Greek or Syrian, or any of the vernacular languages; the language of the liturgy is the Christian language. Every language carries with it particular cultural nuances and images, overtones of where the language has been and its development. If we will understand the liturgy we must become experts in the *Christian cultural language*.)

When we speak of the Triduum, we say it refers to the three days, the Three Great Days of Christianity. You know certainly that it means, quite literally, "tres dies", three days. But there is nuance that must be opened up if we are to grasp fully its meaning.

In Hebrew, one cannot say “holiest.” One must say “holy, holy holy.” Something that is “holiest” is “three times holy.” The French say *très bien* which is something more than its literal three times good. It is the *superlative* of good. Just as the *tres hagian* (as the Greeks say) is the superlative of holy, Christianity adopts the Hebrew superlative to speak of the Great Days that summarize our faith. The Triduum, then, is less a chronology of three consecutive days. It is the *superlative* of days. This is why on the feast of the Epiphany the Sacred Liturgy says

Dear brothers and sisters,
Let us recall the year’s culmination, the Easter Triduum of the Lord:
his last supper, his crucifixion, his burial, and his rising.

Each Easter – as on each Sunday –
the Holy Church makes present the great and saving deed
by which Christ has forever conquered sin and death.²

The Holy Father highlights three principle facets of the Mass of the Lord’s Supper, namely the *mandatum*, the Institution of the Eucharist, and the Farewell Discourse of the Lord (specifically Jn 15, 4). There is an essential connection between the institution of the Eucharist and the passion of the Lord, thus between the Eucharist and the birth of the Church. It is from the side of Christ (just like from the side of Adam) that the Church is born. This is the meaning of John 19:34, “One of the soldiers thrust a lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out.”

The passion of Christ is the sacrament of total self-giving. The Eucharist is the gift *par excellence*, the superlative gift because it manifests a “love which knows no measure.” (¶11)

The story of the Lord’s Supper can never be seen simply as a farewell dinner between friends. It is decidedly not a simple celebration of days gone by. As if the last supper was a scene from the musical *Les Misérables*, with revolutionary buddies singing of “days gone by.”

And yet, in recent years, it seems that the aspect of table fellowship at the Eucharist has not only dominated our experiences but essentially suffocated the aspect of sacrifice; all full of warm feelings about our neighbor and making sure that “all are welcome,” the *kenosis* of Christ, the pouring out of his life because of our sins seems to have been forgotten. In our rush to announce that the liturgy is the work of the people, we have failed to remember the “work” of salvation that God has accomplished for us in Christ.

So, the Holy Father insists on a wider and, at the same time, more profound understanding of the Eucharist that goes beyond the simplistic notion of Eucharist as “Banquet”, this notion that has been so popular in

post-conciliar discourse, to foster a more complete understanding of it as sacrifice and Presence. (Cf. in particular ¶60: "The mystery of the Eucharist – Sacrifice, presence, banquet – *does not allow for reduction or exploitation...*")

I would like to remark here that one of the mistakes that "religious professionals" have made in our implementation of the liturgical reform, is that we have underestimated the ability of the Catholic faithful to grasp the mystery of faith. Rather than raise the level of discourse, we have settled for a watered-down version. In the early days of the Twentieth Century Liturgical Movement, the great pioneers, who were fully imbued with the spirit of the sacred liturgy, urged that their understanding and appreciation for the Mysteries be *shared* with the people:

"We (monks and scholars) are the elites of the liturgy," said Lambert Beauduin. "We must... democratize the liturgy."

By "democratize", Fr. Beauduin did not mean that everyone has a right to do whatever they want. The sense of this statement is that the great treasure of the liturgy be available and accessible to the people, rather than being the possession only of scholars.

Virgil Michel, the father of the American Liturgical Movement, and Martin Hellriegel would insist on this:

Many think what is sought after is a return to older forms of vestments, to antique chalices, crucifixes, and candlesticks, and to the ceremonial practices that have long passed out of usage. But what is really being striven for is *a change in the spiritual orientation* of the faithful, which, it is hoped, will result in a much needed strong, virile Catholicity.³

It was not the intention of these pioneers that the Mass be compromised so that the masses could understand it; they wanted to raise the people up. One develops an appreciation for a symphony not by pounding out the melody on a piano, but by learning about it and frequenting the concert hall and attending to what is being played. This is the full, active and *conscious* participation in the liturgy as stressed by *Sacrosanctum concilium*. "Mother Church earnestly desires"⁴ this because such participation is demanded by the rites themselves.

The pope's Encyclical likewise calls for greater appreciation of the richness of the liturgy, not more compromise.

So with regard to the occasion of this letter, three salient points must be made: 1) the Holy Father uses the occasion to reflect personally on the Eucharist; 2) he broadens the group he would typically address on this day;

and, 3) offers clarification on the Church's understanding and celebration of the Eucharist.

Published on Holy Thursday, the day he has traditionally set aside for his Letter to Priests, the Encyclical gives him the opportunity to express his own gratitude and awe for the gift of the Eucharist and his desire to engender devotion to it (§6), he says:

I would like to rekindle this Eucharistic "amazement" by the present Encyclical Letter [...]

The word "mystery" is connected here; it has its origin in the Greek word, *mueo*, which suggests standing speechless before the awesome, amazing presence of God.

To contemplate the face of Christ, and to contemplate it with Mary, is the "programme" which I have set before the Church at the dawn of the third millennium, summoning her to put out into the deep

again a reference to a more profound understanding of the faith, put out into the deep

...on the sea of history with the enthusiasm of the new evangelization. To contemplate Christ involves being able to recognize him wherever he manifests himself, in his many forms of presence, but above all in the living sacrament of his body and his blood. *The Church draws her life from Christ in the Eucharist*;

(this is the title of the Encyclical)

...by him she is fed and by him she is enlightened, The Eucharist is both a mystery of faith and a "mystery of light".³ Whenever the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the faithful can in some way relive the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: "their eyes were opened and they recognized him" (Lk 24:31).⁵

The power of the Eucharist, its meaning and its mystery is immediate for the Holy Father.

The letter allows the pope to address the entire community of the faithful (§7). The letter traditionally written by the Roman Pontiff and issued on Holy Thursday is typically addressed to priests. The letter for 2004 began simply with the salutation: "Dear Priests!" In 2003, the laity were permitted to do more than "eavesdrop" on a missive usually reserved to priests. The Holy Father addresses the letter "to the bishops, priests and deacons, men and women in the consecrated life, and all the lay faithful." It

is significant, then, that he addresses the letter to the entire community of the faithful; it means that what he has to say goes beyond the boundaries of ministerial life and touches the Christian life directly.

A third value of the letter is that it provides a forum for clarifying vague notions concerning the sacrament – it is proposed as a safeguard against ambiguity in Eucharistic theory and praxis (§10). While saluting the progress and interior growth that came about in the years following the Second Vatican Council, the Holy Father notes a shadow side:

Namely,

1. the abandon of Eucharistic adoration
2. a confusion of sound doctrine
3. reductive understanding of the Eucharistic mystery, i.e., the erasing or downplaying of the sacrificial nature of the Mass in favor of a simple “fraternal meal.”
4. the question of the ministerial priesthood and apostolic succession

The Eucharist is too great a gift to tolerate ambiguity and depreciation.

It is my hope that the present Encyclical Letter will effectively help to banish the dark clouds of unacceptable doctrine and practice, so that the Eucharist will continue to shine forth in all its radiant mystery.⁶

II. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*

The Encyclical title makes reference to what seems to be a patristic formula, frequently attributed to St. Augustine, “the Eucharist makes the Church, the Church makes the Eucharist.” The Church and the Eucharist stand “as cause to each other.” The Church gathers to celebrate the Eucharist and in “confecting” Eucharist, is nourished by the sacrament to become the Body of Christ.

In fact, the principle appeared for the first time only in 1953 in Henri de Lubac’s *Méditation sur l’Eglise*. The title, then, is a sort of papal or ecclesiastic wink to de Lubac who was “a tireless scholar, a spiritual master,” according to the pope’s own assessment.⁷ De Lubac was named to the College of Cardinals by John Paul II in 1983. He died in 1991.

The title, then, underscores an important aspect of the Holy Father’s understanding of the relationship between the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy and perpetual “birthing” of the Church. One cannot exist without

the other; but more than that, both are sacraments of Christ. The Church is the abiding presence of Christ in the world.

You perhaps recall the story of the statue of Jesus Christ in Coventry, England. During World War II it was hit by a bomb and blown to pieces. The townspeople gathered all the pieces they could find and reassembled the statue. They were able to put it all together except for the hands, which were missing. They decided to place a plaque at the base of this statue which reads, "He has no hands but yours." The phrase became the motto of the lay apostolate of the 1950s.

The Blessed Sacrament is the permanent presence, the real presence of Christ. The intimate connection between the food for the journey, the *viaticum* and the mission of Christians is evident. And the trinity is explicit in the formulation: created by the father, nourished by the Son, sent by the Spirit.

The Eucharistic Prayers themselves draw attention to this double notion by the *epiclesis* which invokes the Holy Spirit upon the bread and wine, and by the plea that through the Spirit, those who receive the Eucharist may become one in Christ.

"And so, Father, we bring you these gifts. We ask you to make them holy by the power of your Spirit..."

And then later:

"Grant that we who are nourished by his body and blood,
May be filled with his Holy Spirit,
And become one body, one spirit in Christ."

Or as in Eucharistic Prayer IV:

"Father, may this Holy Spirit sanctify these offerings.
Let them become the body and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord..."

"By your Holy Spirit, gather all who share this one bread and one cup into the one body of Christ, a living sacrifice of praise."

Each of our Eucharistic Prayers has some form of this double *epiclesis*. And it is symbolized ritually by the extension of the priests' hands over the gifts.

That we gather "around" the Eucharist as a community is essential. We cannot become Christ's body without it. The early Christians even called the Eucharist the *circumadstantes*, the standing around the altar. (A remnant of this ancient notion can be found in Eucharistic Prayer II, which was composed around 215: "We thank you for counting us worthy to *stand*

in your presence and serve you.” Since the eucharistic prayer is the people’s prayer, albeit said aloud by the priest, the phrase refers to the whole assembly “standing” in God’s presence. It does not mean the priest celebrant stands alone.)

Yet, as I pointed out earlier, we must be cautious that our “becoming community”, the so-called horizontal dimension of the Eucharist, our finding Christ among us, does not alienate us from the vertical, transcendent dimension of the Mass.

Christians must always walk the tightrope of doctrinal balance. Be in the world, but not of the world, as the evangelist John reminds us. We must reach beyond in ever-widening circles; and reach up. For Christians, parishioners are always, until the eschaton, on a journey toward the heavenly Jerusalem. Call us pilgrims if you will. But more correctly we are resident aliens. The word “parishioner” shares the same root as “pariah.” We must always cultivate a healthy Christian restlessness: “Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until we rest in you.”

The acclamation of the assembly following the consecration appropriately ends by expressing the eschatological thrust which mark the celebration of the Eucharist (cf. 1 Cor 11:26): “until you come in glory”. The Eucharist is a straining towards the goal, a foretaste of the fullness of joy promised by Christ (cf. Jn 15:11); it is in some way the anticipation of heaven, the “pledge of future glory”.⁸

There is, then, this community of believers with whom we celebrate the Eucharist, the parish church. But there is also a wider church, the one we call “local” or diocesan; then the regional or “metropolitan,” the national and the universal church.

The Encyclical makes a magnificent assertion: On one hand, it underscores the essential character of the Eucharist as the center of the Christian life; on the other it manifests the profound dignity of the Eucharist celebrated everywhere, or better, *anywhere*. Because it is the “perennial making present of the paschal mystery,” (§5) in whatever place, “even when celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always celebrated *on the altar of the world.*” (§8)

On the one hand, it celebrates our communion with one another, here on earth; on the other, the Holy Father will not let us ignore our communion with the Saints in heaven.

Perhaps one of the most frequently overlooked aspects of the reformed liturgy is the reflection of the Saints in glory. Yet this idea is not foreign to the conciliar documents:

In the earthly liturgy, we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, Minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle. With all the warriors of the heavenly army we sing a hymn of glory to the Lord; venerating the memory of the saints, we hope for some part and fellowship with them...⁹

With language like this, we must assert that it was not the council that created a sort of Pollyanna Catholicism. The Council still prefers the early liturgical movement's "virile catholicity."

The Church draws its life from the Eucharist, from all its many nuances and facets. By evoking our communion through the Liturgy with the Saints in heaven, (§19) the Encyclical manifests its eschatological vision while maintaining Christian responsibility for the world. (§20) The document seeks a balance between contemplation and action, between our responsibility on earth and our hope for heaven; a balance between the Church here and the Church there. We must learn to maintain a dynamic tension with all of these aspects. To reduce the spiritual life to one or the other is to betray our Christian calling.

III. Organization and Spirit

The structure of the pope's letter itself indicates its meaning. The Encyclical is organized into six chapters flanked by a short introduction and conclusion. These chapters emphasize various aspects of the Catholic vision, showing how they are rooted in the Eucharist.

The Mystery of Faith: We have already spoken about this chapter; it contains the foundational aspects of Eucharist and Church, and Church and world. Let me simply cite the Holy Father because this passage really shows his heart and his deep conviction about the Eucharist.

Proclaiming the death of the Lord "until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26) entails that all who take part in the Eucharist be committed to changing their lives and making them in a certain way completely "Eucharistic". It is this fruit of a transfigured existence and a commitment to transforming the world in accordance with the Gospel which splendidly illustrates the eschatological tension inherent in the celebration of the Eucharist and in the Christian life as a whole: "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20).¹⁰

The Eucharist Builds the Church: In addition to the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church, the Holy Father speaks of the reciprocal relationship between the believer and Christ.

We can say not only that *each of us receives Christ*, but also that *Christ receives each of us*.¹¹

But, again, it is not simply about the believer and Christ, isolated from the rest of the community. Communion by its nature moves us toward union with one another that we form "that perfect man, Christ in glory." He evokes images of the early fathers and of the *Didachè* which see the many becoming one; the Eucharist is the sacrament of the gathering of the individuals of the Church into one body:

As this [grain] lay scattered upon the mountains and became one when it had been gathered, so may your Church be gathered into your kingdom from the ends of the earth.¹²

And as Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Romans, this seed of each one of us, by our *kenosis*, our willingness to suffer for Christ, becomes the means by which we manifest our faith; imprisoned and at the point of martyrdom, he implores his friends not to block the plan of God:

I am writing to all the Churches and state emphatically to all that I die willingly for God, provided you do not interfere. I beg you, do not show me unseasonable kindness. Suffer me to be the food of wild beasts, which are the means of my making my way to God. God's wheat I am, and by the teeth of wild beasts I am to be ground that I may prove Christ's pure bread.

The spiritual life, of course, is not limited solely to the participation in the Mass.¹³ Faith must also manifest itself in our care for others and the holiness of our lives. This is the vocation of lay Christians as much as the vocation of "religious professionals." The Eucharist must continue to influence believers even outside of its celebration. Pope Paul VI pointed this out in 1965.

In the course of the day the faithful should not omit visiting the Blessed Sacrament, which in accordance with liturgical law must be reserved in churches with great reverence in a prominent place. Such visits are a sign of gratitude, an expression of love and an acknowledgment of the Lord's presence.¹⁴

The spirituality of this letter is more akin to the tradition of the Church and focuses on the resemblance of Christ and Christians. It rejects the notion of church membership as an exclusive club for like-minded people. This is an enormous obstacle for American Catholics because we have been so influenced by the individualism of Protestantism. The notion of Mystical Body, it seems to me, is the better image for our participation in liturgy and our engagement in the world.

Why is it that priests are tempted (and sometimes encouraged) to dress and behave like laypeople and laypeople insist on usurping the liturgical responsibilities of the ordained? Saint Paul's analogy of the body seems so necessary: "As it is, God has set each member of the body in the place he wanted it to be."¹⁵

The Apostolicity of the Eucharist and of the Church: The pope underlines three qualities of apostolicity: The Church is 1) built on the foundation of the apostles,

It is in continuity with the practice of the Apostles, in obedience to the Lord's command, that the Church has celebrated the Eucharist down the centuries.¹⁶

2) The Church is apostolic because she hands on the faith received from the apostles, remains in conformity with their teaching and manifests continuity through the ages and, 3) the apostles continue to instruct and teach the Church through the bishops. Our apostolicity grounds us and gives us direction. The tradition is both stable and dynamic: like a clay baton in a relay race – passed from generation to generation, the tradition receives the imprint of each. The French call the baton the *témoin*; it is the witness of where the baton has been, that the course has been run, the athletes have each made a unique contribution.

This apostolic faith is safeguarded by apostolic succession. The Church has always resisted efforts to abandon the community of the apostles; no bishop ordains himself. In fact, in the history of the Church, it is even rare that a bishop would ordain his successor. They are not the successor of a particular apostle, but of the apostles as a whole. This is why the tradition of the Church requires more than one bishop to lay hands; the ordaining bishops manifest their communion with each other and their union with the tradition of the whole Church. In the ritual of ordination, only the Bishop of Rome has the right to ordain without the help of co-consecrating bishops.

The apostolicity of the Church and of the Eucharist guarantees continuity.

The Eucharist and Ecclesial Communion: The communion between bishops, celebrated in the Eucharist, manifests the communion of local churches. This becomes a visible sign of what is celebrated in the Eucharist.

The Eucharistic Sacrifice, while always offered in a particular community, is never a celebration of that community alone. In fact, the community, in receiving the Eucharistic presence of the Lord, receives the entire gift of salvation and shows, even in its

lasting visible particular form, that it is the image and true presence of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

From this it follows that a truly Eucharistic community cannot be closed in upon itself, as though it were somehow self-sufficient; rather it must persevere in harmony with every other Catholic community.

The Bishop, in effect, is the *visible* principle and the foundation of unity within his particular Church. It would therefore be a great contradiction if the sacrament *par excellence* of the Church's unity were celebrated without true communion with the Bishop. As Saint Ignatius of Antioch wrote: "That Eucharist which is celebrated under the Bishop, or under one to whom the Bishop has given this charge, may be considered certain."

For Ignatius, the Bishop acts as Christ in the Church. "Whoever is not with the bishop," he says, "serves the devil."

The Eucharist "presupposes that communion already exists." (§35) Thus, Eucharist and Penance are intimately related (§37) and the dialogue for unity among Christians is the precursor to unity at the Table of the Lord. (§42-43)

The Dignity of the Eucharistic Celebration: The Holy Father underscores the dignity of the sacrament and the value the Church places on the Eucharist, saying that she offers "the best of her resources" in the celebration of the Liturgy. (§47) The offering of First Fruits is the outward expression of interior devotion and is reflected in the Church's embrace of beauty in art, architecture and music. (§48) This, I believe, is an aspect of the spirituality of the Eucharist that we must retrieve. The whole theology of first fruits manifests our confidence and trust in God. It is both an acknowledgment that we are constantly created by God, that we owe our existence to God alone; and that everything we have comes from God. If like Abraham, we are willing to sacrifice the fruits of God's promise, trusting that even then God will provide, we witness to our confidence in the One who is source of all. The stingy one, who hoards even a little, betrays trust.

Respect for the internal beauty of the Church's worship, for the sacredness and universality of the Liturgy allows it to manifest the ecclesial nature of the Eucharist. (§51) Here again our American penchant for individualism is challenged. We tend to want *my mass* rather than understanding the Eucharist as the celebration of the *Church's* liturgy.

Christian Models: At the School of Mary, "Woman of the Eucharist": In this encyclical, the sacramental, institutional, hierarchical, anthropological, and Christological dimensions of the Eucharist are noted. Each dimension is represented in a unique way: together they create a

mosaic of true Eucharistic piety. While insisting, for example, on the necessity of ordained ministers in the celebration of the Eucharist, the Holy Father is careful to affirm the role of the Faithful.

Both Saint Peter and Saint John provide models for devotion to the Eucharist. If Peter can represent the apostolicity of the sacrament, he is, after all, the one who holds the keys; John shows the faithful how pleasant it is "to spend time with him, to lie close to his breast like the Beloved Disciple." (§25) But the Holy Father recognizes in Mary, Mother of God, the model *par excellence* for all Christian disciples. Because by the "fiat" of the Blessed Mother and the "Amen" of the believer, the same Lord becomes present. (§54) Thus, the womb of the Virgin is the First Tabernacle of the presence of the Lord.

The Church has always tried to make the connection between the *lex orandi*, the *lex credendi* and the *lex vivendi*. This encyclical of John Paul II shows how our prayer, our belief and our manner of living find their source, their apex and their ultimate fulfillment in the celebration of the Eucharist.

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