

1-1-2011

# The Ecclesial Meaning of the Eucharist

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Published version. "The Ecclesial Meaning of the Eucharist" in *Critical Issues in Ecclesiology: Essays in Honor of Carl E. Braaten*. Eds. Carl E Braaten; Alberto L García; Susan K Wood. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011: 105-119. [Publisher Link](#). © 2011 William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Used with permission.

# The Ecclesial Meaning of the Eucharist

Susan K. Wood

Discussions of the eucharist in an ecumenical context have most often focused on the manner of Christ's presence, the relationship between the sacrifice of the cross and the eucharist, or the minister of the eucharist. Largely absent from these discussions has been the ecclesial meaning of the eucharist, probably because this aspect of the eucharist has also needed attention within various ecclesial traditions. The "ecclesial meaning of the eucharist" includes the role of the eucharist in the formation of the communion of saints, the making of the members which make up the body of Christ, and the constitution of the church. The source of this meaning has biblical roots in Pauline theology and Patristic roots in Augustine's mystagogical theology. It can be traced in the historical changes of the use of the term *corpus mysticum*. It lies embedded in the scholastic analysis of the relationship between sign and reality and comes to life in the liturgical invocation of the Holy Spirit to transform the assembly in the second *epiclesis*.

A retrieval of the ecclesial meaning of the eucharist corrects an overly individualistic and privatized eucharistic spirituality. It manifests the Christological and pneumatological foundations of the church. It expresses the connections between church and sacrament.

In the face of dissension within the Corinthian community, Paul makes the appeal: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10:16-17). Paul grounds the bond of charity that should exist within the Corinthian

community in their participation in the eucharist. The meaning of the Christian community, which the liturgy mediates, establishes, and maintains, is that the church is in some way the body of Christ. The unity of the church is the unity of Christ.

In his mystagogical instruction to the neophytes who have just received the sacraments of initiation, Augustine exhorts: "Take then, and eat the body of Christ, for in the body of Christ you are already made the members of Christ."<sup>1</sup> In this same sermon he explains: "Because you have life through Him, you will be one body with Him, for this sacrament extends the body of Christ and by it you are made inseparable from Him." The unity of the body received at the altar is a sign and measure of the unity of the ecclesial body. The eucharistic sacrament both signifies and effects the unity of the church. The sacramental realism of the historical Christ leads to the sacramental realism of the ecclesial Christ so that Augustine can say to the neophytes he is instructing, "there you are on the altar, there you are in the chalice."<sup>2</sup>

Henri de Lubac's historical study, *Corpus Mysticum*, traces a fascinating change in eucharistic and ecclesial terminology.<sup>3</sup> Before the eucharistic controversies with Berengar of Tours in the eleventh century, the church was designated as the *corpus verum*, the true body. In contrast, the eucharist was the *corpus mysticum*, the mystical body, just the reverse of the use of these terms today. For example, in the familiar eucharistic hymn "Ave Verum," composed by Thomas Aquinas after this shift in usage occurred, the "true body" is the eucharist, not the church. The Church Fathers, however, "had seen his [Christ's] ecclesial body as the *veritas* of his mystical eucharistic body." The eucharist was "mystical" because it was received spiritually. Within this earlier view, there was an inherent unity among the historical body of Christ born of Mary, his eucharistic body, and his ecclesial body. In response to the threat posted by Berengar, who emphasized a symbolic rather than real presence of Christ in the eucharist, the church emphasized the real presence of Christ in the eucharist, calling it the "*corpus verum*." To prevent any misunderstanding concerning the reality of Christ in the eucharist, it emphasized the link between Christ's eucharistic body and the true body

1. Sermon 3. This translation is from *Selected Easter Sermons of Saint Augustine* by Philip T. Weller (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1959), p. 113.

2. Sermon 6, translated in Weller, p. 109.

3. Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: L'Eucharistie et l'Église au Moyen Age* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, Coll. Théologie 3., 1944).

born of Mary, dead and risen. As vital as this link is, the other connection with the ecclesial body was lost in the process. In the emphasis on eucharistic realism, the ecclesial realism of the Augustinian view of the *totus Christus*, the whole body of Christ comprised of Christ the head and his members complete only in the eschaton, was lost.

The expression *corpus mysticum* lost its eucharistic connotation when the church was considered apart from its sacramental context. As a result of the influence of Aristotle's *Politics*, the church was thought of as a visible reality or as a human society. In such a context, the unity of the body with the head was no longer understood sacramentally, scripturally, or eschatologically, but was modeled on a society with its human leader. A concept of church as "mystical body" changed to that of "visible body." Later, under the "symbolist" influence of Wycliffe, Hus, Luther, and Calvin, the mystical body of Christ became completely dissociated from the visible church.<sup>4</sup>

The scholastic analysis of the sacraments also shows the relationship among the sign of the sacrament, the sacramental presence of Christ, and Christian unity. The scholastics spoke of the *sacramentum tantum*, the sign of the sacrament, the *res et sacramentum*, the reality of the sacrament, and the *res tantum*, the effect of the sacrament. According to this schema, with respect to the eucharist, the *sacramentum tantum* is the outward sign and appearance of bread and wine. The *res et sacramentum* is the reality of the eucharist, that is the body and blood of the risen Christ. The *res tantum* is the effect of the sacrament, that is, the unity or bond of love created by the sacrament. Too often in eucharistic piety people get "stuck" at the level of the *res et sacramentum*, thinking that the purpose of the liturgy of the eucharist is to make the body and blood of the Lord present so that they can receive him in communion. Although true, this interpretation does not go far enough. The Lord does not give us his body and blood just to be adored and worshipped in the eucharist or even that the faithful may individually receive him, but so that a greater unity, greater bond of love may be created in forming the *totus Christus*, the whole body of Christ comprised of Christ the head and his members, what we call the mystical body of Christ. The *res et sacramentum* does not exist for itself, but so that the *res tantum* may be effected. What the scholastics called the *res* or the fruit of the sacrament of the eucharist is the unity

4. de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, p. 130.

of the church, which is to say the ecclesial body of Christ in union with its Head. Thus there is an intrinsic relationship between sacramental realism, belief in the real sacramental presence of Christ in the eucharist, and ecclesial sacramental realism, wherein the church is also sacramentally present in the eucharist.

Within the eucharistic prayer the sacramental body of Christ in the eucharist is inseparable from his ecclesial body. In Eucharist Prayer IV of the Catholic rite, the double nature of the epiclesis, the invocation of the Holy Spirit, is particularly evident. The first epiclesis invokes the Spirit to change the bread and wine into the body of Christ. The second epiclesis invokes the Spirit to transform the assembly into the ecclesial body of Christ, so that joined to the Christ, they may be gathered up in his return to the Father. Thus the structure of the eucharistic prayer is a great *exitus-reditus*, a coming forth and a return. We receive the gifts of creation from the Father to whom we give thanks. These gifts are transformed into the Body of his Son, who joins us to himself and gives himself to his Father.

Yet another piece of evidence for the ecclesial meaning of the eucharist is its place as the third sacrament of initiation within Catholic theology. As such, it not only unites us to Christ, but also incorporates us into the church. Even though a baptized person who has not communicated is not less a member of the church, something in that person's baptism has not been brought to visible, sacramental expression in the absence of the eucharist. Baptism constitutes the baptized as a "liturgical person" oriented to worship in the official prayer of the church, the eucharist. That person has been incorporated into a priestly community by baptism, but without the eucharist, the priestly liturgical exercise of that person within community is missing.

Just as the restoration of the catechumenate has shown us that baptism of adults within the Easter Vigil constitutes the norm of baptism, so too, we should look to the Vigil for a deeper understanding of the eucharist. The eucharist at the Easter Vigil is where the eucharist is most itself in public and the "standard that defines the meaning of everything else — cross and sacrifice, memorial and presence, ministry and priesthood, intercession and prayer, participation and communion."<sup>5</sup> The eucharist is the culmination of initiation because it is there

5. Nathan D. Mitchell, *Forum Essays: Eucharist as Sacrament of Initiation* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994), pp. 109-10.



that the communion of believers with one another and with Christ is sacramentally visible in the sacrament of God's presence with us. In its associations with a messianic banquet, the eucharist is a sign of the ultimate and final union to which we are called and which will be completed only in the eschatological end time.

### Catholic Ecclesial Consciousness Then and Now

Despite its deep historical and theological roots, the ecclesial meaning of the eucharist has not been at the forefront of pastoral sensibilities for Catholics and other Christians. The heritage of eucharistic piety for Catholics provides a helpful illustration of the difference of eucharistic piety and sensibilities before and after the liturgical renewal. Similarly, other Christians have also experienced shifts in their understanding and practice.

Catholic history gives evidence of a tension between a private, devotional eucharistic piety and a more ecclesial, communal one. Joseph Chinnici identifies the Eucharistic movement as "the most vital spiritual movement of the first fifty years of twentieth-century American Catholicism."<sup>6</sup> The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the growth of tabernacle societies and nocturnal adoration groups. The Confraternity of Perpetual Adoration had the stated purpose "to adore the divine Lord in the Sacrament of His love and to make reparation for the many indignities offered this Holy Sacrament by ungrateful mankind."<sup>7</sup> This group promoted frequent communion, attendance at benediction, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and eucharistic processions. Chinnici notes that the practice of forty hours became a major social event in New York in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The understanding of the Blessed Sacrament during this period of history served as the sign not only of Christ's presence, but also of the identity of the priest, the role of the laity, and the place of women.<sup>8</sup> It also served a sociological function of supporting Catholic identity in a predominantly Protestant environment.

6. Joseph P. Chinnici, OFM, *Living Stones: The History and Structure of Catholic Spiritual Life in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), p. 146. I am indebted to this source for the history summarized in this section.

7. Chinnici, *Living Stones*, p. 146.

8. Chinnici, *Living Stones*, p. 152.

Hymns and prayers for private devotion suggest that the connection between object of devotion and liturgical action was not always in popular consciousness despite rather consistent magisterial teaching to the contrary. For example, the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore (1866) pointed out that the eucharist is intended primarily not as an object of adoration, but as spiritual food to be eaten.<sup>9</sup>

Chinnici comments that the eucharistic movement in the United States concentrated almost exclusively on the relationship between Jesus and the believer.<sup>10</sup> With respect to the Forty Hours devotion, Nathan Mitchell concurs, citing evidence that in popular prayer books and manuals of devotion, the liturgical aspects of Forty Hours were ignored in favor of prayers with a strongly sentimental and individualistic orientation.<sup>11</sup> A negative effect of the eucharistic movement was to constrict the meaning of the eucharist to the real presence and individual devotion. According to the piety (as contrasted with the official teaching) of the period, the primary purpose of the Mass was the consecration of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. The purpose of this consecration was individual communion with Christ and the reservation of the host in the tabernacle for private prayer. The presence is so objectified that Christ at times was popularly referred to as "Prisoner of the Tabernacle," and the piety of the time urged that people visit the Blessed Sacrament lest this prisoner be lonely. One particularly sentimental hymn occasionally used at the close of benediction was entitled "Goodnight, Sweet Jesus." The focus was on the objective presence of Christ in the sacrament. Much eucharistic devotion took place outside of the liturgy: in visits, processions, benedictions, and holy hours.

The theology of the Constitution on the Liturgy, the first document promulgated by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965),<sup>12</sup> sought to expand Catholic piety and understanding. According to this document, the nature of the liturgy is fundamentally ecclesial. The document clearly states: "liturgical services are not private functions but are

9. Nathan Mitchell, *Cult and Controversy: The Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), p. 334.

10. Chinnici, *Living Stones*, p. 154.

11. Mitchell, *Cult and Controversy*, p. 333.

12. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, translation from Austin Flannery, *Vatican II: The Basic Sixteen Documents: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations* (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Co., 1996). Hereafter SC.

celebrations of the church which is 'the sacrament of unity,' namely, "the holy people united and arranged under their bishops" (SC 26). This is evident in the following principles of liturgical renewal:

1. The primary principle of renewal is the "full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people' (1 Pet. 2:9, 4-5) have a right and obligation" (SC 14).
2. Private devotions "should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical season, according with the sacred liturgy, are in some way derived from it, and lead the people to it, since in fact the liturgy by its very nature is far superior to any of them" (SC 13). The 1973 reforms of eucharistic worship outside Mass emphasize the source of public and private devotion in the liturgical activity of the Christian people.<sup>13</sup>
3. The primary purpose for reserving the sacrament is for the communion of the dying. Devotion towards and adoration of the sacred species remain a secondary purpose.<sup>14</sup>
4. "Rites which are meant to be celebrated in common, with the faithful present and actively participating, should as far as possible be celebrated in that way rather than by an individual and quasi-privately" (SC 27). This applies with special force to the celebration of Mass and to the administration of the sacraments.
5. Christ is present most of all in the eucharistic species, but also in the person of the minister, in the word, and in the assembly (SC 7). Even though the eucharistic species remains a privileged locus of Christ's presence, this broadening to include minister, word, and assembly emphasizes the entire liturgical action as the arena of Christ's presence and action at the same time that it evokes a theology of the word as Christ the Word and a theology of the community as the body of Christ.
6. "The principal manifestation of the church consists in the full, active participation of all God's holy people in the same liturgical

13. Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, "On Holy Communion and the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery Outside of Mass," *Eucharistiae sacramentum*, 21 June 1973, Chapter II.

14. *Ibid.*, §5.



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celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in one prayer, at one altar, at which the bishop presides surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers" (SC 41). This text identifies the church liturgically and emphasizes its communal and collegial nature.

These principles of liturgical renewal exhibit a concern for the primacy of communal worship over private devotion and the nature of liturgical prayer as the prayer of the church rather than private prayer. The context of the eucharist is ecclesial and its theological meaning is also ecclesial. By our communion with Christ in the eucharist we also enter into communion with one another.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the ecclesial character of the eucharist. First, "communion" is never exclusively an action between an individual and Christ, but incorporation into Christ's ecclesial body. The emphasis is never exclusively on an individual's union with Christ in communion, but on the union among individuals in Christ. When we are joined with each other in Christ we comprise the *totus Christus*, that is, the whole Christ made up of head and members.

Since the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ, represents the church in its eschatological dimension, it is only in this sense that we can say that the church is a continuation of the Incarnation. We can only affirm this of the church as the body of Christ, not as an organization. The eucharist signs and makes sacramentally real this fullness of Christ, which will be definitively achieved only eschatologically. We anticipate a fullness and wholeness under sacramental sign even while our present experience of the body is one of brokenness and alienation through sin.

### Eucharistic Ecclesial Consciousness in Protestant Traditions

Various faith traditions emphasize that communicants receive the body of Christ when they receive the eucharist, but how conscious are most communicants that they also sacramentalize their communion with one another within the church that is the mystical body of Christ? All traditions have largely lost the ecclesial meaning of the eucharist in an almost exclusive focus on an individual's communion with Christ. For instance, for Lutherans, this may arise from Luther's concentra-

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tion on the word of promise "for you" and "for the forgiveness of sins." The Lutheran liturgical scholar Beverly Nitschke remarks, "It may be argued that in Lutheran consciousness the forgiveness of sins which is received is an intensely individual experience. It is the individual experience of forgiveness which is received." She cites the German Lutheran theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg as identifying the "Lutheran distortion of the meaning of the Eucharist" to consist in celebrating it "primarily as a visible and touchable assurance to the individual of the forgiveness of sins."<sup>15</sup>

As in Roman Catholicism, the emphasis on the individual benefits of eucharistic reception eclipsed the communal and ecclesial meaning of the Lord's Supper in Protestant circles. Even though some ecumenical documents are recognizing the ecclesial meaning of the eucharist, this recognition has probably not passed into popular consciousness. Recent Ecumenical convergence on the eucharist has roots in the historical work of all our traditions in the history of liturgical rites.<sup>16</sup>

Frank Senn, Lutheran liturgist, comments that the contemporary church is struggling to retrieve the reality that "the sacramental body forms the ecclesial body, which is kept in union with the historical body of Christ, the head of the ecclesial body, by receiving his body and blood in the sacrament."<sup>17</sup> He notes that 1 Corinthians 10-12 represents the earliest eucharistic theology and the earliest ecclesiology.<sup>18</sup> This "communion ecclesiology," which links the Eucharistic body and the ecclesial body, reflected standard teaching in the church for the first five centuries.<sup>19</sup>

Recent eucharistic sensibilities may not reflect the whole of a tradition. In addition to his emphasis on the individual benefits of the

15. Beverly A. Nitschke, "The Eucharist: For the Forgiveness of Sins: A Lutheran Response," *Ecumenical Trends* (June 1991): 92.

16. See Maxwell Johnson, *The Rites of Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), and Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

17. Frank C. Senn, *The People's Work: A Social History of the Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), p. 168.

18. Senn, *The People's Work*, p. 168.

19. J.-M.-R. Tillard, in *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ: At the Source of the Ecclesiology of Communion* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), develops this theme throughout this study. See also his *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992).

Lord's Supper, Luther, in his 1519 "Sermon on the Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ," speaks of communion as a sharing or participation in the life of Christ through his body the church: "Thus in the sacrament we too become united to Christ and are made one body with all the saints, so that Christ cares for us and acts on our behalf . . . likewise by the same love we are to be united with our neighbors, we in them and they in us."<sup>20</sup> This text clearly speaks of the eucharist's role in forming the communion of saints.

The contemporary document "Toward a Lutheran Understanding of Communion" identifies the unity of the church with communion in holy baptism and the eucharistic meal.<sup>21</sup> Recognizing the link among sacramental communion, incorporation in Christ, and ecclesial unity, it states: "The ecclesial communion is the body of Christ."<sup>22</sup>

It is difficult to view the church as sacramentally constituted if the Lord's Supper is rarely celebrated. A move to more frequent celebration characterizes a shift in eucharistic practice in many Protestant churches, although for some traditions this represents a return to earlier practices. These earlier practices by the Reformers were even more remarkable given the fact that four communions a year were considered to be very frequent for late medieval communicants. John Calvin promoted a frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper, but he could not persuade the civil authorities in Geneva to authorize more than four celebrations a year.<sup>23</sup> Although John Wesley communed on an average four or five times a week and was highly critical of the infrequency of Holy Communion in the Church of England of his day,<sup>24</sup> American Methodism inherits a practice of infrequent, usually quarterly, communion that originated with the scarcity of ministers. For

20. Noted by Simo Peura, "The Church as Spiritual Communion," in *The Church as Communion: Lutheran Contributions to Ecclesiology*, LWF Documentation 42, ed. Heinrich Holze (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1997), pp. 104-121. Citing *Luther's Works: American Edition*, Volumes 35 and 59. I am grateful to Cheryl Peterson for the reference.

21. Lutheran World Federation, "Toward a Lutheran Understanding of Communion" in *LWF Documentation: The Church as Communion*, No. 42 (1997) (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1997), No. 221, but see also Nos. 8, 11.

22. "Toward a Lutheran Understanding of Communion," No. 25.

23. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 600-601.

24. He advised the American Methodists to administer the Supper of the Lord on every Lord's Day in his 1784 letter to Dr. Coke, Mr. Asbury, and Our Brethren in North America cited in "This Holy Mystery," p. 18 (see n. 25).

decades after the establishment of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the number of elders was too small to offer the sacraments regularly to Methodist communities, often serviced by circuit riders who came to a community only quarterly, at best. The custom of quarterly communion persisted well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During this period the eucharist came to be understood as only a memorial of the death of Christ. As with other traditions, Methodism began to reclaim their sacramental heritage in the mid-twentieth century, especially with the introduction of new liturgical texts for the Lord's Supper in 1972. Both *The United Methodist Hymnal* and *The United Methodist Book of Worship* encourage congregations of The United Methodist Church to move toward a weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper at services on the Lord's Day. The Methodist document, *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion*,<sup>25</sup> reflects this reclaimed heritage. It identifies the ecclesial meaning of the eucharist:

Holy Communion is the communion of the church — the gathered community of the faithful, both local and universal. While deeply meaningful to the individuals participating, the sacrament is much more than a personal event. The first person pronouns throughout the ritual are consistently plural — we, us, our. First Corinthians 10:17 explains that “because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” “A Service of Word and Table I” uses this text as an explicit statement of Christian unity in the body of Christ. . . . The sharing and bonding experienced at the Table exemplify the nature of the church and model the world as God would have it be.<sup>26</sup>

While this text stops short of saying that the “eucharist makes the church,” it does strongly identify the unity of the church with the unity of the sacrament and develop the spirituality of eucharistic reception toward a more communal understanding while retaining the

25. <http://www.kintera.org/atf/cf/{3482e846-598f-460a-b9a7-386734470eda}/THM-BYGC.PDF>; accessed December 7, 2010. (See Resolution 8014 in The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2008, which contains the text for “This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion.” This text was adopted at the 2004 General Conference.)

26. “This Holy Mystery,” p. 7.

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traditional emphasis on the sacramental benefits as including forgiveness, nourishment, healing, transformation, mission and ministry, and eternal life.<sup>27</sup> Today many Methodists experience a richer sacramental life, including weekly celebration of Holy Communion.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has also experienced a sacramental revival that includes a greater frequency of celebration of the Lord's Supper on Sundays. The 1994 ELCA document "The Use of the Means of Grace" reaffirms weekly communion as a normative Lutheran practice: "According to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Lutheran congregations celebrate the Holy Communion every Sunday and festival. This confession remains the norm for our practice."<sup>28</sup> Currently, 46% of ELCA congregations celebrate the sacrament weekly compared to 16% in 1989. Approximately the same number celebrates it more frequently than once a month, while only 5% offer it monthly or less often.<sup>29</sup>

For many traditions, including Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, and many Lutherans, the sacraments of baptism and eucharist are constitutive of the church. Both incorporate an individual simultaneously into the body of Christ and into the church, the ecclesial body of Christ. One is a member of the church by virtue of being a member of Christ.

An agreed statement between the Orthodox and Roman Catholics expresses this understanding of the relationship among baptism, the eucharist, and the church. The Joint International Commission stated in 1982:

Believers are baptized in the Spirit in the name of the Holy Trinity to form one body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13). When the Church celebrates the eucharist, it realizes "what it is," the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:17).<sup>30</sup>

27. "This Holy Mystery," p. 8.

28. "The Use of the Means of Grace, A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament, Adopted for Guidance and Practice by the Fifth Biennial Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, August 19, 1997," Principle 35. See <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Worship/Learning-Center/The-Use-of-the-Means-of-Grace.aspx>; accessed July 23, 2010.

29. *Ibid.*, 41.

30. Joint International Commission, "The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity" (1982) in *The Quest for Unity: Orthodox and Catholics in Dialogue. Documents of the Joint International Commission and Official*



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The Report of the Anglican-Reformed International Commission (1981-84), "God's Reign and Our Unity," affirms the eucharist as constitutive of the church: "Along with baptism, the Eucharist is fundamental to and constitutive of the life of the Church. It is the sacrament given to the Church by her Lord for the continual renewal of her life in him."<sup>31</sup> This statement affirms a liturgically based identification of the church.

#### **A Eucharistic Ecclesiology as Essential for Understanding the Church as Communion**

A failure to grasp the ecclesial meaning of the eucharist impoverishes our understanding of the church, for they are necessarily interrelated. The Catholic Church believes that "the principal manifestation of the church consists in the full, active participation of all God's holy people in the same liturgical celebration, especially in the same Eucharist, in one prayer, at one altar, at which the bishop presides, surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers."<sup>32</sup> This unity of celebration both signs and effects the unity of the mystical body of Christ, for the eucharist is where the faithful are gathered together by the preaching of the gospel of Christ and the celebration of the Lord's Supper so "that by the whole fellowship is joined together through the flesh and blood of the Lord's body."<sup>33</sup> Thus the church is sacramental, mystical, Christological, and pneumatological before it is sociological or juridical. The unity of the church is not psychological, political, or a federation of the like-minded, but a sacramental and spiritual unity in Christ first established in baptism and then expressed, nourished, and brought to maturity in eucharistic communion.

A eucharistic ecclesiology perfectly expresses the creedal marks of the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The holiness of the church is communion in Christ by the power of the Spirit. The catho-

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*Dialogues in the United States 1965-1995*, ed. John Borelli and John H. Erickson (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, and Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), pp. 54-55.

31. Anglican-Reformed International Commission (1981-84), "God's Reign and Our Unity," §71 (g).

32. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 41.

33. *Lumen Gentium*, 26.

licity of the church embraces communion with the church's apostolic past as it obediently celebrates the eucharist in memory of Christ. It communes with the saints in heaven. It constitutes the unity of the church as the unity of the mystical body of Christ.

Eucharistic ecclesiology also structures the church as a communion. In Catholic ecclesiology, the church is gathered by the preaching of the word, the celebration of the Lord's Supper under the sacred ministry of the bishop.<sup>34</sup> The bishop then represents this community in the communion of particular churches, the bishops collectively in the college of bishops representing in their persons the communion of churches in union with the Bishop of Rome.<sup>35</sup> The Bishop of Rome exercises the Petrine ministry, defined as the charge to safeguard the church in unity and communion.<sup>36</sup> Thus the sacramental communion initiated in baptism and the eucharist is lived out in institutional relationships as well as in personal relationships.

## Conclusion

Some who try to restore a more ecclesial understanding may be accused of a certain horizontalism in their eucharistic piety, implying that the transcendent nature of the eucharist has been lost. Such criticisms, however, fail to acknowledge that the ecclesial meaning of the eucharist is rooted in the identity of the ecclesial community as the body of Christ within the Pauline theology of 1 Cor. 10:16-17. In the eucharist, affirmation of the Christological reality leads to the affirmation of the ecclesial reality. The presence of the latter is as real as the presence of the first. When we commune with the sacramental Body of Christ, we commune not only with the resurrected Christ but also with the church, which is also the body of Christ. The eucharist simultaneously effects communion with Christ and communion in the church. The ecclesial meaning of the eucharist restores the connection between the personal communing with Christ and the communion of all communicants with each other in Christ.

A retrieval of the ecclesial meaning of the eucharist corrects an

34. *Lumen Gentium*, 26.

35. *Lumen Gentium*, 23.

36. *Lumen Gentium*, 18.

overly individualistic and pietistic approach to the eucharist that tends to drive a wedge between the sacramental life of a Christian and the communal life of the church. It demonstrates why the eucharistic celebration is primary and indispensable to the communion of the church and cannot be replaced by scripture study groups or private devotions. As J. M. R. Tillard has remarked, "... the Eucharist is not just 'the fountain of graces from which one drinks when one is thirsty.' It is the sacramental event by which the church 'that is in such and such a place' expresses its nature: to be a gathering of human diversity in Christ."<sup>37</sup> It is also the sacramental event that expresses the essence of the Christian life: to be "in Christ" in the power of the Spirit is to be joined to all the other members of the body of Christ. A Christian cannot live a solitary life for no one who shares in the body and blood of the Lord can live for himself or herself. In this sense the ethics of the Christian life also arise from the fusion between the meaning of the eucharist and the meaning of the church.

Finally, a eucharistic ecclesiology shows the church to be that place where all is reconciled in Christ. Salvation will ultimately be restored communion with God. More than simply a judgment and proclamation of righteousness for an individual, salvation is the reconciliation of all in Christ through the power of the Spirit for the glory of the Father.

37. Tillard, *Flesh of the Church*, ix.