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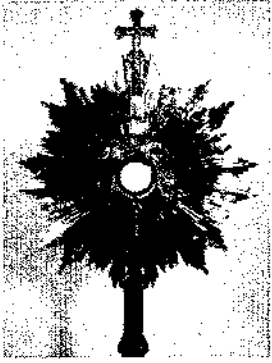
Vinculum Caritatis: Bond of Love

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Published version. *Emmanuel Magazine*, Vol. 121, No. 6 (November/December 2015): 368-378.

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EUCCHARISTIC SPIRITUALITY

Vinculum Caritatis: Bond of Love

by Susan K. Wood, SCL

In what way can it be said that the Eucharist is "a bond of charity" among believers? How are we to understand the inseparable relationship between the sacramental body of Christ and the ecclesial body of Christ, the church? Sacrosanctum Concilium invites us to see and to experience the Eucharist mystically.

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THE CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRED LITURGY FROM VATICAN II CALLED THE Eucharist a "vinculum caritatis," "a bond of charity." This reference occurs within a passage giving us the purpose for which the Eucharist was instituted:

At the Last Supper, on the night when he was betrayed, our Savior instituted the eucharistic sacrifice of his body and blood. He did this in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross throughout the centuries until he should come again, and so to entrust to his beloved spouse, the church, a memorial of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us (SC, 47).

This bond of love is not only between an individual and the risen Lord, but also the bond of love among all who receive the Eucharist, and is thus inseparable from the ecclesial meaning of the Eucharist as well as its social meaning. It is not a warm fuzzy feeling, but has a deep ontological density. It is the final effect of the koinonia established by the Eucharist.

I will develop the relationship between the Eucharist and the bond of charity within the Christian community by looking at Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, patristic sources in the mystagogical teaching of Augustine, the scholastic analysis of sacramental sign and efficacy, and the post-modern eucharistic theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet. Thus, I will look at this traditional theme as it has been appropriated through

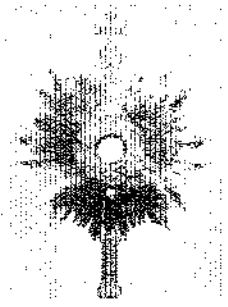
various historical periods and sacramental methodologies.

The Church of Corinth

A prime example of a community having problems with charity was the Corinthian community. The community had broken their bond of charity through quarrels and divisions, factions, some saying, "I belong to Paul," "I belong to Apollos," "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ" (1 Cor 1:12). They tolerated a Christian living with his own stepmother without interference from the community (5:1ff). Paul had to remind them not to have relations with prostitutes (6:12ff). He appeals to them to settle their grievances against each other within the community (1 Cor 6:1). Some members of the community accepted invitations to meals at which meat that had been sacrificed to idols was served (10:27ff), and took part in meals in pagan temples (8:10). At the Lord's Supper, the rich stuffed themselves with food and drink they had brought along, while the poor remained hungry (11:17ff). Worship was disrupted because glossolalia, speaking in tongues, threatened to suppress all other workings of the Spirit (14). Some denied the resurrection of the dead (15:12). The Corinthian community certainly bears witness to the fact that we are not the only Christians who have a difficult time living up to the example of Christ and getting along with one another.

In the face of this dissension, Paul appeals to the Corinthians: "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 among the members of the community in their participation in the Eucharist. Christian identity is grounded in Jesus Christ.

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. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor notes the close relationship throughout the epistle between "body of Christ" referring to the eucharistic body and referring to the ecclesial body. He finds that it is habitual in Paul's vocabulary to attribute the name "Christ" to the community.¹ This is not an identification between the community and the historical Christ, but indicates that the community performs the same function as Christ.²



Augustine

A similar identification between the ecclesial and the eucharistic body is found in Augustine of Hippo's Easter sermons and his sermons on the Gospel of John. The Easter sermons were addressed to the newly baptized, initiating them into the mysteries of the Christian life, and were instructions on the sacraments of the altar. He first affirms that the bread which they see on the altar consecrated by the word of God is the body of Christ and that the chalice holds the blood of Christ. He then asserts, "If you have received worthily, you are what you have received. He then repeats 1 Corinthians 10:17 to support this assertion.

The dominant image here is that the unity of the bread is a type or sacramental symbol of the unity of the ecclesial body. In a very similar sermon, Augustine extends the image as it applies to the newly initiated:

Bear in mind what this creature, wheat, was formerly when it still grew in the field; how the earth caused it to germinate, how the rains nurtured it; how it ripened in kernels; and how afterward the laborers carried it to the threshing floor, treaded it, winnowed it, stored it in the granary, brought it out again to be milled, then added water to it, and baked it, until at last it emerged as bread.

Bear in mind what happened in your own case, imagining a time when you did not yet exist, but then you were created and brought to the threshing floor of the Lord, threshed by hard-working oxen, that is to say, by the heralds of the Gospel. The period of your probation as catechumens was the time when you were being stored in the granary. Then came the day when you handed in your names, and the milling process began by means of the fasts and exorcisms to which you were subjected. Afterward, you came to the font, were immersed in the water, and kneaded into one dough. Finally, you were baked in the fire of the Holy Spirit, and became the bread of the Lord. . . . Now ponder on what you have received. And as it dawns on you what unity there is in the sacrament which has been instituted, be impressed with the unity that ought to prevail among yourselves. . . .

Likewise, there is an identification between the newly initiated and the eucharistic wine:

So, too, the wine made from many grapes is now one liquid, one sweet liquid in the chalice after being crushed in the wine press. In Christ's name, you also, as it were, have come to be present in the chalice of the Lord through your fast and good works, through your humility and contrition. There you are on the altar, there you are in the chalice. In this sacrament you are united with us — we are joined together, we drink together, because we share life together."

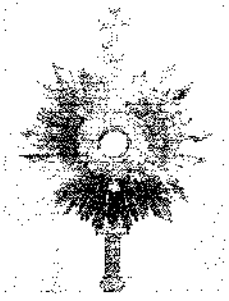
In yet another sermon, he exhorts: "Take then and eat the body of Christ, for in the body of Christ you are already made the members of Christ." In this same sermon: "Because you have life through him, you will be one body with him, for this sacrament extends the body of Christ and by it you are made inseparable from him."

The eucharistic sacrament as a sacrament of unity signs, signifies, and creates the unity of the church, the vinculum caritatis.

However, the unity of the body received at the altar is a sign and measure of the unity of the ecclesial body. The eucharistic sacrament as a sacrament of unity signs, signifies, and creates the unity of the church, the *vinculum caritatis*. The sacramental realism of the historical Christ leads to the sacramental realism of the ecclesial Christ, so that Augustine can say, "There you are on the altar, there you are in the chalice." 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 with the resurrected Christ and the church which is also the body of Christ.

The Ecclesial and Eucharistic Body

Henri de Lubac's historical study *Corpus Mysticum* traces a fascinating change in the application of the term *corpus mysticum*. 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. This is just the reverse of our use of these terms today. In the familiar



hymn used at benediction, "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 [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 between the historical body of Christ born of Mary, his eucharistic body, and his ecclesial body. In response to the threat posted by Berengar, 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 born of Mary, dead and risen.

As vital as this link is, sadly, the other connection with the ecclesial body was lost in the process. In emphasizing eucharistic realism, we have lost the ecclesial realism of the Augustinian view of the *totus Christus*, the whole body of Christ comprised of Christ the head and his members, which will only be complete in the eschaton.

The sacramental body of Christ in the Eucharist is inseparable from his ecclesial body.

The scholastic analysis of the sacraments also shows the relationship between the sign of the sacrament, the sacramental presence of Christ, and Christian unity. The scholastics spoke of the *sacramentum tantum*, that is, the sign of the sacrament, the *res et sacramentum*, that is, 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 our piety we get "stuck" at the level of the *res et sacramentum*. We think that the purpose of the liturgy of the Eucharist is to make the body and blood of the Lord present so that we can receive him in Communion. That is true enough, but it does not go far enough.

The Lord does not give us his body and blood just so that we can adore and worship him in the Eucharist or even that we may individually receive him, but so that a greater unity, a greater bond of love may

be created in forming the *totus Christus*, the whole body of Christ comprised of Christ the head and we his members, what we may call the mystical body of Christ. The *res et sacramentum* does not exist for itself, but so that the *res tantum* may be effected.

Expressions in the Liturgy

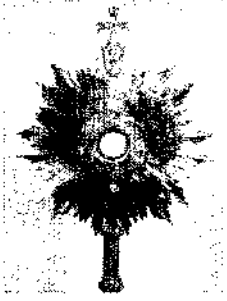
This unity is expressed through a number of liturgical elements in the eucharistic liturgy: the very fact of being gathered as an assembly, singing hymns and acclamations with one voice, exchanging the sign of peace, and receiving the one body of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Eastern Rite liturgies, there is an exclamation, "Let us love one another!" which at times replaced the action of exchanging a kiss of peace.³ This love is the "origin, content, and goal of the church's life, the only sign of the church, and the essence of the holiness and unity of the church."⁴

Consider all the scriptural citations directing us toward this love: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom 5:5); "Abide in my love" (Jn 15:4, 5, 9); "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35); "If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor 12:1-3).

Alexander Schmemmann says that the church is a union of love, not just because the members of the church are united by love, but because through this love of one another, the church manifests Christ and his love to the world. The church witnesses to Christ and "loves and saves the world through the love of Christ."⁵ The regeneration of a fallen world is accomplished not by the "natural" love we may have for those to whom we are attracted, but by the love of Christ manifest and enacted in his life, death, and resurrection. The mission of the church is to manifest this kind of love in its body, the body of the whole Christ.

Schmemmann asserts that we go to church so that this divine love will be "poured into our hearts" so that we may once again "put on love" (Col 3:14).⁶ In doing this, we constitute the body of Christ and manifest Christ to the world. This is why he deplores an "individualized" piety, in which "we egotistically separate ourselves from the gathering."⁷ I cite him at length:

How often do seemingly "spiritually" attuned and "devout" people openly declare their distaste for crowded gatherings,



which disturb them from praying, and seek empty and quiet chapels, secluded corners, separate from the “crowds.” In fact, such individual “self-absorption” would hardly be possible in the church assembly — precisely because this is not the purpose of the assembly and of our participation in it. Concerning this individual prayer, the Gospels say: “When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray . . .” (Mt 6:6). Does not this mean that the *assembling of the church* has another purpose, already contained in the very word “assembly”? Through it, the church fulfils herself, accomplishes our communion with Christ and with his love, so that in participating in it, we comprise “out of many, one body.”⁸

Schememann’s comments point to a problem we also encounter in Roman Catholicism, that we make the liturgical assembly bear the weight of all our prayer. In doing so, we fail to distinguish private prayer from public prayer or a certain kind of individual contemplation from liturgical prayer.

He notes that in the simple rite of the exchange of peace we turn to others who may be strangers to us and exchange the love of Christ. In this exchange, “we are both ‘revealed’ to each other as participants in Christ’s love, and this means as *brothers* [and sisters] *in Christ*.”⁹ This seems to be a much richer explanation of the gesture, although it remains related to the catechetical instruction based on Matthew 5:23-25: “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

In the present Western liturgy, the exchange of peace does not occur before the preparation of the gifts, but as part of the Communion Rite. Pope Innocent I interpreted the gesture as putting a seal on the conclusion of the Eucharistic Prayer, as the people’s consent to everything that has gone before.¹⁰ If this is true, it is significant that the Eucharistic Prayer is sealed by a sign of love. However, the liturgical history of the placement of this gesture in the liturgy is both varied and contested, sometimes occurring before the preparation of the gifts, so it is probably best not to make too much of this.

A more post-modern explanation of the same idea is found in the work of Louis Marie-Chauvet who distinguishes between the Eucharist as

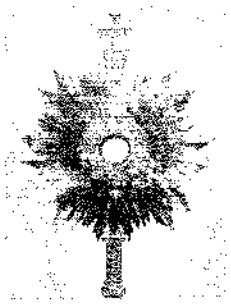
esse and *adesse*, that is, being in itself and being for, a being for us. He notes that "Christ is here" in the liturgy in the assembly, the Scriptures, and the Eucharist, but he is "not here like a "thing," but in the gift of his life and his coming-into presence."¹¹ The Eucharist does not exist for Christ to be present sacramentally for himself, but that we may be united with him and each other in a bond of love.

The Scriptures contain this same message. For example, the institution narrative in Matthew says, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28). Mark says the blood of the covenant is poured out for many (14:24). Luke says, "This is my body, which is given for you" (22:19). The body and blood broken and poured out are for us and for our salvation.

Chauvet comments that the *sacramentum*, that is, the sign of Christ's presence is not the bread as such in its unbroken state. Rather, it is the bread "in its very essence, bread-as-food, bread-as-meal, bread-for-sharing. It is in the breaking of the bread that its ultimate reality is manifested. As the 'he broke it and gave it to them' and the 'for you and for all' of the story of the institution indicate, the gesture of breaking the bread is the *symbol par excellence* of the *adesse* of Christ giving his life."¹² In the liturgy, this breaking of bread is accompanied by the sign of peace we extend to each other and our coming forward with others to commune with Christ. Chauvet notes the parallelism between the *breaking of bread* and the *communion* between members in the charity of Christ.¹³

A eucharistic people is a missionary people.

The sacramental body of Christ in the Eucharist is inseparable from his ecclesial body, as the liturgy shows. In Eucharist Prayer IV, 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. The bond of charity is none other than being gathered up



into the life of the Trinity by being joined to Christ in the power of the Spirit to return to the Father.

Chauvet speaks of the emptiness of broken bread and the absence of Christ under sacramental sign. By this, he means the sign of bread and wine, the sacramentum, conceals what it reveals, the risen Christ, who cannot be seen by our bodily eyes, but only in faith. He comments that "the Eucharist seems to us the *paradigmatic figure of this presence-of-the-absence of God* outside of which the faith would no longer be the faith, which holds us upright, watchful in hope, and exacts that we live in love in order to give God this body of humanity and of world for which God has made us responsible."¹⁴

The eucharistic presence, concealing yet revealing the presence of Christ with us, refers us back to the body, to the "here" of faith. This can be none other than the historical, social, economic, and cultural specificity and particularity where the love of Christ and the bond of charity can be made manifest. The presence of the absence of God impels us forward. The sacramental drives us to the ethical enactment of that which we acclaim and celebrate in faith, for it is only within the ethical that sacramental modality can be translated into the social, the economic, and the cultural, and that ritual time becomes historical time. The bond of charity cannot remain sacramental, the product of "ritual time," but must find its place in the "historical time" of our everyday lives.

The Heart of Christian Mysticism

As Kenneth Leech observes, the Eucharist is the heart of Christian mysticism, but this is not a flight of the alone to the alone, but a real communion with God through the materiality of bread and wine shared together.¹⁴ Eucharistic liturgy points to the fulfillment of the incarnation in the redemption of the material world. Leech identifies liturgy as a deeply subversive act, a spiritual force working within the fallen world to undermine it and renew it. The bread and wine symbolize human labor and human struggle, placed upon the altar so that they can be sanctified. It is bread "which earth has given and human hands have made."

Liturgy becomes the microcosm of the work that God is doing in the world, that is, transforming it into his body. This is the theme of Romans, chapter 8, which speaks of all creation being set free from its bondage

to decay, obtaining the freedom of the glory of the children of God, groaning in labor pains as they wait for adoption and redemption, the reconciliation of all things in Christ. The Eucharist signs and effects the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Although not transubstantiation in the technical sense of the word, the analogous transformation of creation, particularly human creation, into the body of Christ is the task of human history.

At the eucharistic liturgy, we celebrate, commemorate, and participate in this cosmic transformation. The task of realizing the bond of charity, the root of this cosmic transformation, celebrated liturgically, must be effected by being sent forth into our world to enact what we have just celebrated.


We rarely refer to the liturgy as “Mass” today, but this older term does reveal directionality within the eucharistic liturgy. It does not exist for itself or even for the spiritual lives of those assembled there, but for mission. The Latin word *missa* meant the dismissal of the group at the end of an assembly. Isidore of Seville suggests that the word “Mass” was applied to the Eucharist because the catechumens were dismissed at the beginning of the sacrifice.¹⁵ However, as Robert Cabié notes, the word *missa* covers the entire celebration, including the entrance rites and the Liturgy of the Word.¹⁶

Does this not suggest that the whole of the Eucharist is meant to send us forth to enact in the world what we have just celebrated? In other words, Eucharist is for mission. A eucharistic people is a missionary people. Someone has said that the model of a parish should be less a service station filling the spiritual needs of the members than a campaign headquarters strategically planning for the kingdom of God.

It is more than appropriate that stable eucharistic communities such as parishes develop mission statements. Moreover, these mission statements should orient the parish or eucharistic assembly beyond itself. An example of a mission statement I saw recently was “Saint _____ Parish is a family of believers, dedicated to carrying out the mission of Jesus Christ through prayerful openness to the transforming presence of God, a generous response to God’s many blessings, and respect for all God’s creation.” This seems to be a rather self-referential and consequently a rather weak mission statement. It really does not ask the parishioners to do anything.



This is in contrast to another parish I visited in Louisville. A declining center-city parish experienced dramatic revitalization when it undertook to live out three objectives: to have the best preaching in the area, to invest in high quality liturgical music, and to extend itself in mission as a “hospital for marginalized people in the church.” This group includes divorced Catholics as well as gays and lesbians. It is now such an example of congregational revitalization that the Lilly Foundation takes theological educators to visit it. The circle of the bond of charity must be an open one to embrace the other as other. In extending itself it becomes stronger.

In conclusion, the Eucharist creates a *vinculum caritatis*, a bond of charity. This bond constitutes the church as the body of Christ and manifests the church to the world. It also identifies the mission of the church in the world, uniting liturgy and ethics, ecclesial identity and mission, prayer and action. This bond of love reveals us to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, specifying the basis of our unity and communion with one another and with Christ. 

Notes

¹ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Becoming Human Together: The Pastoral Anthropology of Saint Paul* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1982), 183.

² *Ibid.*, 186.

³ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist* (Crestwood, New York: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 134.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁰ Innocent I, *Ep. 25 ad Decentium*, cited in Cabié, 114.

¹¹ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 404.

¹² Chauvet, 406.

¹³ Chauvet, 407.

¹⁴ Chauvet, 405.

¹⁵ Kenneth Leech, *Experiencing God: Theology as Spirituality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 288.

¹⁶ Saint Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* VI, 19 (PL 82:252), cited by Robert Cabié, *The Eucharist* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1986), 2.

¹⁷ Cabié, 2.