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Body of Christ: Our Diversity in Him

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FACE . . .

Body of Christ: Our Unity with Him

SUSAN K. WOOD

THE CHURCH, WRITES PAUL, IS IN SOME WAY THE BODY OF CHRIST: “DO YOU NOT know that your bodies are members of Christ?” (1 Cor 6:15); “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17).

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, addressed to the newly baptized, initiated the new Christians into the mysteries of the Christian life and gave instruction on the sacraments of the altar. Augustine first affirms that the bread that 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 goes on to assert, “If you receive them well, you are yourselves what you receive.”¹

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.”² 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.”³

At one level it would seem that Augustine is simply comparing the unity of the bread with the unity of the ecclesial body, so that what we have is merely a literary device, a simile or a metaphor. 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 is a sacrament of unity. This means that it signs, signifies, and creates the unity of the church. Thus the bread is a sacrament of the church not just because it belongs to the church, but because it signifies the church. The sacramental realism of the historical Christ leads to the sacramental realism of the ecclesial Christ so that Augustine can say, in effect, “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

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¹Augustine, “Sermon 227,” in *Sermons*, pt. 3, vol. 6 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John Rotelle (New Rochelle, NY: New City, 1993) 254.

²*Selected Easter Sermons of Saint Augustine*, trans. Philip Weller (St. Louis: Herder, 1959) 113.

³*Ibid.*, 114.

TO FACE

Body of Christ: Our Diversity in Him

LOIS E. MALCOLM

LIKE OTHER ANCIENT WRITERS, PAUL USES THE HUMAN BODY TO ILLUSTRATE how unity and diversity in Christian communities are not incompatible. As Christ's "body," the church has diverse members in the same way that a body has diverse parts (1 Cor 12:12-30). That diversity does not threaten the unity of the body; rather, diversity is essential for the body's proper functioning. The church itself could not function without a diversity of gifts: some are apostles, others prophets and teachers, yet others have gifts for healing, assistance, the use of spiritual power, and so on. Even weaker—or more embarrassing—members are indispensable. Indeed, less respectable members are to be treated with greater respect. And in sharp contrast with ancient Greek and Roman ideas of self-sufficiency, Paul urges the members of Christ's body to share deeply in one another's experiences. When one member suffers, all suffer; when one rejoices, all rejoice.

This image of the church as Christ's body is not peripheral to Christian belief and practice. In baptism Christians are incorporated into Christ's body. We are "baptized into Christ's death" so that we might "walk" or live a new life (Rom 6:1-11). We now live within the "world"—the new creation, the new age—ushered in by his death and resurrection. In that world, the fundamental distinctions that separate people—or cause them to grade each other in hierarchies of who is in or out, high or low—no longer matter. Christ's baptism is for all people—Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female, to use Paul's pairs (Gal 3:27-28). All who have died in Christ are now heirs to all Christ has, this Christ who "shared equality with God" (Phil 2:6).

This new age, of course, has arrived yet is still fully awaited. We still live in a world where the bombings of New York and Afghanistan only continue decades of terror like that in Cambodia, Rwanda, and other lesser-known places. But in our baptism into Christ's death and life, we have at least tasted the "first fruits" of that new age (Rom 8:18-27). We can, even in this present age, witness to the new creation inaugurated by his death and resurrection.

Paul also speaks of "discerning the body" when we "eat of the bread" and "drink of the cup" (1 Cor 11:17-24). At the Lord's Supper, we are to examine ourselves as members of Christ's "body." It is not insignificant that 1 Corinthians focuses on the very topics that have plagued Christian communities ever since the

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we commune with the sacramental body of Christ, we commune with the resurrected Christ and the church, which is also the body of Christ.

We speak of three bodies of Christ: the historical body, the sacramental body, and the ecclesial body. One consequence of this original perception of the unity of the “three bodies” is that the emphasis is never on an individual’s union with Christ in communion, but on the union among individuals in Christ. “Communion” includes incorporation into Christ’s ecclesial body. The unity of the eucharistic body and the ecclesial body is never an extrinsic unity, because the ecclesial body is not another body and the body of Christ, but the *totus Christus*, the fullness of Christ, head joined to members of the body. Since the eucharistic action is memorial, presence, and anticipation, the eucharist signs and makes sacramentally real this which will be definitively achieved only eschatologically.

Sadly, the patristic and early medieval perception of the original unity between the body of Christ, born of Mary, the eucharistic body, and the ecclesial body was lost. Symptomatic of this loss was the semantic change of the term *corpus mysticum*, the “mystical body,” from its original use to designate the eucharistic body to its use, from the middle of the twelfth century, to designate the ecclesial body. At the same time, and to a large extent because of the eucharistic controversies about the real presence with Beranger of Tours, the term *corpus verum*, the “true body,” which originally referred to the ecclesial body, was now used to designate the eucharistic body. A reaffirmation of sacramental eucharistic realism led to the diminishment of sacramental ecclesial realism. Yet, as we have seen, it is precisely sacramental realism that enables us to affirm ecclesial realism.

The danger in this image of the church as the body of Christ lies in considering the church as a prolongation of the incarnation, which too closely identifies the church with Christ. Here the church is absorbed into Christ without adequate observance of the distinction between the two. In Roman Catholicism, the concept of church as sacrament functions as a corrective to this since the concept of sacrament is able to express the unity between the sign and the referent of that sign at the same time that it maintains their distinction. A sacrament is a symbol of a sacred reality, a visible form of invisible grace. In the case of the church, the visible sign includes the institutional and social aspect of the church, that is, all that is manifest in history and located in space and time. The referent of the sign is the resurrected Christ. As with the incarnation, in the union without identification of the human and divine natures of Christ, in the church there is the union of the divine and the human, the human being the manifestation and revelation of the divine. ⊕

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letter was written (sexual morality, marital relations, lawsuits, the meaning and use of spiritual gifts, the status and function of women, the Lord's Supper, the resurrection, and so on). Even if we disagree with Paul's advice on specifics, we can nonetheless acknowledge that these concrete matters of communal debate are precisely the places—the loci—where we discern the palpable presence of Christ's broken and raised "body" in our communities.

In turn, Paul's "theology of the cross" (found in 1 Cor 1:18-2:5) cannot be divorced from his very concrete appeal in 1 Corinthians for reconciliation. The Christ in whose body we have been baptized and crucified cannot be divided. The crucified Christ has called us out of our divisions—regardless of our ethnic identity or even religious persuasion—into a new humanity created only by the power that raised Jesus from the dead. Thus, the message of the cross is not primarily about negation. Its odd use of the contrasts between strength/weakness and wisdom/foolishness forces us rhetorically to attend more closely to how God's power and wisdom is radically different from human conceptions of power and wisdom. In view of the cross's power and wisdom, we no longer need to secure ourselves by rallying in separate interest groups that defend well-earned turf. We no longer need petty political or theological leaders who sow divisions among us or create hierarchies demarcating who is in or out, or who is high or low. All is now ours in Christ—the present and the future, even life and death (1 Cor 3:22-23).

I would be dishonest, of course, if I did not acknowledge that Paul is inconsistent in his use of the body metaphor. He also uses it, for example, to reinstate the very hierarchies between men and women that his account of baptism—and by implication the Lord's Supper and the message of the cross—undermines (see, e.g., 1 Cor 11:2-16). Students of his carried this teaching even further, using Christ's body as a sanction for reinstating Greco-Roman household codes within Christian communities (see, e.g., Eph 5:21-33). Paul and his students probably understood only too well what havoc proclamation of Jesus' crucified and raised body unleashes when it overturns conventional notions of power. This proclamation does create—within the very messy complexity of our lives—a new humanity out of men and women, and out of people of different ethnic groups, religious backgrounds, races, and social classes. Jesus' broken and raised body will—and should—continue to threaten anyone concerned with securing turf. Far from sanctioning human hierarchies and demarcations among people, the witness to Jesus' broken and raised body "embodies" a foolishness that shames the wise and a weakness that shames the strong. Indeed, such a witness embodies how God uses "things that are not" to reduce to nothing "things that are" (1 Cor 1:29). Like Paul, we too perhaps have reason to want to mitigate its world-shattering impact on our communities. ⊕

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