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Eucharistic Hospitality: A Bi-directional Dynamic

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Eucharistic hospitality transcends the modern notion that limits hospitality to welcoming someone into our homes or being friendly to others. To stop at this means nothing less than a mere simplification of a serious issue. Hence, “to equate hospitality with generic friendliness or private service is to domesticate it. For such domestication distorts how extraordinary and strange Christian hospitality really is.”¹ The Eucharistic hospitality that this paper advances implies a two-way movement and activity. First, it is a coming (communion), and secondly, a going (sharing), so long as the going is intrinsically understood as a demand to share that which we have become (“christs”). It is essentially an empowerment to share the new identity (Eucharistic person) of the receiver; not just a participant of Christ but also a willing channel for the same Christ to reach others. It stands as rational therefore, that Eucharistic hospitality is a mission of love; an extension of the Trinitarian *perichoresis*. In a similar sense, we should consider the African practice of ‘eating kola nut together’ in light of this two-way aspect of communion and sharing in love.

This dynamic balance of a bifurcated centripetal (coming) and centrifugal (going) impulse ensures equilibrium of the vertical and horizontal aspects of Christian lives. It evokes an invitation to participate in the divine life (hospitality), which launches us into the life of sharing among one another in gratitude to God’s prodigality (immanent and economic). The two forces notably derive from the same Trinitarian source. The forces that attract towards the source and that impel towards others draw from an ultimate participation in philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher’s *Deus est tremendum et fascinans*: “[A] participation that might well be as terrifying as it is consoling.”² Our responsibility towards others can be terrifying, but our resilience comes from God’s love. The exodus account of the burning bush suggests that understanding being advanced here. It connotes a strange imperative manner that humiliates, as depicted in Moses. The significant metaphor of the burning bush, without its leaves getting burned, captured the attention of Moses and engaged him in a mission of hospitality—the liberation of the Israelites. The encounter humbled but also empowered Moses, in such a related manner as what we experience at the reception of the Eucharist. He worshipped God in profound adoration and set out, considering himself only an instrument of God.

Worship as motivation for hospitality³ misleads because it locates hospitality outside worship and reduces worship as a means, not an end. But the proper locus of worship cannot be outside the trinity, which is the origin of the *perichoresis* of hospitality. The church’s liturgical life typifies this Trinitarian love that invites our participation, as depicted in David Fagerberg’s definition. “Liturgy is the Trinity’s *perichoresis* kenotically extended to invite our synergistic ascent into deification.”⁴ Even though liturgy as a whole is a participation in the divine life for the dual ends of glorification and divinization,

¹ Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality, Welcoming God and other Strangers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 13.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴ David Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 9.

the Eucharist as source and summit of liturgical activities suffices for the grounding of hospitality in Christian lives. Worship names the way we participate in a triune of God's mutual giving, and worship itself is hospitality.⁵ Other forms of hospitality derive from this Trinitarian foundation.

Worship simultaneously inculcates gratitude and disposes us to acknowledge our finitude and dependency, which harmonizes God's transcendental otherness without destroying His incarnational vulnerability, an event that recalls the divine-human intercourse towards the eschaton. In divine-human relationality, transcendence and solidarity mutually cohere. Worship in this context transcends the traditional one moment of a faith-gathering in a church to include the living out or sharing of the faith-based experience. Every authentic faith experience demands concrete witnesses, often described as liturgical life, in response to the divine invitation. In consonance with Fagerberg's classic definition, mentioned above, Don Saliers provides a deeper appreciation of the word "invite." First, "invite connotes a dialectic of action–reaction dynamics, whereby humanity only follows the constant initiation of the divine prompts. Invitation defines Eucharistic hospitality whose imperative does not compel but only impels.

Narrowing liturgical worship to the specificity of hospitality, Saliers explains liturgy as that unique opportunity which invites us to a home where none of us has ever been.⁶ The implied antimony of a home in a strange place or a home away from home should not evoke suspicion of contradiction; instead, it points to the reality that undergirds Eucharistic hospitality. "Salier's description of a home-to-be is depicted in various biblical stories. Abraham is called to a home where he has never been, as are Moses, Mary, the disciples, and many others. They leave a familiar place in order to take up a new place before God."⁷ The new home indicates a leap of faith in accord with divine love and providence in a radical dependence on God, understood within the ambience of "for God's sakeness but never as it pleases us." Theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez's entering into the other, to be that neighbor, resonates with Salier's proposal.

This possible shift of location from our whims towards God's will, with respect to the origin of hospitality, defines the difference between the modern distorted notion of hospitality and the abandoned Eucharistic hospitality in need of retrieval. "To say the liturgy is a home where none of us has been and to refer to God's beauty as always 'new' and 'strange' reminds us that God cannot be domesticated."⁸ It is easy to lose sight of who owns the work of hospitality or who controls it. With the least attention, God could be objectified and boxed into our whimsical framework. "God's hospitable can be 'inhospitable' by contemporary standards; it can make us feel not 'at home.' The process of becoming guests

⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶ Don Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 105.

⁷ Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.



The dying Vincent receiving Viaticum.
Stained glass, Église Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, Rolbing, France.
Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
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and also hosts of God is not necessarily easy and smooth.”⁹ The Eucharistic hospitality of a Trinitarian basis reflects this dual effect of attraction and awesomeness—attraction that invites us to come and eat, and after eating, when our eyes open, the startling imperative which impels us to leave immediately and share our experiences, as was taught by the two disciples at the Emmaus encounter.

The Eucharist provides a closer paradigm for a more profound understanding of the triad: God, humanity, and the world, through the incarnational lens. Robert Bellah understands this and posits that the Eucharist “is the supreme ritual expression of brokenness and death, of homelessness and landlessness. It consecrates all the good things of the earth and it promises renewal and rebirth not only for the individual but for society and cosmos. And yet it makes us restless on this earth: It makes us see the conditional, and provisional, and broken quality of all things human.”¹⁰ The participatory role of any community in the Eucharistic life of Jesus defines such community to be Eucharistic. The ecclesial community, therefore, is that known to keep alive the example given by Jesus, with the Eucharistic meal as its central ritual. Emphasis is laid here on community spirit and the centrality of the Eucharistic meal.

Community spirit denies not the vertical dimension of our spirituality; instead it points at the insufficiency of the vertical dimension and consequently lends itself as a

⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁰ Robert Bellah, “Liturgy and Experience,” in *The Roots of Ritual*, ed. James Shaughnessy (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 232.

proper complement. The complementarity of the vertical and the horizontal dimensions underlay the first Eucharist experience. It started with a thanksgiving to the Father by Jesus (vertical), then the breaking, the sharing, and the eating by the disciples (horizontal). The two planes, though distinct, are inseparable. But unfortunately modern individualism has infiltrated consciously or unconsciously into many of the contemporary Eucharistic communities, and gnawed injuriously on community spirit in order to dissect the two planes.

More recently, the vertical dimension has received greater emphasis to the detriment of the horizontal—the sharing. Incidentally, participation in the Eucharistic meal reflects an atomized aggregate of mutually suspicious individuals,¹¹ each person to himself and God for us all. There is a contemporaneous spirit that conflicts with the Mass dismissal empowerment, “Go and share the good news.” Commitment to individual duties often conflicts with or even obstructs this Eucharistic empowerment, thereby putting the will of God in constant competition with compulsive duties. It stands rationally correct why Mother Theresa of Calcutta reminds modern minds that “charity begins when duty ends.”

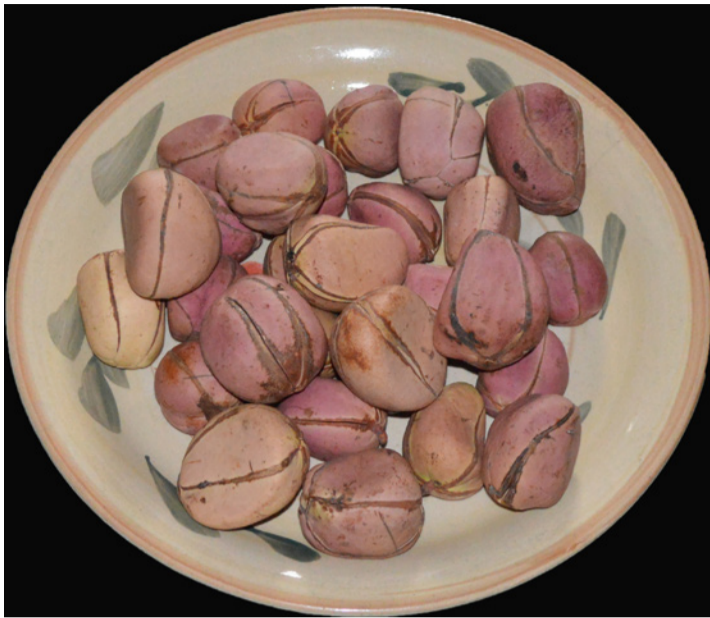
Once, I was terribly shocked that there was no single young person or child at a Sunday Mass, probably my very first experience in the United States. Curiously, I inquired from the pastor, but his reply did not help my perplexity: “The parents won’t bring them,” he stated. And why not I persisted? Then with a chuckle he said: “Everyone is busy here in the U.S., and moreover individual boundaries are meant to be respected.” Whatever he meant by these words, the memory is still strong and challenging. Based on this possible threat to community spirit, I would ask that we consider a pre-Christian hospitality practice that has persisted among the Igbo society (Nigeria) in an attempt to highlight the true meaning of a Christian Eucharistic community, expected in Eucharistic hospitality. By following this route, I do not intend to disparage or sound polemic to any culture but to share fragments of my earliest experiences that helped to inform my understanding of what Eucharistic hospitality might entail. It is, however, by no standard a better example but a mere clue to better appreciate Christian teaching. Hence, parallels between the two traditions cannot dissolve their differences.

For the Igbo people, reality is unitary. Everything else is seen from the relationship with the Supreme Being. “The Igbo world is deeply religious and integral. This explains the living unity between the spiritual and the material realms of existence.”¹² This particular Igbo cosmology differs not from the African universe often likened to “a spider’s web,” with human beings at the center of God’s creation and all other creatures spread out around the humans in a system of relationships that interact with one another. Thus, when a single thread is struck or pulled, the whole system is affected. It is right, then, to say that God is the fundamental source of the unity of all beings.¹³

¹¹ William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist, Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 12.

¹² A.M. Ngweshemi, “Rediscovering the Human: The Quest for a Christo-Theological Anthropology in Africa,” *Studies in Biblical Literature*, vol. 39 (2002), 11.

¹³ Michael I. Mozia, *Solidarity in the Church and Solidarity Among the Igbos of Nigeria* (Dissertation, Rome, 1982), 176.



The kola nut.

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The traditional Igbo society is structured to promote communal fraternity, sorority, and being-with-others. Communion defines real existence to an extent that one dares not dream of severing from this integral web-like link. Communality pervades the entire fabric of the Igbo society anchoring at different levels or stages of interpersonal interactions. The scope of my paper might be too small for any elaboration of this claim, except for just one very important custom that possibly parallels the communal practice of the Eucharistic hospitality. In addition to the sustenance of communal spirit, it supports the primacy of hospitality. Like the Eucharist, it could be seen as both food and symbol.

Communal spirit is not only cherished in this particular society, but it is also highly ritualized through the sacred symbol of Kola nuts.¹⁴ It is a peculiar ritualistic gesture not so common to her neighboring people. The first shock that greets a stranger is the asymmetrical relationship between the kola nut and the profundity of respect or sacredness accorded it. For example, its denial to an individual or one's willful refusal to participate in it evokes a dangerous signal of severance from the web-unit. Kola nut is a locally grown multi-cotyledon nut, botanically known as *cola acuminata* and strictly distinguished from *cola nitida*.¹⁵ Ambrose C. Agu summarizes its function thus: "[F]irst and foremost, it fulfills a mystic union for the Igbos." For him, "it is a symbol of ritual communion of the living and the dead under the benevolent presence of God. It celebrates the oneness of those who partake of it, among themselves, and their unity with the spiritual world. As a social object, it is a primary sign of welcome to one's guests, and a pledge of benign intention towards those with whom one relates. Indeed, it expresses all that the Igbos envisage in communion with others... namely love, unity, togetherness, friendship, benefaction and so on."¹⁶

The famous Igbo writer J.U.T. Nzeako's articulation of Kola nut, though originally written in the Igbo language, captures the sacramental aspect. The translated version reads:

¹⁴ Victor Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 75.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁶ Ambrose C. Agu, *The Eucharist and the Igbo Communal Spirit* (Wurzburg: Echter Verlag GmbH, 2004), 76.

“Certainly, kola nut is small, but it fulfills many functions in our (Igbo) land, signifying the benevolent disposition (good intention) one has towards others, before the creator of humans, and before the ancestors, that is, those dead but worthy of remembrance. In view of these, where there is kola nut, there is respect, honor and good intention.”¹⁷ Among its polyvalent values, Nzeako omits life, which is central in the words of its blessing, and which Agu captures elsewhere. The blessing of the kola nut usually begins with words of appreciation, “who brings Kola, brings life.”¹⁸ The provider manifests the best of intentions for his guest, who qualifies for a xenophile. According to Damian Eze, “the kola nut assumes a new meaning after the prayer. It becomes a communion, a covenant meal. This trans-signification, or assuming a new meaning is a clear indication that the people become what they eat, or rather, they renew what they are—a people bound by a covenant.”¹⁹

Blessing of the kola nut comes second in the four stages of its ritual, before its consumption. The rest, respectively, include the presentation, often used to trace or familiarize the relationality of those present, the breaking, and finally sharing. Sometimes the sharing is done by the youngest, while the eldest says the blessing. But when the host does the blessing, he never omits to emphasize the mutuality expected between his guests and his hosting. Such words are used as, “May the visit of my guest(s) not bring my down fall and when he leaves may he not develop a hunchback on his way home.”²⁰ Having expressed these sentiments together, they can then share the kola nut, which bonds their friendship. “Those who share the nut, seal thereby a bond of friendship which, so long as normal conditions prevail, is not likely to be broken.”²¹ A reader might wonder what the significance of a hunchback can be. Hunchback is symbolic and derives from the possible effect of the weight of gifts that the stranger (guest) carries home, often (in ancient times) carried on the head or over the shoulder. The motif then can be understood that the honesty and innocence of the stranger assures his safety home, which echoes the biblical assertion of Jesus that, “truth will always set you free.” Nevertheless, the necessity of hospitality provides no excuses for emergencies or uninvited guests. The Igbo people’s motif of hospitality fits into this paradigm as couched in her popular idiom: “When my guest departs peacefully and satisfied, let my creditors come.”²² They can go the extra mile to satisfy their guests.

That kola nut knows no discrimination²³ is the key symbolism of this seed of communion, except for its gender divide among the ritual presiders, but not in the eating.

¹⁷ J.U.T. Nzeako, *Omenala Ndi Igbo*, cited in Agu, *The Eucharist and the Igbo*, 77.

¹⁸ Agu, *The Eucharist and the Igbo*, 77.

¹⁹ Damian Eze, *The Eucharist as Orikonso: A Study in Eucharistic Ecclesiology from an Igbo Perspective* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 2008), 115 .

²⁰ Anigbo Osmund, *Commensality: The Kolanut and the Stranger in an Igbo Community* (Enugu, Nigeria: Ministry of Information, 1988), 34.

²¹ G.T. Basden, *Niger Ibos* (London: Seeley, Service and Co. Ltd, 1938), 162.

²² Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, 72.

²³ Agu, *The Eucharist and the Igbo*, 79.



Igbo people participating in the ceremonial sharing of the kola nut.

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Primarily, it seeks a common wellbeing of its partakers. Another very important symbol is the material significance of this nut. “And as the seed is made up of lobes joined together by a cotyledonous ligament, so is kola nut seen in Igbo land as a symbol of unity.”²⁴ Its distinct lobes (between two and eight) image the constitutive nature of human society, made up of individual persons but also as ones in relation; as taught by Augustine. Like the Eucharistic wafers whose bits contain Christ in his fullness, every person is satisfied by the tasting of a small piece of kola nut. And similar to the Eucharist, its aim in the eating transcends the satisfaction of physical hunger. “Kola nut is not meant to satisfy hunger. The joy of it all is the *Koinonia*.”²⁵ In fact, after the kola nut ritual comes other forms of (hospitable) meals and drinks, but never before it. “It (kola nut) always comes first. It is the king.”²⁶ Eating and drinking together symbolize an existing bond of communion, which kola nut reassures by absorbing strangers into the web of existence.

Conversely, kola nut is not shared with one’s enemy, because the latter’s life constitutes a dangerous threat to the communal society. Once the centripetal link of harmony is suspected to have been strewn, probably through quarrel, communality is suspended. “The people quarrelling do not eat kola nut unless at the instance of reconciliation. But once reconciliation is achieved, the disputed parties can then offer kola nut to each other and eat it together.”²⁷ It is a gesture meant to reestablish the broken web-link. This, in sum, demonstrates vividly the spirit that underscores kola nut sharing.

However, kola nut sharing falls short of Eucharistic hospitality in many senses. First, and most importantly, is its Christological absence. Second, kola nut sharing segregates and excludes its enemies. Third, the ancestral connection of kola nut sharing can provoke suspicion for Christians. Fourth, kola nut sharing is a parochial practice while the Eucharist is universal. Nevertheless, one important value of kola nut sharing that parallels Eucharistic hospitality is its symbolism of communality, friendship and love. This love bond was emphasized by Bishop Joseph Ukpo, a non-Igbo Catholic cleric, during the second Nigeria

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, 74.

²⁷ Agu, *The Eucharist and the Igbo*, 79.

National Eucharistic Congress at Owerri, Igboland, in 1992. He said, “Jesus celebrated the last supper within the context of a community meal.... The love manifested in the traditional breaking of kola nuts can enrich the Christian understanding of the Eucharist as a communion, as *agape*. We can offer the world a Christianity that is operational in Africa as a communitarian family where unity and peace reign supreme in justice and love....”²⁸

The spirit at work in the community is done in the form of *agape*, of love. In a most precise formula, Lucien Richard teaches that “love is the great leveler.” And “it is in the Eucharist” he argues, “that equality and reciprocity must be manifested.”²⁹ These two key words, equality and reciprocity, are very essential to a true Eucharistic understanding and practice. One alone cannot be enough since it is difficult to actually have one and not the other. They resemble two sides of a coin. Their mutual importance is felt at the absence of any or both of them. It is not strange, therefore, that the first biblical recorded conflict over the Eucharistic meal is a class/tribal conflict between the rich and the poor³⁰ (Hellenistic widows), informed Paul’s injunction in I Corinthians, 11:20-22. Also, Jesus’ personal experiences witnessed gross distortion of either equality or reciprocity or both. This is one reason I noted Richard’s Eucharistic love formula to be classic and timeless. The Eucharistic abuses which suppressed the communal (equality) and sharing (reciprocity) undergirded attacks inflicted on Jesus by either the Jews or the apostles, when they noticed how he interacted with the despised and marginalized in society. Even though these eventful moments (eating with tax collectors and chatting with the Samaritan woman) preceded the institution of the Eucharist at the last supper, the lessons were virtually the same since they highlight the opposition to communion and sharing.

But Eucharistic hospitality targets the despised and marginalized, which defines it as an apt interruption of a status quo that nurtures and perpetrates inequality and individualism. Eucharistic hospitality can be revolutionary; a reminder that the standard of the world is not enough but demands the “extra mile” towards the marginalized. “Those marginalized by social and economic injustice not only have a claim on God’s mercy but an equal potent claim on the Eucharistic community attention.”³¹ Monika Hellwig connects it to a broader reality as a full realization of God’s kingdom here on earth, where equality and reciprocity reign sublime.

The [Eucharist]... is in the first place the celebration of the hospitality of God shared by guests who commit themselves to become fellow hosts with God. It is the celebration of the divine hospitality as offered in the human presence of Jesus as Word, Wisdom and out-reach of God. It subsumes in itself the

²⁸ Matthew Kustenbauder, “Rediscovering the Eucharist as Communion Meal: African Contributions to the World Christian Church,” in *The Other Journal.com: An Intersection of Theology and Culture* (2006), 3.

²⁹ Lucien Richard, *Living the Hospitality of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 50.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

grateful acknowledgement of God's hospitality in creation, but also the recall and renewal of God's liberating intervention on behalf of the *habiru* (Hebrews), the enslaved and deprivileged who had been kept from peoplehood, freedom and human dignity, and were therefore redemptively called anew to be the people of God, a witness and blessing to all peoples of the earth.³²

Understood as a meal, the Eucharist should not be only spiritualized as Angel F. Mendez Montoya warns.³³ Primarily the Eucharist is about food, about eating, but even more about sharing, for the food that the Eucharist is, is the "will of God" as Christ tells us.³⁴ Montoya reminds us that "we are currently facing a terrible food crisis, but the problem is not a lack of resources. The problem is the lack of sharing food with others."³⁵ Hence, hospitality does not require many resources; it does require a willingness to share what we have, whether food, time, space, or money. It often seems that the most gracious hosts are themselves quite poor.³⁶

The will of God as manifested in Jesus's Eucharistic hospitality bears on the bifurcated love of God and our neighbor; even if that neighbor qualifies in our standard as an enemy or stranger, who in the estimation of the Igbo society poses a threat to the coherence of her existence. The truth is that love for our neighbor is required for our love for God—the horizontal must bond the vertical to form a cross, a sign of salvation. The love that extends to the enemy seems contradictory when not anchored on God's love, which we only reciprocate.³⁷ This Johannine text provides the link: only those who love their neighbor can love God back. And only those who truly love God can share fully with others.

At this theological height, hospitality to the stranger becomes a bridge that connects our way to God and God's way to us, in such a manner that God is not in competition with the neighbor-stranger, but is the stranger. In the Eucharist, the dialectic of host-guest is sacramentalized and realized; communion happens.³⁸

The epitome of hospitality in the Good Samaritan model is worthy of recall. Compassion can only be enough in the Eucharistic hospitality as a starting point that invites for relocation in solidarity, an entering into space with the other.³⁹ The willingness to enter

³² *Ibid*, 18.

³³ Angel F. Mendez Montoya, *Dialogo* [A bilingual journal published by the Center for Latino Research, DePaul University] 16:2 (Fall 2013), 71.

³⁴ Richard, *Living the Hospitality of God*, 51.

³⁵ Montoya, *Dialogo*, 69.

³⁶ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room, Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 116.

³⁷ I John 4:19-21.

³⁸ Richard, *Living the Hospitality of God*, 52.

³⁹ Luke T. Johnson, *Sharing Possessions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 104-105.



Vincent de Paul kneeling in prayer, as theologians discuss the Eucharist.

A mural in the chapel of the Sorbonne, Paris, France.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

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into the location of the other resonates with Montoya's desire of God to be with humanity; also humanity's participation in that desire.⁴⁰ However, Eucharistic hospitality includes food but extends to every human need. The Good Samaritan shared his three "T"s, "time, treasure, and talent," almost himself, just as Christ did. They were put into practice in his response to the wounded stranger. The action of the Samaritan also exposes the weakness of the traditional Igbo hospitality which requires a kola nut ritual to establish a bond of friendship before an expression of solidarity. But what could have been the Samaritan's motivation in the biblical context? One possible answer, even though contestable, might be to save the life of the stranger, which is a participation in the Trinitarian desire towards humanity. Otherwise, why should a despised Samaritan show love to his despiser, a Jew?

The uniqueness of Eucharistic hospitality combines two most difficult acts, forgiveness and repentance; each are vividly exemplified in two significant events of the Good Samaritan and the two disciples at Emmaus. While the Samaritan forgave and shared of himself, the two disciples experienced transformation at the breaking of bread by Christ and left immediately to share their experiences.⁴¹ James Loder's exegetical hermeneutics captures this '*metanoia*' dimension of the Eucharist:

As the men "take this [broken bread] in," they are not only exposed to the brokenness they brought consciously to the room, but they are also exposed in the false hopes they brought into their relationship with Jesus in the first place... Thus the broken body received from the risen Lord presents a whole new reality, a startling way of looking at things... Following Jesus' disappearance, the two men experience within and correlatively a power of new being.⁴²

As a practice of divine-love, hospitality, symbolized by the partaking of a meal, can set in motion a movement of awareness that leads to repentance. The Igbo society knows this

⁴⁰ Montoya, *Dialogo*, 71.

⁴¹ Luke 24:30-35.

⁴² James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment* (Helmets & Howard Publishers, 1989), as quoted in Richard, *Living the Hospitality of God*, 52-53.



Kola nut bowl (okwa oji), Nigeria, Igbo people.

Early 20th century, wood carving.

Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Wisconsin.

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vital step and expresses it in the conciliatory practice, which heals a ruptured web-link in the communitarian framework. But the non-eating or non-sharing with whomsoever falls outside the web limits its efficiency and contrasts to Jesus' inclusive example, wherein, for instance, the latter fed Judas from his dish.⁴³ It is this love of enemy (stranger) that defines and differentiates it from other cultural practices, such as that of the Igbo society. And excepting that, as Christians our practice of hospitality is defined by Jesus's standard, we are not yet Eucharistic people.

The two operative words highlighted by Richard, equality and reciprocity, undergird Eucharistic hospitality. The Eucharistic standard lived by Jesus, especially love of enemies or suspicious strangers, qualifies the kind of hospitality being advanced. Eucharistic communion and sharing with strangers, enemies, poor, vulnerable, and friends and families truly represent what we become—"christs"—whenever we commune at Christ's table. Christ, the center point of a centripetal bond of invitation to eat, and the centrifugal mandate to share what we become, gives new meaning and renewed identity. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."⁴⁴ Reciprocity must not be misread as "give that you may receive from the same person." Rather, give with the firm belief that you will never lack because God is superabundant.⁴⁵ Reciprocity also indicates that hospitality is not a reserve for a particular group towards others, but a universal mandate that switches the guest-host dynamism. The willingness to act in love makes all the difference, because whatever denies our freedom negates God's will made manifest in the Eucharist.

The shared meal was not only a social act of friendship but also a religious act of fellowship with God.⁴⁶ The peculiarity of Jesus's table that invites for emulation, contrasts with any form of exclusiveness. As the invitation to eating is open to all, so must sharing be, for Eucharistic hospitality in its uniqueness represents a great leveler of humanity. "The fullest meaning of Eucharist goes well beyond a mere attitude of thankfulness and

⁴³ John 13:26-30.

⁴⁴ Matthew 10:40.

⁴⁵ Montoya, *Dialogo*, 69.

⁴⁶ Richard, *Living the Hospitality of God*, 32.

presses with eager yearning for concrete outward evidence of gratitude that indicates the gift is effective and present."⁴⁷

Eucharistic hospitality is practical Christianity. Christianity is first a journey towards Christ in response to God's open invitation to all of humanity: "Come and eat without cost."⁴⁸ Moreover, Christianity is a reaching out for Christ: "Go make disciples of all nations."⁴⁹ Christ feeds us with his body and blood, and commissions us to go and do likewise for others. But the simple truth is that, for whatever reasons, we have failed Christ. Such is the modern disease of self-centeredness that if we had lived during the time of the crucifixion a large number of us might have sided with Peter in his denial and many with Judas in betrayal, while the rest would find solidarity with the crowd rather than Christ. But, in contrast, the Eucharistic hospitality is critically advanced and enlightened, the necessity of its two integral movements that challenge our utmost responsibilities. And like receptacles with outlets, the inflowing of God's love in us opens up the outflowing of that same love towards others without any segregation. Hence, Christianity truly understood is Christianity lived as Eucharistic persons or community, where oneness, equality, and reciprocity prevail for the sake of Christ. For in Christ the vertical and horizontal dimensions of life perfectly intersect.



⁴⁷ Johannes Betz, "Eucharist," in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 448.

⁴⁸ Isaiah 55:1.

⁴⁹ Matthew 28:19.



The dying Vincent receiving Viaticum.

Stained glass, Église Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, Rolbing, France.

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The kola nut.
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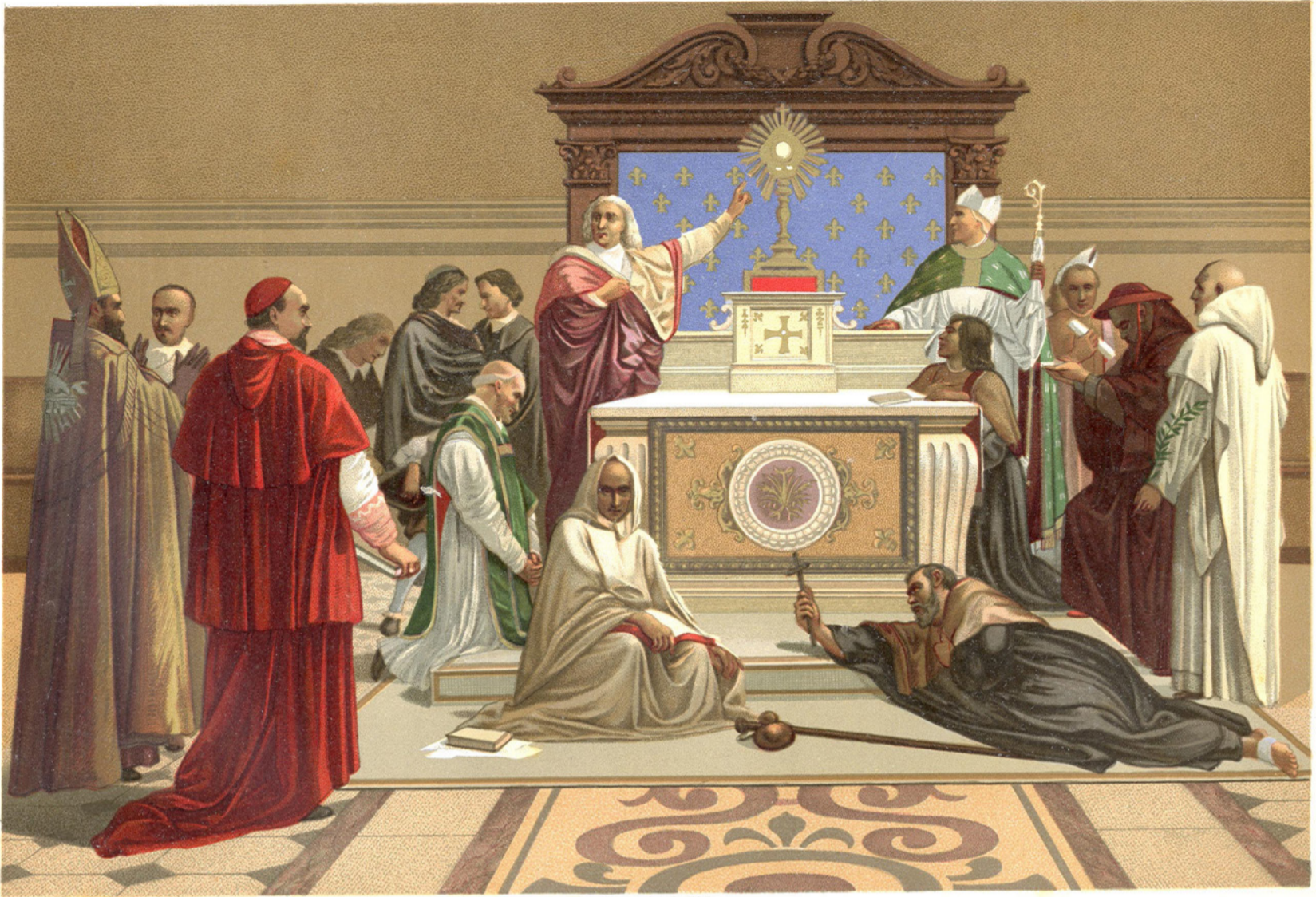




Igbo people participating
in the ceremonial sharing
of the kola nut.

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Imo Lemercier & C^o Paris

Vincent de Paul kneeling in prayer, as theologians discuss the Eucharist.

A mural in the chapel of the Sorbonne, Paris, France.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online

<http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/>





Kola nut bowl (okwa oji), Nigeria, Igbo people.

Early 20th century, wood carving.

Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Wisconsin.

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