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Russell Hardiman

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Communio and communion Eucharistic issues far beyond translations

By Russell Hardiman

[Editor's note: The following article by Russell Hardiman, the founding editor of this journal, was written in 2022, fifty years after the opening of the Second Vatican Council. As this is the sixtieth year since Sacrosanctum Concilium was written it is fitting to include this article.]

Introduction

In the new translation of *Roman Missal*¹, the Priest greets the people, '*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all*', where, since 1970 we had spoken of the *fellowship* of the Holy Spirit. We have become used in our Catholic tradition over the years to using the word '*communion*' to refer to our eating and drinking of the Eucharistic Bread and Wine. This essay seeks to clarify and expand on our understanding of this word in the context of a fuller appreciation of all that is involved in our participation in the Eucharist.

Many people were formed in an individualistic understanding of '*receiving Holy Communion*' as a very personal act in which they were strengthened in grace. For some, it is more important to receive communion than to participate in Mass itself. For some, the participation in Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest is not very important, whereas to receive communion would be.

Overcoming the distortions of these perceptions may well be difficult. One pathway at least is to focus on the best understanding of the word '*communion*' and connect it to its original scriptural meaning. In this essay we will follow the various traditions of the concept of communion into its practice in the Latin Church and in subsequent historical eras, up to the restoration of its meaning in the present day.

The words *Communio/Communion*

The true meaning of the word communion is very hard to communicate. This is because the profound experience of most people is in the use of the word '*communion*' and phrases like '*First Communion*' and '*Holy Communion*'. This reality is expressed in the popular phrases, to '*receive communion*' or '*to go to communion*', used in Catholic circles, so similar to the Anglican phrase '*to take communion*'. The long and the short of all of this is that the word '*communion*' is bedevilled in its English usage without any reference to its original language or context.

The source of this word comes in the farewell greeting used by St Paul in 2 Cor. 13:14. This was taken up after the Second Vatican Council in the Roman Missal as '*May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all*'.² The essence of the problem reveals itself in the new translation of the Ordinary of the Mass where *fellowship* has become '*communion of*

¹ *Missale Romanum*, First Edition 1970 p. 385, Third Edition, 2002.

² *Missale Romanum*, First Edition 1970 p. 385, Third Edition, 2002.

the Holy Spirit.³ This may well provoke angst about how many communions there are at Mass. In the original Greek the word used is 'koinonia', which was translated into Latin as '*communio*'. And so became anglicised as 'communion', usually associated with a qualifying adjective, viz. first, holy, solemn, annual, monthly, daily, etc.

The original Greek and Latin words emphasised the literal sense of being 'at one with or in union with'. This was both in a vertical union, in being one with Christ in being raised up through baptism into his living body and consequently a horizontal union, in being one with all others in being one with Christ.

***Communio*/Communion in the Latin Rite**

A further example of the concept in its linguistic sense comes from the various prayers in the Roman Canon (Eucharistic Prayer I) where a strong emphasis is given to the union of the whole Church in offering the Eucharist. The prayer, which is usually designated by its first word as *Communicantes*, specifically links up the image that we offer [Eucharist] in union with the Pope and the local bishop, with all the baptised now living, in union with Mary and all the saints and all the baptised who have died. In addition, on the major celebrations of the Church Year, particularly allied to the celebration of Christian Initiation at Christmas, Epiphany, Holy Thursday, Eastertide, Ascension and Pentecost, special texts of remembrance of the day's meaning are inserted.

The previous English translation poorly expressed this sense of communion with the Pope and the bishops. The original Latin is '*quae tibi offerimus una cum famulo tuo papa nostro N. et antistite nostro N.*'⁴, literally '*which we offer to you as one family with our Pope N. and our bishop N.*' This was rendered in the previous translation as '*We offer them for N. our Pope and for N. our bishop*'; this alters the sense of the text. There is a big difference between offering together with the Pope and bishops and praying for them (which is done in the Prayer of the Faithful. This is more clearly expressed in the new translation, '*...we offer...together with your servant N. our Pope and N. our Bishop...*'⁵

Pauline *Communio*/Communion

The fundamental basis of *Communio/Communion* is in the Pauline baptismal theology of being baptised into Christ's death and being raised up with his Risen Spirit. This foundation of *Communio/Communion* is the source of the deep roots in the ecclesiology of the New Testament, and particularly St Paul, which became the common Eucharistic ecclesiology of the Latin and Greek Fathers and their various schools in the earliest centuries. We have emphasised elsewhere how Paul expounded his theology of the Body of Christ making this base metaphor as the foundation of his theology of Church, which was his personal experience on the road to Damascus.

New meanings in new contexts

³ *Roman Missal*, English Translation, 2011, p.548.

⁴ *Missale Romanum*, First Edition, p. 447.

⁵ Eucharistic Prayer I, *Roman Missal* p. 669.

For the first five centuries the Pauline image of the Body of Christ was the primary analogue as to how Christians explained their experience of Christ's presence with them. The Fathers of the Church linked past, present and future as the unique three levels of the one relationship in Christ:

1. Past - The Body of Jesus dead and raised up to eternal life at the Father's right hand.
2. Present - the Body of Christ which is the Church in the era of the Spirit he promised.
3. Future - The Body of the Church whereby all are called to be in communion in the mystery of God's plan.⁶

The interconnection between *receiving* the Body and Blood of Christ and *being* the Body of Christ was well expressed by St Augustine in one of his Easter homilies (Sermon 227) where he challenged the new Christians '*If you receive worthily, you are what you receive.*' Pastorally to say '*Amen*' in receiving Holy Communion in the Body and Blood of Christ is to affirm '*We receive who we are, we become what we receive.*' This is better expressed in Italian, in saying, '*così sia*' or, '*Would that it be so.*'

St Augustine is still quoted for his profound expression of the mutual connection. Whereby '*The Eucharist makes the Church and the Church makes the Eucharist.*' Beyond the fifth century there were many movements. following the attacks on Rome, the invasion of the northern pagan tribes, with the consequent separation of the Eastern Church and its Constantinople leadership from the Western Church and the Bishop of Rome. These resulted in significant changes in liturgical practice and theology.

In theological terms of the era, the loss came about in a movement beyond the original Augustinian language which featured the ritual action (*sacramentum*) and the reality (*sacraficium et res*) to the platonic sense of reality being made present in symbol. This brought about a new terminology to explain the purpose of the Church's ritual action:

Rite - *Sacramentum tantum*

Effect - *Res et sacramentum*

Purpose (grace in Christ) - *Res tantum*

A significant consequence of this loss of sacramental action was to be the preoccupation to focus on the moment when the change was effected. This eventuated in new interpretations of the different contexts when the special action was done:

- In Eucharist, the focus was on the moment of consecration and the words used.
- In Baptism, the focus was on the pouring of water with the words, just

1. ⁶ *Pastoral Liturgy* (Vol 35, 1 pp 9-13,266. The *Lineamenta* Draft for the Synod on the Eucharist late in 2005 (n 15) developed this threefold level of past, present and future in the theology of St Thomas Aquinas, especially in the hymn, *O Sacrum Convivium*.

- one single occasion out of multiple rites.
- In Confirmation, now separated from the context of initiation, the focus was on the anointing with the oil of Chrism rather than the laying on of hands.
 - In Holy Orders, the focus was on the rites of handing over the instruments of the Order: for deacons, the Book of Gospels; for priests, the chalice and paten; for bishops, the mitre and crozier.

It was a loss of the appreciation of the sacramental action to a focus on special moments. allied with special words. These words, often now separated from their original Jewish matrix, adapted for Christian use. Now shaped a change in the expression of the meaning of grace. Grace was no longer seen as the unique relationship in communion with Christ, sharing in his humanity which was expressed in intensifying ways through the character imparted with Baptism, Chrismation, and Orders. Grace now was objectified or reified, that is, almost turned into an objective thing, encouraging a quantitative sense of grace, the possibility of an increase in grace, and the merit in earning grace. The personal relationship in communion with Christ through his Holy Spirit was no longer very clear.

St Anselm's theology of atonement

In the first century of the second millennium, St. Anselm of Canterbury introduced a new paradigm or model for explaining redemption and salvation. This was in terms of the emphasis on the incapacity of humankind to make atonement for the offence against God through human sin. Only in Christ Jesus, the divine Person incarnated as human like us in all things but sin, could reparation for the sins of the world be made by a human with infinite capacity.

This theology of atonement rapidly became the major paradigm of spirituality and devotions throughout the Church. The capacity for implementing this change was facilitated by the vision of the Benedictine monk, Hildebrand, who became Pope Gregory VII in 1075, who epitomised a new era of papal power and the spiritualised theology of priesthood and celibacy which was taken even further in the next century. The medium of further change was the growing impact of the codification of law, and the structures of the Roman Curia, to implement the new universal legal system. In the extreme arc of the pendulum swing, this led to minimalist expressions of the absolute requirements for validity and the possibilities in legal requirements for lawfulness. This was further reinforced with a changing theological model of ordination. This was now defined in terms of the reception and possession of the power to confect the sacraments, because Holy Orders were the source of this power (*potestas*).

The Scholastic synthesis

This corresponded also with the new usage of paradigms from the recovered philosophy of Aristotle, especially regarding sacramental practices. The important distinction between matter (the material used) and form (the words recited), and also between substance (the essence) and accidents (the external appearances) gave St. Thomas Aquinas a new capacity to synthesise the teachings of the Church about the cause and effect of sacraments in new philosophical concepts which have lasted for almost a thousand years.

In the same era (the thirteenth century), came an innovation in religious life, until then limited to monks and nuns. Mendicant friars, chiefly Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and Servites, rather than being static and attached for life to a particular monastery, moved about among the people and travelled from place to place. They were equally at home among the ranks of the students in the newly arising phenomenon of universities and among the poor and illiterate. They brought the Gospel to life by introducing new devotions, prayer forms and practices which appealed to the imagination and soon became so popular as to promote a rapid growth in the devotional life of the people. This was quite separate from the sacramental, liturgical life of the Church.

This confluence of many factors coming together saw the emergence of the Scholastic synthesis which is often presumed in the claim that the thirteenth was the greatest of the centuries. It was at this time that the popular devotions of the rosary, the Christmas crib, the Stations of the Cross and the crucifix with lifelike image of a bloodied, suffering Jesus became a prominent part of the faith-life of every level of society.⁷

This is also the time for the extension of Corpus Christi from being a localised celebration from 1246 in Liège, Belgium, to a Feast of the universal Church in 1264. The texts of prayers and hymns for the Feast, which were composed by Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas, became the expression of Eucharistic devotion as well as the medium, through Corpus Christi processions, which brought a new Eucharistic spirituality and devotion to the life of the Church.⁸ In the same era, the Church (at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215) brought in the precept for everyone to receive Communion once a year and to confess serious sin. The introduction of a law to instil a value shows how infrequent was the practice, and how disjointed was the devotion of the people from the mainstream sacramental life of the Church.

In this climax of the new institutions, new manpower capacity, along with a devotional lodestone that could be mined for their own needs by people of any background and education, the patterns of worship and the traditions of devotion in the daily life of the Church remained almost unchanged for centuries. To some extent the belief that the thirteenth century was the greatest of all meant a comfort zone in which the same principles were renewed time and time again. The same issues are still very prevalent today.

The Reformation era was initiated by the limitations of the minimalism in sacramental practice and the public scandals of the manipulation of indulgences which were so removed from the practices of the early Church. The criteria of the reformers could be none other than the models of the Scriptures and the early Church, but they were not so secure in their assumptions.

⁷ For background reading on the devotions and the Paschal Mystery, see the author's *Years of the Year: The Paschal Mystery celebrated in Christian Worship*. Fremantle: Pastoral Liturgy Publications, 1997, pp. 191-202.

⁸ See Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*. Cambridge University Press 1991. See also Nathan Mitchell, *Cult and Controversy: The Worship of the Eucharist outside Mass*. New York: Pueblo, 1982

With the rise in critical biblical studies in the nineteenth century, there began new methodologies for considering the theology of the Church, the place of the Bible in the life of the Church and the renewal of the liturgy in the light of these insights. These were to come together in the era of the Vatican Council.

Vatican II and the new millennium

Vatican II and the many post-conciliar documents called for a deeper understanding of the sacramental dimension of the Church as a whole, both in its institutional aspects and in its pastoral activity. In calling for this, the Council was able to draw on the fruits of the monastic liturgical movement of the nineteenth century and the pastoral liturgical movement of the twentieth century, as well as the benefits of the biblical movement and the emergence of the recaptured theology of the Church as the Body of Christ.

In many passages throughout the Vatican II documents, the Eucharist is portrayed in phrases which have helped shape the Council's ecclesiology. To call the Church Mystery or Sacrament (LG Ch.1); the People of God (LG Ch.2); and the Church's Mission to the World (GS) revealed themes of an ecclesiology quite different from anything before the Council. Twenty years after the Council, the Final Report of the 1985 Synod used another phrase that mirrored the reflection of the decades before the Council:

The ecclesiology [of communion/communion] is the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents.⁹

Another significant dimension picked up in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) is the parallel between the word communion/communion and the life of the Holy Trinity as the basis of the central mystery of Christian faith and life:

By this time the word communion begins to be used more often as well in connection with the Eucharist and other contexts; communion is a word used to express our share in the life of the Holy Trinity. This stress on Trinity comes more and more to the fore, and I think it is a result of absorbing at depth the first chapter of **Lumen Gentium**, where the Mystery of the Church is treated together with the Mystery of the Trinity.¹⁰

Ecclesiology of *Communio*

The renewed ecclesiology of communion over a period of century and a half has now reached the stage where the linkage of Trinity, Church and Eucharist are all seen in the one divine perspective. The Catechism's assertion of the Trinity as the central Mystery of Christian life and faith has been expressed in the Church's formal documents and the magisterial teaching of Blessed John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI in many different images and themes.

In this balanced view, communion remains in fact a term for describing ecclesiology and Eucharistic theology in a way that is full of promise, not only for ecumenical dialogue, especially with the Orthodox, but also for

⁹ *The Final Report of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, 1985* Washington: US Catholic Conference, 1986, n.1.

¹⁰ Jeremy Driscoll OSB, *Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Church's Communion in Ecclesia Orans* 21, (2004,) 205.

understanding Church and Eucharist within Roman Catholicism itself. There is no question that the ecclesiology of Vatican II represents a shift from the ecclesiology which held sway in the Latin Church in the immediately preceding centuries. But the Council recovered an ecclesiology rooted in the best traditions of the undivided Church, and it was precisely for this reason that the Council adopted it.¹¹

To be in *Communio*/Communion

When the ecclesiology of *Communio* is understood as the ecclesiology of Christ's Body the Church, enlivened by the Holy Spirit, to witness to the Kingdom, the mystery of God's plan, then it opens up a new dimension of what it is to be in communion with others. It resonates with the phrase, '*communicatio in sacris*' (shared communion), which in Church law has been used to define who may receive communion and who may not. In the many bilateral and multilateral dialogues since Vatican II between different ecclesial communions, there have been numerous documents of shared agreement affirmed. Yet there remain many tensions around the issue of intercommunion. Between ecclesial communities, to be in communion is to have and practice the capacity to share Eucharist. The differences between ecclesial communities are underlined by the different judgements about who may receive communion at whose altar.

To be in communion requires that all the baptised make the affirmation in faith to live in communion with all Christ's faithful, until we **all** become the Body of Christ as one living witness of unity, solidarity and hope to live in the Communion of Saints, in that unity for which Christ prayed (John 17:21). Until this is achieved, it is a greater act of faith to acknowledge the lack of full unity rather than make an individualistic judgement based on personal preference.

More than words

We began by highlighting the problems inherent in the use of the word *communion*. This comes about because the average person in the pew has been shaped for so long by the strong emphasis on '*receiving communion*', which has actually only been a feature of Church life since Pope Pius X's encouragement of frequent, even daily, communion early in the twentieth century. Spirituality has been shaped in such a way that the Eucharistic action had largely been reduced to the reception of communion.

With such a perception of the elevated status of the word communion to refer to the action of receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, it is difficult for most people now to understand the earliest biblical connotations that the word communion refers both to the vertical union with Christ through baptism and the horizontal union of being one with all those baptised in Christ.

The difficulty is in drawing attention to the memorial aspect of Christ's words, 'Do this as the memorial of me' (1 Cor. 11:25). Jesus gave his unique emphasis on these words when he said, 'This is my blood, the blood of the new covenant which is to be poured out for many' (Mk 14:26). The heart of the new covenant is in the way Christians understood that '*The blessing cup that we bless is a communion with the*

¹¹ Driscoll, *Eucharist Source and Summit*, 206.

blood of Christ and the bread that we break is communion with the body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16). This understanding underpinned their connection with the death of Jesus and generated the new awareness that to break the bread and bless the cup was – for Christians – the source of their identity as for followers of Jesus the Lord, just as the Passover was for the Jews. Christians followed the mandate of Jesus to do this in memory of him. It was an action, not a thing.

We need to see the Eucharistic presence of Christ that makes the Church and we need to see the Church in its full ecclesiology to enable it to make the Eucharist. We are the assembly gathered in Christ's name, led by the ordained leaders of the Church Formed by the word proclaimed, mediated by the Eucharistic Prayer in its structure of thanksgiving for the actions of God in the past, and its movement now which brings the presence of Christ through the invocation of the Holy Spirit on our gifts to become the gift of Christ's communion; and the invocation of the Holy Spirit that we become one body, one spirit in Christ, now and in the fullness of his kingdom.