



A Table For All: Eucharist As Model For Radical Welcome And Community

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Abstract:

This article considers the Eucharist as a framework for communal life. Rather than a place of privilege or exclusion, the table creates an inclusive vision for how the world should be. It is a ritual of imagination and transformation, reaching beyond the symbolic table into a material world of need. Drawing on the work of Cláudio Carvalhaes, as well as the Eucharistic instructions of Jesus and practices of the early church, I explore the political and communal contours of participating in the holy meal. In this way, Eucharist provides nourishment and sustenance for the work of justice in the world.

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Introduction

In June 2021, American Catholic bishops made headlines in the US when they began working to deny President Joe Biden Catholic holy communion.¹ Despite warnings from the Vatican, the measure passed with a significant majority of 155-68. The aim of the draft is to admonish politicians who support pro-choice policies. In addition to his stand on women's rights, President Biden's pro-marriage equality platform has made him the subject of the bishops' disapproval. When visiting Florence, South Carolina in 2019, then-Presidential candidate Biden was denied communion by Father Robert More. More believed that because of Biden's pro-choice stance, he was "outside of church teaching," which thus meant he was ineligible to receive the sacrament of communion.

This instance is certainly not the first time that Catholic Church leaders have sought to deny communion to others. In fact, the Church has many historical examples of

¹ Julia Harte Gabriella Borter, "U.S. Bishops Vote to Draft Communion Statement That May Rebuke Biden," *Reuters*, June 18, 2021, accessed July 30, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-bishops-vote-draft-communion-statement-that-may-rebuke-biden-abortion-views-2021-06-18/>.

excommunicating or denying parishioners the sacraments for various reasons.² Yet, it is odd that support for women's right to make choices for their own reproductive help has been cast as issues outside of church teaching under, but Capital Punishment and war have received less attention. Shouldn't death penalty and war at odds with the pro-life platform, too? When Catholic William Barr resumed federal death penalties during his tenure as Attorney General under Donald Trump, he was not denied communion. There seems to be a double standard here; or at the very least it demonstrates a hyper-focus, a fixation, as it were, among sects of the Catholic Church on issues related to women and LGBTQ+ people—people historically marginalized by the Church. Suffice it to say that the Catholic Church would be better served looking and dealing more justly with their own internal contradictions and sins. These conversations would perhaps be more fruitful if we looked at who Jesus included or excluded.

This paper explores the open table (i.e., the Lord's Table) as setting the terms for radical hospitality and community in the Christian tradition. The table, whereon communion is distributed and shared, is a model for how Jesus invited and communed with others and rehearsed how the world could and should be through Eucharistic imagination. We can surmise this theology of radical hospitality through Jesus' teachings, his inclusion of others in the sacrament of Eucharist, and the shared meal as a hallmark of the early church movement. Far from an exclusivist practice, Eucharist invites and welcomes all; and through partaking in the elements together, sharing in the bread and wine brings a subversive hope in newly formed community. I argue that the Eucharist is the ultimate example of inclusion and welcoming outsiders to come and belong. There is room for everyone at the table.

Section One: Between the Altar and the World

In *Eucharist and Globalization: Redrawing the Borders of Eucharistic Hospitality* Cláudio Carvalhaes recalls how Fr. Óscar Romero's death at the Eucharistic altar demonstrated how his work against violence and injustice in his country was not separate from his work at the altar:

Around the table, a new world was called for, rehearsed, and organized. Through gathering at the altar, the ground of God's holy, just, and communal ground food

² Cyprian writes: "No one can have God for his Father, who does not have the Church for his Mother." This quote played an important role in the church's rise to supreme power, a power over life and death. While Cyprian seeking to bring unity to Christian thought and practice, it set a dangerous precedent of uniformity, a way of excluding and excommunicating people from the fellowship of the Church. Cyprian. *Cyprian: De Unitate = (On the Unity of the Church)*. (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1964).

was to be spread across the country to transform structures of injustice, unchain the ties of misery, and turn lives and land into a holy, just, and communal ground. There, around bread and wine, the life and death of a people were at stake, the pulsing of life for many and God's option for the poor over and against the threatening powers that sustained oppressive governance, abuse, and exploitation.³

Romero as murdered because of his message. His blood was poured out as he stood at the table in radical opposition against violence and poverty. His witness is a testimony to what is at stake with Eucharistic theology: people's lives. Carvalhaes contends that the sacrament of Eucharist is one of the most powerful rituals in the Western world for this reason. It has immense power to enact and create worlds. It reorients us in the direction of God's hope for our world. Rather than creating neat boundaries, the practice of Eucharist "crosses boundaries as it affects laws, shapes, behaviors, forms politics and counter-politics, issues ethical demands, and creates worldviews. Whatever we do at, in, or around the altar or table is fundamentally connected to the very practical ways we live. The Eucharistic table gives us a framework that guides us in our decision-making as we are constantly re-creating the world of God."⁴ Eucharist also crosses boundaries of race, gender, class, age, and sexuality.⁵ For Carvalhaes, Eucharist is a way of extending hospitality to a disastrous world. This is Eucharistic imagination.

Section Two: What Would Jesus Do?

In the 1990s, What Would Jesus Do (W.W.J.D.) bracelets became a popular trend in evangelical circles. If I recall correctly, feeding the poor and turning over the moneychangers' tables were not the first examples. Innocently, W.W.J.D. represents an honest question that can be generative: "what would Jesus do?" is a way of personifying the teachings of Jesus in daily life. Naively, however, the bracelet becomes like a bumper sticker, a way of displaying one's piety. In this way, WWJD offers an example of how shallow the language of

³ Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Eucharist and Globalization: Redrawing the Borders of Eucharistic Hospitality*, (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 1.

⁴ Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Eucharist and Globalization: Redrawing the Borders of Eucharistic Hospitality*, 2.

⁵ Ebenezer Akeseh. "Racial Habitus, Resurrection and Moral Imagination." *Journal of Moral Theology* 11, no.1 (2022): 37–54. <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/31673.pdf>; Anne F. Elvey, Carol Hogan, Kim Power, and Claire Renkin (ed.). *Reinterpreting the Eucharist: Explorations in Feminist Theology and Ethics (Gender, Theology and Spirituality)*. (Oxfordshire, England: Routledge, 2017); Tina Beattie. "Insight Beyond Sight: Sacramentality, Gender and the Eucharist with Reference to the Isenheim Altarpiece." *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1014 (2007): 170–86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43251119>.

love and practices of evangelism, narrowly defined as conversion, can be. I have seen Jesus “do” many things over the years, including things which I am not sure he would have done. Like all theological inquiry, “What would Jesus do?” often eludes easy answers. But questions lead to other questions. I ask this question in the context of the Eucharist: What *would* Jesus do as it relates to the Eucharist? Or, perhaps more succinct: Who would Jesus serve or not serve?⁶

We find a narrative of the Lord’s Supper in the Triple Tradition, that is, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In John there is simply a reference by Jesus concerning eating his flesh and drinking his blood, which is not unrelated to accusations of cannibalism against the early church. The meaning of the meal, and what it is or represents has been debated since its inception. There were some, like John Chrysostom and Ambrose, who believed the bread and wine were the literal body and blood of Jesus, while others, such as Cyril of Jerusalem, adopted a more symbolic interpretation (Of course, this predates the Reformation and arguments over transubstantiation versus consubstantiation. I do not wish to enter those debates here).

Regardless of one’s view of exactly what the bread embodies or represents, provisionally, we may say the meaning of the sacrament of communion is more than simply nutrition; it is a ritual of remembrance and the confirmation of a covenant between those at the table that lasts beyond consumption. That gives it a sacramental nature. The bread is not simply bread, the wine not simply wine. In the body and blood, they signify a life that is broken, blessed, poured out, and consumed by all at the table. All eat of the bread.⁷ All drink from the cup. Luke’s gospel embellishes the account, adding more contextual information and spelling out what is to come. But if we aren’t careful, this can distract from the core teaching of this meal: it is an act of veneration meant for the entire community gathered around the table. Jesus teaches this act of remembrance to be done and taught in his absence. It starts with the twelve, but it is meant to be more than a supper club.

Let us for a moment look around and consider those gathered at Jesus’ table: Thomas, called the doubter; Matthew, the tax-collector; Judas Iscariot, known as the betrayer; Simon the Zealot; and Peter, the rock. What can be said of this motley crew? I suggest that Jesus’ inclusion

⁶ John A. Coleman. “How the Eucharist Proclaims Social Justice.” *G21 Resources. The Church in the 21st Century Center*. (Boston: Boston College, Fall 2011), 20-21. <https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/top/church21/pdf/C21ResourceSUMMER110817web.pdf>.

⁷ Brannon Hancock. “Pluralism and Sacrament: Eucharistic Possibility in a Post-ecclesial World.” *Literature and Theology* 19, no.3 (2005): 265–277. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/litthe/fri028>; Jennifer Garrison. *Challenging Communion: The Eucharist and Middle English Literature*. (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 81-104.

of diverse disciples shows the universality and appeal of his teachings. No one is excluded, not the Zealot or the tax-collector, though they certainly had problematic jobs. Peter doesn't get canceled because he is sometimes obtuse and quick to speak or act. Because of his skepticism, Thomas isn't kicked out of the group; in fact, in the post-resurrection story, Jesus allows Thomas to touch his wounds, affirming and assuaging Thomas' doubt. What does it mean that Jesus knew he would be betrayed and loved Judas anyways? If there is room for Judas at the table, certainly there is room for everyone. Indeed, if it is the Lord's table, we are simply guests, not the host.

Section Two: Abundance at the Table

How could we speak of the Eucharist, or worse, share in the bread and cup, without thinking of the hungry in our world? Where is the daily bread for the 25,000 people (10,000 children) who die from hunger?⁸ Dorothee Söelle has argued that without the poor there is no nearness to God.⁹ In fact, justice is the way we discover God. Thus, the dream of daily bread is God's dream. Echoing the words of Jesus to Peter: "Do you love me?... Feed my sheep."¹⁰ In a world of scarcity, the Eucharist challenges the capitalistic impulses that create rich and poor, winners and losers, subverting them with the reality that in God's kingdom and at the Lord's table, there is a plentiful feast. The table is where the greatest commandment plays out: we love God by loving our neighbor and ensuring they have enough to eat.

Hospitality is at the center of the Eucharistic imagination. If we consider the birth of the church in Acts, we see that the early church "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."¹¹ Day by day followers met at the Temple and dined with another from house to house, eating with "glad and generous hearts, having the goodwill of all the people."¹² Once again, the Eucharistic meal, or table fellowship, is placed at the center of community life, inspiring hearts to generosity and a concern for the goodwill of *all*

⁸ John Holmes, "Losing 25,000 to Hunger Every Day," United Nations, accessed August 01, 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/losing-25000-hunger-every-day>.

⁹ Dorothee Söelle, *On Earth as in Heaven: A Liberation Spirituality of Sharing*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 64; Robert J. Starratt. "Liturgy as Curriculum: the Dynamics of Liturgical Education." *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice* 4, no.1 (2000): 57-71. <https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/top/church21/pdf/C21ResourceSUMMER110817web.pdf>.

¹⁰ John 21:17, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

¹¹ Acts 2:42, NRSV.

¹² Acts 2:46-47.

the people. The early church movement was marked by radical welcome, inviting and adding to their numbers daily. Notice the emphasis on inclusion and not exclusion. The community was committed to the common good through acts of altruism and the redistribution of wealth, which, more than a utopic fantasy, represented an extension of Jesus' Eucharistic teaching into daily life. This daily bread was how the church grew and was nourished. But I fear we have mostly lost that sort of double nourishment, i.e., of sustenance in the bread and of the goodwill of all people. John Dominic Crossan writes: "We do not love by bread alone. But bread is never alone."¹³ Bread represents the material needs that people have, and if Christian traditions become too inwardly focused, too parochial, in their imagination, there is no radical welcome or hospitality to offer to those looking for a community of belonging.

The Eucharist represents an invitation; it is not mandatory or meant to be consumed in vain. It is an intentional act. When we accept the invitation, we agree to be in covenant with God and with each other. When we open our tables, we open our hearts and lives. When we approach the table with sincerity, we bring with us our doubts, hopes, and dreams. The table represents an invitation to come make good on promises, to receive forgiveness even as we consume the elements. The sacrament sacramentalizes us, and we can go forth transformed to make amends for our misdeeds.¹⁴ That is part and parcel of covenant and discipleship. In the meantime, we live in the in-between, the tension between the altar and the world. The altar gives a vision for the how the world should be, even as it gives sustenance to go into the world and make it so. The message of Jesus is always waiting for us, an invitation to come and fellowship at a table for all, where there is enough for everyone.

Conclusion

Leonardo Boff writes: "Sacraments are essentially evocations of a past and a future that are lived in the present."¹⁵ The Eucharist is more than a symbolic ritual; it is a model for life and living. Exercising Eucharistic imagination offers nourishment and sustenance to a world in need. Rather than focusing on who to exclude, it is the ultimate invitation to a table where there is

¹³ John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened In the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 422.

¹⁴ Joshua Cockayne, David Eford, Gordon Haynes, August Ludwigs, Daniel Molto, Richard Tamburro, and Jack Warman. "Experiencing the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist." *Journal of Analytic Theology* 5, no. (2017): 175-196. <https://doi.org/10.12978/jat.v5i1.147>.

¹⁵ Leonardo Boff, *Sacraments of Life: Life of the Sacraments* (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1987), 7.

enough room for everyone. Instead of scarcity, at the table there is an abundance to meet the needs of those who approach it. By accepting the invitation, we commit to the work of transformation that seeks to close the gap between the altar/table and the world.

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