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Book Review

Vol. XLI

December 1970

No. 11

# Sharing the Body in the Body

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I have little to share with you on the Eucharist and the Christian life other than my own odyssey in this respect, so let me be frankly biographical. What I have learned about the holy meal and the holy life cannot be separated from the agonies and joys of those who have shared the way of Jesus with me, so I am indebted especially to the people of my parish, including, and above all, my colleague John Puella.

When I was a student at the seminary, I went to my quota of Communion services. They helped me; but I must say, looking back, that for the most part they were terribly sober occasions. If an outsider had been asked to tell whether we were celebrating someone's death or someone's resurrection, I think I know what his answer would have been. In those days few of us ventured smiles. There apparently was an unspoken passage in our catechism that went something like this: "If you are going to the altar and there remember that you are happy about something, leave the line at once. First go to your pew, ponder your sins once more, and then return to the altar." I remember reading Chad Walsh's comment that after becoming a Christian and while shopping around for a church, he considered us Lutherans, but found what he thought to be an almost morbid preoccupation with sin and not enough victory.

After leaving the seminary I had the good fortune of being associated with lively

parishes, where Communion was celebrated almost half as often as in the early church — and that was considered frequent. Still it was a pretty straight-faced affair.

For me the turning point came between Easter and Pentecost of 1965, after lengthy preparation, to be sure, when the congregation pulled the altar away from the wall, turned it into a table, and made conscious efforts to let the family gather around the table as a family should — every Sunday.

Immediately the focus, mood, and style changed. A chalice and a bread basket became the visual focal points. We began using Jewish matzos for loaves, a common form of bread on the Lower East Side. We removed the altar rail and began to stand on three sides of the altar. We wrote a lengthy eucharistic prayer that reflected more fully the meaning of this sacrament.

There were other changes, too. We tried to let the structure of the liturgy become more faithful to early church practices. We separated the confession and absolution from the service of the Word and the Eucharist in order to discourage our inclination to let the preparation set the mood for the entire liturgy. We updated the English, read the Gospel from the center of the nave, and started the practice of greeting one another with the handshake of peace. "Peace be with you," from the magnificent Gospel for the First Sunday After Easter (John 20:19-31), has become a standard greeting of members

to one another during the week. (Many of the children say, "Peace bewitch you" — not at all a bad translation.) Banners and occasionally balloons added to the festivity.

I must say that for me, experiencing these changes was like stepping out of a stuffy building into the spring air. The word "celebration" at once made sense. We were beginning to have fun.

There were other changes and other things that helped us. Some of us, visiting our friends down the street at St. Brigid's one Corpus Christi feast, were startled to hear delightful sounds defy that dreary place. Guitars began to whang, and kids sprang lightly down the aisle singing "Sons of God." We tried it and, sure enough, for the first time our own youngsters actually began to sing and enjoy it. So the guitar has become a steady friend, especially while we are sharing the bread and wine.

Another by-product came as a result of children who began to hound us with the question, "When can I take Communion?" In order not to deny with one hand what we were offering with the other, we decided to prepare children from third grade on to commune.

House communions too, though infrequent, have had the effect of binding people together, and in some cases have turned empty pastoral visits into rich experiences in sharing the Gospel.

In a rough way that summarizes phase one of this odyssey. Phase two began last May when ominous cracks in our century-old ceiling, plus a fire hazard, drove us out of the sanctuary and into our basement. Now we have a table in the center and concentric circles of chairs. Pews, we learned, are an invention of the devil. It's quite a switch to look at faces instead of

hair. While there are certain handicaps, this move has given us a new sense of being a family. The bread, now loaves baked by the women of the parish, is passed from hand to hand, as is the ceramic chalice. A few times we have had 11 o'clock congregational dinners which served as the setting for our Eucharist. We now use a variety of musical settings, eucharistic prayers, and the like.

You would be surprised how sermons change when the action and symbols of Holy Communion are always in the center, when there is no pulpit, and you are surrounded by people. For one thing, dialog becomes a natural possibility. We do this from time to time. Last July when welfare allotments were cut back by our state legislature, we brought the matter up at sermon time. It was a particular crisis for us, since many of our people depend on welfare for survival. What do you do when the rich raid the hungry and the hungry belong to your own family? Well, after several Sundays in which proclamation and discussion intertwined, members of the congregation came up with an income-sharing plan; and ever since \$430 a month changes hands from one part of the congregation to another, quite aside from regular offerings. The Eucharist is more deeply appreciated in such a context.

Whatever the reasons, we found that Communion turned people on like nothing else, and John and I had to ask ourselves, "Do they know something that we don't?" Perhaps.

Let me observe several fundamental needs in the church as I now reflect on our community experience with the Eucharist.

The first: On Sundays our congregation says, "We live by His presence, and we

recognize Him anew in the breaking of bread."

I imagine that someone witnessing the primitive church celebrate the Eucharist would have been impressed by the conviction of these young Christians that they were not alone—not alone because they belonged together; together because they believed that someone was alive and with them who had once died, one whom they called the Son of God. Because of Him they were rescued from the fears, the indifference, the hostility, the ambitions, the values of society that imprison people and promise death. This sense of the *presence* of an unseen person who gave up His life as a for-giver and who came back from death as a life-giver—that, it seems to me, tells what the early Christian Eucharist was all about.

In my third- and fourth-grade Communion class we refer to the Luke 24 account of the Emmaus disciples as a "wow!" Their eyes were opened and (wow!) they recognized Jesus in the breaking of bread. The text is not only a commentary on what once happened to the Emmaus disciples. It is also a commentary on what was happening in the early Christian community each Lord's Day when they broke bread.

I cannot help wondering: Perhaps our underlying difficulty with this sacrament—the reason we can say "twice a month is okay," the reason it can seem so deplorably routine, why there can be Communion without community—is that we are not prepared to celebrate the miracle of Christ's presence and recognize Him anew in the breaking of bread.

A second observation, one I have already touched on, has to do with *joy*.

More than we might like to admit, Lu-

theran faces during Communion resemble too nearly the grim expressions that Candid Camera once found on people coming out of subway exits in New York City.

I have mentioned several ways in which our congregation has tried to let the celebration assume a festive atmosphere. There are no doubt many other options and rich theological resources for joy, not the least of which is the Old Testament psaltery.

Some time back I received a letter from a Lutheran architect, now in England, who concluded with this paragraph:

Most of all I'm concerned about this lack of joy in and out of the church. Christians in a solemn, desperate way struggling to "save" great masses of unhappy people and burden them with this same solemn, desperate purpose. Why can't we just dance and sing and live in the joy that we are loved by God? Then maybe the solemn and the unhappy might join us.

In that first post-Easter Gospel we heard, "The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord." Not a bad idea.

A third major need is to break down the entrenched notion that what happens in church has to do with religion, and what happens elsewhere has to do with life. We have given this idea theological sanction by our less than judicial use of the two kingdoms distinction. At any rate, for the most part our people are committed to an otherworldly theology that turns much of this world over to the devil. Perhaps no condition of the church is more responsible for dissuading gifted young men from entering the pastoral ministry.

I don't think the answer lies simply in more relevant preaching and introducing new elements into the liturgy—though these may be necessary. The problem is

primarily *morphological* rather than *theological* fundamentalism; hence, the shape and direction of the congregation has to be changed. Actions in which members of the congregation take part must make clear, in ways which words cannot, that the church is not a self-promoting religious enterprise, but a community that cares passionately about poverty, hunger, racial injustice, war, and the like, all of which lie much closer to us than we realize. These actions — which may involve only a handful at first — must become part of the raw material of eucharistic celebration.

At Trinity, while making the Sunday celebration the focus of our life as a Christian family, we have also cultivated a sense of rhythm between the breaking of bread and the things that are happening in the world. The Eucharist not only offers the gift of human wholeness for our life in the world, but our own worldly struggles also supply content for our celebration. This is reflected, for example, in the prayers of our people. (In place of the general prayer they raise their hands and say what they want to pray for.) Here is a list of petitions that were requested yesterday:

- For various sick people.
- Thanks for kindnesses from members, from a young lady who had been robbed, pushed down a flight of stairs, and will have surgery for a broken collar bone.
- Thanks for Martin Luther King Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
- For the church and the work of Christ in Latin America.
- For the pope and tensions within the Roman Catholic Church.
- For President Jacob Preus.
- Thanks from a 53-year-old mother and her young daughter who spent all winter and most of the previous winter without heat or hot water. They moved into a decent apartment on Saturday.
- For the astronauts.
- Thanks from a husband that under the pressure of moving he and his wife had not exploded at each other during the week.
- For peace in southeast Asia, especially that the war not widen.
- That the vote by the Senate in favor of a moratorium on the armaments race bear fruit.
- For a girl and her brother, who is an addict, and for the addiction problem in the neighborhood.
- For the schools.
- For Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_'s health and for a safe place to live.
- For an ex-convict who was released before Easter and is being helped by a member.
- For someone's friends who went to jail.
- For health and understanding in family relationships.
- For a little girl who was baptized, and thanks for the children of our congregation.
- For Rhodesia and Africa.

In this context Communion is seen not as something that has to do with religion, but as participation in the heartbeat of life.

Nine days from today is Earth Day. The celebration of Communion is loaded with implications concerning the earth — its ownership, the respect it is due, and the proper use of it. In our eucharistic prayer, after the proper preface, we say:

The whole creation shows Your glory, O God. We praise You for sharing it so fully with us. You provide for us. You

give us ways of caring for the earth and for one another.

And later we pray:

When we commune at this table through these ordinary gifts of bread and wine, fill us with the Holy Spirit, so that in the ordinary things of life we may celebrate the resurrection of Christ, our Lord.

The bread and wine of Communion are magnificent links with the earth and with our total environment. Why cannot the Eucharist, as a celebration of the new creation in Christ, be considered a focal point also for discerning God's will for *this* creation? Does this understanding detract from the Gospel—or does it in fact enable us to celebrate the Gospel and the new creation more fully?

How about world hunger? A few Sundays ago [Laetare, the Fourth Sunday in Lent] the Gospel was John 6, the feeding of the multitude (which our third-graders call a "hey look!"). This was also for the early church clearly a eucharistic miracle. Jesus shared food with the hungry, and in doing so once more signalized the kingdom of God in terms of an eating together, a banquet. The people there, like so much of the world today, thought of bread as a precious commodity, many of them standing constantly only a meal or two away from stark hunger. Especially under those circumstances there is something about sharing food in abundance with others that expresses the merriment, the unity, the equality and love of God's rule among men.

To "break bread" can be quite an event. It is no accident that the word "companion" comes from Latin words that mean "with bread"—like the Spanish today: "con pan." To share bread with someone is to establish a special human bond. So the John 6 event speaks to the issue of Eucharist and community.

But the feeding of the 5,000 also poses this question: Is it possible for us to break and share bread in the Eucharist without breaking and sharing bread with a hungry world? Apparently not, without binding the Word of God, impoverishing the meaning of Communion and impoverishing ourselves as well. However, if the Communion table frees us to share bread with the world, then doing so becomes a sign of the Kingdom, and we extend the miracle of the loaves.

Too many people. Not enough food. With that specter ready to haunt the world these next decades, can we calmly feast in the Kingdom with Jesus while watching Lazarus and billions with him scramble for the crumbs that fall from our table? I think not. But I believe this says something essential and exciting about the venture we call Holy Communion.

The presence of Jesus. Joy. Compassion for the world. Perhaps the only question is: Will we live by His presence and recognize Him anew in the breaking of bread?

New York, N. Y.