

Reflections on Celebration of Eucharist

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EUCHARIST IN TURMOIL

The great challenge today is to convert the sacred bread into real bread, the liturgical peace into political peace, the worship of the Creator into reverence for the Creation, the Christian praying community into an authentic human fellowship. It is risky to celebrate the Eucharist. We may have to leave it unfinished, having gone first to give back to the poor what belongs to them.

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General Background

Over the Christian centuries we have inherited TWO foundational understandings of Eucharist: Eucharist as *Sacrifice* and Eucharist as *Sacred Meal*. The former emphasizes the fact that Jesus, on the night before he died, celebrated a special meal exclusively with the twelve, now known as the Last Supper. Early Christians interpreted that event as a reenactment of the Jewish Passover meal with Jesus himself symbolically representing the Paschal Lamb in the shedding of his own blood through his crucifixion. In this way Jesus became the sacrificial victim through which salvation is made possible for all. Each Eucharist is meant to be a reenactment of this fact, with the priest as the primary representative of the sacrificial Jesus. And in this case the priest has to be male.

The alternative interpretation, of Eucharist as a Sacred Meal, takes all the meals which Jesus shared with his followers – and not merely one – as emblematic of the God who is poured out in generous nourishment for all people, a God we come to know mysteriously yet intimately every time we share food with loved ones. In many such meals the primary facilitator was a woman, e.g., the mother at the Jewish Shabat Meal. In this case, Eucharist is a ritual re-enactment Eucharist is a ritual re-enactment of a more universal phenomenon in which meal rituals have been used to experience a close intimacy with divine nurturing presence. There is evidence for this experience among peoples of every age and culture.

In recent decades, the latter understanding is deemed to be the more foundational to the original meaning of Eucharist, and in all probability this understanding is closer to the practice initiated by Jesus in the Gospels. In this approach, it is the people of God, rather than the priest, who become the primary focus. Eucharist comes to be seen as a people's sacred ritual around the celebration of the gift of food, with the priest acting as a facilitator in a three-dimensional ritual (sacramental) process of a) gathering the people, b) to tell their story, c) in the breaking of bread. Parallels to this approach are found in virtually every great religion and in the faith-practices of indigenous peoples all over the world. Moreover, it seems to have been the primary understanding for the first 1,000 years of Christendom, since the doctrine of Trans-substantiation only became an official teaching of the Church at the fourth Lateran Council in 1215 CE.

Theologically, the second model is much more congruent with the Gospel vision of the Kingdom of God, what is now regarded as the foundational vision which inspired the historical Jesus in his life and ministry. Striving to honour the Jewish background of Jesus,

and his use of Aramaic as his native language, the Kingdom of God is sometimes translated today as the *Companionship of Empowerment*. This illuminates further the significance of the meals Jesus shared with his followers, particularly, with the powerless and outcasts, who were empowered through their participation in the open, inclusive table of N.T commensality.

Also, worth noting, the insightful analysis of theologian, Anthony Bartlett (2022,168ff) that the instruction in John's Gospel to drink the blood of Jesus marks a departure from the shedding of the Lamb's blood in the Old Testament. What is actually consumed in the New Testament meal (the Last Supper) is wine, used to symbolize the blood. In this case, observes Bartlett, the blood contains no violence, but non-violence giving way to peace, love, and celebration of new life.

A Meal of Mutual Empowerment

The attached Eucharistic Prayers (hence EPs) seek to honour the second interpretation of Eucharist as a ritual of the open, egalitarian table, to which all are welcome regardless of class or status, and from which nobody should ever be excluded. The priest is a ritual *facilitator*, very much in keeping with the role of the mother in Jewish Shabat meal, the original model used by Christians in developing Eucharistic celebrations, but also honouring the oldest definition of Priesthood known to all Christian Churches, namely the vision of the priest as the *servus servorum Dei* (the servant of the servants of God). In this Eucharistic context, the Priest has no power other than that of being a facilitator for empowerment in the ritual context.

The primary power in every Eucharistic celebration resides with the living Spirit of God, not with the priest or people. From earliest times the Church has honoured this fact through the notion of the *Epiclesis*: the invocation of the Holy Spirit. When I studied theology, I was told by my Jesuit professor, that the *Epiclesis* is the heart and soul of the Eucharistic prayer. It was several years later before I fully internalized that truth.

The Catholic Church uses a double invocation of the Holy Spirit, which I have retained in the attached EPs, firstly invoking the Spirit over the gifts of bread and wine, and secondly over the people of God to reinforce their unity as a Christian people. The first invocation comes before the words of Consecration, indicating that the real power for change in the Eucharistic elements (however we understand it) is activated through the invocation of the Holy Spirit and not through any special words uttered by the priest. The second tends to be located as the second paragraph after the Eucharistic acclamation.

Other Christian traditions combine the two into one, with the primary emphasis of invoking the Spirit upon the people, thus making the people the focus of the Spirit's transformative power. Some commentators (e.g Crockett 1999) suggest that this may have been the original emphasis when the concept of the *Epiclesis* was first developed. I rather like the notion of the *double Epiclesis* as it truly highlights where the emphasis should rest. The Holy Spirit,

who is the agent of all creativity throughout the length and breadth of creation, logically becomes the primary agent for change and transformation even in the Eucharist itself.

Who is meant to invoke the Holy Spirit? My impression is that theologians are quite clear on this matter but may not always state it forthrightly: *the baptized people of God gathered in worship*. It is both their privilege and responsibility, and should not be taken from them to fulfill clerical power or control. Ritually, it would therefore be ideal for the gathered body to pray aloud and together the two paragraphs related to the *Epiclesis*. Gestures can also be added and in my experience they enrich the underlying meaning. For the first invocation all can be invited to extend their hands over the gifts of bread and wine. And for the second *Epiclesis*, with the emphasis on the unity of the gathered group, people can be invited to link hand to shoulder with the person to their right or left.

In theological terms, what is needed primarily for a valid Eucharist Prayer is the invocation of the Holy Spirit (*Epiclesis*), whether done as one articulation or in a two-fold expression. What then of the words of Consecration? These words certainly belong to the inherited tradition, and carry a primordial memory of what Jesus said at the Last Supper, and probably at several other meals as well. In praying these two paragraphs, we are touching into the power of *sacred memory*. Perhaps, therefore, instead of retaining the words exclusively for the priest, they should be prayed by those in the worshipping group who carry responsibilities around the ongoing life of that particular community, e.g., a parish council in a parochial setting, the staff of a school or Retreat Centre, the leadership team of a religious community.

Praying the Meal Dimension

Contemporary lay people, especially those versed in, or familiar with, creation spirituality query the wisdom of invoking the Holy Spirit to change the elements into something more holy or sacred. "Are the elements not already holy and sacred?" they rightly ask. They detect a kind of spiritual tautology that certainly requires an adult response. Firstly, when dealing with ritual, humans do occasionally use language in ways that may not make rational sense, perhaps to articulate something akin to Paul Ricoeur's *surplus of meaning*. We acknowledge the Holy Spirit to be the co-creative energy activating every experience of transformation. How to articulate it in an adult and responsible way is the challenge at hand.

In the EPs below I have taken on board this concern and created formulations along the lines of invoking the Spirit to awaken in ourselves a deeper awareness of the sacredness inherent in these Spirit-filled gifts, so that in receiving them we too are transformed – i.e. nourished and empowered – for our Christian lives. We invoke the Spirit to make us more aware of the sacredness that is already there in the elements. In other words, *it is we ourselves, rather than the gifts*, that need to be transformed. By adopting this approach, interestingly, one may be reclaiming at least one line of thought from early Christian times in which the invoking of the Spirit upon the people was seen as the primary aspect of the *Epiclesis*.

Regarding the issue of Eucharistic change, whether explained as trans-substantiation, trans-signification, or whatever, I do believe that change is activated in a way that is both real and

mysterious. I have found the work of Masaru Emoto, a Japanese physicist, immensely helpful on this question. He has conducted several experiments on water, indicating beyond doubt that human intentionality can profoundly affect the essential nature of another life-substance such as water (see [Dr Masaru Emoto's Water Experiments - YouTube](#)). If human intentionality is this powerful, I would imagine the sacramental invocation of the Holy Spirit by worshipping people (particularly if they are aware of what they are doing) would be all the more powerful and transformative.

I now come to the two paragraphs popularly known as the “Consecration.” It is widely assumed that these two paragraphs represent respectively the elements of food and drink used in most meals. This is an erroneous assumption. The paragraph related to the bread represents the entire meal, and therefore the words: “Take and eat . . .” should really be “Take eat and drink . . .” as outlined in the attached EPs.

The paragraph related to the cup is rich in subversive meaning. This represents not the drink aspect of the meal, but the cup of libation, consumed after the meal in the banqueting tradition of ancient Greece and Rome (see the seminal research of Dennis Smith, in Tausig 2009). A modern equivalent is the aperitif, an after-dinner drink usually consumed in the less formal context of a lounge or sitting room. As used by the Greeks, the participants of the meal, now retired to a less formal space, lifted their cups as a tribute to the Gods, or to some outstanding local hero. The Romans typically paid tribute to the Emperor, widely regarded as a divine figurehead.

It seems the early Christians adopted the custom, and re-assigned it a deliberate subversive (and prophetic) significance. They lifted their cups as a tribute to Jesus, the one in whom is sealed a new covenant, more noble and empowering than the covenant of Greek deity or the Roman Emperor. This brings to the Eucharistic celebration a strong political and justice dimension. There can be no authentic empowering without challenging the forces that disempower and undermine creativity. There can be no authentic nourishment of persons without seeking to rectify the systemic forces that starve people of true freedom and dignity.

Both priests and people need to be educated on the true meaning of the “consecration” of the cup. It is *the cup of libation*, the significance of which is well explained by Hal Tausig (2009). The attached EPs reflect this correct understanding. I have also omitted the words “so that sins may be forgiven.” These words, cited only in Matthew’s Gospel, probably do not belong to the earlier tradition, and may be indicative of an atonement flavour already entering into the early Christian understanding of Eucharist. I also add an alternative Proclamation of Faith, striving to move away from the Passion and Death of Jesus (Eucharist as sacrifice) towards a proclamation of the God who nourishes prodigiously in all the nourishing potential of creation.

The rest of the Eucharistic Prayer, including the Preface can be prayed aloud by the gathered community, but with partial voices rather than as a whole group. The voice of the whole group is best kept for the double *Epiclesis* along with the Eucharistic Acclamation and the Doxology (last paragraph). Other parts of the prayer can be prayed in choir (two halves alternating), or by using selected voices from the body proclaiming different parts.

Eucharist as Celebration

Every culture that ever existed has rituals that express and explore a perceived sacred meaning in food. And there is an inexplicable mystique when food is shared to mark special occasions of joy and celebration. Meals are widely regarded as precious moments in families and in other groups of close affiliation.

Regarding Eucharist primarily as a meal is congruent with the fact that Rites of Passage related to food exist in every sacred tradition known to humankind. And the Christian Eucharist itself first began as an imitation of the Jewish Shabat meal, celebrated in the family home every Friday night – a custom that continues till the present time. In the Shabat meal, there is a key person, playing something akin to a presiding role, and it is *the Mother*, not the Father, who is head of the household. And the Mother's role is unique precisely in her capacity *to facilitate* the experience. This I suggest is fertile territory for a revamped understanding of Christian priesthood.

I wish to propose that a revitalization of Eucharist needs to start where it originally began, namely in the home, or in small household groups gathering around a common vision or enterprise (house-Churches, or basic Christian communities). In these informal and friendly groups experimentation and exploration can, and should, be normative. And in that context, the use of EPs such as those I provide seems a very adult and responsible thing to do.

It was inevitable that Eucharist would become more structured and formalized as numbers grew and celebrations had to be accommodated in large buildings like Churches. In the process, we lost something precious and primordial. Rubrics and formal procedures undermined the deeper message. Today, there prevails a great deal of Eucharistic starvation in our world, and the feeding of hungry hearts will require some new ventures to give fresh hope and nurturance to God's hungry people.

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