

THE SACRAMENT OF UNITY

INTERCOMMUNION AND SOME FORGOTTEN TRUTHS

By MICHAEL HURLEY

SINCE THE SECOND Vatican Council and the publication of the Vatican *Directory on Ecumenism* roman catholic discipline with regard to intercommunion has undergone considerable changes. Roman catholics may now receive the sacraments of the eucharist, penance and anointing of the sick from Orthodox priests and vice versa, and a western christian not in communion with Rome may, in certain circumstances, be admitted to these sacraments by a roman catholic priest, 'so long as he declares a faith in these sacraments *in harmony with* that of the Church and is rightly disposed'.¹ The phrase italicized here was deliberately chosen to avoid demanding an identity of doctrine as a condition; to indicate that – in the case of the eucharist – belief in the fact (as distinct from the 'how') of the real presence would be sufficient; to indicate, for instance, that acceptance of transubstantiation would not be required. Every student of theology knows that belief in the eucharistic real presence is not to be equated with belief in transubstantiation; and everyone should know that the main Churches of western christendom are all committed to belief in the fact of Christ's real presence in the eucharist, and differ only as to the mode of this presence. Indeed, as the World Conference on Faith and Order at Montreal in 1963 and the Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Uppsala in 1968 go to show, the growth of the liturgical movement in all the Churches is at present producing a very remarkable 'consensus on the eucharist'; so much so that one scholar could write:

For some time now, baptism has been thought of as the most fruitful avenue to unity. The fact of a common baptism with a widespread recognition gives it this appearance. I want to suggest that Montreal has shown us that it is the eucharist which actually offers greater possibilities at the moment (*Studia Liturgica* 2/4 [December 1963], p 263).

¹ *Vatican Directory on Ecumenism*, 55.

On the basis of the changed discipline of the roman catholic Church it can and must be said, with Fr Bernard Leeming, S.J.,¹ that 'some arguments against "intercommunion" must be modified. Complete unity in faith is not an absolute and invariable condition for sharing the Eucharist'. On the other hand, article 55 of the Vatican *Directory on Ecumenism* ends with the statement: 'A Catholic in similar circumstances may not ask for these sacraments except from a minister who has been validly ordained'. In other words, the second chief argument against reciprocal intercommunion remains intact – 'lack of the sacrament of orders', as the Decree on Ecumenism puts it.² In recent years various efforts have been made by roman catholic theologians to answer this argument, to overcome this difficulty. It has been suggested, for instance, that the ministry 'exercised by protestant ministers may in terms of roman catholic Church order be qualified as recognizable as an extraordinary ministry'.³ These efforts however have not, so far at least, been found generally satisfactory or convincing.

Asking the right questions, it has often been said, is an essential if progress is to be made towards the solution of any problem. In the present instance our problem is not, it seems to me, 'reciprocal intercommunion': that is, whether and in what circumstances and under what conditions individual christians belonging to separated Churches may receive holy communion from each other's ministers. Insofar as it focusses on individuals, this seems to be a somewhat pre-ecumenical statement of the problem. One of the distinctive features of a Church which participates in the ecumenical movement is that it recognizes outside itself not just individuals calling themselves christians, but bodies which in a true sense of the word are to be called Churches, because they possess 'some, even very many, of the most significant elements or endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church'.⁴ This statement of the problem also seems rather pre-ecumenical and indeed unrealistic, insofar as it envisages one particular Church being the host. The situations in which intercommunion is desired, and now in fact increasingly being practised, are those in which separated Churches come together 'on an equal footing'⁵ for common study or common action. From an ordinary, non-theological point of view,

¹ *The Heythrop Journal*, Vol IX, No 1 (January, 1968), p 24.

² *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 22.

³ *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol 3, No 1 (Winter, 1966), p 90.

⁴ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

and also from an ecumenical point of view (which would stress the factor of parity), it is hardly appropriate in such situations that one Church should celebrate its own eucharist and invite the others to participate. It is surely more appropriate that the ministers and laity of all the Churches present should join in a common celebration of the eucharist, that they should hold what the Church of England Report, *Intercommunion To-day*, terms a 'joint celebration of the eucharist'. This seems confirmed by the fact that joint bible services are found to be preferable and more appropriate on such occasions; that it seems less appropriate in these circumstances for one particular Church to celebrate its own evensong and to invite the others to participate. In the case of mixed marriages, I have argued elsewhere for the appropriateness of a joint marriage service for the partners and a joint baptismal service for the children.¹ The Lund principle of ecumenical action is that the Churches should do everything together as far as conscience permits. According to this principle, a joint celebration of the eucharist, if permissible, will be much more in order, much more ecumenical, than reciprocal intercommunion as ordinarily understood.

This article wishes to suggest that joint celebrations of the eucharist by ministers and members of separated Churches are, in certain circumstances, justifiable, desirable and necessary for the promotion of christian unity and the establishment of Church union. The suggestion is based on the nature of the eucharist as essentially a concelebration; and this, it may be noted, is a truth which, alone among all the Churches of the west, the roman communion is now in a position to appreciate, because it alone has so far restored the practice of concelebration. There are, however, other forgotten truths about the eucharist relevant to the problem of intercommunion which may usefully be considered before dealing with concelebration.

The main forgotten truth about the eucharist which modern theology is rediscovering and re-emphasizing stresses its efficacy in building up the body which is the Church, until all men 'attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the fulness of Christ'.² In general we no longer think of a sacrament as just a means of grace, as a means for the individual of spiritual union with his God. The inadequacy of this view becomes clear when we honestly face the question: what does the sacrament of orders do; or indeed when we ask our-

¹ *One in Christ*, Vol 5, No 1 (January, 1969), pp 96-102.

² Eph 4, 13.

selves what any of the sacraments (baptism, penance, marriage etc.) do. The distinctive and first effect of each sacrament is ecclesial and visible rather than 'spiritual' and invisible. These two effects are of course ordinarily present and themselves related as cause and effect; but the prior and characteristic effect is the former: a new, special relationship with the visible Church. It is because the sacraments are means of differing degrees and forms of incorporation into the visible Church that they are means of grace.

Similarly with regard to the eucharist, the stress is no longer individualistic and pietistic. Mass and holy communion are no longer considered as means for mere private, personal union with God, but as the means *par excellence* by which the Church becomes the Church: a more committed, believing, worshipping and witnessing community; the means *par excellence* by which the people of God grow in love, in faith, in hope, in their dedication to the Lord and his world, and so become, more really and truly and effectively, the sign and sacrament and instrument of universal, cosmic salvation.

The eucharist is a coming together, a gathering, a congregation, an assembly of those already initiated into a certain community. Ideally it involves this gathered community in a common activity: praying, singing, listening to readings from special books of its own and meditating together on them, mutual confession and forgiveness of community failings and disloyalties, the offering of gifts, recalling, commemorating and thanking God for all his interventions in this world on behalf of the community, in particular for the life, death and glorification of his Son Jesus; and, in conclusion, eating and drinking together, partaking in a communal meal. To the eyes of any observer this is obviously a concelebration which binds the concelebrants together, which deepens their commitment to each other and to their common task. To the eyes of faith, however, this concelebration is something far richer, and certain aspects of this richness are now becoming clearer as our renewed faith seeks and finds fuller understanding. Christian faith sees the gathered eucharistic congregation as no ordinary community, but as the people of God engaged in expressing and deepening its self-identity, in becoming what it is, in renewing and strengthening its existence as the Church which is Christ's body, in order that it may become more perfectly God's agent of reconciliation and peace and 'the fulness of him who fills all in all'.¹

¹ Eph 1, 23.

The second forgotten truth about the eucharist which throws fresh light on the problem of intercommunion is a corollary of the first. It emphasizes that the ecclesial unity, which, as a sacramental sign, the eucharist expresses and thus requires, must be imperfect and incomplete. If the eucharistic Church can sincerely pray for 'that peace and unity which are agreeable to thy will', if the eucharist is really a sacramental cause, if it does build up and is intended to build up the Church as a believing, worshipping and witnessing community, then the unity which it expresses and requires cannot be complete and perfect but only fragile and defective; and the Church which it manifests and reveals must be a Church needing reconciliation and reform, needing help in its unbelief, a disunited Church, a pilgrim Church.

Descending to particulars, the third forgotten truth about the eucharist which can advance our thinking on intercommunion is its nature as a converting ordinance, as a means of repentance and forgiveness of sins. We usually think of penance as the sacrament of forgiveness of post-baptismal sin. To describe the relationship between the eucharist and sin we ordinarily have recourse to the words of the thirteenth session of the Council of Trent: it is 'an antidote by which we are freed from daily faults and preserved from mortal sins'.¹ We have forgotten the subsequent statement of Trent in its twenty-second session:

If we approach God with a sincere heart and right faith, with fear and reverence, contrite and repentant, we obtain mercy and grace (through the sacrifice of the Mass). Placated by this oblation, the Lord grants grace and repentance, and remits crimes and even the greatest sins (*crimina et peccata etiam ingentia dimittit*).²

As Ligier, among others, has shown, this teaching has a long tradition behind it, especially in oriental liturgies; but for today's roman catholic theologian it is a hard saying and, despite the work of Til- lard, we still await a satisfactory synthesis of the theology of penance and eucharist. No explanation, however, can be allowed to explain away the latter statement of Trent. The eucharist is a converting ordinance. As such it helps to build up the Church as a holy people. It helps the members to overcome their estrangement from God, from each other and from their neighbours, in order to reconcile

¹ Denzinger - Schönmetzer, 1938.

² *Ibid.*, 1743.

them with their Church and with their God. As such it cannot require in advance that they be already fully reconciled to each other and to God. As such it can be used to promote christian unity among the separated Churches.

The fourth forgotten truth about the eucharist, which is of special interest in a discussion of intercommunion, is its nature as the mystery of faith, as the sacrament *par excellence* of the christian faith. What we are rediscovering in this regard is that the eucharist, because essentially an efficacious sign, does much more than express our faith; it helps our unbelief, develops our faith and in this way too builds up the Church. But we are also rediscovering that the faith which the eucharist expresses and requires cannot be identified with doctrinal propositions, much less with the whole system of doctrinal propositions developed in any one particular tradition. The faith which the eucharist requires and develops is baptismal faith, the faith of the creeds, faith in the principal mysteries of christianity, faith as the believing hope aroused by the self-relevatory promise of God which is contained in the salvation history commemorated in the eucharist; faith in the eucharist itself as the memorial of this salvation history as (in the words of the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order at Montreal in 1963) 'a sacrament of the presence of the crucified and glorified Christ until he comes, and a means whereby the sacrifice of the cross, which we proclaim, is operative within the Church'. We are rediscovering in addition that the faith expressed and required by the eucharist cannot be identified either with theology, much less with uniformity of theological thinking and formulation in any area of faith (incarnation, atonement, eucharist, ministry, orders, etc.); so that roman catholics holding differing and conflicting theologies of the Mass, of the priesthood and of the papacy, can and may concelebrate; so that protestants, for example, believing in the real eucharistic presence but denying transubstantiation can and may be admitted to the eucharist in a roman catholic church, as allowed by the Vatican *Directory on Ecumenism* (55).

The fifth forgotten truth about the eucharist which has a bearing on the problem of intercommunion is its essential missionary dimension. According to Fr Godfrey Diekmann, 'the most grievous defect of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*' (of Vatican II) lies in its failure 'to present a vigorous and compelling case for the eucharist as *fount*'.

That Christ's body and blood is the source of strength for our human task of social love and justice, that God's gift becomes

our personal and communal obligation to the world in which we live, is, most regrettably, not an evident major concern of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. Despite conscious efforts to strike a better balance, the cult motif still predominates at the expense of mission to men, to all men, to the world. The worship of the transcendent God continues to obscure to some extent our recognizing his immanence in the world and among the men he redeemed.¹

The eucharist is missionary: it manifests and builds up the Church as an institution for others, mainly because the concelebrants partake in the body and blood of the Lord which was given and shed for the world, for many, for all men; and, by so partaking, the concelebrants express and renew their dedication to the service and redemption of the world after the manner and in the power of Christ. The eucharist, however, does not demand that our missionary sense be already satisfactory: we allow roman catholics whose missionary zeal is minimal to concelebrate the eucharist. It would seem therefore quite in order, and indeed necessary, that we should also allow and encourage those christians with different Church allegiances, who are united in joint action for mission as an expression of their christian faith and hope and love, to hold joint celebrations of the eucharist. Joint action for mission seems to call for a joint celebration of the eucharist as its due expression and due means of renewal and strengthening. The instinct of so many non-roman christians in reaching this conclusion and following it in practice seems to confirm the orthodoxy of the theological argument. Such joint celebrations have taken place in Canada;² and last October, in the Church of Ireland Cathedral in Cork, two anglican priests, two presbyterian and two methodist ministers concelebrated according to the rite of the Church of south India at the conclusion of a United Conference for Young People.³

The sixth forgotten truth about the eucharist which calls for special mention in the context of intercommunion is its nature as a concelebration: not only in the sense that the whole congregation should take an active part in the rite, but also in the sense that all the ordained ministers of the community should join in the celebra-

¹ 'Worship', in *Theology of Renewal* (Montreal, 1968), II, p 93.

² Cf *The Ecumenist*, May-June 1968, p 157.

³ In Canada, roman catholic priests have sometimes participated in such joint celebrations, but not, to my knowledge, with ecclesiastical approval.

tion with each other and with the congregation. Calvin, in his *Institutes*, deplored the fact that roman catholic priests 'gradually began to make innumerable masses in every corner of the churches and to drag the people hither and thither, when they should have come together in one assembly to recognize the mystery of their unity'. According to *Intercommunion To-Day*, 'concelebration, which involves the sharing together of a number of ministers in the celebration of the eucharist, is as yet an unfamiliar practice within the Church of England: if it were more familiar, we should be in a better position to appreciate its possible relevance to ecumenical problems'. In the latin rite, the restored practice and use of concelebration since Vatican II is already enabling us to appreciate its meaning and its theology, and – I now wish to suggest – its relevance to the problem of intercommunion.

Concelebration is essentially related to the nature of the eucharist as sacrament, as both cause and sign of Church unity in faith, love and mission. Concelebration therefore it is which above all else manifests the full dimensions of the Church as it is, and at the same time builds it up as the Body of Christ. All the priests of a particular parish concelebrating with their local congregation, or many of the priests of a particular diocese concelebrating with their bishop and a representative gathering of their people, serve in an outstanding way to express and to deepen their unity as the Church. This truth is stressed by the Constitution on the Liturgy:

The Church reveals herself most clearly when a full complement of God's holy people, united in prayer and in a common liturgical service (especially the Eucharist), exercise a thorough and active participation at the very altar where the bishop presides in the company of his priests and other assistants.¹

It is the sign value of the concelebration which receives the major emphasis here, but the eucharistic sign is sacramental and hence essentially efficacious and creative. Concelebration therefore deepens as well as reveals the unity of the Church. 'Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the same loaf'.² And in speaking of the liturgy of eastern Churches not in communion with Rome, the Council declared:

¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 41.

² 1 Cor 10, 17.

Through the celebration of the Eucharist of the Lord in each of these Churches, the Church of God is built up and grows in stature, while through the rite of concelebration their bond with one another is made manifest.¹

In consequence of all that has already been said, a concelebration according to a mutually acceptable rite (for instance, that of the Church of south India) by the ministers and members of two or more Church communities not yet in full communion with each other, but seriously striving to reach this goal, seems not only possible but uniquely appropriate as an instrument of reconciliation. Because they possess various elements of the Church's life (bible, baptism etc.) and indeed something at least of the reality of the eucharistic mystery,² the existing separated Churches may be considered as different, more or less perfect, embodiments of the Church; or, conversely, the Church may be considered as subsisting, more or less perfectly, in each of them. It follows therefore that a liturgy in which ministers and members of separated Churches jointly celebrate the eucharist, remembering and making intercession for the whole people of God, reveals as fully as possible the actual state of the Church throughout the world: and also, because of the special efficacy of the eucharist in building up the ecclesial body, that such a liturgy is the means *par excellence* of promoting christian unity and establishing Church union.

Such a concelebration (a 'joint celebration' in the terminology of *Intercommunion To-day*) would have the added advantage of satisfying the consciences of those who, concerned with the problem of valid orders, would otherwise have scruples about going to communion. Not everyone nowadays is disturbed by scruples of this sort, as the discussion of apostolic succession in, for instance, the April 1968 issue of *Concilium* goes to show.³ This new thinking by some roman catholic theologians on the authenticity of the ministry of other Churches (non-episcopal as well as episcopal) is, however, still very tentative and does not yet command any general agreement. The advantage therefore of a joint celebration in satisfying the consciences of many is not lightly to be dismissed. A joint celebration, however, is emphatically not in the first place a way of making intercommunion acceptable 'by cloaking scruples about the status

¹ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 15.

² *Ibid.*, 22.

³ Cf also Küng, H., 'Intercommunion', in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol 5, No 3 (Summer 1968), p 577.

of the ministries involved in it'.¹ It is first and foremost a means of expressing and enhancing, of manifesting and magnifying the presently imperfect unity of the Church, as it exists in separated Churches whose leaders and members desire in word and deed to overcome their separation, and to be reconciled in that unity which is according to God's will, so that the world may believe.

Joint celebrations, however, may not be used indiscriminately as a means of promoting christian unity. In the concrete they may not be so used where there is still no pained concern about the scandal of disunity, no serious commitment to the cause of ecumenism, no sustained effort in joint action for mission, no previous experience in doing together all those other things which are clearly and admittedly according to conscience. In such situations joint celebrations would not be a sign of separated Churches seeking to overcome their estrangement. The 'amen' to the words 'the body of Christ' would be a lie. However, the reason usually advanced for this limitation, and indeed for the refusal of reciprocal intercommunion under any circumstances, is more prudential than theological: a fear that otherwise there would be a grave danger of indifferentism and no more pain to stimulate the Churches to ecumenical action. 'Intercommunion between separated christians would appear to consecrate divisions rather than heal them. We need to feel the pain of division, to make us pray and work for unity'.² There can be no denying that this is indeed a sound reason; but experience and theology both warn us against exaggerating the extent of the danger. In the quite recent past the very same reason was advanced against all forms of inter-Church cooperation, in particular against the very existence of the World Council of Churches itself and of its regional and local counterparts.

In fact, the Churches for the most part have not succumbed to but overcome this danger. For a variety of reasons, and not least the missionary needs of the world, the ecumenical movement in all its forms (for instance, councils of Churches and joint action for mission) has not produced ecumenical indifferentism; more striking still, neither has it produced confessional indifferentism but its exact opposite, as the new life of the world confessional bodies shows.

A real as distinct from a notional acceptance of the eucharist as a sacramental cause of ecclesial unity, and therefore of that pained

¹ *Intercommunion To-day* (London 1968), p 114.

² Coventry, J., in *Theology* (May 1968), p 213. In this case, however, the prudential argument is a mere tailpiece to a number of deep theological considerations.

dissatisfaction and holy impatience and missionary zeal which are part and parcel of being a christian, can also help to avoid exaggerating the dangers of joint eucharistic celebrations and seeing them as narcotics rather than as stimulants. With such a conviction about the efficacy of the eucharist in building up the body which is the Church, and with Karl Rahner's theology of risk, the idea of joint celebrations should arouse hope rather than fear. 'To give an example: in ecumenical matters the question should not be put: What do we have to concede to the separated brethren? But rather: How do we exhaust all imaginable possibilities, all that our Catholic Christian conscience permits, in a courageous and unhampered fashion? ... Today we just cannot afford to do less, in order to bring Christian unity nearer'.¹

The second Vatican Council, it may be observed in conclusion, when relaxing the rules of the roman catholic Church for common worship between its members and those of the separated eastern Churches, excluded only 'intolerable risks',² thereby allowing some risks to be taken in the matter of common worship, if not actually endorsing this whole theology of risk as exposed by Rahner.

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¹ *The Furrow* (May 1968), pp 266-8.

² *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 26.