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A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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Holy Communion – for Whom?

October 2016

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One of most quoted statements of Pope Francis came in his first major document, *Evangelii Gaudium*. He said:

The Eucharist ... is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak. ... Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems (*EG* 47).

This statement is usually invoked by those who argue that Protestants in mixed marriages and divorced people who have remarried should be permitted to receive Catholic Holy Communion. In this article I want to suggest that, in line with the approach of Pope Francis, there is a sound biblical and theological basis for Catholic Church authorities to take a wider perspective and to make a more extensive change in the rules governing shared Holy Communion.

We are frequently reminded that the Eucharist represents the summit and source of Christian life; and that it represents the unity of the Christian community of believers. That is true, but perhaps it may not be the whole truth. Following the inspiration of Pope Francis, should we not add two further equally important points? Firstly, the Eucharist can also be a very powerful instrument of reconciliation, a means of promoting and deepening the unity of believers. And, secondly, it can be a truly effective means by which the Christian community fulfils its missionary task of drawing others to have an experience of God's presence and of communion with others.

SCRIPTURAL BASIS

One of the parables of Jesus provides us with a powerful image of Holy Communion. It is the story of the man who prepared a great banquet for his friends (Luke 14:16-24). When those who had first been invited made excuses, the man who was providing the feast insisted on bringing in the most unlikely guests, including the poor,

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the blind, and the lame ‘from the streets and the lanes.’ No doubt many of these latecomers had at first little or no understanding of why they were being brought in, and no sense of communion with the other guests. It was the organizer of the banquet who welcomed them, made them feel at home, and created a sense of communion between these unlikely guests and the man’s own family.

This parable of Jesus gives us a real insight into the central meaning of the Christian Eucharist. It is that Jesus who invites us to share in his banquet of Holy Communion is not content just to nourish those of us who call ourselves his friends. He wishes also to call in even the most unlikely guests.

At the banquet of the Eucharist, just as at the feast in Jesus’ story, it is essential that there be a core-group who hold in place the full meaning of what is taking place. But around this inner group there is room for others who may at first be not so sure about the purpose of the feast and may perhaps be quite surprised to find themselves welcomed to share in the banquet. There may even be others who do not share the Catholic faith in the Eucharist, but who come as respectful visitors, attracted by the sacredness of the event, and willing to share in some degree in the sense of communion of the group with each other and with God.

This situation is in fact a quite accurate account of what frequently happens at present. Nowadays, when we celebrate weddings or funerals, quite a lot of the people in the congregation are not practising Christians. It is likely that some of them are not even fully believing Christians. Nevertheless, very many of them come to Communion, and it is not practical to forbid them from doing so. Why not see this tolerance not just as a practical necessity but as a positive opportunity to awaken the dormant faith of these people?

Some of those who receive Communion may not be Christian believers at all but may be people who are searching for some spiritual meaning in their lives. As they receive the Host alongside their friends they may find it spiritually nourishing and may experience real communion with the rest of the congregation and with God. Why should we forbid them from doing so – even if that could be done without causing disruption? Could we not see their action as providing a great opportunity for them to foster whatever sense of communion they already have with others and with God? After all, the purpose of the Eucharist is to create and nourish communion in the people of God.

Of course, some of those who are in the church at this time and who come up to receive the Host, may have come in idle curiosity. Their lack of faith and lack of communion with the rest of the group means that for them there is no Eucharist, no Holy Communion.

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PRESERVING THE MEANING

As I have already said, what needs to be protected at all costs, is the fundamental meaning of the Eucharist. At each and every Catholic Eucharist this central meaning must be ‘held’ by an inner core of believers who *are* the Church at this moment, because they are in communion with God and each other in faith, in hope, and in love. If we were ever to reach a point where there was no such inner core of believers, then the meaning of the Eucharist would have been compromised. The presence of this core group is ‘the bottom line’ – it is what ensures that the basic meaning is not lost or watered down.

The participation of ‘visitors’ from other Churches, or of people who are less sure of their faith in the mystery that is being celebrated, does not necessarily undermine or erode the meaning of our Catholic Eucharist – provided the inner core-group do not allow the presence of ‘guests’ to dilute their own belief. On the contrary, the Eucharistic faith of the core-group of believers could in this case take on a missionary character, inviting others to a firmer or more explicit faith and to a deeper communion with God, with Jesus, and with each other. Eucharistic openness would then be a very effective way of inviting people on the margins of the Church to share with us the rich Christian symbols which may speak to their minds and touch their hearts.

The meaning and experience of Holy Communion is carried, not primarily in the doctrinal statements of our Church or other Churches, but in the hearts and minds of those who take part in it. It is not practical to use any doctrinal Church statements as a standard for judging who is allowed to share in our Eucharist. Why should Catholic Church leaders – or the celebrant of the Mass – have to take on the onus of trying to weigh up the authenticity of the faith or goodwill of those who come as ‘visitors’ to share in our Eucharist? I am not for a moment suggesting that the issue of the faith of the visitor is irrelevant. But is it *our* task, or the task of our authorities, to make the judgement? The parable of the wedding-feast seems to indicate that we may invite all and sundry to come and share the feast, and then leave it to God to judge whose wedding-garment is adequate.

The connection between the unity of the Church and sharing in the Eucharist is not a strictly logical one. It belongs rather to the symbolic sphere: the fact that we receive Communion together symbolises the unity of Christians. But in fact, our own unity within the Catholic Church is a very imperfect and fragile one – and this is true both at the global level and at the local level. Whenever the Eucharist is celebrated, all of us who take part are people weak in faith, wounded by sin, and prone to further sin. Nevertheless,

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apart from the exceptional case of excommunication, we are not forbidden to share in the mystery even though our faith is inadequate and our communion with each other is far from perfect.

PRUDENTIAL PASTORAL DECISIONS

The Eucharist is such a sacred celebration that Church authorities have always tried to ensure that those who take part in it do so with respect and reverence. For this reason, in the early Church even the catechumens were asked to leave the celebration before the community moved on to the most solemn part of the Mass. But this rule was changed for good pastoral reasons: Church authorities realized that those who were not yet baptised could be spiritually nourished by being present at all of the ritual – and that this would not lessen people's respect for the Eucharist.

Such changes in the past suggest that nowadays there may be an equally good pastoral case for an adaptation of the rules about receiving Holy Communion. I suggest that it would be helpful for Church authorities and the Christian community to engage in a serious pastoral reflection on three questions:

- How should we bear witness in our Eucharist to our commitment to going out ‘to the streets and the lanes’ to invite the unlikely people to God’s banquet? How can our Eucharist make visible not just the present (imperfect) unity of Christians but also the fact that it is ‘a pledge of future glory’ including the glory of the perfect unity which Christ promised?
- In our present-day pluralist situation, where it is difficult to know who is a full Christian believer, is it possible or appropriate to expect the celebrant or the community to judge who may receive Holy Communion?
- How best can we avoid the danger that a more open policy concerning reception of Communion would lessen respect for the sacrament?

It would be unfortunate and quite wrong if this kind of pastoral reflection were left to be done privately by individual priests or members of the community. The reflection should be authorized by the Church authorities, and any decision to change the rules for the reception of Communion should be made officially, rather than in a haphazard manner. However, I stress the point that this reflection should be a *pastoral* one – based not on an abstract theology but on a theology which is related to the actual experience of what is happening in our churches today.

Since Vatican II there has been a major change in the Catholic approach to sharing prayer and religious ceremonies with people

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of other Churches and religions. No serious Catholic leader or theologian would now claim that it is wrong to allow Christians from other Churches, or non-Christians, to be actively and prayerfully present at a Catholic Eucharist (apart from receiving Communion). Once we have conceded that such joint worship is a good thing, it is a matter not of doctrine or principle but rather of 'prudential wisdom' where we draw the line about the extent of such participation. Even at present that line is drawn in different places in different countries – and this reinforces the point that the issue is one of prudence rather than of principle.

PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE

This suggested change is not at all as radical as it may seem at first sight. In fact it is quite similar to what frequently happens in practice in our Church. At present there is no rule which excludes those Catholics whose personal understanding of the meaning of the Eucharist may be vague or even quite inadequate. Why then should we exclude those whose Church or religion may profess on their behalf an understanding of Eucharist which is different (to a greater or lesser extent) from our official teaching? The non-Catholic individuals who come to our Eucharist may have only a quite vague idea of the official Eucharistic doctrine of their own Church. Their faith in the Eucharist may actually be more authentic than that of some Catholics. Perhaps the parable of the banquet invites us to realise that the more crucial issue is the degree to which they and we open ourselves here and now to experience a real communion with each other and with God, and the extent to which we together seek to deepen that communion.

It is quite likely that many of the readers of this article will have at times experienced how participation in a prayerful Eucharist has in fact nourished the spirituality of people who had been on, or beyond, the margins of the Catholic Church. My own experience as a missionary priest is that some of the most missionary actions I have undertaken have been occasional celebrations of the Eucharist. I am thinking especially of occasions when I took part in workshops or retreats, in which we sought guidance and direction in life, and at times had a palpable sense of the presence of the Spirit. Some of the participants were practising Christians and others were more 'on the margins' – or perhaps beyond them.

Quite frequently, the high point of these events was a Eucharist in which the participants celebrated the gifts of God and came to appreciate the gracious and mysterious purposes of God at work in their own lives and in the wider world. It would have been quite unrealistic and insensitive on such occasions to have interrogated the participants about their belief or theology of the Eucharist prior

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to the celebration. And I am pretty sure that in many cases the actual celebration brought them to have a more authentic experience of communion, and a more rich faith in the Eucharist. So the sharing in Holy Communion had a missionary effect, nourishing a Eucharistic faith that may have been dormant, underdeveloped, or merely embryonic.

A thin web. One of the main findings of the study was how little not just the Catholic Church but religion in general was part of the cultural repertoires of the everyday lives of the people I interviewed. There were few indications that God was in their minds and hearts and on their lips, that religion provided them with either a model or explanation of life, or that it was a model for how they should live their lives. Very few respondents mentioned God or religion until we reached the end section of the interview when I asked them specific questions about their religious beliefs and practices. When I asked them how they decided what was right or wrong, very few mentioned religion or the teachings of the church or the Bible. When I asked those who had suffered a major illness, tragedy, or death, how they got through their ordeal, only a few mentioned religion. Being Catholic is, then, a cultural ingredient that many participants used to facilitate and create meaning with each other, to mark major life transitions, to celebrate, and to mourn. For many, being Catholic seems to be a vague, thin web of meaning within which other webs of meaning are spun: it was less of an ideological conviction and more of a learnt, habitual way of being in the world.

– TOM INGLIS, *Meaning of Life in Contemporary Ireland* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan) p.188.