

Eucharistic Sharing: Recent Developments

Ernest Falardeau SSS

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to give a quick overview of the present status of the Catholic Church on the subject of eucharistic sharing with special emphasis on recent developments. It explores the present situation while asking whether in the long run that position is adequate to the goal of the ecumenical movement. In the hope of exploring a way out and a way forward, I will suggest some of the next steps which could and should be taken to move ahead, with the help of the grace of Jesus Christ, especially the sacramental grace of unity, which is the Eucharist, the sign and means of unity.

Eucharistic Sharing or Open Communion

The Catholic Church steers a middle course between open communion on the one hand, which is practiced by some Christian denominations such as the United Methodist and the Church of Christ (Disciples), and an almost total exclusion of eucharistic sharing (e.g. the general rule of practice in the Eastern Orthodox and Ancient Eastern Churches.) Before Vatican II the practice of the Church of Rome resembled very closely that of the Orthodox. Eucharistic sharing was out of the question. The change was made possible by dramatic shift in ecclesiology reflected in the Vatican Council's documents *Lumen Gentium* and *Unitatis Redintegratio*. Reflecting upon the unity among all Christians by virtue of their baptism, the Vatican Council began to see a possible opening to other Christians for eucharistic sharing.

Documents dealing with the implementation of the Second Vatican Council tended to be somewhat conservative in this matter. Though the *Ecumenical Directory* (1969/70) indicated when such eucharistic sharing

was possible, documents from Rome (1972/73) seemed to put a damper on any extensive use of eucharistic sharing.¹

In 1993 the new *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* followed the trajectory of Vatican II and the earlier *Ecumenical Directory*. It emphasized the communion and unity shared by all Christians and the possibility, however limited, for eucharistic sharing provided certain conditions were present. This use of eucharistic sharing was essentially for pastoral reasons and by way of exception, and was to be judged in individual cases. Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* made the rather remarkable statement that "it is a source of joy" when under the appropriate conditions, eucharistic sharing is possible.²

Problems

One of the problems with the present legislation in Canon 844, and the other official documents of the Church are that initially these existing rules were interpreted very strictly. Any attempt to interpret them generously was resisted. At the present time, this is changing. The Guidelines of South Africa, India, Germany and Austria tend to interpret existing rules more broadly. The new Policy for Canada

expressly recalls the general principle of Canon Law that privileges are to be interpreted broadly. And it understands Eucharistic sharing as a privilege.³

Commentators point out that one of the problems overall is the fact that without a policy or general guidelines, practice becomes arbitrary and restrictive.⁴

Ecumenical Perspective

I have studied the development of eucharistic sharing in the past three decades⁵ and noted the growing desire for such sharing. I find it useful to see the kind of forward movement that has occurred and to project where this movement is leading us.⁶

First of all the World Council of Churches in its monumental *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, has clearly indicated that a sharing in the Eucharist is one of the ultimate goals of the modern ecumenical movement. It encourages Churches to move in this direction. Some churches have responded favorably. The history of interim eucharistic sharing between Episcopalians and Lutherans in the United States has helped these churches to move toward a status of "full communion" (*Called to Common Mission*)⁸

At the present time, this is changing. The Guidelines of South Africa, India, Germany, and Austria tend to interpret existing rules more broadly. The new Policy for Canada expressly recalls the general principle of Canon Law that privileges are to be interpreted broadly. And it understands Eucharistic sharing as a privilege.

However modern theology and catechesis emphasizes that the Eucharist is not a reward. It is a need. Our effort should not be to 'protect Jesus': He ate and drank with sinners. The purpose of his coming was to bring salvation to a sinful world. 'I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners' (Lk 5:32).

effective January 1, 2001). Other churches will be moving in the same direction through the *Churches Uniting in Christ* (formerly COCU) which will be effective in 2002.⁹ The Reformed and Lutheran Churches are now in full communion (A Formula of Agreement)¹⁰ as well as the Scandinavian Lutherans and the Church of England (Porvoo Common Statement).¹¹

The Catholic Church has signed agreements of doctrine with two Ancient Eastern Churches (East Syrian and West Syrian) permitting the laity to share the Eucharist mutually (though not concelebration).¹² These agreements have included a formulation of Christological doctrine in the light of the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon

From an ecumenical perspective, the first point that needs to be made, is that eucharistic sharing will not "go away". In the light of all that has happened, especially in recent years, the felt need for sharing the Eucharist across church lines will not diminish. It can only grow.¹³

The second point is: *'Is this enough?'* I would raise the point especially in terms of Roman Catholic legislation. The hesitation to share the Eucharist is popularly phrased in this way: "If we give them the Eucharist, what else will remain to negotiate?" There is a sense in which to give the Eucharist to other than Roman Catholics is to "give away the store". Once this is done, there is nothing left to negotiate ecumenically.¹⁴

I can understand this protective attitude toward the Eucharist. We have a long tradition of not allowing the Eucharist to people who are not considered to be worthy. This is the attitude that multiplied excommunications in the past. It was the attitude that kept people away from the Eucharist for many centuries. However modern theology and catechesis emphasizes that the Eucharist is not a reward. It is a need. Our effort should not be to "protect Jesus". He ate and drank with sinners. The purpose of his coming was to bring salvation to a sinful world. "I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sin- 5:32).

For further progress in eucharistic sharing, it will be necessary to eliminate the idea that the Eucharist is some kind of reward for good behavior. It is the bread of life.- It is a necessity "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have life in you." (Jn 6:) Members of other churches are not sinners any more than we are. They are "brothers and sisters in the Lord." Often they are far better prepared for the Eucharist than members of our own church.

Our understanding of the Eucharist has been founded on a deficient ecclesiology. Once we begin to think of the Church as one but divided, we will begin to see that in the one and divided Church we must come to Christ for the unity we seek. Unity is not achieved by human effort, it is

given by God's grace. Our task is to receive and accept it. And the Eucharist is the sacrament of Christian unity.¹⁵

Eucharist as Means

The Second Vatican Council has clearly stated that the Eucharist is both a sign of unity achieved **and a means of unity desired**. The latter aspect of the Eucharist has been underestimated and underplayed. I believe it is time we begin to look upon this other aspect of the Eucharist and its compelling imperative to move forward.

Some Protestant churches clearly see this imperative. The Orthodox, because of a Cyprianic emphasis on appropriateness, will have a harder time coming to appreciate the imperative of eucharistic sharing. The Roman Catholic Church needs to go beyond current legislation to what it is being called and challenged to do.

Looking forward to "next steps" in the ecumenical movement, it is clear that the recognition of ordination and valid sacraments is the next major hurdle on the road to Christian unity. Anglican orders and Lutheran orders are the logical places to begin. The polity of these churches is such that recognition should not be long delayed. Anglican orders probably offer the greatest hope for the immediate future.

As for Orthodox recognition of Catholic orders, this will require a revision of ecclesiology. However, the elements of that ecclesiology are already at hand. The Orthodox stress on the differences between East and West because of the addition to the Creed of the "filioque" and the disagreements on Marian dogmas are not seen as insurmountable today by most theologians on either side. The mechanism for a reconciliation between Rome, Constantinople, Moscow and other Orthodox centers has yet to be found. However there is real hope that such a mechanism will be found with the celebration of a Pan-Orthodox Council in the near future. Preparations for the Pan-Orthodox Council are already under way.

The Eucharist as means to unity has largely been either ignored or underestimated by the Catholic Church. This is understandable in the light of where the Catholic Church was before the Second Vatican Council. That the Church was reluctant to go beyond an initial change of direction is not surprising. However in the light of the tremendous ecumenical progress that has been made in recent years, it may not be enough for the current challenge and the present reality.

More and more churches and more and more Christians are in fact receiving across church lines. This is happening every Sunday in Catholic churches around the world. Catholics are being invited repeatedly by Protestant ministers to come forward to receive the Eucharist at weddings, funerals and other family and church celebrations. Many do not see or understand the prohibitions of the Catholic Church to do so. To simply repeat these caveats will not resolve the problem.

Pastoral Need

The present Catholic legislation allows "for pastoral reasons", by way of exception and in individual cases. Is it enough? Given the very important breakthroughs with Orthodox, Anglican and Lutherans (as well as other major dialogue agreements) precisely concerning the theology of the Eucharist, can the Catholic Church simply stand pat when other churches are moving forward? Is pastoral need the only criterion? Does not ecumenical progress require the Catholic Church to keep pace with this progress? If there is no major disagreement about Anglican, Lutheran and Roman Catholic understanding of the nature of Eucharist, should there not be some forward movement in the area of eucharistic sharing to reflect this common consensus?

As for reciprocity, a breakthrough in the area of recognition of ordinations is absolutely required. And this cannot delay much longer. It is the greatest obstacle to further progress. When the subject is broached, the

The Eucharist as means to unity has largely been either ignored or underestimated by the Catholic Church. This is understandable in the light of where the Catholic Church was before the Second Vatican Council. That the Church was reluctant to go beyond an initial change of direction is not surprising. However in the light of the tremendous ecumenical progress that has been made in recent years, it may not be enough for the current challenge and the present reality.

problem of women's ordination is often raised. That problem will not go away. Women will continue to be ordained in other major Christian denominations. The Catholic Church is on the horns of a dilemma in this regard. Either it has to forego the goal of Christian unity or accept the fact that other Churches do not see the matter as it does. For Anglicans and Lutherans ordaining women is a call of the Gospel. To refuse such ordinations is simply gender discrimination.

The fundamental question is: Is the ordination of women a matter of the essentials of the faith? Is it so essential, that agreement on it is required for unity of faith? Is the ordination of women at the core of Christian faith? How shall we resolve this impasse, since resolve it we must.

Does not the principle of the hierarchy of truths apply to this question?

There are Catholic men and women who feel that women's ordination is something that the Roman Catholic Church must eventually embrace. For them the matter is strictly canonical and cultural. The Catholic Church will not allow a discussion of the question, much less a resolution in the opposite sense of what has been established by Paul VI and John Paul II. My purpose is not to open the debate here. It is simply to indicate that this obstacle to unity must

be either circumvented or resolved if the question of the validity of orders is to be resolved. As a matter of fact, I believe the matter should be left to God, and we should simply move forward with the essential question, which is: Can there be a mutual recognition of orders among the major churches of the West? I believe, with the theologians involved in these dialogues, that the answer is yes. In the term used by Martin Luther the matter should be considered *adiaphora* (i.e. nonessential to the faith, non-creedal) and so "in dubious libertas". Incidentally, such an approach in the 10th century would have kept East and West' in unity rather than in a thousand years of separation.

The Way Ahead

Vessula Ryden,¹⁶ in a popular video interview states that she had a vision of the three major Christian divisions as three bars of iron. Iron represents the lack of flexibility of Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches. The love of Christ will melt these iron bars, she says, and something new will be created: a unity among the Christian churches. That is one person's view or vision of the future. Whatever will be is known to God alone.

I believe the way ahead will involve a greater use of eucharistic sharing to move the churches toward greater unity. This is what is happening. The Pope has put his "seal of approval" on such eucharistic practice. The ecumenical value to such eucharistic sharing is apparent to all. Rather than try to reverse the trend, it would be important to recognize that this movement forward as the work of the Spirit and to make the best use of it.

We should open the possibility for interchurch couples receiving the Eucharist together as a family. We should open the possibility of Christians receiving the Eucharist together at ecumenical gatherings. We should move forward as soon as it is feasible on the recognition of orders among the major Christian churches of East and West. We should extend *epikeia* and *econo-* as far as possible so that the Eucharist may be allowed to work in the hearts of Christians. The source of our unity is Jesus Christ. He is present in the Eucharist to make us one. We should allow him to work his miracle of grace. Putting obstacles in the way of his desire to unite Christians should not be our task or our aim.

Recent Developments

Having discussed some of the issues central to eucharistic sharing from a theological point of view, and the need for a greater openness to progress in this area, I would like to review some of the significant developments that are both encouraging

As for reciprocity, a breakthrough in the area of recognition of ordinations is absolutely required. And this cannot delay much longer. It is the greatest obstacle to further progress. When the subject is broached, the problem of women's ordination is often raised. That problem will not go away. Women will continue to be ordained in other major Christian denominations. The Catholic Church is on the horns of a dilemma in this regard.

and point in a direction for the future.

1. *South African Guidelines Revised*

The Guidelines on Eucharistic Sharing for the dioceses of South Africa came under very close scrutiny not many years ago as a result of the publicity which surrounded a decision by a local pastor to give then President Bill Clinton and his wife Hilary communion at a Sunday service in his Roman Catholic church. The bishops of South Africa sent their Guidelines to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and several suggestions were returned to improve the Guidelines. As a result the Guidelines were revised and promulgated.

What is interesting about the revis-

ion is that there is very little change. Most of the change has to do with Roman Catholics receiving in other Christian churches and the emphasis on the validity of ordination required for such eucharistic sharing.

The Guidelines are broad and encouraging. This is particularly the case for families in which one member is Catholic and the other is Anglican or Protestant. The very fact that they attend services together is sufficient reason for allowing eucharistic sharing.

2. *The Canadian Bishops' Pastoral Policy*

The Catholic bishops of Canada were not yet ready to establish national guidelines in the area of eucharistic sharing. However they were able to approve a policy that will be in place for the coming years. At the end of a three year period of experimentation, the bishops' conference hopes to review what has been happening, and if the bishops are ready, to establish guidelines based on the experience of this period.

The Canadian policy is very important because a good number of critical issues have been faced by the bishops. The following points are noteworthy:

Provisions are to be interpreted generously.

We should open the possibility for interchurch couples receiving the Eucharist together as a family. We should open the possibility of Christians receiving the Eucharist together at ecumenical gatherings. We should move forward as soon as it is feasible on the recognition of orders among the major Christian churches of East and West.

Terminology: "Cases of *Serious Need*

Each bishop is to authorize the policy in his diocese

The *Policy* provides general guidelines; reports are to be made over the next three years and reviewed by the CCCB.

In Mixed Marriages, the couple is to determine occasions of special significance.

3. *One Bread One Body (Catholic) and The Eucharist: Sacrament of Unity (Anglican)*

In 1998 the bishops of England, Scotland, Wales, North Ireland and the Republic of Ireland issued a statement on the Eucharist entitled *One Bread, One Body*.¹⁷ The document summarized the Catholic Church's teaching on the Eucharist and gave guidelines and rationale for the people of the United Kingdom and Ireland. The theology of this document has been widely praised even in Protestant circles. The practical conclusions and guidelines, however, have been characterized as very conservative. Eucharistic sharing was described as a "once off" practice, i.e. permissible for a very special occasion, perhaps once in a lifetime.

The Anglican response came from the Bishops of England who wrote *The Eucharist: Sacrament of Unity*¹⁸ in 2001. The bishops indicated that they had little disagreement with the theology of *One Bread, One Body*. However, they criticized the practical application of the document. They began by pointing out that the Anglican Communion does not consider itself "another Protestant Church". The Anglican communion sympathizes very much with the Reformation and is indebted to it. However the Church of England considers itself the historic and authentic continuation of the Church founded in England by St. Augustine of Canterbury. They also disagree today, as they did at the time of Leo XIII, with the position of *Apostolicae Curiae*¹⁹ that Anglican ordinations are "absolutely null and utterly void."

Hence they hold that the Eucharist celebrated by Anglican priests is true and valid. Indeed they feel that the term "validity" is not appropriate for discussion of the topic. The English bishops are saddened at the prohibition for Roman Catholics from receiving the Eucharist in Anglican churches, and the restrictive interpretation of the possibility of eucharistic sharing by Anglicans in Roman Catholic churches. They are quick to point out that other bishops throughout the world interpret existing legislation more broadly.

We do not have time and space to go into further analysis of this very important document. It will be very interesting to see what the official Vatican response will be. For our purposes, we simply point to this recent document as an indication of the growing interest and concern with the topic of eucharistic sharing and the felt need that other Christians have to see the Eucharist as the means to unity, as well as a sign of unity already achieved.

(Rev. Ernest R. Falardeau, SSS is Director of the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, Albuquerque, New Mexico.)

NOTES

1. SPCU., *On Admitting Other Christians to Eucharistic Communion in the Catholic Church (In Quibus Rerum Circumstantiis)* 1 June, 1972, AAS 64 (1972) 518-525.

SPCU. *Note Interpreting 'Instruction On Admitting Other Christians to Eucharistic Communion in the Catholic Church Under Certain Circumstances (Dopo Le pubblicazione)*, 17 October 1973, AAS 55 (1973) 616-619

2. John Paul II, Pope, *Ut Unum Sint* # 46.

In this context, it is a source of joy to note that Catholic ministers are able, in certain particular cases to administer the Sacraments of Eucharist, Penance and Anointing of the Sick to Christians, who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church but who greatly desire to receive these sacraments, freely request them and manifest the faith which the Catholic Church professes with regard to these

sacraments. Conversely, in specific cases and in particular circumstances, Catholics too can request these same sacraments from ministers of Churches in which these sacraments are valid. The conditions for such reciprocal reception have been laid down in specific norms; for the sake of furthering ecumenism these norms must be respected.

3. *Sacramental Sharing Between Catholics and Other Christians in Canada: Pastoral Commentary to Assist Priests, Deacons and Lay Ministers in Determining Cases of Serious Need*, (Prepared by the Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations Commission for the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2000.), p.6 and 7.

4. John M. Heels. *A New Policy for Sacramental Sharing for Canadian Dioceses*, Celebrate 39 (2000) 24-29. *Sacramental Sharing in Mixed Marriages: The Polity for Canadian Dioceses*, Celebrate 40 (2001) 24-29. A fuller development can be found in *A Polity on C. 844#4 for Canadian Dioceses* in *Stadia Canonica* 34 (2000) 41 ff

5. Ernest Falardeau, SSS, *Sacramental Sharing: A Theological Perspective from the New Ecumenical Directory of 1993* Ecumenical Trends 24 (1995) 113-114 and 121-124.

6. Among recent articles, see Ladislav Orsy, SJ, *Interchurch Marriage and the Reception of the Eucharist*, *America* 175 (1996) 18-19.

7. World Council of Churches, Faith and Order Commission, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, #111, Geneva: WCC, 1982, # E33.

8. *Called to Common Mission*. This full communion agreement between the Episcopal Church USA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America became official on January 1, 2001.

9. *Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC)*. This agreement for full communion between nine Protestant denominations (formerly called the Consultation on Churches Uniting in Christ) is scheduled to become effective on January 20, 2002.

10. *A Formula of Agreement*. Another full communion agreement at the world level between the various Reformed Churches of the world.

11. *Porvoo Common Statement*. A declaration of full communion between the Anglican Communion and the Lutheran Churches of Scandinavia (ca. 1996).

12. West Syrian- Roman Catholic Agreement (1984)- East Syrian-Roman Catholic Agreement (1994).

13. Pastoral experience and contact with retreat centers confirm this belief.

14. Is it not time to ask whether "for pastoral need and by way of exception is adequate for the present situation? Many Protestants regularly share retreats, ecumenical gatherings or are involved in ecumenical marriages. They express a need to share the Eucharist more frequently than is presently encouraged. See also National Association of Diocesan Ecumenical Officers. *Food for the Journey*. Albuquerque: 1985, for other pastoral situations where a growing sense of need is expressed.

15. Thomas Aquinas, St. *Summa Theologica* III q.73, art. 3.

"Respondeo: ...res hujus sacramenti est unitas corporis mystici, sine qua non potest esse salus; nulli enim potest adirus salus extra Ecclesiam, sicut nec in diluvio absque arca Noe. quae significat Ecclesiam..." (I answer that... the reality of the sacrament is the unity of the mystical body, without which there can be no salvation; for there is no entering into salvation outside the Church, just as in the time of the deluge there was none outside the Ark which denotes the Church...) Transl. from First Complete American Edition, Benzinger, 1947.

16. Vessula Ryden is a mystic who is intensely interested in the unity of Christians. She is quite well known and has produced some videos of her lectures.

17. Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, Ireland and Scotland *One Bread One Body: A teaching document on the Eucharist, and the establishment of general norms on sacramental sharing* London: Catholic Media Office, O 1993.

18. *The Eucharist: Sacrament of Unity: An occasional paper of the House of Bishops of the Church of England*, London: Church House Publishing, © 2001.

19. Leo XIII, Pope, *Apostolicae Curae, ASS 29* (1896/97) 198ss., DS #3315-3319.



Reprinted by permission from *Ecumenical Trends* by the Office of Ecumenical & Interreligious Affairs of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe

Office of Ecumenical & Interreligious Affairs
Archdiocese of Santa Fe
1000 St. Joseph Place NW
Albuquerque, AM87120

Published in 'Ecumenical Trends', a publication of Graymoor Institute, operated by the Friars of the Atonement.
<http://www.graymoorarc.org/>