

Between the Times, Between Communities: Eucharistic Theology for the Bridge

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The story is told of a wedding between a Mennonite and a Catholic. Since the wedding was to be a Catholic ceremony, Mennonite family members were uncertain whether they should take communion. At the rehearsal, one of them pulled the priest aside and asked what they should do. 'There are two rules I must observe as a Catholic priest,' he told them. 'The first is that I cannot invite non-Catholics to receive communion. And the second is that I cannot refuse communion to anyone who comes forward in the communion line.' With that he gestured to indicate that the conversation was over.¹ Welcome to Catholic culture - welcomed to the table? or not?

The story *needed* to be told because a modest but growing movement of 'sacramentally-minded Mennonites and peace-minded Roman Catholics' calling themselves [Bridgefolk](#) have been coming together since 1999 'to celebrate each other's traditions, explore each other's practices, and honor each other's contribution to the mission of Christ's Church.'² Since 2001 St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, has been hosting Bridgefolk and Abbot John Klassen serves as co-chair of its steering committee. Bridgefolk embodies the conviction that for ecumenical conversation to bear fruit between high-church and low-church traditions, it is especially important that the necessary work of high-level dialogue find its complement in grassroots encounters that accommodate the polity and dynamics of 'Free Church' or 'Believers Church' or 'Radical Reformation' communities.³ What this means in practice, however, is that some of the thorniest issues along the ecumenical path sprout with particular sting precisely and urgently at the grassroots level, where the joy of discovering unexpected unity exposes Christians all the more personally to the pain of Christian unity. Such pain can sometimes require a pastoral attention that will not wait for an official concordat.

Certainly that has been the case for Bridgefolk and the unavoidable - unavoidably thorny - issue of intercommunion. Still, if the dynamic of grassroots ecumenical exchange has confronted Bridgefolk all the more urgently with the issue, that same grassroots dynamic may also offer a fertile test plot⁴ from which may grow learnings of benefit to other Christians, engaged in other dialogues. Though the theological and

pastoral explorations that follow arose from a very particular context, I share them in that hope.

The 'Already' and 'Not Yet' of Our Unity

At the first public Bridgefolk gathering of Mennonites and Roman Catholics at St. John's Abbey in July 2002, one of the conference's Benedictine hosts attempted to convey something of the same message as the priest officiating at that Mennonite-Catholic wedding had done. But what *was* the message? Some Mennonites present heard hard official words, others saw generous pastoral gestures. Many, both Mennonite and Catholic, felt the pain of Christian disunity. Some felt pain from misunderstanding the cues in another's culture, perhaps. But many felt the pain of understanding all too well how far we still have to go before we share the common theological language, to say nothing of common institutional bonds, that will give shape to that living unity we sense God's Spirit already making present among us.

We do face serious issues, and not simply the challenge of cross-cultural misunderstanding. In one sense, when the time comes that participants in a movement like Bridgefolk can partake together at the table of the Lord without any reservations whatsoever - in a communion so full that both traditions may name its fullness equally well in their own ways - then its work will be done. In the meantime, we gather together in Bridgefolk precisely because we have discovered a unity worth celebrating and exploring even though we are still in a 'meantime,' living between the times, living between the 'already' and the 'not yet' of that Christian unity which is both a gift and a calling.

In this meantime, the very nature of the Christian unity we are called to seek is itself one of the issues that divides our traditions. Conscientious Roman Catholics really do believe that without institutional ties embodied through communion with a bishop who is in communion with other bishops and ultimately the bishop of Rome, then Christian unity is at best incomplete; other expressions or sentiments of unity are welcome but by themselves ephemeral. Conscientious Mennonites really do believe that unless Christians are joining their daily lives together in practical down-to-earth ways as they offer one another the mutual aid they need to follow Christ in life, then Christian unity is itself disembodied; structures and institutions are welcome but only as tools to enable shared discernment issuing in faithful discipleship, without which claims of unity may be nothing but a front for hypocrisy. Mennonites may look at the celebrations of the Eucharist in average Catholic parishes

and see far less unity than in a meeting such as Bridgefolk's. Catholics may look at Mennonites gathering around the Bible to discern God's will and see not a seedling church but a seedling schism. In the face of empirical evidence of institutional inertia, Catholics will sometimes need faith to affirm that Christ really is at work guiding the Church through a Spirit-guided hierarchy. In the face of empirical evidence of countless Church splits, Mennonites will sometimes need faith to affirm that Christ really is revealing his will wherever two or three gather for Spirit-guided congregational discernment.

Bridgefolk represents a conviction that Roman Catholic catholicity-from-above and Radical Reformation catholicity-from-below need each other desperately. But to trust that these will one day meet widely and formally also requires faith! In the meantime, we are pilgrims together on a journey. Is it possible to celebrate and embody a unity that is 'on the way?' And how?

The Communion of Ss. Benedict and Scholastica

For some participants, the first Bridgefolk gathering at Saint John's Abbey was not in July 2002 but in March 2001, when its original steering committee, some of their spouses, and one other participant from a 1999 retreat in Pennsylvania, met in Collegeville to renew the work of Bridgefolk together. Building on the relationships that Weldon Nisly, pastor of the Seattle Mennonite Church, had developed during his sabbatical, one of the first things the committee did was meet with the new abbot, John Klassen. Perhaps to initiate his guests briefly into the Benedictine charism, perhaps to communicate his commitment to sustained conversation, or perhaps for a reason only God's Spirit then knew, the abbot began by recounting the story depicted on a mural that covers one entire wall of his parlor.

It is the story that Gregory the Great told in his *Dialogues* about what turned out to be the last yearly visit that the aging St. Benedict received from his consecrated sister St. Scholastica.⁵ Having 'spent the whole day (together) in the praise of God and in holy conversation' at some distance outside the gate of the monastery, Scholastica wished to continue discussing 'the joys of heaven' on into the night. Faithful to the Rule for his community that St. Benedict himself had penned, Benedict was determined to return to his cell before nightfall. But while he acted strictly according to the rule, she acted on love and prayed to God with so many tears that the heavens themselves - calm until now - burst out in their own downpour of rain and thunder. Benedict could not leave.

Gregory's comment was that Scholastica's love had proven stronger than Benedict's calm but firm resolve. The commentary of many since is that it has been just this combination of flexible love and resolute structure that has given the Benedictine tradition its durability.

We would do well to pause and reflect on the gift that this story constitutes. Without the Benedictine integration of structure and flexibility, as modeled and offered to us by St. John's Abbey, Bridgefolk might not be possible. Our fledgling movement benefits from the structures, resources and ordered wisdom of a long tradition. Still, it is available to us precisely through the flexibility and hospitality of a community open to an unexpected relationship - with Mennonites of all people. And there is more:

My hypothesis, at least, is that the Mennonites and the Catholics who are drawn to explore one another's traditions in a movement like Bridgefolk are attracted in part because each one integrates structure and flexibility in a way that looks fresh and invigorating for life within their own church structures. Catholics are attracted by the possibilities for lay leadership and grassroots initiative within the Mennonite tradition, which somehow remain compatible with a rigorous ethic of nonviolence. Mennonites are attracted to the rich plurality of Catholic spiritualities, which somehow have all found a place within the 'big tent' of the Catholic tradition.

If only we better understood the 'somehow' by which both traditions have held rigor and hospitality, structure and flexibility, together! Mutual misgivings remain, after all, as a check upon our mutual attractions. Whatever their own frustrations with their hierarchy, most of the Catholics among us would hesitate to abandon those structures for the potential fractiousness of Anabaptist-Mennonite church life. And whatever their embarrassment at the record of church splits in their history, most of the Mennonites among us would hesitate to abandon the grassroots dynamic of their church life for potential submission to the Catholic hierarchy. So anything we can learn from the communion between Benedict and Scholastica will be good for relationships both within and between our communities.

While St. Scholastica is undoubtedly the hero of this story, and her rule-bending love is its lesson, we would not even know that story were it not for the Rule of St. Benedict that structures love into a durable community life through time. In the same breath, though, we must add that Benedict's Rule would not have proven so durable if the Rule itself had not allowed for flexibility all along, and presented itself not as an end in

itself but as merely a tool and a beginning to growth in the life of virtue. Mature Christians need both. The fullness of Christ's Church needs both. So even as we explore a possible theological basis for a flexible approach to the rule against non-Catholics partaking in the Eucharist under ordinary circumstances, I have lingered over the model of Benedict and Scholastica in order to urge us neither to resent that rule nor to question the responsibility for rule-making that resides with church authorities.

As they struggle to come to terms with the Catholic approach to these matters, Mennonites would do well to recall some salient facts about their own tradition. Mennonites themselves have practiced 'closed communion' for most of their history, sometimes restricting it not only to their own church members but to those who have gone through a Mennonite version of penitential self-examination that was not just between the individual and their pastor but known to the entire congregation.⁶ Mennonites themselves have used certain actions and prohibitions as boundary markers to define and preserve group identity, and in hindsight some of these look far more theologically trivial than the Eucharist. To be sure, few of us would be seeking dialogue and exchange with Catholics if we remained part of tightly-defined traditional Mennonite communities. But at least some of the Mennonites in Bridgefolk find far more energy for ecumenical dialogue with Catholics than with Protestants precisely because they do still retain a deeply communitarian approach to Christianity. Such an approach can hardly exist at all unless group norms carry greater weight than individual preferences on issues that are key to community life.⁷ As St. Paul insisted in 1 Corinthians 11:29, one cannot partake rightly without 'discerning the body.' Whatever challenges and frustrations the Catholic policy of closed communion presents, the Mennonite tradition itself gives reason to suspect that a wide-open invitation to open communion, so natural to a more individualistic Protestantism, is in fact a false solution. For according to the deeply communitarian approach to Christianity that Mennonites and Catholics share, the eucharist or Lord's Supper must always confirm the realities of ecclesial identity and commitment, not simply personal identity and desire. Mennonites should not find it too hard to agree with Pope John Paul II when he writes that 'Liturgy is never anyone's private property.'⁸

Structure

If we are to discover the flexibility that is integral and proper to Roman Catholic structure, then at some point, in some way, we will have to come to terms with that structure. And there is no way to do this without

recognizing that on any matter about which the pope has authoritatively spoken, one will sooner or later have to come to terms with his words. One need not receive those words as Catholic fundamentalists do – ‘Rome has spoken; the case is closed’ - in order to receive them respectfully. One need not discount the responsibility to adapt church-wide teachings to local conditions and personal circumstances in order to recognize the role of the pope in defining global norms and setting a common agenda for the worldwide body he pastors. One need not stifle the questions that church documents raise in order to read them with a clear conscience that is open to formation - particularly since careful and probing readings can themselves be an act of respect.

The pope’s recent encyclical on the eucharist is both a case in point, and the occasion for making that point. If one only read the headlines and general news summaries about *Ecclesia de eucharistia* there would seem to be no room for ongoing theological conversation about the question of intercommunion, nor any room for exceptions to the rule it reiterates, which limits eucharistic participation to full members of the Catholic Church. It is precisely when we take the structures and teachings of the Church seriously that we will discover unexpected flexibility and pastoral sensitivity.

In any case, Mennonites will not be in serious dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church if they simply brush Catholic convictions aside. Certain of these are key to understanding (at the very least) Catholic policies regarding eucharistic participation. The first is the one I have just been illustrating - that even if Catholics themselves have debated the precise nature of the pope’s role in defining and embodying institutional unity, that role is inescapable.

The second conviction is more subtle. In fact it is so basic that Catholics themselves do not always think to name it explicitly. This is the priority of the objective over the subjective. It surfaces in the encyclical at a couple of critical points. One obvious example in the encyclical is that the ‘objective reality’ of transubstantiation, by which the bread and wine become the very body and blood of Christ, is guaranteed ‘independently of our mind’⁹ by ‘the objective truth’ of Christ’s words in John 6: “‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life within you. ... My flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.’”¹⁰

As the pope turns to the question of who may participate in communion, therefore, subjective ‘invisible communion’ is insufficient without

objective ‘visible communion.’ The pope certainly recognizes the importance of ‘invisible communion’ through moral faithfulness or (when Christians fall short) through penance.¹¹ But he goes on to insist that communion must also be visible in the bonds, structure, and ‘visible framework’ by which Christ offers the means of salvation and governs the Church through the hierarchy. ‘The Eucharist, as the supreme sacramental manifestation of communion in the Church, demands to be celebrated in *a context where the outward bonds of communion are also intact.*’¹² (emphasis added)

Now, non-Catholic skeptics (and no doubt some Catholic ones too) may see little more here than a Roman obsession with hierarchical control. While it would be pointless to deny some of that dynamic, much more is at work. Translated into English, *Ecclesia de eucharistia*, the title of the encyclical, reads: ‘The Church draws her life from the eucharist.’ The phrase evokes and the encyclical follows through with much fruitful reflection on the organic process by which the eucharist nurtures the Church and forms Christian lives. But in Catholic sacramental theology, one simply cannot move on to pastoral, aesthetic, mystical and subjective concerns without defining the objective conditions that make for a valid eucharist in the first place. In Catholicism, therefore, the sacrament of Eucharist thus requires the sacrament of Holy Orders, conferred by a bishop, who has been rightly consecrated according to apostolic succession, and so on. In turn the ritual must be performed according to canonical guidelines. The personal holiness of the priest is not the criterion of eucharistic validity. The quality of music, the eloquence of the homily, the aesthetics of worship, and the intensity of experience are not the final tests of sacramentality.

There is a cost to the priority of the objective over the subjective, and one only needs to move from the exquisite liturgical setting of a place like St. John’s Abbey into a mundane struggling parish with anemic singing to find reminders of that cost. But the core theological conviction has been a settled matter since the Donatist controversy of the 4th and 5th century.¹³ And behind it there is actually a deep pastoral concern that the faithful be able to partake in confidence of sacramental grace, without subjecting that grace to the human foibles of the priest or parish that sets the table. If one does not have time to trace the pertinent arguments back to the 4th century, then I suggest Graham Greene’s marvelous novel, *The Power and the Glory*, set amid the anticlerical persecution of the Mexican Revolution. The novel’s anti-hero is a whisky-soaked adulterous priest who acts heroically in the end, not through any great virtue of his own, but because he knows what he is to do as a priest and goes through the

motions even though it means going into the trap that will lead to his death. It is the eucharist that has made him worthy, not he the eucharist.

Third, then, is a conviction I have already mentioned, but that is all the more recognizable next to the other two: To the Roman Catholic mind, objective bonds of institutional unity really do count as the *sine qua non* among all other expressions of Christian unity, and certainly count more than mere sentiments of unity. If the eucharist 'demands to be celebrated in a context where the outward bonds of communion are also intact,'¹⁴ those bonds are formed not only through Holy Orders on the part of priests, but through Baptism, assent to 'the full truth of the faith regarding the Eucharistic mystery,'¹⁵ and communion with the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic church' by way of the bishop who is the visible principle of unity in any particular Christian community.¹⁶ In other words, we come at last to the question of the 'objective' status of those receiving the eucharist as well - the condition of membership.

Intriguingly, however, when the encyclical turns to this question its primary focus is not individual communion or membership but concelebration between church bodies - i.e. joint celebration of the Eucharist by ordained representatives of ecclesial bodies that have not yet restored full bonds of mutual recognition.¹⁷ The point is crucial to understanding the force of the pope's continuing prohibition against non-Catholic participation in Roman Catholic eucharists. To lift the prohibition against joint celebration of the Eucharist prematurely would be to communicate 'duplicity'¹⁸ - to send a mixed message - about whether the church bodies in question have resolved their differences or not. Not only would this obscure the question of 'valid means' (those objective conditions for a valid Eucharist we've just discussed) but it

... might well prove instead to be an obstacle, to the attainment of full communion, by weakening the sense of how far we remain from this goal and by introducing or exacerbating ambiguities with regard to one or another truth of the faith. The path towards full unity can only be undertaken in truth.¹⁹

The pope recognizes that it is perfectly natural that those who long deeply for the fullness of Christian unity should hunger to share the eucharist together, since it is 'the supreme sacrament of the unity of the People of God.'²⁰ But it is the common sense wisdom not only of ecumenists but of other mediators that before the parties to a conflict can resolve it they must often feel its pain acutely *and* view it realistically. Hence, at an official, global, churchwide level, the pope could hardly do otherwise than to reiterate the rule.

Flexibility

Yet the pope remains a pastor, and it has been the enigma of John Paul II in particular to be at once doggedly firm and compassionately sensitive. Thus he continues:

While it is never legitimate to concelebrate in the absence of full communion, the same is not true with respect to the administration of the Eucharist under special circumstances, to individual persons belonging to Churches or Ecclesial Communities not in full communion with the Catholic Church. In this case, in fact, the intention is to meet a grave spiritual need for the eternal salvation of an individual believer, not to bring about an intercommunion which remains impossible until the visible bonds of ecclesial communion are fully re-established.²¹

What are these special circumstances? No doubt what the pope and canon law have especially in mind are Christians from traditions that share a high view of the real presence of Christ in the eucharist but whose circumstances make reception in their own community temporarily impossible.²² Displacement, travel and illness present the obvious emergency situations. Proximity to death would heighten the gravity of such circumstances still further.²³ But can this be all?

If all 'special circumstances' could be anticipated there would be no need for the discernment to which the pope refers when he writes that it is 'possible to provide for the salvation of souls with proper discernment.'²⁴ So what of a Christian whose personal vocation is so intimately wrapped up in working for Christian unity, promoting mutual understanding, and reconciling differences in their very person that to falter or turn away from their calling would in fact pose a certain kind of risk to their salvation? What of a group of such Christians who banded together to support one another in their callings and on this journey - not claiming to constitute one more Church, yet faithful to a communitarian understanding of Christianity that requires us to embody the changes God is working through us, by joining together in durable bonds of society, friendship and accountability?

For one thing, such Christians and such an ecclesial movement will need sustenance for a journey that may be arduous and painful. In his own way, the pope recognizes this near the end of his encyclical when he reiterates the Church's commitment to persisting on the path of ecumenical dialogue:

The path itself is long and strewn with obstacles greater than our human resources alone can overcome, yet we have the Eucharist, and in its

presence we can hear in the depths of our hearts, as if they were addressed to us, the same words heard by the Prophet Elijah: "Arise and eat, else the journey will be too great for you" (1 Kg 19:7).²⁵

The pope is right to insist, as he does in this very context, that the need to sustain the ecumenical journey over the long haul gives reasons not to squander or cheapen the very 'treasure' of the eucharist - just as earlier in the encyclical he had reason to warn that to celebrate communion together officially but prematurely might actually delay the prospect of full communion. Yet the 'special circumstance' not anticipated here - though perhaps allowed - is that some may find the ecumenical quest itself unsustainable without the nourishment of the sacrament. Yes, for a while, hunger might urge a traveler more quickly along on a journey. But one can only travel so far on the pangs of hunger alone. Besides, as Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the papal household itself, points out, as 'the bread of travelers' and a 'first fruit' of God's presence, the eucharist increases our hunger and thirst for the fullness of the Kingdom even as it satisfies.²⁶ There is little chance that participating in the eucharist under these circumstances will satiate the hunger that is proper to this pilgrimage.

If there is one area where the pope's encyclical most invites further theological exploration it is in fact here, concerning the 'eschatological' reality of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, what Christ has 'already' accomplished in the world through the Church brings near and makes present those realities that are 'not yet' altogether tangible except by faith. At various places in the encyclical John Paul II points to the eschatological tensions that the eucharist holds together,²⁷ but he may not have fully explored the practical implications of this reality. In elaborating on the bedrock Catholic conviction that 'The Church draws its life from the Eucharist,' the pope has underscored the 'already' of 'the Eucharist (that) makes the Church' - in other words, the norms and conditions that define an authentic Eucharist. But according to the eschatological tension that the Eucharist holds together, accent can also be placed on the 'not yet' of the eucharist in this way: 'The Eucharist makes the Church.'²⁸ The process of making is ongoing and unfinished; the Church must continue to draw life from the eucharist precisely because the Church in its fullness of unity is still being completed. Unity is required for eucharist, but the eucharist makes unity possible. Though I have not made a case for greater official intercommunion than the encyclical allows, in coming years one can expect some theologians to press the encyclical precisely at this point. After all, the very eschatological tension of the eucharist to which John Paul II himself points can be expected to perpetually stretch the 'already' of well-defined

official norms toward that very ‘not yet’ of which the sacrament is a foretaste.

Bridgefolk Theology of the Eucharist: A Possibility?

Catholics and Mennonites tend to have significantly different attitudes about rules. Among Mennonites, someone who does not keep a rule is breaking it - which leaves no option but to seek to change a rule outright if it proves unwieldy or unfair in even a few cases. Among Catholics, however, someone who does not keep a rule may simply be making an exception - and a community as large as the Roman Catholic Church must have some way of allowing for exceptions and granting dispensations.²⁹ That allowance is often largely unspoken and merely cultural. Still, stories like that of Benedict and Scholastica (as well as some of the finer points in writings by Catholic moral theologians and canon lawyers) make the approach explicit: Catholics do take their rules seriously, but to follow a rule rigidly in all circumstances will sometimes produce precisely the opposite of what the rule itself intends. To make exceptions - rather than to either break a rule or demand that it change to accommodate one’s local and personal circumstances - is in fact a way of respecting not just the rules but the community life such rules are meant to serve.³⁰

If some provisional resolution is possible here, however, is it only possible at the level of cross-cultural understanding? Or is it proper for us to articulate a Bridgefolk theology of the Eucharist too? If by ‘theology’ we mean an official pronouncement, doctrine, canon or policy, then no, that is not the role of a group like Bridgefolk. We can offer our services and witness to the church bodies that represent the traditions we love, and we may even goad or inspire their work, but we cannot do that work for them. However, if by ‘Bridgefolk theology’ we mean careful theological reflection on our vocation, on what it means to live on the bridge between our traditions, and on what it takes to sustain our journey, then we not only can but must. Any ‘Bridgefolk theology’ will be a theology ‘on the way’ - provisional and pilgriming - and this is as it should be. But we would be irresponsible not to name it.

Thankfully, a eucharistic theology for the way, for the meantime, and for the exception, can lay a certain claim to being biblical. It was a priest and canon lawyer, no less, who gave me a great gift of encouragement along my own journey through these questions when he reminded me of the following text from Luke 6:2-4:

But some of the Pharisees said, ‘Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?’ Jesus answered, ‘Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions.’

It is not mine to offer the bread and wine of eucharist, but what I can offer to my own companions is this biblical story, with a final invitation to reflect:

There would be no story to share if David and then Jesus himself did not assume the validity of the Hebrew priesthood and the Law of Moses. Neither David nor Jesus challenged the authority of their tradition, even while they legitimized exceptions to its rules. It is in that same spirit of respect that we are invited joyfully to receive the obvious lesson of the story - that there is a precedent for pastoral flexibility buried deeply but integrally within the tradition itself. As bands of people sharing on a journey, like David’s companions and Jesus’ disciples, on the way and hungry, let us promise one another support as each examines his or her conscience to discern how best to find the nourishment we need to live between the times, on the bridge between our communities.

¹ To be sure, the second point quoted here is something of an oversimplification, stated this way for the pastoral setting and applying to ordinary circumstances. As article 915 of Canon Law states, ‘Those upon whom the penalty of excommunication or interdict has been imposed or declared, and others who obstinately persist in manifest grave sin, are not to be admitted to holy communion.’

² From the opening paragraph of the Bridgefolk mission statement, available along with other resources at <http://bridgefolk.net>. The paragraph continues: ‘Together we seek better ways to embody a commitment to both traditions. We seek to make Anabaptist-Mennonite practices of discipleship, peaceableness, and lay participation more accessible to Roman Catholics, and to bring the spiritual, liturgical, and sacramental practices of the Catholic tradition to Anabaptists.’

³ Cf. Gerald W. Schlabach, ‘The Bridgefolk Movement in Ecumenical Context,’ *Ecumenical Trends* 32, no. 3 (March 2003): 14–15.

⁴ I avoid here the overly-clinical metaphor of a ‘laboratory’ in favor of a more organic one!

⁵ Gregory The Great, *Dialogues*, book II, Life of St. Benedict of Nursia, chapter 33.

⁶ Weldon Nisly comments: ‘I wish to remind us that not all Mennonites, even today, would say “any baptized Christian should be welcome at the communion table of any Christian Church.” I suspect that approach is a fairly recent and ecclesiological ‘unreflective’ Mennonite assumption. It never was and still is not the case for at least some Mennonites who have always practiced ‘closed communion.’ In my Conservative Mennonite roots, many people would have a hard time sharing communion with other Mennonites and couldn’t conceive of doing so with Catholics! To put this in very personal context, my parents (who have always been and remain Conservative Mennonite) do not receive communion when they worship here at Seattle Mennonite Church even when I preside and serve communion. This has

happened twice in recent years when they have visited us and worshipped with us. We haven't talked about it much and they don't wish to make an issue of it and certainly don't want to cause me pain. But they are very clear that they "only take communion with their own church." I grew up with a strong sense that we take communion only with "our own people" with whom we are reconciled and share beliefs and a way of life.' Email message, 17 June 2003.

⁷ Communitarian traditions will differ on how they determine those group norms, on how they protect individual dignity from group injustices, and on how they distinguish key issues from trivial ones. But the fact of these differences should not obscure what communitarian traditions have in common.

⁸ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, encyclical letter (2003), para. 52.

⁹ *ibid.* para. 15.

¹⁰ *ibid.* para. 16.

¹¹ *ibid.* paras. 36-37.

¹² *ibid.* para. 38; sic. Also cf. para. 42: 'The safeguarding and promotion of ecclesial communion is ... the particular responsibility of the Church's Pastors, each according to his rank and ecclesiastical office. For this reason the Church has drawn up norms aimed both at fostering the frequent and fruitful access of the faithful to the Eucharistic table and at determining the objective conditions under which communion may not be given. The care shown in promoting the faithful observance of these norms becomes a practical means of showing love for the Eucharist and for the Church.'

¹³ Those familiar with theology or church history will recognize it in the formula, *ex opere operata*.

¹⁴ *op.cit* para. 38.

¹⁵ *ibid.* para. 38. The full paragraph from which I quote reads thus:

The Eucharist, as the supreme sacramental manifestation of communion in the Church, demands to be celebrated in a context where the outward bonds of communion are also intact. In a special way, since the Eucharist is "as it were the summit of the spiritual life and the goal of all the sacraments", it requires that the bonds of communion in the sacraments, particularly in Baptism and in priestly Orders, be real. It is not possible to give communion to a person who is not baptized or to one who rejects the full truth of the faith regarding the Eucharistic mystery. Christ is the truth and he bears witness to the truth (cf. Jn 14:6; 18:37); the sacrament of his body and blood does not permit duplicity.

To 'not...reject the full truth of the faith regarding the Eucharistic mystery' must on the positive side mean assent rather than full acceptance or unambiguous faith precisely because what is being received is a mystery.

¹⁶ *ibid.* para. 39.

¹⁷ The word 'concelebrate' appears at the beginning of para. 45, in a sentence that serves as a transition from the previous section reiterating the prohibition against official intercommunion between divided church bodies or liturgies that might prematurely suggest unity, and a new section recognizing the possibility that individual Christians from other church bodies might join in communion under special circumstances. It thus confirms that paras. 43-44 had been about official concelebration, even though in their English translation those paragraphs did not actually use the word. In any case, in the definitive Latin original, *concelebratio* also appears in para. 44.

¹⁸ *ibid.* para. 38.

¹⁹ *ibid.* para. 44.

²⁰ *ibid.* para. 43.

²¹ *ibid.* para. 45.

²² The relevant article of canon law, cited in footnotes to para. 45-46 of the encyclical, is no. 844. The canon itself builds in flexibility at a couple of points:

...Whenever necessity requires or a genuine spiritual advantage commends it, and provided the danger of error or indifferentism is avoided, Christ's faithful for whom it is physically or morally impossible to approach a catholic minister, may lawfully receive the sacraments of penance, the Eucharist and anointing of the sick from non-catholic ministers in whose Churches these sacraments are valid. Catholic ministers may lawfully administer the sacraments of penance, the Eucharist and anointing of the sick to members of the eastern Churches not in full communion with the catholic Church, if they spontaneously ask for them and are properly disposed....

²³ That such circumstances are being contemplated seems clear both in Canon 844 and from para. 46 of the encyclical itself:

In my Encyclical Ut Unum Sint I expressed my own appreciation of these norms, which make it possible to provide for the salvation of souls with proper discernment: "It is a source of joy to note that Catholic ministers are able, in certain particular cases, to administer the sacraments of the 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."

²⁴ *op.cit.* para. 46.

²⁵ *ibid.* para. 61.

²⁶ Raniero Cantalamessa, *The Eucharist: Our Sanctification*, translated by Frances Lonergan Villa (Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 1993), pp. 94-95.

²⁷ *op.cit.* paras. 18-20, 57.

²⁸ This is in fact the focus of chapter 2 of the encyclical, paras.21-25, entitled, 'The Eucharist Builds the Church.'

²⁹ Perhaps the difference is that when congregationally based decision making works well, any rule has already anticipated local circumstances, whereas the inevitably hierarchical decision making of a worldwide body must expect and allow exceptions in order to accommodate local circumstances. Of course, congregationally based decision making does not always work well, either within congregations or between them. One is tempted to speculate that some of the contentiousness that has surrounded Mennonite debates over controversial moral issues down to this day would not have been necessary if Mennonite ethics allowed for the possibility of making legitimate exceptions even while respecting churchwide norms.

³⁰ Painful misunderstanding results in both directions when Catholics and Mennonites (or others, of course) come together in a eucharistic setting without recognizing their differing attitudes and assumptions about rules. Catholics will think themselves generous when they offer an exception, but Mennonites will miss the generosity and instead feel great pain because they assume they have no option besides feeling excluded or breaking the rule. If Mennonites then express dismay at the very existence of the rule in question, many Catholics will then feel an equally great pain at being told, in effect, that they must give up their deeply held belief that communion and institutional unity are inseparable. Neither will have intended to slight the other,

but their mutual pain will be no less - and may in fact be greater because the other may scarcely seem to comprehend its source. This is not to say that we can expect to alleviate all of the pain that surrounds this issue. The source of that pain, after all, is the disunity of the Church, and the eucharist is doing its work if we are left feeling that pain more acutely. (I am grateful to Ivan Kauffman for helping me articulate these dynamics. For an excellent discussion of why we are meant to sense the pain of disunity at the very table at which Christians celebrate unity, see William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* [New York: Continuum, 1999], 165–69.)