

The Experience of the Eucharist in Ecumenical Study : Revisiting the Debate on Eucharistic Sharing

A study and discussion seminar held on Monday 23rd February 2004 at the Church of England Council for Christian Unity, Church House, Great Smith Street, Westminster SW1

Keynote Speakers:

- **Ruth Reardon**, founding member, the Association of Interchurch Families
- **Judith Maizel-Long**, the new Co-ordinating Secretary for Church Life, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland

The topic arose from the Society's experience at its London Colney residential conference, where only one eucharistic celebration had originally been scheduled. The decision to add another for Roman Catholics had, far from emphasising divisions, allowed a richer sharing. Dr Hermann Docx, a member from Belgium who had written a thesis on the subject, had facilitated a searching discussion owing to his view from outside England and also from his experience as a missionary in Africa. The seminar fulfilled a pledge to explore the matter further, and to discuss whether the meetings of the Society might meet criteria for eucharistic sharing, as these notes of the discussion at the conference show:

- i. The Society should directly address the 'real sense' of the Eucharist, the meaning of which is not in the Eucharist, but in life. What we are given in each Eucharist we divide and do not express in life. By making the emphasis on ecumenical spirituality, the Society could deflect attention from eucharistic division, towards declaring that we are mature enough to accept discipline, as we can recognise that the bond between Eucharist and the Church at one in

baptism is inseparable (something persuasively commended by Rowan Williams)

- ii. We should examine the link between the Pope's request to non-Roman Catholic churches to comment on the nature for them of the Petrine ministry and how it might serve unity on the one hand and, on the other, what that implies about the prospects for eucharistic sharing. Given that the churches acknowledge real communion to exist between them all by virtue of baptism, at what level of inter-communion in church life can eucharistic sharing (Holy Communion) be achieved?
- iii. Instead of concentrating on division at the Eucharist, the Society could emphasise in its study the positive fullness of life in the sacrament of baptism common to all churches. This may be 'imperfect' communion, but it is nevertheless real and should be maximised
- iv. Study of the relation between the sacrament of Eucharist and that of matrimony has been neglected. If there is union in Christian marriage, what are the theological grounds for not acting upon that union at the Eucharist? What grounds could be defined that would permit a married couple, in which each spouse belongs to a different church, regularly or on occasion to receive the Eucharist in each others' churches at the same time as building loyalty and allegiance to their respective communions
- v. The discipline of various churches permits those who do not belong to them to receive the Eucharist for special reasons, and allows members to receive the sacraments in a church with which another is not in 'full' communion. As a long lasting ecumenical group which meets to study and take forward the journey to unity, are there such occasions when its members can licitly receive Holy Communion together in defined circumstances?

The View from the Association of Interchurch Families, Ruth Reardon

The first thing to say is that this topic of eucharistic sharing only came up in this context of SFES because we had a residential conference of the Society, and especially because we held it over a weekend. We lived with one another for 3 days – well, parts of 3 days. On the third day, which was a Sunday, Christians normally celebrate the day of the Lord's resurrection with a eucharist. So we inevitably had to decide what was to be done about celebrating the eucharist. The decision made by the Committee beforehand was that there would be only one celebration, and that it would be an Anglican priest who celebrated.

In the event this was thought to be an unsatisfactory decision, and a Roman Catholic celebration was added to the programme. This allowed all participants to receive communion in accordance with the disciplines of their own churches, and allowed, I think, a much richer experience of solidarity than would have been possible if we had stuck to the original intention. We were fortunate in having a Belgian participant at the conference; this meant that we were not limited to an Anglo-Saxon Roman Catholic perspective on eucharistic sharing (as a young priest he had written his doctoral thesis on intercommunion some 40 years ago).

After the weekend I wrote to the SFES executive saying that I was grateful to him for making it possible for us to talk about eucharistic sharing. I asked the Committee if they would consider continuing to make this possible, particularly if we decide to meet again in a residential context. Of course it's unwise to make suggestions, because you get asked to implement them! Thus I was asked to talk about eucharistic sharing today.

I shall do this by sharing with you a perspective that comes from the experience of interchurch families. I think this will touch on all the points raised in the Notes on the Residential Conference, section E. But we all come

to this question from our own perspectives, and it is important to realise this. So this will be explicitly from an interchurch family perspective.

By 'interchurch family' I mean here a family in which one partner is Roman Catholic and the other a member of the Church of England or one of the Free Churches, where both are practising communicant members of their respective churches. So for us the Roman Catholic perspective is very important.

The Roman Catholic position

So far as eucharistic sharing is concerned, as with so much else in the Roman Catholic Church today, we need to go back to Vatican II. Before the Council there was simply no question of eucharistic sharing between Catholics and Protestants. But I quote from the amazing statement of the conciliar Decree on Ecumenism (n.8):

As for *communicatio in sacris*, it may not be regarded as a means to be used indiscriminately for the restoration of unity among Christians. Such *communicatio in sacris* depends chiefly on two principles: it should signify the unity of the Church; it should provide a sharing in the means of grace. The fact that it should signify unity generally rules out *communicatio in sacris*. Yet the gaining of a needed grace sometimes commends it.

This was something quite new. Note that the *discriminating* use of *communicatio in sacris* is linked to the restoration of Christian unity. Although it is generally ruled out, it is sometimes not just to be tolerated, but *commended*. Yet how often still today the position of the Roman Catholic Church is over-simplified, giving the impression that there can be no eucharistic sharing until ecclesial unity is achieved. This is not what the Council said.

There have been different applications of this 1964 conciliar statement over the years in various places. At world level it was applied legally in the Code of

Canon Law in 1983, and this was spelled out in greater detail in the 1993 Ecumenical Directory issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. So far as western Christians are concerned, it has been limited to admission to communion in the Roman Catholic Church by way of exception in certain circumstances of spiritual need ('grave and pressing' is the Directory's phrase) under certain conditions. These are that the person concerned cannot have recourse to a minister of his or her own church, that he asks for the sacrament of his or her own initiative, manifests Catholic faith in the sacrament and is properly disposed (129-31).

Two years later, Pope John Paul II made an important re-phrasing of this in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*. He speaks of signs of convergence, and of our burning desire to celebrate together the one eucharist of the Lord. We can't yet, but we're getting closer. Then he says:

In this context, it is a source of joy to note that Catholic ministers are able, in certain particular cases, to administer ... the eucharist ... to Christians who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church but who greatly desire to receive [it], freely request [it] and manifest the faith which the Catholic Church professes with regard to[it].(46)

Notice that he makes no mention at all of an individual not being able to have recourse to his or her own minister, and 'grave and pressing need' has become 'great desire to receive'. Both these points are very important for interchurch families.

Interchurch families

I now want to return to interchurch family history. We have to go back again to the 'sixties, and to the first meeting of mixed marriage couples at Spode House in 1968. We studied what was happening in the wake of the Council (it was two years later, in 1970, when the great breakthrough came in removing the obligation of both partners to baptise and bring up all the children of the marriage in the Roman Catholic Church). We also looked at the biblical texts on marriage: the 'one flesh' of Genesis, the God/Israel relationship seen as a

marriage covenant in Hosea, the Christ/church analogy of Ephesians, and the great marriage supper of the Lamb in the Apocalypse as an image of the final union of God with God's people. It was in that context that we raised the question of eucharistic sharing in interchurch marriage. It was out of the experience of a married relationship, understood in biblical terms.

Note E iv from our SFES residential conference refers to more work needed on eucharistic sharing in interchurch families – well, a great deal of work has in fact been done since 1968. We have a language of marital spirituality and theology available to us today, closely linking marriage and eucharist, that was not available to us in 1968. The 1993 Ecumenical Directory does specifically identify those who share the sacraments of baptism and marriage as in possible need of eucharistic sharing, and *One Bread One Body* picks up on this, although it seems to recognise a need for such sharing only on 'unique occasions' during a marriage. So I am surprised at the tentative tone of what was recorded in note E iv.

Obviously I can't go into all the details of the story, but the Association of Interchurch Families has tried to keep the experienced need of interchurch couples, both as partners and parents, and of their families, for eucharistic sharing before church bodies and authorities in a consistent way. I think particularly of 1980, when the National Pastoral Congress met in Liverpool in preparation for the papal visit of 1982. In the same year the Synod of Bishops met in Rome taking the theme of Marriage and Family Life, and Cardinal Willebrands, then President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, devoted his contribution to the subject of interchurch families and eucharistic sharing. After the 1993 Directory made its specific mention of those who shared baptism and marriage, we tried to draw out all the possibilities it offered, and to compare its application in different parts of the world.

But at the same time and over a long period we had been building up actual experience of eucharistic sharing in informal ways. It is generally agreed that a change in practice usually precedes a change in church law! Here I must refer above all to John Coventry, SJ, who was, incidentally, a founder-

member and the first treasurer of SFES. As Secretary of the Catholic Bishops' Ecumenical Commission of England and Wales he was present at our first meeting in 1968, and remained devoted to the pastoral care of interchurch families for the rest of his life. We cannot measure what we owe to him. From the beginning he grasped the need of some interchurch families for eucharistic sharing, and he gave us the freedom to assess and meet that need for ourselves. Year after year he would stand up at our annual conference and say something like this. 'I am not in the happy position of my Anglican colleague in being able to invite you all to communion; my church does not allow it. However, I have been taught never to refuse communion to anyone unless they are in a state of mortal sin, so if you come to communion I shall not refuse you.' It was his way of making it clear that we were welcome to come as couples, but the initiative had to come from us.

What about reciprocity? Because of the nature of marriage as an equal and reciprocal partnership, eucharistic sharing became reciprocal for some interchurch families. This of course has never been officially approved by the Roman Catholic Church, but we do not know of any Catholic spouse who has been excommunicated because of it. Sometimes church authorities have expressed sympathetic understanding. Interchurch families have of course often found themselves in situations where they are together at the eucharist but are not able for varied reasons to receive communion together. Different people make different decisions about what to do, even in apparently similar circumstances. There is an interplay between individual decisions and couple decisions, and the attitudes of particular ministers. It remains a difficult issue for interchurch families, but a crucial one for their marriages and family lives. In giving us the freedom to make our own responsible decisions, John Coventry asked us to use that freedom to bear fruit for the unity of all, always keeping close to our church communities so that it did not become a barren gesture. I think that interchurch families have in fact earned a good reputation for ecumenical involvement. What some have experienced is the fruitfulness for our marriages and family life of reciprocal eucharistic sharing. It has not drawn us away from any of our respective church communities; rather, it has

deepened our integration with and through them, as couples and as families, into the one Church of Christ. We have plenty of experience to testify to that.

But how is all this relevant to SFES and our residential conference?

The great significance of the 1993 Ecumenical Directory in identifying those who share the sacraments of baptism and marriage as in possible need of eucharistic sharing is not just relevant to interchurch families, although they are clearly a special case. But this is a move beyond recognising the need of an individual for admission to communion – e.g. in danger of death or a diaspora situation – to recognising the need of the *married couple* for eucharistic sharing. They need to share because they are a ‘little church’, an ‘intimate community of life and love’. This is a gigantic step forward in spelling out the meaning of ‘grave and pressing need’, of ‘great desire’. It is a recognition of the need not just of an individual cut off from his own church, but the need to express by eucharistic sharing the real bonds of communion that exist in small-scale communities. Communion that exists in real life, and cries out to be recognised and deepened in the eucharist. I think this is perhaps relevant to Note E i in the report of our residential conference. The French bishops had already grasped this when the Code of Canon Law came out in 1983. Episcopal conferences were asked to identify circumstances of need. The French bishops identified ‘certain interchurch families and some long-lasting ecumenical groups’. There is a reference to that identification of need, I think, in note E v of the report.

I mentioned in my letter to the SFES Committee that AIF, but also l’Arche and Hengrave, having sent in responses to *One Bread One Body*, have been approached five years on for a follow-up process of assessment and reflection. As ecumenical groups, we did not fit in to the category of official church responses to OBOB. The invitation was made in late 2002 when Mgr Bernard Longley was Secretary of the Department of Unity and Mission of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference. The process came to a halt when he was ordained bishop in January 2003, and his successor only came into post a year later, a month ago. He hopes to follow up this process, once he is settled in to his new job. In the meantime, AIF and l’Arche have had a very helpful

meeting, sharing our concerns and trying to work out what it is we really want to ask for at this stage. The experience of the International Ecumenical Fellowship conference meeting in England in 2002 also raised these questions in a concrete way. The IEF has a long experience of the value of being together at the eucharist across the Reformation divide, and sharing eucharistic communion whenever this is possible in local circumstances. The very interesting talk about the Chemin Neuf Community, given at the Westminster Couturier conference last year, shows that similar questions are being raised in their context of community life.

Chemin Neuf commented: 'Overall the Community has discovered that while it is a joy to be able to share at the same table, the choice not to receive can also be a powerful and prayerful witness: truly a "communion of desire".' Some interchurch families who have agonised over what to do in particular circumstances have been calmed by the words of the late Bishop of Bristol, Oliver Tomkins, to a Catholic priest who consulted him about whether to receive Anglican communion on a particular occasion. 'Well, if you do', said the Bishop, 'you will be witnessing to the unity that is already given in Christ. And if you do not, you will be witnessing to the great work of reconciliation that has yet to be achieved. And both are Gospel witnesses.'

Our subject tonight was billed as our experience of the eucharist in our context of ecumenical study. I think the practical question for us is, what kind of community are we? Probably the French bishops, when they identified long-lasting ecumenical groups, were thinking of something like the *Groupe des Dombes*, which was meeting regularly and residentially year after year and had an explicitly spiritual approach, as well as a theological one, as it carried out its studies. Are we anything like that kind of body? Do we want to think in terms of one eucharist at a residential weekend meeting? Might the celebrant be a Roman Catholic priest? If not, is it better to celebrate two eucharists rather than one?

I wrote after our St Albans weekend to the Committee:

I do not want to put forward any particular position or proposal, just to ask that we can talk about the subject. It seems reasonable to raise the question of whether our common life in SFES is such that there is a possible need and deep desire for eucharistic sharing in that context. Probably the answer to the question is no at present, judging by some of the things said during the weekend – but if not, why not, and could our society become that sort of community? Would we want it to? And if not, can we try to agree on the best possible way to express the communion we share at the eucharist? In discussion we might at least be able to understand each other better. In itself this would be positive, and open us to absorbing new insights from one another. As Tina Beattie said, not talking about something simply leads to polarisation.

So I leave you with questions, not answers, but just with a plea that we go on talking about it, struggling with it, as a subject that is of enormous practical importance on the road to unity.

A Methodist perspective, *Judith Maizel-Long*

Brendan Behan was present at mass, although he was excommunicate. Also there was a Methodist minister. They agreed that whatever the grounds for exclusion from the Eucharist, the pain is the same.

A Methodist emphasis would be on the proleptic understanding of the Eucharist as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. It is proper to anticipate the unity of heaven in the eucharist even if it remains to be achieved on earth. There is a widespread Free Church usage which speaks of the Eucharist as the Lord's Supper, as there is in parts of the Church of England. So as it is the Lord's sacrament as well as that of the Church, there should be humility about church regulations that concern it, for it is the Lord who provides it and not the churches.

It is hard to hold together marriage as it is. So the Church should not make it even harder for interchurch families than for "uni-church" families. Interchurch families should be seen as proleptic situations, allowing formal permission for intercommunion in marriage automatically. The rest of us should not hold back.

Discusssion

Hilary Martin

Harsh things were said in the 16th century about transubstantiation. This is still of vital importance for Catholics whose forbears laid down their lives for the sake of the Eucharist, and the unity of the Church on this precise point of doctrine. Despite growing affinity in eucharistic practice and belief, even in the Church of England there is no full agreement and that this teaching is essential to the unity of the Church has not been truly achieved, so we have not reached the point of eucharistic unity any more than we have reached the point of doctrinal unity.

Paul Avis

The Anglican response to "One Bread, One Body" agreed that it contained a superb exposition of eucharistic theology on which there was nothing to disagree. The Anglican position distinguishes, however, between its affirmation of the doctrine of the Real Presence (the presence of Christ in the actual sacramental gifts themselves) and the manner of that Presence. While transubstantiation uses a philosophical language which exactly accounts for this in Roman Catholic terms, and therefore this account is definitive of Catholic teaching, it is as valid and proper for Anglicans and others to affirm the Real Presence without authoritatively demanding one way of accounting for it. This is not to make a point in contra-distinction from Roman Catholic belief; it is to affirm the same tradition as the universal Church has held from the beginning, without recourse to a concept whose origins are medieval. In

this Anglicanism takes its cue from Orthodoxy, which does not embrace the philosophical terminology of transubstantiation but affirms the Real Presence in the Eucharist in a way that is recognised as authentic by the Catholic Church.

Maximos Lavriotes

The teaching of East and West is identical, but the East does not take on the philosophical categories of the Western Catholic tradition.

"Transubstantiation" is recognised as shorthand for a high doctrine of the Real Presence, and the East emphatically affirms that this is exactly what it professes. It is rightly the test for the West for Catholic unity and Catholic belief, and substantially this is held by Anglicans, although perhaps they do not nor culturally and historically could not express it in the same terms. Therefore the Eastern Christian asks why the Roman Catholic bar to eucharistic communion remains for Anglicans, and why the Catholic Church permits no circumstances for its members to receive the Eucharist outside its bounds, even where there is identity of doctrine.

Richard Mortimer

The Anglican position explained by Paul Avis is surprisingly close to that of John Calvin, whose view of the Eucharist has been misunderstood. He rejected the philosophical categories applied to the teaching of Scripture on the Eucharist and held a pneumatological view of the action of the Spirit in the Eucharist (the gifts being received by the people in the liturgy, or the people receiving the gifts) effecting the meeting with the Ascended Christ. This does not locate the Presence solely in the eucharistic bread and wine, but they are the means of Christ's presence in and to his people by the power of the Spirit.

Martin Reardon

It is a question of whether you see the Eucharist (and for that matter the Church) as something which operates from the top down, or from the bottom up. Transubstantiation as a doctrine was developed to counter realism, the idea that Christ's presence is physical in a place, a misunderstanding about spiritual presence.

The trouble is that after the many centuries since when the idea was developed to address an important theological question, the language has solidified long after the original debate was settled. There is no need for it to be the subject of ongoing controversy about different questions, if all can accept that it is the authoritative Roman Catholic definition of what Orthodox and Anglicans also believe but define differently without affirming that this does not imply lack of identity.

Bishop Azariah referred the question of whether the Eucharist could be shared with Methodists and other Protestant Christians ahead of the union of all the Churches in the Church of South India to Archbishop William Temple. He acknowledged that it was permissible, because mutual agreement had been committed to for the seeking of unity. He could therefore be termed the "apostle of eucharistic sharing". The potential of this in each other is understood neither on the Roman Catholic nor the Anglican side. But are we committed to uniting with each other?

Rules represent the ideal, so we cannot say Methodists and Anglicans are permitted to share the Eucharist as we are not yet all agreed on the ideal in the rules, But we can say "you are not forbidden" for certain pastoral occasions in the meantime.

Maximos Lavriotes

I am perplexed by the rigidity of impenetrable attitudes in the matter of terms concerning the Eucharist. Oscar Cullman's ground breaking research into the origins of Eucharistic language reveals that for the first Christians what we now call the Real Presence meant eating with Christ, the Eucharist effecting the Presence of Christ's Risen Body among the people. A valid Eucharist is therefore a Eucharist in which the Risen Christ is present to transfigure those present; so the dimension of the Presence is not about recalling memory or present circumstances, it is eschatological. After all, according to Cullman, "Do this in memory of me" seems to have been added in a corruption of the Scriptural text as much as 200 years later, something borne out by Orthodox understanding of the forward dimension.

Frank Davis

Language is important. The expression of belief in the Real Presence and in transubstantiation is the explicitness of Catholicism. However good Christians are who do not recognise the eucharistic sacrifice and the Real Presence, not admitting them to communion is not a comment on their goodness or worthiness. It is a recognition that there is a lack of identity in view on something of the utmost importance to Catholics. The current emphasis for Catholics expressing their eucharistic belief is on koinonia, but that is against the background of the givens of eucharistic doctrine. In itself koinonia is not sufficient ground for establishing identity between Catholics and other Christians. The act of receiving communion is, after all, an act of koinonia with the Bishop, of accepting his authority, and therefore of accepting the teaching of the Catholic Church.

Mark Woodruff

There is a joint group of Anglican and Catholic lay people and clergy who annually visit Brugge, staying with the Benedictine sisters of the Beguinage and attending as a group the pilgrimage mass at the Basilica of the Holy Blood. By permission of the Bishop of Brugge, Anglican Christians desiring to receive Holy Communion, sharing the belief in the Eucharist of the Catholic Church and without opportunity to receive Communion from their own clergy are explicitly permitted to receive from Catholic altars. This includes the mass at the Holy Blood where the Anglican priests are invited on to the altar and to receive, on the grounds that they cannot celebrate their own Eucharist for Anglican pilgrims on the same occasion; there is also no question nowadays of a separate Anglican Eucharist on the Sunday. This is understood by the Anglicans as "proleptic", a foretaste of the heavenly banquet and of the unity of Christians that will be revealed on earth because Christ has prayed for it. It is not seen as a precedent for pushing for change in England where we all come from, or as anything other than exceptional, given the long standing nature of the group and the continuity of our visits to the Brugge diocese. The group is careful not to make false comparison between so-called "more liberal" or "more enlightened" attitudes on the Continent and the more

complex ecumenical situation in the UK, seeing the circumstances as different in nature and the admission to communion in Belgium as unique to Belgian conditions and non-normative for, and non-transferable to, those in England. It is gratefully accepted as an encouraging and inspiring gift on the road towards unity and reconciliation. With such an outlook, not to be allowed communion in England is a witness to the work of unity, as much as receiving it exceptionally on specific visits to Belgium is witness to the unity we already possess.

Sylvia Fitzgerald

The absence of the institution narrative of the most ancient liturgy of the Assyrians, previously thought to be essential for a valid Eucharist, has been at last accepted as authentic by Catholic authority which now deems that the antiquity of the rite and the presence at other points of the required form renders validity indisputable. So despite centuries of division over different expressions of eucharistic belief in liturgical formularies, eucharistic hospitality between the Apostolic Church of the Assyrians of the East and the Chaldean Catholic Church (of the same liturgical family but united with Rome) has become possible.

Martin Conway

Rene Beaupere comments that the Church lives from the Eucharist, therefore we should move fully into what is allowed for churches, and into what is allowed for individuals in need.

A parish in Geneva with a strong ecumenical tradition, formerly in France and now in Switzerland it has a small Reformed community with which it has very friendly relations. On certain occasions there is a joint Liturgy of the Word, after which the priest and pastor celebrate consecutively the eucharistic prayers of their distinct traditions and then minister to their respective congregations the Sacrament simultaneously. So neither Communion is denied and both are recognised, at the same time as the boundaries are not transgressed. A new pastor arrived and, after the priest consecrated the Eucharist for the Catholics but before they received, he took the Catholics'

Sacrament and over it said, "You know who we are. You know what my brother has done with this Bread and this Wine. Do the same for us." Far from a denial of the Catholic Eucharist it was an acknowledgement of it in the Reformed tradition. The priest was of course taken aback.

Intercommunion thus cannot be arranged from the top, nor should we wait for it. Unity must arise from the bottom of the Church. Unity comes as the Lord calls groups and individuals in what is right for experiment. The role for the rightful authorities is to monitor what is happening locally, to encourage it, correct excesses and abuses, and also to disseminate what is happening well. They should permit and not forbid. This approach could lead to a variety of useful models, suited to the variety of needs.

Fidelis Daly

In the Vatican II Constitution on the Liturgy the Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is understood as occurring in four ways: in the people who are his Body, in the person of the priest as alter Christus, in the Scripture readings as Word of God, especially the Gospel, and the Eucharistic Gifts themselves, the Real Presence of his Body and Blood.