

Churches Together In England

Eucharist As Event

To the National and County Ecumenical Officers at Parmoor on 4 October 2005

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In this talk I would like to share with you my faith and understanding of the Mass, the Eucharist.

Clearly this is a rich topic. There is a lifetime in which to understand the Eucharist more and more. In my experience, this understanding changes and develops as years go by. Certainly for me it has changed and developed quite considerably in the last ten years or so.

The ecumenical links that have been a crucial part of my life for many years have contributed to this changed understanding. For example, I have learnt much from the greater emphasis that is to be found in some Churches on the presence of God in the Word. Other Churches are better at imaginative use of music than sometimes Catholics are. Clearly one of the areas in which my understanding has deepened is that raised by the question 'Why can't we all receive Holy Communion at Mass celebrated in a Catholic church?'

Five parts of the Mass

In considering this question it is so important that the nature and structure of the Mass is understood. Sometimes people think that the action of receiving Holy Communion is the only significant point of participation. But I think that is not true. Every celebration of Mass has five parts to it.

The Mass opens, after the initial greeting, with an act of penitence. This is the first part, as all who are present ponder on their need for God's mercy and forgiveness. The Mass is marked by this sense of our inadequacy, our need for God's presence and action in our lives. We are not 'OK' just as we are. Our divisions make that clear. Everyone participates in this.

Next comes the Liturgy of the Word, in which we ponder the presence of God in the Word of Scripture and open ourselves to receive that Word as a transforming presence in our lives. Everyone participates in this.

The third part of the Mass is the Eucharistic Prayer in which we recall and make sacramentally present the sacrificial death of Christ on Calvary. We unite ourselves to this action of Christ by our own spiritual union with him. In this prayer we make of our lives an offering to the Father. Everyone participates in this.

Next there is the Rite of Communion, or, more simply, the Holy Communion service. This is the point at which our question arises.

Finally, there is the act of dismissal, or sending out, when all present, without exception, are invited, or mandated, to go out and the put into action the saving mysteries they have celebrated, the mystery of the love and compassion of God for all people.

Receiving Holy Communion

It is within this context, that the challenge of this issue of Eucharistic communion has led me to explore much more deeply the link between the act of receiving Holy Communion and the visible reality of the Church. It led me to remember a lesson learned in my childhood, though without clear understanding at that time. You see, when I was a youngster our parish priest was a bishop. He had retired from Episcopal duties because he had suffered a stroke and needed real assistance in his celebration of Mass. I learned that when I was going to receive Holy Communion from the bishop, I had first to kiss his episcopal ring and before receiving Holy Communion. It is only much later that I realised that this simple gesture expressed the link between my acceptance of this bishop – in other words, my membership of a

visible Catholic Church – and the action of receiving Holy Communion. In a similar way much of our ecumenical discussion has highlighted for me some of the defining characteristics of a Catholic understanding of the Eucharist, not least the way in which we understand the Mass to be both sacrifice and banquet.

My understanding of the Eucharist is, therefore, extensive and quite complex and I really don't know where to begin. However, the title given to this talk 'Eucharist as Event' has been really helpful. So this talk will consist of reflections on six ways in which I understand Eucharist as Event.

An event of grace

Every celebration of the Mass as an event of grace. This means that the celebration is always God's initiative. Through it we know that God is reaching out to heal, to form community, and to seek our service. In other words, there is in this event of grace a deep link between the worship of God and the service of each other within a community.

We can also say that because the Eucharist is an event of grace then it is a Trinitarian event. Its shape is best understood within the perspective of the Trinity. To put it very simply, the mystery celebrated at Mass is entirely the initiative of the Father, to whom every prayer is addressed; it is focused on the Son, whose word, life, death and resurrection is made present and alive during the Mass; and it depends upon the Holy Spirit in whose power all of this takes place.

In some ways to say that the Eucharist is an event of grace is simply to give it an overarching theological context. But it's within this context that I would like to touch on other aspects of the Eucharist as Event.

A historical event

In Catholic faith obviously every celebration of Mass links us to the defining historical moments of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. In the celebration of Mass, of course, memory is a key word.

During the Mass we look back particularly at the key moments in which our Lord's life on earth ended: his last supper and his death on the cross. These, of course, are revealing moments and in a way sum up everything that the Lord said and did. These two moments, made present in the Mass, encompass all that is spoken out in the Word made flesh. Indeed, one can say that the final actions of Christ's life are actions which fulfil all the words that he said. So we can see, within the structure of the Mass, how the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist are closely intertwined. Indeed, they are inseparable at heart. The liturgy of the Eucharist fulfils the liturgy of the Word. The liturgy of the Word unfolds and leads into the liturgy of the Eucharist.

In understanding the Mass as a historical event, it's also important to understand the strength of the word 'memory'. As you will understand, in its liturgical use this 'memory' is actually a making-present of the unique event. It is, in a way, a 'living memory' bringing the past into the present, bringing that unique event of the death of Christ on the cross into this moment. This, of course, is only achieved through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Understanding the Mass as a historic event also helps us to see it as set within the memory of the Jewish faith and, indeed, of the framework of Jewish ritual. Within that ritual there are two strands. One comes from the people known as Israel, the nomadic people, whose history is best summed up in the exodus from Egypt. The Exodus Passover meal, which marked that moment, was then celebrated annually as part of the cycle of Jewish ritual. This Passover meal obviously has strong resonances in the present celebration of Mass and, indeed, St Paul speaks of Christ as our Passover.

The second strand within Jewish life and ritual is, of course, taken from the people known as Judah. These were the people who centred on the temple worship in Jerusalem and understood, particularly in the Feast of the Atonement, the central act of offering sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin.

Both of these strands reach back at least as far as the Book of Exodus. The Passover story is well known. The origins of the Feast of the Atonement is also to be found there when Moses pleads with God to forgive the infidelity of the people who

have, out of fear, made a golden calf and used that as the object of their worship. In doing this they were led by Aaron. Moses, in his pleading with God, asks God to accept his life instead of the life of the people, indeed, as a ransom for their sins. In the Book of Exodus God accepts Moses' proposal but says it is Aaron's life that he wants to take as an expiation for the sin of the people. In this Aaron becomes the High Priest, and the Levitical priesthood and the pattern of sacrifice grows out of this moment.

Those who know about the Feast of the Atonement will readily understand how it involves the lamb of sacrifice, known as the lamb of God, which is offered in the stead of the High Priest in order to cleanse the sins of the people and renew in them the gift of life for the coming year.

The resonances of this, not least in the title of Christ as 'the Lamb of God', are clearly to be seen in the Mass. This emphasises for us the truth that the Mass is, at heart, a sacrifice. It is the sacrifice of Christ himself, taking away now not simply the sins of the people, but the sins of the world. It is this sacrifice that is made present in every celebration of the Mass. The supper is the means by which this sacrifice is shared. This was succinctly expressed in the teaching document 'One Bread One Body' when we said that 'the altar of sacrifice becomes the table of our banquet'.

A cosmic event

This brief reflection on the historical nature of the Eucharist leads us to understand that the Eucharist is also a cosmic event.

As a young student at college in Rome I remember very clearly the mother of a newly ordained priest being present the first time he celebrated Mass. This lady, Mrs Pullen, was a great fan of Teilhard de Chardin. 'Who could ever believe it', she exclaimed. 'There is my Frank holding the entire universe in his hands.' She was referring, of course, to the real presence of Christ in the Mass and seeing Christ as 'the Word through whom all things are made'. She was also expressing her understanding that in Christ all things will be reconciled to the Father, everything brought to its fulfilment.

Made present in the action of the Mass is the action by which we are reconciled to God. It is the action by which the gulf between our human family and our creator is bridged, for that gulf is sin and it is in the forgiveness of that sin that we are again united with our creator and redeemer. Pope Leo the Great expressed this very simply when he said that it is in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ that the spiritual life of our human family starts again.

It's not surprising, however, that this teaching of Leo the Great requires a clear grasp of the teaching of the Church that in Christ, in the person of Jesus, are to be found both the divine nature and the human nature united in that one person. This is crucial because it is only through his divinity that sin is overcome while at the same time it is only through his humanity that we have a part in that victory.

The Mass as a cosmic event reveals something of cosmic importance – that the law of our redeemed nature is the law of self-gift. To put this another way, as human beings redeemed in Christ by his sacrificial love, it is when we make a gift of ourselves to others that we find our true fulfilment. Every celebration of the Mass, then, is a cosmic event which not only brings about our reconciliation in Christ to God and to each other, but also reveals this fundamental truth of our nature: our fulfilment lies in self-gift, in sacrificial love.

An ecclesial event

The ecclesial aspect of the Mass is very simply summed up not only in Pope John Paul's last teaching document *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* but also in the writings of de Lubac, the great French theologian, whose insight is expressed in the axiom: 'It is the Church which makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist which makes the Church.'

First, let me take the first half of that axiom.

The Eucharist is a God-given event. It is our work only under the influence of the Holy Spirit. In our faith we know that the gift of the Holy Spirit is given only in and through Christ. We take a further step and say that the Church is the instrument of Christ in the giving of this gift. The Church is the body of Christ through which the Holy Spirit is poured out, not in an exclusive sense but certainly in a definitive one.

Here my exploration enters into the arena of ecclesiology and how we come to an understanding of what exactly is meant by the term 'Church'. This is a theme on which I can't really expand at this point, so forgive me if I simply state Catholic understanding.

In that understanding, the Church of Christ is certainly to be found in the visible Catholic Church linked as it is with visible bonds to the visible ministry of the Bishop of Rome. This was the clear teaching of the Second Vatican Council, which, at the same time, took great trouble to recognise aspects of that one Church of Christ is many other places. These bonds are, of course, many-layered and, indeed, flexible. It is an exploration of what precisely links the visible Church that was invited in the encyclical *Ut unum sint*.

It is within this understanding of the Church that there is an insistence that the event of the Eucharist comes about through an ordained ministry, which carries with it the authority of that visible Church.

Another way of putting it is that through ordination the priest lends his voice and his hands to Christ so that Christ's words, Christ's actions, Christ's sacrifice, may take place in every part of history and in every part of human territory.

It is the Church, through this sacrament of Holy Orders, which guarantees that what is said and done is effective through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Church does this in succession to Jewish faith but also in transformation of that law and in fidelity to the mind and intention of Christ.

A community event

Let me now take up the second half of de Lubac's axiom that 'it is the Eucharist which makes the Church'.

One way of reflecting on this theme is to say that it is through the power of Christ's sacrifice, it is through sharing his word, his body, his blood, that the transformation of a people takes place.

Indeed, the word 'transformation' is crucial to what goes on. We recall the transformation of death to life which happened in Christ himself through the power of the Holy Spirit. This, we believe, is the transformation of sin, through forgiveness, to the new life of grace taking place through the redeeming death of Christ.

The same word, 'transformation', also describes what takes place on the altar, the transformation of the bread and wine into the real presence of Christ's body and blood – as Catholic and Orthodox Christians believe.

Similarly transformation takes place in each one of us in that through the celebration of the Eucharist it is 'no longer I that live but Christ lives in me'. In other words, our life is transformed into a participation in the life of God, the life of the Trinity itself.

Then, similarly, we can say that a transformation also takes place in us, as a people, a community. We are now bound together in Christ and through the action of the Holy Spirit we become his body, the Church.

Over the last two hundred years there have been many ways in which this transformation of human community, effected through the mystery of the Eucharist, has been reflected upon. One strand of such reflection came with Pope Pius XII who spoke and wrote about the Church as the 'mystical body of Christ'. More recently there has been developed a strand of thought under the title of 'a *communio* ecclesiology'. This is proving to be particularly fruitful, not least for ecumenical discussion. It emphasises that through the mystery of grace each of us is drawn into a communion of life with God and thereby what is established between us is a *communio* of life, or a community, deeply rooted in the reality of God's saving grace.

We can also go on to say that at the heart of this sharing in the life of God is our sharing in the mission of Christ. After all, the sending of Christ is the defining nature of the action of God both in creation and in the Incarnation. So, too, mission becomes the defining nature of that community which arises because of the action of the Eucharist. Hence we have the strong connections between our celebration of Mass and the imperative that from Mass we go out to serve the people. The word 'Mass'

itself actually derives from the word 'missio', or sending out. Indeed, there are all those strong links, which I think you are also exploring in your time together, between our celebration of the Eucharist and our hunger for justice in the world.

A lasting event

The Eucharist as a lasting event is a key part of Catholic theology. Every celebration of the Mass brings about a permanent transformation in the bread and wine which become substantially (ie in their substance and not in their appearance) the real sacramental presence of Christ. And this presence of Christ, in the consecrated elements, is abiding and not temporary. This is such an important gift of faith for it enables not only the presence of Christ in the consecrated bread, the host, as we call it, to be taken to the sick but also to be reserved in the Church as a focus for adoration and ongoing prayer. You know, of course, of the rich tradition in the Catholic Church of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. You will also understand that this abiding presence of Christ is one of the ways in which the promise of Christ 'to be with us always' is fulfilled.

Of course there are many ways in which Christ fulfils that promise. Certainly, there is his abiding presence in the word of Scripture. There is also the unending outpouring of the Holy Spirit as the effective prompting and presence of Christ in our hearts. There is also the presence of Christ in the love we receive from others and, indeed, from the love we give to others. The presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament has, however, a very particular characteristic and, therefore, fulfils the promise of Christ to be with us always in a very particular way. This is well understood when we see that the abiding presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament is his presence precisely in the moment of his self-gift to us. What we come before in the Blessed Sacrament is Christ saying: 'Take, this is my body, this is given for you.'

It is for this reason that prayer before the Blessed Sacrament is a constant reminder to us of our Saviour's love and an inspiration to us to allow the same words to echo in our own hearts. Prayer before the Blessed Sacrament helps us to make our own those words, for indeed they are words that define the very essence of Christian discipleship. We strive to say of ourselves to each other: 'Take, this is my body, given for you.'

Conclusion

In this brief talk I have tried to reflect on the Eucharist as event. I have suggested that it is always an event of grace, always an historical event, always a cosmic event, always an ecclesial event, always an event creating community, and always an event of the lasting presence of Christ.

I could, of course, have talked of the Eucharist as a promise of what lies ahead, as an eschatological event. And much more beside.

I hope that these reflections help in your time together. The Eucharist, surely, is such a strong promise of what lies ahead, even if it is also an occasion which brings us both comfort and a longing for change as we make this journey through life together

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