

Holy Communion: from Consumers to Celebrants

The Relation between Church and Sacraments

- The Church is not a building where sacraments are dispensed; communion is not a commodity the Church provides to consumers.
- The Church assembles to be formed and reformed in its baptismal identity and calling.
- Bishops, priests, and deacons (people in Holy Orders) are not the Church; they are people chosen from within the Church to preserve, cultivate, and enable the authentic order and ministry of the Church.
- The one who presides at the Table does so not *in persona Christi* (as the embodiment of Christ), but *in persona ecclesiae* (as the voice of the people of God). The presider has not been endowed with special powers to consecrate the Lord's body and blood, but has been authorized to give voice to the assembly's sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving in communion with the whole Church, by virtue of her/his responsibility for pastoral oversight of the community. "There is one great Prayer which offers by consecrating and consecrates by offering and does both by giving thanks." (*E. L. Mascall*)
- The Eucharist is more than a reception for friends of Jesus; it is a participation in the paschal mystery, a regular repetition of the final element of our initiation into Christ through which we are incorporated into that mystery.
- The eucharist is not magic; it is a living symbol which effects what it signifies. If the symbol is distorted, the significance is distorted.

Forming (or de-Forming) the Community

- It is the assembly that celebrates the eucharist, not the presider who celebrates while the assembly waits to receive communion. An individualized eucharistic piety violates the character of eucharistic sharing.
- The Church's ritual practice has a long and complex history. Our appreciation of, and enculturation of, the mystery of the eucharist has grown richer and deeper over the centuries, but distortions have also corrupted its meaning. Such distortions have undermined communal formation in the eucharist:
 - the prolonged use of a language no longer understood by the assembly, and the resulting takeover of the eucharist as the private domain of the presider;
 - the decline of the Catechumenate, resulting in baptism without formation in discipleship;

- the expropriation of ‘sharing the priesthood of Christ’ by presbyters (‘priests’), leaving baptismal identity impoverished and participation in communion in decline;
- the deluded invention of a ‘moment of consecration’, accompanied by related gestures, leading to a misunderstanding of the Great Thanksgiving as a whole;
- the use of individualized wafers instead of bread broken and shared;
- the distortion of liturgical space through hierarchical segregation, making it more suitable for a theatre audience than a community gathering;
- the distortion of assembly participation into private, individualized piety, supported by a reliance on printed (or projected) ritual texts.
- The reforms of the last century (of which ELW, the BAS, and the RCL are manifestations) have largely been adopted in a selective fashion, preserving some of the worst distortions from our past.

Reforming the Celebration

- In the earliest centuries, as far as we can tell, the bishop who presided at the eucharist stood with hands upraised in prayer, while the assembly joined him in this posture. The only additional gesture was at the end of the Great Thanksgiving when the bishop and the assisting deacon together raised the bread and the cup during the final doxology. This shared posture of prayer made it clear that the whole assembly offered prayer together, and it is worth emulating.
- There are important clues in our liturgical books to guide us in this reform:
 - the *Sursum Corda* (“Lift up your hearts”) is an even stronger form of summons to assembly participation in prayer than the one that typically precedes a collect (“Let us pray”), for in it the presider explicitly requests permission to speak on behalf of the assembly, and the introductory rubric in ELW makes this even clearer: “The presiding minister greets the assembly and invites all to give thanks”;
 - the BAS discourages any change of posture during the Great Thanksgiving;
 - the assembly participates in the prayer vocally through acclamations and responses, including the *Sanctus* (“Holy, holy, holy Lord”);
 - the Anglican rubrics requiring ‘manual acts’ during the words of institution (present in every prayer book since 1662) have been removed by the BAS;
 - the BAS implies that the presider and the assembly *receive* communion (the presider does not *take* communion);
 - the ELW suggests the ministers receive communion *after* others have received.

- The renewed appreciation of the Great Thanksgiving in our time is a priceless gift that we need to grasp. Its structure is simple: a rich offering of *praise and thanksgiving* (the thanksgiving taking the form of a recitation of God’s wonderful acts in the creation and redemption of the world, whose definitive episode was the paschal mystery), followed by *supplication* that God will pour out the Spirit upon us and upon our gifts to bring to completion this work of creation and redemption.
- The story of the last supper (part of the paschal mystery) serves not only as a warrant for what we are doing at this Table but as an acknowledgement that our communion in Christ’s body and blood is our *incorporation* into the paschal mystery. Nevertheless, this story is a component of the recitation-as-thanksgiving, *not* an act of supplication or consecration. The *transition* from thanksgiving to supplication clearly *follows* the words of institution in both the BAS and ELW.
- In every assembly we need to find a way to restore the physical act of joining with the presider in the entire eucharistic action. The Altar is not the presider’s workbench; it is the assembly’s dining table. But unless the assembly can enact this participation, they are unlikely to believe it. Given the variety of physical obstacles we have inherited, this restoration will be different in every place, and may need to be implemented in stages over time.
- We need to end the use of individualized portions of bread. “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”
(1 Corinthians 10: 17)
- We need to restore the relationship between this meal and other meals. Bread should look like bread, and it should not be served from something that looks like a cup. Feasting at this Table should look like feasting.
- The presider should avoid any gestures during the Great Thanksgiving that could suggest a ‘moment of consecration’, for this violates the structure of the prayer by turning the words of institution into a performative ceremony — something other than thanksgiving. It also implies that consecration has shifted from the assembly’s prayer to the presider’s action. Presiders should not play with the food.
- The presider should be served communion by another minister or member of the assembly, rather than serving herself/himself.
- It is an offence against the unity of the body if the ministers and choir are served separately.
- The choreography of the communion ritual, imposed on us by the customs of the past and the buildings in which we gather, needs to be carefully reassessed to minimize the appearance of private, individual consumption. The words of administration should be proclaimed aloud, not whispered. If at all possible, we should all be able to wait for one another, rather than each of us leaving the Table as soon as we’ve been fed.

— John W B Hill