

“In his usual eminently readable style, Thomas O’Loughlin presents forceful arguments on why Christians from different churches should share in communion with one another as they journey together that challenge all to serious reflection.”

—Paul F. Bradshaw
University of Notre Dame

“In this engagingly written book, Thomas O’Loughlin conducts a compelling theological exploration of a persistent and unresolved question in pastoral life. A series of reflections on what it means for Christians to ‘eat together’ at the eucharist draw with equal poise on canon law, profound readings of scripture, and the experience of parish life. Both systematic teaching and challenge, they lead readers of all churches to reimagine local reality, and live it differently, in the light of the imperatives of the kingdom.”

—Bridget Nichols
Lecturer in Anglicanism & Liturgy, Church of Ireland Theological
Institute, Dublin

“Development in doctrine or ecclesial practice is a fact throughout the history of the Catholic Church. Often such changes have come about through taking a fresh perspective on a particular issue. In this carefully argued book, Thomas O’Loughlin presents a compelling case for change in Catholic practice regarding eucharistic hospitality. O’Loughlin writes as a historian, theologian, liturgist, and pastor; but it is above all his pastoral perspective that gives his call for change such cogency and urgency.”

—Ormond Rush, author of *The Vision of Vatican II: Its Fundamental Principles*

“Do not be deceived. This book is about a lot more than eucharistic sharing among Christians. It is indeed about sharing communion, but O’Loughlin also provides excellent ecumenical and eucharistic theology to back up his bold proposals for Catholic eucharistic hospitality. We desperately need this kind of forward-looking thinking today. I recommend it highly to pastoral ministers, theologians, and ministerial students—in fact to anyone concerned with the issue of eucharistic sharing.”

—John F. Baldovin, SJ
Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

Eating Together, Becoming One

*Taking Up Pope Francis's
Call to Theologians*

Thomas O'Loughlin



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Cover image: This painting entitled *Das Abendmahl unter Tage* [The Eucharist Underground] is a piece of public art on an underpass in the town of Westerholt in North Rhein-Westphalia, Germany. It was painted in 2011 by Helmut Dellmann, who died April 18, 2013, and who was a founding member of the local miners' old-comrades' association that now cares for the painting. It presents the eucharist not only as an activity of the people of God in union with Jesus but as an incarnational event. Rather than occurring in a sacred space apart from the world, it enters into the workspace and transforms that location into a place of divine encounter and an experience of community rejoicing.

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For Daniel Rossa
—a token of gratitude

“But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers”
—James 1:22

Contents

Preface	ix
Introduction: A Problem for Pastors and Theologians	xi
1. Why This Book Now?	1
2. The Grammar of Meals	21
3. Pray My Sisters and Brothers	33
4. Fictive Families—Real Churches: The Spirit and Intercommunion	47
5. The Ecumenical Meal of Mission	59
6. Building upon Baptism	71
7. The Eucharist and the Pilgrims' Journey	85
8. A Theology of Divine Acceptance	103
9. Gathered as an Easter People	113
10. The Phenomenon of Conflicting Theologies	125
11. Where Do We Need to Go from Here?	141
Conclusion: Non-Catholics at the Table—Now or Never?	153
Bibliography	159
Index of Scripture	165
Index of Subjects	169

Preface

The idea of this book can be traced to a few off-the-cuff remarks that were made in a Lutheran church in Rome in November 2015, when Pope Francis replied to a question about intercommunion and suggested that theologians should address the question! I had by then lost count of how many times I had been asked a version of that question in churches, in class, in meetings with clergy, and even once while waiting for a plane in India: Why will the Catholic Church not allow other Christians, whom they acknowledge as Christian, to share their table? I then recalled that I could not think of a single book that presented the arguments in favor of a change in Catholic practice—the very sort of examination Pope Francis was calling for. So the idea took root, and I desired a small book that would address the several dimensions of the question (theological, liturgical, and pastoral) in a unified way. This, what you hold in your hand, is the result.

But even a small book runs up a large list of debts of gratitude. First and foremost, I am grateful for the questions and stimulating seminars that have taken place with those undergraduates in the University of Nottingham who over the last decade have taken my “History of the Eucharist” module. Coming from every denomination, several faiths, and sometimes no faith background but an interest in the human phenomenon of religion, they have asked me a range of questions to which few theologians who write on worship are exposed. I am in their debt more than they realize. While speaking of Nottingham I am also in the debt of my colleagues—it is a department of friends—who patiently have helped me clarify my thoughts on many matters.

Second, I need to thank all those communities of Christians who have asked me to speak to them about the eucharist. While it would be expected that I would be invited to speak to Catholic dioceses and groups, I have also learned so much from being asked to address what it is we are

doing when we are eucharistic with many other churches. I must single out for mention just a couple of them because their welcome has left such a memory with me: the Episcopal seminary of Nashotah House in Wisconsin, the Countess of Huntington Connection Chapel in Mortimer, West End, in Berkshire, and a United Church of Canada in Victoria on Vancouver Island. The eucharist does really unite us because we recognize our need to be thankful to the Father, and we know that sharing food binds us as human beings.

Immediately following the pope's statement, the Franciscan Sisters in Arkley (to the north of London) organized a special one-day conference on the topic drawing together Anglican and Catholic scholars in February 2016—they moved fast—and conversations at the seminar with Bridget Nichols, now president of the *Societas Liturgica*, James Cassidy, and Patricia Rumsey (abbess of Arkley and the moving spirit behind that seminar) convinced me that a book was needed. For all the work involved in organizing that fruitful seminar, we are all indebted to that community. But it was not until I was speaking with an even wider range of scholars at the 2017 Leuven meeting of *Societas Liturgica* that I became fully convinced that this was a worthwhile project. For all their inspiration and encouragement I am in their debt. In the aftermath of that conference I approached Liturgical Press and am now also indebted to Hans Christoffersen—who has taken the lead on the project—and all the staff there.

I would like to thank Daniel Rossa, once my Erasmus student in Nottingham, for drawing my attention some years ago to the stunning painting by Helmut Dellmann's *Das Abendmahl unter Tage* on the cover and for taking the photograph of that painting. I am grateful to Kunibert Kiehne of the Knappenvereins "St. Barbara" Bergmannsglück in Westerholt for permission to reproduce the image—and, once again, to Daniel for obtaining this permission for me.

I would also like to thank John Bolger, then editor of *One in Christ* for pushing forward the publication of the 2016 seminar; to Brendan Walsh, editor of *The Tablet*, for encouraging the project as an urgent one; and, yet again, to Patricia Rumsey for agreeing to read the typescript and save me from split infinitives. What is written here takes a very definite line within the broad tradition of Catholic theology, and so for the opinions found here—and for the blunders that remain—I alone am responsible.

Introduction

A Problem for Pastors and Theologians

One of the great signs of hope in the Christian world over the past century has been the growth of the ecumenical movements as churches saw discourse rather than discord as the more appropriate tone for their mutual relationships. Then in the 1960s, part of the overall renewal of the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church entered these dialogues, and old enmities were set aside and new relationships established. The joy of seeing Patriarch Athenagoras I and Pope Paul VI embracing on the Mount of Olives in January 1964 was often matched at local level by the first time a group of Catholics, ever so tentatively, went inside a local Protestant church for an ecumenical service. Learning to be with one another and learning to pray together was a slow and often tense business; and the idea of learning *from* one another was not even considered. In many places sectarianism was still just beneath the surface—and it has still not disappeared—but slowly we Christians are discovering one another not as strangers but fellow pilgrims.

As we progressed we also discovered that, if we are serious about ecumenism, it is more demanding of change within ourselves than an annual special occasion during Church Unity Week or admiring some carefully nuanced joint statement relating to historic divisions. If we were serious, then being pilgrims together meant that we had to share those things that are supposed to be precious among Christians, and here we ran into trouble immediately over that very reality that is supposed to bind us together: the eucharist. The sacrament of unity was actually the lightning rod of division! This separated the Western churches, Protestants and

Catholics, from one another, and separated the Catholics and the Orthodox from one another. There have been documents on this from the churches aplenty, no end to special workarounds, but eucharistic intercommunion is more than a mere roadblock. Knowing it is such a barrier to full communion often “takes the wind out of the sails” of those who work for the unity for which Jesus prayed (John 17:11). Often faced with this conundrum, church leaders and theologians adopt the line of “do what you can,” knowing that there is a pre-set limit to growth (unless one church simply converts to the other) saps energy. We look back on the photographs of the various embraces of church leaders and place them alongside other handshake images—such as that of Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin on the White House lawn in September 1993—that were full of promise and good intention but led nowhere.

But sharing at the eucharist is not simply a matter for theologians or leaders; it will cause pain and division next Sunday in a church somewhere near you. It will be the pain of a family arguing about being together at what many churches would describe as the center and summit of the Christian life. It will cause hurt and new dissention when a pastor prevents or reproves a fellow Christian from sharing at the Lord’s gracious banquet. And, sadly, for many Catholics it is seen as a closed issue—or one that is so fraught with difficulties that it is best ignored. This book argues that it is an issue we Catholics need to confront openly not just in reflection but, as befits anything concerning the eucharist as a form of Christian activity, in what we do.

What follows is not a single supposedly “knockdown argument” in favor of a change in Catholic practice but a series of theological reflections: each a glimpse strung together as a chain. In all such matters of practical theology, the evidence from all our sources of theology scripture, doctrine, law, practice, ritual, art, history, and so on is hardly ever so clear and one-sided that it can clear opposition from the field. Rather, it is a case that the wider sweep of theological sense, the *sensus ecclesiae*, suggests that we have reached a tipping point and that we need to alter our practice. Then, sensing that this is the correct way forward, we need to see how this can be seen to be in accord with our tradition. The chapters that follow each approach the issue from a different angle, but when taken together they provide, I hope, a cumulative case for a change in practice.

When I am in the process of writing a book, one question is always unwelcome: What are you working on now? I may have only just begun

and wonder if I am really engaging, or I could be close to the end and wonder if I will have the energy to bring it to a conclusion. And there is always the doubt as to whether one has adequately addressed the relevant questions. So when such a question is asked, I usually fudge. Within days of completing this manuscript, I was again asked this question around a table that included several Catholic clergy, so I felt confident to give a rather definite answer: a book taking up the question of Pope Francis to theologians on intercommunion. To my shock and sadness one of the presbyters quipped: "I don't know why we should bend over to them until they give us something!" I had, perhaps naively, imagined that we had moved beyond the tit-for-tat view of relations between churches as a kind of political game. Thinking about it, I realized that the importance of intercommunion is not that it might be an action that might promote good ecumenical relations (which it would) or even that it would bring solace to painful pastoral situations (which it will) but because it is the right thing to do. I hope that I have shown that it is out of the inherent nature of our liturgy that intercommunion is a good to be pursued. It is certainly my own conviction that intercommunion is not a matter of church relations but a witness to the nature of the new covenant that has been established with us in the Christ. We share because he has already made us one in him in our baptism.

I have been concerned with this issue of sharing at the eucharistic table since I first met it as a real pastoral issue in the early 1980s, and over the years I have tried to tease out in academic papers some of its dimensions.¹ Then came the call from Pope Francis in late 2015 for theologians to review the issue afresh and some very insightful off-the-cuff notes on how such a review might take place.² Reading the pope's statement I at once tried to reshape some work I had recently published on the topic,³ and then asked a small group of theologians to look at it and the results were published in a special issue of *One in Christ*.⁴ Then at a meeting of

1. For instance, O'Loughlin 2015a.

2. See ch. 1 for details.

3. O'Loughlin 2016a.

4. The daylong symposium was held in the Poor Clare convent in Arkley, Barnet (UK), in spring 2016, with proceedings published in *One in Christ* 50, no. 1 (2016). The papers are Ball 2016; Cassidy 2016; Nichols 2016; Rumsey 2016; and O'Loughlin 2016b.

liturgists and theologians held in Leuven in 2017 under the auspices of the ecumenical Societas Liturgica I realized that more discussion of the topic was called for and this is the *raison d'être* of this book. However, the aim of this book is not more theological discussion but a change in mindset about the eucharistic *mysterium* that then manifests itself in a renewed practice.

1

Why This Book Now?

Life is greater than explanations and interpretations.

—Pope Francis, 2015

It was Christmas morning, 2018, and the church built to seat 250 people held nearly four hundred. It was a typical Christmas congregation with the regulars far outnumbered by two seasonal groups. First, there were visitors from elsewhere staying with family or friends in the area. The second contingent was those who turn up at Mass just for this feast—and there were, no doubt, several individuals who belonged to both categories. The priest was very aware of this complex mix of people and tried in the homily to say that such an infrequent appearance was okay and recalled that even such annual visits indicate a longing for God in every life. So far, welcome and inclusion were dominant themes. Then it came to the time for eating and drinking from the Lord's table and a housekeeping announcement was required about the route people should take while coming up to communion and then returning to their place. It took this form:

For communion, there will be two stations here in the center [pointing], and there will be three people with chalices either side. So come up the center aisle, and then go back along the sides [again pointing]. If you're a non-Catholic or can't go to communion for some other reason, then remember you are very welcome to come up for a special blessing with the Blessed Sacrament, and you can show me this by crossing your arms [gesture].

There it was: the Catholic Church's position in a nutshell. Doctrine and praxis stripped free of complicated casuistry and the conditions and qualifications of canonists and ecumenical directories. It was a simple matter of black and white: if you are not a Roman Catholic, you are *not* to take communion! It was not a rule that was shouted out in an imperative *thou shalt not!* but given as a simple, factual statement as part of a practical notice intended to avoid a traffic jam. His very casualness in mentioning it showed that for that priest it was not a matter of dispute or debate. It is no more problematic than a motorist's saying one should signal before turning. Indeed, the injunction was even framed in a bizarrely positive way. You may not be able to participate in the primary goal of communion, eating and drinking, but there is a secondary commodity that is not restricted. So the friendly message was "Do not feel *too* left out, you can have a valuable consolation prize!"

I was seated off to one side and remained behind until almost the last moment, and while waiting I tried to estimate how many went up for communion and how many for a blessing. My estimate was that just under half the gathering left their seats, and, apart from small children, I saw only one adult seek a blessing. The notice clearly had been heeded, and anyone who had any doubts about eating and drinking at that Christian banquet stayed firmly where they were. Rarely is the issue of "only Catholics can go to communion" so clearly enunciated as on that Christmas morning, but the basic position is widely accepted by both Catholics and other Christians as a position set in stone. As another priest once said to me: "Them's the facts: non-Catholics are non-Catholics." Apparently, it is a simple matter, and there is no need for dispute.

A Theological Minefield

That priest's announcement about non-Catholics is neither unusual nor an extreme position identified with some specific ecclesial agenda. While there may be very nuanced positions in canon law regarding when a non-Catholic can fully share in the eucharistic meal, and this may have been given further elaboration in documents from various bishops' conferences,¹ the word on the street does not mention conscience, spiritual need, indi-

1. See Cassidy 2016 for an example of the nuanced position of a canon lawyer in comparison with the black-and-white certainties of many parish clergy.

vidual local circumstances, moral or physical impairment of access to one's own rite or ministers, or individual assent to Catholic doctrine. It simply says that only those who are explicitly Catholic (i.e., Roman Catholic) can receive. When I ask clergy, informally, if it is as clear-cut as this, the only mention of conditions takes the form that "it is different for the eastern churches," but this is very vague. Then if I ask whether it is the same for Uniate Ukrainians, Greek Orthodox, Armenians, and Copts, the answer is usually "yes" and the reason given is that "since we can take communion from them if we cannot get to [a] Mass [celebrated in the Latin Rite]," then we can reciprocate and give them communion.²

So, I then ask, if we can receive from a non-Catholic if that person belongs to one of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, can we go to communion in one of the local non-Catholic churches? The answer in this case is invariably a very clear "no" but with a variety of reasons offered. The reasons range from "They do not have communion" or "Receiving communion would be equivalent to accepting their theology" (and such an act of assent could not be countenanced) to the argument from validity: they do not really have the eucharist because they do not have a priest (that is, a validly ordained priest), and without a priest there is no eucharist. What about ecumenical dialogues such as *BEM*, *ARCIC*, and the agreements with the Lutherans?³ These are either unknown (in the case of *BEM*), considered outdated and not having made any difference (*ARCIC*), or having no practical implications. The situation can only change when, in effect, all these groups are restored to complete unity with the Catholic Church, and this would, in effect, involve all their ministers being ordained (not "reordained" for they are deemed to be but laymen) as Catholic priests.

2. Needless to say, this is a very Roman Catholic-centered vision that would shock most Eastern Orthodox with its presumption that because Catholic canon law says so, such churches should meet Catholic demands! See Ware 1978 for a response to that attitude.

3. *BEM* is the document of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches published in Lima on January 15, 1982; to appreciate it in its larger context, see Norwood 2018. *ARCIC* is the Anglican and Roman Catholic International Commission, which has met on and off since 1969, but after a decade of steady activity in the 1970s, it has retreated into the background and what statements it has made since the early 1980s tend to be on very abstruse points of doctrinal difference.

This position should not be dismissed as simply ignorance or confusion. The church is the people of God seeking to follow the Way, not those who have the time and inclination to keep up with the latest developments in ecumenical dialogue. The subtleties that caused so much division in the past need to be discussed with the precision of theological dialogue today, but just as the past debates produced simple, graspable (if crude) outcomes—for example, a village that had just one church in 1500 might have had two in 1600 with each side convinced that those in the other church were “lost”—so there will always be clear-cut “rules of thumb” guiding people’s actions in situations like that Christmas Day Mass. Moreover, while the notion that complete unity could only come about when *every* Christian minister is ordained as a Catholic priest may seem absurd, it does fit very well with the notion that “full sacramental sharing can only occur when there is unity of belief,” a statement commonly found in the documents issued by Catholic bishops’ conferences on intercommunion. Perhaps this *reductio ab absurdum*—that this sort of unity will only occur at the eschaton—should point out to us that we need to think about what “unity of faith” means among Christians, and about the human timescale of everything concerning faith, discipleship, and practice.

But these are not the only problems we, as Catholics, encounter. When we discuss ecumenism we often engage in a very focused discourse, as if Catholicism is not only the center of the religious world but that all other manifestations of Christian faith are to be seen as peripheral to Catholicism. This binary self-focus, “us” and “the rest,” is captured in the distinction of Catholics on one side, and then all others as “non-Catholics.” Such self-focus is invariably present in human discourse, but whenever we want to engage in a dialogue that does not self-destruct on the launch pad, we need to change our approach radically. You cannot enter into a human and respectful exchange with any other individual or group if it only exists for you as being the outsiders, those who do not belong within your circle. As one goes through customs in an airport one can sort people into citizens and noncitizens. In a hospital you can divide people into patients and nonpatients, but what is a good sorting tool (dividing into x and $non-x$) is a flawed basis for human interaction. Would Catholics describe themselves as “non-Protestants”? What does that mean? Could you sit down and describe yourself starting from that label? Likewise, if one said one was “non-Orthodox” or a “non-Copt,” one has only a tiny basis of identity, and if we are to relate to others in a respectful

way—simply acknowledging our common humanity much less our common fellowship in the Lord through baptism—then we have to not only avoid the sorting mechanism but root it out of our thinking. Moreover, every positive encounter begins by a common affirmation of being parts of a commonality. In this case that could be “churches whose common identity today is founded in the division of the sixteenth century” or our common affirmation of the Nicene Creed or the more embracing reality of our common baptism.

Such a starting point is not only an acknowledgement that all human culture is full of variations—we should recall at this point that the sort of uniform consistency implicit in a world of Catholics and non-Catholics belongs more to the binary world of computer programs than that of living individuals—and that variety is the spice of life. Everyone brings something to the party. The simple fact is that Christianity has been so split by divisions, all the way back to the very start when there were Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians (and even factions within individual churches such as described in 1 Cor), that no one side in any dispute about doctrine or practice can claim to be the only way.⁴ The Way is a lifestyle and an inheritance and so everyone has something to learn from the other and something to offer the other.⁵

But what does this mean for the issue of intercommunion? It is the widespread perception of every body of Christians that their theological stance is essentially simple and clear, and that complexity only relates to the outsider who sometimes must be accommodated. The problem with this assumption only becomes visible when we consider interactions between two groups of Christians. Let us examine, for instance, the assumptions at work in the statements already mentioned. Many Latin Catholics assume that because *their* authorities allow them to receive communion at Orthodox liturgies they can simply present themselves without more ado, and they then expect to be given communion. When

4. This starting point is the opposite of the myth of an early period of perfection preceding a period of decay in corruption and confusion; see Bauer 1971 for the background to the approach adopted in this book. On the persistence of myths about the early church in Christian thought, see J. Z. Smith 1990. In this book it will be assumed that complete unity and harmony is a gift of the Spirit that will only be fully realized at the End, rather than a human fact that can simply be imitated.

5. See O’Loughlin 2010, 28–45.

the Orthodox priest points out that they are not in communion and refuses their request, they are affronted!⁶ How could anyone, these Catholics argue, deploy such an argument against them? Surely their status as Christians could not be in doubt? This insults their own claim to be Christians. In such a situation it is easily forgotten that this is almost the same argument they deploy against other [Western] Christians. Alternatively, if those same Catholics then refuse to receive at the celebration led by an Anglican priest or a Presbyterian minister, it can come as a shock to them that this nonparticipation is not simply politely ignored—after all, they have bothered to take part by just being there!—but seen by their hosts as a theological denial of their very status as Christians. One can vary these mutual suspicions and multiply the rationales given for staying apart almost endlessly. That very fact is, to me, indicative of the flaw at the base of this whole approach to sharing in the meal of the Lord. Because the reasons vary so greatly, we are not dealing with anything that related to the eucharist as such, as an activity of Christians, but with “the eucharist” as a ritual event. It is no longer a practice but rather an indicator of group identity, a marker of the provenance of one’s own group as “genuine” when in competition with some other group of Christians.

But it will be replied that there is the fact of the necessity of “valid orders” if a priest is to be a priest, and one must have a priest if one is to have a *real* eucharist, and, therefore, one is comparing a real with an unreal! While but few Catholics today would want to describe eucharistic celebrations by, for example, an Episcopalian, as a “sham”—language used until very recently—it cannot be denied that the Catholic Church insists that clergy from other denominations who become Catholic priests are ordained “absolutely”—that is, on the assumption that they have not been ordained previously. If that is a fact, and the necessity of a priest for the eucharist is a fact, then one cannot evade the next fact: they—other Western Christians—may believe sincerely that they are celebrating the eucharist, but in this they are mistaken. Such arguments are not about group identity but about “facts” that are intrinsic to the whole theological edifice. There is no way around such facts; they must simply be acknowledged in the same way that I must accept physical laws. I may need to flee from the highest floor of a burning building, but my need does not mean that I can fly!

6. Ware 1978.

This is a very serious argument not only because it is widely diffused as the theory underpinning practice but because it has a rigorous logical integrity which, when extended to its rational conclusion, arrives at the position that Catholics cannot even pray together with other Western Christians, as this would be tantamount to approving tacitly of their error. This was, indeed, the formal position of the Catholic Church until the 1960s, and it was defended as a practice by just such a logic. Moreover, I know several Orthodox priests and monks who, sincerely and logically, take that position regarding the non-Orthodox. The integrity of this position was brought home to me by three little incidents. Some years ago, I was visiting an ancient monastery in the East to look at a manuscript. The monk was most welcoming and at the end of my visit gave me a gratefully received glass of lemonade. On parting I said “Brother: let us pray for one another,” and this produced a storm: he told me that Catholics had willingly engaged in a schism, had altered the creed, and so were guilty of apostasy. I was aware of this change and admitted it had taken place, therefore I was culpable and guilty, and should know the results of such apostasy. He would pray for me, but he could not do so within the liturgy nor within the church building, nor could he pray for me as a “brother.” He would pray for my conversion lest I be lost forever, and so as a charity to me he would pray that I would eventually seek [a valid] baptism.

The second event was meeting an Anglican priest the day after the visit of Pope Benedict to Westminster Abbey (September 17, 2010) as we both saw a picture in a newspaper of the Archbishop of Canterbury standing alongside the pope at an ecumenical service in the abbey. My comment was “a hopeful sign of closer links.” Her reply startled me: “I consider it a sham that brings the church’s witness into disrepute.” Her explanation was that anyone looking at it would see two brother bishops seeking to repair division, but while this might be the position of the Archbishop of Canterbury, it was not the “deep down position” of Benedict XVI. If it were the pope’s position, he could still refuse to receive communion from the archbishop (on the grounds of schism) but would have to admit that the archbishop was validly ordained—and the proof would be that he would not deem Rowan Williams in need of ordination were he to become a Roman Catholic. “Actions” [in this case no second ordination], she reminded me, “count more than words!” So what should have happened when these leaders met? Her reply was that the Archbishop of Canterbury should have asked publicly: “Am I your brother bishop or a [theologically] confused layman?”

3

Pray My Sisters and Brothers

That the dining table is one of the best places for communication—perhaps the ideal place, where the desire to communicate with one’s familiars is expressed with ease and freedom—is so evident and so readily observable in daily life that there is no need for historical confirmation.

—Massimo Montinari¹

In the last chapter I tried to look at what we are doing as human beings when we share meals, and I argued that the intrinsic nature of this activity determines the parameters of what is acceptable behavior when we celebrate the eucharist. One aspect of human meal-sharing is that if a stranger comes into our community we make the guest welcome through sharing our meal. Conversely, a refusal to eat together, whether that comes from the host or the guest, sets up or entrenches a boundary between people, deepens division, and pushes us toward increased mutual antagonism. But is that scenario of making the stranger welcome an adequate way to view the presence of some fellow Christian at our eucharistic gathering? Is a fellow Christian really an outsider?

Siblings in the Christ

There are very few eucharistic assemblies in the Catholic Church today where anyone, even the presider, knows everyone. The presider might

1. Montinari 2015, 177.

know everyone by sight, but I doubt if he could name everyone. Moreover, as dioceses adapt to having fewer presbyters, the number of people at each Sunday eucharist tends to get steadily larger. So there is a real sense in which every gathering is a meeting of strangers. And, if such is the nature of our meeting then perhaps worrying about strangers is silly: who cares so long as all get Mass and as many as are willing to go up for communion can get it.² However, this viewpoint is derived from a diseased state of the liturgy and one that has forgotten that a meal where we share a loaf and a cup is not something that can be just “scaled up.” The nature of our gathering is as a community where we affirm that as sisters and brothers we will travel the way of discipleship together. By its nature this is a small-scale affair. In this setting we need to remind ourselves that each of us is called by name within the church and so in any assembly of the church we should know the members of our local community as individuals. If we celebrate the eucharist within a situation where we only know the names of our immediate family, then we can only say by a very stretched metaphor that we are a community of sisters and brothers who bear witness as a church in that place. In such “scaled up” situations Christianity has, in effect, been replaced by a religious individualism. But we should note that this situation of liturgical anonymity is both relatively new and is perverse. The early churches met in domestic spaces—and so there were many churches each with a few people. Medieval Christians met in village churches and these were as numerous as those villages, and even in cities there were umpteen small churches catering for smaller localities within the city. It is only in recent centuries when the size of congregations is a direct function of the number of ministers that the anonymous (either wholly or in part) has made its ugly appearance. So let us think in terms of communities where we know each other, can call upon one another by the name given us when we entered the church at baptism, and where we have a sense that we, all of us, are the people of God who bear witness to the truth of the gospel as a community. This may be far from where you are now, but no other starting point is worthy of us who are called to be the church through the Father’s love.

2. We Catholics must be continually aware of how our habitual language leads us astray in treating the eucharist as an object in a world of religious objects and indeed, allowing for its sacramental nature, as an object with extension in the natural world.

But this gathering is at once both intimate and open. It is intimate in that we have a sense of our being a community, calling each other by our *Christian* name, but it is also open because others can join us—indeed, we openly welcome visitors. Moreover, we know that we are one church, but also that we are part of a whole worldwide network of churches. We could even say that the Christian church is one of the first groups who could adopt the motto: “Think global, act local.”³ The assumption of the network of churches that forms the *oikoumene* is that any other member of the church is welcome: we will find space, and we will find them a place at our table. So I am simultaneously a member of this church—a very visible network of people gathered in one place today—and of the church that is an international network that keeps in touch with its churches, just as the first churches kept in touch with one another sharing skills, and resources, and people, and letters.⁴ Indeed, I should have a sense that if I turn up at any church I will be brought in and the people there will address me as their brother. This is the very heart of what *catholicism*—as a fact about the Christian gathering that we confess in the creed—means. It was this catholicism, that every disciple of Jesus is a sister or brother, that underpinned the collection for the famine in Syria that we hear about in 2 Corinthians. Likewise, it underpins the movements of Paul around the Mediterranean, the great motif of the latter part of the Acts of the Apostles. Without this sense of network, we would not have four gospels accepted as canonical in every one of the churches. So, if another follower of Jesus is a sister or brother, just from outside our local group, to what extent can that person be a stranger? That person may on arrival be unknown by name, but that is very different from that sister or brother being an alien, an outsider, an “other.”

Sadly, between the *catholicism* so many Christians confess and the actual networks of churches we have the phenomenon of division. We have networks of churches, denominations, that do not see communion as extending to other networks and who express their identity by breaking communion, *excommunicating* each other. And on the other hand we have endeavors to preserve communion—activities like the ministry of the patriarchs, the Petrine ministry, the Synod of Bishops, and the Lambeth Conference—which try to ensure that the tendency of human beings to

3. O’Loughlin 2010, 105–12.

4. Thompson 1998.

split off into factions is counteracted. We also have endeavors like the World Council of Churches, whose work is to patch up communion this way and that between these networks (its agenda is found in its one-word motto, *oikoumene*), and its various formal meetings to try to resolve differences on doctrine. Likewise, at the local level we have conflicting evidence. On the one hand, we have the tendency to identify difference as a betrayal of the gospel, and so a different group must be named and rejected. And there are also those who believe and feel that they can no longer associate with others because of what they preach or do, and so want to form a fresh distinct community. On the other hand, however, the local level also sees people forging bonds between groups and working across their differences in the name of the gospel. It is worth examining these two tendencies—toward ecumenism and toward sectarianism—in greater detail, for the fact that these phenomena exist side by side is of great importance for intercommunion.

For most Christians the history of division is very simple. There was the faith “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) and proclaimed by the apostles, who “devoted themselves to . . . teaching and fellowship” (Acts 2:42), and all was well within the church. Then corruption set in, greed and false teaching caused division, and this destruction had to be rejected. Thus difference was always a “tearing” (*schisma*) of something that was one and whole, while a “sect” (*haeresis*) was something that is in opposition to the rest. But built into both concepts is not only a romantic view of origins but an assumption that Christian faith is a fixed body of structured and consistent doctrine that was downloaded by the apostles (who, incidentally, were also a highly organized and harmonious group operating at the same time such that each statement of Paul fitted with each of the evangelists). This myth of original consistency and unity is emotionally attractive, seems to be logically consistent with the notion that there is an authoritative Christian doctrine, and it is one that is relatively easy to preach. In short, there was God-given unity at the alpha-point and subsequently human-made division—and unity is the challenge of those who have departed, who must now recognize their failures in thoughts or deeds and return to the fold.

But the history of the Christian movement is rather more complex. A good place to start is with Paul writing to the Corinthians urging them to accept the differences between hands and feet while knowing that every body has many parts—and it is when all the parts work together that

there is the one body of the Christ (1 Cor 12). For Paul, unity and consistency are not a past reality but a potential within us that we must seek to bring to perfection. There are divisions, differences, but these must be overcome so that the glory of the Christ will be revealed. Unity, all working together with the harmony and accord of foot, hand, and eye within the healthy body of the skilled worker, is a future reality, an Omega-point, toward which we travel with the Spirit's guidance. This theological vision of unity as a destination fits with everything we see from the historical study of Christian origins, for we find anything but the consistency and organization that is implicit in the alpha-point model. The followers of Jesus came from different sects within Judaism at a time when the temple was still the great religious focus. They were joined by others with a variety of religious and cultural backgrounds, and Paul himself was continually adapting his own teaching as he met new situations. There were many preachers and many customs, and our canonical gospels come not only from a time when the Christian movement had to rethink its belief in the aftermath of the destruction of the temple but they present us with a variety of theologies. All the extant documents together from the first century and a half (whether they made it into the collection we call the New Testament or not) do not witness to all the diversity of practice and doctrine that existed.⁵ It is little wonder that there have been so many competing visions all claiming "Paul," "the gospels," or "the tradition" as their justification. Unity is a desire, and we will only have it in its fullness at the heavenly banquet, toward which we must strive. Being in communion, living and working with every sister and brother, must be as much part of the moral agenda of each Christian as honesty and working for justice. We have a vision in the Christ, and we must work to realize it in his body that we are.

Unity as Omega, and Action Now

If we envision the unity of the body as part of the Omega toward which we journey, what does that demand as activity from me at next Sunday's gathering? If I should have a stable moral intention, a habit, that I will seek and work toward the unity of the whole body of the Christ, the

5. For a good example of this diversity, because it touched their practices when celebrating the Eucharist, see O'Loughlin 2018.

oikoumene, then I should, in love, presume that every other brother or sister has the same intention. Put negatively, I should give everyone the benefit of the doubt. I do this already with those who are baptized Catholics and stand around me. I know that if I were to examine them as to their doctrine, much less their doctrine regarding the eucharist, I would get an astonishing range of answers, yet we seek to act together. I know that likewise many of those around me would be surprised if they asked me similar questions, yet they would not dream of excluding me. This diversity of understandings is, indeed, already acknowledged in the liturgy by the fact that we have a homily—there is always room for growth in Christian understanding.

Now I see someone in the eucharistic gathering who is also a follower of Christ but not a member of the Catholic Church and my first thought must not be that this is a stranger or an alien, an interloper, but a sister or a brother. This is a real human being, beloved of the Father, not an embodiment of some defective theology. And, as such, I must hope that person is also moving toward the Omega-point. Presuming that, I must offer to share all I have with that person. If that person does not see him or herself on that path toward the goal of unity for which John presents the Lord praying (John 17:22), then that person can choose not to eat and drink with me—that is the individual’s choice. But I must behave with the Omega-point as my goal and guide to action. And, given that this person has chosen to stand among us in our eucharistic action, I should be saddened if she or he then refused to eat and drink, for that now is a statement that building the links, the bonds, the sinews of the body of the Lord is not a priority. Yet being the body of the Lord is what we are deep down, and it is this reality that must be constantly growing and developing.

The situation presented by Anke de Bernardinis to Pope Francis in 2015 is a case in point. She said she had been “living happily” with her husband “for many years, sharing joys and sorrows,” and so she found it “quite painful to be divided in the faith and to be unable to take part together in the Lord’s Supper.”⁶ She has expressed the desire to build bonds. The bonds of marriage are a paradigm for those of the church and all these bonds form part of the web that is the *mysterion* that will only become complete

6. See ch. 1 above.

and fully visible at the Omega-point.⁷ I must presume here someone working toward that final goal of the Christ being all and in all (Col 3:11), and as such I must welcome her to the table fully as befits a sister. Not to do so would assume that I and my group, unlike her, had already reached the Omega-point—and that plainly is not the case for we still need to celebrate the liturgy of those still on the way to the eschaton.

What happens when I find myself among another group of Christians—for example, in a Methodist church—where I know that there would be little interest in many of the ideas about the papacy that Catholics hold dear and where there would not be an elaborate theology of presbyteral ministry in terms of sacerdotal powers? Rather than try to answer this abstractly I shall work my way through an actual situation that occurred for me about twenty years ago. My friends' baby boy was going to be baptized, and I was invited and was delighted to attend: rejoicing at a baptism is a basic Christian instinct and joining in the party at a baptism is a significant way of expressing our common joy at receiving adoption as children of God.⁸ While I might skip a friend's housewarming if I had to go somewhere to give a lecture, I have always placed baptism alongside weddings and funerals as times "to be there"—and as a Christian theologian I see putting a baptism on a par with a wedding as a little aspect of my own witness. When I heard that the minister was going to have the baptism as part of the regular Sunday liturgy, I was further pleased as it showed that baptism was not being viewed as an individualist affair but as being welcomed into a church. On arrival, I discovered that that church's regular Sunday liturgy was a eucharist, and the presider explained at the beginning that while some visitors might not link together baptism and the eucharist, the connections were intimate. This, celebrating the eucharist, was the appropriate way for Christians to thank God for the gifts of children and of faith. Then she pointed out that baptism is the first step in initiation and the eucharist is the fullness of entering the church, that baptism is not a private family matter but an event of the church, and that the church is never more the church than when it celebrates the eucharist. She gave that community a fulsome rendering of our common Christian theology in a few user-friendly sentences. About that time there was a rather arid dispute when a Catholic bishop

7. See Eph 5:32.

8. See Gal 4:5.

objected to a Catholic politician who had taken communion in an Anglican liturgy, and at almost the same time surprise in the media when a Catholic priest very publicly rebuked a non-Catholic politician who went to communion with his Catholic wife. So I thought I should work through my options as I sat there in that Methodist church. Could I have refused to attend the baptism? No, because Christians should rejoice with their fellow disciples on such an occasion. Should they have “warned” everyone that it would be a eucharist, lest someone might not want to take part? No, because, first, every church is free to celebrate a baptism as it wishes; second, it is good liturgical practice to have a baptism at the regular Sunday eucharist, and indeed this is a growing together toward the unity for which the Lord prayed; and third, such a warning could be seen as encouraging division: everyone should act in a way that promotes the deepest bonds within the church giving fellow Christians the benefit of the doubt that they too would act in that way. So, if I had been minded to, was I free to choose not to eat and drink at this liturgy? In terms of raw possibilities I was, of course, free: I could walk out, I could just sit there and not move. But this is the same sort of freedom that would declare that I could tell a friend in need that I would not help. Responsible human freedom involves knowing that I can both damage and build, and it continuously chooses that which helps, builds, and gives light. Love and vocation limit my choices in that I must choose that which builds up the body of the Lord and express those links right now. While no one took notice that I did eat and drink, my friends would have noticed if I had not done so—and that act would have been a failure to testify to the journey upon which we are embarked of building bit by bit now the one, holy, catholic church. Therefore, the demands of building unity meant that, there and then, I had to eat and drink! And this moral responsibility is distinct from the human obligation to act with good manners when I am a guest at a meal.

A Catholic bishop once told me that it was “easy to be an ecumenist when sitting in the theologian’s study,” but very difficult when you were out working with people. I rather annoyed him when I said I thought it was the exact opposite. Sitting in the study one deals with abstract situations and with Catholic doctrine as a body of ideas, and one can list the difficulties of each position and add nuance upon nuance. In a community setting it is a matter of doing what is right because here you, as a real person, meet others, and it is the actual journey of faith, real life, we are

making as distinct from just thinking of the journey. In the parish I must actually build up links toward unity rather than simply imagine them. Consequently, in actual life, I am never free to confess in the creed that I believe in the church's unity and then act in such a manner that one more little bond that could be established is not established. I am never free to declare I believe in the Catholic Church and commit an action that casts doubt on a sister's or brother's good faith that they too want to build the church. If I recite the creed and act differently, then I act inauthentically; I contradict my words with my deeds.

An Irony of Fraternal Love

Thus far in this chapter we have reflected on the fact that no Christian is ever a stranger to another, but that despite lots of deep differences in the way we do things and understand discipleship we are siblings on a journey—and we will all only be fully one in the Christ at the end. But, if we are brothers and sisters, is there not a much simpler way of approaching practice based on the nature of fraternal love?

The churches from the very beginning thought of themselves as not simply gatherings of people but as people who, through Jesus, were given a new relationship to their Father in heaven and to one another as sisters and brothers. We see this radically new way of thinking of one another at the end of 1 Thessalonians when Paul concludes with “Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss” (5:26) and elsewhere when he greets Phoebe, the deaconess at Cenchreae, as “our sister” (Rom 16:1). This language has survived in the liturgy of most churches (e.g., *Orate fratres*, pray, sisters and brothers) and as a specialist terminology within religious orders, but we should never forget that we are expected to behave within the church as among those with whom we are intimately connected. Moreover, the community of Christians is not simply a club—people with a common interest and purpose—but a group with a new vision of how we should relate to one another.

For an early teacher named John, from whose pen we have several early letters, this relationship of brotherhood and sisterhood with one another is a sacramental event:

Whoever says, “I am in the light,” while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such

a person there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness. (1 John 2:9-11)

and

Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4:20-21)

The bonds of being siblings in the Lord is not simply a fact, but through loving my sister and brother visible beside me in the church I express my love for God. The sister or brother is there as a reality and our mutual love builds the kingdom now, but they are also a sacramental reality and through the mutual love we encounter the presence of God.⁹ Loving one’s siblings is a way of being in connection with God, far more than a moral rule for a happy society on the basis of “do as you would be done to.” Appreciating that behaving toward other disciples as if they are brothers and sisters becomes one of the challenges of accepting the gospel. From this perspective much of the preaching in the gospels has to be understood as calling the early Christian audience to become aware of this relationship with their fellow Christians. In short, I must want the best for my brother and sister, appreciating that this new way of loving is the beginning of the reign of God.

The early communities found this call for brotherly love just as difficult as we do—hence the constant repetition of the need to see others in this way—but they did have one advantage. To them the language was new and shocking and so they were conscious of it as an aspect of the demands of the Christian lifestyle in a way that we are not. But now let us turn our attention to the one place—outside of full-time religious communities—where we encounter this language: the liturgy. There Christians will confess to “you my brothers and sisters,” they will be asked to pray as sisters

9. This is, of course, a fundamental basis of the divine presence within the eucharistic assembly, but it would be a distraction from my argument to pursue this point here.

and brothers of the presider, they will pray at funerals for a brother or sister who has died, and there will be references here and there in homilies to our all being siblings in the Lord. For most people, most of the time, these references go by wholly unnoticed and are little more than the jargon of religion. But if liturgy is a serious business, as Catholics claim, then why do we refer to one another in this way? The most obvious answer is that this is a hangover from the early churches and is now little more than an anachronism that serves as a cultural distinguishing mark. The liturgy is full of these, as witness the vestments worn by presiders which are little more than a formalized vestige of higher-status Roman gentlemen in late antiquity,¹⁰ and such language is simply there: it *means* nothing. As an explanation of the presence of this language this approach is solid, but there is much more going on in our liturgy than simply being a repository for nostalgic items from our past.

The liturgy sets up an alternative vision of living to that which we see around us in the everyday world.¹¹ It should model the lifestyle to which we as disciples aspire to live, and it should provide us with a physical glimpse of the world toward which we are on pilgrimage. We live in one world, but we discover other worlds in our imagination. Humans experience a world of meaningless strife, but in the story of Cain and Abel (Gen 4) we imagine another and remind ourselves that fratricide is the antithesis of God's plan. We live forgetting our neighbor, but in a story like that of the good Samaritan (Luke 10) we envisage another way of interacting with one another. We seek to be disciples and in the fraternal language of the liturgy we behave for a little while in a different way and

10. It was at this time that the eucharistic meal ceased being an evening event, a dinner, and became a breakfast given for clients. See Leonhard 2014.

11. Many object to seeing and treating others as brothers and sisters as specifically Christian, pointing out that *fraternité* was an Enlightenment value and that students join mutual support groups in colleges called fraternities and sororities. First, however, we should note that the sole ancient roots for this value of fraternity lie in the *fraternité* that was manifested in the liturgy and the monastic life; second, college groups are by their nature exclusive, whereas the problem for individual Christians in antiquity was that these links cut through the stratified society and were radically open: a slave whom you had never met could address you with a term of intimate equality as "brother"; and, last, Christians do not see these relationships as simply a functional interpersonal ethic but reflect an ontological reality in the process of coming to be, recognized now in faith.

imagine the world as we believe it should be. Just as love for a brother is sacramental of loving God, so the liturgy's use of this language is sacramental of Christian hope. But if this is the case, does it not pose a problem for anyone who would refuse to allow a sister or brother to share in the meal? If I call you a sister, I am obligating myself to behave in certain ways? Then, since I will act as a brother in every other way, I must be willing to act in a specific way at the eucharist and so share fully with you *all* that is on the table.

Moreover, if the liturgy is to remind us what should be and what will be—as in the way we call each other brothers and sisters—then must I not now make you fully my brother and sister by sharing my food and drink with you? Similarly, if I am present at another liturgy, one not organized by Catholics and presided over by someone who is a Catholic, must I not still act as a brother and sister and help us all to glimpse the world of fraternal unity for which the Lord prays?

We are faced with a choice. One option is to see the liturgy as a provisioning system organized by the group for the support of the individuals that make up the group. As such, the church is a cooperative. These are excellent organizations, and Christians should support any system that makes life easier for our fellow humans. But if the church is not more than this, we should abandon the trappings of family language as no more than an illusion that just adds to the level of deceit and deception in the world. We should get rid of all the family language such as “brother” and “sister” and referring to “our Father” in heaven. In such an organization we could have clear rules about belonging, here and now, post them on the notice board outside the building in which we assemble, and all will be well.

The other option is to see all this family language as part of the revelation to which we bear witness, which we grasp now in part but look forward to in its fullness. This partial, almost momentary, grasping of the world the Father intends is what we are engaged in when we assemble. The liturgy exists in the overlap between our everyday world and the world of the kingdom and within it a different logic of anticipatory imagination applies. Here each person is a sister or a brother and we gather with Jesus our brother who is also Lord and we address our Father as his adopted children. Here no one can be excluded as less a brother or sister without shattering the very nature of our assembly. Here no one can act in a way that disrupts the image of the family without undermining the very reason we are assembled as a liturgical community.

This argument is an argument from irony—if you are doing this, then you cannot behave in any other way than this—and it has a far better theological pedigree than many contemporary theologians recognize. My favorite example of the approach was that used by Luke in reference to prayer, and it is very apposite here.

“What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:11-13).

If fellow Christians asked us to share with them our earthly skills or possessions, we would not hesitate to see this as a moral imperative. So if we are sharing our sacramental riches as part of our common activity of bringing about the Father’s kingdom, for whose coming we pray daily, then could we be justified in refusing full participation to a Christian sister or brother? And if I have prayed with others to *our* Father in heaven, and acknowledged myself as a brother when so addressed by you, can I refuse to share at the Christian family table without contradicting in action the very basis for my being there?

Respicere Finem: Look toward the End

We should recall where we began this chapter with the world described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. We profess that we are “one in the Anointed One,” but we also know that we are fractured people with fractious tendencies living in a fractured world where fractiousness and division hold only too much sway. However, we do not see this situation as either part of the nature of the universe (as, for example, Social Darwinians do) nor an inevitability consequent of a “fall” (as indeed do some Christians who imagine the universe through Hobbes’s image that life is “brutish, nasty, and short” and for whom salvation is a wholly other worldly event unconnected with our activity now). So we must acknowledge problems and then move toward a better existence that will more adequately reflect the Father’s will.

From within this cosmic vocation we can derive two liturgical principles affecting what we do next Sunday:

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Index of Scripture

Genesis		42:3	123
1	52	42:10	121
1:24-30	62	55:1	107
4	43	55:1-2	51
4:2-5	48		
11	134	Matthew	
18	51	7:6	67
18:1-16	27	8:11	28, 99, 107, 157
		12:10-12	107
Exodus		12:20	123
12	50	15:26-27	67
		18:12-14	107
Leviticus		18:20	118
11:2-23	61	18:22	110
		20:26-27	106
Deuteronomy		25:37	96
8:10	138	26:26	139
14:3-20	62	26:44	62
		28:19	71
Psalms			
23:5	99	Mark	
43:4	147	1:5	95
80:17	86	7:23-40	66
149:1	121	7:27-28	67
		11:25	118
Proverbs		14:3	109
18:18	150	14:41	62
		15:38	147
Sirach		16:14	124
31:12-33:13	51		
		Luke	
Isaiah		2:14	81
25:6	51	4:18-19	119

10	43
10:8	51
11:11-13	45
13:29	151, 157
14:7-11	26
15:2	63, 107
15:8-10	107
15:11-24	107-8
15:11-32	28
19:1-10	107
19:7	26
20:20	62
22:19	114, 116, 138
22:20	61
22:34	62
22:61	62
24	64
24:13-25	119
24:35	124
24:41-43	123-24

John

1:1-4	103-4
1:14	96, 104
2	23
3:5	71
4:7-42	107
4:20-24	96
4:23-24	142
6	86
6:35	97
7:53-8:11	107, 118-19
14:17	56
15:13	116
16:13	57
17:11	xii, 59
17:22	38
20:19	118
20:26	118
20:31	116
21:4	118
21:9-15	124

21:17	62
Acts	
1:2	61
1:8	69
1:9	65
2:1-12	132
2:11	134
2:14-40	64
2:42	36
5:5	65
5:10	65
7:55	65
9:31-11:18	60
9:43	61
10-11	68-69
10:1-9	61
10:2	69
10:3-7	65
10:4	61
10:6	61
10:10-16	65
10:12	62
10:14	60, 67
10:17	62
10:19	66
10:22	65
10:23	62
10:28	60, 63, 65
10:30-32	64-65
10:33	63
10:34-43	64
10:35	64
10:40	117
10:41	64
10:44	66
10:44-45	64
10:47	66
10:48	64
11:1	64
11:3	63-64, 66-67
11:4	66

11:5-10 64-65
 11:5-17 66
 11:9 64
 11:12 63-64, 66
 11:13-14 65
 11:15 66
 11:17-18 66
 13:47 69
 19:12 65

Romans

1:23 62
 5:5 47
 6:3-5 71
 8:26 57
 14:1-6 105
 16:1 41

1 Corinthians

6:11 71
 10-11 105
 10:1-2 71
 10:7 51
 10:17 99
 10:27 27
 11 45
 11:17 30
 11:23 28, 116
 11:24-25 116
 11:26 139
 11:27 30
 11:29 95-96
 12 37
 12:13 71
 13 97
 13:12-13 19
 15:13 116

Galatians

3:27 71, 80
 3:27-28 71

4:6 155

Ephesians

1:10 145
 4:5 72, 81
 5:14 71
 5:32 39

Philippians

3:2 67
 3:14 105
 3:21 118

Colossians

2:12 71, 80, 116
 3:11 39

1 Thessalonians

5:26 41

2 Timothy

2:8 116

Titus

3:5 71

Jude

3 36

1 Peter

2:5 96
 3:20-21 71

1 John

2:9-11 42
 4:20-21 42

Revelation

5:9 121, 151
 14:3 121
 22:15 67

Index of Subjects

- Abraham, 27, 29, 51
Adams, M. M., 128
Aesop, 109
Alberigo, J., 93
altars, 100
Ambrose, 134
analogical imagination, 122
Anglicans, x, 3, 6, 7, 13, 40
anthropology of meals, 21–32, 49, 50
anticipatory imagination, 43
apologetics, xii
Apostolicae curae, 143, 150. *See also*
 orders, validity of
Arafat, Y., xii
ARCIC, 3, 15
Aristotle, 128
Arkley, Herts, x, xiii
Armenians, 3
Arnault, A., 30, 90
Athenagoras I, xi
Augustine, 59, 70, 93, 97, 107, 134,
 135

Ball, J., xiii
banquets, xii, 51, 55
baptism, xiii, 5, 7, 9, 17, 38–39, 60,
 71–83, 134, 155
Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry, 3, 9, 55,
 71, 130
Baptists, 14
Barclay, J. M. G., 149

Bates, J. B., 82
Bauer, W., 5
Benedict XVI. *See* Ratzinger, J.
Berengarius of Tours, 127, 135
Berger, T., 149
Bible, the, 9–10
Bithynia, 56
Blessed Sacrament, 90–91
Boethius, 49, 128
Bokser, B. M., 51, 138
Bolger, J., x
Book of Common Prayer, 148
Boyle, L. E., 78
Bradshaw, P., 15
Brown, J., 10
building unity, 40

Caesarea, 63
Calvin, J., 144
Cana, 23
Canterbury, Archbishop of, 7
Cassian. *See* John Cassian
Cassidy, J., x, xiii, 2
Catholic Social Teaching, 11
Chadwick, H., 135
character, sacramental, 76–78
Charsley, S. R., 50
Christmas pudding, 50
Christoffersen, H., x
church, the, 3, 13, 17, 35, 37–38, 46,
 126

- churches learning from one another, 13
- Church Unity Week, xi
- Clayton, P. B., 106
- Code of Canon Law (Latin), 14, 90, 125, 127–30, 136, 154
- Communion, infrequent, 88–90
- communitas*, 55, 119
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 15
- Connerton, P., 96
- consubstantiation, 129, 131
- cooking, 22
- Coptic Church, 3
- Corpus Christi, feast, 86, 88
- Countess of Huntington Connection, x
- covenant, 11
- creatio ex nihilo*, 52
- creation, 48, 149
- Dallmann, H., x
- de Bernardinis, A., 15–16, 18, 38, 57, 72, 127, 139, 142, 154
- Decian persecution, 85
- Denzinger, H. J., 77, 89, 93, 125
- development of doctrine, 8
- de Vooght, P., 127
- Didache*, the, 52, 57, 61, 67–68, 82, 97, 116, 138
- Diederich, E. A., 117
- Dillon, R. J., 60
- discipleship, 4, 8, 11, 17–18, 146
- dissent, 148
- diversity, 148–49
- divine acceptance, 103–11
- doctrine, 125–40
- Douglas, M., 25
- Draper, J. A., 67
- drinking, 22
- Easter, 115–24, 134
- Easter Duty, 89
- Easter people, 115–24
- Easter Vigil, 122
- eating, 22
- ecumenical movement, xi
- ecumenism, xiii, 7–8, 14, 40, 72
- Edmonson, S., 82
- Edward VII, 27
- Ely, J. W., 10
- Emmaus, 64, 119
- Englund Nash, A., 77, 89, 93, 125, 135
- Enlightenment, the, 43
- entelecheia*, 128
- ephodion*, 92
- eschaton, the, xii, 5, 16–17, 37–39, 46, 110, 156
- Essenes, 52
- eucharist as medicine, 93–95
- Eucharistic Prayer I, 53
- Eucharistic Prayer III, 52–53
- Eusebius of Caesarea, 116
- faith, 127
- family, the, 17–18
- Farewell, J., 82
- Fastiggi, R., 77, 89, 93, 125, 135
- fasting, 86–87, 93
- festivals, 147
- fictive family, 33–57, 155
- finality, 17
- First Communion, 134–35, 151
- Flannery, A., 72
- food, 21–22, 96–98, 100–101, 122, 155–56
- food, sharing, 23, 49, 51, 78, 85, 99, 110
- Francis, pope, ix, xiii, 1, 15, 16, 18, 38, 57, 72, 75, 80–81, 85, 95, 98, 127, 132, 139–41, 146, 154–55
- Franciscans, 13
- Franklin, R. W., 143
- fraternal love, 41–43

- fraternité*, 43
 Freestone, W. H., 93
 friendship, 26–27, 43
 fundamentalism, 68

 gathered at table, 47
General Instruction on the Roman Missal, 117
 Gentile-Christians, 5, 60
 gift, 13, 149
 giving thanks, 48
 God, dependence upon, 48, 52
 Goody, J., 23
Gospel according to the Hebrews, 115, 124
 grammar of meals, 21–32, 155–56
 Gregorian Masses, 135
 Gregory the Great, St., 135

 Haig, D., 106
 hell, 28
 Hobbes, T., 45
 hocus pocus, 31
 Homan, M. M., 51
 hospitality, 26–27, 30, 32
 human, definition of, 49
 human-sized gatherings, 34
 humility, 26
 Hus, J., 127
 hydration, 21
hypokeimenon, 128
hypostasis, 128

 ideology, 127–31
 incarnation, 103–11
 inclusion, 148–49
 institution narrative, 86, 116, 139
 intercommunion and moral action, 40
 Isaac, 29
 Jacob, 29

 Jansenism, 30
 Jennings, T., 153
 Jerusalem, 16, 60, 68, 88
 Jewett, R., 105
 Jewish-Christians, 5, 60, 64, 67
 John Cassian, 93
 John, H. J., 134
 Jones, M., 23
 Joppa, 62–63
 Jordan, D. P., 10
 Josephus, 51

 Kenrick, F. P., 11
 kingdom of God, 17, 19, 104
 Knox, R., 30
 Küng, H., 141
 Kursawa, W., 93
 Kuttner, S., 130

 Lambeth Conference, 35
 language, religious, 47, 99, 101
 LaPorte, J., 138
 Last Supper, 16, 31, 115–16, 151
 Lateran Council, the Fourth, 89
 learning, mutual ecclesial, xi
 lectionaries, 107
 Leonardo da Vinci, 151
 Leonhard, C., 43
 Leuven, x, xiii
 Lima Report. See *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry*
 Limbo, 72
 Lindbeck, G., 14
 Liturgical Movement, the, 91
 liturgical reform, 143–48
 Liturgy of the Hours, 121
 Lord's Prayer, the, 57
 Luke, evangelist, 60, 62, 64–68, 69
 Luther, M., 15
 Lutheran Church, Rome, ix, 15
 Lutherans, 3
 Lutherjahr, 15

- Lysaght, P., 134
- Macy, G., 128
- marriage, as sacrament, 73
- Marshall, M., 51
- Mass-and-Communion, 31
- Mass stipends, 134–35
- McGowan, A., 47, 67
- meals, xii, 29–30, 32, 48, 50, 64, 67, 69, 86, 123–24, 155–56. *See also* anthropology of meals
- Mediator Dei*, 137
- memory, 10, 96, 115
- metanoia*, 11
- Methodists, 39–40
- Meyers, R. A., 82
- ministry, 9
- missal of 1570, 87, 93–94
- missal of 1962, 93
- missal of 1969, 143
- missal of 2011, 15
- mission, 59–70
- monotheism, 103
- Month's Mind, 135
- Montinari, M., 33
- Mount of Olives, xi
- Murphy, J. H., 94–95
- mystery, 17, 31, 38, 60, 109, 117–18, 121, 136, 144, 154. *See also* paschal mystery
- Nashotah House, Wisconsin, x
- New College, Oxford, 21, 24
- New Jerusalem, 16
- Newman, J. H., 17, 97
- new song, the, 121, 123
- Nicaea, Council of, 92
- Nicaea, creed of, 5, 137
- Nichols, B., x, xiii
- Ninety-Five Theses, 15
- non-[. . .], 4
- non-baptized, 81–83
- Norwood, D. W., 3
- nostalgia in ritual, 145
- Nottingham, ix
- nourishment, 21–22. *See also* food
- O'Loughlin, T., 5, 9, 35, 37, 50–52, 63–64, 68, 72, 93, 98–99, 107, 115, 118–19, 123, 133, 135, 139, 145
- One Bread One Body*, 15, 75, 154
- Onesimus, 10
- operationes ad extra*, 117
- orders, validity of, 6–7, 143, 150
- original sin, 72
- Orthodox churches, xi–xii, 3, 5–7, 126, 139
- otherness, 28, 35
- ousia*, 128
- Parker, D. C., 145
- parties, as events, 23
- paschal mystery, 117–18
- Passover, 50
- pastoral responsibility, 83
- Paul of Tarsus, St., 10, 18, 37, 131, 138
- Paul VI, pope, xi
- people of God, 4, 49, 80, 146
- perichoresis*, 117
- Pericope de adultera*, 107, 118–19
- Peter, St., 60–66, 68–69
- Petrine ministry, 35
- Phillips, L. E., 82
- Philo, 52
- pilgrim church, xi, 13, 41, 85–101, 146
- Pius X, pope, 145
- Pius XII, pope, 137
- Pliny the Younger, 56
- Plutarch, 49
- post-resurrection consciousness, 116
- potentia*, 75–76
- Prayer of the Faithful, 133

- Presbyterianism, 6
 presbyters, shortage of candidates, 34
 priesthood, 9
 prohibiting communion, 1–2

 Qumran, 10, 52

 Rabin, Y., xii
 Raj, A. S., 149
 rationality, 49
 Ratzinger, J., 7, 15, 31, 48
 Reformation, 31, 71, 91–92, 126,
 129–30, 139
 Renaissance, 30
 resurrection, 115–24
 revelation, 10
 RCIA, 73, 80, 134
 Roermond, 153
 Rome, 10
 Rossa, D., x
 Rublev, A., 27
 rubrics, 1
 Rumsey, P., x, xiii

 Sabbath-eve meal, 51
 sacraments, 14, 17, 31, 72, 73
 sacrifice, 127–28
 salvation *post mortem*, 75
 Schell, D., 82
 schism, 7, 36
 scholasticism, 16, 140
 Schwartz, B., 115
 Scotists, 128
 scripture, 9–10
 sectarianism, 13, 120
sensus ecclesiae, xii
 Seville Cathedral, 105
 sexual continence, 87
 Shakespeare, W., 23
 sharing at table. *See* table, tables
 sharing meals. *See* meals
 slavery, 10–11, 43

 Smit, P.-B., 51, 105
 Smith, D. E., 48, 63
 Smith, J. Z., 5, 145
 Societas Liturgica, x, xiii
 spiritual competition, 13
 St. Gregory of Nyssa Church, San
 Francisco, 82–83
 stipends for Masses, 134–35
 substance, 128, 139
 Sunday lunch, 24
 superstition, 31
 Synod of Bishops, 35

 tabernacle, 104, 150
 table, tables, 26, 29, 33, 39, 44, 110,
 120, 147–49, 156
 Taft, R., 86
 Tanner, K., 82
 Temple, the Second, 28, 51, 88
 Thanksgiving (festival), 24
 Therapeutae, 52
 Thomas Aquinas, St., 76, 77–79, 93,
 104, 109, 128
 Thomists, 127–28, 134
 Thompson, M. B., 35
 Torah, 62–63, 67
 Tracy, D., 122
 tradition, 9
 transubstantiation, 125, 128–29, 131,
 139
 Trebilco, P., 63
 Trent, Council of, 125–26, 131, 134,
 137
 Trinity, icon of, 27

 Ukrainian Church, 3
 Uniate churches, 3
 Uniformity, Act of, 148
 United Church of Canada, x
 unity of Christians, 37
 unity of faith, 4

- validity of orders. *See* orders, validity of
- van Aefferden, Lady, 153
- van de Sandt, H., 82
- van Gorkum, Colonel, 153
- Vatican, the, 15, 72
- Vatican II, council, xi, 12, 89, 95, 97, 117, 130, 133, 143, 145, 157
- viaticum, 16–17, 85, 89, 92, 98, 155
- Visser, M., 25
- Vogel, C., 98
- Walsh, B., x
- Wandel, L. P., 90
- Ware, K., 3, 6
- Way, The, 4–5, 67, 79
- weddings, 50
- Westerholt, x
- Westminster Abbey, 7
- Whatley, R., 136
- Williams, R., 7
- Wilson, A., 131
- Wolter, M., 50, 62, 147
- works' righteousness, 31
- World Council of Churches, 3, 9, 36
- xenodochium*, 27
- Zacchaeus, 26