

Eucharist:

The Sacrament of Reconciliation and Justice

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I. The Centrality of Eucharist in the Life of Christian Churches

All Christian churches, diverse as they are in terms of culture, language, liturgical expression and political background, emphasise the significance of the Eucharist whether they reflect on liturgical and ecclesial life, or examine the Church in its charismatic and institutional aspects, its mission in the world and the social sphere, and its relationship with other churches.¹

The eucharistic assembly is at the heart of ecclesiology of communion: The Church is the communion of believers with other believers, God and creation in the Body of Christ; a communion actualised through the power of the Holy Spirit. By virtue of their faith and baptism, the believers are members of this Body, whose fullness is expressed in the eucharistic celebration of the local church.

The Church as communion of churches is revealed in the eucharistic assembly, and its structure is fulfilled in it. Ministry is meaningless apart from the eucharistic assembly. All church ministries and institutions find their meaning in the eucharistic context.

The Church of God is a communion in all its aspects. Nothing in ecclesial life and structure can escape communion. The Church is a communion of grace, life, hope and mission. Every facet of this communion is relational. The identity of the Church itself is relational, since it can be conceived only in relation to God and to a certain locality.²

II. Eucharist as the Sacrament of Unity and Reconciliation with God, Men and Creation

The Eucharist as experienced in the Church is the revelation of the Kingdom of God in the present and at the same time a movement towards the Heavenly Kingdom. It is a gift of God that nourishes the life of the Church. This gift – as the name of the Eucharist itself implies – is received in thanksgiving. The Eucharist is the continuing revelation of the mystery of Godself, which is Communion (three distinct persons in one nature). The entering of men and women into the divine communion that the gospel proclaims is made real in the eucharistic meal.

In the ecclesial event of the Eucharist the bread and wine along with the community itself are offered to God the Father. The Holy Spirit is invoked for both the consecration of the gifts and



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the realisation of the unity of the community. God's response to the *epiclesis* (the invocation) is the transformation of the elements and lives of the partakers of the Body of Christ through the Spirit of the resurrection. His response is the actualization of communion of the community and the whole creation with the Triune God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.³

In the New Testament the theme of the Body (Rom. 12:3-6, 1Cor. 12:4-27) is extensively used to indicate the organic union and the solidarity of the community. The believers become the one and single Body of Christ (1 Cor. 10: 14-17) that is the Church. The internal unity of the members comes from the fact that they are all (each one in their uniqueness and singularity) gathered into the one and indivisible Body of Christ in whom all kinds of division and injustice are transcended (Gal. 3:28), as long as the members have forgiven one another before offering their prayers to God (Matt. 5:23-26).⁴

The believers are introduced by the Holy Spirit into communion with the body of the risen Christ and at the same time with other believers, who are members of the same body no matter what their ethnic, social and economic background may be. The Church finds its full reality only in the eucharistic mystery, where men and women that the Spirit brings into existence are reconciled in the body of the Lord. In that sense the Eucharist makes the Church, it builds up the community of Christ, the body in which all humanity is reconciled.⁵



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III. Eucharistic Theology contradicting with everyday Life and Experience

This is what the Church believes and teaches. This is the faith proclaimed in the world, but is it really what the Church experiences? Is it something we know in our everyday lives? Does the justice and peace that we taste in the eucharistic gathering extend into our social relationships? Do we bear the wounds of our world in the Body of Christ and do our celebrations promise the healing of the inequalities and violence that injure human dignity? Having received the gift of consecrated bread and wine do we demonstrate a respect for the sanctity of creation? Each day we experience a tragic absurdity, the inconsistency between our theology and actions. We constantly pray, ‘Thy kingdom come,’ yet do we actively participate in the ongoing transformation of human life and the renewal of creation?⁶

The Church has always emphasized three inseparable sacramental ways of knowing and communicating God: proclamation of the gospel, participation in the eucharistic feast, active compassion and care for the poor and in need. Whenever one of those constitutive aspects of Church life is not adequately emphasized, the life and witness of the Church suffers.⁷ Moreover, the mistreatment and rape of nature that totally denies the sanctity of the natural environment and disregards how human beings are part of creation, constitutes another symptom of our spiritual illness.⁸

For the Church to remain faithful to its mission in the world, it has to mirror the communion of persons that exists in the Triune God⁹ and witness to the world concerning the

transformation experienced in the Eucharist. As the priests imitate the liturgical gestures of Christ when they offer the Eucharist on behalf of the whole community, we have to imitate his life and social action.

IV. Demonstrating the Unity experienced in the Eucharist in contemporary Society

This means that as long as we live in time and space as historical beings, we have to actively participate in the humanisation process.¹⁰ Our mission in the world is to stand on the side of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised, and at the same time to protect and preserve creation. Struggle for human rights, social justice, peaceful co-existence and integrity of creation is a demand, as well as a sign of the authentic worship of God.

This sending out of each Christian to the contemporary society, often called “the liturgy after liturgy”,¹¹ is not limited only to the proclamation of just peace in the world. On the contrary, it is the clear declaration that the Church cannot be tolerant to any kind of injustice, oppression and abuse any more. In this perspective, not only do we have to work for reconciliation and healing,¹² but also denounce all kinds of injustice and violence.

The WSCF thematic conference “*A Just Life or just life? Intercultural Dialogue on Alternative Globalisation*” emphasised that in order for Christian communities and individuals to be effective, concrete action has to be taken. On a personal and also local level, we could start by knowing, loving and caring for our own community, the specific place where we are located and the community for whose people, nature and needs we have affection. In the

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particular place to which we are related in a personal way, we can love and care for every other place and community.¹³

Within our local context, we could raise awareness on the economy that is based on cooperation, reciprocity and solidarity, just trade and finance, and just interaction between humanity and creation¹⁴ by discussing the issues in our SCMs or other student groups, in bible studies, worships and film nights, and acting them on in campaigns and workshops along with other student bodies, by buying fair trade products and encouraging others to buy them as well.

The conference raised these ideas for concrete actions that can be related to the liturgy:

- » To be well informed and to inform others by publishing articles or creating websites – should we not also make these concerns part of public preaching?
 - » To choose one campaign and support it or to become active in an organization; to support blood and organ donation; to recycle everything – should we not also begin by taking the Gospel values as a ‘rule of life’ and form base communities?
 - » To display the fair trade sign, to wear clothes with a message, to become less materialistic – should we not also consider how the Gospel, Christ, and our churches are the brands, slogans, symbols and places of an alternative culture of hospitality, creativity and friendship?
 - » To form a group to help homeless children, to involve at least one of your friends in the process; to buy two loaves of bread and give one away – could the church offering and the church community become a way of sharing our gifts of time and money and become ways of being accountable for the spiritual use of these gifts?
- Indeed the Eucharist reminds us that our creativity, talents and material goods are gifts from God and we use them wisely when they assist our human maturity and sharing.

We can all take action using our creativity and the talents of our community. By this action we can participate in God’s mission for the restoration of human nature and the renovation of Creation. Our individual contributions to social justice and renewal are all part of God’s continuing work of reconciling the universe, human beings together with creation in the dynamic life of the Spirit.

Endnotes

1 See the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document, Faith and Order paper No 111, WCC, Geneva, 1989, 10-17, and *The Nature and Purpose of the Church, A stage on the way to a common statement*, Faith and Order paper No 181, WCC, Geneva, 1998.

2 For communion ecclesiology see J.-M. R. TILLARD, *Church of Churches: The ecclesiology of Communion*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1992 and J. D. Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church, The unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop during the first three centuries*, Elizabeth THEOKRITOFF (translator), Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, 2001, as well as his *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1985.

3 Petros VASSILIADIS, *Eucharist and Witness*, Orthodox Perspectives on the Unity and Mission of the Church, WCC Publications, Geneva, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline MA, 1998, esp. p. 47-66; J.-M. R. TILLARD, *Church of Churches, The ecclesiology of Communion*, R. C. De PEAUX, O. PRAEM. (translator), Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1992, 23.

4 Petros VASSILIADIS, *Eucharist and Witness*, Orthodox Perspectives on the Unity and Mission of the Church, WCC Publications, Geneva, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline MA, 1998, esp. p. 47-66; J.-M. R. TILLARD, *Church of Churches, The ecclesiology of Communion*, R. C. De PEAUX, O. PRAEM. (translator), Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1992, 23.

5 J.-M. R. TILLARD, *Church of Churches*, 24-28; J. D. ZIZIOULAS, *The ecclesiological presuppositions of the Holy Eucharist*, available on www.resourcesforchristiantheology.org; see also Paul MCPARTLAN, *The Eucharist makes the Church*, Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in *Dialogue*, S. J., T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1993.

6 See *BEM* document, p. 14.

7 Emmanuel CLAPSIS, *The image of Christ in the Poor*, published by International Orthodox Christian Charities, www.iocc.org/greatent2005.

8 See Emmanuel CLAPSIS, “Population, Consumption and the Environment” in the volume *Orthodoxy in Conversation, Orthodox Ecumenical Engagements*, WCC Publications, Geneva, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline MA, 2000, p. 209-215.

9 J. D. ZIZIOULAS, *Communion and Otherness*, SVTQ 38, no 1, 1994, p. 352-353.

10 Athanasios N. PAPATHANASIOU, “Evangelization and Social Justice, An outlook into history” in his *Future, the Background of History, Essays on Church mission in an age of Globalization*, Alexander Press, Montréal Québec Canada, 2005, p. 86-97.

11 Anastasios YANNOULATOS, *Mission in the traces of Christ* (in greek), Apostoliki Diakonia Publications, Athens, 2007, p. 129-132; Ion Briar-Petros Vassiliadis, *Orthodox Christian Witness* (in greek), Tertios Publications, Katerini, 1989, p. 65-76.

12 See *Participating in God’s Mission of Reconciliation, A Resource for Churches in Situations of Conflict*, Faith and Order Paper 201, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2006.

13 See the interesting views of Mary Jo LEDDY in *Radical Gratitude*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 2005, esp. p. 168-169.

14 For information on the economy of solidarity and the economy of life read *Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth, (AGAPE), A Background document*, Justice, Peace and Creation Team, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 2005; see also Aruna GNANADASON, *Listen to the Women! Listen to the Earth!*, WCC publications, Geneva, that is on the stewardship of creation.