



EUCHARIST: SOURCE OF COMMUNION AND COMMUNITY

Imagine that we are living in the first century. A person you know has extended an unexpected invitation to supper. You accept, but with some serious reservations, for in your first-century world who you ate with was everything. Meals were very personal and very defined cultural events. (This is why Jesus raised so many eyebrows when he ate with sinners and tax collectors.) On the appointed evening you show up at the door, and as you enter you are astounded by a sight you have never seen before. You begin to back out the door, but your friend sees you and takes you by the hand. What astounded you was that around the table were women and men at the same table, a Greek and a Jew sharing a cup, a person in rich clothes handing bread to a person in ragged clothes, and at the end of the table sat a slave as if she actually belonged there. You are completely at a loss to explain how these people could be around the same table. You blurt out, "How is this possible?" and your friend answers, "We are all one in Jesus Christ."

In the early church the Lord's Supper was an impossible experience for the simple reason that no class, culture, race or sex-in fact, no one-was excluded. Jesus was present to his early church so that they could form these impossible reconciling communities. Jesus remains present to us today for the same reason.

Jesus' institution of the Eucharistic celebration put the "Good News" into the lived experience of his followers. The Jewish people were waiting for God to break into their world. The Good News that Jesus brought to them and to us is that God is with us now, and we no longer need to wait. The second part of the Good News was more difficult for the first-century Jewish community, and it remains difficult for us today: The Good News of God's presence leaves no one out. The Lord's Supper at which no one was to be excluded put the Good News into the reality of people's lives. "The impossible was made a reality by the continued presence of Jesus Christ."

The followers of Jesus who wrote down what he did, said and intended did not miss the communion/community connection. In the story in today's Gospel, Luke saw the importance of details and reminds us that Jesus was always focused on helping people gather in reconciling communities. He said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty." He didn't say, "Have the women sit here and the men over there," or "Have the slaves serve the others and then they can have what is left." He did none of those things. Jesus simply said, "Have them sit down in groups." And that is exactly what happened.

Today our church struggles to remember that essential connection between communion and community. Catholics historically have preserved the awesomeness of Eucharist by insisting on the presence of Jesus under the form of bread and wine. Our modern Catholic Eucharistic celebration with its emphasis on "full, active, conscious participation" can be a liturgy of both awe and gratitude. It can be a liturgy of awe at the choice Jesus made to be forever present to us in the everyday elements of bread and wine. And it can be a liturgy of gratitude for Jesus bringing us together, the people of God, in our united participation.

Awe and gratitude, real presence and welcoming, reconciling community were not separate realities to Jesus or our scriptural writers. The Christian call is the same today as it has always been. Eucharist is the sacrament that leads us to community, and we should be very careful not to allow it to be a source of division. That has never been its purpose.

The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

June 6, 2010

As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. -- 1 Corinthians 11:26

