

50  
table of contents

The Imperative of Intercommunion  
James E. Griffiss ..... 3

Three Poems  
Lynn Surles ..... 14

Towards a Theology of Humor  
Norman M. Butwill ..... 17

Review Article: Catholicism and Early Christianity  
O. C. Edwards, Jr. .... 25

Book Reviews ..... 36

Contributors ..... 43

Seminary News ..... 44

Obituaries ..... 46

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NASHOTAH REVIEW

VOLUME 13

NO. 1

the imperative of intercommunion

(The following article is from a paper originally read to Anglicans and Roman Catholics at congresses in Ponce, Puerto Rico and Salamanca, Spain. For that reason it does not deal specifically with the problem of intercommunion with the Churches of the Protestant Reformation. The same principles would, however, apply to intercommunion with those Churches.)

Today, as a result of many things, all of us have begun to think of the Church and the sacramental life in ways that are different from the past. If, for example, we take seriously the teaching of the II Vatican Council that the Church as the People of God is called to be the sacramental sign of God's redemption of the world, and if we see the sacramental economy itself as the proclamation to the world of God's love, then we have reached a level of unity which cuts beneath many of the historical difficulties and the juridical problems which have divided us in the past. It is not that the history of our past separation is not important, nor that we can overlook the juridical problems, but rather that we have discovered new bonds of unity which are more important to us. Where we now are able to find our unity is in our common faith in the redemptive work of God in Christ, and that affects our understanding of our unity in many other areas.

Because we are now able to see our unity with one another more clearly, I should like to explore in this paper one aspect of the sacramental life which is immediately and practically concerned with our unity in Christ. It is a subject which only recently and with the greatest hesitation has begun to be discussed by Roman Catholics and Anglicans, but it is, I believe, the most crucial issue in our rela-

tions with one another and in our theology of the sacraments. The issue is that of *communicatio in sacris*, or as it is sometimes called intercommunion — not on a personal level (which now happens quite frequently) but on an official and recognized level. And I wish to suggest that we ought to begin a serious examination both in prayer and in study of the scandal which we cause to the Body of Christ by our sacramental division. I do not believe that Christians can any longer allow themselves to refuse a sacramental unity, for the time has come when we must proclaim to the world in our Eucharistic action the unity which we have in Christ.<sup>1</sup>

There are, I believe, three reasons why we must now begin the serious consideration of our sacramental unity. Two of them are immediately obvious: the visible similarity of our liturgical traditions and the developments which have taken place since the II Vatican Council in our theology of the Church and of the sacramental economy. As important as these are, however, there is a third reason which to me (and, I believe, to many others) is of much greater importance, and which creates a situation of great urgency. That reason is that we, Roman Catholics and Anglicans, have begun to discover that we have as Christians a *communio in vita*, a communion in our lives, which undercuts all of the problems which separate us and makes them irrelevant.

It is common knowledge that all Churches today are in a state of crisis. All of the traditions, institutions, and structures of the Churches are being radically questioned. It is possible that the institutional Churches will not be able to survive in their traditional form for much longer. But,

<sup>1</sup>Quite obviously I am not here speaking of the juridical or institutional unity of the kind which has been proposed in the United States in the Consultation on Church Unity (COCU). That form of unity presents other problems and is not, to my way of thinking, of particular importance now, except in terms of finance and strategy. I believe it is a form of unity which could only develop *after* the kind of unity which I am discussing in this paper.

what has happened is that for a great many of us the crisis in the institutional Church is no longer the major issue; it is no longer important. What is the major issue, what has emerged as the most important thing of all, is the radical commitment of the Christian to his vocation as a Christian. For most of us now the question is: How can I be a Christian, how can I fulfill my Christian vocation as a man in the 20th century? We believe that all Christians, whatever their ecclesiastical allegiance may be, share a common calling: to witness in the world to the love of God in Christ. This is the calling which we received in our Baptism, and it is the common calling of every Christian man and woman. No matter what divisions may have existed in the past among Christians, the fundamental unity of all of us in our Baptism has never been denied. This is the reason, of course, why there ought never to be such a scandal as "re-baptism." However, the nature of the unity which we have in Baptism has not always been seen in its proper context, nor has it been given its full weight. The unity of all Christians in Baptism is primarily our unity of *vocation*, our unity in what we are called to do, our unity in the Death and Resurrection of Christ in our Apostolate to the world. As Christians, in virtue of our Baptism, we always share a radical *communio in vita* in spite of all our doctrinal disagreements.

Now in the present situation of the Churches this communion which we have together is of fundamental importance; it is what unites us as Christians in our concern with the problems of the world to which we have an Apostolate: war, racism, poverty, hunger, economic and political exploitation. Because we are Christians we are concerned to act about these problems, and we act from a common foundation in Christ. This is the radical unity of the People of God in their lives, and it forms the foundations for all other forms of unity. What we must, then, ask ourselves is why we cannot express in the Sacrament of Unity, the Eucharist, that unity which we already have in our lives,

in our common concerns, and in our common Apostolate?

Among theologians and in the teaching authority of the various Churches, there have been traditionally three principle objections to *communicatio in sacris*:

1. the historical problems of the Reformation and the polemical vocabulary of that period which led to mutual distrust and suspicion;
2. the juridical question of the validity of the Order of Ministry in Churches separated from Rome or from Apostolic Succession;
3. the theological objection that the Eucharist is the sign of unity in faith, and that as long as that unity does not exist sacramental communion is impossible.

The first objection is, I believe, no longer of any importance. The change in our attitudes can be seen in the Decree on Ecumenism of the II Vatican Council, and in the various meetings between Anglicans and Roman Catholics which have taken place since then. As I have said, we have together discovered a bond of unity between us which has already led to greater charity and communion with one another.

In the same way the juridical question of the validity of Anglican Orders (and also of the Ministry of the various Protestant Churches) is no longer of first importance. Essentially, the arguments by theological and historical experts in this area have been that the validity of Order cannot be treated separately from the theology of the Church.<sup>2</sup> What makes an order of ministry valid (in the technical sense) is the authenticity of the Church or ecclesial community in which that ministry functions. It is the Church which celebrates the sacrament and the order of

<sup>2</sup>The most important discussion of the concept of validity of Order is that of Jozef van Beeck, S.J., "Towards an Ecumenical Understanding of the Sacraments," originally published in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, vol. 3, no 1, pp. 57-112. It is now available in *Doctrinal Development and Christian Unity*, ed. Nicholas Lash (London, 1967). See also the article by Daniel J. O'Hanlon, S.J., "A New Approach to the Validity of Church Orders" in *Worship*, vol. 41, no 7, pp. 406-421.

ministry cannot be judged as valid or invalid apart from the particular Church. The Decree on Ecumenism opened up vast new (and still unexplored) possibilities for resolving the problem of Order when it specifically and intentionally referred to other Christian groups as "Churches or ecclesial communities." One statement in particular from the Decree is especially important:

Moreover, some, and even most, of the significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written word of God, the life of grace; faith, hope, and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, and visible elements too. All of these, coming from Christ and leading back to Christ, properly belong to the one Church of Christ. The brethren divided from us also celebrate many liturgical actions of the Christian religion. These most certainly can truly engender a life of grace in ways that vary according to the conditions of each Church or community. These liturgical actions must be regarded as capable of giving access to that communion in which is salvation.<sup>3</sup>

Such language from the Fathers of the Vatican Council has laid to rest once and for all the old question of the validity of orders of ministry.

By far, the third objection to *communicatio in sacris*, disunity in the faith, is the most serious. We shall have to deal with it in greater detail.

The traditional argument against *communicatio in sacris* between two Churches is that where there is not unity of faith there cannot be unity at the Table of the Lord. The Eucharist, it has been argued, is the visible sign of the Church's unity, the most perfect expression of the

<sup>3</sup>On the intention of the writers of the Decree in their use of the phrase "Churches and ecclesial communities" see B. Leeming, S.J., *The Vatican Council and Christian Unity* (London, 1966), pp. 24 ff. The quotation is from Ch. I, n. 3 of the Decree on Ecumenism.

*Catholica*. According to traditional Catholic theology, in which we Anglicans also share, the Eucharist is not an individual act but is the sacrament of the Church, and the reality which it communicates to us is, as St. Thomas said, "the unity of the Mystical Body of Christ."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, any doctrine of the Eucharist which is not related to the community of the Church cannot understand the meaning of the Eucharistic action in its fullness. The Eucharist is the concrete expression of the Church, the visible act of what the Church is. On these grounds, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, and some Protestant Churches have argued that without unity in the faith there can be no unity in the Eucharist, no unity of *communicatio in sacris*.<sup>5</sup>

However, in the light of our newly-found *communio in vita*, the question which we must now ask ourselves is whether such arguments any longer have justification. If we are able (as I believe we can) to distinguish in our theology of the Church between the juridical and institutional unity of Churches and the sacramental unity of Christian people, can we not say that the time has come to make visible precisely that unity which as the People of God we already have? I shall hope to answer that question by suggesting three points which can direct us towards the gathering of all the People of God in the common celebration of the Eucharist.

1. What is most characteristic of contemporary thinking about the Church, with both Catholics and Protestants, is that the Church of Christ is *in via*; it is the pilgrim Church which always lives towards the End. Triumphalism, in its Catholic form as well as in its various Protestant forms, is dead—even though we may occasionally find examples

<sup>4</sup>*Summa Theologica*, III, 73, a. 3 and ad. 3.

<sup>5</sup>The position of the Orthodox is well-stated in the article by John Meyendorff, "Notes on the Orthodox Understanding of the Eucharist" in *Concilium*, vol. 24, *The Sacraments: An Ecumenical Dilemma* (New York, 1966). For statements by various Protestants and Anglicans see *Inter-Communion*, ed. D. Baillie and John Marsh (London, 1952).

of it here and there! There have been many factors which have contributed to the death of triumphalism, but the most important of all has been the renewed awareness of eschatology. We live between the times, between the Resurrection and the Parousia. As long as we expect the Kingdom, all institutions and Churches stand under judgment; there can be no claim that any institution or Church is the Kingdom of God.

The most immediate consequence of accepting that the Church of Christ is *in via* is that we realize more deeply the tentative nature of all our beliefs and customs. To see the Church in terms of the End is to reject all forms of absolutism. The second consequence of this way of thinking is that the Church can no longer think of itself as settled and established. On the contrary, a pilgrim Church, a Church *in via*, is always faced with new challenges; it lives in the state of exception; laws, which once were valid, may no longer apply.<sup>6</sup> The third consequence is that when we see ourselves in this light we know that all of us are always seeking and hoping for that full and perfect communion which awaits us in the End. Here, *in via*, all communion that men have with one another is only partial communion; it is only an anticipation of the full, eschatological communion which we seek and hope for in Christ. Even those who share the same faith, who are in communion with the same Bishop, and who live under the same laws have only a communion of anticipation and hope, until the time when God is all in all. For this reason the Church has always prayed, *Marana tha*, Come, Lord Jesus. (Apocalypse 22:20)

2. The eschatological nature of the Church and of its sacraments leads us to the second consideration. It is true that the Eucharist is the sign of our unity in the faith, but it is also true that it is the means of our unity. We can see

<sup>6</sup>For a discussion of Law and the extraordinary situation in Roman Canon Law, see van Beeck, *op. cit.*, pp. 84, ff.

this not only from Biblical and Patristic sources<sup>7</sup> but also from ordinary Christian experience. What all of us who participate in Eucharistic worship in our own Churches know is that the Sacrament forms us into a community of faith. No one comes to the Eucharist in personal unity with himself or in full unity with his neighbor. Through our participation in the Eucharist, however, we begin to discover both forms of unity. The Eucharist makes us one precisely because it is the sacrament of the unity of the Body of Christ. It is the end towards which we move, the eschatological unity of the creation in God, and for that very reason it is the means to the end.

There are many ways in which one could develop the theological justification for this point of view. I should like, however, to limit myself to that which I referred to earlier, namely, our communion in life. There is no more tragic sign of our time than the collapse of the human community throughout the world. All of the traditional structures through which people could discover a life in community are breaking down through war, hatred, and the economic and political developments of the technological society. In this situation the Apostolate of the Church, its particular vocation in our time, is to be a community within and towards the world. We who are Christians have, through our Baptism, the possibility of forming and developing a life of community, and our work in the world is to be a sign of communion and unity to a world of men who are tragically separated and divided from one another. It is this Apostolate which Christians are discovering to be the *most* important thing about the Church—to be a community in a world that is broken.

For this reason we must begin to see our Apostolate to the world more in relation to our baptismal unity, and

<sup>7</sup>See "Eucharist: Source or Expression of Community" by Bernard Cooke in *Worship*, vol. 40, no 6, pp. 339-348. In addition to citing the Biblical and Patristic evidence for regarding the Eucharist as the source of community, Cooke lays down specific suggestions for intercommunion.

we must begin to see our baptismal unity as *requiring* a Eucharistic unity if we are to fulfill our vocation in Christ to do what we are called to do towards the world. *Communicatio in sacris* is no longer a luxury but a requirement of our Baptism and of our Christian vocation. It is to see the Eucharist in terms of its purpose: "the growth of Christ in the heart of the Christian and in the community."<sup>8</sup>

For a pilgrim Church, a Church which lives towards the End, nothing can be of greater importance than the fulfillment of its Apostolate. At this time our Apostolate is to make concrete *in sacris* that unity which we already have *in vita*.

3. Our final consideration is the question: What ought Christians mean when they talk about unity of faith? Have we, because of historical and polemical considerations, seen only partially what unity of faith involves?

As we have seen, Christian eschatology requires us to think of the Church as living towards its ultimate unity in Christ, and that the Church as the People of God exists in terms of Baptism requires us to make concrete the unity which we have in Christ. Both of these ways of thinking are dynamic. They see the Church primarily in terms of its Apostolate to the world and as a process of growth towards full communion in Christ with our fellow men. If we are willing to re-examine what we mean by faith, we shall find that the same dynamic quality characterizes that form of unity as well.

<sup>8</sup>See the article "Transubstantiation, Transfinalization, Transfiguration" by E. Schillebeeckx, O.P. in *Worship*, vol. 40, no 6. Fr. Schillebeeckx points out that according to Holy Scripture, the Fathers, and medieval scholasticism the *res sacramenti* always pointed to the end of the sacrament of the Eucharist as the unity of the mystical body, in contrast to the Tridentine emphasis on the *sacramentum et res*. The former is concerned with the purpose of the sacrament, namely, the presence of Christ in us. St. Thomas also discusses the connection between Baptism and the Eucharist in these terms: that those who are baptized are directed towards the Eucharist *per ecclesiam* and receive the *res* of the Eucharist *voto*, i.e., by desire. *Summa Theologica*, III, 73, a. 3.

In a very important article published several years ago the German Catholic theologian Thomas Sartory suggested that the Biblical sense of "truth of faith" has two equally important aspects. Truth of faith always involves true doctrine, but this is not its only meaning. Dr. Sartory argues that the Biblical idea of truth means that "no Christian and no Church can possess the truth in the same way as a mathematician possesses his knowledge, that is, as an absolutely certain system of propositions and statements." On the contrary, "true doctrine does not mean that we understand Christ's Person, for the God of the Bible is truly experienced in life, not in an abstract process of thought . . ." <sup>9</sup> Thus, while retaining the idea that truth is authoritative doctrine, we must recognize that the deposit of faith itself is an event; it is primarily the saving act of God towards men in Christ. As Karl Rahner has said, "Revelation is in the first place not the communication of a certain number of propositions . . . It is rather a historical dialogue between God and man in which something happens."<sup>10</sup>

In this light the traditional formulae of truth of doctrine and unity of faith as the ground for *communicatio in sacris* take on a new dimension. What they refer to primarily is our life of obedient response in service (*diakonia*) to the Event of Christ. Our faith is in Christ as the Person in whom God acts, and it is this faith (a life of obedient service to the Word and Promise of Christ) which creates and unites the Church. The dogmatic expression of that faith in doctrinal form, while always necessary and always present, is secondary.

We can best see the force of this argument if we think again in terms of our communion with one another in life. What is in fact uniting Christians of different confessions

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Sartory, O.S.B., "Reunion of Christians Despite Catholic Dogmas" in the Journal of Ecumenical Studies, vol. 1, no 1, p. 86. See also the collection of papers delivered at The Canisianum, *Toward a Theology of Christian Faith* (New York, 1968).

<sup>10</sup>Cited in Sartory, *art. cit.*, p. 88.

is their common obedience to their *diakonia* in the world. In this sense I know, for example that many Roman Catholics and Anglicans in Latin America and Spain have a much greater unity of faith with such a man as Camilo Torres than they have with many in their own Churches. They have with him a unity of faith in the primary sense—of obedient service to the Word and Promise of Christ. It is ironic that we Christians, who are after all disciples before we are anything else, have subordinated our unity of *diakonia* to truth of doctrinal expression. Perhaps we need to return to that command which is the basis of the Apostolic mission of the Church: Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28: 19, 20).<sup>11</sup> As we Christians more and more *act* in our unity of faith we may discover that unity of doctrine will not be so difficult of achievement, for in acting together *in vita* and *in sacris* we shall discover the true nature of our unity in one Lord, one faith, and one Baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. (Ephesians 4: 5).

James E. Griffiss

<sup>11</sup>Interestingly, both the Vulgate and the Authorized Version of the Bible translate the Greek incorrectly.