

Eucharist - An Open Banquet?

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We have many images in the New Testament that could serve as models of the 'common meals' that later developed into the Eucharist. Our usual tendency is to go back to the image of the Last Supper. Even here, we are not really sure who were all present at that supper. While Jesus was traveling round he was followed, not only by the twelve apostles, but also by other disciples, male and female. Some of the female disciples supported him with their resources. It is likely that they too were present at the Last Supper. But our imagination is often guided by scenes of the Last Supper painted by people like Leonardo da Vinci in which the participants are limited to the apostles. So we tend to think of the Last Supper as an intimate meal of Jesus with his disciples. Some of the later gospels like that of John may also give us such an impression. We never stop to think that this image itself may be more theological than historical. If after the resurrection and at Pentecost there was a whole crowd of disciples, male and female, in the upper room, there is no reason to think that they were absent during the Last Supper.

We also have other common meals in the New Testament that could be taken as models of the Eucharist. The feeding of the five thousand, not counting women and children, in the desert is often seen today as a forerunner of the Eucharist (Mk 6:33-44). This would seem even more evident if we consider the long discourse on the Eucharist that follows the feeding miracle in the gospel of John (Jn 6:25-70). It is because that feeding in the desert had Eucharistic overtones that John could take it as an occasion to develop his own presentation of the mystery of the Eucharist.

The table-fellowship that Jesus had with the publicans and sinners (Mk 2:15) is being widely recognized today as a prophetic

gesture that point to the Eucharistic banquet. Membership here was not limited to the perfect and the pure. Everyone who welcomed Jesus and felt at home with him was invited, the 'sinners' seeming to have a preference: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mk 2:17).

Finally, we cannot ignore in this list the parables of Jesus where he compares the Kingdom of heaven to a wedding feast (Mt 22:1-14). Though the big and mighty were originally invited, finally the participants at the banquet are the poor from the streets and lanes of the town. "And those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good; so the wedding hall was filled with guests" (Mt 22:10). These symbolize the crowd as opposed to the social elite.

Today, the tendency is to look at the Eucharist as a closed banquet to which only a select few who are baptized and share the full faith of the Catholic Church are invited. Questions are periodically raised about the possibility of admitting other Christians or even members of other religions. The answers given are always ambiguous and hesitant.¹ The Eucharist is hardly seen as an open banquet. But a consideration of the examples listed above from the New Testament seem to indicate the possibility that the Eucharist could be a more open banquet, where even the sinners from the streets find a place while the elite seem least interested and even reject the invitation. I would like to explore this thought in the following pages. I am personally convinced that the Eucharist could be an open banquet, open to any one who knows what it is about and who wishes to join. But I need to prepare the ground before making such a bold suggestion. Such a preparation involves a look into sacramental theology as it is understood today. Let me set about it then.

Sacraments are Symbols

It is almost trite today to repeat that the Sacraments are symbols. But the answer to the questions: 'what do the sacraments symbolize?' is not as simple. Traditionally we see the sacraments as symbols of a divine mystery. In the case of the Eucharist, on the one hand, we

1. Cf. Paul Puthanangady (ed.), *Sharing Worship: Communicatio in Sacris*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1988

imagine Jesus offering himself on the cross and associating the Church in his self-offering; on the other hand, we see the Spirit transforming the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus, who offers himself to us as our food. The focus is on the mysteric, heavenly action of which the sacramental action is the visible symbol. The link between the two aspects of the symbolic action is the priest who is specially empowered to do this.

Today we tend to see the symbolic structure of the sacraments in a different way. We see three levels in it.² There is a ritual level of a gesture or an action like washing, anointing, eating together or imposing hands. These are well known human and social symbols that can be seen in many cultures and religions. They have common meanings like purification, consecration, participation and empowerment. At a second human-social level, these common meanings are specified in the context of the self-awareness of a particular religious community. Thus the imposition of hands in a particular community recognizes and empowers some one to fulfill certain specified social roles in that community. This is the human-social meaning of the symbol. Here the meaning is determined, not purely in terms of the rite itself, but in terms of the community that performs that rite for a particular social purpose. The intention of the community adds a specification to the common human meaning of the symbolic action. In the context of its faith, however, the community sees the action not merely, as a social gesture, but as sanctioned and accompanied by the power/Spirit of God. At this level, washing indicates rebirth in the Spirit, anointing points to a special gift of the Spirit, etc. Thus we move from the ritual through the social to the mysteric level. While the meaning moves up from the ritual to the mysteric, its roots move down from the mysteric to the ritual. There is no direct portrayal of the presumed mysteric action in ritual symbols. Rather the community invests the ritual action with the mysteric meaning by its faith. Its intention is supplemented by its faith experience of the action God/Spirit.

The Symbol of the Eucharist

How do we look at the symbolic action of the Eucharist in this three-level framework of meanings? One way is to see it as the

2. See M. Amaladoss, *Do Sacraments Change?* Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1979.

mysteric action of Jesus Christ and the Spirit which they execute through the ministry of the priest and in which the people are asked to participate. The bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ and are shared with the people who are appropriately prepared for it by their faith and good dispositions. Another way of looking at the Eucharistic action is to see it as primarily the action of the community. It is a group of people sharing their life, eating and drinking together. On special occasions it performs this symbolic action in memory of Jesus and in his name. By the faith that accompanies this action, the Lord himself is present to the community in a special, personal way, so that the community feels united as the body of Christ. The focus here is not some mysteric action, not even the bread and wine transformed into the body and blood of Christ. The focus is the community and its relationship. The life that links them together is experienced as life of God's own self, manifested as the body and blood of Christ in this particular sacrament. The life of God may communicate itself in other forms in other sacraments. But in this sacrament it takes the form of the body and blood Christ. But the focus is the celebration of the community and its relationships. If this relationship is not there, the Eucharist would be an empty symbol. The mysteric action will be hanging in the air, so to speak. It is in the community relationship that the mysteric action becomes real. It is in the love of the other that the love of God is experienced and shared.

What Kind of Community?

How is this community experienced in the present-day Eucharistic celebrations? A brief look at the question of sharing worship with members of other religions will give us a good idea about the kind of community that is celebrating the Eucharist. All of us are familiar with the huge multi-religious gatherings on the occasion of feasts, or in sacred shrines and pilgrim centers, or at prayer meetings for healing. We have heard the routine announcement at the time of distributing communion in the course of the Eucharist that the host can be received only by the Catholics present in the audience. The others are requested to keep away from it.

This principle of membership in the Catholic Church as a requirement for participation in the Eucharist is affirmed in discussions concerning intercommunion among Christians and sharing worship with other believers. The other Christians cannot be admitted to the Eucharistic banquet because they do not share our

faith . The same will even be more true of the members of other religions. Sharing faith is further explained as not merely sharing our beliefs, but being members of the believing community in a visible, permanent way. Some recent thinking on intercommunion seems to indicate that what is important is community at least in an imperfect way through Baptism, even if s/he is not a full member of the community in an ongoing way. The Indian theologians, however, seem to go further when they suggest that belongingness to the community is not important provided there is acceptance of the basic meaning of the Eucharist. One can see here a certain lack of clarity and rigour in reflection.

I think that the question hinges around what kind of community we imagine the Church to be. For the purposes of the present discussion I can evoke two kinds of images of the Church-community: one closed and the other open. We can look on the Church as the ark of the covenant. It is a group of people who are saved from a wicked and sinful world. This group needs to be guarded and protected from all sorts of contamination. Non-believers should not be allowed to come near. Heretics should be expelled and even destroyed (by burning) as apostates. The Church is the community of the chosen ones. The Church does go out on mission. But its mission is precisely to save others by bringing them into the fold through baptism and membership in the Church. Its mission is a fishing expedition. In a world in which the Church feels a persecuted minority, we can imagine the Church becoming self-defensive and closing in on itself and protecting itself from the 'enemy' outside. This feeling may also relate to the idea of the 'chosen people' in the Old Testament. The Christians feel that they are the 'chosen people' in the New Covenant. The sense of being 'predestined' has always been a strong current in the Church, though it may not be carried to the extremes as some groups have done.

To this image we can contrast another one of an open community. The Church is primarily a movement of people. As it goes out into the world it reaches out to all sorts of people and brings them into the fold. A basic sense of commitment and loyalty to the movement is required. This is part of belonging to any movement. But apart from this there are no hard and fast rules. As a matter of fact, the mission of the Church is not to gather a group of the elect and lead them to heaven. Its aim is rather to gather all things, every one (1 Cor 15:28; Eph 1:10). Its scope is not elitist, but universal. We see this goal spelt out by the prophets. As against the exclusivism of Israel, we see the prophets speaking of people coming from all parts of the world

to Jerusalem. Jesus too did not focus his attention on the exclusive groups of the Essenes or even the Pharisees, but opens his Kingdom out to the Galilean peasants, publicans, prostitutes and sinners (Mk 2:15). The early Church is guided by the Spirit not to concentrate its attention on Israel, but on every race and nation (Acts 10).

The Eucharistic Banquet

What is the kind of community that is celebrating the Eucharistic banquet? Is it the community of the elect, which is jealous of its privileges and guards them ferociously, excluding others vigorously, of course, in the name of the mystery whose sacredness it seeks to protect? Or is it an open community, a group of sinners trying to be converted, inviting people who have a desire to be converted, but without making rigorous demands?

What is the kind of Eucharist does this community celebrate? Is it a divine mystery that it makes present unworthily or is it a community meal in the memory of Jesus in which the Lord becomes personally present. The openness of the community to every one merely reflects the openness of Jesus himself to the whole of humanity, particularly to those who are present to these people and makes it a point to be open to them.

What the kind of belongingness does the community expect for a meaningful celebration of the Eucharistic banquet? Is it total belongingness to an elite group of people baptized as members of the Catholic Church or is it a basic belongingness to the community that characterizes all children of God, whatever may be their religious affiliation? Jesus in his day went beyond the racial identification of the people of God to open out to all peoples. I think that today we are becoming aware of a new community of all people of whatever religion as children of God, in whom the Word and the Spirit are present and active. This community is more profound than factors that separate them. It is fashioned not by a presumed uniformity of religious belief, but a common praxis of basic human and spiritual, and therefore divine, values like love, service, sacrifice, sharing, etc. If this is so, will not this community relationship be enough as a starting point for a celebration of community, which is not merely human, but in which the Lord becomes present? We do not seem to have any problem with a community celebration where the only unifying element is that all are formally members of the Church even though there may be wide gaps, amounting to total incompatibility,

in their moral behavior. Such an approach is made easier because the focus is not on the celebrating community but on the minister specially ordained for the purpose. But this objectifies the sacrament in an unacceptable way. A community of people, committed to the cause of justice, may be a more authentic community, even if they belonged to different religions, than a community of nominal Catholics.

We can also explore the possibility of a diversity of real presences in the Eucharistic banquet. The Constitution on Worship of the Second Vatican Council speaks of a variety of real presences: in the assembly, in the Word and in the Eucharist. Secondly the Eucharistic presence, though it may be the same 'objectively', is appropriated very differently by the participants according to their various dispositions. There can be a significant variety here. Analogously one can understand that the depth of the presence of the Lord and his unifying action can vary according to the depth of the relationships that bring the members of a community together. What is important here are not the formal factors of belongingness, but actual relationship that knit people together whatever be their formal socio-religious status.

Conclusion

Unlike the other sacraments like Baptism, Confirmation, Ordination, etc, the Eucharist is meant to have an open structure, open to all those who are called to become the community of God. If we think of the table-fellowship of Jesus we cannot imagine Jesus laying down conditions of participation of a formal kind. Over the centuries, the Eucharist has lost this openness because it became the central rite of identity of the Church-community. In a situation of persecution this identity also needed to be protected. So the Eucharist became a kind of in-house sacrament, meant only for the adepts. Moving from a situation of persecution to one of mission that moves out to reach out to every one and to gather all people together the Eucharistic banquet could become again an open one.

Hospitality is a Christian-Indian virtue. We are expected never to eat alone, but to invite a guest for our meals, According to the *panchayagna* (five sacrifices) of the Indian sacrificial tradition, a householder is supposed to feed (share food with) the gods, the ancestors, the birds and animals and a human guests before eating. To share food is to share life and each one is responsible for the life of

all. The Eucharist must become such a universal sacrament. If it really becomes a banquet, and not a sacralized ritual, it can be an open one - open to any one who wishes to experience fellowship, at the same time as a heavenly and an earthly reality.

The openness I am suggesting is based on two principles. The first is that the Eucharist is not primarily the symbolic actualization of a mysteric, heavenly action in which the community is called to participate. On the contrary it is an action of the community, to which the community gives meaning and significance. The action of God/Spirit is mediated by the community. The second principle is that the Church-community is an open community, because it is the symbol and servant of the community of the Kingdom with which it is in constant relationship. This community of Kingdom includes all people of good will. In former times we used to identify the Church-community with the community of the Kingdom. The dividing line between the community of the people of God and the others was the 'border' of the Church. Today we are aware that the community of the Kingdom is much wider than the Church. The outsiders to this community are not members of other Churches and other religions. They could very well belong to the community of the Kingdom. The real outsiders to the Church-community and to the community of the idols of Mammon and Satan can enslave people who are formally members of the Church and of the other religions. The community of the people of God therefore includes all people of good will. Compared to the unity they have in God in the Spirit, the religious divisions are quite secondary.

Taking these two principles together I think that we can say that, besides the Church-community, the community of the Kingdom may be called to celebrate its togetherness through the symbolic action of sharing food. When this is done in memory of Jesus Christ, I am sure that the Lord becomes really present to encourage and seal their relationships. The Eucharist is fulfilling its eschatological function in this manner. The core group of this community of the Kingdom remains the Church-community. But it is not longer a closed community, but an open one. It has a firm, fixed center, but open borders. Such openness corresponds to the openness of the Spirit and of Jesus himself as shown in his table-fellowship.