

The Many-Sided Eucharist

Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment..." (Jn. 13, 34). Most of us tend to interpret this in its Scriptural context as referring to love one another, and rightly so. Additionally, Jesus gave us (at least) two other startlingly new commandments: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk. 22, 19b) and "...you also ought to wash one another's feet (Jn. 13,14)." These latter two references, of course, have a Lord's Supper context. The new Christian commandment, really, is threefold: love, eat and drink, and serve. And it is in celebrating and living Eucharist that these three new commandments most profoundly and clearly intersect as one: to be Body of Christ, to do and be as Jesus.

Four traditional paradigms have shaped our understanding and approach to the celebration of Eucharist over the past twenty centuries: Eucharist is covenant, memorial, sacrifice, and meal. These can serve as a springboard for searching out an alternative paradigm that may more adequately encompass the challenges of today's world and our own contemporary insights into our Precious Blood spirituality.

To speak of Eucharist as covenant stretches us to embrace our Christian identity as the Body living out the gift of God's largess. Eucharist is God's unprecedented gift of Self to us so that we might in turn gift ourselves to others.

By eating and drinking together we all share in the same heavenly food, all partake in the divine refreshment of life, and all are more perfectly transformed into the divine identity of being the Body of Christ. Eucharist as meal invites an openness and transparency of self such that we all recognize our common identity and destiny. To gather around the table of the Lord is to hospitably proclaim Christ's victory over death until he comes in glory.

To remember is a communal activity that enables the spirit of a person or the meaning of a past historical event to be present...When Christians "do this in memory of me," they participate in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ; that is, they enter into the life, death, resurrection, and ascension/pentecost event of Jesus. Eucharist, therefore, is our entry into those historical realities, not as a "going back" but as a making present. Eucharist is a making present of the Jesus event. Eucharist as memorial necessarily takes us beyond the ritual action and into participation in the very life and ministry of Jesus in the here and now.

Eucharist as sacrifice has a unique twist to it, for Christ is both the one sacrificed and the one who offers. Further, our baptismal identity with Christ suggests that we, too, are both victim and priest; that we, too, are called to surrender for the sake of the common good. Eucharist costs. Oh, but what a gain! The sacrifice of self in union with Jesus' death on the cross is the assurance of a share in the divine life of the resurrection.

The proclamation of the Gospel is a prophetic utterance; we are challenged by the "Good News" to take up Jesus' life and ministry, even to the point of taking up the cross and dying. The paradox of the Gospel makes apparent what our baptismal commitment is all about: there can be no life without death.

The paradox of the Eucharistic Prayer also makes apparent what our baptismal commitment is all about: death has lost its sting because resurrection has overcome it.

In the paschal mystery, death and resurrection hold each other in a creating tension (dialectic). In Eucharist, too, death and resurrection hold each other in creating tension: The Liturgy of the Word prophetically challenges us to take up the cross and live the Gospel, even to the point of death; the Liturgy of the Eucharist joyfully invites us to share in the resurrection by standing at the messianic table. This is Eucharist's alternative paradigm. Eucharist as creating tension holds together in a dynamic integrity the whole mystery of salvation; by dying we rise to eternal life. Covenant, meal, memorial, and sacrifice are all gathered into the single paradigm of a death/resurrection dialectic...Celebrating Eucharist is our entry into the creating tension of the death/resurrection mystery of Christ, whereby we become more a perfect manifestation of his Body, the Church.

This death/resurrection creating tension or dialectic is hardly limited to Eucharist's ritual celebration. In fact, the dynamic of the eucharistic ritual parallels the dynamic of Christian living. This is to say that the reality of Eucharist is not limited to its ritual celebration (Mass), but it extends into and defines our Christian living. In other words, Eucharist cannot be understood merely in terms of "going to Mass." It cannot be relegated to a specific time and space, but rather cuts across all time and space and is received as the reality of God's overture of love to us that is so powerful and dynamic that it is really and truly the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ given and received. Eucharist itself is the paradigm or model of Christian living. To be Christian is to live eucharistically; that is, to die and rise. Eucharistic action transforms us ever more perfectly into the Body of Christ. This is our Christian identity; this is who we are. Living Eucharist is to be the Body broken and Blood poured out for others.

Practically speaking, this means that before there can be a truly fruitful eating and drinking the Body and Blood, there must be a concomitant embrace of the prophetic Word. Unless the Word is a lived reality in our everyday lives, we eat and drink to our own condemnation (1 Cor. 11, 17-34). The creating tension between Word and Body and Blood is the dialectic between the prophetic and messianic realities of our salvation. Redemption consists in living (dying) and then living anew (rising). Living Eucharist means that there will be formidable demands on us: our wills must be surrendered to God's will; our living must change to reflect more perfectly the life that Jesus lived; our ministry must be a response to the Christ within the other we meet, whether that other is rich or poor, healthy or diseased, associate or outcast, free or imprisoned, woman or man, saint or sinner.

Living Eucharist means realizing the Gospel in our everyday lives, with all the evangelical demands and contradictions. For it is by identifying with the Jesus of the Gospels that we, first, manifest the reality of the Body which we become by sharing in the eucharistic food and, second, that we make a difference in the world. In this context it is patently inconceivable that eucharistic living is anything but just living. Righteousness and just actions are a fruit and measure of eucharistic living.

Just as Eucharist must be understood broader than an "unbloody sacrifice of the cross," so must Precious Blood spirituality be understood in terms broader than Jesus' shedding of his Precious Blood, as rich and implicit an image as that may be. Indeed, Precious Blood spirituality is really just another paradigm for Eucharist. They have parallel internal dynamics: Eucharist is the creating tension between Word and Food, between prophetic and messianic, between dying and rising, between losing and embracing, between doing and being, between covenantal meal and sacrificial memorial. The Precious Blood marks a creating tension between violently spilled and lovingly poured out, between senselessly emptied and willingly filled, between ignoble death and eternal life, between the dead wood of the cross and the ever viable tree of life.

Both Eucharist and Precious Blood spirituality have their negative aspect that we humans wish to shun; they also have their positive aspect that we humans wish to encompass without also embracing that dying. But this cannot be. The only way to life is through death.

Precious Blood spirituality calls us to liminal ("on the edge") living. This is no poetic reflection, but a clear statement of a challenging way to live. Make no mistake about it: this is hardly a call to make dramatic changes in one's life. There is more at stake than a shaking "conversion experience" that is really no more than the seed planted in sand and the shoot soon withers. The creating tension of Precious Blood spirituality (and Eucharist) makes much greater and lasting demands on us: it demands that in whatever state in life or ministry we presently find ourselves, we always choose to do perfectly God's will, just as Jesus did. Only in doing God's will is God's reign present. Only in doing God's will is a peaceful and just humanity reborn. Only in doing God's will does the seed of God's prophetic Word take root in good soil, and grow in a healthy shoot that feeds and nourishes.

Christ's new commandment is to love one another. But lest we turn these words into innocuous fluff that we can ignore, Jesus also gave us the commandments to share a meal and wash other's feet. Love, true Christian love, is always played out between surrendering ourselves to being filled by God and spending ourselves in emptying service. Being filled and being emptied are the only ways to enter into the depths that Eucharist offers. They are also the only ways to enter into living and authentic Precious Blood spirituality. They are the only ways to love as God has first loved us. This is our gift. This is our identity. This is our hope. This is our challenge.

(Joyce Ann Zimmerman, C.P.P.S., "A New Commandment: Eucharist as Loving, Eating and Drinking, and Serving", The Wine Cellar, February 1995, pp. 5-14)