

The Huron Statement: Font to Table

8 June 2012

The Council of the Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission (APLM) has been honored to be part of the ongoing reform of the liturgy and mission of the Church for more than sixty years. Meeting at Canterbury College, Windsor, in the Diocese of Huron, we wish to define issues surrounding the traditional unity of baptism and eucharist in response to the innovation of inviting those who have not been baptized to share in communion. This contribution is the result of theological and liturgical research and discussions led by APLM over the last twenty years.

I Baptism and Eucharist in St. Paul

In one of the earliest strata of the New Testament, even earlier than the Gospels, St. Paul expresses the intimate connection between baptism and eucharist as he writes to the assembly of Christians meeting in Corinth. He insists that Christians constitute the Body of Christ. First, Paul claims that he received directly from the Lord that the meal they share is nothing less than participation in the Body and Blood of Christ:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?
The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we are all partake of the one bread.¹

Paul is not talking about transubstantiation (a theological explanation still 1200 years in the future). He is talking about the presence of Christ made real in both the meal and the assembly, for he adds,

Now you (*plural*) are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.²

Having linked the eucharist to the Christian assembly as Body of Christ, Paul goes on a few years later in the Letter to the Romans to explain *how* this incorporation into Christ takes place:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have

¹1 Corinthians 10: 16 - 17.

²1 Corinthians 12: 27.

been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.³

Therefore, he argues, since we are Christ's Body, we should behave accordingly towards each other: the wealthy must share the food they bring to the Supper of the Lord with the poor who are every bit as much the Body of Christ. On the road to Damascus Paul had had a similar insight — that by persecuting Christians he was persecuting Christ himself.

Thus, Paul is not only making an ethical point for renewal of life; he is not saying, "you are not Christ's Body if you do not behave like him," but rather, "because you *are* Christ's Body, you *should* behave like him," and, "You *became* his body by being 'buried with him by baptism into death.'" By linking baptism, eucharist, and the Paschal Mystery to the moral imperative of the gospel, Paul points to the centrality of these two sacraments for Christian identity, belief, and life.

2 The Paschal Mystery and its Implications

Communion before baptism may sound appealing because it seems to rescue us from having to deal with deeper challenges that have been creeping up on the church for a long time. Challenges such as our retreat from the public sphere that leaves us no method for communicating the gospel except waiting for people to show up on Sunday. Or our deteriorating sense of membership that expects next to nothing of the baptized anyway. Or our centuries-old practice of normalizing *emergency* baptism (baptism as security against ending up in hell) which obscures the purpose of baptism as free response to the *gospel*, and makes adult baptism an embarrassing anomaly.

Hospitality and inclusiveness are definitely Christian virtues and vital elements of good liturgy; indeed, welcoming the excluded and sharing meals with them, often as the guest of sinners, was a central part of Jesus' mission. But his mission also included an appeal to the *excluders*, to the 'elder brothers' (as depicted in his parable of the prodigal son) to open their hearts to God's new reign of mercy. Jesus cared about the redemption not just of individuals but of the whole social order. When the excluders denounced him for profaning all they held sacred, he did not turn his back on them but insisted on going up to Jerusalem to make a final appeal and face their wrath. Jesus came to "gather into one the children of God,"⁴ and yet his impact was to divide: "This is the judgment, that light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light."⁵ This division reached its climax at the point when all were divided against *him*. Even his disciples abandoned him, seeking safety (*inclusion!*) in the angry crowd.

³Romans 6: 3 - 5.

⁴John 11: 52.

⁵John 3: 19.

So the execution of Jesus does more than reveal God's love and mercy; it also reveals our human enslavement to fear, our self-justifying social consensus to resist the all-inclusive love of God. The gospel announces God's intention to deliver all humanity from this captivity to the dominion of fear. As the daily news makes clear, this is still very much a work in progress.

If I identify with Christ but refuse to recognize the responsibility I share for his death ("I would never have cried 'crucify' if I had been there"⁶), I simply repeat the deluded self-righteousness which condemned him in the first place; and I join the company of those who blame the Jews — or the Romans — for killing Christ. Thus, when we promote inclusivity by suppressing the offense of the cross we betray him all over again. It is precisely the offense of the cross that confronts us in both Baptism and Eucharist: we submit to being "crucified with Christ" as we descend into the water⁷; we "proclaim his death until he comes" as we eat his body and drink his blood.⁸ As my eyes are opened by the revealing spectacle of the cross, I see that my whole world is judged by it, and my very being comes to a dead-end. Thereafter, the only future open to me is the new being offered to me by the risen Lord who holds out bloodied hands in forgiveness and peace. In Christian tradition, baptism is the definitive way to accept that offer.

It is therefore not enough to ask whether the eucharist owes more to the inclusive meal practices of Jesus than to the Last Supper. We need to go deeper and ask whether we are drawn to the eucharist primarily because we (unlike the first disciples) have such a natural affinity for Jesus' progressive social outlook, or whether we (*like* the first disciples) have found ourselves transformed by the spectacle of his rejection and the mystery of his vindication.

There is, then, an unavoidable self-definition by the community, which some will see as exclusivity, in the celebration of the sacraments, but this is the *self*-exclusion of those who refuse to come to terms with the cross of Christ and choose to avoid this crisis. Our administration of the sacraments must include guiding people *through* the crisis, not tempting them to *avoid* it.

3 The Erosion of Sacramental Order

The ending of state persecution of the church in the fourth century was also the beginning of co-option of the church by secular powers; before long, Christianity was called upon to provide the foundational mythology of society in support of those powers. The existing social order soon took precedence over any 'realized eschatology' of the church; stability, not transformation, was the goal, and only a speculative and

⁶Cf. Matthew 23: 29 - 36.

⁷Romans 6: 3 - 6.

⁸1 Corinthians 11: 26.

individualized 'futurist eschatology' was permissible (as in 'the immortality of the soul,' or, 'getting to heaven when you die').

This actually served the purposes of both the church and what became the state (once 'church' had been redefined as hierarchy). Excommunication provided the leverage needed by this alliance of church-and-secular-powers for sustaining social cohesion (baptism could not serve such a purpose once infant baptism had become the norm). This was how dissenters and revolutionaries would be dealt with. A debased eschatology thus gave rise to a mythology of heaven and hell that functioned as the basis of social inclusion and exclusion.

Thus, a doctrinal shift was required: away from *baptism* as the foundational sacrament to *eucharist* as the foundational sacrament. According to Thomas Aquinas, the mass is the sacrament of sacraments; "all the other sacraments are ordered to it as their end."⁹ Ecclesiastical authority was focussed on the power to consecrate bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ and the power to excommunicate. It was not only baptism that fell off the sacramental radar, but diaconate as well — since deacons lacked this power. Baptism and the diaconate remained only in vestigial form — baptism as provisional salvation, and diaconate as probationary priesthood. Clericalism became the dominant reality of the church.

Baptism effectively ceased to be the sacrament of inclusion, leaving the church free to exclude the unworthy even if they were baptized — women, children, slaves and serfs, homosexuals, etc. Diaconate ceased to be an order devoted to the present realization of God's promise to the poor, and became instead the first rung of an oppressive hierarchical ladder.

To secure this social power structure, sacramental consciousness shifted from the symbolic celebration of the hope of a world transformed to ensuring the validity of 'the sacrament.' A mechanistic minimalism coupled with theatrical staging triumphed over sacramental authenticity.

The radical reformation saw through this sham and de-sacramentalized the sacraments. Baptism was reduced to a ratification of personal belief (understood as individual assent to propositions). And eucharist was reduced to a memorial of the Last Supper.

The Liturgical Movement, however, of which APLM has been a major instrument in North America, has rejected both distortions of the church's sacramental order and called us back to a baptismal ecclesiology and a eucharistic eschatology. Through the Font, all the baptized turn to Christ and participate in his death, renounce the delusions

⁹Thomas Aquinas, *STh*, III, 65, 3.

of a world governed by the fear of death, and become Christ's risen presence in the world. At the Eucharistic table, the company of the baptized enacts its vision of the kingdom of God, a new world of truth-telling, justice, freedom, and love. And the church orders itself sacramentally to live out its true calling: a life of apostolic witness, of formation in discipleship, and of service to the poor.

4 A Coherent Sacramental Grammar

Restoring a sacramental order founded on baptism does not mean we should turn anyone away at the Lord's Table. The issue is whether we wish to undermine the 'grammar' of our sacramental language by explicitly contradicting the relation of baptism and communion. *Inviting* the unbaptized to share in communion does that. Baptism is the defining moment in one's life, incorporation into a new sacramental identity and vocation for the sake of the world, from which there is no turning back; sharing in communion is the sacramental living out of this priestly vocation as we reenact the truth decisively acknowledged in our baptism. What is at stake in this 'grammar' is the meaning not only of the sacraments, but of discipleship, too: baptism is turning to Christ; communion is cleaving to Christ. By undermining this sacramental 'syntax' which serves as our corporate memory, we open the door to mindless revision of meaning, to commodification and fragmentation of the sacramental order. And we risk pandering to a culture of spiritual tourism.

For most of us, of course, baptism predated any conscious coming to terms with the implications of Christ's death and rising. Nevertheless, for the church, that is what baptism *is*. Sacraments celebrate both the grace of God and our response to that grace. We live therefore with a tension between our response that is at best partial and emergent, and God's grace which is complete and unfailing. Even though "we have died with Christ" in baptism, St Paul urges us to "put to death the deeds of the body." The slow process through which we awaken to the meaning of the rituals we celebrate is a normal and essential aspect of our sacramental life.

So baptism before communion is the rule in Christian tradition for good theological and pastoral reasons; there will always be justifiable pastoral exceptions, but these must not be allowed to erode or replace it. Unbaptized worshippers will, on occasion, receive communion with us for reasons we may or may not be able to anticipate. This in itself does not undermine the church's sacramental 'grammar,' nor does it spiritually endanger the unbaptized. Rather, it is the *explicit invitation* to the unbaptized to share in communion that undermines the meaning of the sacraments.