

EUCCHARISTIC SHARING: REVISING THE QUESTION

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[The author provides a brief examination of Roman Catholic norms for sharing communion with non-Catholic Christians. He then discusses three areas of concern with respect to these norms as currently formulated: the Eucharist as the cause and expression of unity; the Eucharist in the context of Christian initiation; and Christian ministry with respect to eucharistic sharing. He concludes by offering four modest proposals to revise the question of eucharistic hospitality.]

UNITED STATES PRESIDENT Bill Clinton, a Southern Baptist, received Holy Communion in the township of Soweto, outside of Johannesburg, South Africa, on March 29, 1998, during Sunday Mass celebrated at Regina Mundi Roman Catholic Church. As Clinton spoke to local residents, he referred to the building as “this great shrine of freedom” since it had been a center for resistance to apartheid during the previous decades of struggle.¹

When asked why he permitted Clinton to receive Communion, the parish priest, Fr. Mohlomi Makobane, replied: “You can’t quiz the president of the United States before the Mass whether he believes in Catholic doctrine, and you can’t send him back to his pew when he comes up to receive Communion.” The view of the South African Catholic Bishops (prior to Vatican intervention) was that non-Catholics normally would not receive, “but a special circumstance can be said to exist on occasions when Christians from other churches attend a Eucharistic celebration for a special feast or event.”²

The international reaction prompted frequent NPR and ABC political

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¹ “Clinton Communion Draws Vatican Inquiry,” *The Christian Century* 115 (April 15, 1998) 394.

² “Clinton’s Communion Gets Mixed Reception,” *U.S. Catholic* 63, no. 6 (June 1998) 9.

correspondent, Cokie Roberts and her husband, to remark: “You know the world’s gone crazy when Bill Clinton gets in trouble for going to Holy Communion.”³

In my brief note on eucharistic sharing, I have three goals: to articulate the current norms, to discuss three of the more important theological problems associated with these norms, and to present four modest proposals to revise the question.

THE CURRENT NORMS

For every Christian Church, the norms for eucharistic sharing express multiple values that churches must uphold. For Protestant Christians, these values include hospitality, unity by stages, and recognition that the Eucharist is Christ’s and not our own. For Catholics, these values include unity, apostolic succession in ministry, validity, and the recognition of pastoral necessity. For Orthodox and other Eastern Christians, these values include communion, economy, and the reconciliation of schism.⁴

General Principles of Interpretation

Canonist John Huels has explicated the purpose of disciplinary norms for the administration sacraments. In the first place, he states, the purpose of the law is not to injure, wound, or embarrass the men and women who approach the sacraments in good faith and are doing so in accord with the dictates of conscience. In the second place, the purpose of the law aims to protect the fundamental structures of the sacraments and to promote the possibility of communion among Christians by upholding good order among us.⁵

Unitatis redintegratio

Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio* spoke of *communicatio in sacris* in reference to eucharistic sharing and other acts of shared worship. The council’s concern was to open the possibility of shared worship which until that time had been prohibited to Roman Catholics. The bishops commended *communicatio in sacris* but warned against an indiscriminate (*indiscretim*) use of the practice.⁶ To say that *communicatio in sacris* is “not to be used indiscriminately” is not to say that it should “not

³ Cokie Roberts and Steven Roberts, “Sacrament Should Serve to Include, Not to Exclude,” *The Denver Rocky Mountain News*, April 12, 1998, F-3B.

⁴ Myriam Wijlens, *Sharing the Eucharist: A Theological Evaluation of the Post Conciliar Legislation* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2000) xiii.

⁵ John M. Huels, *One Table, Many Laws: Essay on Catholic Eucharistic Practice* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1986) 31.

⁶ Vatican II, Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio* no. 8.

be used at all.” According to John Huels, the decree amounts to saying: “Don’t use the Eucharist as an ecumenical tool.”⁷ Additionally, to say that *communicatio in sacris* provides now divided Christians with a modest sharing in the means of grace is not to say that we should only one-sidedly share in the means of grace. Sharing the sacraments must flow in both directions from Catholic to non-Catholic and vice versa. Finally, *communicatio in sacris* does not mean we should be miserly and share mere morsels of the means of grace. Sharing in sacramental life must always reflect the abundance of God’s mercy.

Canon 844

The present, controlling norms for eucharistic sharing are set out in the 1983 Code of Canon Law, canon 844. This canon prohibits eucharistic sharing in general. Catholics may not receive sacraments from non-Catholic ministers; non-Catholics may not receive sacraments from Catholic ministers. Nonetheless, canon 844 admits a number of important exceptions to the general prohibition. These exceptions vary along degrees of closeness in communion to the Catholic Church.

Orthodox Christians and others “in valid apostolic succession” may receive sacraments from Catholic ministers in time of need. Catholics may receive sacraments from Orthodox ministers in time of need, according to Orthodox discipline. Christians from churches “not in valid apostolic succession” may receive some sacraments from Catholic ministers in time of need (danger of death or other grave circumstance) but Catholics may not receive sacraments from ministers “not in valid apostolic succession” at any time.

In a recent study of the postconciliar legislation on eucharistic sharing, Myriam Wijlens has concluded that the current legislation on eucharistic sharing does not correspond to the doctrine of Vatican II in general and the Decree on Ecumenism in particular.⁸ On the one hand, the council was concerned to permit sacramental sharing with due care and consideration. On the other hand, the postconciliar legislation has been more concerned to limit and prohibit sacramental sharing. Still, the 1983 Code of Canon Law represents a vast improvement on the issue of eucharistic sharing when it is compared to the 1917 Code of Canon Law and earlier norms. The 1917 Code of Canon Law simply dismissed non-Catholics—the *acatholici*—as heretics and schismatics. So strict were the boundaries between Catholics and non-Catholics that many North American Catholics remember the days when they were not permitted to swim at a local YMCA.

⁷ Huels, *One Table, Many Laws* 86. ⁸ Wijlens, *Sharing the Eucharist* 364.

U.S. Bishops' Statement of 1996

In response to the Ecumenical Directory of 1993, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued guidelines for the reception of Holy Communion in 1996. These guidelines are often published on the back cover of mis-salettes used in parishes. The guidelines remind Catholics of the discipline for receiving Holy Communion and welcome non-Catholics to worship with the Catholic assembly. Members of the Orthodox Church, and several other churches, in particular the Polish National Catholic Church, are "urged to respect the discipline of their own churches." The guidelines note that the Code of Canon Law does not "object" to their receiving the Eucharist. This is not exactly a ringing endorsement. The guidelines urge non-communicants and non-Christians to pray for unity with Christ and one another.

On the positive side, these norms are specific to the U.S. context. They attempt to be ecumenically sensitive. They refer first to norms applicable to Roman Catholics. They express words of welcome to non-Catholic worshipers. They state the general principles on which Catholics premise the exclusion of non-Catholics from receiving Holy Communion. On the negative side, the U.S. norms are less thorough than those given by other national conferences of bishops. Curiously, they omit the many exceptions permitted under the Code of Canon Law.

One Bread, One Body

The Catholic Bishops' Conferences of England and Wales, of Scotland, and of Ireland, jointly published norms for eucharistic sharing in a teaching document entitled *One Bread, One Body* (January 27, 1998). These bishops of the United Kingdom and Ireland allow non-Catholics to receive Holy Communion under four conditions: (1) non-Catholics cannot approach their own minister; (2) non-Catholics express a great desire to receive, on their own initiative, and not as the result of an invitation; (3) non-Catholics manifest a "Catholic faith" in the Eucharist; and (4) non-Catholics are properly disposed to receive the sacrament according to Catholic disciplines.⁹

The bishops determine that these norms permit eucharistic sharing in situations of pressing need (grave illness, danger of death, etc.). They also apply to occasional, special events in the lives of interchurch couples such as weddings, funerals, and first communions.

⁹ Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, Bishops' Conference of Ireland, and Bishops' Conference of Scotland, *One Bread, One Body: A Teaching Document on the Eucharist in the Life of the Church, and the Establishment of General Norms on Sacramental Sharing* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1998) 108–13.

Misconception of the Current Norms

The norms in canon law and in their application to the conditions of local churches are subtle and admit a variety of exceptions. Catholic ministers are therefore well advised to restate the norms on eucharistic sharing with great care to avoid jeopardizing ecumenical relationships. For example, should Catholic ministers ever announce: “Only Roman Catholics may come to communion,” their words are blunt, unnuanced, and false.¹⁰

THREE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

A study of eucharistic sharing hinges less on eucharistic theology than on problem areas in the theology of Christian initiation, ordination, and ecclesiology. Here I focus on three particular areas of concern: the Eucharist as the cause and expression of unity; the Eucharist in the context of Christian initiation, and Christian ministry with respect to the question of eucharistic sharing.

The Eucharist as the Cause and Expression of Unity

Catholic theology understands the Eucharist as the principal sacrament of Christian unity. When one regards the Eucharist as the cause and expression of church unity, two problems emerge: what kinds of unity does the Eucharist cause and express? and, what is the relationship between the Eucharist and church unity?

What Kinds of “Unity”?

I identify at least three types of unity that are caused and expressed in the Eucharist. Catholics tend to confuse them. First, there is a unity of intent. This is the kind of unity expressed in engagement and betrothal. In marriage, when couples say, “I do,” or “I promise to be your spouse,” they signify a unity of intention. In the absence of the unity of intent, eucharistic sharing is not possible. As Thomas Richstatter writes: “Receiving communion at the same altar is not a sign of unity when we do so with the intention of separating afterwards to return to our various Churches.”¹¹

Second, there is a unity of identity. Unity of identity refers to a unity or equality of being. In the Eucharist, for example, the Church *conforms* its own intentions to the intentions of Christ in a unity of identity.

Third, there is a unity of jurisdiction. Party unity and *esprit de corps* are

¹⁰ Gerard Austin, “Identity of a Eucharistic Church in an Ecumenical Age,” *Worship* 72 (1998) 26–35, at 26.

¹¹ Thomas Richstatter, “Eucharist: Sign and Source of Christian Unity,” *Catholic Update* (May 2000) 1.

examples of this kind of unity. It is the unity of “institutional coherence,” as in the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag: “. . . one nation under God, indivisible.”

It is important to mold and refine our understanding of eucharistic unity based on biblical and historical study. For example, the biblical concept of unity is always a unity in diversity. For the ancient Christian writers, unity is always a communion and it is always catholic, but not in the sense of universal, ubiquitous, or totalitarian. The word “catholic” comes from the Greek expression *kat’ holon* (according to the whole). By saying the Church is catholic, one means the *whole* Church comes to expression in each place and time. In all its parts, the Church is therefore an organic whole. Its cohesion stems from each part having turned toward a center which assures its unity, from its having turned toward Christ and become an image of Christ.

If one stresses too strongly the universality of the Church, one distorts the meaning of catholicity. One should beware of making ecumenism the Church equivalent of globalization. The Church of Christ cannot be a multinational corporation with a papal CEO. Biblical unity is not totalitarian and catholicity is not “universalization.”

Unfortunately, to the extent that Vatican centralism has come to dominate parts of the Catholic Church at the expense of more balanced perspectives, there is the chance of jeopardizing catholicity.¹² Theologians assist the Church when they correct and refine such political metaphors for Christian unity. After all, unity is fundamentally a characteristic of God. If we know unity and may participate in it, this is true only because God has given it to us as a gift.

Consequently, the unity of Christian communion is always real though partial. Even the full communion of Roman Catholics remains less than what it ought to become. In the words of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the division of the Church wounds the Catholic Church for it is then not able to manifest its full unity and universality.¹³

What is the Relationship between the Eucharist and Unity?

By definition, sacraments cause what they signify and signify what they cause. However, Catholic authorities since Vatican II have consistently argued against the use of the Eucharist as a means toward Christian unity. This argument divides the sacrament as the cause of unity from the sacra-

¹² Johannes Brosseder, “Towards What Unity of the Churches?” in *The Church in Fragments: Towards What Kind of Unity?* ed. Giuseppe Ruggieri and Miklós Tomka, *Concilium* 1997/3 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997) 130–38, at 134.

¹³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (2000) no. 17.

ment as the sign of unity. Catholics are told, in effect, that they must signify unity, before they can engage in the sacrament that grants them the ability to be united. This formulation of the problem is fruitless, for it establishes a “means-and-ends” style of thinking no different from the “chicken-and-egg” paradox.

To argue strongly against the power of sacraments to “effect what they signify” radically distorts our sacramental theology. This way of thinking exhibits an implicit Pelagianism. It supposes that we can unite ourselves on our own, before God acts to unite us. It suggests that human action brings about unity. However, with respect to our need for salvation, any unity that human means could create would be, at best, inconsequential, or, at worst, a tragic failure.

Rather, eucharistic unity must exceed the borders of the Church, or it will bring us nothing everlastingly good.¹⁴ For this reason, Cardinal Augustin Bea, one of the leading figures of Vatican II, urged Catholics to trust in the power of the Eucharist. Perhaps in our day, the reluctance to understand the Eucharist as a cause of unity represents a lack of trust in its power for good.

Because Vatican II understood these concerns, *Unitatis redintegratio* commended sacramental sharing as a means for God’s gracious drawing of Christians together into unity. As long as sacramental sharing was not to be “used indiscriminately” or “undiscerningly,” the council did not prohibit it. While the present norms are very good on the “not using” part of the norm, they are less good on the “commending.”

The Eucharist in the Context of Sacramental Initiation

Baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist are three sides of the same sacramental coin. The theological consideration of any one of these three sacraments affects (negatively or positively) our consideration of the other two. In the context of sacramental initiation, the Eucharist is the epitome of baptism. Consequently, “we should not think that baptismal and eucharistic communion are two separate realities.”¹⁵

To borrow a phrase from the late Edward Kilmartin, the “modern average Catholic theology” of initiation represents a significant departure from apostolic and ancient Christian practice.¹⁶ Two significant problems

¹⁴ Giuseppe Ruggieri, “The Unity of the Church through the Unity of Humankind,” in *The Church in Fragments* 146–54, at 150–51.

¹⁵ Susan K. Wood, “Baptism and the Foundations of Communion,” in *Baptism and the Unity of the Church*, ed. Michael Root and Risto Saarinen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 37–60, at 54.

¹⁶ Edward J. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*, ed. Robert J. Daly (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1998) 365.

in the theology and practice of Christian initiation handicap our attempt to understand the Eucharist in the ecumenical context.

First is our excessive emphasis on original sin with respect to baptism. By focusing narrowly on baptism as the means of the forgiveness of original sin, we forget how baptism is the ordinary means of the forgiveness of every sin. This imbalance clouds our understanding of baptism as the sacrament of incorporation into the Body of Christ by way of entrance into the paschal mystery.

Second, we have lost a sense of confirmation as the sacrament of admission to Holy Communion and as the sacrament of relationship between Christians and their local churches. Because we have a diminished sense of baptism, baptism seems no longer sufficient; we look elsewhere for the gateway to admission to the Church. Instead, we distinguish among people within the community of the baptized. We speak as though some baptized people are members of Christ's Body, while others are not. Then we create policies to make sure our words are true.

Members or Subjects of the Body of Christ

For example, Robert Bellarmine held that baptism made one only a "subject" of the Church, not a "member." This distinction helped him describe how non-Catholics could be both "subject to canon law" but not "admissible to the benefits" of the Church. Bellarmine held that the three bonds (*vincula*) of faith, sacraments, and authority constituted membership. If one lacks the bond of faith, one is a heretic. If one lacks the bond of the sacraments, one is excommunicated. If one lacks the bond of authority, one is a schismatic. All three bonds had to be in place before the baptized subject could be a member of the Church and receive any other sacraments.

Today, we look to the age of reason as gateway to Eucharist. Emphasis on the "age of reason" originates in a decree of Pope Benedict XIV (ca. 1740). Benedict held that those who were "baptized by a heretic" were "excluded from the Church" if, after reaching the age of "moral awareness," they continued "in the errors of the baptizer." It seems unusual to require young Christians first to sin—and seek forgiveness—before they can unite with Christ and the Church in Communion. Yet that is the present practice of Catholic churches in the United States. Our bishops are required to insist that first reconciliation is the principal gateway to first Communion. Catholics have inherited ambiguity in their theology and practice of sacramental initiation.

Pope Pius X took confirmation out of the equation of admission to first Communion. In less than a century we lost the significance of confirmation as the primary sacrament for admission to Communion. In Aidan

Kavanagh's view, Pius X "dissolved the integrity of initiation" and "left confirmation bereft" of its psychological consummation in the experience of first Communion.¹⁷

Liturgical historians tell us the ancient Christian churches conducted baptism in private, apart from the assembly, for the sake of the modesty of the men and women being baptized. The catechumens were baptized naked. Therefore, confirmation with chrism was the main element of the public portion of the baptismal rite. The bishop administered this anointing in the presence of the Christian assembly as a whole.

The episcopal confirmation of baptism by anointing with chrism and by the laying on of hands is the primary sacramental means to signify and create the relationship between Christians and their local church. It comes by way of their relationship to the local bishop. The intuition of the bishops of the United Kingdom and Ireland was correct on this point: to receive Communion is always also to say: "I am in full communion with the Catholic Church united with the bishop of this local community and with the Bishop of Rome."¹⁸

Restrictions on eucharistic sharing in the current Roman Catholic documents are premised on the relationship of the communicant to the Church. The norms implicitly recognize that communicants are incorporated into the universal Church by way of their incorporation into a local church. Moreover, in the conservative communion ecclesiologies (from Ignatius of Antioch to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger), the relationship between communicant and the one, local bishop is integral to eucharistic Communion. For Ignatius, unity with the bishop was the only empirical validation he could imagine for unity with Christ and with the Church.¹⁹ For Ratzinger, unity with the bishop of Rome is the main empirical validation he imagines for unity with Christ and with the Church.²⁰

Along these lines, I recommend a restored initiatory praxis of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist in a continuous rite for all Christians, regardless of age and maturity. This would put the Catholic Church on much stronger grounds in discussions of eucharistic sharing. If the sacrament of confirmation were restored to its historic location, the 1983 Code of Canon Law could simply state, "Ordinarily, only those who have been confirmed by a Catholic bishop (or his delegate) may receive Holy Communion." This

¹⁷ Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York: Pueblo, 1978) 70.

¹⁸ *One Bread, One Body* 62.

¹⁹ Kenneth Hein, *Eucharist and Excommunication: A Study in Early Christian Doctrine and Discipline* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1973) 215.

²⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987) 246.

is a much simpler and inviting norm than are the current prohibitions. It amounts to a simple and positive assertion of an important element of Catholic faith: Catholic bishops are ordained in apostolic succession, and the sacrament of confirmation is the ordinary means for baptized men and women to participate in the apostolicity of the Church.

I find it ironic when Catholic authorities emphasize the relationship between the Christian and the local bishop, but fail to recognize confirmation as the missing link between baptism and the Eucharist. Perhaps some persons fear the loss of confirmation as a “sacrament of Christian maturity.” To them, Aidan Kavanagh offers reassurance that the Eucharist, not confirmation, is the typical sacrament of Christian maturity. The Eucharist, he states, is the way in which baptism “comes home to rest in us at every stage of life.”²¹

Christian Ministry with Respect to the Question of Eucharistic Sharing

The current norms on eucharistic sharing distinguish between Christians based on apostolic succession. Canon law treats non-Catholics from churches in valid apostolic succession differently than those from ecclesial communities that have lost or impaired the apostolic succession. Recognition of ministry is a painfully acute question, made all the more neuralgic for disagreement on the ordination of women among our closest dialogue partners.

With the exception of the Orthodox and other Oriental churches, our closest dialogue partners have embraced the concept of unity by stages. This model understands that church unity can be prepared for and implemented in stages. Over time, Christian communities plan to join in full reconciliation of ministry, doctrine, church life, and sacramental discipline. Eucharistic sharing and the mutual recognition of ministry are essential components in the plans of uniting churches. The resistance of Catholic authorities to unity by stages perplexes me. It seems inconsistent given the congeniality of Catholic theology to the idea of a variety of levels of communion.²²

²¹ Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism* 177.

²² For a contrasting view, consider Aidan Kavanagh who states that “degrees of belonging to the Church are real only antecedent to baptism” (Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism* 174). Also see Brosseder who says that speaking of “degrees of being the Church” is nonsensical because “fullness” refers to the Church in reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit. And, the Holy Spirit is either “filling you or you are resisting it” (Brosseder, 132). Enforcing distinctions among the baptized (as those who “belong” to the Church and those who do not) does risk turning the Church into an Orwellian “Animal Farm”: “All are baptized but some are more baptized than others.”

Nevertheless, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has clearly enforced the idea that any restoration to unity with the Catholic Church will not result in a unity that had not existed prior to the merger. Various documents from the Vatican have changed the plain meaning of *Lumen gentium*. The phrase “the Church of Christ subsists in (*subsistit in*) the Catholic Church” is now said to mean “the Church of Christ subsists *only* in (*subsistit solummodo in*) the Catholic Church.”²³ Authorities insist the Catholic Church is an unequal partner in ecumenical dialogue.

This insistence reflects a refusal to accept the empirical success of unity be stages to foster unity between diverse Christian churches. The Congregation is poised instead to enforce the idea that the Catholic Church is nothing less than the One Church of Christ alone and by itself. This is a stunningly more audacious claim than one may find in the documents of Vatican II.

The current norms do not reflect a more nuanced understanding of communion as relationship. Communion, because it consists of relationships, is fluid and changes with time. Communion, like relationships, can be planned, prepared, and energized. As Teresa Berger reminds us, the “ecumenical we” is constantly being reconstituted. God’s promise of wholeness is not couched in terms of unity but—this is Berger’s image—primarily in terms of multiple webs sustained by God and God’s gracious kindness. It consists of cosmic, human, and ecclesial well-being for all.²⁴ I recommend this as a fruitful decision for Christian ecumenism.

I encourage Catholic authorities to make the necessary steps to prepare for full communion. If we were more eagerly preparing ourselves for full communion, our resistance to eucharistic sharing might be more acceptable to our closest dialogue partners. How long do we expect them to wait for us?

FOUR MODEST PROPOSALS TO REVISE THE QUESTION

I offer four modest proposals to revise the question of eucharistic sharing for Catholic ministers and authorities.

We should put to bed the “means and ends of unity” argument. The means and ends of unity argument is fruitless, faulty, and paradoxical. It is fruitless

²³ *Dominus Iesus* no. 16; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion” *Communio notio* (1992) 10.

²⁴ Teresa Berger, “‘Separated Brethren’ and ‘Separated Sisters’: Feminist and/as Ecumenical Visions of the Church,” in *Ecumenical Theology in Worship, Doctrine, and Life: Essays Presented to Geoffrey Wainwright on his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. David S. Cunningham, Ralph Del Colle, and Lucas Lamadrid (New York: Oxford University, 1999) 221–30, at 229.

because it does not help us understand the different kinds of unity expressed in the Eucharist. It is faulty because it conceals the genuine Christian character of communion as a unity in diversity. It is a paradoxical formulation, one that jeopardizes our theology of sacramental efficacy with a Pelagian emphasis on human achievement independent from divine grace.

Catholic authorities should restore baptism and confirmation to the historical order of Christian initiation. For all Christians, we should place much stronger emphasis on the ecclesial effect of baptism. We should do this with no less emphasis on the very important personal effects of baptism. In the words of Myriam Wijlens, we must always stress how “baptism and faith unite [Christians] more than we could ever be divided.” Catholic authorities, in particular, would assist ecumenism if they restored confirmation to its proper place as the ordinary sacramental means of admission to Holy Communion regardless of age, mental, or moral capacity.

Ministry is a particularly neuralgic problem for Catholic authorities and it will remain so into the conceivable future. Some Catholic authorities would like to rule definitively (negatively) on the validity of Protestant ordination and Eucharist. Cardinal Ratzinger has expressed the opinion that the emphasis on apostolic succession and the historic episcopate among Anglicans was the result of a 19th-century “liturgical romanticism,” a “sentimental search for origins played out in a nostalgia for liturgical ceremony.”²⁵ These desires are balanced by the equally strong ecumenical desires of other Catholic authorities, notably Pope John Paul II as expressed in his encyclical *Ut unum sint*.

By way of comment, I would note that non-Catholic dialogue partners may draw comfort from the realization that Catholic resistance to eucharistic sharing is less indicative of negative attitudes about them. This resistance is far more indicative of unresolved dilemmas and controversies among Catholics. At the end of the day, official resistance to eucharistic sharing seems to be premised on unstated fears about the loss of papal authority, a crisis in the understanding of episcopacy, and serious, unresolved questions about the power and person of the presbyter. Catholics will require special assistance and extraordinary patience from our non-Catholic dialogue partners when we begin to plan for the reconciliation of ministries and a restored apostolic succession.

Catholic and non-Catholic theologians can assist in revising the question of eucharistic sharing in light of new insights drawn from biblical and historical studies. I briefly mention two important conclusions from biblical

²⁵ Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* 245–56.

scholarship. The first is scholarship on the phrase “to discern the body.” The second is Jesus’ own practice of meal sharing.

The strongest biblical foundation for any restriction on admission to Communion is found in 1 Corinthians 11:17–34. There Paul emphasizes the need to “discern the body.” Dale Martin has examined this issue and three of his points should be mentioned here. First, Paul held that the Lord’s Supper was the “worst time to have divisions surface” in the Church.²⁶ Second, Paul held that the Corinthians perverted the meal “when they use it to reinforce status distinctions.”²⁷ Third, for Paul, discerning the body “certainly has something to do with paying attention to the bodily needs of other Christians.”²⁸

What are the practical consequences of discerning the body for eucharistic sharing? Failing to discern the body was the most serious offense against the Eucharist that Paul could imagine. An unworthy communion is one in which the communicant receives, yet despises and neglects the needs of his or her fellow communicants.²⁹ Or, as stated in the words of Archbishop Emeritus of Milan, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini:

We recognize Christ not just in the sacramental signs of bread and the wine, but also in the face of the little ones, in the lowest social outcasts. We recognize him *beyond the confines of our Christian communities*, beyond the murkiness of so many difficult situations in which so many of our brothers and sisters live in desolation.³⁰

Because Christians in North America fail to share the Eucharist with other Christians, I venture the guess that St. Paul, were he here today, would be no less critical of us than when he wrote to the Corinthian Christians.

A final example from biblical studies is seen in Jesus’ own practice of meal sharing. His practice of meal sharing had profound social and theological implications for the people of his day. Those profound implications are often lost to Christian communities of our day and may be recovered. For example, recalling the meal Jesus shared with his disciples at Emmaus, John Muddiman, an ordained Anglican member of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, asked: “What assurance did the risen Christ have that Cleopas and his companion had the right beliefs and were in good standing before he celebrated the Eucharist for them?” The simple

²⁶ Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University, 1995) 75.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 194.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 195.

²⁹ Hein, *Eucharist and Excommunication* 63.

³⁰ Carlo M. Martini, *On the Body: A Contemporary Theology of the Human Person*, trans. Rosanna M. Grammanco Frongia (New York: Crossroad, 2001) 86 (emphasis mine).

invitation to stay and eat, Muddiman says, was “sufficient for the divine grace to comply.”³¹

CLOSING REMARKS

The more we repeat and restate the bans and prohibitions on eucharistic sharing, the dimmer the prospect for Christian unity. The repetition of bans, even for the purpose of clarification, amounts to a rubbing of salt into wounds. Philippe Larere put it this way: unilateral statements on eucharistic sharing are experienced by many Christians as “painfully tactless.”³²

Unfortunately, the present norms suggest that, even when Catholics are in grave circumstances, the reception of a sacramental rite from a non-Catholic minister would be positively harmful to them. If it were merely a question of the rite being somewhat beneficial or vaguely neutral, the grave circumstance would be sufficient to warrant the dispensation. For such reasons, it is not surprisingly how the Anglican bishops of England have concluded that the ban on Catholics receiving the Eucharist in Anglican churches is an “ecumenical, theological, and pastoral affront.”³³

I agree with George Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, who finds the repetition of the bans on eucharistic sharing both “hurtful and unhelpful.”³⁴ Catholic authorities ought to find a way to honor what is strong in our convictions about admission to Communion, while minimizing what is weak and hurtful in these convictions. I encourage Catholic authorities to formulate norms in more positive language. I encourage them to minimize the reasons for excluding baptized non-Catholics from the reception of Communion.

The current statements of the bans on eucharistic sharing jeopardize ecumenical relationships. They imply unsubstantiated, sweeping, and negative judgments on the worth of non-Catholics, their ministries, and their faith. In a word, Catholic authorities ought to help us recover the gracious immensity of Christian communion. It must be bigger than we can presently imagine, or else it would hardly be worth our time. Our efforts toward Christian unity, timid and fearful as they are, represent but a minuscule advance toward the communion that God has prepared for us.

³¹ Meinrad Scherer-Edmunds, “Let’s Stop Posting Bouncers at the Table of the Lord,” *U.S. Catholic* 65, no. 6 (June 2000) 24–28, at 28.

³² Philippe Larere, *The Lord’s Supper: Towards an Ecumenical Understanding of the Eucharist*, trans. Patrick Madigan (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1993) 68.

³³ House of Bishops of the Church of England, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of Unity* (London: Church House, 2001) 16.

³⁴ “Canterbury Objects to Vatican Eucharist Ban,” *The Christian Century* 118 (April 11, 2001) 11.