

EUCCHARIST & CHURCH UNITY – RELATING TO THE ORTHODOX (EASTERN CHURCHES) BY BRENDAN ROBERTS

Introduction

Our Saviour's passionate prayer for his followers has resonated throughout the history of the Church, "May they all may be one." (John 17:21) But the impetus, in a world that is losing its morality and becoming even more individualistic, is once again shining with a greater intensity. Though the flock has been scattered as a result of mistrust and misunderstandings, the Holy Spirit is once again strengthening and spreading the desire for unity. In this essay I will explain the relationship of the Eucharist and the unity of the Church, especially pertaining to the Orthodox Church. Additionally we will explore signs of hope gifted by the Holy Spirit, for the communion with our Orthodox brothers and sisters is "so profound that it lacks little to attain the fullness that would permit a common celebration of the Lord's Eucharist."¹ You will also have the opportunity to encounter what challenges still face the Church on the road to Full Communion.

Quest for Unity and Forgiveness

With any quest comes a deep desire to set off on a journey into the unknown. The Pilgrim Church too is on a journey in its quest for full unity. The burning desire of oneness must include a renewal of heart and a desire for forgiveness, for "division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature"² How can wholeness be achieved if the wrongs of the past

are not confronted and the wounds of division healed?

Unity of the Church Centered on the Divine Eucharist

Christ instigated the Church to be his kingdom on earth, a communion of holiness and service (*diakonia*). And so through lay ministries, people distinct from leaders (*laikos*), the Church is made present to the world. The presbyter shares in the Bishop's fullness of priesthood and so he is the sacramental icon of Christ in which the Church's life and being is in Christ and from Christ; and he acts *In Persona Christi*.

The Church is in the world and the world is in the Church, for the Church is a sign of God's love to the world and part of the world is brought into the Church. The sacraments make the whole chosen people (*laos*) holy.

From the Church's inception Christ has given the gift of unity to His Church. But the Church must always keep focused upon being one and so we must "pray and work to maintain, reinforce, and perfect the unity that Christ wills for her."³

With this communion, though imperfect, we are to reflect on what we hold in common (*koinon*). For this is the base on which to build, rather than starting with spotlighting our differences. Pope John XIII said, "What unites us is much greater than what divides us."⁴ While dialogue, an "exchange of gifts"⁵ leads to a greater understanding and awareness of each others beliefs, the Eucharist is the foundation of the Church.

The Eucharist is not only a symbol of unity for the "the memorial of the Lord, celebrated

1. Paul VI, Discourse, December 14, 1975; cf. UR 13-18 as cited in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, n.838
2. *Unitatis Redintegratio, Decree on Ecumenism*, n.1

3. Catechism of the Catholic Church, n.820
4. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint, That They May All Be One*, n.20
5. *Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, n.13 as cited in *Ut Unum Sint*, n.28

according to his will, signifies and effects the unity of all who believe in him.”⁶

Sacred Scripture explains the relationship of Church unity and the Eucharist. St Paul writes, “And as there is one loaf, so we, although there are many of us, are one single body, for we all share in the one loaf.” (1 Cor. 10:17). The Eucharist is central to the Church and unity is effected through the sacraments. Primarily through the sacrament of the Eucharist we become one body.

We can learn a lot from the rich heritage of the Orthodox Church. “From their very origins the Churches of the East have had a treasury from which the Church of the West has drawn has drawn largely for its liturgy, spiritual tradition and jurisprudence.”⁷ Indeed, their very terminology of *Divine Eucharist* resonates with clarity, reverence and awe. We share a special bond of deep love for Christ in the Holy Eucharist. For it is from the Eucharist that the Church “derives its life and on which it thrives.”⁸

When we take an example of the Orthodox Church’s theology on the Eucharist we see that we share in common the knowledge that receiving the Eucharist worthily not only takes away venial sin but also pours grace into our hearts and we can receive eternal life now for we are united with Christ’s Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. In the Syrian Orthodox Church of the East the Priest says, “May these be unto all who partake of these, for the remission of their debts, and may they inherit eternal life by these. They will raise praise and glory unto thee, unto thy only begotten Son and unto thy Holy Ghost, now and ever more.”⁹

The Catholic Church deeply respects the culture, diversity and the theological and canonical traditions of the Orthodox Church. In fact in 1987 Pope John Paul II and Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I in a joint statement declared “that the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church can already profess together that common faith in the mystery of the Church and the bond between faith and sacraments.”¹⁰ We are united but the oneness is imperfect until we share in the one Eucharist.

Proclaiming the Divine Eucharist

In teaching on the Eucharist pastors must proclaim the truth, and in their hearts and their lives “endeavour to penetrate more deeply the Church’s spirit in this matter”¹¹ He must let the Divine Eucharist transform him and become fruitful in his life for his proclamation to be most fruitful.

It is also the lay person’s duty to submit their hearts and lives totally to penetrate the depths and wonder of the Eucharist. Therefore it is our duty to study the experience of the Church and the pearls of wisdom that the Holy Spirit has revealed through the Divine Eucharist.

This raises the question: Why is there not much emphasis on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist within our parishes?. It also brings to mind the following questions: Why are we not finding new ways, or more effectively utilising existing ways of sharing this truth with the world? Why are the pearls of Pope John Paul II’s encyclical, *Ecclesia De Eucharistia*, not being taught in the parishes? Why are parishes not running seminars on the Eucharist to educate the faithful? Regarding society at large,

6. *Sacrosanctum Concillium, The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, n.8

7. *Unitatis Redintegratio, Decree on Ecumenism*, n.14

8. *Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, n.26

9. Very Rev. Kadavil Paul, *The Eucharist Service of the Syrian Jacobite Church of Malabar* as cited in Ed. Max Thurian and Geoffrey Wainwright, *Baptism and Eucharist: Ecumenical*

Convergence in Celebration, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1983, p126

10. *Ut Unum Sint, That They May All Be One*, Pope John Paul II, n.59

11. *Sacrosanctum Concillium, The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, n.5

should not the Church advertise the truth of the Real Presence?

Challenges to Full Communion

Several obstacles have been overcome as the walls of division are one by one knocked down. However it would be very naive to ignore that there are still challenges to be faced and problems to be solved as the journey continues to Full Communion. Cardinal Kasper illustrates some of these challenges. He says that the “difficulties persist beyond those which could be considered normal and part of life.”¹² He concludes that in some ways we have reached a crisis, a turning point, as the concept of Petrine ministry is a large stumbling block to the Orthodox. Kasper’s answer to the crisis is to return to the roots of the ecumenical movement, prayer. “Only a renewed Pentecost, a renewed outpouring of the Holy Spirit, can bestow on us the unity of all disciples of Christ for which Jesus prayed on the eve of his death on the cross: ‘That all may be one’ (John 17.21)”¹³

An example of a big challenge, unforgiveness, being overcome was when Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, on behalf of the Orthodox Church accepted Pope John Paul II’s apology for the sacking of Constantinople three years after he asked for it in 2001.

The Path Forward

With the monumental work of Vatican II and in conjunction with Pope John Paul II’s encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*, inspired by the Holy Spirit the two churches are drawing closer together. Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Athenagoras I, led the way with what Pope John Paul II called the “concrete and profoundly significant gesture”

12. Walter Kasper, *That They May All Be One*, Burns & Coates, New York, 2004, p156

13. Walter Kasper, *That They May All Be One*, Burns & Coates, New York, 2004, p156

of condemning to oblivion and removing from memory and from the Church the reciprocated excommunications of the past.¹⁴ This declaration followed Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism which has opened the doors of dialogue to not only other churches but other faiths.

Closer to our own time, the XI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops was convened with the theme, *The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church*. On the 11th of October 2005 the fraternal delegates, representatives of the Orthodox Churches, addressed the Synod. Their deep gratitude for the opportunity to be present is axiomatic as is their affiliation with us in sharing such a love and awe for the Divine Eucharist.

H.E. JOHANNIS (Zizioulas), Metropolitan of Pergamo; President emeritus of the Academy of Athens (GREECE) brought with him the fraternal greetings of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and the Church of Constantinople. He viewed the invitation as a gesture of great ecumenical significance, and explained the deep bonds we share regarding the Eucharist:

“We Orthodox are deeply gratified by the fact that your Synod, too, regards the Eucharist as the source and summit of the life and mission of the Church. It is extremely important that Roman Catholics and Orthodox can say this with one voice. There may still be things that separate our two Churches but we both believe that the Eucharist is the heart of the Church. It is on this basis that we can continue the official theological dialogue of our two Churches, which is now entering a new phase. Eucharistic ecclesiology can

14. Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint, That They May All Be One*, n.17

guide us in our efforts to overcome a thousand years of separation. For it is a pity to hold the same conviction of the importance of the Eucharist but not be able to share it at the same Table.”¹⁵

The longing and work of unity is for the entire Church. “It extends to everyone, according to the ability of each, whether it be exercised in daily Christian living or in theological and historical studies.”¹⁶

As we gaze with hope into the future Pope John Paul II exhorts us not to ignore the discussions and conclusions of bilateral commissions, but states that “a serious examination needs to be made, which, by different ways and means and at various levels of responsibility, must involve the whole People of God.”¹⁷

The framework for a unification of the Catholic and Orthodox Church does not mean that the Orthodox Church must conform to the Latin rite and denounce its history and culture. On the contrary Pope John Paul II suggests the Church would recognise “the right of the Eastern Catholic Churches to have their own organizational structures and to carry out their own apostolate.”¹⁸

Conclusion

The Church is the kingdom of heaven on earth and simultaneously the unfulfilled or not yet kingdom. It is through the Eucharist that the Church will be become Full Communion. Already it is well underway. This pilgrimage to wholeness has been served faithfully by Pope John Paul II. His comments on the progress made illustrate how close we have come to

oneness with our brothers and sisters in Christ:

Certainly, due to disagreements in matters of faith, it is not yet possible to celebrate together the same Eucharistic Liturgy. And yet we do have a burning desire to join in celebrating the one Eucharist of the Lord, and this desire itself is already a common prayer of praise, a single supplication. Together we speak to the Father and increasingly we do so “with one heart.” At times it seems that we are closer to being able finally to seal this “real although not yet full” communion. A century ago who could even have imagined such a thing?”¹⁹

It is so heartening to see the headway that has been made, for the Catholic and Orthodox Churches have been walking the same route as pilgrims to unity. The Catholic Church shares much in common with our Orthodox brethren, especially regarding the Divine Eucharist, which is the sign and effect of unity. Together with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and the efforts of Pope John Paul II there is much hope that by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit we will, hopefully in the near future, sit at the table with our Orthodox family and partake in the Body and Blood of our Saviour.

NB: For articles or books by Brendan Roberts see www.godfact.com or www.amazon.com

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http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documenti/bollettino_21_xi-ordinaria-2005/02_inglese/b18_02.html. Accessed 19.10.05

16. *Unitatis Redintegratio, Decree on Ecumenism*, n.5

17. Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint, That They May All Be One*, n.80

18. Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint, That They May All Be One*, n.60

19. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint, That They May All Be One*, n.45

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NB: All Scriptural quotations are from The New Jerusalem Bible: Pocket Edition

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