

HOW CAN THIS MAN GIVE US HIS FLESH TO EAT?

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The Catholic Church's prohibition of sharing the Eucharist with other Christians is an abuse of institutional power, issuing from a habit of saying 'No'. The widespread misrepresentation of transubstantiation as essential doctrine, synonymous with real presence, rather than philosophical term, remains damaging. Wholesale condemnation of 'sacrament as symbol' is mistaken. Eucharistic devotions, helpful to many Catholics, can obscure the fundamental reality of Eucharist as Meal. In this matter, as in others, ecumenical dialogue should be an adventure of rediscovery of essential truths. Using the Eucharist as an instrument of exclusion and punishment stands condemned by the 'Yes' which is Jesus.

In the quest for Christian unity no topic clamours for agreement more than the Eucharist. Division over the Eucharist is especially deplorable, because the Eucharist is designed to be a celebration of love, unity and reconciliation with God and with our fellow human beings.

This fiftieth anniversary of the major ecumenical conference in Ireland is an occasion for celebration and rejoicing; but it is also an occasion for regret. Although we have made remarkable theological progress in ecumenical understanding at meetings like this one, little institutional progress has been made at governmental levels in the Catholic Church. I hope that I am not introducing too negative a note into an occasion for rejoicing; but I found that I could not avoid wondering why the institutional Catholic Church is still so

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ungenerous in its approach to celebrating the Eucharist with other Christians. There is no convincing theological support today for institutional negativity about sharing the Eucharist.

In general, in all aspects of Christian unity, we seem to be satisfied with gestures rather than actually making substantive progress. For example, the Pope meets the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the media seize on the occasion as a significant moment in church unity. No doubt it makes for good television, but it's of no great significance unless something happens on a universal and practical level in the church. Gestures cost nothing and can easily give the illusion of ecumenical progress.

Throughout this talk I will occasionally be critical of my own church, because criticism, like charity, begins at home, and because I can make critical remarks about my church which Protestants and Anglicans might find it inappropriate to make in an ecumenical setting like this. I may offend traditionalists in my own church, but that is a risk that all ecumenists must take. It would be unfortunate if we avoided questions of reform because, for reasons of ecumenical tact, we were afraid to give offence. I appreciate that members of other churches can be bored by our domestic Catholic problems with authority, but I ask them to recognise that an ecumenical gathering offers a forum that is not yet provided within our own church. Ecumenism needs to be practised within a church as well as between churches. Church unity is inseparable from internal domestic reform, where reform is needed. Church governance unfortunately pervades every aspect of church life and theology. It matters, from the standpoint of church unity, *how* our different churches are governed. As we shall see later, Alexander Schmemmann, the distinguished Eastern Orthodox theologian, makes the point that attitudes to the Eucharist are influenced by how a church is governed.

On the whole, Protestants and Anglicans practise a more generous eucharistic hospitality than we Roman Catholics do. We are still a church characterised by restrictive laws and suspicion of hopeful initiatives. St Paul challenged this negativity in a remark he made to the Christians of Corinth: 'For the Son of God, Jesus Christ ... was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes"' (2 Cor. 1:19). This could be an encouraging text for all who are dedicated to the movement for Christian unity. Too often our authorities seem primed to say 'No' to initiatives that many ordinary Catholics, and especially

ecumenical conferences like this one, would like to see put into practice. This negativity is often combined with a serious abuse of power, especially when power is allied to hidebound conservatism, and when the ecumenically unconverted have the power to say 'No' to some basic initiative like a shared Eucharist.

This is why we simply have to be vocal about what needs to be done about reform in our church. One deeply conservative faction has power in the Catholic Church and is using it to suppress legitimate opposition to its attitudes and actions. We have a new pope who seems to bear some resemblance to Pope John XXIII; and that gives us hope that he will be able to bring about some badly needed institutional reforms.

We are still acting as if ecumenism means finding out how far other churches measure up to *our* requirements, even when those requirements are themselves in need of far-reaching change.

To some extent we are all prisoners of what happened in the past. We did not cause the divisions. We have inherited them; and it is our duty to do what we can to heal them. A sense of history prompts us to remember that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were an age of *dedicated division* and controversy between Catholics and Protestants. Christians caused schisms among themselves and actually considered it virtuous to be different from each other in matters that are central to our common Christian faith! (I am old enough to remember the time when we were told that it was a sin even to enter a Protestant church!)

There was little or no hunger for unity among divided Christians then. Each tradition institutionalised the differences that divided them; that is, each defined its own beliefs consciously in terms that rejected the beliefs, or supposed beliefs, of the other. Each made a *virtue* of differing from the other. Thank God many of us have moved on from that depressing and unpromising situation; but it remains as an unhappy inheritance from the past, and it can be exploited by comfortable traditionalists who see no need for change and who like to speak dismissively of *à la carte* Catholicism when their co-religionists do not share their convictions. They believe in *table d'hôte* Catholicism where the menu is prescribed by them.

If ecumenical dialogue is not an honest *search for truth* and for new insights, it becomes an exercise in what professor John Macquarrie, in a memorable phrase, has called 'ecclesiastical joinery'. (Macquarrie has

been described as ‘unquestionably Anglicanism’s most distinguished systematic theologian in the second half of the twentieth century.’¹) Although he was a committed ecumenist, Macquarrie was quite prepared to speak of the ‘many dangers in ecumenism’, especially ‘the danger of submerging legitimate differences, and thereby impoverishing the body which is enriched and strengthened by these differences. ... *The genuine diversity-in-unity of the body of Christ needs to be defended against uniformity just as much as against divisiveness*’.² Macquarrie is here making an immensely important observation, which applies to all our churches. If we struggle for Christian unity at the expense of legitimate diversity, the enterprise is not worth the effort.

One might interpret Professor Macquarrie’s robust attitude to ecumenism as a warning against promoting unity at the expense of truth—being ecumenical with the truth, as it were. His phrase ‘diversity in unity’ neatly summarises the situation as it ought to be. When are we going to appreciate the difference between unity and uniformity? Christianity is a big enough religion to welcome the sort of diversity that enriches rather than threatens its unity. To put it bluntly, I would not want to belong to a united church that did not welcome legitimate diversity. We Catholics have to put up with too much of this kind of thing in our own church!

Let me turn now to an event of some relevance to the quest for Christian eucharistic unity. In September 1965, three months before the end of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI issued an encyclical letter, *Mysterium Fidei*, on the Eucharist. It seemed like a voice from the past, and it was in vivid dissonance with much that the council was trying to bring about. It was a profoundly reactionary document that condemned some of the ideas about the Eucharist, such as ‘transignification’ and ‘transfinalisation’, that were circulating as a result of new thinking released by the council. I have no difficulty in accepting that some of those ideas were open to criticism; but they were a significant contribution to healthy church life and thought.

¹ Timothy Bradshaw, ‘John Macquarrie’ in Alister E. McGrath (ed), *The SPCK Handbook of Anglican Theologians* (London: SPCK, 1998), p.168.

² J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London, 1977), 403-4. My emphasis.

Pope Paul's encyclical dismissed them out of hand and inflexibly reaffirmed the unreformed tradition.

The encyclical was especially critical of the role that the new thinking on the Eucharist gave to symbolism. It claimed that emphasis on symbolism amounted to a defective idea of the *reality* of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, as if acceptance of symbolism amounted to a watering down of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Suspicion of symbolism has been a pronounced feature of official Roman theology since the condemnation of Modernism in the first decade of the twentieth century. At the centre of that suspicion lay the word 'transubstantiation', which is still causing widespread problems in ecumenical dialogue. I believe that it is important enough to merit a fairly close look.

The term 'transubstantiation' is still being treated as indispensable to Catholic theology of the Eucharist. That is worrying; for as long as this remains the case, there will be little progress in moves to unity with respect to the Eucharist. 'Transubstantiation' has proved to be a most contentious word among Christians. Protestants have always rejected it. For example, Baptists in the seventeenth century judged that the Catholic view of the Eucharist was 'carnal and corporal'; in other words, that it was disturbingly physical and lacked a spiritual and biblical dimension.

Anglicanism, in spite of its general attempts to preserve a mediating position between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, was as dismissive of transubstantiation as Protestantism was. The Anglican view, expressed in article 28 of the 39 Articles, says that the doctrine of transubstantiation cannot be found in sacred Scripture, and that it has given rise to many superstitions. Both of these contentions are quite true and can be immediately conceded by Roman Catholics, without any infidelity to their theological principles.

'Transubstantiation' is a highly technical term that ought never to have been brought into everyday usage. It should have remained in the studies of theologians, where it was first conjured up in the twelfth century. The powerful influence on Christian theology of the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, in the thirteenth century, shaped the subsequent scholastic era during which the word 'transubstantiation' entered into formal and conciliar use by the church.

Today it is bandied about as if its meaning is self-evident—which it most certainly is not. One cannot '*believe in*' transubstantiation, which

is a philosophical term. You can't 'believe' in philosophical positions—you either accept them, modify them or reject them. They do not belong to the substance of faith; they are ways of giving cultural relevance to what Christians believe; and when cultures change, they may become obsolete and even misleading. The Catholic Church has said that it is not competent to impose any philosophical system in the name of faith; though it *can* say that a particular philosophy 'fittingly', or 'aptly' expresses a doctrine, as the Council of Trent did with the philosophical notion of transubstantiation. Trent does not say that Catholics *must* use the term, only that its use was 'apt and proper' in the sixteenth century. After all, the church got on without the term for over a thousand years; therefore it follows logically that it cannot be an indispensable part of Christian teaching. Rather, it is a theological development that is valid only in its own highly specialized culture. Tradition cannot legitimately add to the substance of Christian faith; it can only clarify its meaning in terms that are culturally appropriate.

I appreciate that many people are bored with what they regard as theological niceties; but those who use highly technical theological terms like 'transubstantiation', cannot reasonably avoid attending carefully to the theology involved. If they misuse the term—as often happens—they may cause needless confusion. Catholics sometimes use the term 'transubstantiation' as a synonym for 'real presence'—which it is not. Real presence is an essential element in Catholic doctrine, though it begs the philosophical question of what the words 'real' and 'presence' actually mean. We need to recognise that symbolic presence can be real presence. (In my teaching days I used to advise students not to use the phrase 'only symbolic'!)

Some of the most important gestures in everyday life and art are symbolic. Think of the political significance of displaying flags in Northern Ireland or marching in certain places at certain times of the year. Think of the significance of bringing to New Ross in Ireland, with full military honours, a light from the Eternal Flame of the tomb of President Kennedy in Arlington National Cemetery in America. It's not the action in itself; it's the meaning that the action is intended to carry symbolically, especially when it links a great President with the sad history of poverty and emigration.

The Eucharist was symbolic from the first moment of its creation in the upper room on the evening before the passion and death of Jesus.

It linked the Last Supper with the suffering of the next day. That the Eucharist is a meal, is primary and indispensable to its symbolic meaning. This is a truth that had been obscured in the Roman Catholic Church, largely because of its preoccupation with what happens to the elements of bread and wine after consecration.

For Catholics, the importance of the Eucharist as a symbolic meal has also been obscured by the various eucharistic devotions that concentrate on the reality of Christ's presence in the consecrated bread, rather than on the meal in the upper room on the evening before his passion and death. We have to admit that it is not easy to reconcile the fact that the Eucharist is a meal with such devotional uses of it as exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, or Benediction. Please note that I am in no way repudiating Benediction or exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. They are legitimate, but not compulsory, developments that occurred in a later age, and they are in no way necessary to the integrity of Catholic faith.

Many Catholics, however, have found eucharistic devotions helpful to the living out of their faith and prayer, and there has been a strong and persistent tradition of eucharistic piety in the church based on the conviction that Christ remains present in the bread and wine after the liturgical celebration is over. There is, however, the possibility that people can come to think that eucharistically inspired prayer is superior to other forms of prayer. This is not so.

The fact is, that believers can be inspired to prayer by great art—a consideration that is appropriate to remember here in Glenstal with its famous icon chapel. Examples are endless, and personal experience determines what each one finds to be transcendental in everyday life. One cannot prescribe particular occasions as transcendental for others; they must find their own.

Because music happens to be the art that speaks most powerfully to me, I find that, for instance, a symphony by the Austrian composer Anton Bruckner creates a mystical atmosphere that inspires prayer. Others may find Bruckner's music long, dense and uninspiring. Bach's B minor Mass is one of the greatest artistic monuments to Christian faith in all music. Atheists can be moved by the sublime music; but a Christian who loves the music can find that it raises the mind and heart to God.

John the Evangelist does not describe, in his gospel, the institution of the Eucharist in the upper room on the eve of Jesus' passion and

death; but chapter 6 of his gospel makes it very clear that Jesus employs the symbol of eating his flesh to refer to the *total* attitude of believers towards him as Messiah and Son of the Father. Jesus spoke through parable and metaphor as if challenging his listeners to use their imaginations in order to appreciate the full thrust of what he was saying. He was an artist and a poet as well as an inspiring teacher; and his artistry is inseparable from the revelation that his Father had sent him to bring to the entire world.

The Eucharist, then, is a symbolic liturgical expression of a *comprehensive* act of faith in Jesus Christ, and not simply of his presence in the elements of bread and wine. In many respects, focusing attention on the bread and wine was, and remains, a regrettable direction to take in our Christian consideration of the Eucharist, though it has had a long history in Catholic piety and especially in relations between Catholicism and Protestantism. Whenever the focus has been upon what happens to the elements of bread and wine, there has been disagreement and dissension, both between Protestants and Catholics and also between Protestants themselves. (Martin Luther and the Swiss reformer Huldreich Zwingli could never agree about what happens in the Eucharist.)

It is possible to be a perfectly orthodox Catholic and never use the term 'transubstantiation'. In fact, it has become culturally unwise to use it today, since people today normally think in terms of physics and chemistry rather than of substance and accidents. Transubstantiation, which is a strictly metaphysical term, often seems to be given a physical meaning. Unfortunately it is also sometimes used as a thoughtless and divisive slogan 'Catholics believe in transubstantiation' (with the implication that it is this that makes them different from Protestants).

Speaking in Dublin a while ago, Richard Dawkins, the well-known professional atheist, remarked in his familiar and magisterial fashion: 'If they don't believe in transubstantiation then they are not Roman Catholics'.¹ So there: now you know. The atheistic magisterium, which often has a poor grasp of reputable modern Christian theology, has spoken and defined how Catholics should think about the Eucharist! The fact that an intelligent man like Dawkins can make an *ex cathedra* pronouncement of this kind is a warning of how easily popular

¹ As reported in *The Irish Times*, Thursday, June 7, 2012, p.13.

misconceptions can become dogmas in the minds of even intelligent people like Professor Dawkins, whose desire to attack religion sometimes overpowers his understanding of it.

Let's use our imaginations as well as our minds. Let's envisage the scene as the evangelist, Mark, describes it. In the course of his last meal, Jesus took a loaf, broke off pieces of it and distributed them to the disciples, saying 'this is my body'. Then he took a cup of wine and gave it to them to drink, saying 'this is my blood' (Mk. 14: 22-25). Both offerings were a clearly symbolic gesture to illustrate his union with them. *We cannot imagine that any of them wondered what had happened to the bread and wine that he had just shared with them.* They were focused upon the meaning of the *entire* occasion, including his washing of their feet (which was plainly sacramental and symbolic in the deepest possible sense, though it was never officially designated as one of the sacraments).

St Paul, reflecting theologically on the significance of the Last Supper, adds that Jesus exhorted his disciples to 'do this in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes'. Thus Paul links the supper with the sacrifice of Jesus' life that was to occur on the next day (1 Cor. 11:23-26). It was a daring thought, and it opened up a valuable direction for eucharistic theology; but it was also one that was later to prove needlessly contentious, because there were Protestants who believed that Catholic doctrine proclaimed that every celebration of the Eucharist was a *new* sacrifice; and Catholics did little to disabuse them of this belief.

Speculation about the meaning of sacrifice would follow in the later church; and it would become another cause of utterly needless division between Catholics and Protestants. The eucharistic liturgy is not a separate, *new* act of sacrifice each time it is celebrated. It is a liturgical *re-presentation* of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice of himself on Calvary. 'Do this in memory of me', Jesus said at the last supper with his disciples, thus leaving them a symbolic memorial of his passion and death.

It cannot be said too often that true ecumenism is not a matter of bargaining: it is a joint voyage into fresh understanding of truths that are ever ancient and ever new. Those truths have to be lived with imagination and rediscovered in every age of our lives. Dialogue

between the churches is, or ought to be, always an adventure; and adventure is an aspect of faith that deserves greater attention than we, perhaps, usually give it. Nineteenth century Catholic theology was preoccupied with the intellectual certainty of faith, rather than seeing it as an adventure. We need to return to what faith meant to Abraham, who was prepared at God's bidding to set out on a journey 'not knowing where he was going' (Heb. 11:8). The notion of adventure can help to keep our Christian faith lively and protected from the deadening effect of mindless routine.

As a result of joining in the ecumenical movement, many Roman Catholics have found that they have to take the Reformation seriously, and not simply to think of it as a regrettable occurrence that divided Western Christianity in the sixteenth century. It raised issues that are still with us and need to be pondered afresh.

A notable instance of how such issues can be reconfigured is *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the text produced by the conference organised by the World Council of Churches in 1982 in Lima, Peru and comprising a large number of theologians from most of the Christian churches. It is a justly famous text, and it gives us a splendid view of the meaning and scope of the Eucharist both in the church and in the world. I would draw your attention to two major points in the text. One of its statements offers a neat resolution of a long-standing problem. It says that while Christ's real presence in the Eucharist does not depend on the faith of the individual, all agree that to discern the body and blood of Christ, faith is required. That admirably concise statement should go far to remove both Catholic and Protestant anxieties.

The statement goes on to emphasise that members of the Christian church are there not simply for themselves, in a cosy enclave separated from the world. When we take part in the Eucharist, we are performing a ritual celebration of what a redeemed *world* would look like *ideally and globally*. St Paul, in the wonderful eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans, speaks of all creation groaning in labour, waiting for redemption (Rom. 8:22). Paul also observed that with Jesus it was always 'Yes'. Everyone, without distinction, was welcome to his table. It was his post-apostolic followers, quite early in the church's history, who made rules and regulations about who could, and who could not, share in the Eucharist. To use the Eucharist as an instrument of exclusion and punishment is a deplorable misuse of a sacrament that

is all about unity, love, acceptance, understanding and forgiveness. It is appalling to hear some priest or prelate excluding, with apparent relish, this or that person from receiving Holy Communion. In an age when people are leaving the church in disturbingly large numbers, and when the treatment of clerics who have abused children has brought obloquy upon the church, it is incongruous that its leaders should be wielding a big stick by refusing the Eucharist to anyone.

If you had been able to approach the apostles a few days after the last meal that Jesus had eaten with them, it is safe to say that you would have heard nothing about what had happened to the bread and wine after Jesus had identified them symbolically with his body and blood. Nor would you have heard anything about conditions of validity in the celebration of a sacrament. Power-driven bureaucracy, linked to bad theology, can destroy the simple and straightforward thrust of the Gospel. What worried St Paul were the stories he had heard about the behaviour of the Christians in Corinth. Paul is remarkably down-to-earth: in his first letter to the Corinthians he says, 'when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. ... When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk' (1 Cor. 11:18, 20-21). Paul has to tell the Corinthians to have their ordinary meal at home, before assembling for the Eucharist. At least they got it right about the Eucharist being a meal.

Having considered what Protestants and Catholics have contributed to our thinking about the Eucharist, I turn in conclusion to a distinguished Russian Orthodox theologian, Alexander Schmemmann, who was born in Estonia and spent much of his life in the United States. The Eastern Orthodox have a remarkably integrated approach to church, to theology and to liturgy. Schmemmann virtually identifies eucharistic celebration with the church itself. In other words, he says that if you want to know what the church is there for, look at its celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the church in action.

In an age like ours that quite properly emphasises the need for social and political action in favour of the poor, the hungry, the victims of persecution, refugees and of those who are suffering the inequities of life, we westerners may need to remember the mystical element in the church which the Orthodox take so seriously and which can be

neglected by Christians who are taken up exclusively with action in the world; though some do indeed combine the two, thus giving witness to the full meaning of the Christian Gospel.

Schmemmann makes a fascinating point when he claims that a theology of church in which institutional absolutism predominates, promotes spiritual individualism and what he calls a 'subjective' religious life. In other words, a church that places disproportionate emphasis on authority and on hierarchical rank has the effect of making its members turn inward to a form of prayer that is purely private. Thus we lose a sense of the church as an integrated community of equals, in which authority is seen as a service, and not as an opportunity to lord it over its institutionally powerless members. A sense of 'them' and 'us' impairs its unity. There is no 'upstairs/downstairs' in the Christian church—a fact that Pope Francis is making clear by his behaviour, which has symbolic as well as domestic relevance. We can only hope that he also manages to reform the bureaucrats who claim to act in his name and with his authority! Let me be candid at the risk of appearing subversive: the appearance and behaviour of an autocratic and intolerant magisterium can destroy the eucharistic nature of the church. It's a disturbing claim; but I put it before you in all seriousness and conviction.

Excommunication and censorship of men and women who are trying to bring Christ to a troubled and uncertain world is a denial of everything the Eucharist stands for. Ecumenical attitudes are needed not merely *between* churches but also *within* churches. Roman Catholic authorities should be doing a great deal more about the disaffected in their church, instead of trying to rule by aggressive tactics and by the fear that those tactics are designed to cause.

Let me finish on a tranquil and uncontroversial note with a direct quotation from Schmemmann that sums up what I have been trying to say: 'It is in the Eucharist that the Church ceases to be "institution, doctrine, [and] system" and [instead] becomes Life, Vision, [and] Salvation. [I]t is in the Eucharist that the Word of God is fulfilled and the human mind is made capable of expressing the mind of Christ.'