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4-2014

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### Recommended Citation

Wood, Susan, "Eucharist and Society" (2014). *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*. 378.  
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# Eucharist and Society

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To speak of the relationship between the Eucharist and society is to speak of the relationship of the Eucharist to the human race as it exists in the world and is oriented to its eternal destiny. I will develop this theme through the theology of Henri de Lubac, for this relationship is the social dimension of the nature/grace problematic that he addressed in *Surnaturel* in terms of each person being oriented to a supernatural end, the beatific vision. To speak of society as embracing all of humanity is to speak of a unity among humans that precedes the multiplicity of societies identified by national, racial, and ethnic boundaries. It is to speak of a unity that also surpasses religious boundaries separating Christians from non-Christians and Christians from each other. The present task is to relate this unity of the human race and its eternal destiny to the Church and the Eucharist. I will do this by supporting the thesis of the unity of the human race from the dogmatic tradition, by presenting the Church's role in the world as being the sacrament of this unity, and then by discussing the Eucharist as the sacrament which both signs and effects this unity.

## The Original and Restored Unity of the Human Race

Henri de Lubac writes on the first page of his foundational masterpiece, *Catholicism*,

... the unity of the Mystical Body of Christ, a supernatural unity, supposes a previous natural unity, the unity of the human race. So the Fathers of the Church, in their treatment of grace and salvation, kept

constantly before them this Body of Christ, and in dealing with the creation were not content only to mention the formation of individuals, the first man and the first woman, but delighted to contemplate God creating humanity as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

The Church Fathers identified the divine image as the principle of the unity of human nature, since the same image is in all people. The same participation in God through this image effects the unity of all who share that image. Furthermore, the prayer taught to us by Christ, the “Our Father,” implies that monotheism postulates the brotherhood of all human beings.<sup>2</sup> De Lubac cites writers such as Irenaeus, who explains, “There is but one salvation as there is but one God.”<sup>3</sup>

Within this framework, all infidelity to this divine image, every sin against God, is also a disruption of human unity. For example, Maximus the Confessor considered “original sin to be a separation, a breaking up, an individualization.”<sup>4</sup> Correspondingly, within this framework, redemption is the recovery of lost unity—the recovery of the supernatural unity of human beings with God, but equally of the natural unity of human beings among themselves.<sup>5</sup>

This, of course, sounds very much like a Platonic worldview wherein the Fall effects the disintegration of the one into multiplicity. De Lubac would situate this idea philosophically less in the Platonic doctrine of essential being than in the Stoic conception of universal being.<sup>6</sup> However, he asserts that the Fathers were less conditioned by Platonist or Stoic influences than by Christian concepts. For example, the writer of the epistle to the Ephesians speaks of God's plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10). Paul described the unity in diversity of all in the image and reality of the body of Christ. John spoke of the vine and the branches. Typologically, the creation of humanity, represented in the creation of Adam,<sup>7</sup> is paired with the last Adam, Christ, in Romans 15:45, citing Gen. 2:67: “The first man, Adam, became a living being’ the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.”

*Gaudium et Spes*, the pastoral constitution on the Church that emerged from the Second Vatican Council, comments on this relationship by first reflecting on Christ as the new human being, stating that “... it is only in the mystery of the Word incarnate that light is shed on the mystery of humankind. For Adam, the first human being, was a representation of the future, namely, of Christ the Lord. It is Christ, the last Adam, who fully discloses humankind to itself and unfolds its noble calling by revealing the mystery of the Father and the Father's love” (GS 22). This section explains that Christ, the second Adam, restored to the offspring of the first Adam the divine likeness that had been deformed through the first sin. All of human nature was assumed in Christ, for “by his incarnation the Son of God united himself in some sense with every human being” (GS 22). Conformed to the image of the Son, Christians receive “the first fruits of the Spirit” (Rom. 8:23) which enable them to fulfill Christ's new law of love. The text then asserts, “This applies not only to Christians but to all people of good will in whose hearts grace is secretly at work. Since Christ died for everyone, and since the ultimate calling of each of us comes from God and is therefore a universal one, we are obliged to hold that the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in this paschal mystery in a manner known to God” (GS 22).

Fifteen years later, in *Redemptor hominis*, John Paul II refers to this passage, commenting,

This applies to every man, since everyone is included in the mystery of Redemption, and by the grace of this mystery Christ has joined himself with everyone for all time. ... Every individual, from his very conception, participates in this mystery (n.13). Every man without exception was redeemed by Christ, since Christ is somehow joined to every man, with no exception, even though the person may not be conscious of it (n.14).

This view of humankind's common relationship to Christ was also explicitly espoused in Vatican II's *Decree on Non-Christian Religions*, which declares that “all nations are one community and have one origin because God

caused the whole human race to dwell on the whole face of the earth. They also have one final end, God, whose providence, manifestation of goodness and plans for salvation are extended to all, until the elect be gathered together in the holy city ..." (NA, 1).

If we fast-forward once again, this time to the inter-religious gathering at Assisi in 1986, we notice that John Paul II applied these principles to the situation of religious pluralism:

People can often not be conscious of their radical unity of origin, destiny and place in God's plan, and while they profess different and incompatible religions they can think that their divisions are insurmountable. But in spite of that, they are included in the great and single design of God, in Jesus Christ, who "in some way is united with everyone" (GS, 22), even if they are not conscious of it.

However, the "radical unity of origin, destiny and place in God's plan" in regard to both Christians and non-Christians, and the Church's role-in-the-world as the graced sign and instrument of this unity, only makes sense if we attend to the social aspect of salvation. While each of us is potentially and actually saved personally and individually, we are also saved potentially and actually as a people. A great deal of the theology regarding salvation and justification has been primarily focused on the salvation of an individual rather than on communities of salvation or the form of salvation *as* communion. The eschatological meaning of baptism, as that of the Eucharist, points to salvation as a social reality. The second sentence in Chapter II of *Lumen gentium* makes the remarkable claim: "He (God) has, however, willed to make women and men holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness."<sup>8</sup> According to Chapter II, this people is comprised of those elected by Christ's covenant. This new people of God, called together from Jew and Gentiles, is reborn of water and the Spirit, a reference to baptism (John 3:5–6). Its destiny is the kingdom of God which will be brought to perfection at the end of time but is already present among us, most explicitly and clearly through word and sacrament, but also present in a hidden way wherever and whenever the Spirit is at work. This messianic people who constitute the Kingdom of God, even if such a community does not include everyone at the present time, is "a most certain seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race."<sup>9</sup> This people, compared to a "seed" because of its limited, yet promising scope, is "the instrument for the salvation of all" (LG 9). This people of God is also called the church of Christ, identified in *Lumen gentium* 10 as "the visible sacrament of this saving unity."<sup>10</sup>

So the history of salvation is not limited to a chosen people but extends to all humankind and all of human history. In the second chapter of *Lumen gentium*, even though covenant and election are the identifiers of the community, salvation is not limited to the people of the covenant but extends potentially to the whole human race.<sup>11</sup> The messianic people, described as a tiny flock, although it does not include everybody, nevertheless truly does constitute "for the whole human race a most firm seed of unity, hope, and salvation."<sup>12</sup> In fact, not only the whole human race, but all creation is destined for eschatological renewal and will participate in the final freedom of the glory of the sons and daughters of God (Rom. 8:21). As seen from the foregoing, there are several key sources in the dogmatic tradition that affirm the original unity of the human race in addition to an understanding of salvation as the restoration of a natural unity among human beings with one another as well as a supernatural unity between humanity and God.

## Church as Sign and Instrument of Unity

An anthropology of the inherent unity of the human race, together with an understanding of eschatology as the final reconciliation of restored unity, gives us a framework for considering the relationship between the Church and society. The Church, as a visible sacrament of this saving unity, has a role in signifying and effecting the saving unity that potentially encompasses everyone. As a sort of sacrament, the Church signifies both the intimate union between God and humanity as well as the unity of all of humanity.<sup>13</sup> It is also an instrument

facilitating this unity. The theological question is how to account for the salvation of those aspects of society not explicitly associated with the Church, as well as for the salvation of non-Christians at large.

No human being or aspect of human reality escapes the universal salvific will of God or lives outside God's providential will and intervention in history for God's salvific purpose, although God gives all the freedom to reject his divine love. Unity is not something we achieve through our own efforts, but something we are given in creation and redemption. The dynamic of grace, however, is dialogical. In response to the invitation, all people must respond in implicit or explicit faith for salvation to be effected. Salvation is the form of the restored community of the human race in communion with God and with each other. The Spirit testifies to our common filiation as daughters and sons of one and the same gracious Father, and so to the universal and universally loving paternity of the Father. This universal paternity necessarily implies a universal divine filiation, making us brothers and sisters with all peoples.

There is one savior, Jesus Christ, who recapitulates the human race in himself through his incarnation and achieves its redemption by his death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit is the divine love that seals the bond of the communion within the Church as well as the divine person who inspires all people of good will to live according to right conscience and thus implicitly as well as explicitly to believe in God's existence and his salvific design and loving will. The Spirit, who is the Spirit of the Son, never works apart from the Son. The missioning of the Son is for the recapitulation of all that they may achieve reconciliation with the Father.

The 2000 document issued by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, "Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church," interprets this possibility of salvation for non-Christians in relation to Christ and the Church as follows:

For those who are not formally and visibly members of the Church, salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church, but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. This grace comes from Christ; it is the result of his sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit; it has a relationship with the Church, which "according to the plan of the Father, has her origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit."<sup>14</sup>

The precise manner in which the non-Christian is related to Christ and the Church remains mysterious. However, *Dominus Iesus* expressly rejects any position that would consider the Church as one way of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions if these religions are understood as complementary or substantially equivalent to the Church and even though they may be oriented along with the Church toward the eschatological kingdom of God.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, *Dominus Iesus* acknowledges that "the various religious traditions contain and offer religious elements which come from God, and which are part of what 'the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures, and religions.'"<sup>16</sup> I believe that the document's insistence on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church is on target and consistent with the unity of the human race and a view of salvation and redemption as the restoration of that unity. The issue is how non-Christians and even all of creation are related to the Christian community that represents explicit, visible profession of faith, conversion of life, and participation in baptism. In other words, how are all of creation and especially the whole of the human race related to the Church?

More specifically, we must ask to what aspect of the Church is the non-Christian related. Obviously, this does not refer to explicit membership in the institutional church, but to some affiliation to the Church as the mystical body of Christ in which all are members of his body as he recapitulates and restores communion with our common Father. This is not necessarily a visible or explicit or even intended relationship to the Church in its institutional dimension, but rather a hidden affiliation through the work of the Spirit. One possible way to begin

to plumb this hidden and mysterious affiliation is by exploring the social dimension of the Church as it is understood to be the Mystical Body of Christ, especially in its celebration of the Eucharist.

Even though theologians have not been able to explain the manner of salvation of non-Christians in a completely satisfactory way, either to Christians or especially to non-Christians, the fact of this possibility of salvation, the relationship of this salvation to the God whom Christians confess as Father, Son, and Spirit, and the necessary relationship to the Church as the body of Christ and the sacrament of the unity of God and humankind are all profoundly related to the idea of unicity and universality. Salvation reflects our unity as members of the one human race, the recapitulation of that race in Christ, the new Adam, and our interconnectedness with one another and with Christ through the bonds established by the Spirit expressed in various images of the Church such as the mystical body of Christ, people of God, or temple of the Spirit. The very fact that each is not individually saved but personally saved, *and* saved as a people, implies that the salvation of all people, including non-Christians, is because of a relationship to the Church, even though there appears to be no connection institutionally and thus non-Christians are not a formal part of the Church.

The “elements that come from God” and the work of the Spirit are found positively in human hearts, history, and cultures that sincerely seek and desire God through righteous decisions of conscience and that search for the divine. Such actions of conscience and longing for the divine result in what has traditionally been termed “a desire for baptism,” even though it is not a conscious or explicit desire for the sacramental water bath in the Triune name. Christians have identified that longing as a desire for baptism, but when this is not an explicit desire, this “desire for baptism” becomes a shorthand way of expressing the universal human desire for that holy, good, and ultimately transcendent personal presence which gives meaning to our living and dying, our loving and failed relationships, our struggles, hopes, and joys, even in the face of immense personal and global tragedies. Christians know this to be the paschal mystery of Christ's death and rising, the Christ who was sent to reconcile all with the Father in the power of the Spirit. Baptism is insertion into this Triune life and mystery, into the relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit, and into the process of dying and rising in the company of all so initiated. Nevertheless, the Church has never required that non-Christians be able to identify the transcendent object of that holy longing explicitly in order that we might rightly understand such a desire to be an authentic “desire for baptism,” to use the traditional phrase. Since the Church is “a sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humanity” (LG 1), Christians have an obligation to be visible signs of that communion, as well as humble workers who lovingly bring that unity to greater fullness and actuality. The mission of the Church is to be this sign and instrument of communion. The Church's mission is to make implicit faith explicit, to articulate the Trinitarian form of salvation, to be that community of salvation. As sign of eschatological unity and reconciliation, the Church witnesses to the ultimate destiny of all humankind. As the mystical body of Christ, it embodies that which it signs. In its sacramental life, particularly in the Eucharist, it unites Christians to Christ and signifies the unity of the mystical body that exceeds the boundaries of the visible Church. In its preaching it announces God's plan for salvation, the Good News in Jesus Christ. It signs the Trinity in its identity as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Spirit.

## The Eucharist and the Mystical Body

Henri de Lubac's study of the term *corpus mysticum* retrieved the social and ecclesial meaning of the Eucharist at a time when Eucharistic piety was primarily individualistic and the prevailing model of the Church was predominantly juridical and institutional. The term *corpus mysticum* referred to the Eucharist before it referred to the Church. De Lubac's study of the Eucharist, *Corpus Mysticum* (1944), traces the historical shift in the use of the term *corpus mysticum* from referring to the Eucharist to its present use to refer to the Church.<sup>17</sup> In a parallel fashion, the term *corpus verum* first referred to the Church, and subsequently, under the pressures of the Eucharistic controversies in the eleventh century with Berengar of Tours, it came to designate the real

presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Where the “truth” of sacramental communion was once union with the Church, it became communion with the “true” real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Where the Eucharist was once the “mystical body” because it was received “spiritually,” the Church became the mystical body.

This linguistic shift accompanied a loss in the original perception of the unity between the body of Christ born of Mary, the Eucharistic body, and the ecclesial body. Henceforth, Catholics were very resolute in affirming the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the unity between the historical body and the sacramental body, but the connection between the sacramental body and the ecclesial body dropped out of consciousness. In the emphasis on Eucharistic realism, the ecclesial realism and meaning of the Eucharist signifying and making sacramentally present the whole body of Christ, comprised of Christ the head and his members, was lost. This shift in terminology and meaning resulted not only out of a concern to protect the sacramental realism of the Eucharistic presence, but also was the consequence of a certain loss of symbolic ways of thinking, which made one capable of perceiving the spiritual depth and dimension of material realities. This shift paved the way not only for a more individualistic rather than social or ecclesial Eucharistic piety, but also for a theology of the Church severed from its sacramental moorings.

In de Lubac's thought, the Church as the mystical Body of Christ is indissolubly linked to the Eucharist: “The Church, like the Eucharist, is a mystery of unity—the same mystery. ... Both are the body of Christ—the same body” (*The Splendour of the Church* 1956: 110). The fullest meaning of the Church is the fullness of Christ, the head of the body, united with his members. This is signified in Eucharistic communion. Within its sacramental sign, the Eucharist signifies the eschatological completion of restored unity in Christ of the original unity of the human race fragmented by sin. The *res* of the sacrament is this unity.

The Church is sacramental, mystical, Christological, and pneumatological before it is sociological or juridical. The unity of the Church is not psychological, political, or a federation of the like-minded, but a sacramental and spiritual unity in Christ first established in baptism and then expressed, nourished, and brought to maturity in Eucharistic communion. Within the sacramental life of the Church, the Eucharist is not only the visible sign of communion in and with Christ, but is also constitutive of ecclesial communion, for in partaking of one bread we become one body (1 Cor. 10:16–17).<sup>18</sup>

In summary, the Eucharist is the sacrament that expresses and effects the recapitulation of all in Christ and the final restoration of unity of humanity with one another in God, the unity of the *corpus in mysterio*, the body mystically signified and realized by the Eucharist, the unity of the eschatological community that is made real by the “holy mysteries” in an effective symbol. This plenitude of Christ consisting of head and members in this final restored unity is the *corpus verum*, the true body of Christ.

William Cavanaugh has convincingly argued that this “true body” can function as an alternative body capable of resisting the discipline of the state.<sup>19</sup> Rightly understood, the Eucharist can and should provide the basis for the Church's social practice at the same time it offers an alternative resource for the construction of a counter-body or counter-performance for political systems, dominions, and powers that claim allegiance at the expense of unity in Christ. This unity transcends the boundaries of nations, races, and political parties and relativizes them. In the Eucharist, the Kingdom of God becomes the true homeland of the members of the body of Christ who are brothers and sisters to one another. This is the true relationship of Eucharist and society.

## Footnotes

1 Lubac, Henri, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* ( San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988), 25. Original: *Catholicisme: les aspects sociaux du dogme* (Paris: Cerf, 1947).

2 *Ibid.*, 31.

3 *Ibid.*, 32, Citing *Adv Haereses*, 4, 6, 7 (PG 7, 990); 4, 9, 3; 5 in fine (1224).

4 Ibid., 33.

5 Ibid., 35.

6 Ibid., 40.

7 The New Oxford Annotated Bible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 4, comments that gender distinction is not mentioned in the second creation account until Gen. 2:21–25 where a different word is used to distinguish man (“ish”) from woman (“ishah”).

8 *Lumen gentium*, §9.

9 *Lumen gentium*, §9.

10 *Lumen gentium*, §10.

11 See LG §16 for how those who have not accepted the Gospel are yet related to the people of God in various ways.

12 *Lumen gentium*, §9.

13 *Lumen gentium*, 1. Note that the Church is “a sort of” (*veluti*) sacrament. Thus it is a sacrament analogously, not in the same way that Christ and baptism and the Eucharist are sacraments.

14 Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, “ ‘Dominus Iesus’: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church,” August 6, 2000, §20. Text available in *Origins* 30/14 (September 14, 2000) 209, 211–219.

15 Ibid., §21.

16 Ibid.

17 See *Corpus Mysticum*, cited above; Wood, Susan K., *Spiritual Exegesis and the Church in the Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), chapter 3.

18 For a Eucharistic ecclesiology see Lubac, Henri, *Corpus Mysticum: L'Eucharistie et L'Église au moyen âge*, second edition (Paris: Aubier, 1949) and *Catholicisme: Les aspects sociaux du dogme*, 7<sup>e</sup> (Paris: Cerf, 1983), chapter 48; McPartlan, Paul, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), *Sacrament of Salvation: An Introduction to Eucharistic Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), “Eucharistic Ecclesiology”, *One in Christ*, Vol. 22, no. 4 (1985): 314–331; and Tillard, J. M. R., *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ: At the Source of the Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. by Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001). For an Orthodox perspective see Zizioulas, John, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop during the First Three Centuries*, trans. by Elizabeth Theokritoff (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001).

19 Cavanaugh, William T., *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), Chapter 5, 206.