

One: The Sacrament of Unity

by Fr Chris Borah

Eucharist is just a fancy (Greek) word for *thanksgiving*. When we think about “the Holy Eucharist,” we generally rush straight to the table—to the meal on the table—to the bread and to the wine. In modern times, we go even smaller, talking about the atoms that make up the bread and the wine (this is the modern discussion about transubstantiation; read Article XXVIII in our BCP, p. 783). We will get to the bread and wine, but *eucharist* is so much bigger than that.

The Whole Picture

Read just a little bit of pre-modern eucharistic theology and you’ll find very little conversation about questions like “Is the bread bread?” or “grape juice or wine?” Why is that? Because the Lord’s table is a bigger picture. There is Someone seated at the Head of the table, there are many gathered around the table, and the bread is broken and the cup is passed to all to make them *one* at the table. We zoom in and focus on ourselves and upon the elements to our peril.

When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with *his own meal*. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. (1 Corinthians 11:20–21)

We focus on atoms and yeast bacteria and not on Jesus. We keep our heads down and make the meal about me and myself, when we should lift up our heads and see Jesus and all the saints gathered around the table as one. Eastern Orthodox theologian, Fr Alexander Schmemmann laments our present age as being consumed with “utterly individualistic piety,” and this in the Orthodox Church (not the self-declared “independent” churches all around us)!

The man who says, as is so often the case in our day, “I am deeply faithful, but my faith does not need the Church,” may possibly believe, and even deeply, but his faith is something *other* than that faith that from the first day of Christianity was the thirst for baptismal entry into the Church and the constant quenching of this thirst in the “unity of faith and love” at Christ’s table in his kingdom. (Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, p. 151)

Before we start talking about our practice of drinking from one common cup, before we talk about the one loaf of bread and the Lord’s table—before we get into the smaller details—we must see the big picture, all of us together as one

around the table. “In Christ Jesus” we are made “one... in his flesh,” in him we are “one new man,” reconciled together in “one body,” granted access to God in “one Spirit,” “in him” we are built into a single holy place. (Eph 2:13-22) “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:16–17). Peter Leithart answers the Apostle Paul’s question (1 Cor 1:13),

“Has Christ been divided?” The answer is, in a sense, “Yes,” for at the table the bread is broken and distributed to the church, just as at the cross His body was torn for us. But this division of Christ has the goal of uniting the church. On the cross, Christ was broken in the process of breaking down the dividing wall separating Jew and Gentile; in the Supper, Christ is divided so that His one loaf can feed many. (Peter Leithart, *Blessed are the Hungry*, p. 136)

Schmemmann perfectly sums up the fullness of the unity that God has accomplished in Christ.

The miracle of the church assembly lies in that it is not the “sum” of the sinful and unworthy people who comprise it, but the body of Christ. How often do we say we are going to church...? We forget, meanwhile, that we are the Church, we make it up, that Christ abides in his members and that the Church does not exist outside us or above us, but *we are in Christ and Christ is in us*. (Schmemmann, *Ibid.*, p. 23)

At the beginning, we must get our heads up and see the unity that is pictured, and created, and renewed, and sealed at the Lord’s table. Holy Eucharist is the Sacrament of Unity. We do not *go to church*, we *are* the Church (Matt 18:20). We are *made one* in Christ as we partake of one bread. One Mediator. One Spirit. One loaf. One cup. One body.

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Right in the middle of our eucharistic prayer, the celebrant says these words: “We celebrate the memorial of *our* redemption, O Father, in this *sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving [eucharist!]*, and *we* offer you these gifts.” (BCP p. 133) What we bring to God every Sunday is very little: our simple songs, our humble prayers, common bread, common wine, maybe a little bit of money—we bring our unified sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. And the miracle of the Eucharist is that he receives our childlike offerings and then he gives us himself in return. What an exchange!

Our offering of praise and thanksgiving culminates at the Lord's table, but it begins way before that. On Saturday night, in homes scattered throughout the world, we pray looking forward to our shared eucharist: "Grant that we, putting away all earthly anxieties, may be duly prepared *for the service of your sanctuary*, and that our rest here upon earth may be a preparation for the eternal rest promised to your people in heaven." (*A Collect for Sabbath Rest*, BCP p. 24)

When we wake on Sunday morning, when we scramble to get semi-decent clothes on our children (and on ourselves!) and everyone in the car on time, we are waging war against the world, the flesh, and the devil in our pursuit of God in the assembly (that's what the word "church" means). The early church called this the "sacrament of the assembly." If we don't gather, we are not part of the assembly. The work of preparation, the warfare of going to be the assembly (church!) is sacrifice. This is unseen praise. This is thanksgiving.

Jesus unites our voices together in harmony. He makes us alive together with his word. We proclaim one creed. Jesus makes us one on our knees in confession. He gives us peace. Jesus lifts up our hearts together as one at his table. We are "made one body with him, that he may dwell in us and we in him." Heaven and earth are united together in one assembly in Christ, "with all your saints into the joy of your heavenly kingdom, where we shall see our Lord face to face."

All this we ask through your Son Jesus Christ. **By him**, and **with him**, and **in him**, in the **unity** of the Holy Spirit, all honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father, now and for ever. **Amen.**