

# *Koinonia*: The Movement of the Eucharist

by Fr Chris Borah

There are many words and phrases we use to describe the Holy Eucharist. “Holy Eucharist” simply means “thanksgiving devoted to God.” Holy Eucharist is also the “Lord’s Supper,” which points back to Jesus’s Last Supper with his disciples (Mt 26, Mk 14, Lk 21), and points forward to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (with all his disciples from all time; Rev 19). Holy Eucharist is the “Paschal Feast” (1 Cor 5:7), pointing us back to the Passover Meal (Ex 12) and to Jesus the Lamb of God setting a table that fulfills, completes, and transforms this ancient Jewish festival (Jn 1:29; Jn 6; Rev 19:7, 17).

## ***Koinonia***

Holy Eucharist is also “Communion” (*koinonia*), pointing us to the *fellowship* of all the saints in heaven and on earth, to our *participation* in Christ, to the *mutual indwelling* of the members of the Body, because of Christ—“that he may dwell *in us* and we *in him*... by him, and with him, and in him”—we participate in the *koinonia* of the Holy Trinity because we are united to Christ the Son.

In the *koinonia* of Jesus, we share with someone (a person) in something (a shared, deeply personal participation)—it is both personal and affectionate—it is adoption into the Father’s family as sons and daughters because we *share* in Christ. We are made one in Christ (Gal 3:28), we are altogether the fullness of Christ (Eph 1:23), we are united to Christ in baptism (Col 2:12), we are raised to walk in newness of life (Rom 6:4), and we are seated with Christ in heavenly places (Eph 2:6). With him we die, and with him we rise. As he ascends, we ascend.

## ***Koinonia* Lifts Us Up**

There are two broad movements in our worship service that always go together: Word and Sacrament. We begin our service with the Liturgy of the Word, and then we end with the Liturgy of the Table. The word “liturgy” comes straight from the Greek word in Acts 13:2, usually translated as “worship”—it’s a compound word for “people” and “work”—our worship is “the work of the people,” liturgy.

Our liturgy goes all the way back to the early church (see Justin Martyr in A.D. 155). In A.D. 215, in *The Apostolic Tradition*, Hippolytus described the call and response at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Table:

The Lord be with you.

**And with your spirit.**

Lift up your hearts.

**We lift them up to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

**It is right to give him thanks and praise.**

At the beginning of our Eucharistic liturgy, we “lift up our hearts” together into the heavenly courts where Jesus—in his physical, resurrected body—sits at the right hand of the Father. St. John Chrysostom exhorts us, “Let us beware that we do not remain on the earth.” Fr Alexander Schmemman explains:

“... if we remain on earth we have no place in this heavenly eucharist... [we must] turn our hearts on high... Thus, when we hear this *ultimate* summons let us ask ourselves: are our hearts turned to the Lord, is the ultimate treasure of our heart in God, in heaven? If so, then in spite of all our weakness, all our fallenness, we have been received into heaven, we behold now the light and glory of the kingdom.” (Schmemman, *The Eucharist*, 169)

At the Lord’s table, we are lifted up in the Spirit like John (Rev 4:1) to sing praise to God and to the Lamb (Rev 5:8) with “Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, who for ever sing” the heavenly song, “Holy, Holy, Holy” (Rev 4:8). Our worship is heaven-and-earth-united worship (altar, Rev 8:3; white robes, Rev 4:4; candles, Rev 1:12; incense, Rev 5:8; manna, Rev 2:17... I could keep going).

“The Eucharist [is] proof of a *koinonia* held out to humanity now... [and] a truly human participation in God must happen in a truly human way” (Julie Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 160-61), at a table, with the most basic of human acts: a shared meal. Following Calvin, Canlis describes this movement of *koinonia* as our being...

“...drawn up to God rather than dragging him down to us – whether it be in the Lord’s Supper, idolatry, or carnal ways of conceiving of God. Yet it is not only that we must ascend to Christ (and not he to us), but that our whole lives are now reoriented and repersonalized by our communion [*koinonia*] with the Son of God. (*Ibid.*, 119)

Calvin asks, “[H]ow could we aspire to what is on high, without Jesus Christ drawing us there?” We cannot unless we are united to Christ. Canlis concludes then that “the Christian life is not response *to* God but inclusion *in* God” (*Ibid.*, 125-27).

(John 14:3, 28) “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to *myself*, that where I am you may be also... You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to *the Father*, for the Father is greater than I.”

Why did Christ come down to us? Christ descended...

“... that he might unite us to God; for until we have reached that point, we are, as it were, in the middle of the course. We too imagine to ourselves but a half-Christ, and a mutilated Christ, if he does not lead us to God... Let us therefore learn to behold Christ humbled in the flesh, so that he may conduct us to the fountain of a blessed immortality; for he was not appointed to be our guide, merely to raise us to the sphere of the moon or of the sun, but to make us one with God the Father.” (John Calvin; quoted in Canlis, *Ibid.*, 126)

Calvin says that we only have a “half-Christ” if we only imagine Christ as coming down to us. Christ descended so that we might ascend “by him, and with him, and in him” to be one with Father. Jesus is one with the Father. Christ came down to us not because of any want or need in himself (this is God’s *aseity*). Rather, Christ came down to us in order to display God’s loving character (for God is love), and he desires to multiply love and rejoicing in his presence. “Jesus Christ leads us there and raises us by the graces which He distributes” (*Ibid.*, 130).

The physical, bodily resurrected Christ has ascended to the right hand of God the Father in heaven, and because we are united together in Christ, we are lifted up into his heavenly presence with the saints and the angels. Importantly, this heavenward movement is *physically* embodied at the Lord’s table, *not* as individuals having a personal spiritual experience, but as one body, united together with and in Christ. Canlis concludes:

“Communion [*koinonia*] in the Lord’s Supper is not a human activity but the Spirit’s means of grounding and reconstituting our very being. As such, the Eucharist is an extension of that all-radical, all-transforming communion we share, by invitation, with the Trinity. For communion with the risen Jesus can never be anything but material and mediated by creaturely things.” (*Ibid.*, 171)

## ***Koinonia* In The New Creation**

Holy Scripture begins with Creation. The story begins in a garden, where heaven and earth overlap, where God and man are intimately together. God tells man to guard and keep this place (the work of a priest; Gen 2:15) and to cultivate seeds [bread] and fruit [wine] (Gen 1:12). But man took the fruit of the devil and destroyed this intimate space (Gen 3:6). Heaven and earth were separated. Man continued to plant vineyards (Gen 9:20), but like Adam, the fruit of the vine brought destruction (Gen 9:21).

Holy Scripture ends with New Creation. But before the end, those who live in the city of man, Babylon, drink the cup of destruction (Rev 16:19, 18:6). Their gluttonous feast is demonic and destructive.

(Rev 18:14) “The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you, and all your delicacies and your splendors are lost to you, never to be found again!”

But the story does not end there. The Lamb of God shed his blood (Rev 5:6), he drank the cup of wrath for us (Lk 22:42), and after this, he gives us a cup, not of judgment, but a cup of life in his kingdom (Mk 10:39). Holy Scripture ends with heaven and earth reunited at the Marriage Feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:9). Heaven and earth restored, spiritual and physical united at the table of the everlasting feast.

When we gather at the Lord’s table, we are not simply looking back (at the Last Supper); we are not simply looking forward (to the Lamb’s Supper); we are participating in Jesus restoring heaven and earth right now. The end has come, heaven has come down in Christ and we are lifted up in Christ. The New Creation is breaking into the present at the table, and this is exactly what we pray before we receive the Supper: “Our Father... in heaven... thy kingdom come... on earth as is in heaven...give us this day our daily bread.”

“At the Lord’s table, we receive an initial taste of the final heavens and earth, but the Lord’s Supper is not merely a *sign* of the eschatological feast, as if the two were separate feasts. Instead, the Supper is the early stage of that very feast. Every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we are displaying in history a glimpse of the end of history and anticipating in this world the order of the world to come.” (Leithart, *Blessed are the Hungry*, 15)

From beginning to end, Holy Scripture sets a physical table with bread and wine as the place where God and man meet: in the garden, in the tabernacle and the Temple, at the Passover, at the Last Supper, and at the Supper of the Lamb. “There

is no room given to develop a spirituality that defies creation and the importance of the human body for spiritual formation” (Kreglinger, *The Spirituality of Wine*, 71).

The Lord’s table is the place where heaven and earth is being reunited now, where *koinonia* in Christ is created and renewed, where intimate and mutual indwelling happens on earth as it is in heaven. Let us therefore keep the feast!