



For a Synodal Eucharistic Church

Por una Iglesia Eucarística Sinodal

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the power of the Eucharist, a sacramental gift from God that fosters conversion and enables the ability to see others as part of a unified body. It explores how this gift can heal a world plagued by hostility, division, and polarization. A Church that is both Eucharistic, patterned after the unity and love inherent in the Trinity, and synodal, marked by the sensibility of journeying together in communion and mission, can lead us toward a future where sources of disharmony disappear. In this future, the transfigured presence of the 'Eucharistic Lord' draws all people together in fraternal love and peace.

Keywords: Eucharist, synodality, unity, fraternity, communion, peace

Resumen

Este artículo reflexiona sobre el poder de la Eucaristía, un don sacramental de Dios que fomenta la conversión y permite la capacidad de ver a los demás como parte de un cuerpo unificado. También, presenta cómo este don puede sanar un mundo plagado de hostilidad, división y polarización. Una Iglesia que sea tanto eucarística, modelada según la unidad y el amor inherentes a la Trinidad, como sinodal, marcada por la sensibilidad de caminar juntos en comunión y misión, puede guiarnos hacia un futuro donde las fuentes de desarmonía desaparezcan. En este futuro, la presencia transfigurada del 'Señor Eucarístico' reúne a todas las personas en un amor fraterno y paz.

Palabras clave: eucaristía, sinodalidad, unidad, fraternidad, comunión, paz

I. Siblings Divided, Humanity Wounded

It's a common human story. In Emily Brontë's 1847 great romance *Wuthering Heights*, an endless series of acts of tit-for-tat retribution between Heathcliff and members of the Earnshaw and Linton families is driven by childhood grievances. "Treachery and violence are spears pointed at both ends; they wound those who resort to them worse than their enemies," Brontë observed. Failures in love disfigure all those involved.

A more satirical, yet no less haunting, expression of this reality can be found in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In one scene, Buck, the youngest son of the Grangerford family, explains to Huck why he wants to kill a rival in the Shepherdson family.

. "Well," says Buck, "a feud is this way: A man has a quarrel with another man and kills him; then that other man's brother kills him; then the other brothers, on both sides, go for one another; then the cousins chip in and by and by everybody's killed off, and there ain't no more feud.

But it's kind of slow, and takes a long time." We might think of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia for the sake of his conquest of Troy, the revenge killing by his wife Clytemnestra, the mortal revenge upon her by their son Orestes, and the merciless wrath of the Furies against him in the plays of Aeschylus. Or the feuds between the Montagues and Capulets in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and between the Corleones and Tattaglias in Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*. Or the bloodless feud between opposing convictions in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* series.

These cautionary tales of division echo the wisdom of Sacred Scripture.

The Torah, Prophets, and Proverbs all agree that we must shed no innocent blood. "Do not envy a man of violence and do not choose any of his ways," Solomon warns (Prov 3:31, Revised Standard Version¹). "Put away violence and oppression, and execute justice and righteousness," Ezekiel counsels (Ezek 45:9, RSV). "Love one another as I have loved you," Jesus taught (Jn 13:34, RSV); show affection and mercy to your siblings by blood, adoption, or spirit, to neighbors, even enemies; harbor no grudge, and engage in no violence, but rather be peacemakers, serving each other. And so, in their epistles, Paul and John sang of amity and peace and deplored enmity and bloodshed.

The Scriptures are attentive, then, to the rivalry, resentment, and violence in human hearts, as in the stories of Ishmael and Isaac, Joseph and his brothers, or Jacob and Esau even in the womb. In the origin story of these negative emotions and behaviors, Cain kills his brother Abel out of envy and then denies any responsibility for him. "What have you done?" God cries out. "Hear your brother's blood crying out to me from the earth" (Gen 4:10-11, RSV).

Peace in our own times is strained, both globally and locally. We might think of the recent attempts on the life of ex-President Donald Trump in the USA or the successful assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio in Ecuador. It's as if the shared spaces we inhabit are fractured, and we can only see things through a hyper-tribal lens. Everything is "us versus them," and complex issues are boiled down to which side you belong to (Francis, 2020, *Fratelli Tutti*², 1.)

Whenever a 'hot-button'³ topic arises, which is now very often, there is little room for persuasion, nuance, compromise, or respectful disagreement. Instead, we have slogans, binaries, vitriol, and cancel culture attempting to exclude uncomfortable views and their advocates.

The post-modern crisis of confidence in reasoned argument, and the distrust in metanarratives as covers for power, fuels this environment of disunity.

Do Christians offer any antidote to all this hostility? Can the Gospel speak to hearts ensnared by rivalry and hate? Does God's truth, beauty, and goodness offer anything to a world so fractured by disunity and disharmony?

In what follows in this essay, I suggest that genuine reconciliation and lasting fraternity can only be achieved by a "Eucharistic" conversion to seeing ourselves "as one body" with our fellow Christians and all humanity and living for the other, not just ourselves. The Church at its best is a foretaste of the unity that will only be fully realized in the reconciliation of all things in Christ. The process of being and becoming that one body is served today by a synodal sensibility, the idea of journeying together, in communion and mission. This enables people to participate in the Eucharistic love of the

¹ Henceforth 'RSV'

² Henceforth FT

³ A topic or issue that is highly charged emotionally or politically.

Father, the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Son, and the Eucharistic life of the Spirit.

II. That They Might All Be One

What did Jesus pray on the night of His Last Supper? The Synoptic Gospels record His institution of the Eucharist and His prayer for deliverance in Gethsemane, but the Gospel of John offers deeper insight into Jesus' thoughts that night. Troubled in spirit, fully aware that He was about to be deserted, betrayed, and subjected to torture, yet also "glorified" through His Passion and eventual return, He expressed concern for the impact of these events on His disciples. In His final act of teaching, He washes their feet and offers them His Body and Blood. Throughout this moment, He instructs them about trust in the Father, Son, and Spirit, authority and service, truth and goodness, suffering, self-sacrifice, and love. He pleads for their peace, joy, and eternal life. Notably, He prays five times within a few verses that the disciples might be united (Jn 17:11-23, RSV). According to Jesus, without this God-given unity, they cannot be "sanctified in truth" or "remain in God's name." While God and the things of God are often paradoxical and even ineffable, it is clear that contradictory beliefs about God cannot all be true. Furthermore, unity is essential for effective witness: a message loses its persuasive power when its messengers disagree on its content; disunity, in this context, is a scandal. However, the unity for which Christ prays transcends mere strategic alignment, as it is rooted in a deeper, spiritual harmony.

How should we think about this unity? The paradigm Jesus repeatedly offers his disciples is that between the Father and Son: "That they may be one, Father, as we are one." Christ's call to be godlike has many dimensions, but here we see a central one: to be united as the three persons of God are united. The persons of the Trinity are so identified with each other that much of what we say of one can equally be said of the others; they pour out their love upon each other, sharing in the Godhead and giving each other identity and mission; they work together in creation and redemption. So, too, Christ's disciples must be so identified in what they believe and do that we can speak of "Christians" or "the Church" as a single entity, and what we say of all we mean of each. Only then, Jesus says, will his joy, love, or glory—what we call "grace"—be evident in them. Only then will they be able to resist the world, the flesh, and the devil. Fraternal bonds are more than a team-building strategy to maximize effectiveness: they are the result of deep conversion and being conformed to the Trinitarian God.

This is what happens to us in Baptism and the subsequent sacraments. A Trinitarian harmony should then be evident in all our relationships and be a mark of the Church—universal, local, and domestic. In the face of internal and external forces pushing toward disintegration, we must cultivate unity but also pray for it as a divine gift that we could never manufacture ourselves. St. Augustine famously said, "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You" (Confessions, 1.1); but we might also say of the Eucharistic Lord: You have made Yourself for us, O Lord, and our soul is restless until You rest in us.

III. Fraternity

For some, the term 'fraternity' brings to mind a secret society of college students. Those with a deeper historical awareness might think of the banners of the French Revolution, Marxists, and Freemasons. Those with a spiritual focus might picture the monks, friars, and consecrated women who are called 'brothers' and 'sisters.' However, the Christian concept of fraternity begins with the apostolic generation. At least four of the apostles were blood brothers: Simon and Andrew Bar-Jona, and James and John Bar-Zebedee. Lazarus, Martha, and Mary were siblings, and some of the holy women who accompanied Jesus may have been relatives as well. Yet, the term ἀδελφός (brother) was used broadly in the culture of the time, encompassing not just family members but also friends, fellow tribe members, and officeholders. In each case, there was a sense of solidarity or closeness similar to that of a family.

However, the apostles were also brothers in a spiritual sense: Jesus called them "the Brothers." Their relationship was rooted in their calling and response, their coming together, and their shared witness. They had experienced similar hopes, limitations, and emotions as they walked with Christ. In addition to His signs and teachings, they were present at the Last Supper and the post-Resurrection appearances. Jesus prioritized spiritual fraternity over biological ties, and much of His teaching focused on how these spiritual siblings should love one another. They were instructed to avoid grudges and reconcile (Mt 5:22-24, RSV). They were to do "for the least of these brothers [and sisters]" what they would do for Jesus (Mt 25:37-40, RSV). Above all, they were to love each other as He had loved them. After His departure, the early Christians continued to honor this brotherhood, showing φιλαδελφία (brotherly love). They greeted one another with a fraternal kiss, decried division, and mourned failures of love. They were a family.

However, the risk was that Christians might become inward-focused, concerned only with the needs of their physical or spiritual brethren, without extending their embrace to others. A limited view like this would prevent them from healing the fractured world. Therefore, Jesus emphasized their mission to reach out to all of humanity, making everyone their neighbors, friends, siblings, and fellow disciples. He specifically referred to those "not yet" in His flock but whom He must "shepherd also" (Jn 10:16; 17:20, RSV). In his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, the Holy Father invites us to reflect on our shared vulnerability and needs as human beings, our common purposes, and complementary gifts. With the gift of faith, we are called to ask what it means to believe that our God is not only the Creator but also the Father and Redeemer of all humanity. What does it mean to be created and restored to a 'family resemblance' with Him and with one another? Christian love is not reserved for a small, exclusive group of brethren, but, as taught by the Second Vatican Council and successive popes, it is meant for all. It is intended to heal the fractures within and between human beings and to elevate us to be a communion of saints.

IV. The Eucharist as the source of unity and reconciliation

The maxim of Henri de Lubac SJ, that "the Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church" influenced the Second Vatican Council and much subsequent theology. It is found also in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as well as Pope John Paul II's 2003 encyclical

Ecclesia de Eucharistia. De Lubac sought to retrieve a patristic understanding of the Church as the mystical body of Christ powered by his sacramental body. "Where two or three are gathered in my name," Jesus said, "there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20, RSV) and thus the Church is most present when it gathers Christians together in worship, especially for the Eucharist. We might think of that forerunner of the Eucharist when Christ gathered a 'diocese' of 5,000 in the hills, divided them into 'parishes' of fifty or so, performed a miracle with the loaves, multiplying them and distributing them to all those present. Or at his Last Supper when he did so much more for the Twelve and for us. The Church makes the Eucharist but the Eucharistic Lord first makes the Church. De Lubac quotes Cyril of Alexandria, "we are... molded into the one body of Christ, feeding on one flesh alone. One spirit singles us out for unity and, as Christ is one and divisible, we are no longer many but one in him." (De Lubac, 1988, p. 91). This supernatural unity, occasioned by the Eucharist, is the context for Paul's teaching that "Just as there is one Bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one Bread" (1 Cor 10:17, RSV). This makes the diverse People of God "one heart and mind" as the *Acts of the Apostles* put it, "devoted to the apostles' teaching and the *κοινωνία* (communion), to the Breaking of the Bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35, RSV).

Some years ago, the great English Dominican theologian, Herbert McCabe, was asked whether potato crisps and Coca-Cola might be more relevant for a youth Mass than bread and wine. He said he thought we should follow the Church's rubrics in this matter: order matters in the liturgy, the tradition of using wheaten flour and grape wine goes back to Jesus, and it is for the Church to set the parameters of the sacraments. However, he then added another reason not to use chips and coke: because, he said, they are so lacking in nutrition as to be doubtfully food and drink at all! He was being humorous, of course, but there was an important point here about food for body and soul. Jesus deliberately chose the everyday staples of bread and wine to make himself sacramentally present to our everyday world.

But bread and wine are not neutral symbols for us: they bear all the ambiguity of human fabrication, with its mixture of blessing and curse. Bread, the simple food of peasants and kings, is made from that abundance of grain that covers our globe. Yet so many are without their daily bread, while others hoard or gorge on it. The Russian blockade of Ukrainian wheat exports has caused shortages and starvation in some places, and price inflation everywhere. Trade wars parallel military ones, tariffs and cartels prop up prices, and grain is stockpiled and dumped rather than shared. Then there is wine, the drink that cheers hearts, and evokes toasts and parties. Yet we know alcohol is the source of so much pain and suffering in drunkenness and violence, destitution and road-deaths, in broken homes, bones, and lives (Preston, 1978).

Into all this mess of human joys and sufferings, hopes and fears, the crowd on the hill hungry for food and signs, the gang of confused and betraying disciples in the cenacle, amidst the ambiguity of bread and wine, Jesus comes to us, again and again, in the Eucharist. Under these very ambiguous signs he makes himself really present, making sense of it all, humanizing and divinizing it, so that nothing human is alien to God except that which is anti-god and anti-man, 'sin'. As from all eternity, now from the very middle of the human mess, God the Father sings the Word, the great love song that is the Son, who in turn unites the different voices of humanity in the harmony of a choir.

He now charges the Church: “From now on, do this in memory of me.”

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis highlighted the healing dimension of the Eucharist, by insisting that the Eucharist is “not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment of the weak” (Francis, 2013, p. 47). In Jesus we encounter the divine physician, healing our physical and spiritual ills, and restoring us to friendship with God and each other. But the ‘who’ of our healing is corporate; I am made whole to the degree I am part of a healed and healing whole. As Pope Francis put it in *Laudato Si*, the “human person grows more, matures more, and is sanctified more, to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from him or herself to live in communion with God, with others, and with all creatures” (Francis, 2015, p. 240).

So in the Eucharist, along with its sacramental twin Confession, we celebrate our communion with God and each other, but also bring it about, healing the fractures between us. Coming together in *ἀνάμνησις* (in memory) and in *εὐχαριστία* (in thanksgiving) for all God has done for us, in salvation history and our personal histories, we are propelled to renew the bonds of human fraternity and *κοινωνία* (communion), and to share the *Evangelii Gaudium* (the joy of the Gospel) with missionary zeal³. In and through the celebration of the Eucharist, we come to understand better that Christ’s sacrifice is “for all” and urges us “to be ‘bread broken’ for others [and] to commit themselves to a more just and fraternal world.” (Benedict XVI, 2010, p. 97). To “do this in memory of me” is to recall and make present the most profound memory of love: that Christ gave his Body and Blood, the entirety of his life and self, so that we might live in him, and love all humanity as he did (Pontifical Committee for International Eucharistic Congress, 2024, p. 48).

V. Synodality and the Eucharist

Sixty years ago, the Second Vatican Council described the Church as a sacrament, a sign and instrument of union with God and humanity, and as a communion between God and humanity, and between human persons. Against the backdrop of this sacramental and *communio ecclesiology*, the Council then reflected upon the collegiality of the bishops including when gathered in synod. The idea of synodality has been a rich source of reflection on ecclesial sensibility in recent years. What it means to qualify an institution or activity as ‘synodal’ is sometimes unclear because the concept is still crystallizing. But in a truly synodal Church, the pastors and faithful will:

- Exercise their offices and ministries in hierarchical communion and with a sense of co-responsibility
- Balance the universal and particular, the priesthood of the baptized with that of the ordained
- Be conduits of the apostolic tradition but also open to new voices and pastoral strategies
- Govern, teach, and sanctify in ways that encourage the faithful in their communion with God and the saints
- Cultivate an ecclesial sensibility that is inclusive, fraternal, listening, discussing, praying, discerning and deciding, with all and for all, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and Gather the faithful into Eucharistic communities, promoting devotion and outreach.

Eucharistic worship then has a horizontal dimension: it fosters communion not only with those present but also with the broader Church and all of humanity. However, in line with the pattern of Christ's death, all Christian life is cruciform, meaning that the horizontal dimension must intersect with the vertical, our communion on earth must be linked to that in heaven. Unlike secular, political, bureaucratic, or corporate views of the Church, Pope Francis underscores that the Holy Spirit must be the central guiding force in the life of the Church and in any authentic synodality. Without the Spirit, he argues, we might hold an ecclesial U.N. meeting or diocesan parliament, "debating this issue or that," but it would not be a true synod. A true synod involves "the faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome, all listening to one another, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of truth,' to discern what He 'says to the Churches'" (Francis, 2015). The Pope further stated, "There is no aspect of ecclesial life that does not find its summit and its source in the Liturgy." He continued, "More than being the outcome of elaborate programs, a comprehensive, organic, and integrated pastoral practice is the result of placing the Sunday Eucharist, the foundation of communion, at the center of the community's life" (Francis, 2022).

This conception of synodality as a form of worship is unique to Pope Francis (Francis 2021). "The Synod is a process of spiritual discernment, of ecclesial discernment," he says, "that unfolds in adoration, in prayer, and in dialogue with the word of God" (Francis, 2023). A synodal Church will only be a space for the action of the Holy Spirit if participants engage in "trusting prayer... that is the action of the heart when it opens to the divine, when our humors are silenced in order to listen to the still quiet voice of God" (Francis, 2015b). In Eucharistic adoration, Christ stares at us and we stare back at him; we are stilled, listening deeply, exchanging. In the classic story of *σύννοδος* (walking together) on the way to Emmaus, the two climactic moments are Christ breaking open the Word and then Breaking the Bread. As Word-and-Bread-breakers, the pastors are essential to any genuinely synodal sensibility or process; and as Word-and-Bread receivers, the whole People of God must be actively receptive.

When we journey together eucharistically, we better understand God and each other. As the disciples walking together to Emmaus had their hearts and eyes opened to Christ burning in his word and present in his sacrament, we recall, give thanks, are conformed to Christ and become more truly his Body. The sacramental body makes the mystical body, and *vice versa*. This emboldens us to extend divine forgiveness and proclaim divine hope to our divided world. Only as a unified body animated by God's love can the Church be a credible witness to the world, and lead humanity to a deeper communion. In imitating Christ, becoming his body broken for others, we trade in egoism and domination for self-giving and service.

Conclusion

After a century of proclamation that "God is dead" and the terrible fractures of French society by Revolutions and the Napoleonic era, French laywoman Émilie-Marie Tamisier organized the first Eucharistic Congress in 1881. The idea came to her when she witnessed two hundred French parliamentarians kneel before the Blessed Sacrament to rededicate their hearts and nation. Her straight-

forward belief was that “The Eucharist saves the world” and this served as the theme of that first congress. In her estimation, only the power of the Blessed Sacrament would win “the eldest daughter of the Church” back to the faith of her ancestors, and heal the divisions unfaith had wrought in her country.

But if the Eucharist could heal Émilie’s world, so it might ours also. We must, to use the language of St John Paul II, live out a “transfigured existence” committed to “transforming the world” by sharing in the sacred meal that makes the God-man present not only to those who consume him, but in and through them to all humanity (John Paul II, 2003, p. 20). In this way we live no longer in terms of “me and them” or even “us and them” but only “us”, for as Pope Francis says, we are all brothers and sisters taken from the world to the Table of the Lord, and from that Table back into the world, journeying together on our way to heaven.

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