

Ecumenical Reflection on the Eucharist as Sacrament of Christian Love: Implications for Church Identity and Vocation

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Abstract

This paper seeks to contribute to ecumenical discussions on the sacrament of Eucharist from a pneumatological approach. Starting from the theology of John Wesley and Thomas Aquinas, the author argues that Communion is a sacrament that communicates divine love through the Incarnate Christ by the power of the Spirit. As a result, the Eucharist shapes the identity and vocation of the church as the Body of Christ in the world. Further, in Communion, the Spirit leads the local Christian assemblies - as localized Bodies of Christ - toward a catholicism of encounter and inclusion rather than fragmentation and competition. The paper concludes that the Lord's Table nourished a spirituality that seeks to embody Christ's love for the suffering and marginalized neighbor. The author invites further reflection on the Eucharist as a liturgical practice that, rather than dividing, motivates ecumenical work.

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Keywords

Eucharist, Communion, Lord's Table, Medicine of Immortality, Pneumatology, Ecumenism, Catholicism, Body of Christ, Love.

Resumen

Este artículo busca contribuir a los debates ecuménicos sobre el sacramento de la Comunión desde un enfoque pneumatológico. Partiendo de la teología de Juan Wesley y Tomás de Aquino, el autor argumenta que la Eucaristía es un sacramento que comunica el amor divino a través de Cristo encarnado por el poder del Espíritu. Como resultado, la Eucaristía forma la identidad y vocación de la Iglesia como Cuerpo de Cristo en el mundo. Además, en la Comunión, el Espíritu conduce a las asambleas cristianas locales - como Cuerpos de Cristo localizados- hacia un catolicismo de encuentro e inclusión en lugar de fragmentación y competencia. El documento concluye que la Mesa del Señor alimenta una espiritualidad que busca encarnar el amor de Cristo por el prójimo sufriente y marginado. El autor invita a seguir reflexionando sobre la Eucaristía como práctica litúrgica que, en lugar de dividir, motiva el trabajo ecuménico.

Palabras claves

Eucaristía, Comunión, Mesa del Señor, Medicina de la Inmortalidad, Pneumatología, Ecumenismo, Catolicismo, Cuerpo de Cristo, Amor.

Introduction

This paper pneumatologically and ecumenically examines the Eucharist's significance for the church's identity and vocation in contexts of inequity. The question leading this work is what faithful sacramental life means for local churches situated in communities fractured by deep social inequalities. To answer this question, I argue that Communion communicates divine love through the Incarnate Christ by the power of the Spirit, shaping the church's identity and vocation as the Body of Christ. Thus, in this sacrament, the Spirit of God drives the local Christian assemblies, as localized Bodies of



Christ, towards a catholicism of encounter and inclusion that seeks to embody Christ's love for the suffering and marginalized neighbor.

By doing that, in the first section and second sections, I will offer a pneumatological approach to the Eucharist from an ecumenical perspective. From a Wesleyan and Thomistic vantage, I argue that the Eucharist is the sacrament that communicates Incarnate Christ's saving grace to reconcile humanity with God and neighbors in the power of the Spirit. In the third section, building on Wesley and Aquinas's standpoint, I will argue that the Eucharist is a memorial of Christ's death and resurrection that the Spirit relationally mediates to unite the believer to Christ. Therefore, Communion is a vital liturgical narrative and practice that shapes the church's loving vocation as the Body of Christ.

In the fourth section, I will show that, in the Eucharist, the Spirit of God moves the Body of Christ toward the encounter and inclusion of the neighbors and strangers. In dialogue with the theological analysis proposed by William Cavanaugh (1999), I argue that Communion affirms the church's catholicity as the Body of Christ to the extent that it calls for encounter and inclusion instead of competition and fragmentation. Finally, I will conclude that Communion nourishes a spirituality that inspires local Christian assemblies, as a localized expression of the Body of Christ, to embody Christ's love for the neighbor and the stranger to the glory of God the Father by the power of the Spirit of Love.

Wesley: Communion as God-Ordained Means of Grace

Wesley's pneumatological approach is central to his theology of grace and salvation. In the Wesleyan tradition, the Holy Spirit is God's power, producing direct witnesses for justification/new birth and indirect fruits for sanctification in the human spirit (Wesley, 1769). As a result, justification and sanctification depend on the Spirit's operation. Although Wesley recognizes our inability to know or describe precisely how the Spirit produces such direct witness (Wesley, 1991e, S I.7), he draws on Scripture (e.g., Rom 8:16, Gal 4:6) and human experience (i.e., the marks of the Spirit) to affirm that such operation precedes, accompanies, and follows the human conscience's witness,



enlightening and enabling it to confess and live as God's children (Wesley, 1991e, S II.4,14).

Although God's Spirit can act immediately and directly, God's ordinary manner is to act mediately through what Wesley calls *means of grace* (Knight, 1992). These *means* are "outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God, and appointed for this end - to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace" (Wesley, 1991a, S II.1). From a Wesleyan perspective, the Spirit is "creature-friendly," as it does not repel but uses and operates in and through such external means (Castelo, 2015, p. 83-94). Thus, these *means* offer a relational and synergistic ground to participate in God's grace, receiving spiritual renewal and support.

The Lord's Supper belongs to the *ordinary* means of grace. In contrast to the *prudential* means, whose existence and use depend on the circumstances of time and place, the ordinary or instituted ones are ordained by God and thus belong "to the universal church in all eras of history and in all cultures" (Knight, 1992, p. 3). Communion is an ordinance established by Christ himself as interpreted in the Scriptures (e.g., Luke 22:19) and practiced by the apostolic church. Specifically, in Luke 22:19, the "bread and wine are commanded to be received, in remembrance of his death, to the end of the world... [and] all his followers" (Wesley, 1991d, S I.1). Because of this, this sacrament is Christ's death memorial to give us life in and through him.

Wesley points to two realities in Communion that cohere with his general definition of the means of grace. On the one hand, *external signs* such as bread and wine show the Lord's death (Wesley, 1991d, p. S I.2) and analogically represent his body and blood. These outward signs point to the incarnate Christ. On the other hand, a spiritual reality acts in and through the external signs to communicate itself to individuals who receive Communion with sincere faith (Wesley, 1991d, p. S I.4). This spiritual reality is the inward grace which, having Christ's blood and body as the foundation, brings spiritual benefits to the believers, such as confirmation of the forgiveness of sins, strength to fulfill the Christian vocation, and refreshment with the hope of glory.



The Lord's Table has the Christian's perfection as its purpose. Because the sacrament communicates sanctifying grace, it must be interpreted within Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection. For him, the sacrament "is the food of our souls: this gives strength to perform our duty, and leads us on to perfection" (Wesley, 1991d, S I.3). This *perfection* is "the humble, gentle, patient love of God and our neighbor, ruling our tempers, words, and actions" (Wesley, 2013, p. 199). It is a continuous process throughout the believer's life because, regardless of the high degree of maturation, "still [the believer] needs to 'grow in grace,' and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his Saviour" (Wesley, 1991c, S I.9). As a result, Communion's end is that "we may be assisted to attain those blessings which he [God] hath prepared for us; that we may obtain holiness on earth and everlasting glory in heaven" (Wesley, 1991d, S 2.5).

Aquinas: Communion as an Instrumental Cause of Divine Grace

According to Aquinas, humanity's *summum bonum* is God, and perfect happiness is union with Him (Aquinas, 2021, 1– 2.2.8; 1– 2.3.8). This union is impossible without virtue, namely, the good disposition of the voluntary, both acquired (i.e., cardinal virtues) and infused or theological (Aquinas, 2021, 1– 2.55.4; 1– 2.61.2; 1– 2.62.3). These virtues depend on God's grace as the First Move and Act, which gives humans the power to act according to natural capacities while simultaneously healing and perfecting it to attain perfect happiness (Aquinas, 2021, 1– 2.109.1,2). Above all, the human being needs God's grace to obtain love, on which every virtue (cardinal or theological, acquired or infused) depends, for – according to John 15:15 - charity is the friendship toward God" and neighbor, including enemies (Aquinas, 2021, 2– 2.23.1; 2– 2.23.6).

Considering the centrality of God's grace, Aquinas conceptualizes the sacraments as visible signs arranged by God to share his grace and lead humanity toward unity with him. Only God's grace is a principal cause in the sacraments, for "grace is nothing else than a shared likeness of the divine nature, according to 2 Peter (1:4)" (Aquinas, 2021, 3.62.1). In other words, only God can effectively communicate (accidentally) his divine essence to humans. Consequently, an instru-



mental cause (visible signs) only functions through the motion given to it by the principal agent. In short, the sacrament depends entirely on God's grace as the principal cause and agent.

Regarding the Eucharist, and keeping with his distinction between instrumental and principal cause/agent, Aquinas distinguishes between the sacrament itself and its effect, or, in other words, "sacramental eating" and "spiritual eating." On the one hand, in "sacramental eating," the individual consumes the sacrament alone without receiving its effect or spiritual benefits. By contrast, in "spiritual eating," the person receives the sacrament's effects "so that one is spiritually united with Christ through faith and charity" (Aquinas, 2021, 3.80.1). Eucharistic participation has no spiritual benefit if it lacks the faith and charity that unite the person with God in the incarnate Christ.

The Eucharist is the presence of the incarnate Christ, who saturates the sacrament. Aquinas differentiates between "sacrament only" (*sacramentum tantum*) and "reality and sacrament" (*res et sacramentum*). While the *sacramentum tantum* points to the visible signs, the *res et sacramentum* is Christ incarnate (*res tantum*), filling and perfecting the sacrament (*sacramentum tantum*). Hence, the incarnate Christ, sacramentally mediated, works in the heart of the person who consumes it with faith and love. As Augustine reports Christ's words to him: "I am the food of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me" (Augustine, 1991, p. 124).

This spiritual eating and effect do not deny the bodily sign nor the reality "along with" or "under" it but completes its perfection. God becomes the principal cause/agent of saving grace through the incarnate Word, eucharistically mediated, even if not sacramentally received (e.g., the reception by desire from faith working through love; Aquinas, 2021, 3.68.2; 3.73.3). In this framework, the eucharistic Christ is the source of saving grace for the human being. Accordingly, Communion's spiritual purpose is reconciliation with God and neighbor in and through Christ Jesus by the Holy Spirit operating in those who partake of the Medicine of Immortality with faith and love.

The Holy Spirit, invoked in the Eucharistic sacrament, is the best guarantee of God's grace working in the consumer's heart. From



Aquinas' perspective, the Holy Spirit is Love who proceeds from the loving Father as an aspiration for and through the Beloved Son (Aquinas, 2021, 3.27.4; 3.37.1). In the economy of salvation, this same Spirit of Love impelled the incarnate Word in his self-giving for the forgiveness and healing of humanity. In this way, "the just flesh [Christ] has reconciled the flesh that was captive to sin [Humanity] and brought it into friendship with God" (Irenaeus of Lyon, 1997, Book V, 14.2). Subsequently, as the Gift of Love, the Holy Spirit also moves our desire and will to Communion with thanksgiving to the Loving Father by His Beloved Son, and, as a result, we are eucharistically incorporated in the Loving Divine Communion.

Communion: Identity and Vocation of the Church as Body of Christ

As we have seen, from Wesley and Aquinas's perspective, the Lord's Supper is the sacrament that celebrates and acclaims divine love in Christian worship. Beyond their philosophical and theological differences concerning how Christ is present in the signs of bread and wine, they agree that Christ makes the sacrament because of his eucharistic self-giving to reconcile the human being with God the Father and neighbor. Thus, for both, the Eucharist depends entirely on the grace of God in and through Christ and the mediating work of the Spirit, who inspires and compels individuals to participate in the sacrament with sincere faith and love. From Thomistic and Wesleyan insights, the Lord's Supper is relational and synergistic participation in God's loving grace.

Building on Wesley and Aquinas's standpoint, we can affirm that Christ offers himself "under" and "along with" the elements of bread and wine to give real and complete life through his Love. As a memorial of Christ's death and resurrection (cf. Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24-25), the Holy Spirit relationally mediates Christ's eucharistic self-giving within the liturgical and ministerial life of the church, communicating God's gratuitous love in the human soul (i.e., Christ and his love dwells in the human heart through his Spirit; cf. 1 John 3:8-24; Eph. 3:14-18). Hence, the action of remembrance does not rest solely on the fragility of human memory and rituals but, more importantly, on the work of the Spirit, who stokes and renews the fire of



love in the believer's life by protecting him from amnesia and apathy. This making memory is the Spirit's loving work to incorporate the believer into Christ Jesus.

Communion performs and realizes the church's unity in the Incarnate Christ for the glory of Father God by the Spirit. In other words, in Communion, the believers are incorporated into Christ by the power of the Spirit to be transformed into his likeness. Thus, in this memorial action, the Gift of Love impels laity and clergy of different traditions to work for the Christian's unity as the Body of Christ (cf. Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12). This Body, composed of his disciples across the world, following the example and ordinance of their Lord and Master, gives itself individually and corporately to serve the world from the margins of society (cf. John 13:12-17; Luke 22:24-30). In summary, the Eucharist defines the church's identity and vocation as the Body of Christ in the world.

Having considered Communion as the sacrament of Christian love that shapes the identity and vocation of the church as Christ's Body, in the following section, I will consider that, in this sacrament, the Spirit of God moves this Body toward a catholicity of encounter and inclusion. In dialogue with William Cavanaugh and other sources, I will argue that, before that fragmentation and competition, the Lord's Table energizes alternatives of humanizing encounters and inclusion of the neighbors and strangers. Finally, building on the main arguments presented in this paper, I will conclude that Communion entails a contemplative spirituality committed to loving those who suffer injustice and marginalization as a faithful response to God's Eucharistic love.

Eucharistic: catholicism of encounter and inclusion of the Body of Christ

Cavanaugh argues that the Eucharist is a way of resistance to the global capital project as it overcomes the dichotomy between the local and universal and enables a genuine encounter with neighbors and strangers. On the one hand, in the face of the neoliberal global narrative, Communion affirms a catholicity or universality that depends not on geographical expansion but on the local assembly's unity in Christ. In other words, its catholicity rests on the capacity for encou-



nter regardless of the geographical scale. Nevertheless, as Cavanaugh explains, such a multiplicity of places of encounter does not mean fragmentation or competition because each assembly gathered around the Lord's Table is a complete expression of the Body of Christ, the whole Church.

As Cavanaugh argues, in the first centuries of Christianity, the term "catholic Church" was associated with the gathering of the local assembly around the Eucharist (Cavanaugh, 1999, p. 190). For example, this view is consistent with the perspective of church fathers such as Ignatius of Antioch, for whom Christ's "real" presence in the Eucharist defines the Church's Catholic identity. From Ignatius's perspective, the incarnate Christ (his life, death, and resurrection) and his "real" presence (body and blood) in the "Medicine of Immortality" (i.e., the Eucharist) is the source of the church's unity. He resorts to biblical imagery to express this idea, defining Christ as the Father's mind, who builds the church as God's Temple and harmonizes the church as a choir singing in unison toward the Father. Thus, the church and its leadership must harmonize their actions according to Christ's mind in faith and love because "where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church" (Ignatius, 1996, p. 88-90).

On the other hand, catholicism depends on the face-to-face encounter of neighbors and strangers in the Eucharistic and the story of cosmic proportions that is told and realized in that local assembly. The Eucharistic consumer participates in a past, present, and future journey from Christ's life, death, and resurrection through the new covenant to recreate everything. Therefore, taking up Irenaeus' hermeneutical approach, the Eucharist is a form of recapitulation that communicates and performs the church's unity as the result of God's reconciling action in Christ. Thus, Communion unites the "whole Church on earth with the Church of all times and places in eternity" (Cavanaugh, 1999, p. 192).

Although Wesley does not explicitly refer to Communion's catholicity, his theology on the church's catholicity spirit is consistent with this idea. As we have seen, from a Wesleyan approach, the Lord's Table operates the incarnate Christ's ministry of reconciliation that unites the person with God and neighbor. In other words, the sacrament is a Spirit-mediated practice where reconciliation is narrated and rea-



lized in the Christian local assembly. In sermons such as “Catholic Spirit,” Wesley emphasizes Christian unity around the essential (i.e., love for God and neighbor) grounded in his soteriological view of divine love’s universality. As a result, Communion celebrates Christ’s reconciliation and love, which is the foundation of the church’s catholic spirit. As Wesley defines it, the catholic spirit is Christ’s universal love (Wesley, 1991b, p. S III.4).

Conclusion

Starting from a pneumatological approach to saving grace and how the Spirit operates through the Eucharist, I have argued that, from a Wesleyan perspective, the Lord’s Supper is an instituted means whose ultimate goal is to assist and direct the person on the path of love with God and neighbor (i.e., Christian perfection). Similarly, I show how - according to Aquinas - the Eucharist is an instrumental cause of grace that unites the human being with the Loving Father through the Beloved Son by the mediation of the Spirit of Love, the Giving Gift. As a result, for both, the Spirit is the Gift of divine grace that acts mediately and relationally in the Eucharistic sacrament to unite the person with God and neighbor in the bond of love in and through the incarnate Christ.

Communion unites individuals into the Body of Christ, encouraging a catholicism of encounter and inclusion rather than fragmentation and competition. The sacrament introduces the Christian congregation to a world where Christ extends beyond the liturgical experience in the face of all humanity, especially on the suffering and poor neighbor who is now genuinely identified by and in Christ (Mt. 25:31-46). In other words, life is experienced from a sacramental perspective that permeates all our relationships, including our relationship with the excluded and oppressed neighbor and stranger. Thus, “the Eucharist does not simply tell the story of a united human race but brings to light barriers where they exist” (Cavanaugh, 1999, p. 96) as when Paul discovers that the Corinthians are unworthily partaking of the Lord’s Supper because of the humiliation of the poor by the rich (1 Cor. 11:17-21) or as when James criticizes the discrimination of the poor in the Christian gathering (Jam. 2:1-7).



This sacramental perspective implies a critical reflection on reality to understand the causes that produce injustice, as well as a contemplative practice that allows us to encounter the Lord in the face of someone poor and suffering. In other words, this critical reflection arises from and is nourished by a contemplative experience as a mystical way of encountering Christ in the face of the oppressed. This experience is at the heart of any liberating theology (Gutiérrez, 2003, p. 38). More importantly, it is a critical reflection motivated by love as local and universal as the Incarnate Word. Through its Body (i.e., the whole Church), Christ continues to bring salvation to all humanity, breaking down the barriers that prevent him from embracing the least and the smallest of our communities. Therefore, the Eucharist could be a liturgical practice that, before that division, fosters the church's unity in ecumenical loving service.



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