



Assembly of Québec Catholic Bishops
Theology Committee

Theological and Pastoral Commentaries

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RECEIVING OR NOT RECEIVING COMMUNION DURING CELEBRATIONS OF GOD'S WORD SEVERAL POINTS TO CONSIDER

Ecclesial life is in the midst of a period of change and as a result, the Church has adopted various and previously unanticipated liturgical orientations. These changes have both enriched our Christian communities and exposed the fragility of our institutions. They have also obliged pastoral ministers to embark upon unprecedented pathways. Within the context of research on new ways to celebrate the liturgy, and acknowledging the scarcity of priests, many Christian communities have had to modify their liturgical practices for Sunday gatherings. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops [CCCB] has produced several documents which address these particular situations. One of these is: *Sunday Celebration of the Word and Hours, Pastoral Notes (SCWH)*.

For Christian communities who cannot celebrate Sunday Eucharist, *SCWH* offers the possibility of celebrating the Lord's Day within a liturgical assembly. With *SCWH*, communities respond to the Lord's call and remember Christ's death and resurrection. During these celebrations, the faithful encounter the Risen Christ during the proclamation of God's Word, as they do in assemblies with their brothers and sisters. They receive the Body of Christ through the Bread of Life which may be offered. Those who have followed specific *training*, and have been *mandated*, will animate this liturgy. *SCWH* enables the faithful to pursue their communitarian life through one of its essential dimensions: the celebration of the Lord's Day.

To provide support to the ministers responsible for the preparation and animation of these Sunday assemblies, the CCCB has published documents on these rituals, *SCWH – Sunday*

*Celebrations of the Word and Hours, Pastoral Notes*¹, as well as pastoral commentaries which appear in two publications of the Canadian Studies in Liturgy.² There are four proposed methods of celebration: 1) Sunday celebrations of the Word; 2) Sunday celebrations of the Word with communion; 3) an evening psalmodic liturgy; and 4) a morning psalmodic liturgy. Though many Christian communities can still attend Sunday celebrations of the Word with communion, it could happen that they are not aware of other possibilities such as those proposed by *SCWH*. The purpose of this theological commentary is to help us discern the occasions when we would or would not receive communion during celebrations of God's Word.

***SCWH* and the Eucharist**

When we choose to have Sunday celebrations of God's Word with communion, we are expressing our profound desire for the Eucharistic celebration itself. However, this leaves us open to a perception of the Eucharist that is not always accurate, particularly if community members have not previously received appropriate catechesis. The way that some believers have expressed themselves indicate that they have not always grasped the true meaning of these celebrations of God's Word and the Eucharist. We may believe that we "*have had it all*" because we have participated in a Liturgy of the Word where communion was distributed. However, we should be aware that such liturgies are never complete in comparison to the Eucharistic celebration.

For these reasons it is essential to educate communities about the liturgies proposed by *SCWH*. This commentary will explain the meaning and connection with the Eucharist, and focus on the planning and implementation processes, as well as its enrichment and limitations. *SCWH* offers alternate liturgical experiences for communities that cannot celebrate the Eucharist at every assembly.

The Eucharist can never be replaced! The distribution of communion, even during an extensive celebration of God's Word, will never equal the celebration of the Eucharist. No Benediction or Adoration of the Holy Sacrament could ever replace a Eucharist.

¹ CCCB, Ottawa, 1995, p. 232. (Canadian Studies in Liturgy)

² CCCB, *Assemblées dominicales en attente de célébration eucharistique*, Ottawa, 1992, No. 4, p. 20 and *Notes pastorales pour les Assemblées dominicales en attente de célébration eucharistique*, Ottawa, 1995, No. 6, p. 47.

The Action of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist

Receiving communion during a Eucharist and receiving communion outside the Mass are not identical realities. During Mass, the communion rite is understood to be one part of the Eucharistic celebration. It is not presented as an isolated moment of the Eucharist.

The complete communion rite is the summit of a progressive process which takes place during the Eucharist. At the moment the members of the assembly eat the bread and drink from the cup, they are in communion with Christ, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and with their brothers and sisters, both present and absent. They are present through their participation in the assembly that gathered at the beginning of the celebration. The priest, as presiding minister, is another aspect of their communion in Christ's presence. Also, the members of the assembly are in communion when they hear God's Word proclaimed and welcomed in faith. They are particularly in communion – in sacramental communion – through their participation in the Eucharistic prayer³.

At the summit of the Eucharistic prayer, the assembly intervenes to proclaim its communion with the Lord who said, *Do this in memory of me*. The song of the anamnesis summarizes the assembly's covenant with Christ.

To be more precise, during the Eucharistic prayer, the Lord's words⁴ and the anamnesis⁵ are bracketed by two *epicleses*, prayers which ask for the intervention of the Holy Spirit. First, the ordained minister, priest, or bishop, holds his hands above the offerings and asks the Father for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Acting in Christ's name, as well as in the name of the assembly and the Church, he asks:

*And so Father, we bring you these gifts. We ask you to make them holy by the power of your Spirit...*⁶

³ The participation of the assembly in the Eucharistic prayer is much more involved than we often acknowledge. The role of the assembly is to respond by singing to the anamnesis – the part of the canon that follows the consecration – at the summit of the Eucharistic prayer. Its role is also to respond to the song of adoration at the Preface when it refers to the angels and saints who praise God's marvelous work in the cosmos and to the Amen at the end, without which the whole prayer would not be sanctioned by the assembly. According to the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, the assembly should remain standing during the prayer. In this instance, *to remain standing* is more than a simple rule because the assembly adopts the attitude of the Resurrection, and *remains* open to the celebration of the Paschal mystery.

⁴ Often called *the words of the consecration*.

⁵ The response from the assembly to the Lord's commandment: *Do this in memory of me*.

⁶ *Eucharistic Prayer III*. In the *Eucharistic Prayer IV*, we also say: *Father, may this Holy Spirit sanctify these offerings. Let them become the body and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord as we celebrate the great mystery which he left us as an everlasting covenant*.

After the anamnesis, there is a new epiclesis – or a continuation of the first – which asks the Holy Spirit to transform the assembly into the Body of Christ. The presiding minister says:

*Grant that we, who are nourished by his body and blood, may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ. May he make us an everlasting gift to you and enable us to share in the inheritance of your saints...*⁷

Asking to become *one body and one spirit in Christ* and to become *an everlasting gift* to the Father's glory means that we, Christians, are asking for communion. Through our faith, we believe that this happens in the Eucharist, the Father's gift *through Him, with Him, in Him, and in the unity of the Holy Spirit*. When we receive communion with bread and wine, we encounter Christ, and also the Father and the Holy Spirit. We commune with each other, since, as Saint Augustine said, "*Become what we are, the Mystical Body of Christ; we become what we receive.*"

As we eat the bread and drink the wine, we envision a communion centered on Christ which opens onto the Trinity and the Church. This rite is not limited to an intimate encounter between Jesus and the communicant. It is a sharing in the life of the Trinity and the Church.

Through the action of the Holy Spirit, what we become during the Eucharistic Prayer enables us to say the Lord's Prayer in communion with Christ and together address *Our Father...* This happens through the action of the Holy Spirit within us who brings us peace that comes from the Lord's Resurrection, and expresses the communion that we share with one another. The action of the Holy Spirit enables us to share in the breaking of the bread and God's gifts. These are some of the communion rites whereby we can partake of the real presence of Christ in the Trinity and the Church.

Communion with Christ present sacramentally in the celebration of the Eucharist prolongs our communion with the Word made Flesh who lives among us through God's Word. Within the Church's tradition, we have often referred to two tables: one of God's Word and the other of the bread and wine. The Church has always insisted that we see in both tables the unique Word made Flesh who lived among us, the Word that is proclaimed and heard, the Word made Flesh in the bread and wine which have become the Lord's Body and Blood, and the bread that is broken and the wine that is shared.

⁷ *Eucharistic Prayer III*. In the *Eucharistic Prayer IV*, we also say, *Lord, look upon this sacrifice which you have given to your Church; and by your Holy Spirit, gather all who share this one bread and one cup into the one body of Christ, a living sacrifice of praise.*

An Enlightened Attitude Concerning the Eucharist

Communion outside of a Eucharistic celebration is a recognized practice which follows certain regulations that are supported by Church tradition and which can be traced back to the beginnings of Christianity. Our predecessors in the faith kept a Holy Reserve for the sick and dying who would then continue their struggles with courage and serenity after communing with Christ who died and rose again. Our predecessors acknowledged the support of the celebrating community in this Eucharistic sharing. Certain historical documents record that our ancestors in the faith would bring the Eucharistic bread to those who were absent and not necessarily ill. This often took place during times of persecution when it was not always possible to gather around a priest. Today, whenever the meaning of receiving communion outside of Mass is well explained, our experience reveals that though the faithful have received communion during a *SCWH*, it does not diminish their expectations to celebrate a future Eucharist. Our authorization to pursue these customs comes from traditional practices and an understanding of the theology of the sacrament.

Here are several suggestions which could clarify our understanding of the mystery of the Eucharist.

- The faithful should regularly experience different means of celebration through *SCWH*, instead of participating exclusively in celebrations of God's Word and Eucharistic communion. The faithful should avail themselves of opportunities to participate in various types of celebrations of prayer and sharing of God's Word, so as to deepen their understanding of the Eucharist, despite its absence, and particularly when the Eucharist is not *available*.
- Through *SCWH*, we will have opportunities to further develop the liturgy of God's Word and to celebrate its expressive beauty. Christ is sacramentally present under the species of consecrated bread and wine. Christ is not any less present in proclamations of God's Word and among the celebrating assemblies.⁸
- There should be adequate preparations for and implementations of *SCWH* so that participants will not confuse these assemblies with the sacrament of the Eucharist.
- There should be a distinction made between celebrations of God's Word, when the Eucharist is not distributed, and which could take place during the week, at funerals,

⁸ Vatican II, Constitution on the Liturgy, # 7.

and marriages. These liturgies are presided over by a deacon or designated minister and are different from those celebrated during Sunday Mass. These other liturgical celebrations will enable us to increase our understanding of God's Word.

- In celebrations where communion is distributed, it is significant to mention to the assembled members that the Sacred Hosts were consecrated at a previous Mass. Communion is always experienced as a direct connection with the Eucharist. Above all, we must never give the impression that there is a large quantity of consecrated hosts reserved for various communion services.
- We should adopt the practice of distributing the consecrated hosts during the actual celebration. This practice contributes greatly to a better understanding of the Eucharist.
- Our hope is that every *SCWH* is open to communion with others, particularly with neighboring Christian communities. By their nature, Sunday celebrations are a communion of communions and open to all members of the Church.
- Our hope is that there would also be adequate reflection and theological understanding of the role of the ordained minister, particularly when the priest and the bishop are not able to be present regularly. We should reflect on the role of the ministers of communion and the Covenant, and invoke the Holy Spirit's help for new vocations to the priestly ministry.
- *The Church is the Eucharist and the Eucharist is the Church.*⁹ Since the Eucharist is the source and the summit of the Christian community, we should reflect on these aspects particularly for Christian communities that only rarely celebrate the Eucharist.

After a Holy Year consecrated to the Eucharist, and following the Bishop's Synod held in Rome in October 2005, preparations have begun for the International Eucharistic Congress in Québec City in 2008. We anticipate a thorough re-evaluation of our pastoral work with the

⁹ Henri de LUBAC, *Méditation sur l'Église*, Paris, Aubier, 1953, p. 139.

Eucharist and *SCWH*. Within the context of a continuing formation, the pastors, members of Parish Councils, pastoral, and liturgical committees, will be enriched by these intensive theological reflections. At the same time, the entire assembly of Catholics will benefit from a solid catechesis on the Eucharist, the sacrament at the heart of their spiritual existence.

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For further reflection

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