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HOW THE EUCHARIST PROCLAIMS SOCIAL JUSTICE

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It would be wrong to think of Eucharist and social justice as belonging to two disparate or disjointed domains. For at its very heart the Eucharist is a proclamation of social justice. Therefore Eucharist must engage the genuine transformation of the world. To keep from being false or trivialized, our eucharistic worship should embody justice at its very core. As the Vatican II Constitution on the Liturgy puts it: "The Eucharist is the peak or summit of our lives from which everything is directed and from which everything flows." For Catholics, social justice finds its deepest roots in and is fed by a profoundly eucharistic imagination. Both the Eucharist and action for social justice flow from the selfsame metaphor for Christ: the body of Christ and Christ's concomitant close identification with his people, especially any who suffer.

How then have we so lost our way that such claims can seem provocative? How have we so betrayed the Eucharist that most churchgoers miss *seeing* any obvious links between it and action for justice? Why are our liturgical documents generally written with little or no explicit connection to justice? And why is there such sparse mention in official Catholic social teaching about the Eucharist? Is it *really* the Eucharist we are celebrating, when it is almost totally cut off from concern about a profound transformation of the world we live in every day? Is our action to transform the world deeply Christian when it becomes severed from its profound eucharistic source?

To address such questions, I reflect on seven ways in which Eucharist in its profoundest reality and theology is essentially a kind of proclamation of social justice. I insist that the relation of Eucharist to social justice is neither some foreign implant nor the importation of extraneous matter to the sacrament. Rather, the Eucharist is an extraordinarily rich and multivalent symbol and reality. Its basic theology as a proclamation of

social justice looks to transform both persons and communities.

1 EUCHARIST IS A SHARING OF FOOD, A MEAL THAT GATHERS THE COMMUNITY

As the commemorative re-enactment of the Lord's Last Supper, clearly the Eucharist is meant to be a meal. During the Jewish Passover, Jesus took the bread, blessed it, and said, "This is my body, broken for you." Presumably, John or one of the other disciples asked the customary *seder* question: Why is this night unlike other nights? Then Jesus and his disciples would have recalled how the Jews who were in slavery in Egypt were released from bondage and given political freedom in Israel; how the Jews, who had been slaves, should always remember this liberation from slavery as central to their worship; how they were to be hospitable to widows, orphans, and migrant workers in the land as the concrete sign of *this* remembrance.

While the food at the Eucharist recalls the unleavened Passover bread, it also recalls manna—the food God provided Israel in the desert. It nurtured everyone, so the people were warned not to be grasping or avariciously hoarding. Eucharist rehearses, too, the miraculous multiplications of bread for the hungry crowds (in John 6 and in the synoptic Gospels), where there is always more than enough food to feed the hungry. As Monika Hellwig puts it in her beautiful small book *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World* (Sheed & Ward, 1999), the meal of the Eucharist is "the celebration of the hospitality of God, shared by guests who commit themselves to become fellow hosts with God."

Saint Paul clearly understood the Eucharist as a meal in which we celebrate the undeserved, yet gracious hospitality of God toward us. He reminds his hearers: "The blessing cup that we bless is a communion with the blood of Christ, and the bread that we break is a communion with the body of Christ. The fact that there is

only one loaf means that, though there are many of us, we form a single body because we all have a share in this one loaf" (I Cor 10:16-17). In the Corinthian church, the Eucharist was closely tied to communal meals. Whenever class distinctions or the slightest humiliation of the poor enter into the eucharistic celebration, Paul chides the wealthy. "It is *not* the Lord's supper that you are eating, since when the time comes to eat, everyone is in such a hurry to start his own supper that one person goes hungry while another is getting drunk" (I Cor 11:20-22). Paul's language is exceedingly strong. He feared that the celebrations may do more harm than good (vs. 17). In Paul's view, "unjust eucharists," which build in distinctions or exclusions between the wealthy and the poor (or other members of the Body of Christ) are not really the Lord's supper. If radical equality and hospitality are missing, he seems to suggest, then our Eucharist is *invalid!*

The eucharistic assembly, too, should be a concrete sign of justice: the community where all are welcome, where there is a radical equality despite race, wealth, social class, and gender. Social justice is not something tacked on. Rather, the assembly, called to be the body of Christ that shares one loaf, is an integral sign of the meal. If we do not see ourselves as guests of God at a shared meal and if we fail to be fellow hosts with God feeding the hungry that surround us, is it really a Eucharist we celebrate?

We dare not forget our own hungers (including metaphorical hungers for dignity, respect, and freedom as the Jews remember them at their *seder*) nor cut the Eucharist off from the hungers of the world, lest we trivialize it. "Never really to be hungry is to court the danger of forgetting that our very existence is a gift," writes Monika Hellwig. For the Eucharist is not just any meal. It is the remembrance of the Passover liberation from Egypt and the renewed paschal mystery of the Lord.

2 EUCARIST IS THE REDEMPTIVE SACRIFICE, THE NEW COVENANT IN CHRIST'S BLOOD

The eucharistic meal is no less a remembrance and re-enactment of the redemptive sacrifice in Christ's blood, who died for "the many." A pious Jew in the tradition of the prophets, Jesus knew well that sacrifice evoked the words of the Israelite prophets who inveighed against irrelevant and empty sacrifices. He knew such passages as this one, in which God wants obedience of the heart:

What are your endless sacrifices to me, says Yah-

weh. I am sick of holocausts of rams and the fat of calves. The blood of bulls and of goats revolts me....Bring me your worthless offerings no more, the smoke of them fills me with disgust. You may multiply your prayers, I shall not listen. Your hands are covered with blood, wash, make yourselves clean. Take your wrongdoing out of my sight, cease to do evil, learn to do good, search for justice, help the oppressed, be just to the orphan, plead for the widow (Is 1:11-17).

Justice is the true sacrifice God desires.

Jesus decisively inaugurates the kingdom with the price of his blood on Calvary. His blood becomes for us the new blood of the lamb sprinkled over us to ratify the new covenant. Jesus' sacrifice calls us to remember his compassion for the poor and widows, his feeding of the hungry, his own open table fellowship with outcasts and persons who were scorned. Go and do likewise ("Do this in memory of me"), Jesus tells us, as we share in this new redemptive covenant in his blood. Pope Leo the Great once put it this way: "The price of the kingdom is the food you give to those who need it." There can never be a special covenant with God or Christ that excludes the well-being of others. The covenant is given to us for witness and service.

3 EUCARIST IS THE MEMORIAL OF THE DEATH OF JESUS

The meal, and the sacrifice, is also a memorial. We commemorate Christ's death and resurrection. We remember why Jesus was put to death—precisely because of the challenging message he preached and lived. Jesus tells people not to look to their own desires, but to regard the needs of others first, being especially concerned about those *most* in need. In preaching the kingdom, Jesus bids his followers to be concerned at all times with trying to accomplish the will of God in their lives and social interactions, trusting that, thereby, all other needs would be met. He asks us to judge others more by what they do than by their social status. Jesus steadfastly refuses to defend his own rights by any resort to violence (let those who live by the sword die by it, he tells Peter). Instead, Jesus relies on an appeal to conscience. Jesus teaches that, instead of taking revenge, we are to break down the rule of violence by embodying in our behavior an alternative style of life. We are to pattern our relationships on love—tough love, perhaps—but love, not competition, not humiliation, not triumphalism. We are to be in the world as those who serve. In John 13, the evangelist makes service the very heart of the

Last Supper.

Jesus taught his followers to live simply, not to enrich themselves, since possessions do not increase happiness. He urged us not to be worried about saving our lives but to be always ready to give them up. Jesus told his disciples not to seek honors, titles, or high positions, nor to be impressed by these in others. He pronounced a blessing on those persecuted, despised, and ridiculed for righteousness' sake. Jesus also assumed that his followers should be ever ready to practice civil disobedience if need be (rendering "to God what belongs to God and not to Caesar"). These are the teachings that led to Jesus' death.

We who remember the death of Jesus at every Eucharist should recall the deep meaning of Christ's crucifixion. Jesus who is hoisted on a tree outside the city becomes the quintessential despised outsider: "Jesus crucified is above all representative of the marginalized, despised, and oppressed, of those who 'don't count' and are kept out of sight (socially invisible), of those who are outsiders and have no rights. It is not possible to be one with Jesus in the moment of his death and yet ignore the poor and suffering of the world," writes Monika Hellwig.

This is the heart of the meaning of Jesus' redemptive death. As Paul tells us, to neglect the nexus between Jesus' death and the proclamation of justice is a kind of "trifling with the death of Christ" (I Cor 12:29).

4 EUCHARIST IS THE BODY OF CHRIST

Catholics remain faithful to the truth of Jesus' real presence in the elements. The Eucharist is truly the body of Christ. "My flesh," Jesus tells us, "is food indeed and my blood is real drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him" (Jn 6:55-57). This understanding of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist is broader than his real presence in the elements. Christ is also present in the Scriptures we proclaim as we break open the word. As the fathers of the church always insisted, it is Christ who speaks to us through the Scriptures and who preaches. He is also present in the assembly, which becomes, no less, his body. The symbol of the body of Christ is a metaphor for the real transformation of elements, human words, and community. It also is a potent symbol of a social justice of inclusiveness. The body, though composed of many parts, is, nonetheless, one. Some of the parts that seem weakest and least important are really the most necessary and cannot be despised. If one part of the body is hurt, all parts feel the pain (I Cor 12:12-30). This body image takes us squarely to the arena of social justice. Hear for a moment the meditation of St. John Chrysostom on the body of Christ:

Do you wish to honor the body of Christ? Do not

despise him when he is naked. Do not honor him here in the church building with silks, only to neglect him outside, when he is suffering from cold and nakedness. For he who said, "This is my Body" is the same who said: "You saw me, a hungry man, and you did not give me to eat." Of what use is it to load the table of Christ? Feed the hungry and then come and decorate the table. You are making a golden chalice and you do not give a cup of cold water? The temple of your afflicted brother's body is more precious than this temple (the church). The Body of Christ becomes for you an altar. It is more holy than the altar of stone on which you celebrate the holy sacrifice. You are able to contemplate this altar everywhere, in the street and in the open squares.

There is a deep theological point at issue, then, in the dispute between Mother Angelica and Cardinal Roger Mahony. The television nun accused the cardinal of downplaying the real presence because he insisted that the assembly, too, becomes the body of Christ. By her one-sided emphasis on the real presence of Jesus in the bread and wine to the exclusion of his presence in word and community, Mother Angelica disconnects the Eucharist from concerns for social justice and the transformation of the world. Is this trifling with the death of the Lord, to use Saint Paul's phrase?

5 EUCHARIST IS A RITE OF FORGIVENESS

The Eucharist begins with a penitential rite, a solemn declaration of our sinfulness and need for God's mercy. The church has always assumed that the Eucharist is food for healing, a gathering where our sins are forgiven. At every Eucharist, we pray these words from the Our Father: "Forgive us our sins *as we forgive* those who sin against us." We not only ask for forgiveness and empowerment toward new life for ourselves but pledge to become, ourselves, forgivers. Social justice, which is about "righting wrongs," entails forgiveness predicated on conversion and firm purpose of amendment. Perhaps the key arena for social justice in our contemporary world (think of Northern Ireland, for example, or Kosovo, the Middle East, or the racial tensions in our own society) lies in this possibility of reconciliation. Past iniquities are forgiven, here is the chance for a new start. But forgiveness does not come cheap. It is given in response to recompense for wrongs done, to sincere confession of failure, and a reliance on God's blessing to empower a new start.

As Jesus from the cross prayed, "Father, forgive them," he called us to a socially just reconciliation before we offer our gifts at the altar. Can you hear the eu-

charistic resonance to Jesus' words: "If you are standing before the altar in the temple, offering a sacrifice to God, and suddenly remember that a friend has something against you, leave your sacrifice there beside the altar and go and apologize and be reconciled to him and then come and offer your sacrifice to God" (Mt 5:23-24)? Jesus reconciles and forgives on the cross first, then by his death, he becomes a pleasing sacrifice to God for us.

6 EUCHARIST IS THE ESCHATOLOGICAL BANQUET AND COMMUNITY

highways and byways. Since we recall the death of the Lord until he comes again, we also anticipate—like the wise virgins of the parable—Christ's return by celebrating the Eucharist as the eschatological banquet and community. In the symbolism of the eschatological banquet, absolutely no one goes hungry! Inexorably, the Eucharist takes us to the world of hunger in our midst. As Gandhi once trenchantly put it: "There are so many hungry people in this world that they can look for God only in a hunk of bread." To take part in the messianic banquet of the Eucharist is to celebrate profoundly countercultural values that stand in judgment on our settled social arrangements.

7 EUCHARIST IS BLESSING

The Eucharist is a solemn act of thanksgiving by which we receive God's blessing and bless God in return. Jewish liturgical rites, which gave rise to our earliest Christian forms of liturgy, take the form of blessings. A blessing pronounces God as the sovereign source of all that is already good. It invokes the continuation of all existing good and its increase into abundance. Blessings are both proclamations and performatives, that is, they effect what they proclaim and signify. As a sacrament, the Eucharist also effects what it signifies: covenant; communion with God through Christ and with one another; and Christ's real and transforming presence that transfigures us into the body of Christ, making us God's temple and children of God's Holy Spirit.

Note the links, which Monika Hellwig points out, between a blessing and social outreach: "A blessing is always expected to make the one who receives it the source of blessing for others; it is not expected to come to rest on its recipient and to end there.... One is not blessed at the expense of the others." Since we gather at the eucharistic communion to be sent (by Christ) and to send each other into the world, the blessing is a kind of

stewardship by which we become, with God, hosts at an open and inviting banquet.

In sum, I have presented the Eucharist as a proclamation of social justice. It is even more than that, of course, a mysterious invitation to share communion with the triune God and a pause to worship, adore, and thank. Yet the proclamation of social justice, while not exhaustive of the Eucharist, is central and essential to any genuine Eucharist. As Tisa Balasuriya, O.M.I., writes in *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (Orbis, 1979): "When the Eucharist ceases to relate to integral human liberation, it ceases to be connected with Christ's life sacrifice; it does not, then, build human community; it does not, therefore, help constitute the kingdom of God on earth; it does not even honor God objectively. It becomes a ritual without life, like the type of sacrifices condemned by God in the Old Testament." Saint Paul has said as much himself. □

How has it come about that the close nexus of the Eucharist and social justice is not common coin of the realm? How is the link so obvious as to be missed? I have found helpful the book by Keith Pecklers, S.J., *The Unread Vision—The Liturgical Movement in the USA 1926-1955* (Liturgical Press, 1998), which clarifies some ways in which the Vatican II liturgical reforms may, inadvertently, have undercut the necessary "mystical marriage" between the Eucharist and social justice. Let me rehearse his argument briefly here.

Pecklers contends that the pre-Vatican II liturgical movement in America stood out in the world church by its explicit and continuous joining of the liturgy to Christian social activism. The Collegeville, Minnesota, Benedictine liturgist Virgil Michel is the key figure here. Michel insisted that any renewed liturgical participation demands responsible Christians who unite the table of the Eucharist with the table of ordinary life.

The image of the Mystical Body of Christ served as the theological linchpin for the American liturgical revival of the 1920s through the mid-1950s, joining liturgy to social activism. In the liturgy one meets the living, risen Christ who lives on and acts in the liturgical actions of the church. From the liturgy, Christians are sent forth to continue the mission of Christ, which foresees a transformation of social relationships and structures. Thus, the liturgy grounds Christian social action. Michel insisted on a liturgically based social justice that highlights the relationship between the liturgy and social justice; the assembly's responsibility for the poor and marginalized; and the role of the liturgy in shaping moral behavior and attitudes. In Michel's view, the reunification of liturgy and justice was absolutely essential to a healthy ecclesiology. He made this link explicit