

A lay person's experience of the Eucharist

Foreword

I remember what I said, as if I'd said it yesterday. "That isn't what you believe; that's what we believe." With all the certainty and arrogance of a 17 year old, I was telling the mother of my closest friend what she believed – or rather, didn't believe – about the Eucharist. I was a Roman Catholic; and there was no way that Joyce, who was a committed Christian but after all was only¹ an Anglican, could possibly believe in the real presence of Christ in the elements at a Eucharistic service in the same way that I did.

Introduction

As part of our sub-group's contribution to the consideration by English ARC of *Eucharist – Sacrament of Unity* ("ESU"), the Anglican bishops' response to *One Bread, One Body* ("OBOB"), we want to ask the question, what can we learn from lay peoples' experience of the Eucharist?² Or to put it another way, is there any insight which lay peoples' experience can add to conceptual theology in this area?

The professionals have, as it were, had their say.³ We think it is necessary to ask how does the teaching in OBOB, and the response to it in ESU, fit with the experience of lay people? And has that experience – particularly, any imbalance between that experience and the teaching - anything to teach our churches as the dialogue about the Eucharist and related matters continues, particularly in those areas where some disagreement remains?

There is a sense in which these are impossible questions. When the traditional reluctance of many Roman Catholic lay people to talk about their faith is overcome, a wide range of belief and experience emerges; and no doubt the same is true in the Church of England. So there is no universal "lay person's view of the Eucharist"; nor would there be a universal "lay person's experience" of the Eucharist; and even if there were, we do not have the resources available to help us discover them.

Accepting from the outset, then, that any efforts we make in this direction will be partial and incomplete, we nevertheless think that it will be worthwhile for us to explore these questions.

¹ Mea culpa!

² A person being a "lay person" for this purpose at any time when he or she isn't operating as a theologian or "church professional".

³ Not just in OBOB and ESU, of course; also, more recently, in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*.

Aim and influences

The aim of this paper is simple – to provide an example of what we are talking about, by setting out and briefly reflecting upon the Eucharistic experience of one lay person – namely, me. Hence the title, "A lay person's experience of the Eucharist".

As for the most relevant influences to which I have been subject in preparing this paper, my experience has been conditioned by my life as a Roman Catholic layman, born and brought up in a strongly Catholic family and now heavily involved in the RCIA programme and adult formation in a lively and open Catholic parish.

But I have been struck, in preparing this paper, by how much not only my Eucharistic experience, but also the way in which I try to understand, evaluate and reflect upon it, have been influenced by my experience as a member of an interchurch family – my wife being an active and committed Methodist, in fact recently admitted as a Methodist local preacher.

This is not surprising. Like many interchurch couples – and no doubt many others living in other forms of ecumenical community – we have had to face difficult, and for us very important, ecumenical issues together as real life obstacles to be overcome, rather than as theoretical puzzles to be solved; and it is inevitable that our experience of dealing with those obstacles, and of the approach that we have adopted to succeed in overcoming the obstacles, will colour much of our experience and the ways in which we reflect on it.

We are not able to keep talking about a problematic issue forever, until we find the perfect answer. Nor, if we want our marriage to survive intact, can we keep arguing and sniping about it – least of all publicly - without finding a solution⁴. We have to find a way through – or more often, around - the issue, and we have to find it quickly. In doing so, we are helped by an understanding of – at best, a love of and respect for – each other's tradition; and we need to look for the positives and show a willingness to be flexible and to compromise where possible. (Because there are interesting parallels here with ecumenical dialogues generally, I have expanded upon some of these thoughts in the appendix to this paper.)

Experience of the Eucharist

At the time when I was thinking about this paper, a small number of adults at an Association of Interchurch Families meeting answered for me the question, "What does the Eucharist

⁴ Fr Ted Yarnold, in a Tablet article following the publication of ESU, suggested that in this sort of dialogue – that is, in the dialogue between our churches following OBOB - the criticism being made on each side of the other's position "almost inevitably lapses into a tone which sounds nagging, self-righteous or disingenuous to the other side".

mean to you?" I explained that I was not looking for statements of their *belief*, but rather, statements of their *experience* – of how they view it and its impact on them.

As you might expect, even from a limited sample, there were a range of answers. One person wrote of, "An offering of myself, with all my imperfections." Another called the Eucharist, "A time for healing on every level"; and a third, "Sharing with Jesus and one another among the people present".

How would I answer the same question? There are many answers, and different answers would be true at different times, but three stand out. I will look at them in turn below. In each case, I have set out in *italicised print* some thoughts and questions resulting from my reflection on that experience.

"Lord, I am not worthy" - gift

First, I experience the Eucharist as God's *gift*. It is not what I deserve, but what God desires me to have and experience. Receiving Holy Communion is a joy; I can never understand why people look so sad and solemn as they stand in the line!

In my own interchurch experience, the joy of occasional Eucharistic sharing, no less than the pain of so frequently not being able to share it, has certainly brought home to me – and to Gill, from her different background – how much this gift is to be treasured.

The concept of the Eucharist as gift is a central part of the teaching in OBOB (para 4 "The Eucharist is a most precious gift of the Lord to his Church") and I am sure that the experience of Eucharist as gift is a common, if not a universal experience for Roman Catholics and Anglicans alike.

The issue of the validity of Anglican orders is a significant roadblock in ecumenical discussions. OBOB refers to the validity question (para 41) and states that the "special difficulties" with regard to Anglican orders remain unresolved (para 117); ESU rejects the position taken by OBOB (para 32).

Somewhat grudgingly, in para 41, OBOB states that, "Lack of validity in the sacrament of Holy Orders does not mean, however, that the ordained ministry and Eucharistic celebrations of these communities are not used by the Spirit of Christ to draw God's people into the mystery of salvation".

It is a shame that this positive statement is put in a negative way and not emphasised; and that the hints of a positive view of Anglican orders found, for example, in the gifts exchanged on occasion between the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury, remain only hints.

Might it not offer an alternative route round the roadblock constituted by Apostolicae Curae for the Roman Catholic church to reflect further on the Anglican experience of the Eucharist as God's gift, and to say – as loudly and publicly as possible⁵ - "Hang on a minute. What God thinks, says and does is far more important than what we think, say and do. God chooses to give this great gift to the Anglican church, using the ministry of those whom the Anglican church treats as ordained ministers. We rejoice in the fact that God does that and we acknowledge that it's really far more significant and important than the historical and theological issues regarding validity of orders; so we're going to stop bothering about those negatives for a few years while we say lots of positive things about God and how God operates through Anglicans." Or something like that.⁶ It is perhaps time to accentuate the positive, rather than (always) returning to the negative. Let's hope that the IARCCUM process will give rise to lots of opportunities to do just that.

"Take all we start and spoil" – offering and healing

Second, I (sometimes overwhelmingly) experience the Eucharist as an **"offering and healing"** process – my (poor) offering of myself; God's healing of me and acceptance of that offering.

That this also is a very common experience is I think supported by the popularity in Roman Catholic churches of a good number of Offertory and/or Eucharistic hymns which take this as their theme:

Take all our daily toil, Plants in our hearts' poor soil,
Take all we start and spoil, each hopeful dream.
The chances we have missed, The graces we resist,
Lord in thy Eucharist, take and redeem.

I could repeat again here much of what I said in the previous section, since the healing aspect of the Eucharist is part of God's gift to us. One necessary aspect of the norm prohibiting a Roman Catholic from Eucharistic sharing at an Anglican Eucharist in any circumstances is a seeming rejection of a (needed) gift of healing offered by God. Might the

⁵ It is extremely likely that every Anglican knows that the Roman Catholic church considers that Anglican orders are invalid, because it has been repeated and given much publicity. I doubt if many of them have ever heard that there is this additional strand to the Roman Catholic view of Anglican orders and their efficacy.

⁶ Bishop Crispian Hollis, at the CTE forum in 1997, talking about Christ's invitation to "Come and have breakfast", said, "I personally – and I think my Catholic brothers and sisters also – have felt particularly challenged by that invitation from Christ. It reminds us that *he* invites us to *his* table; he invites us to take breakfast with him. Not only does he give us breakfast, but that table is laden with all sorts of gifts. But they are *his* gifts, they are not *our* gifts." I am sure he was not just thinking of Roman Catholic tables.

justification for the prohibition have appeared less strong if OBOB had concentrated on this aspect, rather than (as it seemed to do) on the Eucharist being a sign of the unity of the (Roman Catholic) church?

It is a sad fact flowing from the divisions between the churches that the Eucharist can in practice be a sign, sometimes a cause, of division and pain, rather than a sign, and cause, of reconciliation and healing.

"While they were at supper" - community

Third, the communion I experience at the Eucharist is local, rather than universal. My head tells me that it's about communion with the Pope and the entire church, past, present and future; my heart tells me that it's about the community which has actually gathered.

When I have returned to my place after receiving Holy Communion at Mass at my home parish or at an interchurch families' gathering, I often spend time looking around at the people gathered – these are the people for whom, and with whom, God wants me to be. He has called me to walk with them. They are my communities; I am in communion with them. You could say that these are my parts of the Body of Christ.

I may be, technically, in "full communion" with many of those at my home parish, but there is no way in which I could say that our communion is complete or perfect. I am under no illusions about their faults and weaknesses and I am very sure that they are under few illusions about mine. We no doubt disagree on many things. We fall short, in most imaginable ways, of what we should be as a Christian community. But together, we offer our imperfect individual and collective Christian experience to the Lord in our Eucharistic celebration; together, we receive the Lord's gift; together, we experience his healing.

How different is this from the incomplete and imperfect communion that is often now shared between groups from different denominations at local level? Or by ecumenical communities? It certainly seems to me to be uncannily similar to my experience as a member of the Association of Interchurch Families. So, just how different is the reality, as against the theoretical concept, of "full" (but surely also in reality imperfect!) communion from that of "partial" or "incomplete" (but surely also Go-given and worthy of celebration!) communion?

In fact, my head bursts with questions on this issue, as you'd expect from someone with an interchurch family background. Am I really more in communion with a Roman Catholic whom I have never met and with whom I would disagree on many subjects than I am with Gill, with whose views on most things religious I am in full agreement? Presumably I'll be in full communion with Gill as soon as one of us dies? Are we ever in full communion with anyone in reality (as distinguished from juridical theory)? Is God a lawyer (that is, does he

value our juridical categories, our concepts of validity and full communion, above the reality of the experiences of communion that he gives us?) Does the fact that I don't agree with the Pope on (I suspect) quite a few things mean that I'm only in partial communion with him? As a closet supporter of charismatic renewal, am I more in communion in reality (as distinguished, etc) with charismatics from other churches than with others in my own church?

Conclusion

I am not claiming that my experience has any special significance; indeed, I am sure that what I say in this paper is commonplace and will be considered simplistic or even inaccurate by the more theologically literate members of English ARC.

But it *is* my experience; and at the least it illustrates some divergences – or rather, imbalances of emphasis - between the Eucharistic experience of one lay person and some of the themes which are most prominent in OBOB and ESU.

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Appendix – How interchurch families approach brick walls

It is by no means a new thought to suggest that there are parallels between the experience of life in an interchurch family, our churches' ecumenical endeavours generally and interchurch theological dialogues in particular. As our sub-group started wondering whether the lay person's experience of the Eucharist might have something to offer the dialogue between our churches on the difficult issues which remain unresolved and which can appear to be like brick walls preventing any progress, I started wondering whether our interchurch family experience⁷ of dealing with difficult issues might have something useful to say (or repeat or emphasise) about the attitudes and processes which might help to resolve the issues and overcome the brick walls.

Gill and I started by not understanding each other's faith and practice. Why so many incomprehensible Wesley hymns at your services? Why do you pray to Mary? What on earth (sic) is purgatory about? Do you mean you just pour away the communion wine which is not consumed? Why do priests wear those vestments? What do you call the area behind the communion rail if you don't call it the sanctuary?⁸ Who are all those other people "on the altar"? Why is the sermon so long? All this incense is making me feel sick, do you mind if I leave early? And so on, and so on.

We love each other. Which meant that we *listened* to each other and *shared* each other's experiences of God. So we *learnt*, yes with the head but also with the heart. And by listening, sharing and learning we have come to *respect* – even to *love* – each other's churches, ways of worship and so on.

We have had our share of difficult issues to contend with, our brick walls. How to arrange a wedding service which we would both like to include the Eucharist, when the priest involved won't even discuss the possibility? How to deal with insensitive remarks by family members? What to do when a clergyman from one church is warned by his superiors not to take part in a baptism service in the other church? Above all, how to cope with the continuing pain of not being able to partake of the Eucharist together – and the particular pain of Gill's being refused communion at one of our daughter's First Holy Communion Mass?

⁷ Not just interchurch family experience, of course; there are many other forms of ecumenical communities who will have experienced the same issues.

⁸ I still don't know the answer to that one!

The first thing we do with a brick wall, in our experience, is to bang our heads against it. This is painful, but after a time – sometimes it has taken us years - we recover from the headache; and then we try to find ways around the wall.

Can't share communion together every time you would like to? Cherish the times when you can; and share the pain of the times when you can't. Get an unhelpful response from a member of the clergy? Persist; try another tack; or even another person! Suffer from insensitive remarks or reactions from other family members? Grin and bear it, together – and realise that your example will change their view, if you give it time and prayer.

Crucially, remain optimistic, despite the odds; always stress the positives, the good things, in each church, rather than harping on the negatives; don't blame each other for the brick walls – rather, treat them as a *shared problem* and as far as possible, *remain united* despite them. Above all, remember that you love each other – and it is that love, rather than the problems (and the ill-judged words we sometimes use when discussing them), which you should allow to define your relationship.