

How my experience of spiritual communion with Christians of other churches has affected my perception of Eucharistic communion

I

On 1<sup>st</sup> December each year, the Venerable English College in Rome celebrates Martyrs' Day. This feast recalls the proto-martyrs of the college, and first amongst them, Ralph Sherwin. He died on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1581 upon his return from the College to England. The inherited tradition is that when news of a seminarian's death reached Rome, the brothers gathered in the English College Church and sang the Te Deum to his honour. Today that tradition is continued, although now the Te Deum is sung each Martyrs' Day to recall the honour of the college's recusant history. So on the eve of the annual celebration of Martyrs' Day, an account of a proto-martyr's death is read, and after Mass, on the afternoon of the feast, the relics of the college martyrs are exposed and revered, and the Te Deum sung. In this, the seminarians' spiritual communion with their forebears is renewed, their knowledge of recusant history refreshed, and seminarians remember that they will themselves trace their forebears' steps back to England and Wales.

I want to start my reflections on my understanding of the relationship between spiritual communion and Eucharistic communion with this Mass. It is difficult to know where to start to describe the complex mixture of impressions and responses I had participating as a student three months into a five month exchange. My time in the *Venerabile* contributed to my formation for ordained ministry in the Church of England and followed two years' residential training at Westcott House in Cambridge. It followed a number of years of close relationships with Roman Catholics, attending Catholic Masses over periods of time on retreat, as well as time spent before the Blessed Sacrament in prayer in a variety of churches. In many ways the difficulties of spiritual communion experienced living as part of this Eucharistic community at the English College – one in which I could not fully participate in the sacraments – were brought to focus in this celebration. The experience concentrated my thinking about the relation between Eucharistic communion and spiritual communion with Roman Catholics, so forcing the development of my self-understanding as an Anglican and of the nature of the Church of Christ.

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Life in the college meant sharing in every part of the seminarians' common life: there was a daily mass, morning and evening prayer, an educational programme based at a Pontifical University attended alongside students from the *Venerabile* and teaching in pastoral skills; there were retreats at the country villa at Palazzola, and spiritual counsels – weekly devotional and motivational reflections on Catholic identity delivered by staff. With my fellow Anglican exchange student and the seminarian community, we also shared excursions to local sites, and (importantly) rather impressive common meals.

Getting up for a 6.45 am Mass only then to sit with others slightly bleary eyed over breakfast is a peculiar form of intimacy and can be exposing. Living as part of what is effectively an expatriate community, finding its domestic security within the walls of the seminary, propagates a depth of relationship with others quickly. My Anglican colleague and I had significant participation in the life of the college: partly in formation as if fellow seminarians, partly in seminarians' social lives and in the ups and downs of the community as well as of individuals. There were also with some strong forces against identification with the seminarians. Divergent views of dogmatics and ethics held us in contradistinction, differences that were sometimes held graciously and sometimes more antagonistically; but I suspect that the core of contradistinction was more existential. It was heightened by a significant proportion of the college population having previously been Anglicans, and whose Catholic identity was perhaps still in formation; and it was made apparent every day at Mass, where our being different was made most evident.

If immersion into spiritual communion corresponds with sharing in the ordinary lives of the baptised at work, play and at table, then that communion had an almost Eucharistic quality in the English College. Theological reflection and self-understanding were necessarily through a theological lens centred in the incarnation, and the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Our being in the college was explicitly religious in its orientation. And so naturally enough, that depth of communion 'followed through' holistically to the Eucharistic table. There the lack of congruence between felt or experienced spiritual communion and the discipline of non-reception at the altar meant that follow-through was accompanied by significant dis-ease.

Non-reception of the elements at Mass at the English College often drew me into an urgent - although inchoate - impetus to reconciliation with the others present. In whatever way I found to manifest that impetus inter-personally - say at the peace - it was almost always frustrated by awkwardness. It was as if institutional structures impinged afresh upon the relationships between those present, tainting if not obscuring them. In the Eucharistic assembly I was aware of myself as alien or a cause of discomfort. In anticipation of non-reception I believe there was mutual unease; in exchanging the 'peace' there was the ambivalence of knowing oneself to be complicit in exclusion and broken-Communion, and there was corresponding sense of insincerity, despite the aspiration expressed.

In the Mass on martyrs' day, I felt able to reverence the memories of those who gave their lives sincerely in defence of the faith; I felt deep respect as I witnessed the seminarians' devotion and part of what would form their identity. I knew that most seminarians identified the martyrdom of their recusant forebears with the defence of dogmas such as the doctrine of transubstantiation and with their convictions of the noetic purity of their Church, and for them, there was a particular patriotism that could not easily be separated from working out of their forebears' convictions, a patriotism the existence of Church of England displaced. I couldn't share those convictions, but I believe I understand where they come from, and so understand why someone might believe them - and be convinced that others should believe them too.

Perhaps it is not so paradoxical that I was very much aware of my own un-straight forward spiritual communion with those same reformation martyrs recalled at the Martyrs' Day Mass. I pondered the convictions that led them to martyrdom: a high theology of the sacraments, a desire for the continuing visible unity of the church under a universal head; a conviction of the relationship between the hierarchy of the church and the efficacy of the sacraments. I saw some overlap between these and my own convictions.

I wondered what those martyrs' attitudes to this historical - perhaps even political - framing of this Eucharist might be. Might their view be that the more enduring end of this Eucharist would be to unite, rather than to re-capitulate divisions? That thought helped me to rationalise the spiritual and emotional cost of participation: the same passion and conviction that led them to martyrdom - the same desire for purity of religion and church unity - might have made those martyrs today's spiritual ecumenists. Might that be the perspective gained from their participation as part the church triumphant in heaven: that the painful work of holding together the tension of divergent histories and defining judgements brought to that Mass enables the spiritual foundations of a work of reconciliation to be built?

And so I was aware of my own connection to two opposite political-theological poles as history was brought into the present in that Mass. Those histories were represented by those from different traditions, in the form of Anglicans and Roman Catholics present together. Characterised as Reformation and Recusant, Church of England and Roman Catholic, neither boasted an unambiguous claim to a neutral hermeneutic. And for me, that invited deconstruction of our inherited past from the perspective of what was new at this altar as each of us met afresh with Christ.

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What underlay the conviction that it was possible to 'make sense' of the pain of non-reception of the elements at the altar was for me the belief that spiritual communion is something that is more significant than the emotional response - what individuals feel - when they attend a celebration of the Eucharist. That seems to me a pre-supposition for a series of essays that takes seriously the relationship between spiritual communion and Eucharistic communion and looks at their relation across ecclesial divides. Thought about spiritual communion in these terms requires an endeavour to explore a reality beyond 'my' feelings, to locate the spiritual reality to which those feelings point. My own experience of ecumenism, and a number of years of getting to know Roman Catholics and being present at their altars, has forced me to explore that reality, and

indeed the spiritual reality that inhabits me and is revealed in that experience of Eucharistic spiritual communion.

A distinct concept of spiritual communion is entailed: it proceeds from an idea of communion that is rooted in a common baptism and looks towards one that is fulfilled in participation at a common altar. It asks that a theology of Eucharistic communion might be allowed to develop from the mystical encounter with Christ and his followers at the altar. It asks that that theology explore the transition from communion in the secular and mundane to communion at the altar. It is too limiting to bracket that category of experience as purely 'subjective'. My time at the English College and in various experiences of Eucharistic spiritual communion makes me believe that such insight corresponds with a developed understanding of the Church and of how Christ reveals himself in the Eucharist to those who do not receive.

A related view of spiritual communion I encountered afresh at the English College was that it represents a spiritual grace available to those not receiving the grace effected sacramentally through the consecrated bread and wine. On this view, the climax of the Eucharistic dispensation is still found in reception of the consecrated elements, but it has a 'spiritual' equivalent, which non-communicants may receive. Whilst I think I understand that view and know its resonances in my own positive experiences of ecumenical worship, I suspect that construct is rather narrow and probably too mechanistic to do justice to the multi-layered nature of spiritual communion. I think it is also deceptive as a falsely comforting view. My conviction seems to be borne out by what appears to be an asymmetric burden of pain distributed between those excluded at an altar and that borne by those who are mindful of the excluded – whether Roman or Anglican. I believe this view of spiritual communion as 'compensation' sells us short of the mystical knowledge we are offered at Holy Communion, and that it buys into an economy of seeking to diminish the other's pain.

Participation continuous with 'not-receiving' at the altar establishes a very particular and personal relationship between the individual and the Eucharistic community at that altar. It also provides a particular relationship between that altar, the eschatological Church made real in the celebration and the individual's own particular church. My experience is of a double triangulation in such participation, one that sheds light on the meaning of a Church divided and gives insight into the difference between our two communions. I believe that those insights could be more valued.

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The openness I brought to Eucharistic communion at the English College often left me distressed, quandered and disorientated by the end of a celebration of Mass. To not receive the Eucharistic elements was to stand against the expressed will that 'that all be one', and to contradict the conviction of baptismal spiritual communion experienced in a common life. That contradiction was heightened by feeling that I was standing against the purposes of God at the apex of sacramental communion, reception itself.

When I receive Christ's body and blood under the elements of bread and wine I experience a movement to becoming one with Him and one with those around me. To stand against that grace – even in courtesy under another churches' hospitality – brought an awareness of standing against God's grace. And so what I experienced in the Eucharist was a process of being pulled apart in the emotional and spiritual dynamic. I found myself pulled between the opposing forces of fellowship in a common life centred on the Eucharist and the contradiction of that not finding its fulfilment at the altar. Because my own spirituality has its centre in the Eucharist, sharing in Eucharistic worship was to draw close to God, only to find the receptivity cultivated in the Eucharistic rite frustrated in non-reception at the altar. Repetition of this day after day resulted in a cumulative experience that became a violent encounter with institutional impassivity, effected through various forms of ambivalence expressed human bodies present at Mass, at some cost to all.

Over my time at the English College, I learnt how not to be open to the movement of the Spirit and to guard the pain of non-communication by standing at a distance – emotionally and

spiritually. Non-reception that approached the altar with hands and heart open took me to a place of vulnerability; I accepted that I would get hurt, to the end of discernment of what was real and in pursuit of God. I believed that this Eucharistic alignment with Christ needed to be valued as I sought to understand spiritual communion. It follows that I believe that the language and experience of 'pain' common to Roman Catholics and Anglicans who are non-receiving at each others' altars begs theological interpretation: what is hurt when we meet together in this way?

### III

It is not very Anglican to argue epistemic significance from the experience and understanding that comes from sitting before the exposed sacrament in adoration. For many Anglicans, this devotion will not form part of their experience. But in the years after my conversion at the age of twenty-one, I spent quite a number of hours sitting before the exposed sacrament, whether at St James' Priory in my university city of Bristol, or with the Sisters of the Assumption next to Heythrop College on Kensington Square, or whilst on retreat at Quarr Abbey, in the monastic church there.

Those experiences motivated me to go on the exchange with the English College in Rome, forming in me a desire that I articulated to the selecting panel as wanting to 'understand better why I am an Anglican.' As it turned out, that impetus took me for a while beyond the boundaries of being secure within my own denomination, and indeed beyond the boundaries of safety within my spirituality. The result has been an acceptance of truths that seemed to conflict with and question my Anglican identity.

Part of the desire came in sitting before the sacrament, as I understood myself to be sitting before a window into God. The light that followed searched and suffused me, seeming to enable the deepest movement of spiritual union. Perhaps more controversially, over time there came for me an immutable connection between that experience of encounter and of the structural unity of the church. In particular, the distinctive quality of that experience in Roman Catholic Churches was a reminder of the functional hierarchy of that Church. It was as if that hierarchy were somehow present or evident as I was seated before the sacrament.

For many friends who are ex-Anglicans, such an experience and conviction was enough for them to desire reception into the Roman Catholic Church, perceiving – as they did – a centre to the universal church through the 'window' of the sacrament, finding that compelling. For me that has not been enough, because alongside that conviction has sat one that the Roman Catholic account of revelation and truth is too complete, making it insufficiently open – or perhaps too slow – to assimilate new truth. As such, the spiritual experience before the sacrament is left for me incomplete, and a force that distorts reality. This, as an experience of Eucharistic communion with the Roman Catholic Church, albeit through the 'extension' of Eucharistic adoration.

My experience of being gay within the church, of perceiving the priesthood to be incomplete without the ministry of women as priests, and the nuanced position of the Church of England on these and other ethical issues evinces a question of soteriology. Anglican ecclesiology and tradition, with its receptivity to scholarship, its diversity of opinion and experience, and its more dispersed authority produces a corresponding structural frailty. But in its heuristic power, that frailty has allowed me to remain alive and functioning within the church, allowing me to hope for a church that is catholic in its representation and inclusivity, and for one that draws a larger circumference around those who may be saved.

Waiting and holding these insights together has helped me to understand better why I am an Anglican. It has forced me to sit a little more lightly to the imperatives that seem to flow from spiritual experience. I have had – if you like – to deconstruct those experiences a little; to sit lightly to their intensity – and that has bought for me a fuller account of reality. There has been space for me to do that honestly and with integrity within the Church of England. What has resulted is a refreshed awareness of the incompleteness of Anglicanism in its claim that the fullness of God's truth revealed is an unconscionable possession, and of Anglican self-transparency to that incompleteness. In like measure, I have been aware of the limitations of the

Roman Catholic Church that accompany its possession of a 'gift of unity' that may be more appropriately called a gift of 'centre' in the terms that I describe; one that is entailed in the centralised locus of the ecclesial hierarchy of Roman Catholic Church.

I see the gifts of each as real, and see them as functions of the inherited tradition of each communion; my conviction is that they are gifts that are complementary, if only they could find a way to sit together. It follows that the understanding that grew for me from my time at the English College is that spiritual communion and Eucharistic communion are not separate entities, but are continuous with each other as holistic expressions of the fullness of what it means to be part of the Church, of Christ's body. As such, the attempt to separate spiritual and Eucharistic communion divides the body of Christ here on earth as if it were divided in heaven. The tension between the two is manifest when Anglicans and Roman Catholics meet at the Eucharist and entails a judgement that we bear between us, evidenced by the pain in our bodies.

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