

**HOW HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNION WITH
CHRISTIANS OF ANOTHER CHURCH / DENOMINATION AFFECTED
YOUR OWN PERCEPTION OF EUCHARISTIC COMMUNION?**

In my response to the question suggested by the Steering Committee, I'd like to talk about four occasions when I have shared in eucharistic worship with Roman Catholics, and four sorts of relations that I've had to others present there with me. It seems to me that the journey I'm about to take you on is probably quite particular and in many ways quite personal, but I hope you'll have the patience to walk at least some of it with me this evening.

My first experience of the Eucharist in a Roman Catholic context was in Cambridge, and the word I'd used to describe my relation to others there is "stranger."

I arrived early, sat at the back of the rows of empty chairs and was mysteriously handed a basket. I must have been about 21 at the time, and the late middle-aged gentleman who gave it to me smiled and said thank you as he passed it on, but offered no explanation as to what it was for. For a moment, I was paralyzed by conflicting feelings: I had come in as a stranger, yet here I was being treated, clearly, like one of the family. Should I say, "Don't give it to me, I'm not really a Catholic," or, "I'm sorry, I don't know what to do with this" – or just accept this slightly baffling gift as the symbol of an invitation to make myself, after all, at home? Having sat back down and fretted uncomfortably for a few minutes, I came to the obvious conclusion that this was how, in this place, they took up the collection, rather than with the plates or heavy cloth bags that I had known in Anglican and Free Churches in the past. Still I worried until the offertory was over about getting it right, about not showing myself up as an outsider after all. Now, perhaps one of the reasons why this tiny interaction set off such powerful waves of feeling was that the primary association for me of a small, woven basket was with bread – the baskets in which my mother would place the fresh slices from the loaf we shared for the family lunch when I was at home, and not here in Cambridge, where bread, in the manner of student life, was most often broken alone. Was this place, this church, something like a home, and was this event another kind of meal which gathers in the diverse and often quarrelling members of a single family, single body – and if it was, where was I? Outside or inside? Stranger, or fellow-member?

As I reflect on this distant experience, I am reminded that, whatever else the Eucharist may be, it is a community meal, and despite all the attenuations of that symbolism down the centuries, the experience of sharing in, and not sharing in, the Eucharist cannot be understood in some kind of spiritual isolation from other experiences of participating in meals. Of course there is high theology to be discussed here, but eating together is a fundamental ritual of intimate acceptance in the practice of most human cultures and individuals. Being excluded from the family meal – not allowed to come downstairs because of some previous misdemeanour, or sent away because of bad behaviour at the table itself – must be one of the most common and fundamental sanctions wielded by parents. The self-exclusion quickly discovered by very young children is also deeply potent; pushing the plate away, toying with food, dropping it on the floor, or, as we get older, declaring (with some truth) "I'm not hungry" when unexpressed fear or anger or pain are knotting up our insides. And would it not be

true to say that adults too use the sharing of food with one another as a way of including and excluding, punishing and rewarding, indeed, to put it bluntly, exercising power? What more powerful symbol can there be of division and estrangement – treating another as the alien and stranger – than the refusal to sit down and eat together? Indeed, it seems to me that while what I have just called the attenuation of meal symbolism in the Eucharist historically makes it perhaps a less potent positive symbol of acceptance within the community – after all, we often cannot even see just who is eating and who is not, so far have we tended to individualize the moment of reception as an event between the person and God with only the priest or assistant to observe – a refusal to give the bread and cup, or indeed a refusal to share them, still preserve enormous power to set off deep-lying fears of being the outsider, and consequent reactions of both resentment and the desire for reassurance. I'm not sure we will work our way through to deeper theological understanding without acknowledging some of that very human freight that we all bear with us into this context.

Sitting at the back of that Roman Catholic Church in Cambridge nearly 20 years ago, I don't think I really questioned why it was that I couldn't receive the sacrament. I came in already feeling very much the outsider, so that it seemed only natural that I should not be sharing in the family meal. My primary experience of Christianity as an undergraduate was with the Christian Union, where attitudes to Roman Catholicism were, to say the least, ambivalent. I can remember, as leader of the College Christian Union, being warned by a member of the central University committee about the dangers of allowing Roman Catholics to participate in our Bible Study groups. I also recall attending a prayer breakfast on mission in Europe where the speaker, clearly regarding this statement as a model of open-mindedness, announced the amazing discovery that some Roman Catholics were actually Christians. And I remember a quietly assertive Roman Catholic who happened to be there asking a question along the lines of just why the speaker's organization regarded European Roman Catholics as prime targets for evangelism. Oddly enough, I ran across that same Roman Catholic student just a few years ago, as he is now a Franciscan Friar who works a few hundred yards away from me just outside Canterbury. And the most recent occasion when I attended a Roman Catholic mass was, I think, at his Induction as Principal of the Franciscan International Study Centre there. And, although I sat near the back again, no one asked me to help take up the collection. I even had an official invitation.

My most recent experience of the Eucharist in a Roman Catholic context, then, was in Canterbury, and the word I'd choose to describe my relationship to others there is "guest."

Now, this was a very different sort of experience from that first one. While even twenty years ago I had a more open attitude to Roman Catholics than some of the Christians I knew, I still regarded them, very definitely, as "other," as belonging to a quite different ecclesial culture and theological context – one might even say members of different tribe whose peculiar codes that I had no expectation of understanding let alone ever sharing. Since then, various experiences have encouraged me to see myself instead as belonging, in various senses, *with* Roman Catholics, not standing apart from them: through times of dialogue and encounter, including English ARC, but also a wider awareness of Anglicanism and an

appreciation of how much is or can be shared, spiritually, doctrinally, liturgically between Anglicans and Roman Catholics, how we still carry certain family resemblances from our inheritance of the Western Catholic tradition, even if it one that we have, in various respects, chosen to divide rather violently. That sense of commonality was evidently reciprocated, at least up to a point: I had been formally invited to the service as a representative of an Anglican and Free Church training institution. Moreover, the whole style of the liturgy reminded me very forcefully of the kind of “modern catholic” Anglicanism that I had known while living abroad in Toronto for four years, a style which I came to like very much; so that I actually felt in certain respects more instinctively at home liturgically in this Roman Catholic, Franciscan Eucharist than I had for some time in any Church of England environment.

Yet as the service unfolded, suddenly something jarred. Actually, it wasn't not being able to receive the elements – though I'll come back to that in a moment. It was the point where in the context of the Profession of Faith, Brother Philippe had to respond to a series of questions from the Minister Provincial about his own beliefs. I can't recall the precise wording – doubtless some of you would know it – but it was about whether he accepted all the doctrines of the Church as set out through its teaching office, and the various questions were clearly designed, in their careful and comprehensive progress, to exclude what would in colloquial terms be described as wriggle-room on this point. What jarred for me was not so much even the content of the doctrinal affirmations that Philippe was being required to make, as the very idea that one would be interrogated (as it felt to me) in such a way and required to write a blank cheque of assent (as it seemed to me) to whatever the Church's teaching authority might one day prescribe. I was still a guest, but suddenly no longer at ease in familiar surroundings; not that I am naïve enough to think that no Roman Catholics might have an analogous sort of response, but it is one thing to debate and dissent from inside the family, and another to register from outside the kind of exclusionary discourse that all our Churches have historically deployed precisely to ensure that some are kept outside, while those who remain inside are marked by particular commitments that visibly separate the included from the excluded. I don't mean to pass any judgment about the particular case here: there is a powerful argument that the unity of the Church requires unity in doctrine and that therefore those with teaching responsibilities cannot be permitted to advocate whatever they may deem to be right, and hence limits have to be set, and limits of their nature exclude. Perhaps there do have to be limits to hospitality if our home is to remain, well, our home. I'm just saying that the effect of certain kinds of demand and assertion is to build high walls between neighbours, so that we become somehow institutionally and culturally implicated in the perpetuation of division as a basic strategy of self-legitimation. By that I mean that I know I'm right to be separated from you, because I can't say these things, and you know you're right to be separated from me, because I won't. So, up to a point, we can each be secure in our distinct and divided ecclesial dwellings. But is it possible that one day we may have to acknowledge that our own, profoundly oppositional identities – as the Church of England with its Articles of Religion, as the Catholic Church of Trent and after – may have placed our separate but beloved houses on some disturbingly questionable foundations? That our high fences with their obstruction of hospitality have, so to speak, undermined our ability to be truly and securely at home, even with ourselves?

As long as those fences cemented in oppositional identities persist, well, we are still neighbours, able to visit one another as more or less awkward guests, but not one family, one flock, under one shepherd. And therefore to pray together the Eucharist, as I did at the service to celebrate Brother Philippe's induction, while not receiving bread and wine from one another's hands, seems to me to be at least as honest and profound a way of registering the tragedy of division within the body as is sharing the broken elements together as a pledge of the unity we long to be restored. The guest remains the stranger, and that is a terrible contradiction of our one communion in Christ. In a divided church, there is simply no way of celebrating the Eucharist – even if we celebrate it solely in the company of our own, our comfortable ecclesial home – that does not recall us to penitence and lament for what the body of Christ has become and remains amongst us. Celebration is bound to be painful and bound to the plea for our healing. Still conscious of strong bonds to the Catholic Christians around me in the Franciscans' chapel, I walked to the front for a blessing without any sense that I "ought" to be receiving something more. To be here at all, and to be prepared to remain at this point of closeness to the wounds of the Church – that is a grace, that is the point where it appears, at this moment, I am just being called to dwell.

My next experience of the Eucharist in a Roman Catholic context, after leaving here, will be different again: it will be at Bovendonk in the Netherlands, where I will be a guest again, but this time also host, and besides both of those, spiritual friend.

For in a week's time, I will be accompanying our final-year ordinands on the annual trip to the Roman Catholic seminary in the diocese of Breda. And on Saturday evening I will have the strange and wonderful experience of being paradoxically both guest and host at once: guest at their seminary, guest in their chapel, guest in being invited to lead an Anglican Eucharist there; and host insofar as I am presiding at the sacrament, at the meal, and therefore welcoming all who will to Christ's table. Now, we have evolved a practice whereby staff members, as public representatives of their Churches, observe the strict interpretation of Roman Catholic guidelines on Eucharistic sharing, while students on both sides are left to decide what to do in accordance with their conscience, at the Anglican celebration on Saturday and the Roman Catholic one on Sunday morning. And for me there is something incredibly moving about the willingness of some Roman Catholic students to receive bread and wine from my hands, to respond to the invitation that I am privileged to give: "Draw near with faith." It is a beautiful sign of the unity that lies beyond all our divisions. There is also, on the other hand, something viscerally unnerving about the fact that some of their students, indeed perhaps more as the years go by, remain in their places; however much I appreciate theology and canon law on this point, and I have just set out my own thinking about the value of prayerful participation that holds back from the common meal, it's still something that triggers off a host of surging anxieties about whether it is really me they do not want, whether I did something "wrong" in the way I took the service or even something wrong in being here at all. Those powerful feelings around eating and not eating, exercising and resisting power are relevant again here. But finally there is also something both difficult and redemptive in the presence at the same time of the Rector of the seminary, who has become very much a friend as well as a colleague, and who will also remain sitting or kneeling and not receive – as I will not receive when he presides the following morning. To work my way back to the original question, there indeed exists, it seems to me, an articulation of spiritual communion in the human friendship between the two of us, a

sharing of things of the Spirit, of the journey of the whole human person with and towards Christ. Because of the “felt reality” of that communion as expressed in human friendship, there is for me as it were always a shock, a jolt, when I am at Bovendonk, at not being able to exchange with one another the fullness of priestly ministry in sacramental sharing. But also because of the felt reality of that communion, his remaining in his place when I invite all present to draw near does not activate those same fears about belonging and not belonging, those questions about being at home or being abroad, those anxieties about getting in right or getting it wrong; and therefore that sense of being required, once again, to defend, legitimate, my own position against your threat – the personal correlate to the ecclesial dilemmas of division and self-legitimation that I was talking about a moment ago – that simply does not arise. Unity in Christ can “hold” our passing separation at the eucharistic feast, even as it makes it an anomaly, a puzzle, a surd.

That reflection takes me back to the final, fourth occasion I want to talk about of sharing eucharistic worship with Roman Catholics. I remember staying in the Netherlands with my friend Matt a couple of weeks after the death of my father, who had himself been leading eucharistic worship as an Anglican priest just over a month of so before he died of a brain tumour after a steep and precipitous descent into terminal illness. We went to Sunday mass in Den Bosch, and as the priest broke the host I had the most powerful sense of my father’s presence at this meal, his participation in this truth. And somehow, that perception had an effect on how I understood my own presence there as united in the one sacrament with my living friend and the other worshippers in that place, despite not taking and sharing the one bread, one cup, with them. After all, to be in Christ is to be in communion with many who will never eat the crumbs from this particular loaf: those separated from us by time and space, and by death, the cloud of witnesses – and Jesus himself, who does not make himself present amongst us at the Eucharist as another human being, showing his face to meet our steady gaze, yet who gives himself to be present in the sharing of bread and wine as we do these things for the remembrance of him. At root, our communion in Christ is a gift, and a gift we receive only by faith, which is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen. The broken bread unites us beyond the limits of our sight, even in our palpable dividedness, and through its fractured invitation we learn, in the language of the letter to the Hebrews, to “have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus,” and “approach with a true heart and full assurance of faith,” despite the manifold tragedies of sin, schism and death. For the altar-table is where we continually recover, from the gift of the presence of Christ, the confidence that separation – from a friend present with me but unable to receive with me, from those with whom I have received in the past but who live now, unseen, to God, from the Christ whom I long to know face to face and not just in a mirror darkly – such separation is never the final word, but rather reconciliation. Sharing a common meal – that most basic of human experiences of interpersonal communion, from our very first days in this world – becomes, in the presence of the crucified and risen Lord, sign, instrument and foretaste of the communion of all people and all things in the Holy Trinity, and somehow does so even when the fractures and failures of that sharing within the Church recall the dark impasse of Holy Saturday rather than the glorious movement of Easter morning. The mystery of this sacrament exceeds all our limitations, breaking apart our habitual understanding of relationship, presence, belonging, and re-establishing them on the rock that is Christ.

Well, I have tried to share something of what I have learnt from being present in separation at the Eucharist over two decades, at different times and places, as stranger, guest, host and friend. But that is quite enough about my story. I would like to hear something of yours, and I fully expect it to be very different.

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