The Eucharist Makes the Church[1]

Scott Cowdell

Career-minded clergy are wise not to say this publicly, but there is a crisis of identity and purpose in our Church today that defies easy solution. I am not referring to the fallout over clergy sexual abuse, though this excruciating development does help to explain the problem that we face. Which is that the Church in general and the Eucharist in particular have become optional extras in living a good life, even for living the Christian life, and widely derided options at that. Hence a glaring failure of spiritual vision, compassion, and pastoral leadership on the part of abusers and Church leaders is matched by a new pitch of scapegoating rectitude directed toward the whole Church by its cultured despisers. We are paying the price for our longstanding fascination in the Church with respectability and for claiming the moral high ground, since our institutional feet of clay and our share in the ordinary traffic of human ill will, folly and misery have now been fully exposed. Such respectability was what Church and worship were all about during my suburban 1960s Queensland boyhood, though of course winds of change had begun to blow throughout the Western world at that time, in the direction of moral autonomy, and the exhilaration of being able to choose how our lives are to be lived. Church as a valued part of community life, a marker of respectability, and even a badge of social status are now by and large limited to smaller rural communities in Australia, if they survive at all.

A leading layman once told me that he came to church for the music and to keep his wife happy—but he was in his 70s; no-one under 50 would think like that anymore. The former Scots bishop and now atheist, Richard Holloway, paints an unsparing picture in his memoirs of this increasingly bygone type of Church that is more habituated than embraced, providing for many people little more than a sense of connection with the past and a vague feeling of something transcendent.[2] For a time the Church suited Holloway's own romantic and melancholy temperament, but eventually the dysfunction associated with Church membership among many of his fellow Anglicans got the better of him. A lot of psychological and spiritual immaturity clings to the Church still—those people seem to hang

on in there where many more confident and healthy-minded people have had enough and have moved on.

The Canadian theologian Gary Badcock gets to the bottom of today's mass exodus from the Church, explaining why so many have opted out since the personal and social benefits once associated with the Church are now recognised as being more widely available:

> the hungry sheep look up, remain unfed, and have decided in the hundreds of millions that they can find the same thing (and it is the same thing) in more convincing forms from the other available consumerist alternatives that equally serve the end of individual flourishing: popular culture, environmental activism, uninhibited sex, the fulfilment of career ambition, politics, or even crass materialism.[3]

For those healthier-minded ones who stay with the Church, there is often no clear sense of why they have stayed, or a strong likelihood that their belonging would survive anything much in the way of provocations or setbacks. Even the real, genuine believers who are trying to make a go of following Christ, with a clearer sense than their parents may well have had about what being a Christian means, are typically less clear about the place, the necessity and the authority of the Church in their Christian lives.

Religious Consumerism

The reality is that our postmodern Western culture of choices rather than givens, of optional obligations and personal agendas, is a world of consumers, yes, of joiners, sometimes—as long as whatever you join provides you with worthwhile benefits—but it is no longer a world of unquestioned belonging. In matters of religion things are no different. For example, the second generation immigrant youth *chooses* to embrace radical Islam because it provides him with a clear sense of identity for the first time in his life, since he belongs neither to his ancestral culture nor fully to that of his family's adopted country. So, even fundamentalists are really shoppers in the spiritual marketplace.

The young Christian fundamentalist, too, has essentially chosen a product—one that will help him or her to negotiate the difficult transition from adolescence to adulthood, whereupon another lifestyle product will most likely take its place. Even for serious adult Christians, their Church and parish affiliation falls nowadays under the sway of consumer

forces. And increasingly, the choice is not just which denomination, which congregation, or which style of worship, but whether churchgoing is necessary at all for my "spiritual needs" to be met. This is akin to the question of whether marriage is necessary for my "relationship needs" or even my sexual needs, so-called, to be met—as if sexual needs and relationship needs, like "insurance needs" or even "motoring needs", are things one might best address by shopping around. But that is the extent of our belonging in this postmodern Western culture, which even for Christians means that today's agenda of consumer-driven therapeutic individualism trumps any properly theological and spiritual account of belonging to the Church and participating in its central act of worship.

Let me offer a clarifying metaphor, from the now ubiquitous language of computing: that of hardware and software. The *hardware*, the basic equipment, of our lives is provided nowadays by our personal needs, while these "needs" are met by various forms of *software*. Just choose whichever package or "app" is compatible with your priorities. For your software needs in the personal realm, go to the Church if you like, or to whichever other provider of personal spiritual sustenance—from a "wilderness experience", to a theatre or Musica Viva subscription, to a spa retreat.

As for your "worship needs", if you have those, they might be met by a traditional Eucharist but increasingly it will be anything but that: a "public Christian gathering", perhaps, for Evangelical teaching and fellowship, or a Pentecostal praise event, or one of the proliferating "fresh expressions" of Church that typify today's "Emerging Church" movement. A variation of this state of affairs, perhaps its precursor, is the original Protestant instinct that personal faith in God constitutes the hardware and Church involvement constitutes the software; or else, that Word and Gospel are hardware while worship forms and habits are software. As long as you have an iPhone, there are myriad software resources in the "app store" from which you can choose. Likewise, we hear that as long as you are a Christian, then where you worship, how you worship and, increasingly, whether or not you worship, are entirely up to you, because of course these are essentially software options that are secondary, interchangeable and, by extension, disposable.

Software Church; Optional Eucharistic "app"

This state of affairs is represented in every stripe of Australian Anglicanism, though the most obvious examples are Evangelical ones. Let me offer some vignettes, to illustrate aspects of the problem.

Evangelical

I once accepted an invitation to preach and preside at an Adelaide evangelical service for youth, which was held in a basketball court. The sermon was to be on Psalm 10, for some reason, because of course the lectionary is considered optional (indeed, as something of an imposition). No robes were to be worn, so I celebrated in a suit and tie but insisted on putting on a stole for the consecration. I remember a youth in the communion line who came forward in a baseball cap drinking a can of Fanta, to which he stuck his chewing gum before thrusting out his hand to receive the sacrament. While I have been impressed by the recollection and dignity of Sydney's Archbishop Jensen and Bishop Davies at the altar, even though their beliefs and approach are plainly low-Church, nevertheless it is clear that their sense of the specialness of Holy Communion, shared with great nineteenth-century Evangelicals like Charles Simeon, no longer represents the Evangelical norm.

Today's push in some Evangelical circles for so-called lay administration of the Lord's Supper is at least in part to ensure that the Word and preaching retain their Protestant supremacy over sacrament and cult, which are tolerated for the sake of obedience to Christ's ordinance rather than embraced enthusiastically as foundational practices. Even the older Evangelical commitment to Matins and Evensong is waning as prayer book worship ceases to be the Evangelical norm. A priest friend in Tasmania informed me that the clergy gathered with their bishop for a few days could not get organised to say evening prayer together let alone celebrate the Eucharist, though they did manage a scratch clergy rock band for a session of praise songs. An Anglo-Catholic priest-musician in my own diocese, whose efforts at introducing some contemporary catholic hymnody represented something entirely new at a Clergy Conference, was thanked by an Evangelical clergyperson afterwards with the words "I don't normally go in for Holy Communion, but that was very nice".

Anglo-Catholic

Lest I seem to be harsh about Evangelicalism, we can find similar issues arising within Anglo-Catholicism. There is a preference for high-culture performance in some Anglo-Catholic showpiece parishes, and in some places for antique forms of the liturgy, often celebrated with the full panoply of elaborate ceremonial. These preferences can make Anglicans of this persuasion dismissive of a gentle and inclusive, low-key parish Eucharist, for instance, and for signs of communal belonging such as the presence of boisterous children and of folkier, less formal music. In other words, the quality of their worship experience comes first while the actual inclusive ecclesial miracle of the Eucharist itself is disdained, wherever it appears in unacceptable garb.

Conservative Anglo-Catholics also risk annexing the Eucharist to their own project of ecclesiastical self-definition, so that their preferred form of worship becomes a mark of their specialness and distinctiveness, rather than a call to repentance and God's invitation into a wider Eucharistic fellowship. Anglo-Catholicism can be a peevish and anxious movement, after all, especially when the properly bold spirit of "Forward in Faith" yields to a mood that the aforementioned Bishop Richard Holloway once wryly called "backwards in despair". It is not properly Eucharistic for Anglo-Catholics to be huddled together in their beautiful sanctuaries, dreaming of what might have been. Properly Catholic Christianity is more outward looking and world affirming, also ecclesiastically confident enough to welcome other Christian expressions with grace rather than anxious disdain.

Broad Church

Most Anglicans are neither Evangelical nor Anglo-Catholic, and this broad Anglican middle also manifests various forms of the "software Church" attitude, as evident in its Eucharistic habits. There are legacies of the older "respectable community group" approach to Anglicanism that congregate in our broad-church middle, according to which the Church is not so much about doctrine and discipleship, while the Eucharist is a habituated gathering without notable implications for a distinctive Christian identity let alone mission. This low-temperature, middle-of-the-road Anglicanism is neither a bible reading fellowship, nor is it

marked by Eucharistic devotion, nor is it missional in its self-understanding, beyond perhaps a well-intentioned helping profile in the local community.

A major parish where I once served exemplified this attitude when Australia Day fell on a Sunday and an official commemoration was to be held with the Governor-General present, a marquee and a champagne breakfast. Our role was to provide Choral Matins instead of the normal 10.00am Sung Eucharist, and my advertising, both in the newspaper and to the parishioners, emphasised the fact that Holy Communion would still be celebrated in the earlier 8.00am timeslot for those who wanted it. The result was that not one regular worshipper from the large 10.00am congregation came to the 8.00am Eucharist, so that one whole congregation forewent Holy Communion for a week in favour of matins with chicken and champagne. Does this not indicate that “social needs” and the bare habit of churchgoing are primary while its Eucharistic belonging is secondary?

In another example from the broad Anglican middle, I take my life in my hands and comment on the rising habit of receiving communion by intinction—of dunking the Eucharistic host into the chalice, or into a specially-provided “dipping chalice”, rather than drinking from the common cup—in response to so-called health needs. In that same former parish, up to three quarters of parishioners were eventually receiving communion in this way, including most children from first communion who had been taught by their parents to receive by intinction, contrary to the way I had prepared them. Likewise I see many “broad church” clergy communicating by intinction, even if as president of the Eucharist I have been the only one to receive the chalice before them. Where is the devotion, recollection and reverential awe of earlier Catholic discipline in receiving the sacrament, such that what was once called “the medicine of immortality” can nowadays primarily be viewed as a health risk? Thus we see the spirit of “Let all mortal flesh keep silence” turning into “keep that thing away from my child”.

I daresay that personal, inward communion with God is the primary reality here and the Anglo-Catholic’s proper reverence for Christ’s real presence in the sacrament means little or nothing. My chief concern with this practice, however, is that it has anti-ecclesial as well as anti-Eucharistic implications. I fear that it may involve a perception not only of the shared cup, but also of the fellow Christians with whom it is shared, as a threat and not a blessing.

Rather than providing the context for our Christian belonging and, indeed, our salvation, the Eucharist and its elements are thus made subject to the sovereign, choosing, modern individual will, much as any other consumer product. I have been known to tell congregations that “the host is not a ‘Scotch Finger’ biscuit that you dip in your tea”, though with little if any positive response.

“Fresh Expressions”

A further vignette has to do with the latest fruit of our institutional anxiety in contemporary Anglicanism, the “Emerging Church” movement and its so-called Fresh Expressions of worship. The missionary, Eucharistic Church has always reached out to win converts for Christ and has incorporated new believers into the Eucharistic community through catechumenal formation and subsequent baptism with the laying on of episcopal hands in confirmation. Today, however, a variety of new ways of doing Church commend themselves to increasingly managerial bishops, in a development touching both ends of the Anglican spectrum along with its broad middle.

The pastoral and missional worth of new so-called “Church plants” aside, my concern is that new Christian groups emerging from special interest gatherings of youth, young mothers, students, immigrants etc. are kept practically and in fact structurally isolated from the parish church and from other Christians who abide locally. These fresh expressions are regularly viewed as new Churches in their own right, though they may not involve the Eucharist. I have much sympathy with the “Messy Church” movement, for instance, designed to welcome parents with young children into a gathering based on play and craft with a biblical theme, including hospitality and prayer. One of my most talented former students is using Messy Church to help renew her parish in the Diocese of Grafton—though she views it as a stepping stone to joining the Eucharistic community (as pre-evangelism), rather than a substitute for it. But it is not obviously a type of church gathering amenable to the Eucharist. There is to be a “Messy Eucharist” at Romsey Abbey in England in July, however—a Eucharist “like you’ve never seen before”, according to the online billing[4], which means, what: that it is friendly, fun, inclusive, not typically boring and “churchy”; or might it also mean that soft drink and cake are served along with the more predictable Eucharistic elements? In any event, if we are to have the Eucharist, it has to be “Eucharist

plus", offering something to give things a lift. Though, as mentioned earlier, this same attitude is also found among Anglo-Catholics who insist on glorious music and the perfection of ceremonial for the Eucharist to be tolerable—on "obsessive compulsive Church", if you like, rather than "messy Church".

Eucharist before Baptism?

The final vignette that I offer has to do with what for me is a worrying Episcopalian trend that is finding its way into Australian Anglicanism of every stripe—though, admittedly, it is most typically found in the broad middle of our Church. I refer to the belief that restricting Holy Communion to the baptised, let alone to the confirmed or to others who have been officially "admitted to Holy Communion", represents an intolerable example of un-Christlike exclusion. It leads to invitations from the priest such as "this is the Lord's table; anyone who desires God's mercy is welcome", where once we said something like, "baptised communicant members of other Christian Churches are welcome to receive communion today if their own Church's discipline allows"—which is what I still say. The Eucharist is certainly valued according to the newer view, along with its role in making the Church a welcoming fellowship. The significance of baptism is not necessarily being questioned here, either, though Christian initiation tends to be seen as a ritual of commitment that comes later, once a person has been drawn to Christ through the Church and its Eucharistic fellowship. Nevertheless, I have serious misgivings.

One example of this approach is an Episcopalian Church like no other in San Francisco called St Gregory of Nyssa—visit www.stgregorys.org for the full picture—where a lively and very diverse congregation gather around the word for prayer and homily and sharing of stories then they dance together to encircle the altar, which is right by the main door, whereupon all join together in reciting the whole consecration prayer. After mass, the congregation remains where it is and coffee is brought out immediately to the altar, from which it is served. During the week, the local poor and homeless are generously fed in the same worship rotunda, including use of its altar, whereby Christ's radical call to hospitality and sharing is certainly given concrete expression. One of the lay leaders at St Gregory's, Sara Miles, has written a book about her conversion to Christ through the generosity of this

place, called *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion.*[5] Her baptism, in a font situated behind the Church, followed after a further time of preparation and was very meaningful for her.

I do not doubt that God is at work in whichever order we do things, though I am concerned when baptism is seen as a barrier to inclusion rather than the richest blessing of inclusion, and when sharing in Christ through Holy Communion is not preceded by the renunciation of our former sinful life and our public embrace of the cross in baptism. There is togetherness expressed here, certainly, but it risks becoming a form of togetherness minus the cross of Christ, as English Catholic theologian James Alison warns[6]. Such a celebration of easy "natural belonging" is never reliably free from groupthink and herd behaviour, unless it is leavened by the costly and transformative encounter with Christ that baptism brings, and which the Eucharist goes on to celebrate and cement—a form of belonging "beyond the natural", if you like.

The actual state of our Church membership today, with its spectrum of beliefs, stages of Christian maturity and hence levels of "convertedness" present in the same gathering, can make the logic of restricting communion to the initiated hard to sustain. It would have been much easier when slaves, Roman soldiers, prostitutes and tax collectors were quite obviously being brought from darkness into light through baptism during the three centuries before Christianity became the Roman Empire's official and respectable religion. To deny communion to today's spiritual seekers, however, when complacent pew warmers are welcome, can seem harsh. But the answer lies surely in calling all of us to a higher standard, rather than adding to the ranks of half-converted worshippers by admitting new ones "no questions asked". Our Church's current baptism practice, often more about family and social expectations than about Christ and the call to discipleship, provides a further indication of the challenges that face us in making our Church practices conform to our stated beliefs. But again the answer is surely not mistaking "natural togetherness" for the body of Christ, which is a potentially far more demanding fellowship in which our belonging can be uncomfortable and confronting—and only thus, of course, can it be transformative. The easy kind of "natural togetherness" makes few if any demands, however, leaving our accustomed habits of mind and prejudices unchallenged. Nor does it offer us any resources for venturing

outside our comfort zone, which is surely entailed by belonging to the Church of saints and martyrs.

A Venerable Alternative

What I am advocating is that we come to understand Church and Eucharist as hardware, not software, even though this possibility will sound odd to contemporary ears. Further, I want to re-establish the early Christian expectation that its Eucharistic gatherings constitute and define the Church, rather than representing some sort of afterthought or optional extra to Christian believing and belonging. This primacy of the Church for the Christian life and the Eucharist for the Church's life is what we find among the New Testament Churches and in the undivided Catholic Church of East and West during the first Christian millennium, however, before a number of philosophical, social and political changes in the later Middle Ages began to undo this organic, Eucharistic bonding of life in the body of Christ. I want to sketch this much more foundational vision of Church and Eucharist for the Christian life in what follows, along with its decline, then offer some reflections on where we see signs of its revival throughout history and again today.

The Body of Christ in the New Testament: An Integral Vision

Our conception of Christ's body has become less integral than that of the New Testament Churches. This may not seem obvious, given Protestant emphasis on New Testament texts and teachings above Catholic and Orthodox emphasis on the Eucharist and its cult of worship—the so-called externals of religion—which are relatively less important than the word (hardware and software again). Yet the Eucharist lies at the heart of Christian self understanding according to a range of New Testament witnesses. A number of brief vignettes from Epistles and Gospels will illustrate this perhaps dubious-sounding claim.

I begin with Paul, chronologically the first New Testament writer, and his multivalent image of Christ's Body. From Paul to late-medieval Christianity, the body of Christ referred to Jesus himself, but also to the Church as his body, as well as to his body distributed in the Eucharist itself. This rich and complex image broke down, as we shall see, introducing a split into our Christian imagination between Christ and his Church, and between the Church and its

Eucharist. We have been considering some contemporary manifestations of that imaginative split in the different expressions of Anglicanism today.

Paul's key insights here are found in 1 Corinthians 11-13. His main teaching on the organic body of Christians with Christ as its head is in 1 Corinthians 12, while the love needed to bind that body together is memorably set out in 1 Corinthians 13, as every attendee at Anglican weddings knows. But the nub of it is in 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul talks about the tradition of Eucharistic worship—handed down to his first-generation Church from Christ at the last supper—as actually forming the Church. Hospitable sharing rather than self-indulgent and distracted banqueting is commended, and an end to the cliqueyness that this represents, with those who neglect the lesser members of Christ's body at the Eucharistic meal warned that "all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink damnation against themselves" (1 Cor 11: 29). Now, which "body" is referred to here? Certainly the body of Christ the Church, which we neglect by preferring our own clique and our own prerogatives over respect for fellow Christians who differ from our preferred norm, but also surely the Lord himself in the faces of these Christian poor—and why not the Lord himself in the Eucharistic elements, too, who Paul recalls as having said, "this is my body that is for you"; "This is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor 11: 24-25)? Paul makes no meaningful distinction between these interwoven uses, nor did the ancient Church Fathers in the subsequent age of the creeds, nor indeed where they separated throughout the whole first Christian millennium.

In the first written Gospel, a few decades after Paul, Mark gives us a more compact account than Matthew and Luke who elaborate and extend him. But at the heart of this earliest Gospel, in Mark 8, well before the climactic last supper is set out in Mark 14, we find a Eucharistic narrative about the nature of Christ's Church in the multiplication of the loaves, also that single loaf that the troubled disciples in their boat were told by Jesus would be sufficient. Here, as throughout the Gospels, we are dealing with experiences of the earliest Churches that have been written back into the history of Jesus with his disciples. The miraculous feeding with manna in the wilderness, which sustained Israel in its desert journey, is here repeated by Jesus, the new Moses, in the midst of his Church, the new Israel. Later in the boat, Jesus remonstrates with his disciples over their failure to

understand that the one loaf in their midst is sufficient, because from such a loaf Jesus feeds a multitude (Mark 8: 16-21). The Church in our own time has also failed to understand Christ's sustaining presence in our midst through the Eucharist, making us the Church.

Jesus also contrasts this bread with the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod (Mark 8: 15), which of course refers to the violence and exclusion directed towards Jesus himself and subsequently towards his Church in many places. This juxtaposition is made more explicit in Matthew's version. Matthew 14 gives us Herod's horrific banquet, in which the head of John the Baptist is brought out on a platter, as a counterfoil to Jesus' feeding of the multitude that follows. Thus Matthew gives us an engaging image of the coming Kingdom of God, showing how the Church and its Eucharistic logic differs from the sort of uneasy and often violent togetherness that the world offers, symbolized by Herod's banquet. Luke does not give us the feeding of the multitude, but from the middle of Luke 11 and through chapter 12 he does give us Jesus' same teaching about the violently-maintained boundaries of the older religion, set against the alternative that fearless insidership in Jesus' resurrected body can bring.

In the Book of Revelation, that great and inscrutable testimony to the triumph of Jesus and his Church, we should note that the angels and saints gathered around the heavenly throne of God and the slain lamb (e.g. Rev 5: 6-14; 7: 13-17; 19: 1-8) recall the liturgical gatherings of early Christians around the bishop and the altar at the Easter Eucharist, with the newly baptized catechumens robed in white. Indeed, as American Catholic theologian Paul McPartlan points out, the key to the Book of Revelation is provided by the fact that the troubled seer in exile on Patmos has his vision splendid when he is "in the spirit on the Lord's day" (Rev 1: 10), the day of the Eucharist, which places his vision of the triumphant Church in a Eucharistic context.[7]

At the climax of the Epistle to the Hebrews we have a similar word of encouragement to the persecuted Church,[8] in which again the sort of religious togetherness that ultimately has blood on its hands is contrasted with the new creation in Jesus Christ. Right after mention of the Godless Esau who sold his birthright for the wrong sort of meal, we have an extraordinary image of the heaven opened and God's new creation on full view. The point is that together in Christ, in the Eucharist, we the baptized are participating in nothing less

than a new and different way of doing the world and re-imagining its future. It is one of the most imaginative and stirring passages in the New Testament, and deserves to be quoted in full—recalling that this is a Eucharistic gathering, with Christ present in the midst of a new humanity.

> [18]You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, [19]and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. [20](For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death." [21]Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear.") [22]But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, [23]and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, [24]and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Hebs 12: 18-24).

I mention three other examples, from the third and fourth Gospels, that demonstrate the weaving together of Christ himself and the Eucharist in the formation of his Church. Luke offers us the road to Emmaus narrative, in which the risen Lord prepares his disciples' minds by expounding the Scriptures, though they only recognise him in the breaking of the bread. That encounter provides them with the impetus to return to Jerusalem where their Eucharistic discovery brings a new body to birth, the Church, as different perspectives and stories of Jesus are shared (Luke 24: 13-35). John's Church begins in the upper room of the last supper on the day of the resurrection, where the Spirit is poured out (John 20: 19-23). John goes on in chapter 21 to give us a meal by the shore where the bread and fish, which are given by the risen Jesus to his disciples, are widely recognized to be Eucharistic signs, tied to the disciples' miraculous draft of fish which represents the missionary Church.

In these few of many possible New Testament vignettes, Christ himself present in the Eucharist constitutes the Church as his body—as a new version of humanity, empowered for a world-transforming mission. There is no sense in which the Eucharistic gathering is any less central and formative an encounter with Christ than the equally important beliefs, writings, prayer and fellowship of his disciples that are also mentioned, which Protestants

would declare to be more significant. Paul McPartlan puts these elements in chronological perspective.

> Week in, week out, Christians gathered in local communities to celebrate their faith in Christ our Saviour. They had not yet finalised the formal creed to express that faith in words; they were still exploring it in worship. They had not yet even finally decided which books should be included in the Bible and honoured as truly inspired. That did not happen until the year 382, in the time of Pope Damasus … when a council in Rome gave a complete listing. All of these things were still to come, but the weekly rhythm of the Eucharist in the local churches was already beating, underpinning the Church's developing life.[9]

Sundering the Body of Christ

The Church of the first Christian millennium, from the New Testament period then on through and beyond the age of Fathers and official creeds, was a Church of contrasts and conflicts yet it retained significant spiritual and structural bonds. Early struggles with heretical teachings and schismatic movements led necessarily to the tightening of doctrine, discipline, worship and the understanding of ministry, including an important emerging role for communion with the bishop of Rome that demonstrated one's desire to stay with the whole body of Christ, even in dispute. East and West were still part of the one Church, though very different historical forces in the Eastern and Western Empires of Constantinople and Rome did lead to the divergence of two increasingly different visions of Church and Eucharist that eventually split in the eleventh century. Still, the local Church remained at the heart of Christian imagination, expressed structurally in the diocese gathered around its bishop. The communion of dioceses together, manifest in the various Councils of Bishops such as the most famous one at Nicaea in 325, represented something more organic than a mere federation, though the universal Church was inconceivable apart from its expression in the local Church. Maintaining orthodox faith in Christ in communion with your bishop meant sharing in the one Eucharist—and indeed there was only one Eucharist, the bishop's Eucharist, before larger dioceses and the parish system with a priest in even remote localities became a necessary development from the fourth century, when the whole Empire became officially Christian.

In sum, it was a Church that had not yet divided along the lines of principled choice and mutual excommunication into Roman and Eastern, let alone Protestant strands; it was a spiritual fellowship between Christians and God "in contrast to juridical approaches that over-emphasize the institutional and legal aspects of the Church", as American lay Catholic theologian Dennis M. Doyle explains, going on to describe a Church that "places a high value on the need for visible unity as symbolically realized through shared participation in the

Eucharist" and that "promotes a dynamic and healthy interplay between unity and diversity …, between the Church universal and the local churches".[10]

Our Christian story in today's West emerges from the collapse of this vision along the trajectory of Roman Catholic and then Protestant or else Anglican denominationalism. A number of related factors led to the Western Catholic Church becoming progressively institutionalized, centralized, hierarchicalized, and its Eucharistic ministrations bureaucratized from the early-Middle Ages. Here are some of the most important ones.[11]

The return of imperial rule in the West, after the dark ages, came in the ninth-century when Charlemagne became so-called Holy Roman Emperor, setting the scene for power struggles between pope and Emperor over the control of Europe. These included the so-called Investiture Controversy, about who had the right to appoint clergy and bishops, leading to the Gregorian reforms that centralized papal rule in the eleventh century. Such struggles, as necessary as they were, made the Church more a worldly centre of power and less of a Eucharistic fellowship rooted in spiritual communion.

Another ninth-century development saw a breakdown in the significant conjunction of first-millennium themes around the concept "body of Christ". As we have seen, this multivalent image linked Christ himself with his Eucharistic body and his ecclesial body in a very integral and participatory way. But with the Eucharistic theology of Paschasius Radbertus in the ninth century and Berengar of Tours in the eleventh, the long-accepted sense of Christ's body present in the Eucharistic bread and wine became *more physical and objective*. As a result the reception of Holy Communion came to be seen as more subjective, less important, and hence proved harder to sustain. Attempts to reassert the spiritual dimension of Holy Communion led to compromise under Lanfranc and Thomas Aquinas whereby the bread and wine were understood to change objectively, though by a process that they declined to over-specify called *transubstantiation*, but this new objective emphasis on the Eucharistic elements apart from their faithful reception continued to grow in Roman Catholicism. In *Unam Sanctam* (1302), Pope Boniface VIII formally distinguished between Christ's "true body" in the Eucharist and his "mystical body" in the Church. The Eucharist thus became an end in itself—a mystery to be lived became a miracle to be believed in.[12]

A further development, from the twelfth century under the influence of Gratian, saw the rise of canon law modelled on Roman law to a position of dominance in Church life. It was not long before popes were chosen from among canon lawyers rather than monks, theologians and pastors as formerly. A church of integral Eucharistic belonging was becoming instead the institutional arena in which Christ's body was displayed in Eucharistic form before an increasingly passive laity, literally making a spectacle of society's new power relations.[13] The Eucharistic cult of the late Middle-Ages, with its non-communicating high masses and its exposition of the Blessed Sacrament to bless crops and ensure the fertility of livestock while warding off plagues and disasters, served the same purpose for God and the

Church that the spectacle of public executions later served for establishing Royal power, as memorably set out by Michel Foucault at the start of his classic *Discipline and Punish*.[14]

A related factor was the collapse of Neo-Platonism. This development of Plato's philosophy—so important for Augustine—later manifested itself politically in a feudalistic view of society, with being and authority devolving from God down a great chain of being to the lowest orders—linking society together, if you like, from above through within. In the late-Middle Ages Neo-Platonism yielded to Nominalist philosophy. Grand idealistic schemes of being, its categories and its distribution gave way to a more individualistic conception of each thing and each person. Here we find the necessary shift that enabled modern science to get going, as attention began to focus on things in themselves rather than speculation about their abstract natures—which were now seen merely as names: *nomina*. A new metaphysics usually brings a new political philosophy, and this nominalist world-view supported individualism. The sovereign emerged with a more nakedly independent power out of the feudal nexus of belonging that had once linked kings to nobles to peasants—and bishops to clergy to laity—in the great chain of being.

It was in this climate that democracy advocates like John of Paris and Marsilius of Padua challenged monarchy, while canon lawyers started talking about the Church primarily in terms of individuals linked to Christ, rather than the mutual abiding in Christ and in each other that had been typical of first-millennium views on Church and Eucharist. The communion of Churches familiar from the first millennium thus became a corporation of believers, in a view of the Church that retains widespread currency to this day. The Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* with its definition of the Catholic Church as "the blessed company of all faithful people" represents this thinking, which characterized the Protestant Reformation. As the great mid-twentieth century Catholic theologian, Cardinal Henri de Lubac, concludes,

> the experience of Protestantism should serve as a sufficient warning. Having stripped it of all its mystical attributes, [Protestantism] acknowledged in the visible church a mere secular institution; as a matter of course it abandoned it to the patronage of the state and sought refuge for the spiritual life in an invisible Church, its concept of which it had evaporated into an abstract ideal.[15]

And hence to our familiar modern world, in which the welcome blessings of democracy and freedom, science and bureaucratic expertise, nation states and what the French call *laïcité*, none of which we would necessarily want to do without, come at the expense of imaginatively sundering Christ from his Eucharist and from his Church. These have now become things that we opt into or out of, rather than the very nexus in which our identity as Christians is embedded.

Re-Weaving the Body of Christ in Our Time

One effect of the sixteenth-century Reformation was that Protestantism became defined by an anti-Catholic animus, while the anti-Protestant bias of militant Roman Catholicism, from the Council of Trent onward, returned the favour. The relatively high-Church Anglicanism of Richard Hooker, the great apologist of the Elizabethan settlement, was neither Puritan nor papist, however, and it restored key elements of the early undivided Church, including its reverence for the Eucharist as something participated in, rather than objectively regarded.[16]

Only with the mid-twentieth century *nouvelle theologie* of Henri de Lubac,[17] which recovered the ancient roots of Catholic tradition beneath many later accretions, along with Roman Catholic reawakening to the bible in preaching and scholarship, also the recovery of a "people of God" and "body of Christ" view of the Church thanks to ecumenically-minded theologians like Hans Küng,[18] did Catholic Christianity begin to recover some of its earlier wisdom obscured by the institutional Roman Catholicism of modern times. The second Vatican Council in the 1960s cemented these trends,[19] leading to recovery of the Eucharist as an organic, participatory, Church-constituting event rather than a spectacle of ecclesial power received by the laity in the recollection of private devotion. In the hands of the Belgian Catholic theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx,[20] echoing Anglican theologians such as O.C. Quick[21] and followed, later, by John Macquarrie,[22] Christ himself came to be seen as sacramental and the Church by extension, so that its sacraments, especially the Eucharist, became key manifestations of the Church's being, rather than essentially arbitrary spectacles and services that were delivered by a bureaucratic institution.

The liturgical movement of the mid-twentieth century, and its Anglican version the so-called parish communion movement, ensured that the Anglican and Roman Catholic norm is now a community Eucharist around the altar in a purpose-built building using a rite that draws us far more closely together and to the worship of our early Christians forebears than has ever been the case. The ecumenical movement, too, is returning us to this communal ecclesiology, with even mainstream Protestant worship increasingly centred on the Sunday Eucharist. Our various denominational structures and Church orders must now demonstrate that they can foster such a communal ecclesiology if they are to be theologically and spiritually credible.

In many ways and places the worship, theological education and missional rhetoric of our Church is recovering the ancient simplicity of abiding in Christ's Body, now that Christendom is a thing of the past and that being Christian is no longer identified with respectability and "good citizenship". Our Church's big challenge today is to take this vision so seriously that our Eucharistic community truly manifests Christ's Body in the world, as a desperately-needed alternative to consumerism and to a worsening global culture of dog eat dog.

[1] A lecture given at the St James' Institute , Sydney, on 2 June 2013.

[2] Richard Holloway, *Leaving Alexandria: A Memoir of Faith and Doubt* (London: Cannongate, 2012), 153.

[3] Gary Badcock, *The House Where God Lives: Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2009), 335-36.

[4] Online: http://www.messychurch.org.uk/event/winchester-tour-messy-eucharist-romsey-abbey (last accessed 24 May 2013). See also the photo of one such Eucharist at http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=messy+eucharist&qpvt=messy+eucharist&FORM=IGRE#view=detail&id=3C4756B8051E6F732F972A72F9E1B1801CFA7218&selectedIndex=2 (last accessed 24 May 2013).

[5] Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballantine, 2007)

[6] James Alison, *Broken Hearts and New Creations: Intimations of a Great Reversal* (London & New York: Continuum, 2010), 87-88.

[7] Paul McPartlan, *Sacrament of Salvation: An Introduction to Eucharistic Ecclesiology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 9.

[8] McPartlan, *Sacrament of Salvation*, 4.

[9] McPartlan, *Sacrament of Salvation*, 34.

[10] Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Visions and Versions* (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis, 2000), 13.

[11] Unless otherwise stated, I am grateful here to the discussion in Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent* (Theology in Global Perspective Series; Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis, 2008), 94-99.

[12] McPartlan, *Sacrament of Salvation*, 37-38 (using an image drawn from Henri de Lubac).

[13] Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 140-64. On what he interprets as the curse of legalism in Western Catholicism, inherited from Roman law, and its implications for the body of Christ, see also Arthur Michael Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1936), 165-70.

[14] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) (trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin, 1977), 3-31.

[15] Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (1947) (trans. Lancelot C. Shepherd & Sister Elizabeth Englund, OCD; Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1950), 75-76.

[16] Richard Hooker, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie* (Books 1-4 published in 1593; Book 5 in 1597) (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1907; 2 vols).

[17] See de Lubac, *Catholicism*.

[18] Hans Küng, *The Church* (1967) (trans. Ray and Rosaleen Ockenden; London & Tunbridge Wells: Search Press, 1968).

[19] See especially the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium*, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church”, available online at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (last accessed 31 May 2013).

[20] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God* (1960) (trans. unattributed; London: Sheed and Ward, 1963); *The Eucharist* (1967) (trans. N.D. Smith; London: Sheed and Ward, 1968).

[21] O.C. Quick, *The Christian Sacraments* (London: Nesbit, 1927), 105.

[22] John Macquarrie, *A Guide to the Sacraments* (London: SCM, 1997), Chapter 4: “Christ as the Primordial Sacrament”, 34-44.