

## A Reflection: The Paradox of Orthodoxy

Cynthia Wilson - April 19, 2014

“Sacraments are signs of God’s love made manifest in community.”

(Ruth Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. p.146)

As Christians, we understand the celebration of Holy Communion as a divine encounter with the Triune God through intentional creation of a sacred space where words, gestures, images, and symbols function simultaneously. It is in this sacred space that the Paschal mystery is revealed through the spirit of *koinonia* that, in due course, prepares Christians to carry on the work of Christ in the world. We also recognize that such an experience cannot be made manifest without the *full, conscious, and active participation* of every person within the faith community.

The celebration of Communion is clearly not intended to be a private enterprise, but rather, a corporate action, a social relationship that Erving Goffman refers to as *many to many*.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the intense individualism, detachment, disunity, and obvious breach between the symbolic and lived experience that this present dispensation continues to breed within Christian worship communities.

From its beginning, the essence of Christian worship has been simultaneously dynamic and peculiar at best. And yet, over time, with the codification of the sacraments and the evolution of the apostolic tradition, the Communion rite eventually moved away from the true spirit of *Koinonia*. That is, communion with God and with the family of God. In Luke’s Gospel, we are introduced to a new construct for the understanding of family. In this context, is defined as people who dine together. Therefore, for Christian

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<sup>1</sup> Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, (Collegeville, Minnesota, The Order of St. Benedict Inc., 1992), 136-37.

believers, all of God's people everywhere, at all times are invited to the table of Christ without respect of culture, race, or denomination. Luke further suggests that at the table, the family circle widens, the language of family is revised, the rules broken, protocol is disregarded, the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, blood relatives and kin-folks, women, senior citizens and youth receive a place of honor at table-fellowship with Christ. Anyone invited to the table with Christ is automatically a recipient of the promises of God: healing, power, peace, love, provision, and justice. This is the mission and message of Jesus, the Christ. In fact, throughout the New Testament, Jesus emphasizes "all means all" at his table of grace and unconditional love. More specifically, the insignificant become notable, the immigrant becomes citizen, the corrupted are made pure, those denied access are granted entry, and space is created for those without class, status, or rank. Jesus breaks the rules and disregards protocol to establish *rite* ways of eating, drinking, celebrating, and sharing together in the spirit of comm-Unity. At this table, in real time, Christ and culture collide establishing the importance of face time and a new ritual order: Christian *Koinonia*. In fact, it is highly probably that this is the primary issue for the Jewish leaders who ultimately take his life.

***I believe in the communion of saints.....***

In reflecting on the idea of online communion, consider the following questions: If we believe Christian *Koinonia* to be a space that encourages and inspires reciprocal relationships and creative connections that embrace the richness of diverse peoples, traditions, and symbols, then how can it be lived out *virtually*?" Is it possible to experience the real presence of Christ within symbols of bread and wine apart from community? If so, how does one recognize and appropriate this presence?

Throughout the synoptic gospels, we find Jesus deeply concerned with the day-to-day lives of those he encountered. Mostly, this can be observed at table fellowship each time Jesus took natural, organic bread and drink from the community, divinely blessed it, broke it, and gave it to those who were hungry and thirsty for peace and justice. The Jesus of history spends most of his ministry on earth caring for the needs of those who were rejected and marginalized by the status quo. Not only did he provide food and drink for the human body, but Jesus also offered sustenance for the *poor in spirit*. For Jesus, the two were inseparable.

As Methodists, our Wesleyan heritage has established a precedent for embodying the gospel story in its fullness. This includes, as a core principle, “means of grace” which keeps at the forefront of Christian practice: intentional relationship with “Jesus’ bosom friends”; the last, the least, and the left-out; a conspicuous demonstration of authentic love, care, and support; the deliberate creation of rhizomal connections between faith communities that participate in God’s divine work of transforming grace.

Sadly, the twenty-first century Christian church seems to have lost her essential communal sensibilities at the expense of her role as the body of Christ called to join God in the work of kin-dom building; that is healing, liberation, and transformation in and of the world. This loss has noticeably affected *the full, conscious, and active participation* of large segments of the Christian population in regular worship celebrations. As a consequence, those who are absent from the community have found innovative, resourceful ways to worship, and to observe the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. This observation must presume that something has gone awry in the sacramental praxis of the Christian church. We turn to liberation theologian, Juan Luis Segundo, a

Uruguayan Roman Catholic Priest, who asserts that the need for revival in the sacramental life of the Christian church is confirmed in the reform of Vatican II.

Along with other liberation theologians, Segundo posits that contemporary practices of the sacraments continue to depend on a Eurocentric model that borders on elitism. In his collection, *A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity*, Segundo calls for the deconstruction and demystification of the sacraments that restore communal dialogue intrinsic to what Jesus intended.<sup>2</sup> Further, the “immutability of church (sacramental) activities”<sup>3</sup> has resulted in a functional disorder, producing a “static church”.<sup>4</sup> Markedly, Segundo stresses, “the sacraments are made for the church, not the church for the sacraments.”<sup>5</sup> In dialogue with Matthew 5, 18:20, Mark 2:27, and John 4, Segundo goes on to argue for a sacramental theology that is buttressed by the vital element of human relationship.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, for Segundo, sacrament can only be efficacious as Christ intended in its communal meaningfulness.<sup>7</sup> In other words, to the extent that they point towards the original ministry of Christ, which circumvents rigid forms, and “ritualistic dualism that opposes the gospel”<sup>8</sup>, the sacraments are meant to provide vigorous dialogue between the church and the world. It is no wonder that Deane William Ferne writes, in her survey of Third World Liberation Theologians, “Segundo views theology not as an academic discipline for scholars, but as the reflection of real-life experiences for ordinary

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<sup>2</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology trans.* John Drury (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976), 7-38. “The hermeneutical circle” is reminiscent of R. Bultmann who focused on individual existence vis-à-vis the text. Segundo turns our attention to the ways in which our existence is dictated by a world structure that is hierarchical.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

believers.”<sup>9</sup> Clearly, Segundo’s connection between the sacraments and life /liturgy serves as a precursor to the concept of worship as primary theology.

Similarly, deeply rooted in the ethos and pathos of Black Church worship celebration is the belief that the physical presence of Christ Body at the Communion table is essential for sanctification, and that it symbolizes the eschatological hope for restoration, and reconciliation in the face of a broken family. Much like the first century church, Blacks in the United States of America seek to find a place where their place at the Table with the Jesus of history. It is important to note here that the service of the Lord’s Supper is one of the most highly attended worship celebrations for the Black Church. For many, it is the place where the somebodiness of each person is taken to heart. Daniel Niles further describes the ethos of sacramental life in the Black Church as “one beggar telling another beggar where they found bread.”

Historically, as people of the diaspora, Blacks have never taken the liturgical gathering day lightly. From the establishment of the Invisible Institution, African slaves dressed in their finest on the Sabbath with the expectation of meeting the Jesus of Rightness, Liberty, and Grace in ritual celebrations. Blacks developed an authoritative Ecclesiology, and an ideology of Table that shifts *difference* from the outer circle into the Center where the Jesus of history is found awaiting their arrival. Jesus, the Liberator, bids them come to his Table of equality and authentic fellowship not only with each other, but also with the Holy.

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<sup>9</sup> Deane William Ferne, *Third World Liberation Theologies: An Introductory Survey*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986.), 22-23.

.....as often as you do this....

Dr. William B. McClain recalls the days when Black faith communities depended on elders who were circuit riders. Because of having to serve several churches within a month's time, circuit riders were unable to offer the Lord's Supper on a weekly basis. Therefore, the circuit riders travelled great distances in order to serve the "Circa-ment" (sacrament). Dr. McClain writes,

The church was always full on the first Sunday, for the "faithful" members of Sweet Home, even if they were not there other Sundays, dared not miss the first Sunday, the chance "to get their circament." Miss any other Sunday of the month if you must, but not the first Sunday. At the celebration of Communion our hunger and thirst were satisfied. Our lives were restored and we left energized, enabled, empowered, and compelled to witness to all that [Jesus] is a heart-fixer, a mind regulator, and an attitude adjuster who requires all who call his name and accept his grace to show forth his love and work for peace and justice in the land.<sup>10</sup>

For this reason, in the Black Church context, when Sunday comes, all is made right with the world. "For the faithful, it is a day they may depend on for 'pure water and strong wine', when they are 'athirst in the Sahara of meaninglessness'."<sup>11</sup> Not only is Sunday the Lord's Day, but to Black faith communities, it is the primary day for the communion of the saints. Particular to Communion Sunday was a peculiar excitement about gathering as a community to "break bread together."<sup>12</sup> Much like the first century believers, even in the face of persecution, Blacks were committed to the order of Christian *Koinonia*.

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<sup>10</sup> William B. McClain. "The Importance of Holy Communion: The African American Church and the 'Circament'",

<sup>11</sup> William B. McClain, *Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion*, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1990), 21.

<sup>12</sup> Trad. African American Spiritual, *Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees from Songs of Zion*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 88.

## **Twenty-First Century Sacrament: An Eating Dis-Order**

Nonetheless, in spite of this rich history, we are living in a time and space that has produced an ethos of worship that is completely antithetical to the past, but is yet embraced by the Millennial generation. As an example, we point to the world's largest community organizing networks for Millennials called *Meetup*. According to their mission statement, the primary goal of this organization is to revitalize local communities by helping them to self-organize into the kinds of communities that garner enough strength and power to change one's personal world, and one's whole world. Could it be that some Millennials have opted out of organized, traditional religious practices to connect with such virtual communities in search of authentic relationship, and the reclamation of true *Koinonia* that resembles or even emulates Jesus' model of incarnational celebration of community where forms of genuine grace abounds.

History has proven that the Christian community has struggled to identify with contemporary culture without becoming either isolated from it or identical to it. Christian cult has attempted, with varying degrees of success, to relate to contemporary culture without creating a counter-culture, and without being consumed by secular culture. Needless to say, the church has not always succeeded in walking the tight rope between these two extremes. In fact, few contemporary divisions of Christianity, anywhere on the theological spectrum come close to resembling the magnificence found in apostolic dining practices. Even in our diverse religious cultures today, there is a need to reclaim the intimacy, fellowship, friendship, worship, instruction, and social equality that Jesus give emphasis to in the context of first century faith communities. Twenty-first century Christian traditions are in desperate need of transformation in this area.

It must also be acknowledged that as the church has sought to impose a Universality of Christian worship and sacramental practices and immutable norms, she has successfully negated other particular values and ways of being and doing within non-traditional religious cultures. Therefore, it is no surprise that traditional practices are being co-opted by unprecedented contemporary practices such as Online Communion. If sacramental practices within the Christian tradition insist on ignoring the ecclesial community as a sacramental sign that extends the full grace and the efficacy of love of Jesus Christ, the church will continue to hemorrhage, and its constituency will continue to adopt alternative sacramental practices such as Online Communion.

If it is true that our connection to God can only be secured by our connections to “other”, then to celebrate the Communion rite while exclusively residing “in the temple of [one’s] own familiar” is to sabotage the Christ-agenda in the world. For this reason, perhaps we should consider the following questions:

- Why would a member of any faith community choose to celebrate Holy Communion while physically separated from the body of Christ?
- Could it be that the church needs to re-vision the 21<sup>st</sup> century table event from a hermeneutic of community building that gives serious consideration to a pluralistic world?
- Could it be that the church has not made room for symbols, gestures, rituals, etc. from other contexts that also broadcast the glorious mystery of Christ?
- Could it be that the church’s zeal for accuracy, authenticity, and the preservation of one tradition to exclusion of all others inhibit the capacity for true communion with God and neighbor?



In her book, *Worship for the Whole People of God*, Dr. Ruth C. Duck makes the following observation:

Influenced by the Enlightenment, many churches lost a sacramental sense of the presence of the living God and of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the meal. Given [this] development in theology and practice, churches often celebrate Holy Communion with lifeless liturgy that resembles a memorial to Jesus' death, as if the resurrection did not happen. The congregation reflects on their sins and on the way Jesus' death can lead to forgiveness and new life. Often they sit alone in their pews as they taste a crumb of bread and a sip of juice.<sup>13</sup>

Dr. Duck calls for a "A broader theology and a more gracious celebration of the meal."<sup>14</sup> She goes on to suggest six ways that this might be done. First and foremost, we must "strengthen the connection between sacraments and everyday life."<sup>15</sup> Next, She insists that we must offer thanksgiving or *berakah* to God, even in the face of suffering and chaos. We do this "because God gives us life and shares our human life in Jesus Christ, and the power of God's love is stronger still." Thirdly, we must remember Jesus, meaning we recall the ways in which Jesus lived on earth: he ate, cared for those in need, taught his disciples, died, and arose to new life. Then, We must acknowledge the presence, power, and gifts of the Holy Spirit as she transforms the elements as well as the community. The next important gesture is the *sharing* of Communion with God (vertical relationship) and with each other (horizontal).

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<sup>13</sup> Ruth C. Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God*, (Louisville, Kentucky, Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 184.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

Those who *share* [italics mine] the meal are being formed into one community in all our diversity, as expressed in the beautiful prayer from the *Didache*: “As this broken bread was scattered over the mountains, and when brought together became one, so let your Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.” In Holy Communion, the body of Christ comes together in union with one another and with Christ. Communion was the first meal welcoming the newly baptized and forming the church anew through the addition of new members. Baptism is not repeated, but each occasion of Holy Communion renews the body of Christ.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, we should rehearse God’s future; the eschatological hope of the ultimate meal where all means all, and everyone is welcomed to the Table of God as described in the Revelation of John.

In this progressive, theological understanding of the Eucharistic meal we plainly see how Online Communion can be seen as antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. While the Christian church’s rich tradition of liturgical celebration and the practice of the sacraments serve as an act of obedience and a vital means of formation for its zealous followers, neither prove to be operative without full investment of worshippers as active participants versus passive spectators. Thus, we hear the clarion call for the demystification, deconstruction, and then renewal of the church’s celebration and practice of Communion, and the critical need for that practice to anticipate the Great Invitation to the ultimate meal when we will hear the Spirit and the Bride say, “Come!” And let the one who hears say, “Come!” And the one who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let them take the water of life freely.” (NRSV, Rev. 22:17)

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 187.

### Clarity of terms:

1. **Online** - controlled by or connected to another **computer** or to a network.
2. **Communion** – (from *communio, communis*) *a sense of kinship, fellowship, connection with others*. Belonging to, open to, or affecting the whole of a community or the public.
3. **Incarnate** – Embodied in flesh, personify, make manifest, concretize.
4. **Christian Koinonia** – a space of radical hospitality that welcomes “otherness” along with the familiar, constancy and diversity; the creation of space that encourages and inspires reciprocal relationships and creative connections that embrace the richness of diverse peoples, traditions, and symbols.
5. **Virtual** - simulated, artificial, imitation, make-believe; almost or nearly as described, but not completely. Almost, but not yet.