

Community and Communion: Making the Connections

Pope John Paul II speaks of some aspects of the Eucharist in *Vita consecrata*, his postsynodal apostolic exhortation on the consecrated life:

By its very nature the Eucharist is at the center of the consecrated life, both for individuals and for communities. It is the daily viaticum and source of the spiritual life for the individual and for the institute. By means of the Eucharist all consecrated persons are called to live Christ's paschal mystery, uniting themselves to him by offering their own lives to the Father through the Holy Spirit. (§95)

These words of the pope describe an ideal that seems far from the daily experience of most religious I know. It is not that we do not affirm the ideal. But the realities of community and liturgy seldom come together in the life-giving way envisioned in *Vita consecrata*. The reasons are many and complicated, and the solutions will require imagination and passionate desire. Here I want to explore some factors that inhibit the integration of Eucharistic devotion and community life, to identify some values common to both, and to name some steps we can take to reanimate our communal and Eucharistic life.

First let us describe the present reality of Eucharistic practice among religious. I will focus in this section only on common,

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observable practice. Let us begin by looking at large community houses such as motherhouses and retirement communities. Many of them still have the benefit of a daily Mass, but a significant number can no longer count on the daily presence of a priest. Since these sisters tend to be old and infirm and unable to go out to a parish, they substitute a communion service on the days a priest is not available. Sisters in smaller local communities seldom live in traditional parochial convents; even if they minister in a parish, they may well choose to attend Mass at a different parish.

Where two or more sisters live together but work in different ministries, they may well attend different parishes. In short, the practice of a community attending Mass together is becoming increasingly rare. A few sisters minister in settings too far from a resident priest to expect to attend Mass more than once a week, if that often. In some cases, what counts toward the choice of where to worship is convenient location, convenient time, and a congenial celebrant. At times anonymity and speed are the operative criteria for selection.

Add to this general picture of behavior some frequently expressed thoughts and feelings: "I cannot attend Mass daily and have it be a real celebration. If I go less frequently, each celebration becomes more meaningful." "My ministry requires me to work long hours, and there is no liturgy that fits into my schedule." "The Church's exclusion of women from presiding at liturgy and the use of exclusive language in readings and prayers make Mass attendance too painful for me to endure." I make no attempt to quantify these practices or feelings—only to note that they are part of the experience of at least some religious and therefore, in a sense, part of the experience of us all.

What about the experience of community life today? Elsewhere I have suggested that our inability to be clear about what community living means or what it calls us to is our Achilles' heel.¹ Even raising the topic provokes equivocation, defensiveness, rationalizations. Everyone affirms community as an ideal, but few agree on how to realize it in practice. In the same vein, we are

not clear on how it relates to, shapes, or determines our practice of the evangelical counsels and ministry. Going deeper, we have not challenged ourselves to articulate a theology or spirituality of community living adequate for our time. In the complicated process of adapting our way of life to modern and postmodern realities over recent decades, we have been clearer about what we were discarding than about what we were setting up as a corporate choice. Hence we find it difficult to say with any clarity or assurance what we are inviting potential and new members to share.

Given our uncertainties and ambivalence about Eucharistic devotion and community living, it is no wonder that the ideal of Eucharist-centered consecrated life, for both individuals and communities, seems a dream still to be accomplished. The foregoing sketch of the present situation may sound somewhat pessimistic. But there is, I believe, a renewed hunger among religious today for authentic expressions of the deepest meaning of our life, and so these considerations are important. I suggest that there is a powerful analogy between Eucharistic life and religious community life that can shed light on both and show between them a common spirituality. The analogy has four dimensions.

The Word Is Made Flesh

Religious community and the Eucharist are incarnational. There is a physicality about each that is intrinsic to its nature. Our Eucharistic belief and piety embrace the concept of the Real Presence: that under the appearances of bread and wine the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially present. If the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity had not assumed human nature, human soul and body, there would have been no Last Supper and no enduring Eucharistic presence today. The accidents of bread and wine are able to be seen and eaten; they are tangible.

We know that religious community is also tangible: it is a social experience in which real people, through their physical senses, relate to one another in significant and mutually supportive ways. Sometimes we speak of community as an abstraction, one that is easy to affirm because it makes no demands on us. But religious community is meant to be a tissue of daily relationships, the context in which we realize all the other dimensions of our vowed life: prayer, poverty, celibacy, obedience, mission. Take poverty as an example: not only do we share our income in common, but we

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also discern together how much is enough, whether for the present living situation or for future needs. Living religious community requires interacting in significant ways with companions whom we can see, address, challenge, praise, forgive, and even embrace.

A priest celebrating Mass alone, without the company of an altar server or any other worshiper, is an anomaly. So, I would suggest, is a religious living alone. Something intrinsic to the experience of Eucharistic or religious community is missing. Carrying the incarnational analogy further, we may say that both Eucharist and religious community are preeminent realizations of church. As Vatican Council II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy reminds us, "The liturgy is the outstanding means by which the faithful can express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true church. It is of the essence of the church that she be both human and divine, visible and yet invisibly endowed. . . . Day by day the liturgy builds up [the members] of the church into the Lord's holy temple, into a spiritual dwelling for God—an enterprise which will continue until Christ's full stature is achieved. At the same time the liturgy marvelously fortifies the faithful in their capacity to preach Christ. To outsiders the liturgy thereby reveals the church as a sign raised above the nations" (§2). In short, when the faithful gather to celebrate Eucharist, Church "happens."

The Synod on Consecrated Life also saw a unique ecclesial manifestation in this life. *Vita consecrata* (§§41 and 42) calls community life "an eloquent sign of ecclesial communion," that is, of the church's fundamental identity. Community demonstrates that sharing in trinitarian communion can change human relationships and create a new type of solidarity, built not on family ties or natural attraction, but on common values and commitments. "In this way it speaks to people both of the beauty of fraternal communion and of the ways which actually lead to it. Consecrated persons live 'for' God and 'from' God, and precisely for this reason they are able to bear witness to the reconciling power of grace, which overcomes the divisive tendencies present in the human heart and in society." Community is described as a "God-enlightened space in which to experience the presence of the risen Lord."

In literature the figure of speech called synecdoche uses a part to represent the whole and thus even to contain the whole. Perhaps this figure of speech can illustrate a similarity between the Eucharistic assembly and religious community: each in its own

way, limited in time and space, is a special manifestation of the church, past, present, and future, throughout the world.

Do This in Memory of Me

Whenever Mass is celebrated, the story of our redemption is retold and the stuff of our lives is incorporated into that story. In the penitential rite we are reminded that Jesus heals the wounds of sin and division, and then we recall our sins and ask and receive forgiveness. Scripture readings highlight some aspect of salvation history, and the homily applies it to our lives. In the creed we recite the ancient truths and affirm our contemporary belief. In the offertory our gifts are brought to the altar in order to become Christ's Body and Blood. The words of consecration recall the Last Supper—for the sake of the present action. The telling and retelling of the story of salvation is not a sterile repetition, but an opportunity for us to be drawn into an ongoing story and to make it our own. It is ultimately a transforming story. One day recently the postcommunion prayer included the words "become what we have received." We could never exhaust the meaning of that short phrase. Nourished by Christ's Body and Blood, we are incorporated into him and become Christ in the world.

Each religious institute also lives by a story. The circumstances of the founding, the teachings of the founder, the sufferings and hardships of early members, accounts of new missions undertaken, tales of saintly individuals—all of these are elements in a congregational history that is still being written. A new member is gradually introduced to that story in a process analogous to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Bit by bit she learns the story and becomes a part of it. The story is more than facts: it includes beliefs, values, and customs which have to be interiorized if the new member is to be really incorporated. These are best instilled by example. The new member lives in a community that shows her in a natural and unselfconscious way what it is to be a Sister of Mercy or Daughter of Charity or Franciscan. Gradually she takes on the new identity and lives out of it in an authentic way.

Both processes—Eucharistic and congregational incorporation—illustrate the meaning of theological tradition. This term refers to the preservation and development by which some truth, whether divine revelation itself or a founding charism, is made available to succeeding generations. Through successive genera-

tions of recalling and living and praying that truth, new persons are enabled to enter into the community of belief and practice and to contribute their insights. The words used may differ, as languages and cultures change, but the essential identity perdures, under the guidance of the Spirit. Eucharistic community and religious community are communities of memory, nourished by retelling the story. The words of the Evangelist John apply to both, "What we have seen and heard, we proclaim now to you, so that you may have communion with us" (1 Jn 1:3).

That All May Be One

No group on earth is more diverse than the community of Christian believers. A Coptic Christian in a refugee camp in Ethiopia, a campesino in the highlands of Peru, a Midwest tourist at St. Patrick's Cathedral, all take part in the same liturgy, albeit in different languages and rites. Nor does the diversity end there. Even within the same national or ethnic group, vocational choices, personal gifts, economic circumstances, theological tendencies, and spiritual preferences may differentiate worshippers from one another. Just look around the church some morning and appreciate the diversity present there. Retirees, business executives, students, factory workers, a few street people—all feel comfortable. The church's identity as *communio* means that all members share a fundamental unity, rooted in baptism. Whatever their differences, the liturgy inspires the faithful to become of one heart in love by being "filled with 'the paschal sacraments'" (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, §10).

The sociologist Robert Bellah asserts that the fundamental practice that tells us who we are as Christians is worship.² When we all gather to partake of the same Eucharistic banquet, we are drawn into an embodied world of relationships and connections, a world of human solidarity. Furthermore, he suggests, this solidarity is an antidote to the radical individualism so characteristic of modern society. Every Eucharistic celebration is an opportunity to model hospitality and inclusive love. When we detect that differences have become barriers to *communio*, we must seek reconciliation and the restoration of harmony.

Religious community has its own diversity. Before renewal we often ignored our differences or tried to eliminate them through adherence to minutiae of rules and customs. Once we began to

recognize and appreciate individual differences, however, we did not always differentiate between wholesome and destructive diversity. Perhaps more accurately, we did not always differentiate between accidental differences, which can enhance community, and substantive differences, which can erode common meaning.

We easily think of examples of diversity within a single congregation: national origin (especially if it is an international institute), ethnicity, age, personality types, education, professional expertise, ministry experience, tendencies in theology and spirituality, preferences in art, music, and recreation. On the one hand, this variety of gifts is a wonderful treasure. On the other, it creates a formidable obstacle to the unity of mind and heart which is the ideal of religious life. If this unity is to flourish, it must include a common understanding of the core commitments of the vowed life and a common passion for the mission, and it must be nourished by the sound traditions of the congregation. For we are not on individual spiritual journeys that intersect only occasionally; we share one journey on which everyone's successes and failures challenge all to be better pilgrims.

Successful integration of the varied gifts within a religious community mirrors ecclesial community and contributes to its flourishing. Hospitality and inclusive love are characteristics of both Eucharistic and religious community celebrations.

Go Forth to Love and Serve the Lord

As the liturgy draws to a close, we are sent forth on mission. In the prayers of petition, we remembered the needs of our families, friends, community members, church, and world. We offered ourselves with the bread and wine, and now Christ has incorporated us more deeply into himself so that our hands will be his hands, our hearts his heart, on a mission of service to others. Each liturgy ends in a commissioning that echoes the commissioning of Jesus' disciples before his ascension: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father

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and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always until the end of the age." The message is not "Keep safe and stay well until we meet again," but rather "Go forth to love and serve me in the least of my brethren. What you have received, give freely. And, when next you gather at my table, bring the cares and needs of your neighbors with you."

Liturgy is not a place to retreat from the world's problems for an hour of spiritual comfort. It is a time to penetrate more deeply into the meaning of the world's problems through the lens of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Communion should help us see with his vision. This means seeing beneath the surface of events to the roots of the world's problems. Seeing with Christ's eyes—we call this *contemplation*—is necessary for entering into the struggle against evil in the depths of human hearts and in the structures of society.

Similarly, religious community life is oriented toward mission. "Nor for ourselves alone" should be the watchword. Consecrated life is apostolic in its very essence. This means, not that persons in religious congregations do apostolic works or have individual ministries, but that our whole way of life is for the sake of making the love of God visible and attractive. Community life, therefore, as an intrinsic element of the consecrated life, should be mission oriented in both intention and expression. An apostolic community welcomes neighbors and friends and even, at times, aliens and strangers. An apostolic community weaves the needs of the world into its spiritual consciousness and common prayer. An apostolic community shares its resources with people who are poor. An apostolic community responds to the needs and priorities of the larger congregation and also welcomes new members, introducing them to this way of life. In short, an apostolic community is not turned in on itself, isolated and self-sufficient, but receives from others and shares with them. Eucharistic and religious communities—both of them generate apostolic engagement and support.

Reanimating Our Eucharistic and Communal Life

At the beginning of these reflections, we noted that one of the challenges of living Eucharistic and religious community enthusiastically is the dullness of the two experiences. Building on the

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strength of the analogy between them, let us imagine some ways to make each experience more life-giving. In order to do so, you may want to recall some especially meaningful community celebration—perhaps a patronal feast, a jubilee or anniversary, a profession ceremony, even a funeral. Are there elements of that well-remembered celebration which can be incorporated into daily experience? Let me suggest a few.

The first dimension of any celebration is *anticipation*, together with preparation and planning. We look forward to community celebrations, choosing the time and place with care, sending out invitations, preparing the space, devising a menu. If the celebration is to include a liturgy, additional preparations are made—a celebrant is engaged, the choir and musicians rehearse, programs are printed, the altar is adorned. Far from being a burden, these preparations add to the greatness of the occasion. We enjoy imagining what the result will be. We look forward to the delight others will experience, perhaps to elements of surprise or special beauty they will enjoy. By our anticipatory efforts we are giving the message that what is to follow is important.

In some way the element of anticipation and preparation can be incorporated into the daily rhythm of our Eucharistic and communal life. A simple way to anticipate the Eucharist is to reflect on the scriptural texts before Mass, to pray for grace to hear the word of God and to live it gladly. If we have options, the choice of a time and place to attend Mass is also part of the anticipation. Because community life is not a single event, but an ongoing relationship, the note of anticipation may not seem applicable. I believe, however, that we have to be every bit as intentional about when and how we will gather, what we will do to enhance the meeting, who we might invite to join us. Mealtime, prayer times, and recreation—three common points of encounter—can all be enriched by thoughtful anticipatory gestures. Gathering flowers for the dinner table can say to your companions, "You are important to me. I am happy to spend this time with you."

After the preparation comes the event itself, the celebration of Eucharist, the experience of community living. Harking back to the

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community celebration we specially remember, we note that presence to one another and attention to detail are key ingredients. A sister that I lived with for many years told me this story not long ago. She recalled returning from a trip very late at night and very tired. We used to gather for our community prayer at 7:15 each morning. The following morning she was very tempted to sleep in and skip prayer; she felt she was too tired to contribute anything to the community's effort. But she came, and she had a vivid experience of being borne up and carried by the prayer of the rest of us. Then, when she went to morning Mass with us, she had the same experience at church. The presence of the other parishioners, many of whom we did not know by name but recognized from seeing them frequently, "bore her up." Their faith sustained and animated her. This story is, I suggest, a parable about the nature of Eucharistic and religious community. In times of fatigue, distraction, boredom, the community is there for me. When others are similarly challenged, I want to be there for them.

Attention to the details of presence enhances Eucharistic celebrations and community experiences. The visibility of sisters, at least occasionally attending Mass together in a parish church, gives a clear reminder that we are still here, that ours is an ecclesial vocation, that our apostolic works are rooted in a life of communal and liturgical prayer. Participation as a lector, Eucharistic minister, choir member, or bearer of the offertory gifts can help focus our attention on what we are doing together. Attention to our posture, dress, and demeanor can all help us remember that each celebration, no matter how frequently repeated, is an incalculable opportunity to be united with the whole church living, striving, and praying throughout time and space. Similarly, in local community settings, cultivating habits of courtesy and thoughtfulness can elevate the daily humdrum into graced encounters.

Finally, a meaningful celebration is prolonged beyond the event itself. The liturgical year supplies us with a cycle of special feasts, but, except for Christmas and Easter, the celebration is usually over and forgotten by eight o'clock in the morning. Are there ways in which we can remind ourselves and one another of the morning's scripture reading, the day's feast, or the spirit of the season (the *anticipation* of Advent, the *joy* of Christmastime, the *penitential spirit* of Lent, the *daily challenge* of Ordinary Time)? Our community gatherings give us the opportunity to prolong the Eucharistic celebration into the rest of the day.

All of these suggestions, simple as they are, are ways in which we can integrate our communal and liturgical prayer. And, of course, there are ways in which all of this can relate to our personal prayer. If one dimension is weak, neglected, or underdeveloped, the others suffer. Each part of our spiritual journey is meant to support the others. In these reflections on the connection between liturgy and community life, I have suggested that there is an analogy which illuminates each. Each in its own way is incarnational and ecclesial, an experience of living memory, a manifestation of varied gifts subsumed into a common unity, and a sending forth on mission. Of course, every analogy is limited, and I do not mean that the two realities are comparable in all respects. Perhaps we can switch for a moment from analogy to metaphor—my English teacher would be so proud! Both liturgy and community life are paths to the same goal of union with God, and so it is not surprising that, the closer they approach that goal, the more they converge. The metaphor is limited too, however, for in this life of ours we can take both paths at the same time.

I found the intimate relationship, the reciprocity, between Eucharist and community summed up in the following passage by Marcello Azevedo SJ: "The Eucharist is the soul and inspiration of community [living]. The Eucharist makes community viable and challenges us to live up to its truth. And community provides a way for the Eucharist to become authentic. Where community cracks or becomes truncated, where there is community but not a living communion, there we find less of an opportunity for the Eucharist to be consistently credible. There may be a formal celebration, but the very act may empty the meaning and implications of what we are celebrating."³ Azevedo goes on to say that it is necessary to assist young and not-so-young religious to understand the immense and unique implications of the Eucharist for community life. He comments that, if we do not make the effort to teach them, daily Eucharist will seem a meaningless legalistic obligation to the young. The not-so-young, for their part, having become accustomed to a disciplined ritual, may not be aware of a problem. But, while attending the Eucharist faithfully, they might fail to grasp its new dimensions and appreciate its many benefits for the life of the community.

Before closing let me return to one of the issues identified at the beginning of this reflection, namely, the alienation of some women religious from liturgy because of their feelings of exclusion.

At times the institutional church—which publicly validates our lives through canonical recognition and affirmations of many kinds—also seems to go out of its way to distance us from the Eucharist through clericalist assertions. As a result some women have sought to nourish their communal spirituality by retrieving women's rituals from Native American, Eastern, and ancient pagan sources. This issue, this phenomenon, has not been the focus of my remarks, but, because of its relationship to the overall question of Eucharistic participation by women religious, it is important to at least touch on it.

Mary Collins OSB provides some relevant insights in her essay "Is the Eucharist Still a Source of Meaning for Women?"⁴ After noting that the Eucharistic Christ has brought prayerful women—including our congregational founders—to a depth of spiritual identity, vision, and power generation after generation, she says: "This meaning and power do not lie exclusively in the past; they have a present and future for those who trust themselves to Eucharistic action in troubled times. To insist upon construing Eucharist solely as a symbol of male power is to squander a known source of spiritual vitality in the Catholic community." She addresses the issue of substituting other rituals for Christian liturgy:

Where such impoverished constructions of the Catholic Church's Eucharistic tradition have been accepted as the whole truth or the only significant truth, some Catholics have begun to identify themselves as post-Christian and to look elsewhere for the way, the truth, and the life. Will a neopagan quasi-retrieval of rites of empowerment for women guarantee a better future for the human community than the service of the gospel and the Eucharistic celebration of the mystery of salvation? Nobody has ever been able to prevent people from squandering real assets when the lure of fool's gold overtakes them, nor from risking a solid future on the futures market. Neoclericalism and neopaganism both look like fool's gold to me.⁵

Collins challenges us to hold fast to the treasure which has been entrusted to us and to the whole Christian community. As religious living a communitarian life, we have a special affinity for the communal dimension of Eucharist. I hope that our reflection on these matters will stir our imaginations and irrigate, from the wellspring of our communal religious lives, our desire to celebrate

the Eucharist. I hope that the Eucharist will be for all of us what it has been and is: our "daily viaticum and source of the spiritual life."

Notes

¹ "Community Living: Beginning the Conversation," Review for Religious 58, no. 2 (March-April 1999): 137-149.

² "Religion and the Shape of National Culture," America (31 July 1999): 9-14.

³ *The Consecrated Life: Crossroads and Directions*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 87.

⁴ *Living in the Meantime: Concerning the Transformation of Religious Life*, ed. Paul J. Philibert OP (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), pp. 185-196.

⁵ Philibert, *Living*, p. 195.

Easter

Jesus rose
like a gleaming daffodil,
starting a trend of risings
from cold mud —
purple crocus and wild violet,
pale narcissus
looking too fragile for spring blasts,
and the hooded heads
of tulips waiting to unscarf themselves
in coral and flame.

You feel again your own mud
and wonder each drab day
what seeds
unknown to you
might be rising
from the humus of your Lenten days
and almost ready
for your alleluias.

Pat Schnapp RSM