For a Biblical Regeneration of our Eucharistic Practice

The church is *semper reformanda*: always in need of regeneration and renewal, not only of its ideas, but more importantly of its practices in order that it can become more fully what it is called to be: the voice and active presence of the Christ in the world. In this on-going task of regeneration, our practices surrounding the Eucharist are especially significant. As Hans Küng remarked in 2002:

> The liturgy is and remains the centre of the life of the church. If this can be successfully renewed, won’t that also have effects on all the areas of church activity?

In this quest for renewal, the two basic realities are a renewed practice around the broken loaf and the shared cup. This might seem so obvious as not to require comment – for over half a century liturgists have been calling, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, for a move away from the use of the tabernacle during celebrations of the Eucharist and away from pre-cut individualistic wafers and for a renewal of the practice of sharing the cup. Despite this, in recent months no less an authority than Cardinal Robert Sarah, prefect of the Vatican’s Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has suggested that receiving the broken loaf in the hand is part of ‘the devil’s attack on the church,’ while many bishops seek ways to avoid extending the cup to all present at a celebration of the Eucharist and returning to an older notion of ‘the chalice is for the priest alone.’ In the light of these confusions, and the fact that many do not appreciate the changes in Catholic practice that is required by the vision of Vatican II, some notes on our eucharistic practice are in order.

1. The broken loaf received in the hand

I suspect many Christians were taken aback by Cardinal Sarah’s judgment that communion in the hand is the most recent engagement between the good angels, and Lucifer and his demons (*Tablet*, 23 February). As to the Cardinal’s evidence for this battle within the cosmic struggle, I shall not comment; but as to his liturgical judgment that a particular ritual form, receiving on the tongue while kneeling, ‘is much more suited to the sacrament itself,’ some comments can be made.

The origins of wafers
Exactly when receiving on the tongue became common is by no means clear – the evidence is incidental – but it is certainly a result of the move to unleavened ‘altar bread’ which spread in the west in the ninth and tenth centuries. We know this because one can only receive on the tongue if one has a flat, disc-shaped wafer that can be slotted into the mouth or which will adhere and balance on an out-stretched tongue. Why the west gradually moved to unleavened bread has been a matter of controversy, but it was an innovation. Later claims of continuity with antiquity are simply false, it was confined to western Europe and a significant factor in the rift with the Greek churches, and was accompanied by another development: people stopped going to communion. Actually eating at the Eucharistic Feast became so uncommon that in 1215 it had to be insisted on, with a threat of sin and punishment, that every Catholic went at least once a year. What became known as the ‘Easter Duty’ effectively became a maximum – and it would only be in the twentieth century that ‘frequent communion’ again became common. So while it is easy to reminisce about ‘reverence’ in earlier times, we should recognize that it was a reverence so tied up with fear ‘lest one condemn oneself’ (1 Cor 11:29-30) that it vitiated our whole vision of our gathering as one of joyful thanks to the Father for what he has done for us in Christ.

A loaf, broken and shared

Reverence is not a cowering fear, but a true acknowledgement of what we are about. We have been gathered as disciples at the Table of the Lord, a table which recalls the past of Jesus at his Last Supper, anticipates the heavenly Banquet, and is now a table of encounter with the Lord in eating and drinking as the community of love. We are sharing disciples and in our sharing is the encounter with the Lord. We are not there as ‘takers’ or ‘receivers’ – our inherited language plays us false and far from promoting reverence can all too easily lead to a pious consumerism. That latter notion is promoted by the use of pre-cut individual wafers, suitable for the tongue, but which miss the central image of all our scriptural accounts of the Eucharist. There the emphasis is on a single loaf which is broken and shared. ‘Jesus took a loaf, and having blessed [the Father], he broke it … and said “take, eat” …’ (Mt 26:26). For Paul this sharing, which presumes each participant using their hands to eat – as is the normal human way, is the key. It was the lack of sharing in Corinth that gave rise to severe rebuke, and this reflection: ‘because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf’ (1 Cor 10:17). We have only to look at the large paten pictured in the hands of Justinian in the Ravenna mosaics to see that this was the key theme in the patristic period. Likewise, the Derrynaflan Paten (bigger than a dinner plate) in
Dublin, with room for a loaf broken into over 70 pieces, shows what it was like in practice. Once one has a broken leavened loaf, irregular cube-like morsels, one has to use one’s own hand, and while we have sermons about those broken loaves, we have no hint of fear of irreverence. Rather there is the encouragement that if you have dipped your hand in that dish, you would not betray the Lord (cf. Mt 26:23).

**Divisions in the Body of Christ**

Defending an action that emerged from defective practice / perception also raises more profound issues. Does it reflect viewing the sacraments as sacrat commodities rather than particular manifestations of the primordial sacraments of the creation and the Christ? The Christ is present in many ways and many places, it is not a case of ‘presence’ / ‘absence.’ If the Eucharist is ‘the centre and summit’ of the Christian life, then must it not involve continuities with the rest of our lives? In every sharing of food we are invited, as disciples, to be thankful – Eucharist has deep roots – and to see our meals as an instance of being Christian. In handling all food, sharing and eating, we are already in the domain of reverence – and this attitude reaches its summit when we handle shares of the common loaf and the shared cup. If we think of the priest as standing and distributing, and the communicant as kneeling and receiving in the manner of a fed infant, are we not slipping into a binary vision of liturgy: the priest is active, the agent, the adult, and the laity are passive, receivers, children? But we have the dignity of being equal before God, given a place at his table. And, for Paul, anything indicating inequality at that table divides Christ’s body and has no place there.

**What’s wrong with wafers?**

But any busy pastor will immediately object to this by asking ‘what is wrong with wafers?’ They are very convenient, no one in the pews is clamouring for a change, and the alternative is very problematic: it leaves a vast amount of crumbs and, above all, it takes up so much time (in what appears to be – and is so perceived – simply a mechanical task). Moreover, could it possibly be that the Church has been acting incorrectly, in matter pertaining to the Eucharist, for centuries? Answering these real questions opens up virtually every problem in our current sacramental theology. Let’s briefly tackle these questions in reverse order.

One of the problems of liturgical renewal in the Catholic Church has been the need to make crucial changes while at the same time maintaining the impression that there was nothing defective in what we were already
doing. This attempt at squaring the circle was necessitated by the fear that any admission of a defect was tantamount to holding that the Church was not the sponsa Christi sine ruga vel macula. So if the Church is infallible, there could be no problem except at a surface level – but if the call for liturgical renewal was only a matter of surface level problems (literally: superficial), then it was of no great importance and certainly not worth real worry. So over the past fifty years we have often just changed superficially, exchanging one set of rubrics for another, without realising that Vatican II called for a much deeper renewal of understanding, and, in matters liturgical which involves doing, this meant deep changes in practice. We simply need to recall how few people went to communion at Mass prior to the 1960s, to realise that the problems which Vatican II addressed were not simply superficial but deep seated. We are only now beginning to scope the extent of our inherited problems. Instead of flying from those problems by denial (framed positively as ‘the infallibility of the Church’), we need to confront them adopting the motto ‘ecclesia semper reformanda’ and then seek to re-pattern our practice. In this re-patterning we should acknowledge that our practice will never be perfect, but it always stands in need of improvement.

As to the notion of convenience and the use of wafers being ‘time efficient,’ we might recall that the reason we repeat ‘Lamb of God’ is precisely to have worship in song during this process of braking up a single large loaf; that we have a magnificent inheritance of Confractoria hymns which have not been used since wafers appeared; the need to break up the loaf was one of the key functions of deacons; and that the Eucharist as a meal liturgy really cannot be celebrated in groups of more than 70 to 80 people without becoming an impersonal gathering rather than a gathering of disciples who view themselves as members of a family – so we should have more presbyters. A renewal around the Lord’s loaf should spread out to a renewal of many other areas of our pastoral practice.

But what of the crumbs? The reason that a corporal is spread over the table (already covered with a cloth) was to catch all the crumbs – and, indeed, for a 1000 years after the disappearance of the leavened loaf there was still a rubric that the corporal was to be scraped for crumbs with the edge of the paten! Anyone who served Mass before 1971 will have seen this vestigial (and un-necessary) activity. But, more importantly, the worry over crumbs is a category mistake of imagining the presence of the Christ in terms of physical materials. We do not assert the material or physical presence of the Christ but his sacramental presence. In other
words, when we encounter this loaf, sharing and eating it, we encounter the Christ – and offer our praise with him to the Father.

The argument from convenience imagines a world of ‘fast food’ and pre-prepared fast delivery, it forgets that liturgy works through having its own poetry, its own rhythms, and its own experience of learned behaviour. We have to learn by doing that we each have a share in the Christ; and that we have to share when we gather at this table, just as we have to share all our gifts and resources with our sisters and brothers. A ritual that sends us signals of individuality (an individual round mini-loaf just for one), self-sufficiency, and speedy convenience food (food as a commodity) is inappropriate – and traduces our beliefs. Contrariwise, our practice must send us signals – something far deeper than verbal sounds – that this gathering is an interpersonal event of sharing, and an event that is not a matter of efficiency but of recollection: of the past (the meals of Jesus), the present (who we are called to be as disciples), and of the future (the eschatological banquet) – and so it is not an activity to be rushed or ‘streamlined.’ We are not at the sacred banquet to get something – even if that something is very precious – but to share in the Lord’s meal as his sisters and brothers, and with him offer thanks to the Father. And, we cannot remind ourselves too often that while all animals eat food, only humans share meals.

The renewal practiced by Jesus

The act of offering thanks to God is at the heart of our existence as creatures. It is this that motivated the worship of the temple in Jerusalem (we have but to look at 1 Chron 29 to see an archetypal Eucharistic Prayer), it is this that stood behind all the meal prayers among the Jews (we have but to look at Sir 31:12-32:13 to see how the presider at a meal is to offer a prayer of thanks on behalf of all present), and it is this centrality of thanksgiving that stood behind the sung Eucharistic Prayer at the group meal of the Essenes (around the time of Jesus) when they gathered in their refectory, which they viewed as a substitute for the temple, and who viewed their common table as the altar for their praise and thanksgiving.

Jesus renewed this tradition of praise by addressing God as Father and by doing the act of thanksgiving in a new way. When we look at Paul and the gospels we are not told what words he used in prayer (they simply say ‘he blessed God’ or ‘he thanked God’) but we are told in detail what he did. He took a loaf and broke, he took a cup and shared it. We do not have the words of his prayer to the Father, only his words of instructions
to his table companions! Why so? Because every follower knew how to offer a prayer of thanksgiving – or could learn one by heart such as those in the Didache – for the Christian prayers are adaptations of standard Jewish prayers. On the other hand, what was new, distinctive, and derived specifically from Jesus was they way he wanted all to share one loaf and cup. If we are not being true to that practice – whether that is a case of using wafers or ‘giving communion from the tabernacle’ – we are not being loyal to our basic inspiration and what makes us his disciples: those who worship God in his way, with him, and through him.

2. Sharing the Eucharistic Cup

Whilst our common memory of the origin of the Eucharist in the ‘Last Supper’ is that Jesus took ‘bread and wine’ (a recollection that emphasizes the distinct materials), by contrast all our early texts notice that he took ‘a cup’ (1 Cor 10:16, 21; 11:25-8; Mk 14:23; Mt 26:27; Lk 22:17, 20; Didache 9:2). That it was filled with wine is then inferred from a subsequent statement found in the Synoptic Tradition: ‘Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God’ (Mk 14:25; Mt 26:29; Lk 22:18). But is this early emphasis on ‘a cup’ (and, therefore, on how that drinking took place) when contrasted with the later emphasis on the cup’s contents (hence, on what was consumed) of any real significance? Is seeing a specific reason for the mention of ‘a cup’ anything more than an academic curiosity?

The most obvious evidence that ‘a cup’ was significant in the churches’ memory was that having taken the cup, and blessed the Father, Jesus gave it to those at table so that each drank ‘from it.’ The point stressed is not that they all drank wine, which they could do from their individual cups, nor that they all drank of the same wine as coming from one source, such as a flagon, but that they passed a cup from one to another and each drank from that same cup. We can see that ‘the cup’ was as significant to them as what it contained. The focus of early memory was on the how of their drinking, not upon what they drank.

**Just one cup?**

This implication is more evident when we realize how unusual was the action of sharing a drinking vessel. There was no equivalent to it in any known Jewish practice. Making the sharing of a cup part of one’s table manners is confined exclusively to the followers of Jesus.
Moreover, that Jesus’ followers considered it to be a deliberate and significant ritual is seen in that they located it, and remembered it, explicitly in relation to Jesus’ own action and wishes. This is already evident in Paul when he wrote to the Corinthians assuming there is a single cup (10:16) and that they all drink ‘the cup of the Lord’ (11:27); and that this is a practice ‘received from the Lord’ (11:23). This practice is unique to the churches. That it goes back to Jesus himself is confirmed by its ‘multiple attestation’ (Paul, the Synoptics, the Didache—and, as we shall see, possibly John) and by its distinctiveness that is ‘disruptive of expectations’ (see Meier).

When Christians today see people sharing the cup in the liturgy, there is a danger its human implications are opaque, while its Christian implications become invisible. While drinking is a part of the meal rituals of all cultures, the notion of regularly passing a cup is rare. Sharing the same body of liquid—but not the same cup—is common. The exceptions such as the sharing of a victory cup or ‘loving cups’ derive their significance from their rarity. While we love to share meals, we like having our own drinking vessels. Only in emergencies (sharing a canteen of water) or moments of exceptional informality (two friends, one bottle of beer, and no cup) will we drink from a container in sequence. Even then, we wipe the container’s lip after drinking. This anthropological insight alerts us that, firstly, the widespread adoption of this action of sharing a cup cannot be dismissed as some minor detail: it was a very deliberate choice. Secondly, we can appreciate why, in virtually all Christian traditions, there has been an unspoken aversion to its full implementation.

That it was the action of sharing one cup that was central (rather that drinking from a common volume of wine) is seen indirectly from the second- and third-century evidence when uniformity between the churches was becoming more important. One of the practices that came under criticism was that of sharing a cup of water at the Eucharist (see McGowan). This practice was both widespread and deep-rooted, and it cannot be dismissed as a later-developing deviation. Using water probably avoided disputes over the interaction of rich and poor, the problem of cost, and between those happy to drink wine and those who suspected the practice (such as former disciples of John the Baptist). But when later bishops wrote about the practice, they did not deny the reality of those Eucharists, but stressed the better practice of using wine. The implication: they recognized that sharing of a common cup was fundamental.

The Corinthians’ Cup
Are there any traces of how this most unusual gesture was understood? Clearly, by parallel with the sharing of portions of the loaf, a key element in the significance of the shared cup may have been the gathering’s unity with one another and with the risen Lord. If sharing a loaf indicated the intimacy of the table, and the unity of those around it, then the level of intimacy of passing a cup around the table is even greater.

However, hints linking the cup to the unity of the community are not found in our earliest sources. In the Didache where the unity of the community and the work of Jesus in gathering it, is presented by analogy with grains that formed the loaf, we do not find any parallel notion such as that of individual grapes being combined to form wine—a parallel emphasizing the cup’s content rather than its sharing. Likewise, Paul points out that ‘Since there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, because we all partake of the one loaf’ (1 Cor 10:17), but there is no parallel statement about sharing the cup.

For Paul the choice facing those who share the cup is between ‘the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons’ (10:21). This choice between the Christ and the demons was a choice that faced all Gentile disciples: Were they willing to turn from the idols that were part of the social and domestic fabric of Greco-Roman urban life? If one wanted to express the new discipleship then one not only turned from that which had been offered to idols, but one partook of the common cup of the disciples of the Christ. Drinking from the common cup was a ‘boundary ritual’ that expressed commitment to discipleship, and as such was a serious matter: they may have to answer for their decision to drink from that common cup (11:27-8).

Since it is the action of declaring both commitment to discipleship and rejection of idols, it is a participation in the life-blood of the Christ (10:16) and makes them part of the new covenant which was sealed in Christ’s blood (11:25). For Paul discipleship is about being part of the new covenant and sharing in the new life offered by the Christ; and taking the common cup—not a gesture done lightly—was accepting that discipleship and taking that life-blood of the Christ into one’s own body. We are accustomed to think of the act of baptism as the boundary ritual of the new community, but for Paul at the time he first wrote to the Corinthians, the sharing of the cup was also a demarcation ritual—and since it was repeated weekly it was the ongoing declaration of willingness to continue along the Way.

That such a paralleling of drinking the cup with baptism was present in Paul’s mind when he wrote about that church’s meals is confirmed by his remark about the Spirit being present in that church: ‘For by one Spirit
we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit’ (12:13). Just as the Spirit united them in baptism, so the Spirit was now what they drank in common. In short, if they wanted to be part of the new people, then they drank from the common cup, accepting the consequences.

The *Didache*’s assumption is that those eating the meal have already made a choice between the ‘Way of Life’ and the ‘Way of Death’; and it is explicit that only those who are baptized are to eat and drink (9:5)—so willingness to eat from the loaf and drink the one cup are marks of continuing commitment. This relationship between baptism and drinking as boundaries may seem strange to us who put these ‘sacraments’ into different theological compartments: one is about joining and a once-off event, while the other is about continuing and is repeated over a lifetime. However, such a neat system of ‘outcomes’ does not fit with how ritual establishes and maintains identity. One-off events need to be constantly recalled, while that which is an ongoing concern needs to be seen to have a moment of establishment. They were living as disciples—day-by-day facing its challenges—and so declared themselves day-by-day while looking back to the moment when discipleship was established. The two rituals, baptism and drinking the common cup need to be seen as complementary within living a life of commitment, rather than as distinct from one another with different meanings in a theological system.

“Can You Drink the Cup?”

Turning to the Synoptic Tradition we see that this notion that the one cup of the Lord is be taken as willingness to accept all that discipleship involves is reinforced, while being given a narrative expression, within a paradigm encounter of would-be disciples with Jesus. The scene appears in Mk 10:35-40 where James and John, the sons of Zebedee, ask if they can sit beside Jesus in glory. This prompts a challenge that links drinking the same cup as the Lord with baptism: ‘Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’ (10:38). When they reply that they are able, they are told that ‘The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized,’ but that will not guarantee them their desired places. To accept fully what it is to be a disciple is both to share in the baptism of Jesus and to drink the same cup as him. In Mt 20:20-23 the story re-appears but now the question is asked by their mother and the reference to baptism has disappeared, but the message is just as stark: to be a disciple means drinking from the same cup that Jesus drinks—and this invites from the audience a ritual conversion: if you drink the ritual
cup, then you consciously declare your readiness to accept the cost of discipleship.

This theme linking the cup and discipleship is further developed when Jesus’ own discipleship to the Father is presented as his willingness to drink the cup that the Father offers him. In both the Synoptics and John the suffering the Father’s Anointed must undergo is presented in terms of his ‘cup’ and Jesus’ willingness to drink it. In Mk 14:36, followed closely by Mt 26:39 and Lk 22:42, this is presented as part of his prayer in the garden: ‘Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.’ And thus with obedience he accepts where his discipleship has led. In Jn 18:11 Jesus is presented as doing the Father’s will without hesitation or any sign of human fear, but again he is drinking ‘the cup’ that the Father has given him.

Drinking from one cup declared acceptance of a shared community destiny, and a common destiny with the Christ. As such it formed a very real, and possibly physically dangerous, boundary for the people of the New Covenant. It was also an act that shattered other boundaries such as those of race, social status, and factions within the churches, and implied a willingness to belong to a new fictive community with a new intimacy in Jesus. Sharing a cup they had become blood brothers and sisters.

**Consequences for Today**

Does this call to drink from the one cup pose a challenge to contemporary Christian practice? It could be argued that sharing the cup is now common in many communities—though most Catholics would still find it most unusual, while many presbyters find ‘reasons’ for avoiding it. Our hesitations to sharing a vessel that touches our lips are deep-seated. The Orthodox churches, for example, use a spoon—which destroys the gesture’s force. Some Protestant churches use individual thimble-sized glasses that are as destructive of Jesus’ bold symbolism as pre-cut Catholic wafers destroy the original loaf symbolism, while both transmit signals that appeal to an individualistic consumerist culture. While among Catholics, even a flu scare banishes the cup! Some years ago a bishop at a Eucharist at a meeting of theologians, lest bird-flu spread, restricted the cup to concelebrants. In that bishop’s eyes,’ presbyteral ordination immunized against flu!

In every community the common cup is a source of contention in some way or other: and possibly that is the true value of this symbol in that it demands that each ask whether they can accept the implications of discipleship. Meanwhile, we rationalize these stresses with a mix of
practicality, hygiene, and theology. In one tradition this will be the fear of ‘a spillage of the precious blood,’ in another it will be hygiene, while somewhere else it will be the time taken or the awkwardness involved, or the problem of alcoholic wine … and the list—all with some factual basis—grows longer and longer. Likewise, groups develop subterfuges such as using a spoon or straws (fistulae), dipping (‘intinction’), trays of mini-glasses; and, the most extreme deviation, restricting the cup to the president. These ‘developments’ miss both the central imagery of the action, and the ‘shock’ that is at the gesture’s core: Will you share a cup and a common destiny in discipleship that might demand ‘obedience unto death’ (Phil 2:8)?

‘Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the loaf and drink of the cup’ (1 Cor 11:28). Can we face the common cup of shared covenant discipleship?

References


