

The Eucharist and Mission

Jacob Kavunkal SVD

Systematic Theology, JDV, Pune 411014

Abstract

The Eucharist is the inspiration and support of all who proclaim the good news. This is articulated by St. Paul when he wrote: "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (I Cor 11: 26). The Eucharist gathers individual Christians into one community and in turn sent them into the world, transformed and strengthened. Therefore, the Eucharist is rightly described as the centre and summit of Christian life. In this article the author considers the various aspects of the link between the Eucharist and the Church's mission. The author concludes by affirming that the Eucharistic table is the matrix of mission. It is there the Church and the world intersect in the presence of Jesus Christ. It is the place from which we are sent forth to love and serve the world. The Eucharist is the well-spring of mission for the world. When we move into the world in service to the poor and the needy, we do not cease to celebrate the Eucharist.

Keywords

Eucharist as mission, Eucharist as constituting Church, grace, memorial, Eucharist as centre and summit of Christianity.

Through his incarnation the Lord Jesus became Emmanuel, God with us (Mt 1:23), to carry out his mission. At the end of his ministry he instituted the Eucharist, the new form of his presence. Thus, the Eucharist by its very nature is bound up with the mission of the Church. Even as the Church is for mission, so also the Eucharist is for mission. The Eucharist is the inspiration and support of all who proclaim the Good News. This is articulated

by St. Paul when he wrote: “As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (I Cor 11: 26). The Eucharist gathers individual Christians into one community and in turn sends them into the world, transformed and strengthened. Therefore, the Eucharist is rightly described as the centre and summit of Christian life.

In this article we shall consider the various aspects of the link between the Eucharist and the Church’s mission focusing on the following points:

1. The Eucharist constitutes the Church
2. The grace of mission flows from it
3. It contains the missionary message
4. Eucharist is mission

1. Eucharist Constitutes the Church

Baptism incorporates one into the Christian family, the Church, the community to which the mission of the Incarnate Lord is entrusted. Baptism is the external sign of the effective internal transformation into the discipleship of the Lord. Thus, baptism constitutes the Church. Every baptized person becomes part of the people of God, the missionary community, with a common dignity, based on one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God (Eph 4:5) though with different functions and roles.

However, in reality this community is called together (*ekkaleo*), made visible, concrete and tangible basically at the Eucharistic assembly. It is the Eucharist that gathers the baptized members into one community. The Eucharistic assembly is the visible presentation of the Church. In this sense the Eucharist constitutes the Church. Hence the Eucharist is at the heart of the Christian life. It is at the Eucharist that the Church is formed as a communion and community. It is formed into the likeness of the Lord and eventually sent out through the Eucharistic celebration. The earliest believers in the Apostles’ preaching expressed their communion, according to the Acts of the Apostles, in the breaking of the bread (2: 42). It was not only a continuation of the table

fellowship of the Lord with the disciples, but it also anticipated the imminence of the parousia of Jesus Christ (Mt 26:29).

The mystery dimension of the Christian life is experienced at the Eucharist in so far as in it we experience oneness with God and with each other which, in turn, is the source of inspiration for Christian living and witnessing. The Eucharist is an invitation to join the Lord and each other and to travel with them towards the eschatological fulfilment, a pilgrim people, for the Kingdom prepared before the foundation of the world (Mt 25:34).

With St. Augustine, the Second Vatican Council describes the Eucharist as a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 47). This reminds us of how the Eucharist not only gathers the community but also effects the quality of its existence. This fact is emphasized also by St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 10: 16-17). What is at issue is the quality of Christian life that has to be reflected in the actual celebration and in the life thereafter. Thus, the Eucharist brings about not only a deeper conversion in the participants but it makes them better instruments to witness to the world, with greater unity, solidarity and love. As John Paul II reminds us, “[t]he Eucharist brings about that unbreakable bond between communion and mission, which makes the Church the sacrament of the unity of the whole human race (*Lumen Gentium* 1)” (2000: 452).

2. The Grace of Mission flows from the Eucharist

The bread that is broken opens up the life of the Christians and of the community to a sharing and self-giving life at the service of the world (Cf Jn 6:51). Even as Jesus gives himself in the Eucharist as food for the world, so also all those who participate in this self-giving of the Lord, are invited to participate in his mission of giving themselves to be at the service of the world, so that the world may have life in its fullness. In fact the very symbolism of the Eucharist, food and drink, brings out this constitutive element of sharing. The many table fellowships of the Lord, coupled with the signs/miracles of the multiplication

of the bread, the immediate background of the Eucharist, reinforce the aspect of sharing that we celebrate in the Eucharist. Thus, the Eucharist is an invitation to mission.

In the Johannine Eucharistic discourse Jesus describes himself as the true bread that came down from heaven as opposed to the manna that Moses gave to the people in the desert (Jn 6: 26ff). He is the Word, the new revelation and the bread that nourishes one for eternal life. The Bread of life is the symbol of the Word of God. Here we have the link between the Eucharist and the proclamation of the Word.

The Eucharist as a liturgical act is the celebration of the Christian Faith through symbols. Here the main symbols are bread and wine, the ordinary food of the people of Palestine. Food is a favourite symbol for the poor. The Lord intentionally makes use of this symbol to inculcate in the community of his disciples two key ideas: firstly, how the members of the community are to be drawn together towards each other and to the Lord by sharing of his body and blood in the Eucharistic species and secondly, how they are to be drawn towards the poor. This way the Eucharist leads to a missionary involvement in real life. The Eucharist is not just a dry gesture, but is the context and the content of mission.

We bring to the Eucharist the human realities, more so the boundary situations that stand in need of healing and transformation. In this sense, there can be no gap between the liturgy and the mission of the Church. They are two sides of the same Christian living. Both are expressions of the same faith: one in the form of celebration and the other of living it in day to day life.

Oscar Cullman, basing himself on the study of other scholars, has shown how there were two 'primitive types' of liturgy, one of St. Hippolytus and the other of ancient Egyptian liturgy. While the former emphasized the death of Christ, the latter refers to the return of the Lord and to the fellowship of the community gathered (Cullman: 5). A closer examination would show, in either case, that mission is at the core of the Eucharist in so far as the death of

Jesus Christ was the culmination of Jesus' ministry (Mk 3:6) and the return of the Lord looks forward to the eschatological fulfilment for which the community has to be prepared through the Eucharistic celebration as the anticipation of the heavenly banquet. Each Eucharist is a declaration of God's love for the world. It reminds us of the plight of the world and God's desire to transform it into God's Kingdom. Everything is given to us in the Eucharist and yet everything is not yet accomplished. This is the situation of the already and the not yet of the Eucharistic celebration. It is this not-yet dimension which is the first aspect of the mission. At the same time we also witness to others what we have experienced, inviting them to communion.

3. Eucharist contains the Missionary Message

The Eucharist is the memorial of the Christ event, of Jesus Christ who went about doing good (Act 10:38). Hence there cannot be a Eucharistic celebration without leading the participants to that same mission. In the Eucharist we celebrate God's self-giving in Jesus Christ, at the service of humankind. As "Abba" experience was at the centre of Jesus' consciousness during his ministry and manifesting God as the Abba was the focus of his mission (Jn 12: 45 & 14: 9), so also the Eucharistic experience enables the participants to live the same spirit and thus to manifest God as the Father/Mother of all and each of them as brother/sister. Thus, the Eucharist invites us to be social prophets. One who has participated in the Eucharist cannot be blind to the dehumanizing situations of the world, still worse, cannot be agents of such situations. That would be profaning the body and blood of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 11: 27). In the Indian context, the Eucharistic celebration is a condemnation of any sort of caste practice, or discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, age, profession, etc. Hence Walter Kaspar points out how gathering of the community in the Eucharist without mission becomes a sterile practice (1985:135). The community that participates in the Eucharist is transformed into Christ-like concern and compassion which makes Eastern theologians speak

of the process of *Christosis*, becoming Christ-like. That will enable the Christians to bear fruits of Christian living because the Eucharistic celebration.

The primary function of the Eucharist, as we have seen, is the calling together of the community. From it flows the mission of unity. For a world that suffers from deep divisions, the service that the Eucharistic community can render is the call to unity. The Church can enable communion to grow at every level of its own life and of society according to the model of unity that the Church celebrates in the Eucharist. This mission begins already with the life in the community that celebrates the Eucharist. The various divisions that we experience in our life, such as linguistic, regional, or based on interests, etc., must give way to the unity called by the Eucharistic celebration. If that does not happen, then in a way we too become the objects of St. Paul's reprimand to the Corinthians, who went through their Eucharist without rectifying the divisions within their Church.

This unity within the local communities that results from the Eucharistic celebration will enable those communities to bring that unity to the places of their ministry, such as parishes and places of various apostolates. This can also lead to Ecumenical and Inter-religious communion, with greater mutual respect and acceptance.

This communion can take shape also in the form of greater hope for history where no one is marginalized or exploited but all experience a sense of belonging and participation. The Eucharist as centre and synthesis of the history of salvation makes us understand the dynamic thrust of history and enables us to read the signs of the times in a critical manner. We understand God's project of the communion of all people, the project inaugurated by the Kingdom ministry of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

The Eucharist leads to a mission of liberation. The Eucharist, due to its link with the Jewish Paschal Meal that was commemorated in the last supper, is also associated with the liberation of the Israelites from the Egyptian bondage. This

liberative dimension has become somewhat obliterated by the theology of atonement. That is to say, the historical liberation of the Israelites comes to be equated with the 'redemption' that Jesus won for his people through his atoning death. Such a theology blunts our call to liberate the millions of our brothers and sisters who are condemned to eke out a dehumanizing life in poverty and exploitation. The Eucharist is a serious challenge to all such dehumanizing existence that was also the experience of the Israelites in Egypt. Hence Pope John Paul II teaches how the Eucharist is also a permanent school of charity, justice, and peace for renewing the surrounding world in Christ. From the presence of the risen one, believers draw the courage to be artisans of solidarity and renewal, committed to transforming the structures of sin in which individuals, communities, and at times entire peoples are entangled (*Dies Domini* 73).

Our Eucharistic celebration must sensitize us to every form of enslavement in our human society: based on gender, caste, age, economy, etc. These enslavements hinder people from the development of the full human potential. We are invited to expose these situations and their causes and to commit ourselves to seeking their solutions; to uphold the rights of the poor, to promote primary education, to provide material aid, to accompany people in their march towards a humanized life.

All these somehow indicate that our Eucharistic celebration must become a laboratory of change from the non-Kingdom situation to a life of the Kingdom situation. This requires a great deal of sensitivity and empathy, the ability to feel with all those who suffer discrimination, harassment, unjust suffering anywhere, including in the Church. The Eucharist is to be celebrated "inside out," i.e., with an orientation to the world. The Eucharist must bring us into contact with the world, with its hopes, agonies and aspirations.

This is also a call to free the Eucharist from a mere ritualistic celebration with an insistence on the various practices and rituals, but with little to contribute to the reality of daily life. More than

the insistence on sheer ritualistic observances we have to ask how to make our Eucharistic celebration more fruitful and relevant to the lived situation.

4. Eucharist is Mission

Eucharist as mission can be understood only in the light of the origins of the Eucharist. It has been generally understood by scholars that the Eucharist goes back not just to the last supper, but to the entire Christ event, and more so to the ministry of Jesus, with its journey and the many table-fellowships. In the Lucan Gospel there are 10 descriptions of the meals of the Lord (5:27ff; 7:36ff; 9:10ff; 10:38ff; 11:37ff; 14:1ff; 19:1ff; 24:13ff; 24:36ff.).

The meal was a time of instruction, probably following the Hellenistic practice of inviting guests to dinner when a guest of honour was at home, so that the guest of honour could engage in conversation with them. It had its precedents also in the Eastern hospitality meals. These meals were occasions for Jesus to teach, to challenge, to confront and to transform people. It was at such a meal that the Eucharist was instituted (Lk 22:15-20). Thus, the Eucharist is the memorial of the entire Christ event. Seen in this perspective, the focus of the Eucharist becomes the proclamation of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus was sent on a mission of proclaiming the Kingdom. An important expression of this mission, as we saw, was the many Table Fellowships of the Lord. It was a symbolic gesture that projected and anticipated the Kingdom, the focus of his mission. As an all inclusive communitarian celebration, the table fellowship of the Lord gives us the content of the Kingdom, the creation of a community without exclusion, where all experienced the sense of belonging. Thus, our Eucharistic celebration must become a symbolic projection of the Kingdom to which we look forward. Our Eucharistic celebration becomes an anticipation of the Experience of the Kingdom. Through his many table fellowships, Jesus showed how God was inviting all, without exception or exclusion, to communion with God and with one another. This is

the sum and substance of our Eucharistic celebration today. This presupposes a personal conversion and a social transformation, the fruits of the Eucharistic celebration. Thus, each Eucharistic celebration becomes a proclamation and projection of the Kingdom, the main content of Jesus' mission.

It is also an invitation to give rise to Christian communities where there are no communities or to accompany the communities which are not viable yet. It is the ecclesial community that celebrates the Eucharist and becomes the anticipation of the Kingdom sacramentally. Thus we discharge our mission as disciples of Jesus by sharing in his mission of witnessing to the Kingdom. We not only become instruments of giving rise to communities that serve as the sacrament of the Kingdom in every culture, but we also contribute for the Eucharistic celebration of these communities.

Eucharist leads us more so to those on the periphery, whose lives are broken with the injustice and discrimination that they have to endure. Arguably we have to reach out to all. However, we must have a preferential option for those broken lives as represented by the broken bread, the Eucharist. Such a reaching out, in fact, is the radical continuation of the Eucharistic celebration. Through this we bring healing into the lives of the people on the margins and in the process we ourselves become healed. In this way they become sources of healing for ourselves. In this sense mission becomes a matter or reverse, i.e., those to whom we are sent become missionaries for us.

4.1 Paradoxical Situations

A memorial (*anamnesis*) of Christ's ministry, death and resurrection, the Eucharist (a gift, a meal, and a lesson about love and loyalty, justice and joyousness), has become for many a famine and a scandal: a famine, in so far as it does not nourish us; a scandal in so far as it does not heal the divisions. Rather, separated celebrations accentuate the divisions. A preeminent sign of nourishment and unity for Christians and to the world, the

Eucharist is currently the focus of embarrassment, division, and dissension instead of being a beacon of light and standard-bearer of justice. Often we experience the paradoxical situation of coming to the banquet but retuning famished!

Far too frequently, the Eucharist seems to have been domesticated, where pious people gather around the nectar, hovering in their own space, charming and harmless, effortlessly sustained, but unrelated to the wider world of hunger, homelessness, injustice, hostilities and death.

For others the Eucharist is a foreign affair, controlled by foreigners, celebrated in foreign symbols, unrelated to the life and culture in which we live.

Yet for others, the Eucharist is a crossroads under fire, where a privileged, male, hierarchical Church, with its munitions, complacency, arrogance, and power, has taken the high ground. Others may be invited to the celebration, but come to it with the feelings of woundedness and anger (Gittins 1993:26-27).

The Eucharist, we said, is the visible actualization of the communion of the disciples. This communion is constitutive of the Church's mission to the world in so far as Jesus made it a precondition for mission (Jn 17:21). His disciples are united by the same faith but divided by the same Eucharist! These are some of the contradictions of our Eucharistic celebration. Unless these are addressed the Eucharist remains largely symbolic and far from being the centre and summit of Christian life. As an egg is transformed from the gelatinous to the semisolid and then to the solid state through contact with boiling water, a genuine Eucharistic celebration must enable us to go through a process of transformation.

Are we celebrating the Eucharist or attending the Mass? The latter is a passive presence, with diffidence and apathy, with minimal acknowledgement of the others gathered for the celebration. There is little anamnesis, there is little transformation. On the contrary, in a genuine celebration of the Eucharist we are one with others, with involvement and openness, exposing us to

the warmth and solidness of the signs of welcome, of peace, of sharing, of praying together.

4.2 Eucharist: Centre and Summit

The Constitution on the Liturgy (S C 10) describes the Eucharist as the centre and summit of Christian life and genuinely so as we have seen above. It is instrumental in gathering the faithful as the body of Christ to celebrate the faith and to be nourished and supported to continue the mission of Jesus Christ. At the Eucharist we hear Christ's call, "You give them something to eat" (Mk 6:37), and the disciples' helpless acknowledgement "All we have is five loaves and two fish." It reminds us of the call we have received and of the response and the resources of the response as well as the transformation implied. It is a call to our social responsibility. We must make use of whatever is available and appropriate, relying on the power of God to meet the needs of the people.

The Eucharist is the reminder of the covenant relationship that we have with God as a community and the personal relationship of each of us with God. Thus, it is basic to all other relationships. The Eucharist becomes central to the Christian community, the overriding imperative in our response as a Christian community. Hence we must discover new ways of expressing that relationship with God and with each other.

In John's Gospel, this relationship is expressed in the form of foot-washing, a preeminent symbol of service. The Eucharist challenges us to free ourselves from the various shelters that we normally have recourse to, our tendency to create a home away from home, ensuring our comfort, convenience and privacy, enabling us to retain control, insulating us against the demands of evangelization.

The Eucharist invites us to break ourselves for others, rather than to insulate ourselves against others. We wilfully embrace uncertainty in trust. We identify elements of our selfishness, ethnocentrism, prejudices and fears. We are no more afraid of

people of other ethnic communities, of other gender, of other religions, of different social classes, of different castes, and different political views. We are called to encounter them all. We are sent to them all. This is the centrifugal thrust of mission that derives from the Eucharist: Go, you are sent forth! Jesus is our exemplar. He journeyed along the borders (Lk 17:11ff). He asked the most unlikely people what they would like him to do and to meet their requests (Mk 10:46ff). He encountered a variety of sinners and outcasts (Mk 7:24ff). Jesus' entire life was directed toward engagement with people and negotiating and transcending their boundaries, also his own. We have to be committed to the call of mission, to transcend ourselves to reach out to others. More so, people on the periphery, as we said earlier.

Concluding Remarks

The sharing of the bread broken and the cup blessed was the symbol that Jesus gave the disciples to show how they were included in his own vocation. The Eucharistic table is the matrix of mission. It is there the Church and the world intersect in the presence of Jesus Christ. It is the place from which we are sent forth to love and serve the world. The Eucharist is the well-spring of mission for the world. When we move into the world in service to the poor and the needy, we do not cease to celebrate the Eucharist. For God in Jesus Christ is not only in the Church, where the Word is truly preached and the sacraments are administered. Jesus is present also where the least of his brothers and sisters are ministered to as he says in Mt 25:31-46. That is why Nicholas Berdyaev, the Russian thinker could say, "My own bread is only a materialistic question, but my neighbour's bread is a spiritual question." Philip having stayed with the Lord and having experienced the Lord goes and tells Nathaniel, "Come and see" (Jn 1:46). We who have experienced the Lord at the Eucharistic table are sent to witness to the world and to extend the same invitation as Philip did, "Come and see", come to the feast of the Eucharist. Without mission, the Eucharist becomes an empty symbol: You search me only to have your stomachs full (Jn 6:25).

On the contrary, each Eucharistic celebration reminds us that “When we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim your death and resurrection until you come in glory.”

References

Cullman Oscar,

n.d., *Essays on the Lord's Supper*, Atlanta: John Knox Press.

Gittins Anthony J.,

1993. *Bread for the Journey: The Mission of Transformation and the Transformation of Mission*, New York: Orbis Books.

Kaspar Walter

1985. “The Unity & Multiplicity Aspects in the Eucharist,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 12/2(1985)115-138.

John Paul II,

2000. “The Eucharist Spurs Christians to Mission,” *Emmanuel* October, pp: 452-453.