

## **The Eucharist makes the Church**

**Amette Ley**

*On the Spot* urges us to connect our catechesis on the Church to that of the Eucharist

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We know that providing authentic teaching on the Church and on the Eucharist is absolutely central to our catechesis. This is the case not least because of the intrinsic importance of these subjects but also because of the many misunderstandings and limited views people hold on both of these areas of the Faith. I would like to identify here some of the more common *misunderstandings and limitations* concerning the Church and the Eucharist. I also want to suggest that we catechise strongly on the two topics *together* in order to avoid falling into these difficulties. Catechesis on the Church and catechesis on the Eucharist in fact belong closely together for another, and deeper, reason - because, in the words of the Catechism, 'the Eucharist makes the Church' (CCC 1396).

### **Catechesis on the Church**

We know, of course, that poor catechesis on the nature and necessity of the Church will necessarily contribute to a weakened concept of her reality, a weakened commitment to participate in her life and a weakened love for her. Ask a young child what the Church is, and he or she will probably point to the building. Ask a slightly older child or an adult and they will often answer, 'the people', and consider they have given a more sophisticated answer.

In fact, in our everyday speech we seldom mean 'the people' when we use the term 'the Church'. We are far more likely to mean, if not the building itself, the *Bishops and Pope* who lead, teach and sanctify that body of people. And this is an important part of our catechesis on the Church which is often omitted or played down. The concept of the Church as *only* referring to a body of people continues to be the main image given to children – and very often without any strong notion of authority, service and sanctification included. This can lead to the idea that, if we are all 'Church', there is little or no difference between the service of the ordained ministry and the service of the laity.

A sound catechesis on the Church is therefore necessary to clarify her nature. The truth that the Church is the gathering of God's people needs to be supplemented with other truths about the Church: that she is also Christ's Body, something that belongs to him and cannot be separated from him. We do not go to God alone, but only united to Christ our Head. And also that she is the Temple of the Holy Spirit, uniting the members into a living whole, bringing them into a unity and enabling them to grow in holiness.

### **Catechesis on the Eucharist**

The catechesis we give on the Church is inseparable from the catechesis we give on the Eucharist. Any deficiencies in one lead to deficiencies or distortions in the other. A catechesis on the Church which presents her as only a 'collection', or loose

grouping, of people, neglecting the hierarchical nature of the Church and the ordained ministry, will lead to a deficient Eucharistic catechesis. It can even lead to suggestions for lay presidency at the Eucharist, or a lack of understanding of the distinction between the celebration of the Eucharist and the celebration of a liturgy of the Word, with or without Holy Communion, in the absence of a priest.

The Catechism, as we saw, highlights the essential point that the Eucharist ‘makes the Church’. It forms and sustains her as Christ’s Body. The necessity of a priest to act *in persona Christi*, to make the Eucharist which forms the Church and feeds the people, has been a clear understanding of the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, from the beginning.

In our catechesis on the Church, then, we need to include all the meanings of that word: the *building* where we normally meet to participate in the sacrifice of Calvary and to be formed and fed as the Body of Christ in the world; the *people* who meet there, who are the assembly called by God, at his initiative, not our own; and the *Bishops, priests and deacons* who share in a unique way in Christ’s own ministry as prophet, priest and king.

### **Catechesis on the Church as divine and human**

The Church has both a visible and a spiritual dimension. She is both in history and also transcends it. This double nature which she possesses helps us to keep in mind the dual reality of her life and its proper ordering (see CCC 770).

The dual nature of the Church is reflected in the dual orientation of our lives as Christians, relating to God and to each other. Here I want to emphasise the right relationship we need to maintain between the first and second commandments as Our Lord gave them: he told us that the first and greatest commandment was the love of God, and the second was, well, second! (Mk 12:28-31)

This priority of loving God needs to flow into our catechesis on the Church and on the Eucharist. In today’s world, it is always the divine, the vertical, the Godward direction, that needs emphasis; not only because it is the primary purpose of worship, but also because it is not so obvious or integral to modern society. This Godward direction in catechesis is not in contradiction to the human and horizontal, and the connection must always be made clearly; but the horizontal aspect is not the primary need today. We are fed a constant diet of planet-saving and social issues from the media (not all of these initiatives aligning well with the social teaching of the Church) and it can be very difficult, for young people in particular, to see the Church as anything more than a vehicle for the latest ‘green’ initiative. In this perspective, the Eucharist becomes a vague ‘peace and love’ event in which we are reconciled with each other and the planet.

I have often used a Cross to illustrate this need for a Godward direction as the primary one, and that on which the human dimension depends. The vertical part of the Cross represents our path to God, our relationship with him. The horizontal part represents our relationship with others. Clearly, neither forms a Cross alone, but the vertical piece is essential for holding up the horizontal. We cannot love our neighbour unless this love is supported by love of God. Love of God – the vertical piece – will wobble

without the horizontal which it needs for balance, but it is clearly the root and ground of the whole thing.

### **Seeing the Order by the Effects**

I have found that the section in the Catechism (CCC 1391-1401) on the fruits of receiving Holy Communion, which ‘augments our union with Christ’, can be helpful for bringing together those who have differences of opinion concerning the Church or the Eucharist, for assisting in this Godward emphasis, and for reinforcing the relationship between the Church and the Eucharist.

- The *relationship to Christ* is the primary focus in this section. If we eat the flesh of our Lord and drink his blood, we ‘abide’ in him and he in us (see John 6:56). Receiving the Lord in Holy Communion unites us more closely to him and so to the living Trinity. We are uniting ourselves to the Living God.
- As we eat to nourish our bodies, we receive Christ to nourish our souls. The aspect of the Eucharist as a meal in common is often highlighted in catechetical sessions, but the *effects of eating that food* is not always explained. The Eucharist is our food for the journey, which nourishes the life of grace we received at Baptism, and enables us to grow in that life.
- Receiving Christ in Communion *separates us from sin*, teaches the Catechism – how could it be otherwise? There is no room for sin where Christ is – he who is the fullness of Life itself. Our love for God is strengthened by receiving him in Holy Communion, and this ‘living charity wipes away venial sins.’ The Catechism makes clear that the Eucharist is not the sacrament where mortal sin is forgiven; but in strengthening our bonds with Christ, it becomes more difficult to break away from him in serious sin. The Eucharist is our *protection* against temptation and sin. Should we choose to act or live in a way which separates us from Christ, it is clear that continuing to receive him in the intimate closeness of communion is a harmful lie-in-action, and will be damaging rather than healing to both the individual and the Church. This needs to be made clear in catechesis.
- Through receiving the Eucharist *we are united more closely to Christ* our Head, as we have seen, *and also to one another* in his body; we who are many are one body in him through this participation. Here, then, the Catechism shows us how communion with our neighbour flows from our abiding in God. The Catechism urges us to realise that this union with Christ the Head needs to be lived out in two specific ways: in recognition of Christ in the poor (CCC 1397) and of recognition of Christ in every baptised member of his body, including those in separates Churches and ecclesial communities (CCC 1398-1400).

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