A eucharistic vision for a world of hunger

18. A Eucharistic Vision for a World of Hunger[1]

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Millions are hungry in the midst of a world of affluence. Is this only an economic question or an ethical and theological challenge as well? The situation in which we are living stimulates our faith in the Eucharist. In this situation, how is it possible to believe in the transformation of bread into the body of Christ and of wine into the blood of Christ? Is there any relationship between hope in the transformation of hunger amidst affluence and belief in the transformation of bread and blood?

Eucharist Is about Reality: The Crisis of Hunger amidst Affluence

The starting point of all reflection about hunger, bread, wine, and the gift of the Eucharist is to see that the existing economic system is able to accumulate wealth but unable to feed the people. Hunger and scarcity are increasing – and wealth, plenty, and affluence as well (Erber et al. 357–63). What is emerging as the worst food crisis in a generation has ignited riots and is threatening hundreds of millions with hunger. The author of an article in "Thinking it Over," a journal of the Lutheran World Federation Department for Theology and Studies, wrote in May 2008 that "In 2006 desperate cries for food have reached new fevered pitches because of the dramatically higher costs of basic foods, such as rice, wheat and corn (maize)" (Thinking 1). Enough food is being produced to feed the world's population, but it is being transformed from food for people into a commodity for speculation.

"Thinking it Over" continues:

> As the global population continues to grow in size and in the quality of their diet, there are greater pressures on the global food supply. Energy and fertilizer costs are escalating. Development in countries like China and India has brought increased demand for more and better food, especially for meat that requires more grain and water and produce. Climate change has contributed to intensified

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> droughts, floods, and other weather-related changes that dramatically affect food productivity.
>
> At the same time, a significant proportion of some crops are [*sic*] now being grown not for food but for biofuels. (Thinking 4)

Hunger is being created not by God or nature but by the false economic order of neoliberalism. In July 2009 the report of an international task force on the global food crisis stated: "The global food crisis is hitting with alarming speed and force, challenging the United States, other nations, and key international organizations to respond with a strategic and long-term approach" (Morrison and Tuttle 3). The present global agricultural production and trading system, built on subsidies and tariffs, creates grave distortions. "It structurally favors production among wealthy countries and disadvantages producers in poor developing countries" (Morrison and Tuttle 4).

Every day, one hundred thousand people die of hunger, and every seven seconds, a child under the age of ten dies of hunger. In 2006, Jean Ziegler, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, said in a widely reported speech: "Every child who dies of hunger in today's world has been murdered."[2] He also warned that even though in 2007 enough food was produced around the world to feed 12 billion people, 854 million people went without.

Christophe Boureux, Janet Martin Soskice, and Luiz Carlos Susin have linked human hunger to the Eucharist in their Introduction to the 2005 *Concilium* issue on "Hunger, Bread and Eucharist":

> Too much hunger, too many mouths and not enough bread: this situation reveals the menacing nearness of death. . . . This opens the space for the Eucharist as a celebration of hunger, desire, and the Bread given by God, but only if Eucharist itself is involved in the struggle for justice. All that means that in our world, the same world as that of Jesus but one in which bread does not multiply but hunger in fact does, the Eucharist and justice are joined together. (Boureux et al.)

What does it mean to believe in the transformation of bread and wine into the body of Christ in the face of hunger? Do we believe that the world can

[2] See, e.g., "World Food Day 2008: Vegetarianism Against Global Hunger," *Vegetarian and Animal News*, 16 Oct. 2008, evana.org/index.php?id=38147&lang=en, acc. 8 Dec. 2009.

be transformed from a world of hunger and scarcity into a world of fullness and sharing, as we believe that the bread and the wine is changed into the body of Christ? (Cf. Ruster).

Eucharist Is about Transformation of the World: Eucharist as a Contact Point of Liturgy, Ecclesiology, and Ethics

The Eucharist is faced with the food crisis. Bread is the fundamental element for celebrating Eucharist. The food crisis is our starting point when we reflect on the Eucharist. In this world of hunger, bread is not only food. The economic crisis and the disastrous economic system that is able to produce more than is needed but is unable to feed the people in the midst of abundance affect the Eucharist. Food for the Eucharist is not a non-theological factor. Bread and wine are staple foods. Bread and wine, daily food and drink, are essential for the Eucharist. In a world of hunger, eating and drinking are more than themselves. We need bread and wine for living and worship. The food crisis is a eucharistic problem.

Eucharist is about the resources of the earth and basic human needs. As Boureux, Soskice, and Susin write,

> Bread, the biblical "food," is at the same [time] the most material, most bodily and most spiritual thing in Christian spirituality. The Eucharist, the mystery of faith, is bread. For this reason the sacrament is also a sign of our social nature, of the search for and the giving of bread . . . and sign of the most primordial forms of justice and of gift. (Boureaux et al.)

Hunger is not only an economic or social challenge. The economic and social challenges of hunger are simultaneously theological challenges for the church. The crisis of hunger, the lack of nourishment, and the lack of bread concern the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the response to this impact. At the 1983 World Council of Churches Assembly in Vancouver, the Faith and Order Commission declared that a eucharistic vision was key not only to the unity of the church but also to an integrated view of social and theological challenges:

> Christ – the life of the world – unites heaven and earth, God and world, spiritual and secular. His body and blood, given us in the elements of bread and wine, integrate liturgy and diaconate, proclamation and acts of healing. Our *eucharistic vision thus encompasses the whole reality of Christian worship, life and witness,* and tends – when truly discovered – to shed new light on Christian unity in its full richness of diversity. (Staying Together, emphasis original)

The Eucharist allows us to see the relationship between the challenge of hunger and scarcity in the world of the Eucharist (Poulton 16ff). As Monika Hellwig writes, "Before we can begin to understand the symbolism of the Eucharist or try to fathom the message it conveys, we need to remember hunger" (Hellwig 12). The sharing of bread and the struggle for justice are not merely moral and ethical obligations of the church but rather its constitutive elements. That means not only that churches have an ethic but also that ethical engagement is intrinsic to the very being of church. The church does not merely have ethics; church is itself the sharing and breaking of bread. The eucharistic vision explains the relationship between the Eucharist and ethical behavior (Segbers, Plädoyer 295–96). The eucharistic vision holds together worship and action as a bridge between the liturgy of worship and the liturgy of daily life. Sharing of bread is an expression of the "*koinonia* of the Church." In this spirit we have to ask who suffers and who benefits from hunger. In what way does the transformation of the world begin in the Eucharist?

Eucharistic vision is a theological key to generate imperatives concerning our proper ecclesial response to the dire effects of neoliberal globalization on hunger in the midst of affluence (cf. Käßmann). The crisis of food leads us to the heart of faith in the Eucharist. The catholic faith in the transformation of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood creates the ability to transform the world. The eucharistic rites have a great deal to say about the proper Christian response to the terror of world hunger that we face today. Hellwig writes: "Jesus is the bread of life for the world in a community sense" (Hellwig 36). The cry for food is a cry for another world. Another world is necessary. The transformation of bread and wine is a challenge to transform a world that is characterized by the neoliberal slogan popularized by Margaret Thatcher, "there is no alternative." A different world is possible.

Eucharist Is about Global and Catholic Realities: Church as *koinonia*

When we share the eucharistic bread, we share with others and share their lives. Paul asked the Corinthians, "Is the bread that we break not a sharing in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor 10:16). Speaking of the Eucharist as a body has dramatic effects. All belong together. Nobody can say, "I have no need of you" (1 Cor 12:21). The result is that "if one part suffers, all suffer together with it" (1 Cor 12:26). If one is hungry all suffer. That is why

we have to ask, "Why are they hungry? What should we do about it?" In the early church the Corinthians were deeply divided over the question of what it meant to be Christian in a society divided between poor and rich, a division that arose while they were seeking the right way to celebrate the Eucharist.

The problem was that the wealthy brought along special food, which they selfishly reserved for themselves, thereby creating distinctions that shamed the poorer brothers and sisters. In commenting on this situation Paul contrasts the Lord's Supper with an ordinary meal, explaining the Corinthians' behavior as a failure to discern Christ's body (1 Cor 11:29), which is constituted by common participation in the Lord's Supper. The behavior of the affluent Corinthians in hoarding as their own what should have been offered to the Lord and therefore to others threatened the very existence of Christ's body (cf. Compier 269–70). Unless bread is distributed in a just way within the *ecclesia*, the body of Christ is destroyed. The sharing of bread, especially among the needy, is essential for the celebration of Eucharist. The *ecclesia*, the church, was founded to do precisely this: to be an assembly of those who were previously separated. The eucharist is a paradigm for social ethics.

Mattijs Ploeger has identified the inherent connection between the Eucharist and the church's social responsibility: "Anglo-Catholic Socialists who said that Holy Communion makes us 'Holy Communists' may have been exaggerating – and most of them were not communists in the technical sense – but rightly pointed in a direction of communion and communal responsibility as the natural continuation of the eucharist in daily life" (Ploeger 535). This principle of sharing as a fundamental act of the Lord's Body is surely applicable not only to a single congregation but to the church universal. The use of the introductory formula brings to mind Paul's version of the Last Supper (1 Cor 11:23–25). Paul quoted the received account of Jesus' institution of the Eucharist in order to instruct a congregation in which some were getting drunk while others were going hungry. Sharing food and drink with each other, especially among those who are well-to-do and those who have nothing, is essential to the celebration of the Christian eucharistic meal (cf. Segbers 97–103). As Brian Wren notes in "Justice and Liberation in the Eucharist," "Though bread and wine are shared equally, this is not the equality of strict parity. . . . None should go hungry or have too much to drink (1 Cor 11:21)" (Wren 841). For Paul the meal was linked to ethical behavior. No one will be hungry in the midst of wealth. Therefore Paul asks the question "Or do you despise

the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?" (1 Cor 11:22). Supper or Eucharist and ethics belong together.

The central symbol of the *ecclesia*, the church as the Body of Christ, is not a holy place and not ritualized worship, but the breaking and sharing of bread in justice and love. The community assembled around the table transcends the gap between poor and rich. "Unless food is equally distributed among all members of Christ's body, the celebration of the Eucharist becomes a profanation" (Compier 269). Eucharist makes us aware of the connection between the economy and the plight of millions. As "Thinking it Over" explains: "Food is intimately connected with the life of faith – through prayer ('Give us this day our daily bread'), through diaconal sharing of food (Acts 6:1–6) and in worship (sharing the bread/body of Christ in Holy Communion)" (Thinking 1).

Eucharist – thanksgiving – starts with the precondition that there is something to drink and to eat. This precondition is central to the Eucharist but is also a message for the world. To join the Eucharist means a commitment to struggle for bread for all. Hungry people are our observers when we share bread and wine. Hunger and the lack of food are a challenge for the churches celebrating Eucharist. For the spirit of Eucharist, denominational differences are not the central problem; rather, the problem is the difference between those who are hungry in the midst of affluence and those who are living in affluence. As Nikolaj Berdyaev has said, "Bread for others is always a spiritual question" (cited by Hellwig 52). "Thinking it Over" makes the same point in another way: "The Eucharist models an economy of sharing, rather than of greed; a way of living so that all can eat" (Thinking 1). God's purpose of abundant food for all is contrasted with both Rome's false claims and our own neoliberal global false claims of having provided for all.

Sharing is rooted in the Eucharist, and Eucharist is a practice of sharing. Eucharist is an expression of unity: worldly divisions are no longer perpetuated. The church is called to be the church as a sign of the final unity of all humankind, promised and initiated in the person of Jesus Christ. Ecclesiological problems cannot be studied in isolation from the context of the social progress and conflicts of the contemporary world. Becoming one world happens in each Eucharist. Christian unity cannot be separated from the unity of humankind. Unity in Christ is a unity of all, and this unity of all demands decisions – political, economic, and social.

The church is what it is visibly and tangibly in one context: Eucharist. Eucharist is the high point and ultimate expression of catholicity. The

essence of catholicity is to heal and to overcome each division between people. *Koinonia* and the Eucharist are dramatic reminders of the essential oneness of the church. John Zizioulas has explained the significance of the Eucharist for our fragmented world: "It is in the nature of the Eucharist to transcend not only divisions occurring within a local situation but also the very division which is inherent in the concept of geography: the division of the world into local places" (Zizioulas 58). The root meaning of *koinonia* is 'that which is held in common'. The fellowship of the communion of Christ is premised on a common faith, a common commitment, and a common task in the world. Christians share and participate in the same reality; they are one. The recognition of the common commitment to one Lord highlights the meaning of the Eucharist. Only a church with Eucharist is strengthened by word and sacraments and able to struggle against the divisions between people. The Eucharist is an expression of global and catholic *koinonia*.

What happens to one happens to all, because all belong to the one body. Indeed all are one body. What happens to some happens to all because all are the single body of Christ. As a sacrament of catholicity, the Eucharist is a sacrament of unity in life and life in unity. The unity of the church and the struggle for life are connected in the Eucharist.

The notion of conciliarity has to do not only with being together in the search for truth but also with simply being together. Conciliarity is thus the process of the common responsibility of all Christians in their own cultures and societies for being true witnesses to the love of God as manifested in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It is then a small step to the autonomy of the local church. The local church cannot on its own decide about the truth, but, together with all other local churches, it is responsible for translating the truth of the gospel into its own cultural context.

The unity of the church is an anticipation of the unity of humankind. For the church catholic, which lives in the midst of empire, unity in diversity is a visible sign of God's intention for the world. Catholicity deals with transformative communities, transformed by the freeing of minds from the dominating imperial mindset. Empire and imperialism are the attempt to impose a single way of life on a plural world. Universalism must be balanced with a new respect for the local and the particular. Catholicity balances the universal with the local, so achieving both unity and diversity. To be church in an alternative life and conduct is the central identifying sign of catholicity as the church moves beyond its borders. By

moving outside its own margins, the church can proclaim the message of God: *shalom* for the hungry and peace for all. The adaptation of Christianity to different cultures around the world has been one of the faith's great achievements: we must continue such work in today's world. The former Archbishop of Utrecht, Dr. Andreas Rinkel, has therefore said that "the celebration of the Eucharist itself is already a monument of unity" (Rinkel 3.245; cit. Ploeger 187). The concept of eucharistic vision affirms the dignity of difference within the universal.

Communion or conciliarity is the alternative program of catholicity in the midst of today's empire. The vision is universal but the setting local. Each church in each culture contributes a gift to the totality of catholicity. The Eucharist establishes a communion that is in conflict with the economic, social, and political divisions of the world as it was in ancient Corinth. Eucharist is a path to understanding and a place to celebrate the church's mission to the world, a mission that involves a liberating struggle against the powers of disintegration. This understanding of the liturgy celebrates the relationship between injustice in the world and the justice proclaimed by the church.

Eucharist Is the Remembrance of God's History of Salvation: The Last Supper, Remembrance of the Exodus

God delivered his people from bondage in Egypt. The seder is the remembrance of Israel's history, as God called the people out of the house of slavery. During their wandering through the wilderness they fell into a deep fear of starvation in the desert and complained of their hunger to Moses and Aaron. The Lord responded by sending bread – manna – from heaven.

God's alternative has two characteristics:

First, he instructed each family to collect no more than they needed. There was enough for everyone. They were each day to gather only the portion necessary for the members of each household and to have nothing left over (Ex 16:4–5).

God combined this right to food with a second instruction not to accumulate or to hoard. And the people obeyed: "The Israelites did as they were told: some gathered much, some little. And when they measured it by the omer, he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little. They gathered as much as each of them needed" (Ex 16:17–18). God fed his people. He provided against hunger and scarcity.

The Passover meal, which Jesus celebrated at the Last Supper, was a real meal in remembrance of the Exodus and God's providential care. The hope of feeding the hungry is part of the messianic hope that is connected with the Passover night and the Passover meal at the time of Jesus. The Passover liturgy starts with the order that all who are hungry shall come and celebrate Passover: "Whoever is hungry, let him come and eat; whoever is in need, let him come and conduct the Seder of Pesach. This year [we are] here; next year in the land of Israel. This year [we are] slaves; next year [we will be] free people."[3] Jewish theologians confirm that the Last Supper was a seder, a Passover meal. Jakob J. Petuchowski notices "from a *formgeschichtliche* point of view there remains the very strong likelihood that, at any rate, the writers of the Synoptic Gospels saw the origin of this institution in the *seder* service of the Jewish Passover" (Petuchowski 293). *Remember* is a central term in the Bible. God remembers each person (Ps 8:5), God remembers his covenant (Gen 9:15), and the Israelites remember God and what he has done (Ps 42:7). In a biblical context, *remember* means not only to recall the past but also to recognize God's presence.

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, one of the essential ecumenical documents of the last century, explains it this way:

> Christians see the eucharist prefigured in the Passover memorial of Israel's deliverance from the land of bondage and in the meal of the Covenant on Mount Sinai (Ex. 24). It is the new paschal meal of the Church, the meal of the New Covenant, which Christ gave to his disciples as the *anamnesis* of his death and resurrection, as the anticipation of the Supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9). Christ commanded his disciples thus to remember and encounter him in this sacramental meal, as the continuing people of God, until his return. The last meal celebrated by Jesus was a liturgical meal employing symbolic words and actions. Consequently the eucharist is a sacramental meal which by visible signs communicates to us God's love in Jesus Christ, the love by which Jesus loved his own "to the end" (John 13:1). (BEM 8)

What God Has Done in the Past is Relevant for the Present

Wren has brilliantly articulated the meaning of the Eucharist in that context and in ours:

[3] Text of the Passover, SichosInEnglish.org/cgi-bin/calendar?holiday=pesach11101, acc. 14 Jan. 2009; insertions original.

> Jesus chose to share bread and wine in the context of that foundational memory. There is more to be said about the Eucharist than a longing for political and economic liberation, but never less.
>
> In the Eucharist, we follow Passover precedents by telling the story of God's liberating acts. . . .
>
> Jesus took bread and a cup on the night when he would be betrayed. . . .
>
> He was betrayed to his people's religious-political authorities and to a colonial power ruling an occupied country. His impact on those authorities was the reason for his betrayal. His entry into Jerusalem was a public challenge, and his cleansing of the temple was an attack on the ruling families' economic power. . . .
>
> Though not reducible to a political program, the announcement of the impending Kingdom of God challenges and criticizes the structures of society. To celebrate the Eucharist is to remember *to whom* Jesus was betrayed, why he was betrayed and executed, and why following him will bring us into conflict with today's corrupted political, economic and, yes, religious powers and authorities. . . .
>
> First he took bread: "This is my flesh" . . . , he said, meaning his whole person, and then he announced that he would be handed over. . . . Next he took the wine cup. In Hebrew thought a person's life is in their [*sic*] blood. So Jesus said that his life-blood would be shed. His disciples are to remember this handing-over and execution with the full sense of remembering that is brought to the Passover liberation. . . .
>
> To confront death is to witness to and collaborate with the love that raised Jesus Christ from the dead. A four-dimensional Eucharist is celebrated when the eucharistic community critiques abuses of political power, resists the powers of death in our world, and stands by the oppressed in their struggles for liberation. (Wren 839–40)

As Wren makes clear, the Eucharist is rooted in the Lord's Last Supper, and the Last Supper was a seder in remembrance of the Exodus (Haarmann 268ff). The Salvadorian theologian Ignacio Ellacuría wrote of the necessity for properly contextualizing our liturgical texts: "in themselves they are perfectly suited to our situation of institutionalized violence. We need only read them in a truly vital way, relating them directly to our own context" (Ellacuría 242). Wren explains today's failure to celebrate the Eucharist rightly:

> the problem is that the actual practice of the Eucharist has become so ritualized, privatized and abstracted from its historical basis and communal beginnings. . . .
>
> We get the words right, and take, bless, break, and share, don't we? So all must be well. Or is it? "Do this in remembrance of me." What is the "this" we are asked to do? (Wren 839)

In answer to Wren's question, *this* means to respond to and enact Jesus' life and message. Our mission is the *missio Dei*, to transform life and to struggle for the needs of all human beings, especially those who are suffering, oppressed, and marginalized. In doing so, we do what Jesus said to do.

The Eucharist is situated in the tradition of the Passover meal and recalls what Johannes Baptist Metz has referred to as the "gefährliche Erinnerung" ('dangerous memory') of the liberating God (Metz, Gefährliche Erinnerung 77ff). As Wren explains, this meal links those participating with the wider community of all who labored to produce the food and even beyond, with all creation and its life-giving power:

> It is significant that Christ used food produced by human labor, not berries plucked from trees. Someone has sown, reaped, milled, kneaded, baked and marketed the bread that the Lord blesses. . . .
>
> Similarly, someone has pruned, plucked, pressed, racked, refined, bottled, labeled, advertised, transported, promoted and sold the fruit of the vine. Wine is a symbol of joy and celebration – intended for all. (Wren 840–41)

In the Eucharist of the risen Lord, we offer a symbol of all basic food produced in our society, and by bringing the food we confess that our systems of production do not distribute food equally. But Christ takes the food from us, changes it by his spirit, and ensures that all are fed. That is why Wren questions the wages that people such as the baker and the vinedresser receive and places that question in the context of the Eucharist:

> To ask these questions is not to politicize the Eucharist but to face its intrinsic meanings. The eucharistic celebration is not the occasion to study and debate the causes of poverty and the mechanisms of unequal distribution. But a church that sees the implications of the Eucharist will . . . meditate – at the Eucharist – on how food is produced and sold. Before bringing bread and wine to the table, it will confess the scandal of starvation amid plenty. (Wren 841)

The Eucharist is the celebration of God's will against grain hoarded while people starve, against every act that takes land and food from the poor. It is a witness to the hope and vision of a society where there is enough for all. That is why the Eucharist is not separated from reflecting, understanding, and struggling for economic justice. That is part of the eucharistic memorial.

Since the earliest account, every Eucharist has been a remembrance of the twofold offering.[4] Bread and wine are brought for the eucharistic sharing and for sharing with the poor, "the orphans and widows," and all who are in need. The gifts to God and to the poor are the twofold offering.

[4] For what follows see Compier 270ff.

The practice of bringing bread and wine both for liturgy and for the needy is an expression of catholicity, for as Wren declares, equality is essential to the eucharistic celebration:

> *In the Eucharist, all receive equally. . . .*
>
> There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, master nor servant, employer nor employee. . . .
>
> The Eucharist is an unambiguous reminder that the church is called to build itself on relationships of love and mutuality, not power and domination – not for its own self-satisfaction, but as a political witness, as a harbinger of the Kingdom of God. (Wren 841)

The Lord's Prayer is recited in every Eucharist, Don H. Compier writes: "We are requesting that God grant us physical bread; there is no reason to believe that the Greek word *artos* should be used in a metaphorical or 'spiritual' sense. Nutrition is part of God's providential care and thus a constitutive aspect of salvation and spiritual wholeness" (Compier 272). God is not indifferent to the needy. Neither can the church be indifferent. The faith of transformation in the Eucharist depends, as Wren explains, on the expectation of the transformation of social circumstances in the sense of the Kingdom of God:

> The Eucharist looks forward to a society in God, a city for all the nations, in which the last are first, the humble lifted high, and the powerful repentant, as grace and peace forgive and unite all humanity.
>
> If this is our hope, the supper should be celebrated not as an anaesthetic against the world's injustices but as a shout of joyful defiance and rebellion – a provocation and inspiration to make that rebellion real in love and a song of reinvigorating hope that the future can break through into the present. (Wren 841–42)

Eucharist is sharing and the hope of a just world for all. The celebration of the Eucharist is therefore an expression of hope in the coming rule of God through Christ.

The banquet imagery is not merely symbolic, for all are fed and none goes hungry anymore. At the same time, as Compier writes, the banquet is fundamentally a spiritual one: "We expect a banquet, and get a dry wafer and a sip of wine. We anticipate sitting at a table with our Lord, and instead must kneel and feel the Spirit bringing Him inward remembrance" (Compier 277). As nourishment for the journey towards God's kingdom and as a sign of the food of the future age, the Lord's Supper offers grounds for expectation even when the problems of hunger seem insurmountable.

The Eucharist nurtures our confidence in God and our commitment in the struggle for justice by feeding the hungry, and it trusts in God, who hears the cries of the starving. Thus celebrating is anticipating justice in the midst of our unjust present order with the vision of feeding all hungry people. Fully granted strength for today, we remember the admonition to pray, and we cry out, "Thy kingdom come."

Christ's presence in the Eucharist is the presence of the one who is to come. Christ is not only above but also ahead of us, opening new possibilities of transforming the world. The Eucharist as the breaking of bread also functions as a sign of the world to come, where there is enough for all.

The Eucharist Is about Hope for the Entire World

What is the reality to which we hope the Eucharist will point? What precisely is the sacrament? How is Christ realized as a mediator of justice for the world in the Eucharist?

The Eucharist is a paradigm for social ethics. The Eucharist has a great deal to say about the Christian response to the terror of hunger we face today. Thus we can change and transform the world through the Eucharist because we are called to do this in memory of Jesus Christ. Whenever the Eucharist is celebrated without regard for its transformative power, its integrity and potential are denied. Celebrating Eucharist, the church prefigures a new humanity that breaks and shares its bread. The Eucharist is the celebration of hope for the transformation of the world. Therefore we should not emphasize the centrality of a change in the elements but rather a change of the people into a new humanity with new solidarity. This is a concrete hope for the world and for all hungry people. The celebration encourages us to struggle outside the eucharistic assembly, with those who suffer and hunger, to realize what the assembly itself is practising. In so doing the church fulfils its mission of enhancing justice, peace, and joy – signs of the Kingdom of God.

Orthodox theology teaches the notion of "liturgy after liturgy" (Tsompanidis 169). Celebrating Eucharist generates a community that is moving toward justice and peace. Eucharist is not simply ritualized worship, not merely a liturgy that takes place within the church. The theological connection between the real meal for the hungry and the Last Supper would be lost if that were the case. Rediscovering this fact is the starting point for a new relationship among liturgy, Eucharist, and the struggle for social justice.

Sharing bread and wine is not only a possibility, not only a desire, not only a hope of the poor and hungry – it is a concrete practice in each Eucharist, as Compier explains:

> By hinting at the full Biblical history of salvation, the liturgical text reminds us that the proper celebration of the eucharist absolutely requires equal sharing among all members of the body; that the consecration of offerings for the poor represents the indispensable transition from hearing of the Word to our response of praise and thanksgiving; that our prayers for the poor are in vain and even blasphemous unless we assist in the answering of our petition by extending all the help required by the needy; and above all, that participation in the eucharist is a catalyst for a personal encounter with our Lord, who reminds us forcefully of his merciful deeds and uncompromisingly demands that we ally ourselves with His cause, thus anticipating, in the midst of our unjust present order, the joyous eschatological feeding of all hungry people. (Compier 278)

In the Eucharist is the beginning of a new world. David Daube writes: "Nowhere but in Judaism – and Christianity – did divine salvation involve such emphasis on the establishment of social justice and (this is the point) lead to such an insistent appeal to man to assist, anticipate and emulate God by doing justice here and now" (Daube 272). God comes into the history of human beings with bread and a message: share this bread, break this bread. Do this in remembrance of me.

The hungry cannot wait. The feast of sharing is here and now when the church is celebrating Eucharist. The transformation of the world and the transformation of bread into the Body of Christ mean this: real food and real drink for the hungry and thirsty. When Christians celebrate Eucharist, they live out the challenges and responsibilities of Eucharist in liturgy and after liturgy.

The eucharistic vision is the centerpiece of the anticipation of the Kingdom of God, expressing the unity of the local church and the global church catholic on one hand and transcending the gap between the hungry and wealthy on the other. Eucharist is an indwelling spirit, and a great school of peace, forming men and women who at various levels of responsibility in social, cultural, and political life can become promoters of dialogue and communion. Celebrating Eucharist means by the Spirit of God to become promoters of peace and solidarity. The great challenge today is to convert the holy bread into real bread and to convert the liturgical peace into social justice and peace.

The Eucharist calls us to become what we celebrate. Eucharist is participation in the bread and wine, and this is participation in the Risen

Christ – not only as a devotional practice but precisely in the Christ present in the poor, hungry, and naked: "When you do this to one of the least of these, you do it to me" (Matt 25:40). Where there is bread, there is God. Jesus is the living bread for the hungry, and the church is his disciple. As Peter Maher has written:

> Eucharist inspires cooperation; calls people to action; organises rallies; letter writing; sit-ins; poetry readings; book clubs; soup kitchens and theological reflection that leads to action – all in favour of communion with the poor. . . . This is the real presence of the Eucharistic Christ – the literal presence of the poor in our midst – not tolerated but welcomed; not the object of our charity but the subject and reality of our dream to live in Christ's presence.[5]

The wealthy must give back to the poor what belongs to them. It is risky to celebrate Eucharist, but that is the cost of being catholic.

[5] Peter Maher, *Parramatta Diocese Year of the Eucharist* 4, June 2005, acmica.org/pub_maher-eucharist.html, acc. 8 Dec. 2009.