Eucharist: A Sign and Means of Unity?

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The Eucharist, as stated by *Unitatis redintegratio* the Second Vatican Council’s decree on ecumenism, is supposed to be a sign of unity and a means of grace. However, it often serves as a sign of disunity among Christian churches. This paper provides an understanding of the current unity that already exists among churches, and also an understanding of the final unity we seek. This final unity values and requires diversity among churches. This unity provides for a full extending of eucharistic hospitality.

The Eucharist, as stated by *Unitatis redintegratio* the Second Vatican Council’s decree on ecumenism, is supposed to be a sign of unity and a means of grace. Our worship (*lex orandi*) has instead turned it into a sign of disunity, division. More than just a sign of disunity, Eucharist has turned into a means of disunity. This is because we misunderstand that unity of which we speak and seek. If we correctly understand the degree of unity that already exists and the ultimate unity we seek, if we have right belief (*lex credendi*), then we will see the results in our worship. Then we will ultimately see the results in the way we live (*lex vivendi*), our way of be-
being with each other outside the church building.⁴

The call to unity isn’t about bringing together something that is divided, or at least not divided in the way we think, it is first about unity as a verb, a way of acting towards each other that acknowledges the degree of unity that currently exists. We have a common faith in one God, one Lord Jesus Christ, and we share a common concern for and a desire to eliminate the suffering of the poor and marginalized. Just to name a couple areas where we are united. There may be diversity, various denominations and affiliations, but it is diversity within unity. Those denominational walls of division do not reach to heaven and do not touch eternity.⁵

“The Church isn’t divided, we have just stopped talking to each other.”⁶ I am not saying that we have reached the “fullness of the church;” we are still working towards the fullness of the unity that Jesus prayed for (John 17:20-21). Secondly, the fullness of unity, of which the Eucharist is a sign, should be understood as a unity as a noun. It is a noun in the sense that there is a final telos that we are working towards, a unity in Christ, in the Triune God. A telos where the dialogue between traditions is open and free. A telos where we recognize, value, and help to preserve the richness of each other’s tradition. Unity should first be understood as a verb in the sense that our eucharistic celebrations are suppose to be a way of working towards that telos, the telos or noun of unity which is our final unity in Christ. A correct expression of eucharistic hospitality⁷ is needed to recognize the current unity that exists in the churches of Christ and to move us all to the greater unity to which Christ calls us.

With a richer understanding of the final telos of unity that we are working towards, and an understanding that on both
an *ad intra* and *ad extra* basis the visible Catholic church is still growing in maturity towards that final telos of unity, one can see how the official teachings of the Catholic church allow for, in fact call for, a greater eucharistic hospitality than we currently practice. Eucharist hospitality is a way of acknowledging the degree of existing unity (verb) and the way of working towards a greater unity (noun). Then this belief (*lex credendi*) will shape our eucharistic celebrations (*lex orandi*), so that they can lead us to the fullness of unity and the greatest of all ways of being in relation to each other - the virtue of Charity (*lex vivendi*). I will conclude this paper with some pastoral applications/recommendations to help our praxis shape the way we live in the world.

*Unitatis redintegratio*, the Second Vatican Council’s decree on ecumenism, teaches that unity among all Christians is a principal concern of the Council, and that ecumenical gatherings are desirable, nevertheless “worship in common [*communicatio in sacris*] is not to be considered as a means to be used indiscriminately [*indiscretim*] for the restoration of unity among Christians.” George Tavard, who helped to write the decree on ecumenism, wrote that, “*Indiscretim* does not mean the *communicatio in sacris* may be practiced, not indiscriminately but discriminately or with discretion; it means that the two aspects of communion (means of grace, and expression of unity) cannot be separated.”

To start with there must be a unity to which the common worship is bearing witness, and the worship should also be a means of sharing in grace. The Council goes on to warn that, “The expression of unity generally forbids common worship.” There must be an already present unity and a sharing in grace before we can have common worship.
The Eucharist as a means of grace is not a point that I will debate in this paper, except to say that facts such as the disposition of the recipient is a consideration and ultimately, grace is a gift from God.

Putting aside the issue of grace, the Council further clarifies the unity they are referring to; the Council speaks of a “unity with God and of the unity of all humanity.” The unity that we are working towards, is a common partaking in the life of God by all believers as individuals and as part of a community, a partaking in the trinitarian life of God. This unity has an eschatological element to it; this unity, this full participating in the Triune God, only takes place with the full arrival of the Kingdom. We are living in the world of the already but not yet. As such any celebration of unity in this world is only a celebration of partial unity, an incomplete work-in-progress. On this side of the eschaton, in the already part of the Kingdom, Christians have baptism as a sign and means of that unity with God. All the baptized have eucharistic celebrations as a visible sign of that partial unity. These celebrations can also be a means to move us toward that final unity, the not yet part of the Kingdom.

The Second Vatican Council teaches this understanding of the eucharistic celebration as a call to, an invitation, to continue to work towards unity. The Council reinvigorates this call towards unity with Sacrosanctum concilium, the constitution on the sacred liturgy. It called for a reform of the church’s prayer “to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ.” This should not be seen as an effort to take the church in a new direction, not as much an aggiornamento, (making new), but should be understood as a ressourcement, (return to the sources).
Looking to the sources, the tradition, specifically the anaphoras of the early church, one can see that from the beginning the “primary purposes of the Eucharist” was a “call to unity.” The Didache, from the first century, prays that the “Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into [God’s] kingdom.” The Apostolic Tradition, an early third century anaphora, in the epiclesis asks God to “send [the] Holy Spirit upon the offering of [God’s] holy Church,” that we the church may be gathered into one. This call for unity was lost sometime in the fourth century and is absent from fourth and fifth century anaphoras such as the liturgies of Addai and Mari and of St. Mark. This shift probably happened around the time that eucharistic celebrations went from being associated with the Gospel feeding miracles to being associated with the Last Supper. We were no longer gathering the masses from the hillside, we were celebrating those already at the table.

In application in a very visible way, the call for unity was revised in the reform of the eucharistic prayers after the Second Vatican Council. Other than Eucharistic Prayer I, a translation of the Roman Canon, the other revised prayers now specifically have a prayer for unity. Eucharistic Prayer IV for example prays that salvation be brought to “the whole world” and that we may be “gathered into one body by the Holy Spirit.” These eucharistic prayers bear witness that the Catholic church is a unity-in-process (unity as verb) and that we are working towards a final unity in the body of Christ (unity as noun). Note that it is unity in Christ, the Church is in Christ, Christ is not entirely contained in the Church - Christ has a church, not the church has a Christ. The Second Vatican Council teaches very deliberately that
the church of Christ “subsists in the Catholic Church,” instead of saying that the church of Christ is the Catholic Church."²³

Eucharistic prayers aside, one does not have to take too critical a look at the Catholic Church to see that we are a unity-in-process. Within the church (ad intra) there are differences in theological emphases and interpretations, not to mention differences along social, ethnic, and geographic lines. If we had to wait for full unity before we could worship together, we might never get together. As such the preexisting unity required by Unitatis redintegratio before we can worship together must be a unity-in-process. If we accept that understanding of unity, is not this type of unity present when individuals come together for an ecumenical service? If an individual of a different faith tradition approaches the altar, shouldn’t we extend eucharistic hospitality to them? Isn’t their approach and our response with eucharistic hospitality a sign of unity, a visible embodiment of a unity-in-process?

More than just missing the point that we are in process, I also think we have a misconception of what unity will look like on this side of the eschaton. We tend to mistake a call to unity for a call to uniformity. Unity does not mean uniformity. The unity described above is a way of being in relationship towards each other (the verb of unity) that does not seek to conform the other to our way. What is needed is a reciprocal way of being in relationship towards each other in which diversity is a necessary and a beneficial characteristic to foster mutual sharing and enrichment. No one tradition can exhaust, or completely encapsulate all aspects of the Triune God. The great diversity we have in our worship and
praise helps us get closer to acknowledging and prais-
ing the omnipotent and total transcendent God.

The diversity in “liturgical rites and even in the theo-
logical elaboration of revealed truth” gives us an “ever
richer expression to the authentic catholicity and apostolic-
ity of the church.”24 It can bring “a more perfect realization
of the very mystery of Christ and the church.”25 “Aposto-
licity,” being able to trace the lineage of the church back
to an apostle, is a key point in this statement. Jesus chose
the Twelve, twelve unique individuals, and “together they
found their unity in Jesus himself.”26 The full twelve was
needed to maintain that richness. The original twelve, or
at least the original eleven, thought that maintaining diver-
sity was important enough that when Judas Iscariot forfeited
his role as an apostle, by turning over Jesus and forfeiting
his life, another was chosen to fill his place (Acts 1:21-22).

This understanding of the Twelve needs to be recov-
ered as we consider that diversity in unity that we are called
to by Christ.27 The Catholic church is the representative of
Peter, the Byzantine church of Andrew, the Armenians tradi-
tionally align with both Jude Thaddeus and Bartholomew, the
Coptic church is representative of Mark, the Malabar church
of Thomas, and I would suggest that the emphasis on a Spirit
lead church aligns the Protestant denominations with the Be-
loved Disciple and the early Johannine community.28 Jesus
calls the Twelve and us, in our diversity and intact unique
traditions, to find our unity in him. Once again, as taught by
the Second Vatican Council, the church of Christ “subsists
in the Catholic Church,” and many elements of sanctifica-
tion and of truth are found outside [the] visible confines” of
the Catholic Church.29 “These gifts belonging to the church
of Christ, they are forces impelling towards catholic unity.”

For the “catholic unity” that is the Church of Christ, we need to preserve and honor our unique ways of celebrating the meal of unity. Therefore, the eucharistic hospitality that I am calling for is one that warmly welcomes those that come to table, but on an occasional and individual basis in a way that still acknowledges and values the differences that exist. As Saint John Paul II noted in *Ut unum sint*, abuse of eucharistic hospitality would not be an authentic sign or an authentic understanding of unity. We are called to hospitality in a way that both promotes unity and at the same time does not devalue the important of belonging to a particular church and community. I will discuss the importance of community in building unity when I discuss pastoral applications below. For right now, I will say that we fall short when we do not welcome individuals to our table at all and when it is done in a way that does not promote a dialogue that fosters mutual sharing and building up of the church. It needs to be done in a way that honors the unique articulation of revealed truths and the workings of the Holy Spirit that each has to offer.

The entire eucharistic celebration provides a reminder of our call to unity in Christ and a means of grace to strengthen us in the praxis of unity. Not just the altar, but the table of the Word, the ambo, is also an instrumental sign and means of unity; “we are healed and strengthened both by the proclaimed word and by sacramental communion.”

Across Christian traditions and beyond (i.e. our Jewish and Muslim sisters and brothers) we share many of the same stories from a common past. This shared corporate memory is also a testament to the unity that already exists. We are shaped by a shared base of tradition, how we understand
those stories may vary, but similar to what I noted above, that variance serves to enhance our understanding of the in-exhaustible richness of God’s self-revelation. We may not be using the same lectionary, but each time we come together, we are participating in a unifying encounter with God.

Finally, I don’t want to lose sight that the Eucharist is more than a *sign*, a sign of the unity that already exists and of a unity in process, it is also a *means* of unity. If we believe that the unity we seek is a *way of being* towards each other that is dialogical, results in mutually building up of each other, and values diversity, then the unity we practice around the altar should extend beyond the church door to all humanity. God willing, what we believe will affect how we worship and ultimately how we live (*lex credendi, lex orandi, lex vivendi*). The praxis of building up the churches (the diversity in the unity of Christ) and working towards unity, will foster a habit of respecting diversity and working towards unity when we leave the church building and enter the church *ad extra*. If we see ourselves (all of us) united in worship and united with a common goal, then we will no longer see our neighbor as a competitor. Our neighbor is a teammate, a fellow worker working towards the in-breaking of the reign of God in this world, a visible manifestation of the already invisible reality, a unity in a way of being in relationship with each other. Repeated practice in worship will foster the most virtuous of virtues - Charity!

Pastorally speaking I encourage the pastors of the parishes to consider what I have said. Truly all noted above in theory comes to bear in a most real and concrete way in the parish. The universal church is fully embodied
in each and every particular parish. The parish priest is called upon to guide the flock that has been entrusted to him by the Lord through the local bishop, in welcoming the strangers among them to their eucharistic celebrations. At the parish level, the pastor does not have a direct impact on the practice of eucharistic hospitality at the other church’s tables, but he has a great impact on his own.

The pastor is responsible for welcoming those of different faiths or those of no particular faith tradition that come together during the significant transitions in human life, funerals and marriage celebrations. He must also help strengthen new families that result from the marriage bond that transcends ecclesial boundaries; helping them navigate the responsibilities of practicing their faiths and the challenges of raising children.

Those are just some of the situations that arise outside of the church (ad extra), there are also the ones that arise from a sense of separateness within the church (ad intra). There are issues within the church that effect the relationship between individuals and their church community; when there has been damage to the relationship as a result of the individual being out of step with the teachings of the community. Most recently this can been seen in the debate around those that have been divorced and remarried (without annulling the first marriage), whether they should be allowed to participate in communion. What holds true in regards to the broader issue of ecumenical unity also applies and an ad intra basis; this is not about a division per say, it is about a break in dialogue, unity in the sense of a verb is lacking.

Before go on, I should mention what the law of the Catholic Church, canon law, has to say about eucharistic hos-
pitality. The actual canons are lengthy, however in summary, \(^{35}\) at the *ad intra* level, a Catholic who is conscious of an un-confessed grave sin is restricted from receiving communion unless there is a grave reason and there is not opportunity to confess” (cf. Canon 915). The *ad extra* restriction is that Catholics can administer communion to non-Catholics in case of danger of death or some other grave necessity (cf. Canon 844). This is a simplification of these canons, but generally eucharistic hospitality is to be extended only on an exception basis in case of grave necessity to non-Catholics, those outside the Catholic church by ecclesial allegiance or by way of life.

The *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, nuances this slightly by say that eucharistic hospitality is allowed by way of exception whenever necessity requires or a genuine spiritual advantage suggests, and provided that the danger of error or indifferentism\(^ {36}\) is avoided (cf. sec. 123, 129-131). Even though these are *ad extra* directives, they provide guidance for *ad intra* reception as well, “The Eucharist is, for the baptized, a spiritual food which enables them to overcome sin and to live the very life of Christ, to be incorporated more profoundly in Him and share more intensely in the whole economy of the Mystery of Christ” (*Directory*, sec. 129, emphasis mine). For those Catholics in *grave sin*, it seems like the Eucharist is what they need, but only if they are working towards unity with the community and with Christ. Otherwise it is the cheap grace that Bonhoeffer warns about.\(^ {37}\)

To have a better idea of the level of eucharistic hospitality that can be offered, I point to the Diocese of Saskatoon in Canada and their *Pastoral Directives*
This document notes that in particular circumstances, permission should be granted for a Christian of another denomination to receive Holy Communion in the Catholic Church, if they are in \textit{spiritual need} and are aware of both the personal and communal nature of the sacrament (Directives 8 and 11). It recommends a prior discussion with the presiding priest, but that is not an absolute requirement, when in doubt the requirements are assumed to have been meet (Directive 12).

In fact after listing various times when eucharistic hospitality is allowed (i.e. Baptism, First Communion, Confirmation, graduation Mass, funerals, retreats, religious workshops, etc.), the document concludes by saying that “these Directives and norms are to be applied generously” and “the Church does not demand more of fellow Christians than it does of Catholic people” (Directive 20 and 23).

Pastors should remember that their main task is to safeguard and build up the flock entrusted to them, and this should be reflected in their practice of eucharistic hospitality. This may cause eucharistic hospitality to be withheld even when it is allowed within the guidelines. As Paul points out in his letter to the Corinthians, no matter how theologically sound something is, and no matter how much it is allowed under the letter of the law, if it causes scandal and hurts the flock, then it should be avoided (1 Cor 8:9). If someone is in grave sin and is using the sacrament to make a political statement that they do not think what they are doing is a sin, then withholding the Eucharist might be the appropriate thing to do. For example on May 29, 1997, Cardinal Basil Hume refused Communion to a gay activist who was...
wearing a rainbow sash and trying to exploit the Sacrament for publicity purposes. Causing scandal is not a way of being that is progressing towards unity. This is also echoed in the guidelines for Ecumenism provided by the Vatican.41

Scandal is one risk of the overuse of eucharistic hospitality, another risk is devaluing the importance of community in the act of worship. Ignoring ecclesial borders, even though they are humanly contrived and don’t “extend all they way to heaven,” risks encouraging people to try to “church” independently, by themselves. One should not and cannot “church” as an individual, one churches as part of a community. Ultimately unity is hurt if one separates themselves from a (any) visible worshiping community. Many of the guidelines noted above include a statement to effect if you are going to a Catholic liturgy on a frequent basis, maybe you ought to consider becoming Catholic. If we don’t build up the community inside the church, if we focus just on our individual relationship with God, how can we be expected to be concerned with more than ourselves when we leave the church?

Finally, and this is the most difficult to provide a directive or directory for, sometimes eucharistic hospitality is to be extended when the norms seem to say otherwise. As the Diocese of Saskatoon expressed, norms are to be applied generously when there is a spiritual need and an awareness of both the personal and communal nature of the Sacrament. Eucharist is that spiritual food that enables us to overcome sin and to live the very life of Christ. It provides our spiritual nourishment in our time of need, which is another reason why being part of, in relationship with, a community is so important. It gives the pastor - through the grace of the Spirit - the greatest chance
to know us and know when we need the spiritual food.

Our celebration of the Eucharist is supposed to be both a sign of unity and a means of unity. We have fallen short of this teaching of the Second Vatican Council and have often turned the eucharistic into a sign and means of disunity. If we extend eucharistic hospitality to the full extent that the teaching of the Catholic Church allows, then the Eucharist can fully be experienced as a sign and means of unity. Then we can be actively working toward the unity to which Christ has called us. In extending eucharistic hospitality, we recognize our co-workers in humanity’s quest for the final telos of unity. It is true that a level of unity or a unity-in-progress must first be present before we do so, but we often miss the fact that it is.

Notes:

1 This paper is written in the first person because it is my look at the Eucharist from a practical/pastoral standpoint. I hope to be entering ordained ministry in the Catholic Church, this paper is the result of my reflection on how to pastorally meet the needs of the people of God, while still remaining faithful to the teachings of the Catholic Church. Recently, Pope Francis has been a great example of how to balance the two.

“Our” is defined as Christian churches. The focus of this paper are churches that find their being grounded in Christ. However, certain aspects of what is to follow could be applied on a broader scale to include non-Christian religions, but that will not be addressed in this paper.


Eucharistic hospitality is welcoming individuals from different ecclesial traditions to fuller participation in Mass and the full reception of communion. I am not addressing the issue of intercommunion, which is full communion between ecclesial traditions (i.e. the ability to swap ordained ministers between traditions; Catholic and Luthérian, etc.).

Ad intra and ad extra are terms used in reference to those within (intra) and outside (extra) the Catholic church.


*Unitatis redintegratio*, sec. 8.


Two terms that became popular around the time of the Second Vatican Council. Aggiornamento was taken to mean the updating of the church and bringing it forward into dialogue with the modern world. Ressourcement meant a return to the authoritative sources of faith.
17 The anaphora is the eucharistic prayer said during mass by the priest at the altar.

18 The original call to unity in pre-4th c. eucharistic prayers and the return to this call for unity in the prayers subsequent to the Second Vatican Council was pointed out by Fink in his article “Eucharist,” see esp. 110.


21 Addai and Mari has been in the news recently because even though it doesn’t have the words of institution (Jesus saying do this in memory of me) it was approved as valid eucharistic prayer by the Vatican. To be used in limited and specific circumstance in the war torn Middle East.


23 Second Vatican Council, Lumen gentium, n. 8. A lot of ink has been spilled out what “subsists in” means. Agreeing with the understanding put forward by Cardinal Walter Kasper, I take it to mean that churches outside of full communion with the Catholic Church still belong to the one church of Jesus Christ and possess salvatory significance for their members; elements of the church of Jesus Christ exist outside of the Catholic Church. Further, even though the Catholic Church represents the fullest manifestation of the church of Jesus Christ, it is still incomplete. (See Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Conference on the 40th Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Conciliar Decree “Unitatis Redintegratio,” intervention by Cardinal Walter Kasper (11 November 2004).

24 Unitatis redintegratio, sec. 4.

25 Ibid.


27 Ibid.

28 Ibid. All but the connect between the Protestants with the
Johannine communities less hierarchical than the Petrine churches. Instead of looking to one central figure or structure for leadership, they looked to the voice of the Holy Spirit within each community for guidance.

29 Lumen gentium, sec. 8.

30 Ibid.

31 Irwin, Models, 112.

32 Ibid., 102-03.

33 Lumen gentium, sec. 26.

34 Much of the news coverage in the run-up to the October 2014 extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the family has discussed the issue of communion for divorced and remarried Catholics.

35 I acknowledge that I run a significant risk of oversimplification, but for the purposes of this paper, making a general summary seems to be an appropriate risk.

36 A belief that variations in doctrine and practice are unimportant.


39 Spiritual need defined by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity as “a need for an increase in spiritual life and a need for a deeper involvement in the mystery of the Church and of its unity.” As quoted in the Pastoral Notes for Sacramental Sharing with other Christians in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon (August 22, 2008), Saskatoon Diocesan Commission for Ecumenism, “Pastoral Notes for Sacramental Sharing with other Christians in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon (August 22, 2008),” Diocese of Saskatoon, http://saskatoonrcdiocese.com/sites/default/files/groupfiles/Media%20browser/sacramental_sharing_notesnotes.pdf (accessed October 11, 2014).
Anthony Howard, *Basil Hume: The Monk Cardinal* (London: Headline, 2005), 263. Based on the circumstances of this unique situation, Cardinal Hume made the determination that the person was trying to use the sacrament for political purposes.