

STUDENT ESSAY

Our Meaningful “Amen”



The reception of Holy Communion is one of the most profound, personal and public acts of any Roman Catholic. While only the Lord can read the human heart (1 Sam16:7), our conduct, bearing and demeanor give witness to others of our response to this

most sacred moment. By our very participation in this sacrament, we make visible to the community what is in our hearts. A disinterested pose, an unenthusiastic or omitted “amen,” a race to the Church doors immediately after receiving Holy Communion and other actions may (but certainly do not always) demonstrate that many of us may not sufficiently reflect upon, and appreciate the richness of, Holy Communion.

Christian charity and good judgment require that our evaluations of any person’s actions should be humble and limited. Reflection on my own attitudes and actions, conversations with others and concerned observation indicate that, as individual members of the Body of Christ and as a Church, we can benefit from greater reflection upon the significance of our reception of the body and blood of Christ and what it means for us as members of the Church. Catechesis on the rich ecclesiastical dimensions of receiving Holy Communion may increase devotion to, and reflective reception of, the body and blood of Christ. Conveying this reality presents a theological and pastoral challenge for each of us in Church ministry.

Understanding the significance of the Eucharist for our relationships to Jesus and His Church requires a theological grounding in the nature of the Church, as well as a practical understanding of how we are called to live out those relationships. The Eucharist and our reception of Holy Communion are intimately related to our understanding of the ecclesiology of the Church because they are “intended to be a manifestation and realization of [the community’s]

shared life in Christ.” (Kelleher 5) Thus, the sacrament of the Eucharist is not only the consecrated host and cup, but the communal reception of it, for that action is a sign and realization of the Church as the Body of Christ.

Scripture and the ecclesial documents of the Church (and many related commentaries) provide images to assist our understanding of the mystery of the Church. During different eras in the history of the Church, various images predominated. *Lumen Gentium* “made ample use of the models of the Body of Christ and the Sacrament, but its dominant model was rather that of the People of God.” (Dulles, 22) Yet the text begins by describing the nature and universal mission of the Church as “a sign and instrument, that is of communion with God and of unity among all men.” (LG 1)

Edward Hahnenberg noted that by the 1980s, the primary theological and ecclesiastical model for the Church had become that of “communion.” (53) While the image of the “people of God” emphasizes equality and the development of the Church as a pilgrim people, the image of the Church as a “communion” emphasizes the “spiritual and relational aspects of the Church,” which are both horizontal (i.e., among believers) and vertical (i.e., between the believers and God) and which are “actualized” in the Eucharist. (Hahnenberg 53) Although there are differences in emphasis between these two images, they are united in their presentation of the Church as a place where God acts through the active participation by believers, and where faith is expressed and lived through relationships with God and each other.

The Church community to whom we are united in our reception of the body of Christ is not just the community that is physically visible to us. We are united with the entire Church of our diocese and the universal Church throughout the world. We are also united to the heavenly Church. “It is especially in the sacred liturgy that our union with the heavenly Church is best realized.... When, then, we celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice we are most closely united to the worship of the heavenly Church.” (LG 50)

The thoughtful and meaning-filled reception of Holy Communion is crucial to our participation as members of the people of God and the communion which is the Church. “As members of Christ’s body, we affirm our identity and unity when we receive the Eucharistic body of Christ.” (Harrington 30) *Lumen Gentium* affirms this reality, declaring that “really sharing in the body of the Lord in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with [Christ] and with one another.” (LG 7) Significantly, *Lumen Gentium* uses the words “really sharing,” emphasizing the need for genuine, conscious participation in the mysteries communicated through our sharing in Holy Communion—not unreflective, automatic, or solely individualistic actions.

Writing on the deep meaning behind our expressed, “Amen” when we receive Holy Communion, Margaret Mary Kelleher draws on the teachings of St. Augustine. She notes that St. Augustine taught that saying “Amen” to the minister’s declaration “the Body of Christ” “allows one to express belief in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, to affirm one’s identity as a member of the body of Christ and to commit oneself to live as a member of that body.” (Kelleher 3) This threefold affirmation involves a personal statement of faith, but also a very public commitment to the Church. It is profound.

Understood from the perspective of ecclesiology, our reception of Holy Communion becomes an even more profound act of faith, commitment and community. “The Eucharist is indivisibly Christological and ecclesiological. . . . In its ecclesiological aspect the Eucharist celebrates and solidifies the union of the faithful with one another about the holy table.” (Dulles 62) Believers do not often appreciate this communitarian nature of Holy Communion and how it relates to ecclesiology. Kelleher comments that when she asks “people what they are doing when they say ‘Amen’ to ‘The body of Christ,’ they often say that they are expressing faith in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Yet I never hear them say that they are affirming their identity as members of the body of Christ.” (Kelleher 4) They see the host present before them, but not the communal action that their reception signifies.

Godfrey Diekmann, a Benedictine monk, liturgist and professor who was a *peritus* or theological advisor at the Second Vatican Council, made a similar point, noting that “the mystery of the church is linked to the Paschal mystery.” He affirmed that, “when we receive the body of Christ in the Eucharist, we become the body of Christ (humanly crucified, divinely raised) in order to build up the body of Christ (the church).” (Loxterkamp 16) Diekmann went beyond the theological meaning of Holy Communion and challenged his students to be transformed by their reception of the body of Christ, asking, “What good is it if the bread is changed and we are not?” (Loxterkamp 16) This question, which is both a challenge and a reminder of the deep meaning of Holy Communion crystallizes consistent core teachings of the Church that, “the sharing in the body and blood of Christ has no other effect than to accomplish our transformation into that which we receive.” (LG 26; quoting St. Leo Martyr) This transformation affects the manner in which we live our lives and the values we hold.

The theological and ecclesiastical truths embodied in our reception of Holy Communion manifest the significance of such reception. They also make clear the importance of deep reflection on the meaning of our receiving the body of Christ and the need for preparation before it, devotion and conscious awareness during it and transformation through it. Within the context of the pastoral life of a parish, conveying this message presents opportunities and

challenges based on the time available for catechesis, the varying academic preparation and experiences of the community and the divergent interests of the community.

It is critical that each parish and faith community have a thoughtful plan to convey these truths in order to assure a more reflective, devout and transformative reception of Holy Communion by each member of the community. “Our participation in the Eucharist concretizes and energizes our relationship with Christ and with one another.” (Harrington 30) Without proper reflection on the Eucharist, we will lose the opportunity for such concrete, energized relationships.

“The Instruction on Eucharistic Worship,” promulgated by the Sacred Congregation of Rites in 1967, makes clear that the positive effects of receiving Holy Communion bear a distinct relationship to the recipient’s level of understanding and devotion. Grace is always given through the Eucharist; however, the effectiveness of that grace is conditioned greatly upon the recipient’s disposition and willingness to change. The Instruction provides that, “the faithful achieve a more perfect participation in the Mass when, *with proper disposition*, they receive the Body of the Lord sacramentally in the Mass” and that, “this sacrifice, though offered for all, ‘has no effect except in those united to the passion of Christ by faith and charity . . . To these it brings a greater or less benefit in proportion to their devotion.’” (“Instruction on Eucharistic Worship” 12; emphasis added). Accordingly, catechesis is necessary to assure that the Catholic community has an ecclesiastical understanding of how Holy Communion unites us to Christ and the Church. Catechesis may take many forms, from preaching to teenage and adult faith formation programs. Only with understanding can believers be transformed through the Eucharist.

Three elements must be present in any parish or Church community to increase reflective and devoted reception of Holy Communion. First, liturgies must be well planned, encourage active participation by the faithful and draw believers into the mystery of the Church. Second, ministers of Holy Communion must have an understanding of the sacredness of their ministry and reflect that in their actions and attitudes. Third, catechesis must be made available for adults and children in the parish or other church community to assure their continued growth and understanding of, among other things, the ecclesiastical truths involved in their reception of Holy Communion.

“It must first be said that ‘the best catechesis on the Eucharist is the Eucharist itself, celebrated well.’” (*Sacramentum Caritatis* 64) Indeed, “the way this ritual is enacted can either support or detract from a vision of ecclesial communion.” (Kelleher 2) Assuring that the Eucharist is celebrated well is a responsibility of the entire community; however, priests, deacons, liturgical

planning committees and ministers of hospitality, music, the word and the Eucharist have special roles to play in this mission. Each of these ministries, and the sacred space in which the Eucharist is celebrated, must convey a strong sense of the community and mystery of the Church. Assuring that the prayers of the Mass are said reverently and that appropriate periods of silence are observed during such moments in the Mass as before the prayer after Communion, are critical to a well celebrated Eucharist. Thomas Merton, the well known author and Trappist monk commented that one reason why he is “a Catholic, a monk and a priest . . . is that he first went to Mass” and received a sense of oneness in Christ. (Merton 237) The sense of oneness that Merton experienced at his early Masses was, in actuality, the living out of the ecclesiastical mystery of the Church as the Body of Christ by the community with which he celebrated. With liturgies such as these, the foundation exists for more reflective receipt of Holy Communion.

Ministers of the body and blood of Jesus at each Eucharist have a special obligation to convey the meaning and sacredness of the Holy Communion that they distribute. Eye contact with the recipient, words proclaimed devoutly, a reverent posture and lives of service and commitment to the Church will demonstrate that the reception of Holy Communion calls for deep reflection and a meaningful response. This can be achieved if the training of Eucharistic ministers is focused on both the personal and ecclesiastical meaning of the Eucharist. Perhaps as part of their ongoing formation, Eucharistic ministers can read, reflect upon and discuss *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Pope John Paul II's encyclical on the Eucharist in its relationship to the Church.

Catechesis for the entire parish community must also be encouraged. Such catechesis must be appropriate to the age and educational background of the listeners and should be substantive and creative. For example, in speaking to married couples, the image of Christ as the groom and the Church as his bride can be an effective model. Much as the bride and groom say “I do” with love and reverence, so too our “Amen” when we receive Holy Communion should be said with love and reverence as it is, in some respects, our “I do” to the invitation of Christ to partake in his mystical body. Other appropriate models and images abound that could be similarly used for other groups within the parish.

Fostering greater appreciation of, and reflection upon, the receipt of Holy Communion is a calling for the entire Church. This work requires investments of time, commitment and effort, all of which will be well spent if we build a community which, “strengthened by the body of Christ in the Eucharistic communion,” manifests “in a concrete way that unity of the People of God which this holy sacrament aptly signifies and admirably realizes.” (LG 11)

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