

## Communion as a Missional Ordinance

*Hippolyto Tshimanga*

For years I was engaged in ministry as a priest in the Roman Catholic Church. For the first six years of my priesthood, I served as assistant priest in a popular parish in Latin America. We had a number of volunteers there, among them two men in their forties. Both had been serving the church as catechists and community leaders for many years. But each one had a story in his past. The first was married when he was still very young. In the few years he had lived with his wife, he had seriously misbehaved, which led to her leaving him and emigrating to another country. Repentant, he had tried to reconcile with her without success. After some twenty years, he finally fell in love with another woman and civilly married her. As for the second man, he was living with a young woman who had been previously married in the church and was divorced. Together, they were blessed with two beautiful children.

The drama for these two community leaders, baptized and faithful Christians, was that according to the law of the Catholic Church, they were not allowed to approach the Table of the Lord. Though they had taught catechism to more people than any priest I have ever known, though they were loved and respected leaders, they were doomed to suffer the consequences of banishment from the sacrament they had been taught was their means of salvation.

On several occasions they spoke to me about their willingness to regularize their situation with the church. But I could do nothing for them. From the viewpoint of the Catholic Church, they had to decide between the women they loved and the church's rules. Seventeen years have passed since I left South America, but I still hear the echo of the voice of one of them begging me: "Father, I wouldn't like to die without receiving the body of Christ."

I have never doubted that in many instances the church, in all its denominations, responds to human needs in a manner worthy of its call. Following the example of its Founder, it goes about doing good. All over the world, Christian institutions and individuals have done, and continue to

do, wonders for the human community. However, when it comes to cases like those mentioned above, one cannot help but wonder how the church understands the Lord's declaration, "I have come for sinners." Christian denominations exclude each other from the Lord's Supper, divorcees are kept at arm's length. Even theologians who question certain church policies are excommunicated. Why does the church exclude people who think differently, people who struggle with the truth of some doctrines? Is the church oblivious to their spiritual pain? If not, why does it turn a deaf ear to their cry?

### **Lord's Supper, Eucharist, or Communion?**

The answer to all these questions may lie in the different names that different Christian denominations choose to give to the memorial of the Lord's Supper. Indeed, from the beginning of Christianity, a number of names have been used to identify that special meal Jesus shared with his disciples. The Apostle Paul called it "the Lord's Supper," *Coena Dei* in Latin (1 Cor 11:20). Luke speaks of the "breaking of the bread" (Acts 2:42,46; 20:7,11; 27:35). In Tertullian's writings in the late second century, we find a broader list: "sacrament of the Eucharist," *Eucharistiae sacramentum* (De Cor. 3; Marc. 4.34); the "sacrament of the bread and the cup," *Panis et calicis sacramentum* (Marc. 5.8); the "body of the Lord," *Corpus Domini* (De Idol. 7; De Orat. 19) and "the Lord's Supper" *Coena Dei* (De Spect. 13).<sup>1</sup>

However, from the very early post-apostolic Christianity, the term Eucharist (thanksgiving), which translates the Greek *Εὐχαριστία*, seems to have taken precedence. It was coined after the phrase "when he had given thanks" that pertains to the text of the institution (Luke 22:19; 24:30,35, Matt 26:27; Mark 14:23).

The name "Eucharist" was already present in the *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (60 and 200 AD), one of the earliest non-scriptural materials, which speaks of Christian doctrine. Ignatius of Antioch also uses the term in his letter to the Smyraeans (Ign. Smyr. 8: 1-2). Writing by the middle of the second century, Justin the martyr says the Church in Rome held a regular Sunday service of word and table. He gives the order of the liturgy and declares: "We call this food 'thanksgiving'; and no one may partake of it unless he is convinced of the truth of our teaching, and has

been cleansed with the washing for forgiveness of sins and regeneration, and lives as Christ handed down” (Justin, *Apol.* I, 66, 67).<sup>2</sup>

These different names are still used for Christ’s meal. However, each Christian denomination prefers one of them. These preferences can be a good indicator of the theologies justifying our different doctrines, decision-making processes, and attitudes toward a variety of vital questions. It is not bad for different denominations to focus on one or another aspect of the Lord’s Supper. However, the essential question remains about Jesus’ original intention. What did he really want to tell his disciples while eating that particular meal with them? What message did he want to convey when he instructed them to continue holding this rite in his memory? To reflect on this event, we must re-read the foundational texts in the New Testament.

If we take a closer look at the narratives leading to the institution of the Lord’s Supper, we find that all the redactors seem to have been working within a common framework when it comes to Jesus’ final period of life and ministry. They all start with his entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11:1-11a; Matt 21:1-10; Luke 19: 28-46; John 12:12-19), building through his various teachings and run-ins with Scribes and Pharisees. They tell of his Last Supper, arrest, trial, and execution at the hands of the Roman authorities. As for the narrative on the institution of the Lord’s Supper itself, the synoptic gospels and Paul give a similar version of the events that took place before Jesus was arrested, judged, and put to death. On that Thursday, while sitting at table with the closest circle of his disciples, Jesus instituted a new rite, identifying the bread they were to eat with his body and the wine they were to drink with his blood as a new covenant.

Unlike the synoptics and Paul, John gives no account of the institution. Instead, he provides details that otherwise would have gone unnoticed. More reflective than narrative, John’s gospel reports that when they were at table Jesus got up. He removed his outer garments, took a towel, and wrapped it around his waist. He then poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel. When he had finished, he asked his disciples: “Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must wash each other’s feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you” (John 13:4-15).

By telling this other story without saying anything else about the meal, did John intend to ignore the Supper itself? Did he judge the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the same cup less significant? John did not likely consider the Supper insignificant. In fact, in his narrative on the discourse on the “bread of life” at Capernaum, he has Jesus addressing the crowd, “I am the bread that comes down from heaven....if you do not eat the flesh of the son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise that person up on the last day” (John 6:33,41,52-54). Such language would be nonsense if John had no knowledge of the institution of the sacrament. Thus I concur with Delbert Burkett that this language “most likely presupposes the community’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper, in which the bread represented the body of Jesus and the wine his blood.”<sup>3</sup> John did not intend to ignore the whole of the Supper. To the contrary, by telling the incident of washing the feet, he intended to point to a reality beyond the mere symbols of the broken bread and the sharing of the cup. He wanted to lead his readers to the core of what Jesus wanted to convey when celebrating this meal with his disciples.

### **Do This in Remembrance of Me: a Mandate for a Mission**

“Do this in remembrance of me.” What did Jesus intend to tell his disciples when he gave them this ordinance? What are his followers supposed to remember when they break the bread and share the cup?

Let us begin saying that cross-cultural translation can be misleading. Just as we use the word “peace” to render the richer Hebrew “shalom,” the Western words “memory,” “memorial,” and “remembrance” are unfortunately other examples of the limit of translation. These words translate the Greek *anamnesis*, which renders the Hebrew *zikkaron*. But “memory,” “memorial,” or “remembrance” do not convey all the power and shades of meaning of *zikkaron*.

To grasp the meaning of “Do this in remembrance of me,” we should first try to grasp the meaning of *zikkaron* in the context of Jewish mentality and culture. There is no better way of doing so than by examining the meaning of this word in the context of the liturgy of the Passover (Seder of Pesach), the liturgy the evangelists seem to have used as background for their respective narratives.

### **The Seder of Pesach**

The liturgy of the Pesach celebrates the liberation of the sons and daughters of Israel from the land of Egypt. The theme of the “memorial” (zikkaron) plays a central role in the order (*seder* in Hebrew) of this ceremony. The telling of the story of the Exodus (*maggid*) from Egypt is prompted by a series of questions asked by children not only about the strange character of this celebration but the unusual food and some unexpected ways of behaving: Why is this night different from all other nights?<sup>4</sup> [Why is it] that on all nights we may eat either chametz or matzah,<sup>5</sup> and on this night we may eat only matzah? [Why is it] that on all other nights, we may eat any kind of vegetables, and on this night, we may eat only marror<sup>6</sup>?

The head of the family would then explain that the Jewish people were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, but God delivered them with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, and brought them out from there. The Haggada (homily) makes it clear that this remembrance of the Exodus event is an obligation for all Jewish people, whatever their rank: “It is written in the Torah: ‘That you may remember the day when you came out of the land of Egypt, all the days of your life’” (Deut 16:3).

The extraordinary power of the celebration of Pesach is that it calls upon every Jewish man or woman, old or young, to undergo a personal Exodus from Egypt. Every son and daughter of Israel is asked to make of this event a proper experience. This is why the head of the family retells the story of Exodus as if it was he who had been liberated from slavery. The Haggada is emphatic that in every generation one must regard himself as though he had gone out from Egypt: “You shall tell your son on that day, because of this God did for me when I went out from Egypt.”<sup>7</sup> Refusing to do so makes one a *kofer be-ikar*, one who denies the very foundations of Judaism.

Thus, the Seder of Pesach is more than a simple remembrance of an historical event. It is a memorial (zikkaron). Eloquent in this respect are these words pronounced before the sharing of matzah:

This is the bread of affliction that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt.

All who are hungry, come and eat!

All in need, come and join in celebrating *Pesach*!

This year we are here, next year we are in the land of Israel!  
This year we are slaves; next year we will be free men!

### **From the Pesach to the Coena Deo**

This description of the Seder of Pesach leaves us with a series of questions: Was Jesus' Last Supper a Passover meal? What did he intend to celebrate? Why did he want his disciples to make of this meal a zikkaron?

There are discussions among exegetes as to whether the Last Supper took place on the 14 Nisan in the Jewish calendar, the official date of the celebration of the Passover, and whether this was a Passover meal. The majority agree that the authors of the NT clearly intended it to be understood as a Passover meal.<sup>8</sup> The synoptic gospels say it took place in Jerusalem on the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover had to be sacrificed (Mark 14:1-2, 12-17; Cf. 1 Cor 5:7). Although none of these texts mentions the eating of the Passover lamb, they all speak of the sharing and eating of the bread, the drinking of the cup of wine, and the singing of the psalms (Mark 14:22-26; Matt 26:26-30). These elements are in themselves an eloquent testimony of the Passover background of the Last Supper (Exodus 12:14; 13:9; 17:24; Deut 16:2-3).

### **Predicting his "Handing Over"**

Jesus' teaching in Galilee and in the whole of Judea was undoubtedly causing increasing irritation and uneasiness among the Jerusalem religious and civil authorities. Jesus would have been extraordinarily naive had he not seen where his teaching and actions, and the opposition they were raising, would likely end. The imprisonment of John the Baptist, his herald and mentor, was so recent that Jesus would have been completely blind to think his fate would be different. It is then no accident that the Evangelists report he predicted his "handing over" by one of his followers, his arrest and judgment, and even his death. More than once the gospels testify that Jesus predicted his handing over and execution: "The Son of Man will be delivered into the power of men; they will put him to death" (Mark 8:31a; 9:31a; 10:33-34; parallels in Matthew and Luke).

### **The Last Supper**

The sharing of meals seems to have been a marked feature of Jesus' ministry. The gospel narratives indicate that some of his teaching, not only within the inner circle of his disciples but among the tax collectors and public sinners, took place in the context of meals. However, the heightened significance given to the meal shared with his disciples on that specific Thursday encourages us to think that Jesus likely sensed this would be his last meal with them.

“This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me”; “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me.” These words that Jesus pronounced at the occasion of that meal seem to have made a lasting impression on those who sat to eat with him. Paul confirms the “Lord’s Supper” to be part of the core foundational tradition he had received and in turn passed on when he established the church in Corinth (1 Cor 11: 23-25). Acts testifies that after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Apostles, together with those who joined them in the early Christian community, remained faithful to the “breaking of the bread” (Acts 2: 42). Nevertheless, the question remains: How are we to comprehend Jesus’ command, “Do this in memory of me”?

### **We Remember Your Death, O Lord!**

There exists a tendency in Christianity that explains Jesus’ mission solely in terms of his passion and death on the cross. It is as though God had deliberately sent his Son into the world to be persecuted, judged, and crucified to redeem the world. We profess that when we eat the broken bread and drink the blessed cup, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again. Indeed, there can be little doubt that this interpretation is based on the Scriptures. Paul seems to have favored it when he wrote, “Whenever you eat this bread, then, and drink this cup, you are proclaiming the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). But what do we really mean when we so confess our faith in Jesus’ death? What did Paul intend when he wrote these words? Why would such a death have a special meaning for humanity?

It is unlikely that Paul intended to speak of Jesus’ death per se, but rather of the meaning of this death for us. It is not so much Jesus’ death that made him become bread of life for us but whatever he taught and did that gives meaning to such a death. Jesus would not have been the bread of life

if he had not become a human being like us. His death would have been of no significance to us had he not spoken about God and about human life in a specific way. By persisting unto death in preaching the kind of gospel he preached, he sealed his gospel of liberation with his own life for the world's redemption.

Augustine seems to have had a good grasp on this when he spoke of "the love that carried Jesus on to death." Commenting on John 13:1 he says: "Perhaps the words, 'He loved them unto the end,' may have to be understood in this way, that He so loved them as to die for them. For this He testified when He said, 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.' We have certainly no objection that 'He loved them unto the end' should be so understood, that is, it was His very love that carried Him on to death."<sup>9</sup>

The truth is that Jesus did not quietly die of a natural death. His death was not an accident. It was not the result of a misunderstanding in judgment. Jesus died because he went to the limit of his commitment; he said and did things that the masters and lords of this world did not want to hear. The Teacher made a point in advance about the tragedy he saw coming: "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.... The Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me; I lay it down of my own free will...." (John 10:17-18).

### **Jesus' Alter Ego: "You are this bread that you receive"**

In Western theology, one school of thought puts much emphasis on the sharing aspect of the Lord's Supper. Thus Xavier Léon-Dufour says the bread is for the purpose of "sharing" and thereby brings to expression the unity of the community in Christ. When Christians read the Scriptures through this narrow lens of unity, the result is a one-sided perspective on the biblical witness, in which what is desired or perceived is lifted up at the cost of what is the heart of the matter. Eventually, the longing for the unity of the church eclipses the core of the gospel message, which is the search for God's kingdom.

Despite the controversial and polemic character of his writings, John Calvin provides a better view of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In

his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he argues that “The Lord intended the sacrament of his body and blood to be a *kind of exhortation*, to urge us to live in purity and holiness of life, in charity, peace and concord. [He] committed his body so that he may become altogether one with us and us with him. He makes us partakers in his one body so that by participation we may all become one body.”<sup>10</sup> In another passage we read, “We are to regard those words as a *living sermon*, which is to edify the hearers, penetrate their minds, being impressed and seated in their hearts, and exert its efficacy in the fulfillment of what which it promises.”<sup>11</sup> Balthasar Hubmaier concurs with Calvin when he says the Supper is not only a devotional contemplation of the crucifixion of Christ but an ethical summons to imitate Jesus’ surpassing act of self-giving. Just as Jesus offered himself for me, I offer myself for others.<sup>12</sup> The words Jesus pronounced at the Last Supper are indeed his last instructions. Like a parent who reveals her last will to her children at the sunset of her life, so did Jesus in the evening before his death. He wrote his will on a piece of bread and a cup of wine.

“Take, eat, drink. This is my body, which is broken for you: this is my blood, which is shed for the remission of sins.” Calvin comments: “We ought carefully to observe, that the chief, and almost the whole energy of the sacrament, consists in these words, it is broken for you: it is shed for you.... It would not be of much importance to us that the body and blood of the Lord are now distributed, had they not once been set forth for our redemption and salvation.”<sup>13</sup>

In so speaking, Calvin joins with Augustine in recognizing the remembrance of the Lord’s Supper to be a call to become Jesus’ *alter ego*. Because the Bishop of Hippo had already written, “One must accept to become what one receives. Through the grace that redeemed you, you are this bread that you receive. You respond ‘Amen’ to what you are.”<sup>14</sup> Obviously, Augustine intended to prompt faithful communicants to look beyond the elements made of wheat and grapes. He wished them to see the broader framework of Jesus’ work of salvation. Jesus’ command to celebrate his Last Supper as a memorial was intended to instruct his followers to live and act as he lived and acted, to become his own *alter ego*. The sacrament of the broken bread and the sharing of the cup is truly a *zikkaron*, a meal for a mission.

**The *Epiclesis* for Sanctification of the Partakers**

“To become Jesus’ *alter ego*,” is likely the understanding that the early Christian communities had of this sacrament. Louis Bouyer has shown that the earliest *epicleses*,<sup>15</sup> the prayers through which the consecration is realized were said not to transform the eucharistic elements as such but to sanctify (set apart) the faithful partakers at the Table of the Lord.

Thus, the main character of the *epiclesis* was to stress the agency of the Holy Spirit as the means by which Christ nourishes his faithful communicants. It was the church’s understanding that the Spirit of God enables partakers at the Lord’s Supper to become responsive to what they receive; the bread and wine bear testimony to Christ’s liberating gospel. When Christians partake in the sacrament, they receive the transforming power of the Spirit of God that enables them to live and act as Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One of God, lived and acted during his life. When we call this gesture “sacrament,” we simply acknowledge that it is the Spirit of God who acts in these simple signs to make them effectual for our salvation. A sacrament is precisely the point where God’s offer of grace and the faith of believers intersect. Grace and faith are the conditions *sine qua non* without which no “real presence” is possible in the eucharistic elements.

**Understanding and Living the “Real Presence” of the Lord in the Broken Bread**

Menno Simons, Dirk Philips, Balthasar Hubmaier, and Peter Walpot were right to oppose the medieval theology in which the repetition of the words of institution brings about the transformation of the bread and wine into Christ’s body and blood, the so-called doctrine of transubstantiation. Simons denounced the idolatrous behavior of seeking salvation in outward elements. But his exegesis of 1 Cor 10 still considered the Lord’s Supper as “a communion of the body of Christ.”<sup>16</sup> What the radical reformers opposed was the rationalization that the words of consecration automatically brought about transubstantiation of the elements. Bread remains bread. At the same time, many reformers affirmed the immediate work of the Holy Spirit through the response of faith that unites believers to Christ. The Spirit was seen as the agency that renders communion effectual. John D. Rempel notes that the emphasis on the Spirit as the agent of Christ’s presence, especially in Hans

Denck, Heinrich Rol, and Dirk Philips leads to a view of the Supper as the believer's mystical communion with Christ's body and blood.<sup>17</sup> Like the authors of the earliest epicleses, these reformers held that the transformation is that of the people responsive to the admonition of the Spirit, not that of the elements. This is also the case with Conrad Grebel and Pilgram Marpeck.<sup>18</sup>

The Spirit of God guided Jesus in everything he said and did. All the authors of the gospel narrations agree; they depict him as someone upon whom the Spirit of God rested (Mark 1:9-11; Matt 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-22. 4:18-19; John 1:32-34). When Christians partake in the Lord's Supper, they graft themselves into Christ. Having already in baptism received the same Spirit of Christ, they re-affirm their unity with him, and each can say with Christ: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me.... He has sent me...."<sup>19</sup>

The eucharist is a *zikkaron* of Jesus' life as human being, a prophet who went about doing good, a shepherd who gave his life for his flock. Therefore, it cannot be understood in terms of a mere symbol or a simple souvenir, nor can it be interpreted in the sense of a mere sharing of the bread and the cup for our individual salvation. It is a call to re-actualize Jesus' mission of healing compassion for all God's children. Its aim is to transform all partakers so that they too may become broken bread and poured cup for the salvation of the world. The sacrament of the body and the blood of Christ is really the life of Jesus of Nazareth itself as it is received, carried on, and continued in the personal and collective life of those who want to be his members. Therefore, by virtue of the principle of the imitation of Jesus, it is axiomatic for Christians to live within the framework of God's love, a love that is spontaneous, unconditional, and undeserved, and that radiates God's own healing compassion. Through the centuries the question the world asks remains the same: What does the reception of this sacrament do to you who believe?

The overlooked dimension of the mystery of the Lord's Supper consists in our imitation of Christ. This is not just one dogma among many others to be believed! In my opinion, it is the core of the biblical spirituality of the eucharist. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor has it right:

The community mediates Christ to the world. The word that he spoke is not heard in our contemporary world unless it is proclaimed by the community. The power that flowed forth from

him in order to enable response is no longer effective unless manifested by the community. As God once acted through Christ, so he now acts through those who are conformed to the image of his Son and whose behavior-pattern is in imitation of his. What Christ did in and for the world of his day through his physical presence, the community does in and for its world.... In order to continue to exercise his salvific function the Risen Christ must be effectively represented within the context of real existence by an authenticity which is modeled on his.<sup>20</sup>

A short text attributed to St. Teresa of Avila speaks this very language: "Christ has no body now but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion must look out on the world. Yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now."<sup>21</sup>

To follow Jesus' footsteps requires us to move beyond the visible eucharistic signs to the core of the Gospel message, to get involved in Jesus' ordeal, becoming broken bread that is shared as we reach out to our fellow humans, most of all the downtrodden, with love and concern. Calvin speaks of imitating Christ with zeal, of following his example, and of being prepared to give oneself to one's brothers and sisters, regarding them as members of one's own body; to love, cherish, defend, and assist them as Christ has loved, cherished, and defended us until death.<sup>22</sup> In another passage of *The Institutes* he says:

We shall have profited admirably in the sacrament, if the thoughts have been impressed and engraved in our minds that none of our brethren is hurt, despised, rejected, injured, or in any way offended, without ourselves, at the same time, hurting, despising, and injuring Christ; that we cannot have dissension with our brethren, without at the same time dissenting from Christ; that we cannot love Christ without loving our brethren; that the same care we take of our own body we ought to take of that of our brethren, who are members of our body, that as no part of our body suffers pain without extending to the other parts, so every evil which our brethren suffer ought to excite our compassion.<sup>23</sup>

**Searching for a Specific Way to Follow Christ**

“This is my body, this is me, this is my life, this is my blood which will be shed for you. Here the sacrifice was no longer a symbolic gesture but became a personal gift, a physical commitment, a life genuinely laid bare and offered.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the memorial (*zikkaron*) of the Lord’s Supper cannot be a mere repetition of what Jesus did once and for all, but instead a commemoration that actualizes Jesus’ work of salvation in today’s world. Just as all sons and daughters of Israel in every generation are called during the Seder of Pesach to regard themselves as though they personally had gone out from Egypt, so every Christian is called to partake in the Lord’s ministry. No one partakes in the eucharist if he cannot see himself as broken bread that reveals to others the gospel of Jesus. No one really partakes in the Lord’s Supper if he does not seriously search for a specific way he must walk to follow Jesus.

The meal of Christ was a symbol that pointed to a deeper meaning. The gift of the broken bread and the shared cup represents a whole life dedicated to announcing the reign of God. It is not the bread and wine that makes Jesus become for the first time a sacrament, but whatever the man Jesus said and did, and even endured, to give us life. Therefore, sacramental symbols cannot be severed from a history of a life that gives them their meaning. Christ gave himself daily as he announced the gospel that he knew would lead him to the supreme sacrifice. In the sacred symbols of his Supper, he seals his gift of love, expressing symbolically what he had been accomplishing all along – giving life, and giving it in plenitude (John 10:10).

Henri Nouwen wrote, “When we break the bread together, we reveal to each other the real story of Christ’s life and our life in him.” No Christian really celebrates the Lord’s Supper if she cannot see herself as broken bread, if she does not seriously search for a specific way she must walk to follow Christ.<sup>25</sup> Only when our heart is touched by what happens in other people’s lives does our eucharistic celebration acquire all its meaning.

**Today, Salvation has Come to this House**

Jesus of Nazareth lived his life on earth with tolerance and kindness. He did not go about judging and excluding people. He showed God’s compassion and mercifulness by what he taught and did, who he approached and embraced,

and not who he excluded. Jesus was consistent with his own teaching. He ate and drank with tax collectors and public sinners (Matt 9:10). He touched those considered untouchable, like the hemorrhaging woman, the lepers (Mark 1: 41), and the dead (Mark 5:24; Luke 7:14). Jesus did not only teach and feed; he also forgave the sins of many, allowing them to restore their broken relation with their community and with their God.

Jesus' sojourn in Zaccheus' house allowed Zaccheus to come out of the prison of corruption. Zacchaeus is no longer retained in the slavery of a questionable life. From now on he is to see himself in a new light. He is also a son of Abraham, the father of those who "keep the way of Yahweh by doing what is upright and just" (Gen. 18:19). As for the woman caught in the very act of adultery, Jesus does not identify her with her weakness or her shortcoming. In his eyes she is not "the adulterous woman." He still calls her "woman" (*isha*), a female person created in the image of God. "Woman" is the same word he used to address his own mother at the wedding feast at Cana (John 2:4).

It is no wonder that the Lord shows compassion for the sinners. Had he not declared that he had come for the downtrodden? "It is not those that are well who need the doctor, but the sick. I have come to call not the upright but the sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32; Mark 2:17). For this reason sinners should not be barred from the sacrament that keeps Jesus visible to their eyes. To do so betrays the Lord's message of hope.

This seems to have been how the church of the first centuries understood participation at the Lord's Table. In fact, it was considered an act of unfaithfulness for believers not to commune. Calvin gives many examples that confirm this practice. In the ancient canons of Anacletus and Calixtus, all were to communicate who did not wish to be outside the pale of the church. Those who did not partake were to be corrected. The Council of Antioch decreed that those who enter the church and hear the Scriptures but abstain from communion are to be removed from the church until they amend their fault. In the first Council of Toulouse this was mitigated, but even here non-communicants were to be admonished, and if they still abstained after admonition, excluded.<sup>26</sup>

In his Epistle to the Ephesians, John Chrysostom writes, "It was not said to him who dishonored the feast, Why have you not taken your seat? But how camest thou in? (Matt 22:12). Whoever partakes not of the sacred

rites is wicked and impudent in being present: should anyone who was invited to a feast come in, wash his hands, take his seat, and seem to prepare to eat, and thereafter taste nothing, would he not, I ask, insult both the feast and the entertainer? So you, standing among those who prepare themselves by prayer to take the sacred food, profess to be one of the number by mere fact of your not going away, and yet you do not partake. Would it not have been better not to have made your appearance? I am unworthy, you say. Then neither were you worthy of the communion of prayer, which is the preparation for taking the sacred mystery.”<sup>27</sup>

It is not to those who claim their worthiness, but those who – like Isaiah, Peter, and Paul – recognize their sinfulness that the Lord entrusts his work of salvation. Jesus came for the sinners. Precisely by welcoming everybody, however much of a sinner they may have been, Jesus proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God. Therefore, the concern for the sinners, the downtrodden, and the poor should be at the center of the memorial (*zikkaron*) of his life, death, and resurrection. It is a duty for all Christian churches to consider themselves as a community; a community of the poor coming to a benevolent giver, of the sick to the physician of their soul, of the sinful to the author of righteousness, and finally of the dead to the giver of life.<sup>28</sup> The only worthiness that is ours to claim is the worthiness of our faith.

The dread of unworthy partaking is not exclusive to Catholics; even today, many Protestant denominations, Mennonites included, are still trying to overcome the medieval dread of unworthy partaking that led to the practice of once or twice yearly communion. It is good to say we partake in the communion of Christ not because we are worthy; we approach his Table by faith. We lean on the gospel of mercy that Jesus not only preached but translated into concrete acts. Jesus tells us: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53). We lean on him because that is what faith is all about. The Lord’s Supper nourishes and sustains us along the way. The blessed bread and blessed cup are spiritual food and drink that we eat only by faith. Augustine expresses it beautifully: “Prepare not the jaws, but the heart; for which alone the Supper is appointed. We believe in Christ when we receive him in faith: in receiving we know what we think: we receive a small portion, but our heart is filled:

it is not therefore that which is seen, but what which is believed, that feeds” (Augustine. Cont. Faust. Lib 13: c. 16).<sup>29</sup>

The Lord’s Supper is the zikkaron of Jesus’ life, of his teachings and deeds, and even of what brought about his death. The church needs to celebrate it more frequently to remind itself that it ought, at the example of its divine Founder, to go across the street and around the world preaching the good news of the kingdom of God, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, consoling the afflicted, and curing all who have fallen into the power of the devil (Acts 10: 38). Jesus was a missionary of hope and joy; let his church be like him.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments. A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove / Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 686-64.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 690-91.

<sup>3</sup> Delbert Burkett, *An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 227.

<sup>4</sup> Gérard Garouste and Marc-Alain Ouaknim, *Haggadah* (New York: Assouline Publishing, 2001), 50.

<sup>5</sup> The *chametz* is fermented bread made of wheat, spelt, barley, oats, and rye. Some Jewish groups also add rice, millet, beans, and lentils, which they call *kitniyos*. *Matzah* are the non-fermented breads normally used for the seder.

<sup>6</sup> *Marror* are bitter herbs, like horseradish etc.

<sup>7</sup> Garouste and Ouaknim, *Haggadah*, 79.

<sup>8</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making*, Vol. I. *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), 796-97.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 597.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, trans. John Beveridge (Albany, Oregon: Sage Software, 1996), 1553.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1554.

<sup>12</sup> Eleanor Kreider, “Communion as Storytime,” in *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, 2.1 (Spring 2001): 27. See John D. Rempel, “The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism: A Study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Dirk Philips,” in *Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History* 33 (Waterloo, ON and Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 48.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1508-09.

<sup>14</sup> Sermon pour la Paque, Morin II, 554 , quoted in Jean-Marie Tillard, *Leçon sur le Mystère de l'eucharistie. Pars prima (Notes de cours)*. (Ottawa: Collège Dominicain de Philosophie et de Theologie, 1998), 60.

<sup>15</sup> The word “epiclesis” derives from the Greek *Ἐπικαλέω*: to call upon the deity for any purpose (Rom 10: 12; 2 Tim 2: 22, etc.).

<sup>16</sup> John D. Rempel, “The Lord’s Supper in Mennonite Tradition,” in *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 2.1 (Spring 2001): 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Noël Bezançon, *A Man Called Jesus*. Trans. Robert Nowell. (Slough, England: St. Paul Publications, 1990), 117-19.

<sup>20</sup> Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Becoming Human Together* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier Press, 1977), 203.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York/Toronto: Doubleday, 1999), 73.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin, 1555.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Noël Bezançon, *A Man Called Jesus*, 81.

<sup>25</sup> H.J.M. Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing: Living a Prayerful Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 177.

<sup>26</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1553.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1559-60.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 1557.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 1548.

*Hippolyto Tshimanga is Mennonite Church Canada’s Mission Partnership Facilitator for Europe and Africa. A former Catholic missionary, he is now a Mennonite minister.*