

Anniversary of Communion on the Moon, July 20, 1969

By Harry E. Winter, OMI (first posted on John Wotherspoon's website [www.v2catholic.com](http://www.v2catholic.com), July 15, 2013; then printed in Ecumenical Trends 42 [Sept. 2013, #8] 14/126-15/127).

The first food and drink consumed on the moon, was a Communion celebration by Presbyterian astronaut Edwin E. (Buzz) Aldrin, Jr., July 20, 1969. Many Catholics and Eastern Orthodox are still surprised that an elder in a supposedly non-liturgical denomination did this.

It was at the Second Vatican Council that Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant liturgists converged remarkably. Unfortunately, such convergence, resulting in Eucharistic hospitality among Christians, is one of the most difficult convergences to continue. When one reads the instructions about inter-Communion in most missalettes and worship aids, one can sadly conclude that the Vatican II impetus has been blunted.

Aldrin's parish, Webster Presbyterian Church, Houston, TX, USA, commemorates the July 20 event each year with the Lord's Supper on the Sunday closest to that date. May July 21 this year be a time for all Christians to review the two principles governing Eucharistic hospitality, and beg the Holy Spirit to help us recapture the impetus of Vatican II regarding common worship.

The Decree on Ecumenism stated the two principles very concisely. Since the Eucharist (and the Sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick) signifies the unity of the Church, sharing these sacraments is generally ruled out. However, since sharing these sacraments provides a needed grace, it is sometimes commended (#8). Please note that the word is not "allowed," or "tolerated," but "commended." The Walter Abbott edition of the Documents of Vatican II commented that "common worship" up to Vatican II was mentioned by students of canon law "in tones akin to horror" (p. 352, n. 17).

Although the Liturgical Movement which received so much attention in Vatican II's Constitution on the Liturgy had started in Roman Catholicism, and the Ecumenical Movement which also received so much attention had started in Protestantism, it was at Vatican II that these two movements converged, and have been converging ever since. (May the Eastern Orthodox pardon this over-simplification.) With Protestants travelling in countries where Catholicism predominated, such as Spain and Italy, seeking the Eucharist, the theologians in the Vatican offices drew up provisions for receiving the three above sacraments in cases of need. One development which also caught their attention was the increased number of Protestants at funerals and weddings in Roman Catholic Churches. With our public worship now in the vernacular, many Protestants discovered the beauty and force of the Vatican II Mass. They missed it in their own churches. Even if they were able to increase the frequency of the Lord's Supper in their own churches, from quarterly to monthly, this still left periods of time when the closest Eucharist was in the neighboring Catholic Church.

I explored this development first in a Dec. 1970 article in the now defunct American Ecclesiastical Review (163, #6:384-89). I ended with the observation and question: "Limited inter-communion

probably will not be allowed by the hierarchy in the immediate near future. But when it is, will many priests be as ignorant of its real meaning as they still are of the renewal begun by Vatican II?"

I was stunned and delighted when on July 8, 1973, less than three years later, the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (now the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity [PCPCU]) issued its "Instruction Concerning Cases When Other Christians May Be Admitted to Eucharistic Communion In the Catholic Church." I then wrote an article "Preaching Ecumenically on the July 8<sup>th</sup> Eucharistic Instruction," American Ecclesiastical Review 167 (Dec., 1973 #6:672-83), explaining the developments especially with in the Protestant Liturgical Movement, which made the PCPCU's provisions so timely. (An East African Catholic publication, GABA, immediately obtained permission from AER and distributed it as part of their ongoing education).

When I taught the tract on the Eucharist at our seminary in Washington, DC, from 1994-97, I discovered the difficulty we all have in reconciling the two principles. One older seminarian pleaded with me after class: "Just tell me, is it ok to give the Eucharist to Protestants or not?" I had to underline to him that all I could do was instruct him in the principles, and share my experience. He himself was going to have to apply the two different principles to very differing situations.

Our provincial (now our superior general) shared with me one occasion which verifies the first principle. At a funeral he attended, an Oblate priest went up to the Protestants present and practically dragged them to Communion. Many of them had no interest or desire to receive Communion. Clearly they did not share enough of our belief in the Eucharist.

Other times I have witnessed Protestant relatives at Catholic funeral Masses, with tears in their eyes, come to Communion, in order to be united on this occasion with their deceased loved ones. Clearly, this is a time when they have a right to the Eucharist. I was delighted when one of our priests who has ministered in several areas where Catholics are a minority, and our Masses are the only Eucharists available, announced simply before Communion: "Those who share our belief in the Eucharist are welcome to receive."

Both AER articles are available on the Oblate Ecumenical website ([www.harrywinter.org](http://www.harrywinter.org)), the Eucharistic hospitality page. I wish they were not still relevant, but somehow the two principles, since they are in such tension, may never go out of style or reflection.

In 1982, the World Council of Churches produced "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" (BEM), another noteworthy evidence of increasing convergence of all the Christian Churches in matters of common worship. No doubt this enabled Pope John Paul II to call attention to the common worship convergence in his encyclical letter on ecumenism, "That All May Be One" (May 25, 1995). He pointed out it is "a source of joy to note that Catholic ministers are able, in certain particular cases, to administer the sacraments of the eucharist, penance and anointing of the sick to Christians who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church but who greatly desire to receive these sacraments, freely request them and manifest the faith which the Catholic Church professes with regard to these sacraments" (#46).

More about Buzz Aldrin's Communion service is available on the Oblate Ecumenical website, Five Ways page, in the booklet Dividing or Strengthening, Five Ways of Christianity, chap. 1, pp. 23-24. The Jesuit paleontologist and theologian Teilhard de Chardin, during a 1923 expedition in Inner Mongolia, when he did not have bread and wine to offer Mass, composed a poetic prayer "Mass on the World." Pope Benedict called it "a great vision," and urged that "we consecrate the world, so that it may become a living host" (America, Aug. 17-24, 2009, p. 5). May Catholics and all concerned Christians, join with the Presbyterians of Webster Presbyterian Church this weekend as our common worship brings the universe closer to the God who made it.

*This article is also available on the Oblate website: [www.omiusa.org](http://www.omiusa.org). (Italics in ET article too).*