

PREACHING ECUMENICALLY ON THE EUCHARIST

By  
HARRY E. WINTER, O.M.I.  
The Oblate College  
Washington, D.C.

Reprinted from **THE AMERICAN ECCLESIASTICAL REVIEW** Vol. CLXIII, No. 6, December, 1970  
*Made in the United States of America*

HARRY E. WINTER, O.M.I.  
*The Oblate College*  
*Washington, D. C.*

"In THIS ECUMENICAL business, we Catholics have been the only ones to give in. The Protestants haven't budged an inch." One hears such observations rather frequently, and it does seem true in certain matters. For example, some new Catholic churches have carried the advice of the *Constitution on the Liturgy* regarding statues (#125) to such an extreme that a bareness reminiscent of older Protestant churches has set in. Thus we violate both the advice of the *Constitution on the Liturgy*, and the corporate nature of worship so forcefully presented in the *Constitution on the Church*; #49-51. From the other side, the Presbyterian historian of worship, James Nichols, has complained of Protestant groups, which in an effort to reduce their plainness in worship, uncritically adopted "a full kit of Roman or Anglo-Catholic paraphernalia."<sup>1</sup>

#### THE FIRST STEP

However, it is clear today that in one area of great importance, Protestants and Catholics are converging by returning together to the spirit of the New Testament and the early Church. In the matter of balancing the "Service of the Word" and the "Service of the Eucharist," there has been neither capitulation nor compromise, but convergence. Since Catholics hear very little from the pulpit regarding this significant development, the following thoughts may provide food for sermons to Catholic or mixed groups.

<sup>1</sup> James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), p. 149.

## PREACHING ECUMENICALLY ON THE EUCHARIST

Formerly, the main-line Protestant Churches so emphasized preaching, that the Lord's Supper was celebrated but quarterly in the vast majority of parishes. And Catholics so emphasized the Eucharist, that one could still arrive after the sermon and "fulfill his Sunday obligation." Today, the patterns have changed. The vast majority of Protestant parishes are aiming for a monthly Supper, to come closer to what the 1968 Faith and Order report recommended: a weekly celebration, at least. Even more important is the theological undergirding. Meeting in 1963 at Toronto, Faith and Order theologians declared: "The Lord's Supper ... is a sacrament of the presence of the crucified and glorified Christ until he comes, and a means whereby the sacrifice of the cross, which we proclaim, is operative within the Church."<sup>1</sup> Protestant theologians thereby moved closer to sacrificial language, which they had avoided for centuries, partly because of the abuses existing in Roman Catholic worship at the time of the Reformation.

When the American Protestant liturgists in the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) published an experimental Supper form (1968), it stunned many Protestants. This "Order of Worship" prescribes prayers for the dead, speaks of worshipping "with the whole company of saints in heaven and on earth," suggests kneeling during the institution account, speaks of the congregation offering themselves and presenting holy gifts, and as a clincher suggests reserving the "blessed" bread and wine for communion of the sick.<sup>3</sup>

True, there are many Protestants in the pews who have no inkling that their leaders are presenting views which recover much of the ground lost in the Puritan and revivalistic periods of American Protestantism. True, some Protestant theologians, especially in the conservative wing, are fighting these "Catholic" tendencies. But to say today that Protestants have not budged, or that they are not moving towards us, is completely erroneous.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Toronto statement is available in *New Directions in Faith and Order: Bristol, 1967*, Faith and Order Paper #50 (Geneva and New York: World Council of Churches, 1968), p. 61. Both the Bristol report and the 1968 weekly celebration recommendation are found in the paper "The Eucharist in Ecumenical Thought," *Study Encounter*, 1968 #3. The entire paper is reprinted in the Catholic journal of spiritual ecumenism *One in Christ*, V (1969), 448-56.

<sup>3</sup> An Order of Worship, Committee on Worship and the executive Committee of COCU (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1968).

Even the architecture of most new Protestant churches no longer centers on a massive pulpit, but includes in a prominent place, a table for the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Few Catholics need to be convinced that the emphasis in the Mass has changed from Eucharist alone, to Eucharist and Scripture, or as the *Decree on Priestly Ministry* puts it, "the twofold table of sacred Scripture and the Eucharist" (#18). But many Catholics need to be told why this has happened; it is no capitulation to Protestants. When one encourages people to be present for the proclamation of Scripture-homily, instead of "getting in by the Offertory," one is pruning back a harmful growth, even as when the Church forbids Benediction immediately before or after Mass.<sup>2</sup> From excessive dependence on the Eucharist almost as a magical rite, one is moving towards a balance of Scripture and Eucharist. When the revised ritual for the ordination of a priest speaks of the newly ordained's responsibility for "the celebration of the Lord's sacrifice," and deliberately drops the unscriptural term "Mass"; when it prefers the term "presbyterate" to "priesthood"<sup>3</sup>—do Catholics realize the extent of this pruning back and balancing process?

Perhaps the best place to observe the convergence of Protestant and Catholic Eucharistic thought is the "Bread of Life" discourse in the sixth chapter of St. John's Gospel. Formerly, most Protestant exegetes interpreted the chapter as having no reference to the Eucharist at all. It referred exclusively to Jesus' sapiential teaching, and eventually, to the minister's preaching of this teaching. Catholics, on the other hand, reacted by preaching as if the Eucharist were the only element involved in the chapter. Today, many Protestants quickly find the "unmistakable allusions to the Eucharist" in chapter six.<sup>4</sup> From our side, Father Raymond Brown writes

---

4 Note that Benediction is still a very needed service; those "liberal" parishes which have simply let Benediction lapse are doing just as much harm as the "conservative" parish which still insists on Mass against the wall.

5 *Revised Ordination Rite* (Washington, D. C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1969). Fr. David N. Power, O.M.I., *Ministers of Christ and His Church—the Theology of the Priesthood* (London: Chapman, 1969), p. 201 comments on the one insertion into the revised ordination prayer: It "is designed to give greater prominence to the ministry of the word and each presbyter's responsibility for the spread of the Gospel."

6 *Interpreter's Bible*, ed. by George Arthur Buttrick et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1952), VIII, 567 (562-63 also).

that "the two themes, sapiential and sacramental, complement one another: Christ's teaching reveals the Eucharist; the Eucharist strengthens our receptivity for Christ's teaching."<sup>7</sup> Thus we realize that instead of logically proceeding, as modern Western man expects, the Semitic authors of much of our Scriptures loved to interweave different themes. In chapter six, it is sometimes difficult to decide where the sapiential theme stops and the Eucharistic theme takes over. Used on five consecutive Sundays of Year B, on the weekdays of Easter Season every year, in Masses for the Dead, and Votive Masses of the Holy Eucharist (including Forty Hours), this chapter almost demands that the homilist preach ecumenically, if he is going to soundly explain the significance of the passage.

Any of the selections from the New Testament used in the Votive Mass "For the Spread of the Gospel" provide the preacher with the opportunity of starting from the early Church's emphasis on preaching the Word, and proceeding to the balance in primitive Christianity between the Word and Eucharist. From there, it is a normal step to explain the recovery today, and the ecumenical convergence. Similarly, any of the texts on the Eucharist, especially *I Cor.* 11: 23-34, provide the homilist with the opportunity of starting from the Eucharistic side, proceeding to the balance, and making the application to our current situation, explaining the Protestant- Catholic growing together in worship.

Are not most of our Catholics mature enough to realize that if we preach about a growing convergence, we are not preaching indifferentism or equality of Eucharistic presence? It would seem that Catholics could attend a United Presbyterian Lord's Supper, for example, and recognize with astonishment and thankfulness many common elements. Yet they would not conclude to equal value before God, of both Eucharists, especially if their priests had preached that convergence is not coincidence.

To preach that there are important elements lacking in the Eucharist, as many Protestants celebrate it in their almost infinite variety, tells less than half the story. The bishops at Vatican II (*Decree on Ecumenism*, #22) and subsequent statements by the Secretariate for Christian Unity have also taught that there are definite spiritual values in Protestant Eucharistic worship, values which we Roman Catholics should thankfully recognize.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *Gospel of St. John*, New Testament Reading Guide #13, rev. 2nd ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1965), p. 40.

Urgently and insistently, Catholic priests must present these ecumenical themes to their congregations. It must be shown that in this important area, we are not capitulating to Protestants, but converging with them.

In many states, the current abortion debate has dampened the eagerness of priests to preach on ecumenical themes. But clarity and charity, or friendship and firmness, are not mutually exclusive, not for the true Christian (*Eph.* 4: 31-32). One should clearly state the Church's teaching on abortion, and her position on her love for her sister Churches. If anything, the abortion question makes ecumenical preaching more urgent, as naive instant ecumenism fortunately dies, and the real bonds that unite us, take root.

#### A SECOND STEP?

The above thoughts represent the first step in a greater awareness of what the Spirit is doing in Protestant and Catholic circles. Certainly for priests, and probably for those small groups of Catholics already introduced to the first step, a second step is necessary. We have to ask ourselves what the first step means; are we ready for limited and controlled inter-communion with our American Protestant brethren? Because of the growing convergence explained above, many theologians are asking whether we now share enough of a common belief in the Eucharist to permit limited Eucharistic sharing, as a sign of this common advance, and as a cause of further growing together. Ten years ago, it would have been easy to answer negatively. Today, because of the changes reflected in step one, and visible in both the *Decree on Ecumenism* #8, and the May 1967 Directory of the Secretariate for Christian Unity (#55), the answer is not so clear.

Of course, the problem of valid orders must be solved. Already theologians have begun to grapple with this difficulty, and are proposing to the American bishops, partial solutions which give promise of permitting limited Eucharistic sharing<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See Fr. John Haughey, S.J., "Christian Unity—the U. S. Scene," *America*, October 10, 1970, pp. 261-62 for the Roman Catholic-Lutheran consultation in particular, and Fr. Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B., "Ways of Validating Ministry," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* VII, 209-65, for the general problem of validity in Protestant orders.

## PREACHING ECUMENICALLY ON THE EUCHARIST

Certainly there are localities where neither Protestant nor Catholic is ready for step two. While most Protestant seminaries are increasingly liturgical, and most Catholic seminaries increasingly biblical, there are many parishes where the Eucharistic convergence has never been made known. In some localities, the Catholic priest, after preaching step one, would have to bide his time until several of the Protestant parishes were matching him. The fundamental presupposition of the 1967 Directory's sections on "Prayer in Common," and "Liturgical Worship" (#32-63) is that priests are familiar with the current state of worship in their neighboring Protestant congregations. This is a tall order, but not an impossible one, especially if one has a parish ecumenical committee of educated laypeople.

The implementation of Vatican II has been spotty. In some dioceses, episcopal fiat imposed the changes. The plant of a vigorous contemporary Catholicism, without any grass roots among priests and people, is withering there. If the hopes aroused by the Council are to be fulfilled, ecumenical preaching concerning renewal in Scripture and worship must vastly increase. 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?