

## Communion on the Moon Fifty Years Later

### Eucharistic Hospitality Advances?

by Harry Winter, OMI, published in *Ecumenical Trends* 48 (March, 2019, 3): 10/42-12/44.

When President Donald Trump gave his State of the Union Message on Feb. 5, 2019, he reminded us that fifty years ago this July 20, humans first walked on the moon. By placing astronaut Buzz Aldrin, among those notables invited, he also reminded us that the first food and drink consumed on the moon was the Blessed Bread and Wine Aldrin had brought from his church, Webster Presbyterian, near Houston, TX.

Webster Presbyterian Church commemorates Aldrin's action with Lunar Communion Sunday on the Sunday closest to July 20. This year, that Sunday will be July 21, the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time, and with many Christian Churches using the same Lectionary, I will propose some ways that we might celebrate this event together.

During the past fifty years, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox leaders struggle with the fact and teaching that we hold neither Open Communion nor Closed Communion, but elements of both. Our failure to follow the teaching of Vatican II that spiritual need sometimes "commends" Eucharistic sharing (Decree on Ecumenism, #8) with Protestants is causing much bitterness, as we shall see below.

Father Thomas Rosica, CSB, expressed this on April 18, 2018, when he gave the Concluding Keynote Address at the 2018 National Workshop on Christian Unity in Silver Spring, MD.

Let us look at our understanding and celebration of the Eucharist. Many members of our Churches today feel the pain of division among us and ask serious questions about the meaning and power of the Eucharist for our individual and ecclesial lives. Imagine for a moment if we understood the Eucharist as an opportunity for the Christian community to give praise and thanks to God while being transformed into the body of Christ active in the world today, rather than only insisting upon full agreement on transubstantiation, a term even many Catholics do not understand. Could the Eucharist be a path to unity rather than simply a celebration of doctrinal agreement?

What could happen if Churches (especially the Catholic Church) recognize the important role of ecumenical marriages in the movement toward unity? What would happen if spouses in such marriages could be welcomed at the Lord's table in the churches of both spouses as examples of the unity that is possible? As Pope Francis says, "Communion is not a reward for the perfect but food for the weak." The couples are already united by a sacramental love that reflects the unity of Christ with his church; should they not be able to be united at the Eucharist? These are serious questions and conversations that we must have together on the path to unity, visible full communion and reconciliation.<sup>1</sup>

Rosica's ten page address is a marvelous summary of the entire ecumenical movement, with special emphasis on Evangelization. *Ecumenical Trends* recognized this when it printed the entire talk.<sup>2</sup>

In 2013, *Ecumenical Trends* presented how Aldrin's action increased the need for Eucharistic Hospitality. Again in 2016, *Ecumenical Trends* addressed the challenge.<sup>3</sup>

The Presbyterian-Reformed tradition offer us a good example of how the frequency of the Lord's Supper has increased in those Churches. I'm sure the Methodist tradition also is increasing its frequency, but for this article, let us concentrate on the Presbyterians. When I examined how the Presbyterians led the adoption of the Vatican II Sunday Lectionary by US Protestantism, I inquired about the frequency of the Supper. Jack Marcum, of the Research Services of the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA), informed me that from 1990-97, congregations reported an increase from 42% to 55% of those celebrating the Lord's Supper "monthly or more often."<sup>4</sup>

A 2012 study reported that 2% of current PCUSA congregations celebrate the Lord's Supper every week as their only or primary worship service, but 23% celebrate the Lord's Supper every week at another weekly service (early Sunday morning, evening, or midweek)<sup>5</sup>

A comparison of four editions of the Sunday worshipbook from 1947 to 2018 reveals stronger language in each edition: the weekly celebration of the Eucharist should be the norm. With the introduction of the Church Year, and the Vatican II Lectionary, a sea change has occurred in Presbyterian Sunday worship.<sup>6</sup>

When Protestants are allowed to be the sponsor of Catholic infants at baptism; when Protestants are chosen by their Catholic nieces and nephews as sponsors at confirmation, we should not be surprised that they desire to receive Communion at those Masses. One couple, married Presbyterian pastors, expressed the denial in several ways. First, the husband, Rev. Bruce Gillette, wrote "I don't think most Catholics realize how painful your church's teachings and practices are for us. ...I hope to live to see the day when I can share the Eucharist with Catholic brothers and sisters with the blessing of your church to do so (individual priest friends have often shared it already)."<sup>7</sup>

Bruce was the author of the overture to the Presbyterian General Assembly that resulted in *Interchurch Families: Resources for Ecumenical Hope: Catholic/Reformed Dialogue in the United States*, published jointly by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Presbyterian Church USA (2002).

His co-pastor wife Carolyn Gillette is a noted author of hymns. Part of her response was to publish this hymn: "Christ, You Often Sat at Dinner"

Christ, you often sat at dinner with the outcasts and the poor;

You reached out to every sinner, sharing bread and wine and more--

You proclaimed that God's great table is a joyful, welcome place;

No one wears an outcast label or is turned away from grace.

Some who heard your gracious teaching murmured at the things they saw,

For your love was more out-reaching than the limits of their law.

When they judged the ones you welcomed, when they noted others' sin,  
You responded, "In God's kingdom, all are gladly welcomed in!"  
Lord, you blessed a meal and shared it, giving meanings that were new:  
"It's my body; take and eat it! It's my blood poured out for you!"  
Risen Christ, they knew your presence in the breaking of the bread;  
In that meal was God's abundance: All remembered! All were fed!  
Lord, we grieve a church divided where your people can't embrace--  
Where believers are excluded from the table of your grace.  
How can there be joy and singing at the table you hold dear  
When the words are clear and stinging, "No, you are not welcome here!"?  
Christ, we know that you are able to bring healing through your cross;  
Bring together at your table all for whom you paid the cost.  
Though the feasting in your kingdom may still seem so far away,  
May we share your meal of welcome as we wait that glorious day.<sup>8</sup>

Her hymns are copyrighted. "O God We Grieve the Hatred," written after the March 15, 2019 massacre of Moslem worshippers in New Zealand, went viral.

When we hear the celebrant make the announcement at weddings and funerals "Only Catholics in good standing may receive Communion," we conclude it is unChristian and evil. When we read the US Conference of Catholic Bishops instruction in the missalette "Guidelines for the Reception of Communion," which almost totally ignores the Decree on Ecumenism instruction above "commending" reception in cases of need, we should weep.

The Guidelines from 1996 speak of "exceptional circumstances." The authors seem to be unaware that these "exceptional" times are becoming frequent and regular times. When the German Catholic bishops proposed in 2018 a more Christian and humane way of recognizing cases of need for married couples in mixed marriages, there was an immediate and positive the response from all over the world. Ruth Reardon has clearly written about the document, the response from the Vatican, and most importantly, the hope for future action.<sup>9</sup>

As the July 20 anniversary comes closer, it would be well to remember the description by Webster Presbyterian Church (WPC) of the original worship by Aldrin.

On July 20, 1969, when the first Apollo mission landed on the moon, ruling elder Buzz Aldrin, as an act of thanksgiving, celebrated Holy Communion as an extension of the WPC congregation with the chalice and elements given to him by the church before he left Earth. WPC members were unique participants during the historic service as they gathered for communion in the same hour. Lunar Communion Sunday continues to be celebrated annually at Webster Presbyterian Church on the Sunday nearest the anniversary of the first moon landing.<sup>10</sup>

Would the national Presbyterian Worship Office be willing to send out materials for all Christian Churches to join them this July 21? Would Webster Presbyterian Church invite one representative from both liturgical and non-liturgical Churches to join them? Would each Presbyterian Synod across the United States contact the appropriate Roman Catholic Diocese, and other Churches, to invite a representative to join them for a synod/diocese joint service on July 21?

Would our national USCCB worship office send out an appropriate general intercession for every Catholic Church for Sunday, July 21, with a bulletin announcement the previous Sunday explaining the importance of the 50th anniversary?

One of the most effective Roman Catholic missiologists, Father Stephen Bevans, SVD, recently called attention to a new and creative dimension of spirituality: the cosmic.

to think in terms of the vast amount of time, the 13.8 billion years since the Big Bang, to think of the vastness of space in this universe of billions of light-years in diameter, to think in terms of the complexity of cosmic and biologic evolution--such a perspective changes completely our understanding of doctrines like creation, redemption, Christology, ecclesiology, and mission itself.<sup>11</sup>

The moon is a relatively small distance away, in terms of Bevans insight. But it is a beginning, for Christians to celebrate together during the Eucharist, the accomplishment of reaching our satellite.

Notes:

1. Fr. Thomas Rosica, CSB, "Waiting for the Day when the Spirit Will Make Us One," Concluding Keynote Address, National Workshop for Christian Unity, Silver Spring, MD, April 18, 2018, pp. 7-8.
2. Rosica's talk is available in two parts:  
<http://saltandlighttv.org/WaitingfortheDaywhentheSpiritwillmakeusone>; "Waiting for the Day," *Ecumenical Trends* 47 (May, 2018, 5): 1/1-6/70, 14/78. Citation is #'s 12-13, ET p. 6/70.
3. Father Harry E. Winter, OMI, "Anniversary of Communion on the Moon, July 20, 1969," *Ecumenical Trends* 42 (Sept. 2013, 8) 14/126-15/127 (also available on the Oblate website [www.omiusa.org](http://www.omiusa.org)); Father Harry E. Winter, OMI, "Momentum Builds for Eucharistic Sharing From the 2015 Synod on the Family to the 500th Anniversary of Luther's Theses, 2017," *Ecumenical Trends* 45 (Jan. 2016, 1) 10/10-12/12.
4. Harry E. Winter, "Presbyterians Pioneer the Vatican II Sunday Lectionary: Three Worship Models Converge," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 38 (Spring-Summer, 2001, 2-3): 148; also in PCUSA *Call to Worship* 38 (2004-05, 1): 54.

5. David Gambrell, Associate for Worship, Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Mission Agency, "2012 Clerk's Annual Questionnaire," in an e-mail to Bruce Gillette, March 20, 2019, forwarded to Harry Winter, March 20, 2019.

6. Harry E. Winter, *Catholic, Evangelical and Reformed: The Lord's Supper in the (United) Presbyterian Church USA, 1945-70* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania dissertation, 1976); *The Book of Common Worship* (1946) and *The Worshipbook*, (1970); *The Book of Common Worship* (1993), p. 7; *Call to Worship* (2018). See especially the PCUSA Worship Office website that encourages weekly Eucharist: "Weekly Eucharist," accessible on March 19, 2019, but not on March 23.

7. Bruce Gillette, e-mail to Harry Winter, March 19, 2019.

8. Carolyn Gillette's hymns can be found at [www.carolynshymns.com](http://www.carolynshymns.com).

9. Ruth Reardon, "German Bishops' Guidelines on Eucharistic Sharing in Interchurch Families 2018: What's New?" *One in Christ* 52 (2018,2): 339-58. For more on Dr. Reardon, and on Eucharistic Hospitality, see the Oblate of Mary Immaculate website Mission-Unity-Dialogue, Eucharistic Hospitality page, [www.harrywinter.org](http://www.harrywinter.org).

10. [www.websterpresby.org/content.cfm?id=329](http://www.websterpresby.org/content.cfm?id=329), History, p. 2, accessed 3/23/2019.

11. Stephen Bevans, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 43 (Jan. 2019, 1): 89.

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