

AN INTEGRAL EUCHARISTIC ECOLOGY

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Abstract

In the context of *Laudato Sí*, this article considers the Eucharist in relationship to the theory and practice of integral ecology. It brings together what is too often kept apart: the world and history, matter and spirit, nature and grace, faith and imagination, in the real presence of Jesus in this sacrament, just as the “transubstantiation” anticipates the universal transformation of all things in Christ. The Eucharist is the ever-renewable resource in a world of non-renewable resources as it nourishes the kind of contemplative action required at this critical moment in history.

Keywords: Action, Contemplation, Eucharist, Integral Ecology, *Laudato Sí*, Real Presence, Sacrament, Transubstantiation

How might the Eucharist shape an ecological vision? We suggest in this article that the Eucharist inspires a genuinely integral ecology.

1. Eucharistic Ecology

The Eucharist in serving an integral ecology brings nature and culture together precisely by relating them to the Body of Christ. The “real presence” of the whole Christ is communicated to the community through the transformation of the shared “fruit of the earth and the work of human hands.” Earthy elements that sustain human life and communication have an essential place in the “ecology” of God’s self-giving in Christ. In this respect, the Eucharist

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brings together many gifts and many forms of giving. It offers to all who would receive it a holy communion within a universe of grace and giving. From nature's giving we have the grain and the grapes. From the giving expressed in human work and skill, we have the gifts of bread and wine. From the generous giving of family and friends flow the gifts of good meals and festive celebrations. From Jesus' self-giving at the Last Supper, the disciples were given his "body and blood," the food and drink to nourish life in him. He will breathe into his disciples the gift of the Spirit. And working in and through all these gifts and modes of giving is the gift of the Father who so loved the world. When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, all these gifts come together to nourish our lives in this world with the gift of communion with God.¹

2. Body and Spirit, Nature and Grace

In a telling paragraph, Pope Francis writes,

The Sacraments are a privileged way in which nature is taken up by God to become a means of mediating supernatural life. Through our worship of God, we are invited to embrace the world on a different plane. Water, oil, fire and colours are taken up in all their symbolic power and incorporated in our act of praise... This is especially clear in the spirituality of the Christian East... For Christians, all the creatures of the material universe find their true meaning in the incarnate Word, for the Son of God has incorporated in his person part of the material world, planting in it a seed of definitive transformation. Christianity does not reject matter. Rather, bodiliness is considered in all its value in the liturgical act, whereby the human body is disclosed in its inner nature as a temple of the Holy Spirit and is united with the Lord Jesus, who himself took a body for the world's salvation."²

We can single out four points especially relevant to a Christian integral ecology:

1. A condensed theology of the sacraments is background for the treatment of the Eucharist: The Sacraments are privileged ways in which nature is taken up by God to become a means of mediating supernatural life (LS, 235). Nature supplies not only "the matter of the sacraments," but also, from a larger perspective, suggests what might be termed "the sacramentality of matter."

¹John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World*, Luke Ben Tallon, ed., London: T&T Clark, 2011, 128-131; 135-140; 151-154.

²Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si', On Care for Our Common Home* (May 24, Pentecost Sunday, 2015), Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015, 235. [Hereafter, LS, followed by paragraph number].

2. Through our Christian worship of God, faith embraces the world on a different plane. Water, oil, fire, bread and wine, colours and scents, human gestures are taken up in all their symbolic power and incorporated in the act of praise and thanksgiving (LS, 235).

3. All creatures of the material universe find their true meaning in the incarnate Word, for the Son of God has embodied the material world in his person, planting in it a seed of definitive transformation (LS, 235).

4. Christianity does not reject matter in the name of some higher spirituality. Rather, faith and worship are expressed in and through our bodies. In the liturgy itself, the human body is disclosed in its true nature as a temple of the Holy Spirit and is united with the Lord Jesus who, as the Word incarnate on this earth, embodies for all the world to come (LS, 235).

The Eucharist, then, provides a generous framework in which to sustain ecological thinking and action. It presupposes the fruitfulness of the earth and history. As the Christmas antiphon sings, "Let the earth be open to bud forth the saviour!" The Holy Spirit working through Mary, this woman of both Israel and the earth, brings forth Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to be the son of Mary, to breathe the air of planet Earth. Jesus, in his love unto the end, in his death and resurrection, draws creation into the Trinitarian life, as he prays to the Father, "May they be one, as we are one" (Jn 17:22).

As the summit and source of the life of the Church, the Eucharist inculcates a humble and far reaching wisdom, in its ability to bring together what is too often kept apart.³ It arises originally from the imagination of Jesus himself, intent, as he was and is, to communicate true life to the world (Jn 10:10). With the arrival of the hour in which God's universal love will be revealed, the meaning of the Eucharist comes into focus (Jn 13:1-17). In this respect, John 6 speaking of Jesus as the bread of life, must be read in conjunction with John 13 and the example and commandment regarding foot-washing that he gives.⁴ In this respect, God is not an object to be possessed by connoisseurs of religious experience, but the mystery of self-giving love expressed in Jesus washing the disciples' feet. At that moment of revelation, love is not an escape from the world but a deeper involvement with

³For a sophisticated discussion of the modern situation and the value of the Eucharist, see Simon Oliver, "The Eucharist Before Nature and Culture," *Modern Theology* 15, 3 (July 1999) 331-353.

⁴See Francis J. Moloney, SDB, *The Gospel of John, Sacra Pagina* Vol. 4, Daniel Harington, SJ, ed., Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998, especially 372-378.

it. To love God means loving others; worshipping the Father entails dedication to all God's children, our brothers and sisters, and to the earthly home we have in common. The Father's house (Jn 14:2) into which Jesus goes to prepare a place for his followers, breathes an overwhelming hospitality. He lays down the rules of the God's household by washing his disciples' feet, and exhorting them to do likewise. In the realm of the Father, love rules.

3. The Ever-Renewable Resource

The cosmic scale of the Eucharist is powerfully evoked in the following paragraph from LS:

It is in the Eucharist that all that has been created finds its greatest exaltation. Grace, which tends to manifest itself tangibly, found unsurpassable expression when God himself became man and gave himself as food for his creatures. The Lord, in the culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation, chose to reach our intimate depths through a fragment of matter. He comes not from above, but from within, he comes that we might find him in this world of ours. In the Eucharist, fullness is already achieved; it is the living centre of the universe, the overflowing core of love and of inexhaustible life. Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. Indeed the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love: "Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world" ...the Eucharist joins heaven and earth; it embraces and penetrates all creation. The world which came forth from God's hands returns to him in blessed and undivided adoration: in the bread of the Eucharist, "creation is projected towards divinization, towards the holy wedding feast, towards Union with the Creator himself" (LS, 236).⁵

Note the following six points contained in this paragraph:

1. "It is in the Eucharist that all that has been created finds its greatest exaltation" (LS, 236).
2. "Grace, which tends to manifest itself tangibly, found unsurpassable expression when God himself became man and gave himself as food for his creatures" (236).
3. "The Lord, in the culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation, chose to reach our intimate depths through a fragment of matter. He comes not from above, but from within, he comes that we might find him in this world of ours" (LS, 236).

⁵Pope Francis cites Pope Benedict XVI's "Homily for the Mass of Corpus Domini" (June 15, 2006), AAS 98 (2006) 513.

4. "In the Eucharist, fullness is already achieved; it is the living centre of the universe, the overflowing core of love and of inexhaustible life" (LS, 236).

5. "Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. Indeed the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love: Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world'" (LS, 236).

6. "The Eucharist joins heaven and earth; it embraces and penetrates all creation. The world which came forth from God's hands returns to him in blessed and undivided adoration: in the bread of the Eucharist, 'creation is projected towards divinization, towards the holy wedding feast, towards Union with the Creator himself'" (LS, 236).

With these points in mind, we can take a further step. Catholic tradition employs the hallowed term, transubstantiation, to indicate the manner in which the bread and wine are changed into the Lord's body and blood. This doctrinal element of the sacramental tradition is, however, in need of a larger cosmic perspective, as when it is realised that the Eucharist is being celebrated within a cosmic process of transformation.⁶ The physical, the chemical, the biological structures of our universe have culminated, through a succession of transformations. These are registered in human consciousness. In our minds and hearts, the universe has become aware of itself as a vast wonderful mystery. Within it, we live and breathe, humbly aware that we are not the centre or origin of all this great cosmic event, but thankful for the sheer gift of existence, patient and hopeful as it carries us on toward some final outcome. We owe our existence to the Other, the great creative mystery that has brought us into being. Are we to live on this earth through which we have received much, but as having no part of the giving, as life-givers, love-givers, care-givers for the generations to come? What are we to do with ourselves as the stream of life lifts us up, carries us on, and confronts us with the fact that we were not here until very recently, and will not be here, forever?

Eucharistic faith brings to expression the scope and shape of our humanity. It presupposes all the material and biological transformations that peak in the emergence of human consciousness. It carries forward the momentous leap in human history that occurred in Israel's special covenant with the One God. Then, Mary's Spirit-inspired "Let it be with

⁶For a seminal work, see Gustave Martelet, *The Risen Christ and the Eucharist World*, trans. René Hague, New York: Crossroad, 1976. Note especially Ephesians 1:9-10.

me according to your word" (Lk 1:38) embodies the genetic potential of creation. She gives her consent to become pregnant with the Christ, the final "life-form" of creation, yet sharing in the life of this planet.

4. Eucharistic Contemplation

Both Greek philosophy and Hebrew faith strongly distinguished between God and the world, between the Creator and creation. The distinctively Christian faith in the incarnation of the Word brings together what even the deepest philosophy and the greatest faith had hitherto kept apart. The sacrament of the Eucharist implies that God is so much God, so limitless and creative in goodness, that the divine Spirit can reach into the innermost depths of matter, so to give the physical world a part in communicating the most divine of gifts. From another point of view, the material world is so much deeply and fully created by God, so possessed and held in being by the Creator, that it is the medium through which God contacts us. Thus, the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us.

By nourishing minds and hearts with such mysteries, the Eucharist celebrates the universe as a great spiritual breathing space. In that God-filled space, everything and everyone is related. The Eucharistic universe does not suffocate the life of the world, but is immeasurably hospitable to all that it is. In this regard, the Eucharist educates the imagination, mind and heart to apprehend the universe as one of communion and connectedness in Christ. That totality is materialised in the earthly, physical elements of the shared bread and wine of the sacrament, in the community of believers receiving it, and in Christ giving himself to them as their food and drink. In that holy communion, the universe comes home to us as a new creation.

Through the Eucharist, the totality of creation is reclaimed as belonging to Christ, and to all who are "in Christ." Contemplative faith brings together the superficial, fragmented, and alienating elements, and lifts our experience into another vision. The universe is "otherwise"; it is christened, and seeded with the Spirit-energies of faith, hope and love. It is being transformed—"transubstantiated" — into the Body of the Risen One. To this hopeful vision, the Body of Christ becomes the milieu of our existence, in which nothing is left out, nothing left behind. Eucharistic faith lives in the world of shared mystery, charged with communication, a field of relationships to everything and everyone. Though we human beings have been busy through our short history in sundering relationships to one another, to creation itself and to the Creator, the Divine Word has been writing

our collective name in the dust of the earth we share as our common home. For “in Christ” — according to the Pauline vision — all things hold together (Col 1:17), and are gathered up in him (Eph 1:10). Though the “image of the invisible God,” he is “the firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15). All things are made “in him,” and are destined to be “for him” (v. 16). The mystery of Christ is for the universe the all-unifying attractor, the direction inscribed into its origin, the goal drawing it onward, and the force holding it together. All reality — the physical world, all forms of life, human consciousness, its cultural creations, and its transformation in the Spirit — all are embodied in the plenitude of the Risen One. As the heart and centre of a transformed creation, he is the life and the light of the world (Jn 1:3-4).

Through the Eucharistic imagination, a distinctive ecological vision and commitment take shape. If the literal meaning of *eucharistia* is “thanksgiving”, the comprehensive meaning of such thanksgiving is found in gratitude for all the kinds of givings and gifts that nourish our existence. The self-giving love of the Father is the origin: “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10). Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians with a great Eucharistic outpouring:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love... With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will... as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph 1:3-10).

The Father’s primordial love is displayed in an all-comprehending providence. The “one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:6) is ever at work for our sake, gathering up all things in Christ, the “things of heaven and things of earth.” Whether our gaze is upward to God, or downward to the earth, we are confronted with so many dimensions of God’s giving. We are indeed “up to our necks in debt.”⁷ Divine providence has guided the great cosmic processes over billions of years to create the conditions in which planet earth could be a biosphere, a place of life. The same providence has worked through the evolutionary dynamics that have made us what we are — “earthlings”, human beings, co-existing with a million other forms of life in the delicate ecology of this planet. In

⁷David S. Toolan, SJ, “Nature is an Heraclitean Fire. Reflections on Cosmology in an Ecological Age,” *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits* 23, 5 (November 1991; whole issue) 35-43.

this continuing chain of giving and receiving, we live not only *with*, but *from* and *off* and *for* one another. The long history of gifts, the creative providence of God's acting on our behalf has led to the Word of God being present to us in person. The Word becomes flesh and dwells amongst us, to bring healing, forgiveness and abundant life. His cross reaches into the depths of the evil we suffer or cause, to promise reconciliation in an always greater love. His resurrection is our assurance that this long history of creative love will not be defeated. Love and life will have the last word, beyond anything we can imagine. The crowning gift of the Spirit is made to guide us into all truth, declaring "the things that are to come" (Jn 16:13).

So much has been given to us, that we might exist and live. How, then, do we begin to repay what we owe in a non-inflationary currency? How do we too become a life-giving influence in return? How do we act in this economy of giving and grace?

5. Eucharistic Action

The Eucharistic command of the Lord, "Do this in memory of me," arises from the imagination of one who gave himself without reserve for the sake of the many and the all. By entering into the spirit of Jesus' self-giving, we begin to have a heart open to all God's creation, refusing to leave out of our concerns any aspect of that good creation that the Creator has loved into being. By entering into Christ's imagination and becoming members of his body, we are in fact putting our souls back into our bodies. For we become re-embodied in him who is related to everything and everyone. In and through him, we co-exist with all creation. We begin to live in a new time-frame determined by the patient, creative goodness of God who is working to draw all things to their fulfilment. We start to have time, beyond the pressures and compulsions of instant demand, to appreciate the wholeness of God's creation. We begin to own, as truly our own, what we had previously disowned or bypassed — above all, a living solidarity with the world of nature.

The Eucharist stimulates its own ecological perspectives. Everything has its part in God's creation. Everything has been owned by the divine Word in the incarnation. Everything is involved in the great transformation already begun in his resurrection. We are connected in a giving universe, at the heart of which is the self-giving love of God: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12:24). We are living and dying into an ever larger selfhood. The true

self is realised in a network of relationships within a communion pervading the whole of the universe. This self is shaped by the Trinitarian relationships that constitute the very being of God.

The Eucharist, then, inspires us to welcome the great, generative reality of the cosmos and the ecological reality of our planetary biosphere in a more thankful spirit. The universe and this earth have their place in "the Father's house of many dwelling places" (Cf. Jn 14:2).

To obey Jesus' command, "Do this in memory of me," is to "remember" all that has been dismembered in the sterile imagination of modern culture. The Eucharistic forms of faith, hope and love do not bypass either the universe or even our planetary home. Spiritual progress is not an escape from what we are, but a generous reclamation of the world as destined for transformation. We cannot set nature aside, for it is our own flesh and blood. Loving our neighbour means loving the whole cosmic and planetary neighbourhood of our existence. In the measure we share the charged reality of the Eucharist, the Christian imagination expands to its fullest dimensions. Paul's prayer begins to be answered: "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:18-19).

The time and space of our earthly existence are filled with the energies of true life. Here and now, we are destined, not only to be jubilant participants in the feast but also, through all the giving and service that love demands, to be with Christ part of the meal. We contribute the energies of our lives to the great banquet of the new creation. With Jesus, we fall as grains of wheat into the holy ground to die, in order not to remain alone (Jn 12:24). Such a sense of life suggests a deeper understanding of nature and, indeed, of our earthly existence. The earth itself begins to appear, in the words of Beatrice Bruteau, as "... the Eucharistic Planet, a Good Gift planet, which is structured in mutual feeding, as intimate self-sharing. It is a great Process, a circulation of living energies, in which the Real Presence of the Absolute is discerned."⁸

The relational existence that Christ nourishes inspires a sense of reality at odds with any self-enclosed individualistic vision. In

⁸Beatrice Bruteau, "Eucharistic Ecology and Ecological Spirituality," *Cross Currents* (Winter 1990) 501.

expressing his Eucharistic relationship to us and our world, Jesus is acting out of his own sense of reality as field of communion and mutual indwelling. He prays, "... that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I in you, may they also be in us... I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one" (Jn 17:21-22). Our unity in God derives from the way the Father and the Son are united in the one divine life: the divine persons are not independent entities somehow managing to come together. Divine life is an eternal flow of one into the other, in relationships of mutual self-giving: "Instead of taking as the norm of Reality those things which are *outside* one another, he [Jesus] takes as a standard and paradigm those who are *in* one another."⁹ We are challenged to imagine our inter-relationships in terms of mutual indwelling modelled on the union existing between the Father and the Son. On this finite level, it is to nourish the other into being. And the life-giving nourishment we give is nothing less than the gift of ourselves. We are *in* one another for the life of the other. By being *from* the other, *for* the other, and so, *in* the other, our earthly-human lives participate in God's own Trinitarian life and love.

The Eucharist inspires a deep ecological sensibility. Our ways of relating to everyone and everything in God's creation occur within a field of shared life and communion. The first movement of Christian existence is to give thanks (*eucharistia*) for the wonder of the love that has called us to be part of a commonwealth of life. Such "thanking" deeply conditions the "thinking" necessary to address the urgent ecological problems of our day. Obviously influenced by Eucharistic symbolism, a noted ecologist writes,

To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skilfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily and destructively, it is desecration. In such a desecration, we condemn ourselves to spiritual, moral loneliness, and others to want.¹⁰

The Eucharist must affect our ecological integrity by providing the vision and the hope necessary to address the urgent problems now confronting the human race on planet Earth. A conscience formed by the Eucharist works against powerful cultural temptations to desecrate God's good creation. A sense of universal communion counteracts the spiritual and moral loneliness that threaten modern

⁹Bruteau, "Eucharistic Ecology...", 502.

¹⁰Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land*, North Point Press: San Francisco, 1981, 281.

culture. The heartlessness, that shuts out the poor and the needy from the great banquet of life, is exposed to a redeeming influence. In all parts of the planet, in the daily round of millions of lives, the Eucharist is celebrated. The communities concerned awaken each day to a corporate rededication of themselves, not only to sharing the bread of life with the hungry, but also with a commitment to the ecological well-being of the planet itself. Faith awakens to the vision of the earth as a living sacrament of God's loving presence. As pilgrims, Christians move through time, but always walk on holy ground.

Conclusion

The confession of sins is a typical introductory rite in all Christian liturgical activities. It is a humble recognition of sinfulness when confronted with the reality of the evil we have caused or contributed to. The "heart of flesh" of true thankfulness for the gifts of nature and grace thereby replaces the heart of stone that has wrought so much destructiveness. But any such transformation cannot take place without an outpouring of mercy that offers healing and a new beginning. Confessing one's sins is neither a symptom of weakness or lack of integrity. The believer stands before God to acknowledge resistance to the will of God in thought, word, deed and omission, that has resulted in poisoning creation and making God less visible and credible in the world. The confession of sins is an intensely counter-cultural act — a movement into the God of creation, the ever-renewable source of blessing for all — and a recognition that the order of reality that is taken for granted in a consumerist culture is not as things should be.

Divine revelation continues as an ongoing and inexhaustible event, centred in the promise and fulfilment that have occurred in Christ. In that frame of mind, the Eucharist is celebrated within the horizon of the universe of God's creation in Christ. Consequently, the liturgy occurs in a God-charged field in which the universe — including this planetary biosphere, is being transformed into God's new creation, centred in Christ, "the firstborn of all creation" (Col 1:15). Thus, the Eucharistic liturgy envisions, and even enacts, the world "otherwise", as it is before God. The Eucharist is not a compensation for an absent Christ, but at the Living One as present to it and possessing it in a new way. In Christ risen from the dead our humanity is not destroyed, and our world anticipates its final transformation.