

Catholics and other Christians thanking God together

Has the time come to change our practice on who can share the Eucharist?

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A central illusion in most religions is that their beliefs, structures and rituals are unchanging. They assert a continuity that stretches back into, quite literally, time immemorial.

This phenomenon has been studied for more than a century. Mircea Eliade's notion that religion links people to their mythic original time – *in illo tempore* – is its most famous description.

Theoretically, for monotheists such as Christians, this should not be the case. Only the Creator could be beyond time, and since the all else (the creation) is subject to time, the norm should be that every creature is changing and developing with our human situation.

Change will only cease at some future, unknown moment.

Unfortunately, most Christians slip into thinking their particular focus of attention – usually either "the Bible" or a "deposit of doctrine" – is not only immune to change, but somehow perfect and the last word on any topic.

One particular bit of doctrine that affects practice that has got stuck in this way (i.e. it is repeated rather than reflected upon) is the Catholic Church's statement that only those they consider in doctrinal agreement with them on the significance of the [Eucharist](#) (labeled variously as Holy Communion, the Mass and the Lord's Supper) can participate fully at its celebration.

Put crudely, this means that (1) if you are a Protestant you are not invited to eat or drink at a Catholic service, and (2) a Catholic, even if welcomed at a Protestant Eucharist, must refuse to share fully in the meal event by eating and drinking.

It hurts people

This clear blue water between denominations was standard policy for centuries, but with the rise of the ecumenical movement in the 1900s it seemed out a place.

Nonetheless, the Catholic Church, while willing to talk about unity, saw this step as impossible "until there was unity of faith" (i.e. doctrinal uniformity). It failed to recognize that this approach postpones sharing – actual ecumenism – until the end of time.

This matter might seem but a curious ritual detail, except that the very groups involved all see gathering to thank the Father through Jesus as the center and summit of the worship. Not to share at a Eucharistic celebration, casts a doubt and a cloud over moves towards unity.

This Catholic no-go attitude creates deep hurt and tension at official levels in relations between church-leaders. But it also creates tensions in mixed-denomination households every Sunday where partners want to worship together, but one or the other feels excluded. It is a question that has caused hurt to people.

This problem appeared to be easing in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council (1962-5), but in recent decades, under two conservative popes (John Paul II and Benedict XVI), the situation deteriorated again.

Indeed, in 1998 the Catholic bishops in Britain and Ireland issued the [statement](#) *One Bread One Body*, which, de facto, forbade any sharing of communion until a very distant (not to say impossible) future moment.

Moreover, in a very conservative climate it became clear there was serious resistance to any discussion or research on the topic. Significantly, many other episcopal conferences used *One Bread One Body* as the basis of their own documents.

This negative climate of silence was changed suddenly in 2015. To mark the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther throwing down his challenge to the papacy, Pope Francis visited the Lutheran Church in Rome.

Afterwards, he agreed to [take questions](#) from the congregation and this issue of intercommunion, not surprisingly, was the very first item raised. Rather than closing down the question, the pope opened up several new avenues of thinking, which could lead to a change in Catholic law and practice.

A field hospital approach

Pope Francis used his familiar approach that the Church is more like a field hospital for suffering humanity than an oracular lawgiver. What, he wondered, if communion was food for a journey needed by people, rather than a reward?

This new openness caused ripples. While all noted that the comments implied a new openness, conservatives dismissed it as no more than thinking aloud. They saw it as a lapse in precision, rather than a signal for change. However, few noticed that Francis also called on theologians to explore this difficulty afresh.

So can one create a theological rationale for change?

Here is just one such argument. We human need food, but only through human teamwork can we eat.

Robinson Crusoe, the ideal individualist, is a great story, but fanciful. We also collaborate to cook food – even alone in a bed-sit there are others generating electricity!

We humans do not simply eat together; we also share meals. Meal-sharing is distinctively human; and this sharing has an inherent structure.

This has implications for the Eucharist because, to say the least, its form is a meal. Can you be present and I refuse to share the food with you? To do so makes my own act contradictory: I act in a non-human way.

Could such behavior ever be worthy towards anyone, much less someone whom because of baptism I already am willing to address as "sister" or "brother"? Family meals must promote reconciliation by sharing or they are dishonest – and, as such, they are unworthy of worship.

Fixing this ulcer of division between Christians means re-imagining the meal Jesus bids his followers to share in his memory. If we talk about unity, but do not eat together, we are not being truly human.

Moreover, the notion that doctrine is a fixed body of ideas – by analogy of the way some people speak of 'the laws of physics' – is itself a real threat to the proclamation of the gospel.

After all, at the heart of the gospel is the news that God has done something new in Jesus of Nazareth.

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