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## **The Shrinking Eucharist and the Exile of the Poor<sup>1</sup>**

*Juan M. C. Oliver*  
*Guardian of the Book of Common Prayer*  
*The Episcopal Church*

### **Introduction**

Over the last half-century people of Iberian descent in the U.S., Latin America, and the Caribbean have articulated, in depth and breadth, a theology built upon God's liberation from oppression and God's preferential option for the poor. And yet, fifty years on, Eucharistic practice continues to be at best about liberation as a desideratum, while leaving justice as something posterior to the liturgical event. The Eucharist began as a full Messianic banquet of the Kingdom and remained so for at least two centuries until it began a process of abridgement from a full supper benefiting the poor to a token meal of bread and wine sending the Kingdom of God away (with Lazarus?) to another place in the hereafter. This gradual abridgement, if not downright spiritualization, has culminated, in our own time, in the popularity of streamed or virtual Eucharists during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the first part of what follows, I explore the Christian reframing of the Temple cultus by Paul and the Gospel writers into a new form of sacrifice, the shared banquet, understood as a sign of the Kingdom of God. A close look at the second and third century follows, following the gradual loss of the full meal to a token of the meal, bread and wine. I then present the fourth-century identification of church apses with the Kingdom and the surviving awareness of an earlier relationship between the Eucharist and the poor shown in the procession of the gifts to be distributed by deacons. The section concludes with the laity's growing fear of or lack of interest

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<sup>1</sup> This work is dedicated to the memory of the Rev. Dr. José Luis Lana, poor with the poor.

in receiving communion and the extreme medieval abridgment of communion into an optical event, with attendant theological rationalizations.

In the second part of this essay, I briefly explore the Anglican Reformation's attempt at recovering a fuller Eucharistic experience.<sup>2</sup> The nineteenth-century Oxford Movement will illustrate an attempt to recover the relationship between the incarnation, the Eucharist, and the suffering of oppressed physical bodies. The section continues with the liturgical movement and its influence on the Second Vatican Council and the adoption of many of its liturgical measures by the Episcopal Church, to arrive at the development of liberation theology and the Eucharistic practice of ecclesial base communities.

In the third part of the article, I visit the recent phenomenon of "virtual liturgies" as culminating evidence of this tendency to abridge the Eucharist into something immaterial, destroying its eschatological dimension as rehearsal of the Kingdom and the very nature of the Church as assembly, while promoting an individualistic and consumerist spirituality.

### *Spiritualization or Reframing?*

New Testament scholars since the last century have pointed out the "spiritualization of the cult" carried out by allegorizing Jewish ritual observances into the interior attitudes and spiritual events of individuals. More recently, Stephen Finlan has made a distinction between the metaphorical use of Temple sacrificial language and the advocacy of it, claiming that the earliest Christian communities, when spiritualizing the cultus, were not advocating it, but using its language metaphorically.<sup>3</sup> Andrew McGowan, however, suggests that the earliest Eucharists

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<sup>2</sup> I concentrate on the Anglican Reformation since I am an Anglican, but much the same could be said of other Western "catholic" denominations.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Finlan, "Spiritualization of Sacrifice in Paul and Hebrews" in *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. Christian A. Eberhart (Atlanta: SBL, 2011), 83-97, and Phillip N.

were considered sacrifices in line with the unbloody sacrifices of the Temple.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Gustavo Gutiérrez had, several decades earlier, decried the spiritualization of religion into an individualistic experience:

Individualism is the filter that allows us to “spiritualize” and even evaporate what appears in the Bible as solid social and historical affirmations. For example, reducing the opposition poor-rich (a reality external to the individual) to the polarity humble-arrogant (a reality internal to the individual). This internalizes categories born of realities in which people live and die, struggle and affirm their faith, making them lose their historical bite.<sup>5</sup>

As we shall see, the earliest Christian Eucharists were in no way “spiritualized,” but rather were born of and addressed the “realities in which people live and die, struggle and affirm their faith making them lose their historical bite.”<sup>6</sup>

### **The Shrinking Eucharist from the New Testament through the Middle Ages**

The New Testament did not invent spiritualization, but picked up something already there: the use of sacrificial language in a metaphorical way. In light of this, one may be tempted to think that the earliest Christians simply thought that their meals were like sacrifice in some interior spiritual sense. But there is a catch: In the Greco-Roman world the custom of holding banquets in honor of a patron god was already considered a form of sacrifice. So the earliest

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Richardson, *Temple of the Living God: The Influence of Hellenistic Philosophy on Paul's Figurative Temple Language Applied to the Corinthians* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Andrew McGowan, sermon preached at the Church of the Advent, Boston, at the liturgy concluding the conference “Anglo-Catholicism: Uncovering Roots,” Thursday, November 16, 2017, <https://www.theadventboston.org/sermon-by-dr-andrew-mcgowan-thursday-november-16-2017/>.

<sup>5</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Beber en su propio pozo,” *Páginas*, Sept. 1982, <https://jesuitas.lat/uploads/beber-en-su-propio-pozo/GUSTAVO%20GUTIRREZ%20-%201982%20-%20BEBER%20EN%20SU%20PROPIO%20POZO.pdf>. My translation.

<sup>6</sup> Gutiérrez, “Beber en su propio pozo.”

Christian assemblies did not do away with sacrifice. Instead, they applied the sacrificial nature of Temple bloodless offerings—cereals, first fruits, and so on—to their shared meals, recognizing them as a form of sacrifice.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the transition was not from sacrifice in the Jerusalem (or any pagan) Temple to an individual, interior, spiritualized offering of the self, but rather a shift from Temple sacrifice to both Christ’s death and the Christian meal understood as Christian sacrifice—a sacred offering shared with the participants, including the poor. McGowan makes the important point that

Paul . . . likens Christ to the Passover Lamb in 1 Corinthians, offered not for expiation but as an anamnesis of God’s liberation of Israel from slavery to be celebrated again and again. Paul clearly countenances further sacrifices of at least some kind, calling the charitable gifts of the Philippians “a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (4:18), and urging the Romans to offer themselves as a “living sacrifice” (12:1).<sup>8</sup>

### *The Shared Banquet*

Likely originating in first-century Galilee, the meals of the first Christians were affected by the socioeconomic and cultural factors of that region at that time. Many of these early Christians had lost their farms and ancestral homes thanks to Herod Antipas, who had recently expropriated lands to build the Roman cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias. People were hungry.

At the same time, Greco-Roman culture had also spread to Israel. Among the culture’s longstanding customs was the *symposium*, a dinner party or banquet held by *collegia*—groups or guilds of artisans, or burial societies, or in our case, followers of teachers or philosophers—in

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<sup>7</sup> See McGowan, Sermon at Church of the Advent.

<sup>8</sup> McGowan, Sermon at Church of the Advent.

honor of their patron god. About 52 CE, the apostle Paul wrote to such a gathering at Corinth.

Andrew Mc Gowan reminds us that the Corinthian banquet

was clearly substantial. Calling their common meal a *deipnon*, Paul and the Corinthians were likening it to those held in the dining rooms of pagan temples (1 Cor 8:10) or in private homes (10:27), among diners bound by kinship or common interest.<sup>9</sup>

According to Paul, however, this was not to be any ordinary meal, but the “Lord’s Supper.”<sup>10</sup> Not, however, because the participants were quoting Jesus’ “words of institution” at the Last Supper; these *verba* were probably introduced into Eucharistic prayers only in the fourth century.<sup>11</sup> Paul brings in Jesus’ words to show that the assembled Christians in Corinth were the body of the risen Christ and must therefore behave accordingly. Indeed, it was this intuition on the road to Damascus that led Paul to join the “people of the Way.” Furthermore, by the term “supper of the Lord,” Paul was referring not only to the bread and wine, but to the entire event.

These meals had a structure: they probably began with handwashing, followed in Jewish circles by praising God over a broken loaf of bread (made perhaps from oatmeal) and followed by a blessing over an initial cup of wine. And yet, Mc Gowan comments, “Paul’s discussion of the Corinthians’ banqueting issues is not illuminated by the assumption that the ‘Lord’s supper’

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew McGowan, “The Myth of the ‘Lord’s Supper’: Paul’s Eucharistic Terminology and Its Ancient Reception,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2015): 505.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Cor 11:20. Paul’s point is that since the Corinthian Christians are maltreating each other (customary though it was to bring your own food) their eating assemblies were not “the Lord’s Supper,” meaning not the Last Supper, but a supper according to the Lord, his example and values.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew B. McGowan, “‘Is There a Liturgical Text in This Gospel?’ The Institution Narratives and Their Early Interpretive Communities,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118 (1999): 73-87.

he would have hoped to find there was a distinct Eucharistic ritual, more or less a ‘worship service’ within the meal event.”<sup>12</sup> In the same vein, Graham Hammer concludes:

While there is significant evidence of the importance of Christians eating together as a group, and associating this communal meal with the last meal Jesus took with his closest disciples prior to his death, there is no unambiguous evidence of this meal becoming a formal liturgical event.<sup>13</sup>

The *Didache*, a Church order dating from late first-century Antioch, shows a different or supplementary version of this. The meal begins with the blessing of a cup of wine:

Say over the cup: “We give you thanks, Father, for the holy vine of David, your servant, which you made known to us through Jesus your servant. To you be glory forever.” Over the broken bread say: “We give you thanks, Father, for the life and the knowledge which you have revealed to us through Jesus your servant. To you be glory forever. As this broken bread scattered on the mountains was gathered and became one, so too, may your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. For glory and power are yours through Jesus Christ forever.”<sup>14</sup>

In the case of Christian meals, a simple menu followed, mostly bread and wine (or water) with some vegetables and the occasional fish, if affordable. Christians probably eschewed meat and

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<sup>12</sup> McGowan, “Myth of the ‘Lord’s Supper,’” 506.

<sup>13</sup> Graham Hammer, “Liturgy in the New Testament and Early 2nd Century” (2017), accessed at [https://www.academia.edu/34256419/Liturgy\\_in\\_the\\_New\\_Testament\\_and\\_Early\\_2nd\\_Century?email\\_work\\_card=title](https://www.academia.edu/34256419/Liturgy_in_the_New_Testament_and_Early_2nd_Century?email_work_card=title) on 8/20/20.

<sup>14</sup> *Didache*, 9:1-4.

poultry not only due to their cost, but due to their association with sacrifices to pagan gods. Wealthy *collegia* often went over the top, to the scandal of many.<sup>15</sup>

We may imagine twenty or thirty people gathered in a home. Some are well off, others very poor, some free, others slaves, men and women, Jews and Gentiles. Some are foreigners, citizens or not. There seems to be neither hierarchy of importance nor distinction of persons, other, perhaps, than the role of host and what abilities or “gifts” each individual brought, although soon there would be a supervisor (*episcopos*)—often the host—and servants (*diakonoi*). At the end, the meal continued with the *symposium*, that is, the drinking part, or what Latin@s today would call *la tertulia*. It began with a solemn toast with praise and thanks to the patron god, in this case, Jesus:

When you finish the meal, offer thanks in this manner: “We thank you, holy Father, for your name which you enshrined in our hearts and for the knowledge and faith and immortality which you revealed to us through your servant Jesus. To you be glory forever. Almighty ruler, you created all things for the sake of your name; you gave people food and drink to enjoy so that they might thank you. But to us you have given with spiritual food and drink the life of the Age<sup>16</sup> through Jesus your servant. Above all we thank you because you are mighty. To you be glory forever. Remember, Lord, your assembly, and deliver her from all evil. Perfect her in your love; and, once sanctified, gather her together from the four winds into the kingdom which you have prepared for her. For power and glory are yours forever. May grace come and this world pass away!

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Meals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), *passim*.

<sup>16</sup> *Zoē aionēs*, or “life of the Age (of the Kingdom)” rather than “eternal life.”

Hosanna to the God of David. If anyone is holy, let him come. If anyone is not, let him repent. The Lord is coming. Amen.”<sup>17</sup>

After this, the *tertulia* began. Some participants may have quoted passages from the Jewish scriptures that seemed to refer to Jesus. Songs were sung in honor of God and Jesus, and perhaps parts of the Psalms. There is no other structure to any of this other than the structure of the *symposium*, a generic term for the entire event.

Such were the first Eucharists. They were likely modest meals providing something existential—food and drink and perhaps clothing and other necessities—to people who lacked them. There was leadership, but the other functions of the occasion arose according to the need and skills of the participants. Paul never calls these meals liturgies (*leitourgeia*). Instead, when he employs that term he refers to service to others in non-“liturgical” ways. In fact, the New Testament never uses *leitourgeia* in a cultic or “liturgical” sense, only when the Gospel of Luke mentions Zacharias’s priestly service at the Temple.<sup>18</sup>

### *The Heavenly Jerusalem*

In Galatians, Hebrews, and Revelation these gatherings for meals are considered a “new Jerusalem,” come down from heaven as a new city. The concept of a heavenly Jerusalem predates Christianity. In Ezekiel, the New Jerusalem (*YHWH-shammah*, “YHWH [is] there”) refers to a new city and Temple, the capital of the Messianic kingdom. In Galatians, Paul applies this to the assemblies in Galatia as people born of the promise—like Isaac, of a free mother, the

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<sup>17</sup> *Didache*, 10: 1-6, my translation. *Maranatha* can mean “Lord, come” or “Lord is coming” or “Lord has come.” I prefer the more process-oriented second version.

<sup>18</sup> Lk 1:8.

Jerusalem above.” It is they who are the true reflection of the heavenly city, and not the physical Jerusalem and its Temple.<sup>19</sup>

About ten years later the author of the letter to the Hebrews would address his hearers thus: “You have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem where millions of angels have gathered for the festival with the whole church of first-born sons enrolled as citizens of heaven.”<sup>20</sup> Later still, the author of Revelation, carried in the Spirit to the eschaton, presents the Christian assembly, persecuted and oppressed, with a consoling vision of its future fulfillment:

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth have passed away and the sea is no longer. And I saw the holy city, a New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them, and they shall be God's people, and God will be their God. God's name is God-with-them, and God will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness. The world of the past has gone.”<sup>21</sup>

### *The Supper of the Kingdom*

It is to these meals that the Gospels refer whenever they mention the Eucharist, however obliquely.<sup>22</sup> The meals were also understood to be a sign or image of the *basileia* of God—

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<sup>19</sup> Gal 4: 24-31.

<sup>20</sup> Heb 12:22-23a.

<sup>21</sup> Rv 21:10-27.

<sup>22</sup> This is certainly the case in Luke, but notice also that all the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus in Matthew, Luke, and John involve recognition, very often at meals.

meaning by that term God’s royal power and governance in a new world transformed by truth, justice, peace, and love—the central message of Jesus. This *basileia* (kingdom, kingship, reign, royal power, or governance) of God was not to be something somewhere else but here. N. T. Wright explains: “The phrase kingdom of heaven is not about a place called heaven, which is somewhere else, where God is king and where we’ll go one day. It is about the establishment of the rule of heaven, in other words, the rule of God here on earth.”<sup>23</sup> Mark begins his Gospel describing Jesus proclaiming the good news from God: “The kingdom of God is near; change your hearts and trust the good news.”<sup>24</sup> He calls disciples and gives evidence of his announcement through preaching, healings, miracles, free forgiveness, sharing the table with outcasts, and other signs.

Eugene Laverdiere and John Koenig, among many, have studied the relationship between the Kingdom and the meals recounted in Luke—and not only at Emmaus—as referring to these Christian suppers.<sup>25</sup> The suppers were understood, in a very real sense, as meals of the messianic kingdom. And yet the Kingdom had not really arrived yet. They stood, as Geoffrey Wainwright so clearly articulated,<sup>26</sup> between “both the provisionality and yet the genuineness of the kingdom as it flavors the present,”<sup>27</sup> and a sign (*semeion*) that “announces and initiates or . . . furthers the

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<sup>23</sup> N. T. Wright, “Being in the kingdom today,” at <https://ntwrightonline.org/being-in-the-kingdom-today/>.

<sup>24</sup> Mk 1:15, my translation.

<sup>25</sup> Eugene Laverdiere, *Dining in the Kingdom of God: The Origins of the Eucharist in the Gospel of Luke* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994) and John Koenig, *The Feast of the World's Redemption: Eucharistic Origins and Christian Mission* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 145-51, *passim*.

<sup>27</sup> Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology*, 152

coming of the kingdom of God,”<sup>28</sup> even though “The Eucharist is not identical with the kingdom of God itself and yet it shares the nature of that kingdom . . . in such a way that it may communicate the qualities of the kingdom to . . . the participants.”<sup>29</sup> It is “in that state of eschatological tension between hiddenness and visibility which marks ‘the time of the church.’”<sup>30</sup> These four aspects have in common a tension between foretaste and full savoring, early evidence and full disclosure, glimpse and full viewing, whisper of the divine secret counsel and its full realization. All of these combine two apparently opposite aspects, brought together in a single ritual action.

Furthermore, as Scott Hahn points out, the Church itself as eating assembly participates in the eschatological nature of the banquet:

The *ekklēsia* is the incipient, growing kingdom of David, incorporating Jews, Israelites, and the nations, under the reign of Jesus the Davidic king . . . The earthly Jerusalem and its Temple, despite Luke’s genuine respect for them, cannot be the ultimate locus of eschatological fulfillment (cf. Acts 7:48–50; Luke 21:6). Peter makes clear that Christ’s present rule is not from the earthly Jerusalem but from the heavenly (Acts:33a).

Nonetheless, the whole kingdom (and the whole church) is united by the indwelling Holy Spirit and the celebration of the eucharist, in which the king becomes present, the

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<sup>28</sup> Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology*, 153, *passim*.

<sup>29</sup> Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology*, 153.

<sup>30</sup> Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology*, 154.

kingdom manifest, and the earthly citizens of the kingdom participate in the perpetual messianic banquet of the heavenly king.<sup>31</sup>

Roman Catholic liturgical theologian Mark Searle called the Eucharist “the rehearsal of the kingdom.”<sup>32</sup> Rehearsal, because it is already here, although it has not arrived yet.

### *The Apostolic Fathers*

These Sunday (or Saturday?) evening meals continued, increasingly referred to as “the thanksgiving” (*Eucharistia*) through most of the third century. They also continued to be associated with the needy poor. Tertullian, writing around 200 AD, explains:

Our dinner shows its purpose by its name: it is called what among the Greeks means affection (*dilectio*). . . . We do not recline until we have first tasted of prayer to God. So much is eaten as satisfies hunger; as much drunk as is fitting for the pure. Appetite is satisfied to the extent appropriate for those who are mindful that they have to worship God even at night; speech, as for those who know the Master is listening. After washing of hands, and lights, each is invited into the middle to sing to God as able, from knowledge of sacred writings or from their own mind; thus it can be tested how much has been drunk. Prayer again closes the feast.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). Hahn quotes del Agua: “[In Luke–Acts] the Church constitutes the eschatological people of God. This should end the reticence of properly relating kingdom and Church. The kingdom of God or the divine plan of eschatological salvation is realized, though perhaps not exclusively, in the Church.” A. del Agua, “The Lucan Narrative of the ‘Evangelization of the Kingdom of God’: A Contribution to the Unity of Luke–Acts,” in *The Unity of Luke–Acts*, ed. J. Verheyden, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 142 (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 661.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen S. Willbricht, *Rehearsing God's Just Kingdom: The Eucharistic Vision of Mark Searle* (Pueblo, CO: Liturgical Press, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 39.16–18.

*The Gradual Loss of the Full Meal*

Around 200 CE, however, something new began to take place: a distribution of the leftovers of bread and wine, before dawn on Sunday. Perhaps due to growing numbers of Christians and the limitations of domestic architecture, a morning “Eucharist” appears. Being breakfast, its menu is simpler: bread and wine. Tertullian mentions it:

We also take, in congregations before daybreak, and from the hand of none but the presidents, the sacrament of the Eucharist, which the Lord both commanded to be eaten at meal-times, and enjoined to be taken by all alike.<sup>34</sup>

Andrew McGowan adds, “We must assume that the evening event still involved the Eucharistic ritual; it may be that the morning reception was not yet a full ritual action but the consumption of sacred leftovers.”<sup>35</sup> And further:

This morning reception of the Eucharist is not, however, evidence for what was normative for Eucharistic celebration and reception in the Carthaginian Church. The reference to Jesus’s supposed command that the sacrament actually be eaten *in tempore victus*—at regular meal times, i.e., in the evening—is a clue.<sup>36</sup>

So far we have followed the genesis of the Eucharist as the full shared meal of an assembly (*ekklesia*) of Christians up to the point in the third century when it begins to be reduced to bread and wine. McGowan sums it up best: “At the end of this process, the meal elements

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<sup>34</sup> Tertullian, *De Corona Militis* 3.3. The interesting detail that the bread and wine are administered by the one who presides suggests their sacrality.

<sup>35</sup> Andrew McGowan, “Changing Courses: Eucharistic Origins,” paper presented at the Westar Institute Annual Meeting, Fall 2017, 45, <https://d1cam0bj22fh80.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/F2017-McGowan-Changing-Courses.pdf>, accessed 08/2/20.

<sup>36</sup> McGowan, “Changing Courses,” 44.

[bread and wine] have a value independent both of the meal setting and of their food value.”<sup>37</sup>

The evening meal continues, but, although also Eucharistic, it is increasingly attended by the poor for the food distribution. Later, as non-Eucharistic agapes, these meals were preserved in monastic practice.

The abridged, token meal continued to grow with the increasing numbers of Christians, until by the early fourth century thousands could participate in the Eucharist at the same time in the enormous Constantinian basilicas of St. Peter, the Lateran, the Holy Sepulchre, and others. Now, however, it was the apses of the church buildings that became identified with the heavenly Jerusalem, the whole assembly being less understood to be a sign of the Kingdom, now pushed to the liturgical “east end” of the building.

#### *The Eucharist after Constantine*

In the fourth century, following the peace of Constantine, much fuller descriptions and texts of the Eucharist began to appear. Characterized by both continuity and change, the Constantinian reforms included many factors. We focus here only on the construction of large meeting places and the development of the offertory procession in the West—including the distribution to the poor—through the eighth century.

Although Christians had begun to build new places exclusively dedicated to worship as early as the church in Megiddo (c. 300), Constantine’s construction of very large meeting halls (basilicas) to accommodate crowds of new converts profoundly changed the liturgical experience of the participants. André Grabar has identified two different patterns in this development, one

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<sup>37</sup> McGowan, “Changing Courses,” 47.

Eastern, the other Western after the example of St. Peter's in Rome.<sup>38</sup> We will limit ourselves to the Western development.

A drawing of the original mosaic in the apse of old St. Peter's, kept at the Ambrosian Library in the Vatican; shows the enthroned Christ, blessing with his right hand, holding a book in his left, and seated on a small mount from which flow four rivers. On either side of him stand Saints Peter and Paul with the two life-giving trees mentioned in Revelation. Two cities appear at each end—Jerusalem and Bethlehem—from which lambs process towards the center, where the lamb of Revelation stands with its cross on a small mount.<sup>39</sup> Robin Jensen sums up the interpretation of the two cities, Jerusalem and Bethlehem, in the apses:

This iconography visibly represents the peoples of the two covenants as joining one another. This is why neither city [Jerusalem/Jews/OT and Bethlehem/Gentiles/NT] ever appears by itself; they make symbolic sense only as a pair. Although one covenant is prior to the other, the imagery shows them ultimately uniting in the adoration of the messianic Lamb.<sup>40</sup>

Harcourt suggested that this iconographic program refers to the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>41</sup> Below it the clergy of the new Jerusalem, that is, the Church, performed the liturgy. Variations of the same theme may be found in Rome on the apsidal arch at Santa Sabina, the apses at Santa

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<sup>38</sup> André Grabar, *Martyrium. Recherches sur le culte des reliques et l'art Chrétien antique* (Paris: Collège de France, 1943-1946).

<sup>39</sup> The drawing may be seen at <https://www.wga.hu/art/g/grimaldi/apse.jpg>.

<sup>40</sup> Robin M. Jensen, "A Tale of Two Cities: Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the Mosaics of Early Christian Churches" Accessed at <https://www.societyarts.org/in-the-study-a-tale-of-two-cities.html> on 8/25/20.

<sup>41</sup> Louis Hauteceur, *Mystique et architecture: symbolisme du cercle et de la coupole* (Paris: A. et J. Picard, 1954).

Cecilia in Trastevere, Santi Cosma e Damiano, and San Lorenzo fuori le Mura, while at Santa Pudenziana Christ is shown enthroned against the whole cityscape of the heavenly Jerusalem. In the same period, Church Fathers such as Cyril of Jerusalem, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Socrates Scholasticus (in his *Ecclesiastical History*) also considered the church building an image of the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>42</sup> The association continued through the Middle Ages, as shown by the original stone choir of Master Mateo at Santiago de Compostela.<sup>43</sup>

The development of the long nave went hand in hand with the sudden presence of throngs of new members in the church. What was once an assembly of equals empowered by the Spirit began to be divided into different areas of access to the sacred action taking place now mostly in the apse. A new geography of sacred power arose.<sup>44</sup> The assembly that originally understood itself as the new Jerusalem and a sign of the Kingdom eventually began to see themselves as on the way to the heavenly Jerusalem.

In subsequent centuries in the West, the iconography of the new Jerusalem moves largely to the tympanum over the main door of cathedrals, becoming the last judgment. In the Eastern Churches, however, thanks to the insistence that the liturgy and its visual and architectural context form a kind of canon, the image of the new Jerusalem did not develop in new ways, but

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<sup>42</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis*, XVIII, Patrologia Graeca 33, 1048; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Vita Constantini*, III, 33-39, IV, 46, Patrologia Graeca 20; Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* I, 17, Patrologia Graeca 67, 119.

<sup>43</sup> See [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stone\\_choir\\_of\\_Master\\_Mateo\\_-\\_Museum\\_of\\_the\\_Cathedral\\_of\\_Santiago\\_de\\_Compostela\\_\(3\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stone_choir_of_Master_Mateo_-_Museum_of_the_Cathedral_of_Santiago_de_Compostela_(3).jpg).

<sup>44</sup> For the phrase “geography of power” see my Ph.D. dissertation, “The Look of Common Prayer: The Anglican Liturgical Place in Anglo-American Culture” (Berkeley, CA: Graduate Theological Union, 2006).

kept the cosmic iconography of the cupola, with Christ the Pantocrator at its center hovering over all.

Thus, while the earliest Christian assemblies at table were understood as a sign of the new Jerusalem envisioned in Galatians, Hebrews, and Revelation, and thus the Kingdom *in nuce*, beginning in the fourth century the apse and its depiction of the heavenly Jerusalem became the focal point of the entire meeting hall. Anything placed in the apse took on an aura of special importance, whether relics, altar, cathedra, or the bishop and other clergy, and became identified with the heavenly City where Christ rules as King.

### *The Procession of Gifts and Their Distribution*

The relationship between Eucharist and the poor, however, did not exactly die. It survived in the offertory procession, that is, the transfer of gifts to the altar. Remarkably, as late as the fourth century there are evidences that more than bread and wine was being brought to the altar:

If any bishop or presbyter, offer other things at the altar of God, as honey, milk, or strong beer instead of wine, any necessaries, or birds, or animals, or pulse, otherwise than is ordained, let him be deprived; excepting grains of new corn, or ears of wheat, or bunches of grapes in their season.<sup>45</sup>

Additionally, a letter from Innocent I to the bishop of Gubbio, dated March 19, 416, mentions two common ways of presenting the gifts at the Eucharist. In some places the people brought their gifts of bread, wine, and other offerings to the deacons before the service, and their names were read within the Eucharistic Prayer. In others, however, the people brought their gifts

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<sup>45</sup> *Canons of the Apostles*, 3.

to the altar just prior to the Eucharistic Prayer. In this case, Innocent I writes, there was no need to read the names.<sup>46</sup>

The latter practice of presenting offerings within the Eucharist seems to have won out in the Roman rite over the “early delivery” practice. The Verona Sacramentary, dating from the first quarter of the seventh century but containing fragments of *libelli missarum* going as far back as Pope Damasus (+384), contains the presider’s prayers for the Eucharist on most days in the year, always including the prayer to be said over the gifts, or *secretæ*. Easily over half of these prayers refer to the people’s gifts (*munera, hostias*). This alone indicates that the people were making their *ofrendas* within the rite and not before it, as was becoming the custom in the East. A little later, Augustine too suggests that the people presented their offerings at the altar. And yet some musicologists like Henry Joseph Dyer have been eager to prove that no offertory presentation of the people’s gifts took place before the seventh century. On such, in spite of her commitment to a later date for the development of the offertory, Rebecca Maloy, following Dyer, concedes that “Augustine’s writings do suggest that the laity approached the altar to present their offerings. He expresses regret, for example, that a woman captured by barbarians could not make her offering at the altar.”<sup>47</sup>

The practice is evidenced as well as late in the *Ordo Romanus I*, a description of the papal liturgy celebrated around 700-750, and in the Old Gelasian sacramentary (cf. 628-715),

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<sup>46</sup> Innocent I, Letter XXV, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Rebecca Maloy, *Inside the Offertory: Aspects of Chronology and Transmission* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 17 and Joseph Henry Dyer, “Augustine and the *hymni ante oblationem*,” *Revue des études augustinienes* 27, no. 1 (1981): 85-99.

which clearly states, in a rubric for Holy Thursday, “After this the people make their offering and the sacraments are made.”<sup>48</sup>

In the earlier church, the deacons would have both accepted these offerings before the Eucharistic prayer and distributed them afterwards. By the end of the fifth century, however, as the diaconate began to develop as a mere step towards the presbyterate, it was also abridged, increasingly becoming a liturgical role. But this did not take away the responsibility of bishops to provide for the poor, nor of the deacons and archdeacons in the administration of the church and its public assistance. A council at Neo-Caesarea in 314 had limited the number of deacons in any city to seven, but increasingly the number of liturgical deacons grew while those in charge of distributing alms were limited to seven. Later, to explain this anomaly, the Quinisext Council (692) declared:

The aforesaid seven deacons are not to be understood as deacons who served at the Mysteries . . . but . . . they were those to whom a dispensation was entrusted for the common benefit of those that were gathered together, who to us in this also were a type of philanthropy and zeal towards those who are in need.<sup>49</sup>

In sum, beginning just before the Constantinian reforms, the token meal of bread and wine had won the day. After 313, it was further elaborated with imperial paraphernalia such as incense and torches and took place in increasingly large buildings, where the apses and everyone in them represented the heavenly Jerusalem and therefore, God’s Kingdom. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>48</sup> *Ordo Romanus Primus*, 13 describes the pope and other bishops going to the dignitaries—both men and women—and personally accepting their offerings of loaves of bread and flasks of wine. The rubric “Post haec offert plebs et conficiuntur sacramenta” appears in the reconciliation of penitents on Maundy Thursday in the Gelasian Sacramentary, or *Liber Sacramentorum Romanae Ecclesiae*, ed. H. A. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1894), 67.

<sup>49</sup> Quinisext Council, Canon XVI.

memory of the relationship between the Eucharist and the needs of the poor persisted through the development of the procession of offerings by the people, received and distributed by deacons.

### *Communion Through the Eyes*

By the eighth century, the laity was beginning to be wary of receiving communion, either due to the growing emphasis on the physicality of Christ's presence in the bread and wine, or out of a growing sense of unworthiness. This would continue to develop until by the twelfth century the laity had to be forced to receive communion at least once a year.

Along with the rarity of physical communion, the participation of the people in the Eucharistic action—if one might call it participation at all—was reduced even more. A layperson in medieval Europe would arrive at a local church, stand, kneel for an occasional prayer, and walk around the building. She may have lighted candles to images of particular saints as devotion or in exchange for a special favor from God and looked at the stained glass, frescoes, altarpieces, and mosaics.

She probably also talked to friends, gossiped about others, sat, and even dozed during part of the service. At the consecration, she ran to look at the host, and left before or after the service ended. All this likely proved more meaningful than watching the back of a priest murmuring in Latin. And so the development of popular ritualizations by the people, regardless of the official ecclesiastical dicta, grew rapidly. Even the sermon dropped out of the Eucharist to be considered a separate service, often conducted outdoors.

But the people did not stop receiving communion, not spiritually speaking. Now they did so by gazing at the host and chalice, elevated above the priest. This was so important a moment that bells were rung advising people to draw near just before and during it. "Peeping holes" were drilled into chancel screens so that at least some could look through.

This development was supported by both optical theory and theology. Optics taught that the eye sent a ray out to take hold of the object of vision and bring it into the viewer's consciousness. Aquinas wrote in defense of what quickly became known as "spiritual communion"—the desire to receive communion when one is not able, which, like the baptism of desire, granted the grace of the sacrament—yet pointed out that spiritual communion is not the same as the physical reception of the Eucharistized bread and wine: "Nevertheless sacramental eating is not without avail, because the actual receiving of the sacrament produces more fully the effect of the sacrament than does the desire thereof."<sup>50</sup>

The paucity of Eucharistic reception by the laity was such that in 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council had to decree that all Christians must receive communion at least once a year, during Eastertide.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the interest in the mode of the presence of Christ in the bread and wine, which gave rise to this radical abridgement of the Eucharistic experience, also led to the conciliar definition of transubstantiation and later to the creation of the feast of Corpus Christi in 1264. Rather than an event, the Eucharist was now an object.

This same abridgement was accompanied by others: bread became hosts, baptismal pools increasingly shrank in size, and abundant oil became a mere dab, as the concerns of sacramental theologians increasingly centered on defining the minimum necessary for validity. Even "the church" was abridged in popular use of the term, now referring to clergy and members of religious orders rather than to the community of all the baptized. And the Kingdom, at one time proleptically here in the community gathered for a meal, was pushed out the door and sent to the

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<sup>50</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III:80,1, ad.3.

<sup>51</sup> Fourth Lateran Council, canon 21.

hereafter. “Salvation” (*soteria*) came to mean not safekeeping, health, and liberation here, but eternal life in a different place, later. Such was the situation on the eve of the Reformation.

### **Reformation Recovery and the Return of the Poor**

Perhaps no one is more responsible for the Anglican Reformation in theology and liturgical practice than Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. A friend of Luther’s liturgist, Bucer, Cranmer also sympathized with Genevan concerns. Cranmer’s reforms, initiated in the reign of Edward VI and established during that of Elizabeth I, embody the Reformation emphasis on the Word and the sermon both in and outside of the Eucharist, but also include the destruction of *ad orientem* marble altars and their replacement with a simple wooden table placed in the middle of the chancel, the introduction of a form of intercessions, the use of loaves of bread and flagons of wine at the Eucharist, extensive addresses to the people encouraging reception of communion (now under both species), the introduction of a general confession to alleviate fears of unworthiness, and the invitation of those communicating to kneel around the Holy Table during a new Eucharistic Prayer full of Reformation theology addressing what Cranmer considered Roman abuses. Although Cranmer would have liked the Eucharist to be offered weekly, he could only enforce it as a quarterly or, at best, monthly service. In these ways the English Reformation tried to address at least some aspects of the abridged Eucharist.

Around 1570, the overemphasis on the Word and its interminable sermons quickly caused the development of a system of pews among Puritan exiles in Holland. Further elaborated into box pews, these were sometimes so tall that the people could not see anything, only hear the preacher. They were also private, as communion was now brought to each household penned in its box, allowing for a variety of ways to receive, from kneeling (more Catholic) to sitting (more

Protestant). At times, these box pews were even furnished as parlors. The Eucharist had not only become an object; its reception was now a private affair.

After almost one hundred years of the English Reformation, Archbishop William Laud decreed the placement of the Holy Table back to the east wall, raised on steps and fenced with a communion rail “to elevate the dignity of the priesthood.”<sup>52</sup> These changes were considered “popish” by so many that some historians credit them with sparking the English Civil War, the dismissal of Parliament, and the execution of Charles I and Laud.

The restoration of the monarchy, followed by the Great Fire of London, allowed Matthew Wren and his nephew Christopher Wren to rebuild churches in a new way, cutting down the pews and arranging the seating so all could see and hear, while keeping Laudian details like the raised altar and communion rail. Over a hundred years ensued with quarterly Eucharists, weekly Morning Prayer, and long sermons.

Eventually, the ritualist movement begun at Oxford University in the early nineteenth century tried to reclaim many more physical aspects of liturgy—from Neo-Gothic buildings to vestments, “smells and bells,” et al.—while rediscovering the implications of the incarnation as theological foundation for these changes and, more importantly, for the relationship between liturgy and social justice. These two dimensions, however, remained separate in time and space. One could of course listen to sermons about the importance of almsgiving to the poor later, outside the service.

The Oxford Movement and the Romantic recovery of medieval architecture and trappings in Europe were also a prelude to the nineteenth century’s growing ecumenical interest in the

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<sup>52</sup> William Laud, *History of the Troubles and Tryal of the Most Reverend Father in God and Blessed Mary, William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury* (London: Ri. Chiswell, 1695; Ann Arbor, Text Creation Partnership), 80, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A67908.0001.001>.

history of worship, spearheaded at the monastery of Maria Lach and giving birth to what we now call the Liturgical Movement, leading the research that eventually produced the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) at the Second Vatican Council. Since then, the emphasis on the assembly's full and conscious participation in the liturgical action has continued in the West, along with a call for the full and complete use of symbols such as bread, water, and oil without abridgement. Beyond Roman Catholicism, this is also true of the Lutheran and Anglican churches. The Episcopal Church's *Book of Common Prayer 1979* was the first BCP in the Anglican Communion to incorporate the theology and liturgical reforms of Vatican II. Informed by an ecclesiology of the church as the community of the baptized, this BCP and its theology also gave rise to the recovery of the permanent diaconate and the catechumenate, and the Episcopal Church went on to approve the ordination of women and LGBTQ persons as well as same-sex marriage. None of these would have been possible without an understanding of the church as the community of all the baptized.

Moreover, thanks to the rubrical flexibility of the BCP, some Anglican clergy are at least occasionally able to preside at Eucharists within the context of a full meal. This is especially appropriate on Holy (Maundy) Thursday for obvious reasons, but at different times as well. Several congregations, both Anglican and Lutheran, have developed the "dinner Eucharist" as their norm. Others, like St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, turn the altar and sanctuary into a food distribution center immediately after the Eucharist to bring the meal and the needs of the poor closer together.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> For a description of the practice at St. Gregory of Nyssa, see Sara Miles, *Take This Bread* (New York: Ballantine, 2008).

*The Return of the Poor*

The documents of the Latin American bishops' (CELAM) conferences at Medellín and Puebla are an excellent record of how the Roman Catholic Church applied the liturgical theology and practice promulgated by Vatican II. Here I will only offer a quick note on their salient aspects from the point of view of the liturgy and its relationship to the poor.

It is perhaps unnecessary (but always salutary) to recall that as these conferences endeavored to apply the work of Vatican II to the Latin American context, liberation from injustice and poverty was neither a marginal concern nor a subsequent desideratum flowing from otherwise European theology; it was a core element in the elaboration of the Latin American church's theology, ecclesiology, liturgy, and missiology, to name but a few areas. As a guide to the CELAM conferences, Archbishop Victor Sanchez's summary article is invaluable.<sup>54</sup>

*Medellín*

The documents coming out of the 1968 Medellín Conference show, among other concerns, a desire for greater participation by the People of God<sup>55</sup> at worship, including decision-making and pastoral projects, as they engage in prophetic social justice.<sup>56</sup> To make this possible, the conference called for "catechesis on the Christian mystery and its liturgical expression and the adaptation and incarnation of worship according to the spirit of diverse cultures, welcoming diversity in unity and avoiding uniformity."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Victor Sánchez, "La liturgia en el magisterio latinoamericano: de «Medellín» a «Aparecida»," *Phase* 53 (2013): 247-281.

<sup>55</sup> "People of God" is capitalized in Vatican II documents and post-Vatican II documents such as those of the Medellín conference.

<sup>56</sup> Sánchez, "La liturgia en el magisterio latinoamericano."

<sup>57</sup> Sánchez, "La liturgia en el magisterio latinoamericano," *passim*.

The conference further called for celebrations of the Eucharist in small groups and base communities (Medellín 9, 12), planning and intensifying a community-based sacramental practice through careful catechetical preparation for the sacraments, fomenting the celebration of liturgies of the Word in connection with the sacraments, especially the Eucharist (Medellín 9,14), and granting a liturgical dimension to popular devotions.<sup>58</sup> The conference documents indicate that the emphasis on catechesis and inculturation was very strong from the beginning. One result of the conference was the creation of Institutes or Centers for Pastoral Liturgy and of liturgical conferences (Medellín, 1972, and Caracas, 1977) both sponsored by CELAM.

### *Puebla*

Although the Puebla documents overall present liturgy as a means of evangelization (Puebla 893), other dimensions of the liturgy are noted as well. Liturgy is an encounter with God, the Eucharistic banquet and sacrifice, a fiesta of ecclesial communion, through which Christ . . . takes on and liberates the People of God and all humanity, whose history becomes salvific, reconciling us with each other and God. It is also strength for the journey to bring about the kingdom, through a transformative commitment with life.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, the liturgical celebration of the Paschal mystery as pledge of the Kingdom, our commitment to liberation, and the history of our people are of a piece with a mission to social transformation. These aspects cannot be separated.

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<sup>58</sup> Sánchez, “La liturgia en el magisterio latinoamericano.”

<sup>59</sup> Puebla 918, *passim*.

Archbishop Sánchez finds two main themes in these documents: liturgical formation at every level and the need for an inculturated liturgy. Still to come in later years would be an anthropological awareness of how human ritualization forms a community with a worldview and ethos as well as more granular attention to the means and process of inculturation. The presence of the poor at the feast of the Kingdom, however, shines through the Medellín documents.

The liturgies of the ecclesial base communities born of Medellín have perhaps come closer to the early Christian Eucharist than any other effort. Maybe due to the fact that their ethos was born out of the absence of clergy, the manner in which the Eucharist takes place, assuming a cooperative presbyter, is cause for hope. I cannot go into details here, but an article by Marcelo Barros sums up the Eucharistic celebrations in these words:

Base communities give great importance to the liturgical signs and symbols. In their Eucharistic celebrations they learn to enliven and contemporize gestures, signs and symbols of the tradition, such as the cross, the Bible and the sacramental signs, while also valuing symbols from our culture such as the land, water, fire, flowers and foods. As in the early Churches, the Eucharist at a base community takes on the shape of a meal rather than a rite.<sup>60</sup>

In the process of applying Vatican II to the Latin American reality, the concern for catechesis, evangelization, and inculturation is best embodied in the experience of ecclesial base communities. If our Eucharist are ever going to be the tangible, full meal of the Kingdom again, the experience of these communities is a great gift to the wider church.

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<sup>60</sup> Marcelo Barros, "La Cena de la Vida: Eucaristía en la vida de las Comunidades Eclesiales de Base de América Latina," <http://www.servicioskoinonia.org/relat/364.htm>.

### **The New Abridgment: Virtual Liturgy**

Thus far we have followed the steady abridgement of the Eucharist from a full meal in service to God and the poor and a sign of God's coming Kingdom, to a token meal of bread and wine eventually performed for large crowds on their way to the Kingdom, to an entirely spiritual, dematerialized communion in the Middle Ages, to Reformation attempts to recover the Eucharist's physical dimension. We also followed Anglican attempts to recover the physicality of the Eucharist and the last century's conciliar recovery of much Patristic liturgical theology and practice, as well as its incarnation for Latin America in the documents of Puebla and Medellín. All of these however, had something in common: the people met physically. Then came the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pastoral zeal of many members of the clergy as they explore virtual liturgy during the pandemic is impressive. They wish to make the Eucharist available to those who cannot be present, and in this they are in continuity with the tradition of the church—as early as 150 CE—of including those absent in the reception of communion by taking the Eucharistized elements to them.<sup>61</sup> The use of the internet to do this, however, presents new questions and concerns, among them the eschatological dimension of the Eucharist as sign or pledge of the Kingdom.

#### *Eschatology and Ritual*

The Christian liturgy's eschatological vision of the coming Kingdom has something in common with religious ritual across cultures and epochs, for religious ritual, as anthropologists remind us, makes present to its participants a vision of how things "ought to be"—the ideal world. In this way religious ritual forms us with a worldview (a vision of how the world is) and

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<sup>61</sup> Justin Martyr, *Apology I*, 67.

ethos (our way of living in it).<sup>62</sup> In the development of the Eucharist, the ritual means for this presentation was a shared meal, “the central act around or within which others—reading and preaching and prophecy—were arranged.”<sup>63</sup> This “Supper of the Lord” was also a sign of the coming Kingdom of God. Two aspects of the shared meals gave this away: they were radically egalitarian and they were about love (*agape*).

As the rehearsal of the Kingdom, the Eucharist cannot be only a communication of words and ideas about the Kingdom, but must offer it as already present in a concrete community convened and assembled by God as a sign of a new society.<sup>64</sup>

### *The Challenges of Virtual Worship*

The issues emerging from our zeal to provide something during the pandemic need to be considered against the preceding historical and theological background of the Eucharist. Often supporters of virtual liturgy refer to it as if it were the same as being physically present in our assembly. It is not. Even if those watching the Eucharistic celebration avail themselves of the tradition of “spiritual communion,” it is still not the same, any more than watching a soccer game is the same as playing it. Additionally, virtual liturgy militates against the very nature of the church as an assembly of bodies gathered as a community and the digital distance established by streamed liturgies (even as they claim to “connect”) reinforces aspects of lay passivity and lack of participation that church leaders have been trying to address for at least the last sixty years.

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<sup>62</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic, 1983), 89.

<sup>63</sup> Andrew McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 20.

<sup>64</sup> McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*, 41. See Also John Zizioulas, “The Eucharist and the Kingdom of God (Part III),” *Sourozh* 60 (May 1995): 43.

The rush to virtual Eucharists shows that consciously or not, we still conceive of the Eucharist as a clerical performance acted out to be watched by individual lay spectators. It is thus hardly surprising that clergy who thought they were performing something for a client laity have rushed to transmit their performance in a medium that works well for watching and listening.

Finally, a liturgical performance by only a priest and a deacon is easily transmitted, and reinforces all over again the conception of the church as the clergy. It also commodifies the Eucharistic event into something to be acquired through eyes and ears by passive individuals.

This alone points to one of the great flaws of modernity: the denial of community as a constitutive aspect of the individual person. Briefly put, our rehearsal of the kingdom online becomes a thing to be consumed as an interior, denatured, “spiritual” experience of an individual. The popularity today of “spiritual communion” makes the point. And the poor are nowhere to be seen or heard.

What to do? Instead of virtually packaging the clerical elements of the Eucharist, hoping for the best, we may consider the challenges brought by the pandemic from an altogether different starting point: If we must “gather” virtually, what are the best means of gathering? If the answer is, for example, Zoom,<sup>65</sup> what does this platform do well? For what purpose do people usually “gather” through Zoom? To exchange news, ideas, opinions, decisions. They cannot gather to eat any more than to play soccer. So we should not try to force embodied Eucharistic practice into a medium that dispenses with bodies—a very dangerous thing for ritual, which as we saw above, forms us in the worldview and habits needed to live in the Kingdom. Do we envision a Kingdom made up of individual selves connected virtually?

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<sup>65</sup> See <https://zoom.us/>.

Let us think instead of what the medium does well, and build virtual liturgy on that foundation. Zoom is a very good way to hear the Word, share its meaning, and pray together. That is, virtual liturgy works well with liturgies of the Word (Daily Office or the first half of the Eucharist). In fact, *lectio divina* or other Bible reflection methods may be good examples of what virtual liturgy can do best. With these, we also have the opportunity to communicate in a simpler, more participatory and human interaction, which will in fact, build and support a community of active members growing in the knowledge of God's Word and each other. The example of ecclesial base communities is a case in point.

A great deal is lost when the liturgy is streamed online, doing serious violence to what the Eucharist is, how it takes place, and the nature of the Church as an assembly. It also reaffirms the passivity of the laity as mere spectators and supports individualism and the commodification of the means of grace in the service of an incorporeal, "spiritual" individual experience. Instead of trying the impossible, then, it may be better to think afresh about what it is that the internet does well and build from there. And once we can assemble again as the church, a key question for all involved might be: What will the Kingdom of God look like when it arrives in our town, neighborhood, or home? And what would a shared feast in it be like? These questions cannot be answered without a serious engagement with the inculturation of the life of the church and its worship.