EUCHARIST AS A CELEBRATION OF FORGIVENESS

FRANCIS J. MOLONEY, SDB

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The celebration of the Eucharist is described by *Lumen Gentium* (LG), the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church from Vatican II, as “the source and summit of the Christian life” (LG 11; see also *Sacerdolum Concilium* 10). Stated simply, such teaching captures one of the most profound truths of the Christian Tradition, especially as it is understood and lived by Catholic Christians. On the one hand, participation in the eucharistic life of the Church generates an encounter with the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, a nourishment that sets the believer on the way and directs her or him throughout the Christian journey (the source). At the same time, such participation challenges the believer with Jesus’s unconditional self-gift in love for others, rendered present at the eucharistic table, as the goal toward which all strive (the summit).

Given the centrality of the Eucharist within the Catholic Christian Tradition, it is understandable that its celebration and the theological and pastoral reflection that surround it have had a complex history. This is not the place to rehearse the history of a meal that began in an encounter with disciples “on the night when he was betrayed” (1 Cor 11:23b) and became a “Tradition”; something that was “handed on” from one earliest Christian to another (see v. 23a), incorporated in various foundational “narratives” of the Four Gospels (Mark 14:17–21; Matt 26:20–25; Luke 22:14, 21–23; John 6:51c; 13:21–30) that became part of the Christian Scriptures. Although idealized, Luke reports such table celebrations in the gatherings of the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:46; see also Luke 24:30–31, 35, 41–43). Along with baptism, Eucharist—or the Lord’s Table—is regarded by all traditions as a Christian practice that has its beginnings in the life of Jesus.

Eucharistic celebration is documented in the subapostolic writing of the *Didache* 9:1—10:7 (c. 100 CE), Ignatius of Antioch’s *Letter to the Ephesians* 20:2 (c. 107 CE; see also 13:1; *Letter to the Philadelphians* 4;
Letter to the Smyrnaens 8:1), and what we might call an “order of service” appears in Justin Martyr’s First Apology 65–67 (c. 155 CE). These beginnings already indicate a variety of practices by different people in different settings and in different times. For example, the central role of bread and wine, with reference to the saving flesh and blood of Jesus, is clearly stated in Justin’s First Apology (66). The earlier instruction of the Didache first attests to the cup (9:1; see Luke 22:27), but there is no mention of the wine representing the blood of Jesus shed on the cross. Similarly, the broken bread represents its physical origins as wheat scattered over the hills, brought together to become one, as a symbol of the unity of the Church (9:4). There is no mention of the broken body of Jesus. As also reflected in Paul’s discussion with the Corinthians about their meal-practices at which some eat and drink in excess (1 Cor 11:17–34), the Lord’s Supper in the earliest Church was part of a regular meal. The Didache instructs, “After you have had enough, give thanks” (10:1). The uniformity of ritual and theology that is central to today’s celebrations was not part of Christianity’s eucharistic origins.

Reference to the celebration of the Eucharist and theological reflection on what was called in Latin “the Mysteries” (Mysteria) are unfailingly present across the great patristic traditions of East and West. Universally celebrated in Greek, the earliest common language used by the emerging Christian Church (its Sacred Scripture, the New Testament, is in Greek), it developed a Latin form in North Africa, for example, at the Church of St. Augustine (354–430 CE) in Hippo, located in today’s Algeria. By 380 CE, it was celebrated in Latin in Rome. This practice gradually spread across the late Roman Empire, and the Latin language remains a crucial formal element in the liturgies of the Roman Catholic form of Christianity. This tradition (perhaps unfortunately) was reinforced by the 2001 document from the Congregation for Worship, Liturgiam Authenticam. There are many other cultural and linguistic traditions embodied in eucharistic liturgies reflecting these various origins, and subsequent diverse histories and cultures: Greek, Russian, Ukrainian, Coptic, Chaldean, Melkite, Maronite, and Syro-Malabar, to mention only some of the more ancient traditions. Although it has not had an easy passage since its promulgation in 1963, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Liturgy from Vatican II (Sacrosanctum Concilium [SC]) affirmed the importance of the inculturation of the Roman liturgy, under the direction of national Episcopal Conferences (SC 40). In its manifold forms, wherever and however it is celebrated, the Eucharist has always been the bedrock on which the Catholic Christian Tradition is founded.

Contemporary Catholics have been rightly educated to regard access to the Eucharist as a privilege that flows from their faith in God, and the saving death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. Over the centuries, the recognition of the treasure of the Eucharist has led to practice (and legislation) that limits access to full eucharistic participation only to those “worthy” of such a privilege. This sentiment has very ancient origins. In 54 CE, Paul warned the Corinthians against eating the bread and drinking the cup “unworthily” (1 Cor 11:27; Greek: anaxiōtis), and the author of the Didache (c. 100 CE) warns, “But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptized into the name of the Lord, for the Lord has also spoken concerning this: ‘Do not give what is holy to dogs’” (9:5). Some fifty years later, Justin Martyr develops this teaching further: “No one is allowed to partake except one who believes that the things which we teach is true, and has received the washing that is for the forgiveness of sins and for rebirth, and so lives as Christ handed down” (First Apology 66).

Beginning with these admonitions, directed to specific aspects of “worthiness,” we have come, down through the centuries, to the universal requirement that only those without serious sin may participate fully in the Eucharist.

This blanket prohibition has led to the contemporary prohibition of access to the Eucharist to those whose first sacramental marriages in the Catholic Tradition have failed, and who have subsequently remarried. They are automatically regarded as living in a permanently adulterous situation, judged as sinful and thus “unworthy” of admission to a full participation in the Eucharist. Given the complexity of society and the challenge of maintaining lifelong relationships in a sometimes hostile secular world, many bishops and priests have questioned the wisdom of this practice, asking that more understanding and mercy be shown. Pope Francis asked the Church’s leadership to consider this matter, side-by-side with many other challenges that face Catholic married and family life, at a significant Synod of Bishops held in October 2014 and October 2015. Pope Francis signed off on his post-synodal exhortation, Amoris Laetitia, on March 19, 2016. It is a fine balance of a respect and a restatement of the best of the Catholic Tradition and an
unprecedented openness to the complexities of contemporary married life and sexual relationships. Issued during the Holy Year of Mercy (2015–16), the document breathes a fresh air of nonjudgmental pastoral care, based on mercy and forgiveness. It will prove to be a watershed in the history of the Catholic Church’s teaching on marriage, family, and human sexuality.

One of the potential problems raised by the current thought and practice of the Catholic Church (in a very broad sense, including the Eastern Churches), especially its discipline, is the conflict with Jesus’s eucharistic presence to the Church, as it is presented in the sources of our faith. The stern prohibition of Jesus’s eucharistic presence to the “unworthy” is not found in the teaching and practice of Jesus himself and the inspired transmission of that teaching in the Sacred Scriptures of the New Testament. All the accounts of Jesus’s final evening with his failed and failing disciples (Mark 14:17–31; Matt 26:20–35; Luke 22:14–38; John 13:1–38) report darkness, betrayal, denial, fear, and flight. Yet he gives himself unconditionally to them in a gesture that is explained by words that only Matthew reports. He adds to Jesus’s words over the cup: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28). All the narratives insist that failing disciples are gifted with the Lord’s presence in the shared wine and the broken bread. But Matthew explicitly raises the question that this book will consider: Is the Eucharist a celebration of forgiveness? If the Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life” (LG 11; SC 10), does it accompany the Christian on her and his lifelong journey through the challenges of the blessedness and joy of graces received, accompanied by the sinfulness, selfishness, and failure of graces rejected? In other words, as well as providing the essential encounter with the crucified and risen Lord that inspires and nourishes the Christian journey, does it also celebrate the forgiveness of sins, an integral part of the Christian journey?

The current legislation in the Roman Catholic Church is clearly articulated in its Code of Canon Law (CIC). Two situations are described that call for exclusion from the reception of the Eucharist. The first regards those Catholics who are aware that they are in a situation of grave sin but persevere “obstinately” in that situation; such people “are not to be admitted to holy communion” (CIC 915). The most common (but not the only) contemporary situation where this law applies is when Catholic faithful have contracted a second marriage, after the breakdown of a first sacramental union, without receiving an annulment of the initial marriage. The second refers more generically to any situation where a believer is “conscious of grave sin.” Such people are reminded that they must make use of the sacrament of reconciliation before going to communion. The Canon reminds the faithful that the possibility of perfect contrition could apply in this situation, when the sacrament of reconciliation is not available (CIC 916). Summing this up, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states,

Anyone who desires to receive Christ in Eucharistic communion must be in the state of grace. Anyone aware of having sinned mortally must not receive communion without having received absolution in the sacrament of penance. (no. 1415)

No serious Catholic theologian wishes to deny the holiness and significance of the Eucharist in our Tradition, but a tension between the original revealed witness of the sacrament’s place and purpose in the Word of God of the Scriptures, and the current practice described above, is clear. Understanding of the Eucharist as the celebration of forgiveness (see Matt 26:28) has faded from current Catholic thought and practice. Pope Francis is asking the Catholic Church to look again at this teaching, in the light of the Gospel and the authentic Tradition of the Church: “Our teaching on marriage cannot fail to be instructed and transformed by this message of love and tenderness, otherwise, it becomes nothing more than the defence of a dry and lifeless doctrine” (Amoris Laetitia 59).

The following chapters attempt to ease that tension by means of four related reflections. The first will look back to the earliest written reflection in the Christian Tradition that deals explicitly with the celebration of the Eucharist, or the Lord’s Supper: 1 Corinthians 10:1–11:34. This opening chapter is important for two reasons. First, it forces serious reflection on the essence of the Eucharist: Jesus’s self-gift in love “for others” (see 11:24) that must be “remembered.” Second, it will lead us to examine the widespread use of 1 Corinthians 11:27–28 outside its Pauline context. The passage, generally cited without context, asks for an act of judgment about who is worthy or unworthy of participation in the eucharistic meal. Over the Christian centuries, 1 Corinthians 11:27–28 has played a major role in limiting access to the
Eucharist to “the worthy,” thus lessening the traditional understanding of the Eucharist as a celebration of forgiveness. This traditional use of 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 has been explicitly rejected by Pope Francis in Amoris Laetitia (see nos. 185–86).

Pope John XXIII asked the fathers of the Second Vatican Council to return to the sources to reexamine our traditions in order to speak more faithfully to the contemporary Church and world in a way that reflects more authentically our origins. The analysis of the oldest eucharistic text we have in Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians must be followed by a reading of the narratives that appeared in the Gospels of Mark (c. 70 CE), Matthew (late 80s CE), Luke (late 80s CE), and John (c. 100 CE). The process of returning to the sources, so essential to all contemporary theological and pastoral activity in the Church, is described by the widespread use of the self-explanatory French work: ressourcement, a return to the sources of our faith. The need for the Catholic Church to initiate a renewal process aided and directed by the process of ressourcement is an indication that unhelpful practices, regarded by some as the doctrine of the Church, have gathered across the centuries. They can be questioned by means of closer attention to the sources of Christian life and practice.

Our third reflection will examine the development of the process of exclusion from the eucharistic table. As well as the often misunderstood interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:27–28, Paul exhorts the elimination of a person in an incestuous relationship from the community in 1 Corinthians 5:1–5. The author of Hebrews 6:1–8 also advocates exclusion from the community. Exclusion was certainly in place in the earliest centuries of the Church’s practice, as we have already seen in our citations from the Didache (c. 100 CE) and Justin Martyr’s First Apology (c. 155 CE). This trajectory will then be traced in two figures from the golden era of the fathers of the Church whose ministry was exercised in different locations and circumstances, the Greek-writing Cyril of Alexandria (378–444 CE), and Latin-writing Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE). The earliest Church saw the need to protect the unity and holiness of the Christian community, and necessarily, the holiness of the sacrament of the Eucharist. What was said by Paul and the fathers of the Church was reinterpreted further in the medieval period, and at the time of the Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation. There has never been a time in the history of the Church when the eucharistic table was open to whoever might wish to approach it. Criteria for the practice of exclusion were in place from our beginnings, and must remain in place.

The final reflection will attempt to bring together these historical, exegetical, theological, and pastoral considerations. The Christian Tradition of the Eucharist, one of its central and foundational elements, begins with a powerful expression of the gift of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ to fragile and sinful disciples. It explicitly states that one of the purposes for a “new covenant” is “for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28). Some, no doubt, exclude themselves from such graces, but a case for the Eucharist as a celebration of forgiveness needs development and articulation. Respect for Christian theological and ethical traditions is necessary, and contemporary concern for the divorced and remarried must be attended to, as Pope Francis has requested, and as demanded by the Holy Year of Mercy.

Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that the Eucharist is a crucial presence of a God who forgives in and through his crucified and risen Son. The Church teaches that the Eucharist is both the source and the summit of the Christian life (LG 11; SC 10). The Word of God prompts us to raise these issues. Writing into the confessional situation of his Corinthian community, Paul proclaims the following doxology:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consol... by God. (2 Cor 1:3–4)

A reflection on the Eucharist as a celebration of forgiveness asks that we take seriously the biblical understanding of the superabundance of God’s mercy and consolation showered on the disciples of Jesus, so that we may, in turn, “console those who are in any affliction.”

This study is dedicated to my long-standing friend and colleague, the celebrated Australian philosopher, poet, and systematic theologian, Anthony J. Kelly, CSSR. We have worked side-by-side in Australian theological education for fifty years. We basked in the new energies that emerged immediately after the Second Vatican Council, and have grappled with various challenges as the world and the Church we serve have been transformed across that half-century, for better and
for worse. I was appointed the Foundation Professor of Theology at Australian Catholic University in 1994. Tony succeeded me in that position in 1999. Although geographically separated by a number of years in other ministries within the broader mission of the Catholic Church, we continued our collaboration. We are proud of a study we co-authored during that time, an attempt to marry a critical exegesis of the Gospel and Letters of John and its concomitant theological possibilities: *The Experience of God in the Johannine Writings*. In 2012, I was invited to return to Australian Catholic University. I again joined forces with Tony in our roles of Senior Professorial Fellows in the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy. Thus, our latter years of teaching and writing have been enriched by sharing the wisdom, and especially the good company, afforded by the philosophical and theological community of Australian Catholic University. Much of what follows reflects Tony’s influence, but the mistakes are all mine!

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## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AT</td>
<td>Author’s Translation</td>
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<tr>
<td>BCE</td>
<td>Before the Common Era (traditionally BC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCC</td>
<td>Catechism of the Catholic Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE</td>
<td>Common Era (traditionally AD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCSL</td>
<td>Corpus Christianorum: Series latina. Turnhout, 1953–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CJC</td>
<td><em>Codex Iuris Canonici</em> (Code of Canon Law)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DV</td>
<td>Dei Verbum</td>
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<tr>
<td>LG</td>
<td><em>Lumen Gentium</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>LXX</td>
<td>Septuagint</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>New Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>OT</td>
<td>Old Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSV</td>
<td>Revised Standard Version</td>
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<td>SC</td>
<td><em>Sacrosanctum Concilium</em></td>
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CHAPTER 1

THE EUCHARISTIC TEACHING OF 1 CORINTHIANS 10:1—11:34

"Proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

(1 Cor 11:26)

The practice of forgiveness is a feature of Christianity. It requires the recognition of sinfulness, repentance, and an active search for pardon. Forgiveness in the Christian Tradition has its roots in the gospel accounts of Jesus's forgiveness of others (see Luke 23:34) and his teaching of the importance of forgiveness among those who claim to be his followers (see Matt 18:23–35; Luke 15:11–32; 24:47–48). The call for repentance also has its origins in the earliest Christian Tradition: "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9; see also Mark 1:4; 4:12; Matt 6:14–15; 7:1–5; Luke 3:3; 6:37; 11:4). The witness of the New Testament Scriptures indicates implicitly and explicitly that the Eucharist was a celebration of forgiveness. As we will see, forgiveness is implied in all four Gospels, as Jesus shares a final meal with those who betray him, deny him, and desert him (Mark 6:17–31; Matt 26:20–35; Luke 22:14–38; John 13:1–38). The association between Eucharist and the celebration of forgiveness is rendered explicit in the words of Jesus over the cup: "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28).

Despite the close association between Eucharist and forgiveness in the foundation of the Christian Tradition, there is never an understanding...
people, including the bishops, need to know the meaning of the word "doctrine." Eucharist as a Celebration of Forgiveness examines how we come to the "exclusive" and "need for holiness" criterion for admission to the eucharistic table, it summarizes how all the narratives indicate the celebration of forgiveness and provides the theology of legitimation "exclusion" from the eucharistic table.

Along with marriage and other sexuality questions, it presents a theory of eucharistic forgiveness and its ethical consequences.

"From the Preface"

"Eucharist as a Celebration of Forgiveness" by John Moloney, SDB, AM, FAHA, was the provincial superior of the Province of Don Bosco in Australia. He was on the International Theological Commission of the Holy See (1984–2002) and is a member of the Order of the Order of Australia, formerly the dean of the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America, he is currently Senior Pastor of the Diocese of Washington, D.C.

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Understanding of the Eucharist as the celebration of forgiveness (see Matt 26:28) has faded from current Catholic thought and practice. Pope Francis is asking the Catholic Church to look again at this teaching, in the light of the Gospel and the authentic Tradition of the Church: “Our teaching on marriage cannot fail to be instructed and transformed by this message of love and tenderness, otherwise, it becomes nothing more than the defence of a dry and lifeless doctrine” (Amoris Laetitia 59).

—from the preface

People, including the bishops, need to know the meaning of the word “doctrine.” Eucharist as a Celebration of Forgiveness examines how we came to the “exclusive” and “need for holiness” criterion for admission to the eucharistic table. It summarizes how all the narratives indicate the celebration of forgiveness and provides the theology of legitimate “exclusion” from the eucharistic table. Along with marriage and other sexuality questions, it presents a theology of Eucharist as forgiveness and its ethical consequences.

J. Moloney, SDB, AM, FAHA, was the provincial superior of the Australian Province of Don Bosco in Australia. He was on the International Theological Commission of the Holy See (1984–2002) and is a member of the Order of Mary Immaculate. Formerly the dean of the School of Theology and Religious Education at the Catholic University of America, he is currently Senior Professor at Catholic Theological College in the University of Divinity, Melbourne, Australia. He is the author of numerous scholarly and popular works on the New Testament, including A Body Broken for a Broken People (Con关键是 Press 2016).

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