



Entering into Communion



“Take and Eat”

*W*hen Jesus enters into the home of his disciples, it becomes his home. The guest becomes host. He who was invited now invites. The two disciples who trusted the stranger enough to let him enter into their inner space are now led into the inner life of their host.

“Now while he was with them at table, he took the bread and said the blessing; then he broke it and handed it to them.” So simple, so ordinary, so obvious, and still—so very different! What else can you do when you share bread with your friends? You take it, bless it, break it, and give it. That is what bread is for: to be taken, blessed, broken, and given. Nothing new, nothing surprising. It happens every day, in countless homes. It belongs to the essence of living. We can’t really live without bread that is taken, blessed, broken, and given. Without it there is no table fellowship, no com-

munity, no bond of friendship, no peace, no love, no hope. Yet, with it, all can become new!

Maybe we have forgotten that the Eucharist is a simple human gesture. The vestments, the candles, the altar servers, the large books, the outstretched arms, the large altar, the songs, the people—nothing seems very simple, very ordinary, very obvious. We often need a booklet to follow the ceremony and understand its meaning. Still, nothing is meant to be different from what happened in that little village among the three friends. There is bread on the table; there is wine on the table. The bread is taken, blessed, broken, and given. The wine is taken, blessed, and given. That is what happens around each table that wants to be a table of peace.

Every time we invite Jesus into our homes, that is to say, into our life with all its light and dark sides, and



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offer him the place of honor at our table, he takes the bread and the cup and hands them to us saying: “Take and eat, this is my body. Take and drink, this is my blood. Do this to remember me.” Are we surprised? Not really! Wasn’t our heart burning when he talked to us on the road? Didn’t we already know that he was not a stranger to us? Weren’t we already aware that the one who was crucified by our leaders was alive and with us? Hadn’t we seen it before, that he took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to us? He did so before the large crowd who had listened for long hours to his word, he did it in the upper room before Judas handed him over to suffering, and he has done it countless times when we have come to the end of a long day and he joins us around the table for a simple meal.

The Eucharist is the most ordinary and the most divine gesture imaginable. That is the truth of Jesus. So

human, yet so divine; so familiar, yet so mysterious; so close, yet so revealing! But that is the story of Jesus who “being in the form of God did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross” (Phil. 2:18). It is the story of God who wants to come close to us, so close that we can see him with our own eyes, hear him with our own ears, touch him with our own hands; so close that there is nothing between us and him, nothing that separates, nothing that divides, nothing that creates distance.

Jesus is God-for-us, God-with-us, God-within-us. Jesus is God giving himself completely, pouring himself out for us without reserve. Jesus doesn’t hold back or cling to his own possessions. He gives all there is to give.



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“Be my friend, be my companion, be my love—be part of my life—I want to give myself to you.”

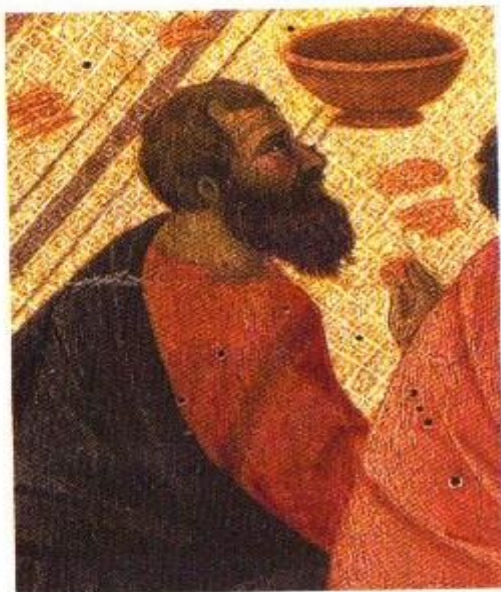
“Eat, drink, this is my body, this is my blood . . . this is me for you!”

We all know of this desire to give ourselves at the table. We say: “Eat and drink; I made this for you. Take more; it is there for you to enjoy, to be strengthened, yes, to feel how much I love you.” What we desire is not simply to give food, but to give ourselves. “Be my guest,” we say. And as we encourage our friends to eat from our table, we want to say, “Be my friend, be my companion, be my love—be part of my life—I want to give myself to you.”

In the Eucharist, Jesus gives all. The bread is not simply a sign of his desire to become our food; the cup is not just a sign of his willingness to be our drink. Bread and wine *become* his body and blood in the giving. The bread, indeed, is his body given for us; the wine his blood poured out for us. As God becomes fully present

for us in Jesus, so Jesus becomes fully present to us in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist. God not only became flesh for us years ago in a country far away. God also becomes food and drink for us now at this moment of the Eucharistic celebration, right where we are together around the table. God does not hold back; God gives all. That is the mystery of the Incarnation. That too is the mystery of the Eucharist. Incarnation and Eucharist are the two expressions of the immense, self-giving love of God. And so the sacrifice on the cross and the sacrifice at the table are one sacrifice, one complete, divine self-giving that reaches out to all humanity in time and space.

The word that best expresses this mystery of God's total self-giving love is "communion." It is the word that contains the truth that, in and through Jesus, God wants, not only to teach us, instruct us, or inspire us, but to



become one with us. God desires to be fully united with us so that all of God and all of us can be bound together in a lasting love. The whole long history of God's relationship with us human beings is a history of ever-deepening communion. It is not simply a history of unities, separations, and restored unities, but a history in which God searches for ever-new ways to commune intimately with those created in God's own image.

Augustine said: "My soul is restless until it rests in you, O God," but when I examine the tortuous story of our own salvation, I see not only that we are yearning to belong to God, but that God also is yearning to belong to us. It seems as if God is crying out to us: "My heart is restless until I may rest in you, my beloved creation." From Adam and Eve to Abraham and Sarah, from Abraham and Sarah to David and Bathsheba, and from David and Bathsheba to Jesus and ever since, God

cries out to be received by his own. "I created you, I gave you all my love, I guided you, offered you my support, promised you the fulfillment of your hearts' desires: where are you, where is your response, where is your love? What else must I do to make you love me? I won't give up, I will keep trying. One day, you will discover how I long for your love!"

God desires communion: a unity that is vital and alive, an intimacy that comes from both sides, a bond that is truly mutual. Nothing forced or "willed," but a communion freely offered and received. God goes all the way to make this communion possible. God becomes a child dependent on human care, a boy in need of guidance, a teacher searching for students, a prophet crying for followers, and, finally, a dead man pierced by a soldier's lance and laid in a tomb. At the very end of the story, he stands there looking at us, ask-



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ing with eyes full of tender expectation: "Do you love me?" and again, "Do you love me?" and a third time, "Do you love me?"

It is this intense desire of God to enter into the most intimate relationship with us that forms the core of the Eucharistic celebration and the Eucharistic life. God not only wants to enter human history by becoming a person who lives in a specific epoch and a specific country, but God wants to become our daily food and drink at any time and any place.

Therefore Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to us. And then, as we see the bread in our hands and bring it to our mouths to eat it, yes, then our eyes are opened and we recognize him.

Eucharist is recognition. It is the full realization that the one who takes, blesses, breaks, and gives is the One who, from the beginning of time, has desired to

enter into communion with us. Communion is what God wants and what we want. It is the deepest cry of God's and our heart, because we are made with a heart that can be satisfied only by the one who made it. God created in our heart a yearning for communion that no one but God can, and wants, to fulfill. God knows this. We seldom do. We keep looking somewhere else for that experience of belonging. We look at the splendor of nature, the excitement of history, and the attractiveness of people, but that simple breaking of the bread, so ordinary and unspectacular, seems such an unlikely place to find the communion for which we yearn. Still, if we have mourned our losses, listened to him on the road, and invited him into our innermost being, we will know that the communion we have been waiting to receive is the same communion he has been waiting to give.

There is one sentence in the Emmaus story that

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leads us right into the mystery of communion. It is the sentence: “... they recognized him; but he had vanished from their sight.” In the same moment that the two friends recognize him in the breaking of the bread, he is no longer there with them. When the bread is given them to eat, they no longer see him sitting with them at the table. When they eat, he has become invisible. When they enter into the most intimate communion with Jesus, the stranger—become friend—is no longer with them. Precisely when he becomes most present to them, he also becomes the absent one.

Here we touch one of the most sacred aspects of the Eucharist: the mystery that the deepest communion with Jesus is a communion that happens in his absence. The two disciples who walked on the road to Emmaus had listened to him for many hours, walked with him from village to village, helped him in his preaching, rest-

ed and taken meals with him. During the year, he had become their teacher, their guide, their master. All of their hopes for a new and better future were focused on him. Still . . . they had never fully come to know him, to fully understand him. Often had he said to them: “Now you don’t understand, but later you will.” They didn’t really know what he was trying to say. They thought they were closer to him than to any other person they had ever met. Still he kept saying: “I tell you this now . . . so that later, when I am no longer with you, you will remember and understand.” One day he had even said that it was good for him to go so that his Spirit could come and lead them to full intimacy with him. His Spirit would open their eyes and make them fully understand who he is and why he had come to be with them.

All during his time with the disciples there had been no full communion. Yes, they had stayed with him



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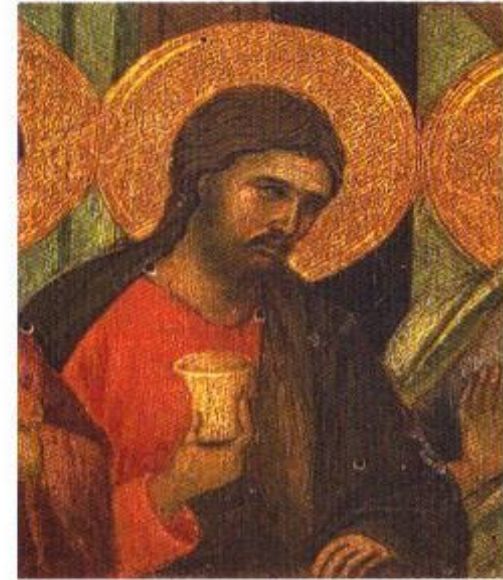
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and sat at his feet; yes, they had been his disciples, even his friends. But they had not yet entered into full communion with him. His body and blood and their body and blood had not yet become one. In many ways, he still had been the other, the one over there, the one who goes ahead of them and shows them the way. But when they eat the bread he gives them and they recognize him, that recognition is a deep spiritual awareness that, now, he dwells in their innermost being, that, now, he breathes in them, speaks in them, yes, lives in them. When they eat the bread that he hands them, their lives are transformed into his life. It is no longer they who live, but Jesus, the Christ, who lives in them. And right at that most sacred moment of communion, he has vanished from their sight.

This is what we live in the Eucharistic celebration. This too is what we live when we live a Eucharistic life.

It is a communion so intimate, so holy, so sacred, and so spiritual that our corporeal senses can no longer reach it. No longer can we see him with our mortal eyes, hear him with our mortal ears, or touch him with our mortal bodies. He has come to us at that place within us where the powers of darkness and evil cannot reach, where death has no access.

When he reaches out to us and puts the bread in our hands and brings the cup to our lips, Jesus asks us to let go of the easier friendship we have had with him so far and to let go of the feelings, emotions, and even thoughts that belong to that friendship. When we eat of his body and drink of his blood, we accept the loneliness of not having him any longer at our table as a consoling partner in our conversation, helping us to deal with the losses of our daily life. It is the loneliness of the spiritual life, the loneliness of knowing that he is closer to us than





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we ever can be to ourselves. It's the loneliness of faith.

We will keep crying out, "Lord, have mercy"; we will keep listening to the scriptures and their meaning; we will keep saying, "Yes, I believe." But communion with him goes far beyond all of that. It brings us to the place where the light blinds our eyes and where our whole being is wrapped in not-seeing. It is at that place of communion that we cry out: "God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" It is at that place, too, that our emptiness gives us the prayer: "Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit."

Communion with Jesus means becoming like him. With him we are nailed on the cross, with him we are laid in the tomb, with him we are raised up to accompany lost travelers on their journey. Communion, becoming Christ, leads us to a new realm of being. It ushers us into the Kingdom. There the old distinctions between

happiness and sadness, success and failure, praise and blame, health and sickness, life and death, no longer exist. There we no longer belong to the world that keeps dividing, judging, separating, and evaluating. There we belong to Christ and Christ to us, and with Christ we belong to God. Suddenly the two disciples, who ate the bread and recognized him, are alone again. But not with the aloneness with which they began their journey. They are alone, together, and know that a new bond has been created between them. They no longer look at the ground with downcast faces. They look at each other and say: "Did our hearts not burn when he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?"

Communion creates community. Christ, living in them, brought them together in a new way. The Spirit of the risen Christ, which entered them through the eating of the bread and drinking of the cup, not only made



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them recognize Christ himself but also each other as members of a new community of faith. Communion makes us look at each other and speak to each other, not about the latest news, but about him who walked with us. We discover each other as people who belong together because each of us now belongs to him. We are alone, because he disappeared from our sight, but we are together because each of us is in communion with him and so has become one body through him.

We ate his body, we drank his blood. In so doing, all of us who took from the same bread and the same cup have become one body. Communion creates community, because the God living in us makes us recognize the God in our fellow humans. We cannot see God in the other person. Only God in us can see God in the other person. That is what we mean when we say, "Spirit speaks to Spirit, Heart speaks to Heart, God speaks to

God.” Our participation in the inner life of God leads us to a new way of participation in each other’s lives.

This might sound very “unreal,” but when we live it, it becomes more real than the “reality” of the world. As Paul says: “The blessing-cup, which we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ, and the loaf of bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? And as there is one loaf, so we, although there are many of us, are one single body, for we all share in the one loaf” (1 Cor. 16–17).

This new body is a spiritual body, fashioned by the Spirit of love. It manifests itself in very concrete ways: in forgiveness, reconciliation, mutual support, outreach to people in need, solidarity with all who suffer, and an ever-increasing concern for justice and peace. Thus communion not only creates community, but community always leads to mission.



