

## A RESPONSE TO MARY COLLINS, OSB

The key to Mary Collins's proposal for the renewal of Catholic eucharistic practice and theology, it seems to me, lies in her conviction that "theological reflection on the Eucharist [and] how we understand the mystery of the Church" are linked.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the Church as a *koinōnia* constituted by a variety of relationships, she claims that "the issue is the eucharistic event as the self-realization of the Church" (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup> The Church as mystery is certainly greater than its official texts, liturgical and others, but it is also more than its public celebrations and the private meanings discovered by individual Catholics. She argues that an adequate theology of the Eucharist must take as much of the data of real practice as possible into account. Among the most important "missing data" is the experience of the "baptized out in the nave." By treating the liturgical assembly as a collective subject which "makes Eucharist," we will be able to overcome centuries of focusing narrowly on the presbyter and his actions and find a way forward to a eucharistic theology adequate to the Church Catholic of the third millennium. Thus it is "from the nave," where she herself stands, sits, kneels, that Prof. Collins proposes, first, to discover the meaning of the faith-praxes (plural) of particular churches and, second, to reflect theologially upon them in service of the construction of a genuinely universal Church. I applaud her proposed method for accomplishing these important tasks.

Mary Collins's reflections ought to stimulate a lively discussion among those who take eucharistic celebration seriously. For my part, I would like to raise points which may be grouped under two headings. First, and most broadly, is the question of the Church's relationship to the world; second is the matter of the theologian's stance vis-à-vis the world. As I see it, the Church's relationship to the world must be taken into account if our liturgical acts are to have their intended salvific significance. Collins helps us by enumerating several theologically significant relationships such as those of God and humanity, the baptized among themselves, Catholic Christians and their own cultures, and Catholic Christians and cultures not their own. But Collins implies—correctly in my view—that the God of Jesus Christ desires to save us together, and not simply individually. And if God saves human beings by drawing them into human *koinōnia* and through human communion into the *koinōnia* of the divine Trinity, then the question of the relationship between the Church as such and the world (or cultures), and not simply between individual Christians and the world, must be confronted. Of course, the thorny and age-old issue of how the Church's life *ad intra* and

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<sup>1</sup>Collins, "The Church and the Eucharist," *CTSA Proceedings* 52 (1997): 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

mission *ad extra* are related admits of no facile solution. When Prof. Collins states that "being drawn into the saving *koinōnia* . . . brings the Church into being and gives it its mission" (p. 27), she implies that the Church comes into being either chronologically or theologically, or both, prior to receiving its mission. While it is true that being drawn into the saving *koinōnia* brings the Church into being, it is necessary to be even more concrete, I believe, about the purpose of the ecclesial communion. The inner mystery of the Church is not simply "God's love," but rather God's love for the world, a world ravaged by sin. Can the *koinōnia ekklesiās* be imagined or constructed apart from the work of establishing the *koinōnia anthrōpōn*—and be consistent with the universal saving will of God? The Church gives thanks for the saving love of God who, as we have come to understand better since the Council, moves first to re-incorporate persons severed from the body of humanity by other persons, that is, severed from our own body. Let me suggest, then, that understanding the Church as the community-of-faith gathered-for-mission may not only move us beyond the overly abstract, disembodied theology of the Eucharist Collins correctly rejects. Attention to the Church-world relationship—indeed, placing the whole of God's world at the center of our concern—may also effectively reinvigorate eucharistic devotion. It is the mission to be the sacrament of God's saving love in history which ought to ground both the unity of the Church and its grateful worship.

A second area of concern is closely related to the first, namely, the stance of the theologian-investigator. Prof. Collins reports that, "concerned to [her] core about doing harm to the Church," she enters her local parish every Sunday "like a scout with an ear to the ground, like a nurse pressing flesh to pick up the pulse, like an uncertain prophet listening for a still voice, like Annie Dillard watching the Church drifting toward the pole of the Absolute."<sup>3</sup> Listening, touching, and watching "in the nave," Collins identifies a proper and long-ignored *locus theologicus* and wisely urges humility in our investigation of the Holy Mystery. At the same time, as members of the community called to be a sacrament of God's saving love for the world, can Catholic theologians fail to notice that most of the people sitting in the worldwide "Catholic nave" are hungry, sick, uneducated, poor, and often despised for being so? Can we afford not to listen to the majority of Catholics who not only live and pray at a distance from those presiding at the altar (and writing our theologies of Eucharist) but more fundamentally at a distance from the material base of life itself? What happens to our understanding of the Eucharist when we press the hands of most members of the world-Church and discover literally almost no pulse? And is the situation not even more critical if we move from the nave of the Church through the narthex and out into the world of the whole human family? What justification can there be for doing theology, especially eucharistic theology, without attempting to give

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 24.

expression to our gratitude from within the ranks of those whose lives bespeak interminable grief? God's solidarity with the marginalized of history must inform our prayer, our praxis, and our eucharistic theology today.

All this means, it seems to me, that the first—but not last—step in our “intellectually . . . groping toward self-actualization”<sup>4</sup> must be knowing the hungers of those whose sacrifice of life does *not* conform to the pattern of Christ because it is, in these cases, neither by their choice nor for the salvation of the world that their lives are destroyed. I am thinking here, of course, of the matter of assigning epistemological and practical priority to the struggle of the poor for life and dignity. Countless times every day, and every sabbath day, the immolation of real lives at the altars of greed, power, indifference, and hatred calls into question the adequacy of the metaphor of sacrifice. So too do the numberless struggles against such waste, struggles which engender hope, growth, freedom, new life, joy, and thanksgiving. Solidarity with those who struggle for life is crucial—saving—for both the powerless and the privileged. Such solidarity also proves theologically instructive, yet too often it figures among the missing data Collins invites us to take into account. Is it true, as some claim, that there is less liturgical crisis and more liturgical and human vitality in Christian communities of the marginalized? Certainly we must entertain the question. In Peru where I lived for nearly two years I rarely heard missionaries from affluent Northern countries complain of “dead” liturgy among those who were poor *and* Catholic *and* aware of the injustice of their lives. For seven years at the College of the Holy Cross I have taken students to visit worshipping communities of marginalized Catholics such as African-Americans, Latinos, and the gay, lesbian, and bisexual members of Dignity. I cannot report a single dissent from the view that “this is how *all* Catholic parishes ought to be.” Where do we find, then, “the liturgical assembly . . . work[ing] as a collective subject”<sup>5</sup> more effectively than in communities of outcasts-come-to-consciousness of their dignity?

The first document promulgated by the Second Vatican Council on December 4, 1963, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, doubtless ought to guide our reflections on eucharistic practice and theology. In the first paragraph of that document the bishops express their hope that the work of liturgical reform will “impart an ever-increasing vigor to the Christian lives of the faithful.” Yet the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy is not the only place we ought to look for liturgical inspiration and ecclesial vigor. Perhaps the opening words of the Council's final document *Gaudium et spes*, promulgated on December 7, 1965, merit consideration in this regard.

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joys and hopes, the grief

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 34.

and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. . . . Christians are bearers of a message of salvation intended for all people. That is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.

Is it possible that these familiar words speak not only about our Church's relationship to the world but, at the same time (and more importantly), about who we are as Church? If so, the very meaning of our eucharistic celebrations is transformed by the "joys and hopes, grief and anguish" of the world.

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