

- Topic: Women and the Eucharist  
Convener: Susan A. Ross, Loyola University of Chicago  
Moderator: Joanne Pierce, College of the Holy Cross  
Presenters: Shawn Madigan, College of St. Catherine  
Cristina L.H. Traina, Northwestern University  
Joan Mitchell, Publisher, Good Ground Press, St. Paul, Minnesota  
Susan A. Ross, Loyola University Chicago

At the invitation of President-elect Mary Ann Donovan, Susan A. Ross convened this group to offer a variety of perspectives on women's experiences of the Eucharist. The four presenters represented, respectively, that of a historian of the medieval period, of women religious, of women working in parishes, and of a mother.

Shawn Madigan began the session with reflections on two dimensions of medieval women's experience of the Eucharist: first, that medieval women saw themselves as the Body of Christ, and, second, that the Body of Christ was not limited to historical descriptions. That is, medieval women understood the real presence not only in the strict sacramental sense, but as located in their own bodies. Their understanding of the presence of the Body of Christ extended far more broadly than the historical body of Christ or that of the consecrated elements. These two dimensions suggest further questions: By what criteria do we label revelation? In considering Jesus' sayings to medieval women visionaries, whose experience counts?

Professor Madigan developed these ideas by drawing on accounts of the early martyr Perpetua and the writings of Gertrude of Helfta. What comes across strongly in these accounts is the idea that women are the Body of Christ and that in their visions, Jesus says to them that they are to be the image of him as he was of the Father. Thus the words, "This is my Body," are not restricted to presbyteral texts.

Joan Mitchell, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph, began by stating that her congregation has historically been a Eucharist-centered community. Thus the kinds of conflicts that have arisen in women's religious communities—over bringing in an "outsider" to celebrate the Eucharist, over having women-led celebrations—have hit at the core of the congregation's identity. Further, the fact that communities are scattered complicates an already difficult situation.

Sr. Mitchell then described the experiences of a group of ten to twelve women who have gathered over the course of five years to celebrate the Eucharist together. The members of the group occasionally bring others, but the main point of the group is to offer support and intimacy for each other, as well as to help members work through various issues.

At its beginning, the group relied on a more "priestly" model, having individuals take responsibility for leading the celebration, but this has changed. Bread is passed around among the group and is blessed by all. Different kinds of bread are used. In the process, anger does come out, but the most important realization was that the group's members were able to access the holy themselves.

In May, Sr. Mitchell recorded the blessings of the bread, and she made this available to the attendees of the session. She commented that the group maintains a Christian identity so does not see itself as "post-Christian," as some women's worship groups do. But there is among the members a realization of the desperate need to bring women's own experiences to the celebration. The reflections of the group members included observations on the blueberry-lemon bread and its many associations, issues of inclusion and exclusion, of sweetness and sourness, of small groups like this as balancing the larger gatherings in parishes, of family gatherings around the kitchen table, of bread as a foothold.

Susan Ross has been working on a book on women and the sacraments over the last year, and as a part of that project, has been interviewing women who work in parishes. They are involved in various dimensions of sacramental ministry, and in the conversations, the subject of Eucharist has been a frequent topic. She made five points as summarizing the experiences of these women.

First, women's involvement in sacramental ministry (preparation, education, liturgical planning) has broadened their understanding of sacramentality. These women do not restrict the concept of sacrament to the seven canonically defined ones, but extend the definition of sacrament to communion services, pastoral care of the sick, preparation of candidates. This also affects their understanding of "real presence," which, for them, is located primarily in the community and not confined to the consecrated host. Second, there is a new sense of the Sunday liturgy as the "gathered community," and a lessened emphasis on each and every Eucharistic celebration as having equal significance. The emphasis on the Sunday celebration serves to unite as well as intensify the parish's sense of community.

Third, these women interpret the Eucharistic celebration as a time of hospitality and community building. This emphasis on hospitality was strong among all the interviewees, and they stressed the need to get to know all of the members of their parishes, as much as possible, and for all of the parish community to do the same. Fourth, while nearly all the women complained about the poor quality of liturgical presiding, preaching, and music, there was nevertheless a strong sense that they needed to "hold on" to the Eucharist. Despite the exclusion of women from ordination, and the availability of alternative worship groups, these women maintained a strong commitment to the Eucharist as central to their faith and tradition. Fifth, these women live with, are aware of, and wrestle with, ambiguity as a constant in their lives and are unwilling to make either/or choices. This is reflective of the ambiguity of the life of the church and of their own lives, where one must dwell in the messiness and "gray areas" and where things are seldom crystal clear.

Cristina Traina's reflections were a partial answer to the question: "How has my own maternity transformed my experience and theology of the Eucharist?" She began by commenting that, as someone raised in the post-Vatican II church, with guitars, homemade bread, and Eucharist under trees, her initial experience of motherhood was that she had been "robbed" of her spiritual weekly high point. Struggling with small children at Mass has made her realize that grace had better not depend on her degree of attention, serenity of meditation, or the depth

of her emotional response. These experiences have reminded her that grace comes from God, that the sacraments are larger than her own personal experience. Motherhood has taught her to experience the sacraments now, through her children, and she has come to an appreciation of the Eastern Orthodox practice of communing all, even infants.

Her experiences have also given her a much more realistic sense of Eucharist as a family meal. While there are often genial conversations and moments of real grace and gratitude, there are just as often spilled glasses of milk, complaints about vegetables, arguments, angry leavings from the table. The point is that the meal is an institution—always there for the whole family, always nourishing. Sustaining such a commitment to this institution sometimes takes real courage, as with realizations that a beloved pastor was a pedophile, or with the pain of women's exclusion from ordination.

Finally, physical motherhood has given Professor Traina a new perspective on sacrifice, on the failure of the church to make theological use of the labor of maternity, as the absolutely necessary condition of mothers' experiences of self-gift. This perspective has challenged traditional conceptions of the atonement and of Mary's willingness to give her son.

The discussion was lively and wide-ranging, including suggestions of ways of including women's physicality in our understandings of God. These are perceived by some as frightening to the tradition, but there is a great need to retrieve such images and experiences. These experiences, especially physical ones, can be seen as radical and disturbing to some. Such a retrieval has methodological implications in that women's experiences are a necessary part of theological reflection. One participant suggested that the presenters might benefit from recent philosophical work on boundaries and border crossings. Another suggested that one can look at ritual as exploratory, rather than simply as expressive. One participant from San Francisco informed the group that there would be a "Critical Mass" celebrated on 5 October 1997 (rain date: 12 October), with women participants as a public act of ritual and that there was considerable risk involved for the participants in this Mass. Another member reflected that this is a kind of "public ritual transgression" that "cracks open" the meaning of Eucharist. Other observers commented on the need to retrieve "popular religion," and the need to grieve over the present state of liturgy. One priest asked about ways in which priest-presiders can be more sensitive to the needs of women's religious communities. One response to this question was that the Eucharist has become less clerically centered and that priests may not be as central to the liturgy as some perceive themselves to be. More than fifty people attended this session and some urged that the questions raised in the session—of women in relation to the sacraments, of the present crisis in relation to the Eucharist—need to find a permanent forum on the CTSA program.

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