

ECCLESIOLOGY AND SACRAMENTAL/LITURGICAL THEOLOGY  
(Joint Session)

Topic: Challenges to Eucharistic and Ecclesial Communion  
Convener: Susan K. Wood, Marquette University  
Presenters: Bruce Morrill, Boston College  
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In “Eucharist and Public Life,” Bruce Morrill investigated challenges to the communal dimension of Eucharistic celebration in the United States Catholic Church: the persistent tendency among the greater number of American Christians to identify religious practice as a private or personal matter; the recent maelstrom over local bishops judging public officials and political candidates’ eligibility to receive Holy Communion; an ongoing disjunction between Catholic’s understanding of liturgical and canon law and their experiences of Sunday Mass in the context of their daily lives; and the tension between the Eucharist’s ritual functions of both assembling the faithful in the mutually supportive *koinonia* of the body of Christ and serving as a means for the local pastor to teach and, if necessary, discipline the faithful.

Analyzing several letters and statements by the United States bishops to their dioceses in the wake of the semiannual meeting of the bishops’ conference in June, 2004 (see *Origins* 34:12), Morrill compared and contrasted how various bishops employed canon and liturgical law, as well as teaching of the ordinary magisterium, in addressing the issue of Catholic politicians who support legislation for abortion and/or euthanasia. Some bishops explained the outcome of their meeting’s discussions to be a strong consensus that these current ethical controversies present the local bishop with the opportunity to dialogue persuasively with politicians and other members of his diocese while not judging any individual’s guilt of formal cooperation with evil. In sharp contrast, other bishops saw their function as more direct, prescriptive, and disciplinary. The bishop’s duty is to teach his flock the criteria for being properly disposed for Holy Communion. These bishops view a public official’s support of proabortion legislation as amounting to manifest or public cooperation in evil, thereby manifesting a lack of communion in the faith, sacraments, and hierarchical order of the church. These bishops cite John Paul II’s *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (nos. 35-38) concerning the relationship between reception and practice of the church’s moral teaching and participation (communion) in those three functions of the church. Allowing such persons to receive communion would amount to the bishop’s failure to guard the sacrality of the Eucharist and to work for the salvation of souls. Bishops of the teach-through-persuasion mindset, on the other hand, bemoaned the reduction of “the communion rail” to a site for “battles for human life and dignity” and considered “tragic” the possibility that inordinate concerns for the integrity of the Eucharist would result in its becoming “a sacrament that signifies and brings about disunity.”

Morrill argued for how such poignant rhetoric aptly demonstrates the symbolic-ritual power the Eucharist exerts in the life of the U.S. Catholic Church. Contestation of the social and religious power exercised in its celebration raises questions about how the sacred reality of the Eucharist is practically manifested, whether and how the ritual celebration both “signifies” and “brings about” the unity of the Church, and what all of this implies about ritual honesty in relation to the praxis of the faith. Morrill utilized both contemporary sacramental theologians and ritual theorists as well as homilies and letters from the early church fathers to arrive at concluding considerations about the symbolic power inherent in the communion procession, with its public dimension of participation or, alternatively, abstaining therefrom.

In “Eucharist, Ecclesial Communion, and Church Law,” Myriam Wijlens, a canonist, addressed the topic of ecclesial communion and the reception of the Eucharist in Nr. 34-46 of the Encyclical letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* by Pope John Paul II in 2003. She noted that the main source for the pertinent section (Nr. 34-46) is not UR 8—which is, like the Ecumenical Directory of 1993 not even mentioned—but OE 26-29. The latter document, however, was originally written as summary of individual responses by the Holy See in 1864, 1898, 1916 and 1941 with regard to *communicatio in sacris* and did not result from the new ecclesiological insights expressed in *Unitas Redintegratio*. Furthermore, for the first time restrictions are mentioned with regard to the norms expressed in c. 844 insofar as no dispensations are possible. The encyclical becomes the source for even more restrictions in the *Instructio redemptionis sacramentum* since all conditions for receiving the Eucharist must exist concurrently.

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