



Infant Communion: A Matter of Christian Concern

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I am still making up my mind on this issue. In general, I applaud the new appreciation of the Lord's Supper or Eucharist in the church. But what of “infant communion,” the practice of opening the sacrament to all the baptized, regardless of age, including new-born infants and young children unable to know self-consciously what they are doing? Here is where I get nervous.

The New Testament does not answer this question conclusively. Yet two considerations raise grave doubts about the practice in the light of the New Testament church. First, while the evidence for infant baptism is not conclusive (as we well know), there is *no* evidence for infant communion. Households were baptized immediately upon reception of faith, but we hear nothing about immediate eucharistic celebrations that follow. It seems that further instruction is required to receive the Eucharist.

Second, and more important, the need for instruction *is* clearly linked to the Eucharist. The command, “Do this in remembrance of me,” carries with it the need to teach and comprehend the remembrance of Jesus and his life and death for us in order to receive the sacrament rightly. Moreover, Paul's injunctions to self-examination in 1 Corinthians 11 are still relevant, despite their history of misinterpretation and abuse. Paul does not intend them to be binding ecclesiastical rules before each participation. Yet his specific injunctions to a divided church, where richer Christians are demeaning the poorer, assume a community of people able to think and reflect on what they are doing in relation to the body of Christ (the church and the Eucharist). Participation in the Eucharist requires this kind of reflection regardless of the particular circumstance. If instruction, examination, and understanding are essential to sacramental reception, then this obviously excludes infants and the very young.

What theological arguments need special consideration? The basic theological argument for infant communion goes something like this. Just as baptism is God's gracious act on behalf of all who believe, regardless of age, likewise the Eucharist belongs to all the baptized. If infant baptism, then infant communion. The logic seems impeccable; yet problems remain.

The strength of the argument lies with its emphasis upon the priority of God's unconditional grace at work in Word and Sacrament. I am ever thankful for this biblical/theological priority in an approach to the sacraments. To shift

away from this to emphasize our human response to God's gift would be a stumbling step backward.

Yet we are still faced with the role of faith, the question of our response and openness to God's gifts, no matter how hard we try to avoid it. We acknowledge the necessity of faith even for baptized infants, yet we must admit to acute embarrassment to interpret what we mean by "infant faith." Mostly we settle for some cozy feeling that God embraces the infant and plants seeds of faith which will grow in years. By God's grace this does happen when and where the children are continually nurtured in the faith. But we must also admit the scandal of "indiscriminate baptism" (cf. *BEM* 4.16) and its disastrous consequences in Christendom. A healthier theology of baptism will link together more closely God's action and the response of faith. Accordingly, the argument may be correct that emergency baptism of infants is unnecessary, if no chance of ongoing faith exists. The sacraments are not understood *ex opere operato*.

So what of infant communion? The Eucharist is God's gift of Christ present in the meal of bread and wine. It proclaims the gracious death of Christ for us, the new covenant affirmed each time we eat and drink. To receive it rightly, we need to know and believe what Christ has done, what it is we remember and celebrate, what is the promise we anticipate for the future. That is, our faith-response is involved, our yes to the gift of Christ embodied in the visible Word of the sacrament. At what age faith becomes a conscious response, I will leave open. But to attribute it to infants should cause acute discomfort. And it opens the door to what I fear most in the argument for infant communion—a purely mechanical, or better, magical, view of the sacrament. It smacks of Irenaeus' "medicine of immortality," the elixir that dispenses divine grace indiscriminately, faith or no. This may be a high sacramentalism and may feed into an exalted view of the church as dispenser of divine graces, but my understanding of the Reformation and current ecumenism would exclude it.

A careful distinction should be made between the two sacraments and hence their practices. Baptism, like birth, begins our new life in God's family. But the Eucharist is God's gift along the way to nourish us, and so involves our continuing desire to remain within the family. The practice of infant baptism symbolizes profoundly God's initial act of acceptance. But with the Eucharist, the responsibility of life within the family is present, and this makes sense only where conscious faith is present.

Two concluding suggestions: (1) the exact age for admitting children to the Eucharist should be left open, but the necessity for careful instruction and for a joint decision-making process (parent-child-pastor-congregation) should be maintained; and (2) the church as a whole should remain the responsible agent for discussion and decision on the question, but discussion should not be stifled nor dissent disregarded.

Infant Communion: A Matter of Christian Unity

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"Bless the cup! Break the bread! Share the body! Do this in remembrance of me...until the Lord comes!" The Eucharistic Feast is for the full participation of the baptized—all of them. I believe that we should restore the practice of the communion of all those who are baptized, infants and children included, when and as they are able to receive. The freedom visibly spoken

and acted in baptism should not immediately result in closing off the altar to children and withdrawing the broken loaf and the shared cup.

In the matter of the communion of all the baptized, Western Church tradition historically has experienced a triumph of the rational and organizational over the doxological and theological. In that process, concern over “discernment of the body” (1 Cor 11:28-29) coalesced with the withholding of the cup, scholastic theology, and the expanding privileged position of the priest so that participation in the Eucharist was narrowed and indeed eliminated for younger members of the body. For theological, liturgical, pastoral, and practical reasons the Eucharist should be restored to all the baptized.

The biblical sources exhibit variety concerning the use and meaning of the Supper in the early communities of Christ. The sources speak of the shared cup and the breaking of the bread in a fellowship meal of the community, being assured thereby of future eating with Christ at his coming; the christological interpretation of the elements; and the Pauline emphasis on the believing community as the body of Christ jointly participating in an eschatological meal. The Eucharist creates the body of Christ. Thus the *theological* focus of the Eucharist is not on the elements as such, the edification of an individual, nor the discernment by the individual concerning the meaning of the elements. All these have been misused to withhold the sacrament from children. What is theologically crucial is the unity of the body. Withholding the sacrament from many of the baptized, a standard practice, undercuts the sacrament and the recognition of its reality. It leads to an emphasis on education, understanding doctrines, and qualifying examinations as the tickets for admission to the table. This posture is not only theologically absurd but biblically deceptive. All the baptized must be what they are—that body of Christ.

Liturgically, the Mass is a celebrative unity. By cutting off children from the action and work of the people at the Eucharist, we truncate their worship. It

is the heart of the liturgy which a child most immediately understands: this reception, this sharing, this eating, this drinking, this communal bonding into Christ. Baptism’s casting out of the demonic and welcoming into the body of Christ is given the lie if thanksgiving and nourishment in the Word cannot follow. In our liturgy, the Word is to be proclaimed, enacted, and presented. For the baptized, the spoken Word is visibly enacted in the breaking, receiving, and sharing. Children who engage in singing, kneeling for confession, praying, hearing God’s Word—but who are passed by at the altar distribution, even if given a “blessing”—will experience worship as an adult ritual and not that which fundamentally forms and sustains the people of God. What essentially binding and celebrative family ritual action would I withhold from my own children? Certainly not their daily participation at the family table.

Pastorally, the opportunity for families and the community to form a eucharistic piety in children from the time of their infancy is encouraged and aided by their full participation at the altar. The *pro nobis* of the Word and the liturgy can most immediately be communicated to children in the sharing of bread and wine, in the communal gathering at the altar in which they are included. Both the present reality and the foretaste of the things to come are there for them.

The eschatological dimension of our remembrance in the Eucharist flows out of the passing of the peace, assuring one another of God’s presence with us now and as we go into an unknown future. We are nourished for the journey and unified as we are made Christ’s body by

the bread and cup. All the baptized need this assurance. We romanticize children's lives too much by an implicit assumption that they do not daily have their own struggles in life and even at times live in the shadow of death.

Practically, there can be no more primal capacity than that of seeking and receiving nourishment. As the body of Christ, this is how we share with one another. It is fully natural, of this created nature, for children to be incorporated into and participate in this reception-action.

Unfortunately, we are far from such celebration of the fullness of the body of Christ at the altar. I hope for open discussion of these matters in the church. There will be congregations which receive infants at the altar in full eucharistic participation. Pastorally, as families move from parish to parish, in no case should the sacrament be withheld from those who have already received and now seek it earnestly. If other children ask, "Why can they receive and not me?," we should listen to what they are asking and why they ask. Is the Spirit speaking in their words deeper than we know?