

Eucharist and Hunger

The foundation for the church's ministry to the hungry is the sacrament of the eucharist. Remembering that one of the most distinctive and celebrated parts of Jesus' ministry was feeding the hungry (e.g., the feeding of the multitude is attested in all four gospels), the early church continued that tradition—gathering their offerings around the eucharistic table and sharing the abundance of that meal with those in need (see Acts 2.44-45 or Justin Martyr's *First Apology*). The church's worship and mission were one.

In subsequent centuries we have nearly lost that connection, spiritualizing the meal that Jesus established, forgetting that our nourishment in the Word of God was meant to strengthen us for service to others. We have argued over the doctrine of Christ's presence in the eucharist, ignoring the real presence of the poor within our sanctuaries and around the world. This is not to diminish the amazing gift of God in the sacrament: that the risen Christ is with us in this supper that we share; this is to say that, *because* the risen Christ is with us, we have work to do, together, in his name.

Still, there are vestiges of the fullness of the sacrament's meaning in our contemporary practices: in the approach to the table we bring our tithes and offerings, pledging our time and treasure for those in need; at the beginning of the eucharistic prayer, we bless God for the gifts of creation, which sustain human life; in the Great Thanksgiving, we recall that Jesus "fed the hungry ... broke bread with outcasts and sinners, and proclaimed the good news ... to the poor and needy"; at the conclusion of the prayer, we anticipate the feast of justice and plenty for all "in the joy of [God's] eternal realm"; we ask for "daily bread" in the prayer that Jesus taught; and when we invite people to the table, we promise that "Jesus said: I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry."

My hope in joining this conversation is that we can hold the church accountable to that promise, that we can recover the material and spiritual wholeness of the meaning of the eucharist. A few months ago I was sitting in worship on a Sunday morning among a group of well fed, well dressed Presbyterians, preparing to receive communion. As I was looking at the bread and cup on the table, I had a glimpse of another vision: a church committed to the eradication of hunger, and to the just distribution of resources for all. What if—whenever Presbyterians saw that bread and cup—they remembered, gave thanks, and prayed for that common mission, as an integral part of our vocation, our common life, our covenant relationship with God and one another?

In her 1976 book, *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World* (Paulist Press), Monica Hellwig wrote: "Before we can begin to understand the symbolism of the eucharist or try to fathom the message it conveys, we need to remember hunger. ... To understand very well what it means to be hungry over a long period of time. To understand in starkly revelatory depth what hunger means is to be starving, or to have developed authentic bridges of empathy to the experience of the starving."

As Paul asked (1 Cor. 10), and as we often say in the eucharistic liturgy, "When we break the bread, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?"