

# Eucharist and Hope<sup>1</sup>

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While the Eucharist has a focus on both the past (re-presenting the passion of Jesus) and the present (feeding and nurturing us with the Body and Blood of Christ), it also is a celebration of hope and renewal. This hope provides a vision for the future, challenges the status quo, and prevents the church from falling into despair when faced with a culture that no longer lives sacramentally.

## **The Status of Hope in the Church Today**

*Even though hope is one of the three theological virtues, it has taken a beating in recent years. In today's secularized culture hope is synonymous with mere optimism or even wishful thinking. For a large segment of Christianity, hope means little more than heaven when you die. Even our language betrays us. A sentence such as, "I hope it may come true," structured in the subjunctive mood and filled with uncertainty, casts a pall of doubt.*

The Christian concept of hope, however, is much richer. It implies expectation, even confidence, and is centered on the promises of God. In fact, the focus of hope is not only on its content but on the act of hoping as characteristic of the community of faith. Therefore, hope is closely connected with patience, because it speaks of future promises which are already authentically experienced now, even though partially and in a preliminary form.

John Baillie once noted that Christians live between a memory and a hope. That is, the Christian life is lived out on the plane of history between the past events that have shaped Christianity—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—and the future hope of the promised kingdom of God. Though the Eucharist takes us in three directions—past, present, and future—it is the future that is especially in need of critical theological reflection if the Eucharist is to serve as a means for hope and renewal.

Today, interest abounds in the subject of the future, both from the religious right and left. On the one hand, one can peruse the shelves of conservative Christian bookstores and find entire sections on "prophecy and the last times." In fact, without the subject of eschatology, a large number of television evangelists in the United States would find

themselves out of business. Most of these books and television programs do little more than match the latest world crisis with a woefully naive and subjective interpretation of the Bible.

For example, I recently saw an advertisement for a book entitled *Armageddon, Oil and the Mid-East Crisis* by John Walvoord. The advertisement carried this description. "Right now, says Walvoord, the stage is set in the Middle East for the final drama leading to Armageddon and Jesus' Second Coming. In this up-to-date book, he explains how biblical prophecies are fulfilled in such recent events as the formation of the European Economic Community, the end of the Cold War, the Arab/Israeli conflict, and the occupation of Kuwait." The retail price for this book was \$8.95, but I found it in the closeout section for 95 cents! Christian hope at a discount! In these kinds of books Christian hope is reduced to matching current events with apocalyptic passages from the Bible.

Many on the religious left, on the other hand, have ignored the concept of hope, erroneously assuming that hope stifles Christian activism in the present. This position, though incorrect, is at least understandable given the kind of eschatological thinking characteristic of many conservative Christian groups of our day. But authentic Christian hope does not rob us of the present. It doesn't place our head in the clouds, nor does it ignore the problems of this life. In fact, authentic hope, far from being pure escapism, compels us towards a life that is active and fruitful for a kingdom that is yet-to-be fulfilled but already anticipated with concrete and tangible expressions in the world today.

### **The Eucharist as a Sacrament of Hope**

How, then, does the Eucharist propel us toward this authentic hope, avoiding the escapism of the religious right and the pessimism of the religious left? Theologian Jürgen Moltmann has written, "Just as baptism is the eschatological *sign of starting out*, valid once and for all, so the regular and constant fellowship at the table of the Lord is the eschatological *sign of being on the way*. If baptism is called the unique *sign of grace*, then the Lord's supper must be understood as the repeatable *sign of hope*.<sup>2</sup> For Moltmann, the Eucharist is an eschatological sign of history. In it both memory and hope intersect on the plane of history as lived today.

Though the meanings of the Eucharist in Scripture and Tradition are multiple (a Christian Passover meal, the ratification of a new covenant, a communion or fellowship (*koinonia*, etc.), the Eucharist does more than point backwards to the saving events of the Cross or nurture us in our

faith today. It anticipates the coming kingdom as a celebration of hope. Within the synoptics, the language of Eucharist and hope varies only slightly. Jesus looked forward to drinking the cup "new" (Mk. 14:25) or "new with you" (Matt. 26:29), in the "kingdom of God" (Mk. 14:25) or "in my Father's kingdom" (Mt. 26:29) or "until the kingdom of God comes" (Luke 22:18). In Paul's writings the Eucharist is the proclamation of "the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). *Maranatha* (Our Lord, come! 1 Cor. 16:22) was probably an Aramaic prayer uttered in connection with the Eucharist, as well as other times.

Thus, the Eucharist anticipates the final blessed state of redemption, referred to in the Eastern Church as deification (*theosis*) and in the Western Church more typically as final salvation, glorification, or union with God. "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb," states the Seer in his apocalypse (Rev. 19:9). The marriage supper of the Lamb is proleptically anticipated in the Eucharist. To be nurtured at the table of Christ is to share in his life, to anticipate and be drawn toward the ultimate goal of theosis or union with Christ. To eat the bread of life and drink the cup of salvation is to participate in a radically countercultural act, because eating and drinking both anticipate the messianic banquet in the kingdom of God and awaken in us a vision of kingdom values—peace, justice, love, equality, and others. And these are precisely the values that cry for attention in our world today.

The God who is described as the "God of hope" (Rom. 15:13), a God with the "future as his essential nature,"<sup>3</sup> goes before us, calling us into an unknown but a promised future. In this promised but hidden future, God awakens within us a hope for this yet-to-be-realized future. But the hope that drives us forward also makes us restless, so long as we live in a world characterized by values that contradict our hope. As we have seen, one solution to this restlessness is to cast our hope totally in the future—to sit back and wait for the end, in other words, to escape the world. A more authentically Christian approach, however, is to live sacramentally in the world, that is, to discern the signals of hope in the world and to act concretely in working to bring about, even provisionally, the future God has promised.

## Hope Provides Vision

The Protestant reformer John Calvin once wrote, "Faith is the foundation upon which hope rests," and in turn, hope "nourishes," "sustains," "strengthens," "refreshes," and "invigorates" faith.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, faith without hope simply dies. On the other hand, hope without faith becomes sheer wishful thinking, utopianism. The two are fundamentally interrelated. "Faith is the evidence of things hoped for"

(Heb. 13:1). Hope is a confident expectation based on the promises of God.

But the future is not only that which is hoped for; it is the act of hoping and the results hope produces. The future includes the actions inspired by our hope. In hope, we don't simply sit back and wait for the future to unfold. Rather, we begin to live now according to the vision we have of the future, in light of the promises and possibilities of God. In hope, the hidden future is already announced in the promises, and the hope awakened within us concretely influences the present.

### **Hope Causes Us to Live Sacramentally**

To partake of the Eucharist is to participate in a sacrament of hope that starkly contradicts the present reality in which we live. Unfortunately, since we live in a decidedly unsacramental world, the radical nature of the Eucharist often goes unacknowledged.

Sacraments communicate the presence of God, which means that potentially anything has the ability to be sacramental in nature. But our culture today understands less and less of the sacramental quality of life. This places the burden more and more on the church to articulate the hope that derives from and is depicted in its rich and meaningful sacramental life.

Why has sacramentalism become a problem in our culture today? The most fundamental reason probably lies in the Western heritage of the Enlightenment and the rise of modern science. For most Westerners, material objects are no longer thought to point to realities beyond themselves. Material objects like bread, wine, water, and oil are simply those objects—bread, wine, water, and oil, or their component parts. Rather than receiving these objects as means by which God communicates himself to us, they are objectified, categorized, and analyzed. Science teaches us that something *is* what it is; it does not represent or make present a more fundamental reality.

Ironically, this inability to live sacramentally has been fostered not only by the forces of secularism in Western culture but also by reductionist forms of Christianity which consider material objects inappropriate for mediating spiritual realities. The pursuit of certainty and the disdain for mystery in some forms of Christianity has undercut a much needed sacramentalism, which could go a long way towards reconnecting us with the God who himself is described obliquely as "unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16).

For example, nonsacramental Christians (notably Baptists in the United States) look with puzzlement, and sometimes with disdain, at sacramentals like holy water, the sign of the cross, the blessing of

houses, animals, churches, altars, oils, vestments, etc. For at least three reasons, these are viewed as unnecessary or even superstitious accoutrements. First, grace and nature are often thought to be radically dichotomous. Grace does not complete, fulfill, and perfect nature but overturns it. The material world is fallen and as such cannot serve as an adequate means for revelation.

Second, many nonsacramental Christians believe that God can be known directly, individually, and with certainty through the Bible. Therefore, why does one need sacramental mystery when God's made it all plain in the Bible? Third, among many nonsacramentalists the efficacy of a ritual like Communion depends entirely on the quality of the faith of the one receiving it. Hence, material objects like wine and bread are mere symbols whose only purpose is to stimulate the memory of the communicant to the past events of salvation. As such, they provide the means for the personal and subjective experience of the recipient but do not in themselves mediate God's presence objectively.

Therefore, the desacramentalization of the world today has been fostered not only by secularism but by forms of Christianity that consider sacraments at best irrelevant and at worst superstitious.

In one sense, without a desacralized world modern science would not be possible. Few would want to return to the terrifying times when people believed that spirits inhabited material objects. But the problem we face today is not one of animism. Rather, we face the loss of the very means by which the presence of God is communicated to us through the created order. Without a sacramental vision of life, the Eucharist cannot create this passion for God's future. Rather, it is reduced to a means of stimulating in the recipient the memory of the death of Christ.

A sacramental view of the Eucharist, on the other hand, allows us to see beyond bread and wine to the mystery of the Christ whose kingdom values stand in contradiction to the values of this world. It engenders within us the hope that can challenge the status quo.

## **Hope Challenges the Status Quo**

The Eucharist is a radical challenge to the status quo. It sets us free from the time and space of this world, transports us to the vision for the kingdom, and then returns us to work in the very material world that God has blessed and used for the medium of his presence. It is at the Table that we capture a glimpse of what God's future kingdom will look like. There we are renewed to return to the world with a passion to make that vision a reality now, even if only partially and provisionally.

Calvin suggests that hope "awaits the Lord in silence,"<sup>5</sup> but surely such silence contradicts the nature of hope. Does not the hope

engendered by a eucharistic theology call us to action? Hope "causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart, but is itself this unquiet heart in man. Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it."<sup>6</sup> Hope challenges the status quo while providing a vision of what can be. And it is precisely in the Eucharist that this vision of God's messianic kingdom is nurtured, deepened, and made concrete.

## **The Kingdom Vision**

What does this kingdom vision, made visible sacramentally in the Eucharist, look like? When we eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ, within us is awakened the promise of a new heaven and a new earth, the holy Jerusalem descending from heaven as a bride adorned for her husband, the hope that God's dwelling place will someday again be with humankind (Rev. 21). At the Eucharist we gather in anticipation of the table fellowship of the messianic banquet that will bring together, from the East and West, the "poor and maimed and blind and lame" (Lk. 14:21).

This vision of a transformed universe, a recreated heaven and earth, is eschatological and future, anticipating when Christ will drink the cup anew in the kingdom of God. Yet, it is also concrete and present. If God indeed has not abandoned the material world but in fact inhabits it sacramentally, and if we are called to be the eucharistic community of God today, then we must begin to make this kingdom hope a concrete reality in our world today.

For example, if God's messianic table is someday to be spread for the poor, maimed, blind, and lame, then these and other marginalized persons ought to be the special object of our concern today. If God's future kingdom is to be one of peace, love, justice, and equality, then we must work to begin to make these kingdom principles a reality in the world today. If we believe that in God's kingdom barriers of race, gender, and ethnic background will be definitively overcome, then we must not sit idle waiting for the future but must begin to make it so in the world today.

Working for the kingdom of God is a radical act that contradicts the reigning values of our culture. In fact, each time we take Communion we are reminded again of the contradiction existing between the world we live in and the kingdom signaled by the eucharistic community. The sacrament of the Eucharist has the potential to generate and invigorate this radical kingdom vision. As the promises of God collide with the experience of evil and suffering and injustice and death in the world today, we cannot simply rest satisfied with the world as it is.

## Sins Against Hope

In the living of a sacramental life it is possible to sin against hope.<sup>7</sup> It is possible to fall into a presumptuous pride, assuming that through our own human abilities we can bring about the complete fulfillment of God's kingdom in this world. The kingdom of God can never be the inevitable consequence or development of human life and history. We must not confuse our eschatological hope with our historical future. Though we proclaim the kingdom and work to realize its ideals, the kingdom ultimately enters from outside history, in God's timing, and in God's way.

It is also possible, however, to fall into despair. To live without hope is to opt for accepting reality as it is. Despair is a sin because we no longer live according to our vision. To lose hope is to accept life exactly as it is. Despair opts for the status quo; it shrinks back into nonsacramentalism and loses sight of God's activity in the world.

When we the people of God gather around the Lord's Table in anticipation of the messianic banquet, the hope engendered makes us restless with reality as we know it and thrusts us back into a world that desperately needs to hear good news. A sacramental approach to life is a radical act of defiance, because it views the world not as it is but as the way it will be. The Eucharist is a signpost against the forces of secularization. When we take the Eucharist, we are literally giving an account for the hope within us (1 Pet. 3:15).

- 1 This article is a revision of a speech delivered in May, 1996 at a symposium on Eastern Orthodox theology held in Kansas City, Missouri, U.S.A. I wish to acknowledge my debt to the writings of Jürgen Moltmann and others in the "theology of hope" school. I still remember the wonderful sense of discovery I felt more than twenty years ago when I first read Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*. I remain convinced today that the concept of hope offers the best category for avoiding the extremes of both historical optimism and historical pessimism.
- 2 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, trans. Margaret Kohl. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977, p. 243.
- 3 E. Bloch, cited by Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch. New York: Harper & Row, 1967, p. 16.
- 4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.2.42.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 21.
- 7 The phrase "sins against hope" comes from the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, section 2091.