

Heike ERNSTING

## Strangers in the Sanctuary:

### Eucharistic Hospitality in Interreligious Dialogue

*A few years ago I was involved with a group of Kurdish refugees who had sought, and been given, sanctuary in an Evangelical church in Wuppertal, Germany. They became part of the community during the time they were staying there.*

*These refugees attended the Sunday service. They joined the parishioners both in their worship and in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. I find such a situation remarkable—non-Christians meeting Christians at the Table of the Lord to share bread and wine together.*

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CASE

In this case, the “other” meets us at the very heart of our life as a Christian community—the communion of the Supper. Usually, Church life is quite unmolested from interference with non-Christians.

The “other” is of course recognized, but often from a safe distance that does not challenge us to reconsider our own ecclesiastical practice and its underlying theological implications. The particular case of church asylum presents, very effectively, the challenge of Christian encounter with other religious and cultural traditions, which is becoming more common in a multicultural society like Germany.

The presence of this interreligious and multicultural reality forces Christian churches to enter into dialogue, as well as to define and understand their identity, mission and being vis-à-vis the “other.”

The issue of sharing the Eucharist with non-Christians is a great challenge for Christian theology. In this article I am going to touch on the theological questions raised by this challenge and suggest some ways to respond to them.

#### EUCCHARISTIC HOSPITALITY IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The issue of Eucharistic hospitality has an important place in interchurch dialogue and is of special significance in the ecumenical movement. Since it strives for the visible unity of the whole Church, the Eucharist, where Christians of all denominations gather around the Lord's table, has become the foremost symbol of this unity.

This sort of communion, however, still remains a vision, because differing understandings of the Eucharist prevent a full sharing in it. This difference is mirrored in the various titles: Protestant churches use the term “Supper” or “Lord's Supper”; the Roman Catholic Church prefers the term “Eucharist” or “Mass”; Orthodox Christians speak of “the Divine Liturgy.”

Interchurch discussion of Eucharistic hospitality presupposes a common confession of Jesus Christ as Lord. This shared commitment is not presupposed when the issue of Eucharistic hospitality is treated in an interreligious dimension, and this factor makes a fundamental difference.

Christians' self-understanding and their attitude towards the “other” is at stake here. The Christian command for mission and claims of truth seem to represent obstacles to interreligious dialogue.

The Roman Catholic theologian Paul KNITTER places mission in the broader context of dialogue. Mission is not to be understood as a one-way proclamation of the gospel. God's revelation and salvation in the world are not one-way activities; rather they are dialogical.

God's self-communication is relational, both within the Trinitarian nature of Godself as well as to us. Revelation calls for a human response. The *Deus revelatus* communicates with the world as the *Deus relatus*, as God-in-relation.

From this line of argument KNITTER concludes sharply that “[t]he *missio Dei* therefore is the *dialogus Dei*.” This understanding of mission implies far-reaching consequences for Christian dialogue with other religions.

Dialogue means accepting that the conversation is one of equals. Each party is asked to proclaim and witness authentically to her or his faith, and also to allow the “other” to do the same. This attitude includes allowing the outcome of the dialogue to be left open.

In such an open and honest conversation of equals, one's own truth claims are vulnerably exposed to the other. They might be misunderstood, rejected, challenged or even proven implausible.

Interreligious dialogue includes an element of risk, for the people involved accept that they may be influenced by the thinking of the other, even to the point of changing their minds about their own faith, and possibly being converted.

Mission as dialogue is about the attempt to witness truthfully to one's faith, seeking for mutual understanding, enrichment and relationship. The Christian command to mission finds its appropriate expression in dialogue when seen as an honest witness to Jesus Christ, not only in word but also in deed.

The great challenge of “strangers in the sanctuary” is that the Lord's Supper becomes a place for interreligious encounter and dialogue. Such a situation creates a challenge to rethink the Christian (Protestant) understanding of the Lord's Supper in an interreligious perspective.

#### A THEOLOGY OF THE EUCCHARIST IN INTERRELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE

##### 1. The Church as a Body with Fluid Edges

Baptism, as the sacrament of incorporation into the Church as the “Body of Christ,” is commonly named a prerequisite for being allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper. This is despite the fact that the Biblical stories on the Lord's Supper do not explicitly draw a connection to baptism.

The case of church asylum confronts us with a situation that does not fit with the usual pattern of baptism, confirmation, and permission to participate in the Lord's Supper. The refugees became part of the Christian congregation and community, without ever having been baptized.

This fact challenges us to reflect on the concept of Church. The Christ hymn in Colossians 1,15-20 presents Jesus as the head of the body, the *Ecclesia*. This statement is made in the context of creation and salvation, the reconciliation of the world, of heaven and Earth, to God.

The perspective of the universal dimension of Christ's death and resurrection is the matrix for defining *Ecclesia*.

The Church is located within the world as the place where God's reconciliation with the world is testified and witnessed to.

Just as Jesus' mission was directed to the whole world, similarly the Church's mission is to serve in and for the world. Therefore, it contradicts the proclamation of Jesus' redemptive death and resurrection to make any general statements of not-belonging to the “Body of Christ” that separates Church from world.

Thus, belonging to the “Body of Christ” can be stated positively as a confession of Christ as Lord, but not negatively as a way to exclude “outsiders.” The “Body of Christ” is a body with fluid edges.

##### 2. The Body and Blood of Christ ‘for You’ and ‘for Many’

The soteriological dimension of the Eucharist is rooted in the salvific meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus. Christ's cross and resurrection are the fundamental statement of God's merciful actions in the world.

Through the elements of bread and wine, Jesus Christ gives himself to us in His body and blood. He grants us the promise of forgiveness of sins and of reconciliation. Who are the recipients of this gift of Christ, given in the Lord's Supper?

The texts of the New Testament present different accounts of the introductory words. I draw special attention to the Pauline phrase “for you” (1Cor 11,24) and the Markan phrase “for the many” (Mk 14,24). The ascription “for you” is addressing the concrete assembly that celebrates the Lord's Supper, whereas the ascription “for many” expands this group.

“The many” are appropriately understood as humankind. Many churches use a combination of these two texts as words of institution for the Eucharist when they say “given for you” over the bread and “shed for many” over the wine.

In breaking and sharing the bread, the concrete, assembled community experiences forgiveness and renewal of life. In drinking the wine and in sharing the cup the community recalls the universal, salvific dimension of the cross. All people of all times are potentially invited to celebrate the renewal of life and creation.

##### 3. Service Instead of Dominion

The ethical dimensions of church asylum are significant. The congregation consciously decided to grant asylum in their churches, as they understood this as an ethical consequence consistent with their Christian faith.

God's prime concern for the poor and for the needy has to find expression in the activity of a Christian congregation. Granting the refugees sanctuary, caring for their needs and being hospitable fulfilled this ethical demand.

But how can this general hospitality, as an expression of Christian ethical conviction, be related to Eucharistic hospitality and its ethical implications? The Last Supper is fundamentally related to other meal communities with Jesus.

Luke tells how in the sequence of the Last Supper an argument broke out among the disciples about who is to be regarded as the greatest (Luke 22,24-27). Jesus intervenes by arguing that greatness finds its expression in serving.

The parallel story in Mark concludes pointedly that “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10,43). The story of washing the feet (John 9,1-13) contains a similar emphasis.

It is inappropriate to respond to being invited to the table with an attitude of superiority. Real greatness is shown in a non-hierarchical manner that is concerned for the well-being of the other. The appropriate response is to imitate Jesus' example: to serve as he serves.

##### 4. The Lord's Supper Anticipates the Reign of God

We celebrate the Supper as we await the Parousia of Christ and as we anticipate the presence of the Reign of God. The provisional character is preserved in the sentence “we proclaim His death until He comes” (1Cor 11,26).

It reminds us that human powers fight against God's salvific acts in the world when they crucify Jesus. The vision and idea of the Reign of God, which we think of as a reign of universal redemption, reconciliation, peace, justice, healing and sufficiency, can be foretasted as we celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Matthew 8,11 promises that many will come from East and West and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the reign of heaven. The verse has to be interpreted against the background of the Old Testament, from where it combines a number of motifs.

It applies to the gathering of the peoples on Mount Zion where the reign of peace begins (Mic 4; Isa 2). It also incorporates the vision of the eschatological joyful feast, when God “will swallow up death forever” and “wipe away the tears from all faces” (Isa 25,8).

And it refers to the gathering of God's people that is accompanied by the redemption from suffering and the satisfaction of thirst and hunger (Ps 107, Isa 43; 49). The Lord's Supper is celebrated at the dawning of the Reign of God and in the hope of the final renewal of creation. The universal vision of the promised time is alive in the midst of the earthly reality of sorrow, guilt and division.

##### 5. The Sacrament of the Supper as Visible Word

Communication theory distinguishes between communication of content and communication *between* people as a fundamental human fact of interaction. The celebration of the Supper contains these two dimensions of communication as it implies both the communication *of* the message of forgiveness and reconciliation and also the communication *between* the partakers of the Supper.

The first aspect of communication, referring to the content, indicates the meaning of the Lord's Supper as the *visible word*. The celebration of the Lord's Supper serves the proclamation of the word in opening another sensual dimension of experiencing God's love and providence.

The notion of communication *between* the partakers comprises the interactive complexity of the Eucharist. As a response, those who receive an invitation to come to the table get up from their seats, move towards the altar and gather there.

When they stand in a line they interact with their fellow-communicants, waiting for the others to receive bread and wine, and sharing them with one another, so that everyone receives an equal amount of the gifts.

The communication of the Eucharistic community is one of strict equality, which is preserved by the ritual character of the interaction. Everyone is treated equally—status, education, eloquence, race, sex, or social background is of no importance.

This equality creates and keeps an atmosphere of respect and belonging together as one celebrating community, despite all the differences. This indiscriminative inter-communication of those who share the one bread can be pictured as “one body.”

After the communicants have been strengthened through the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, they are sent out to carry the blessing of the Eucharist to the world. Thus, the Supper is extended and continued on into everyday life.

#### AN ATTITUDE OF HOSPITALITY

There is a close relation between communication *of* and communication *between* in the Supper, insofar as the proclamation of the message finds an expression in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

The way the Eucharist is celebrated is therefore the test for the proclamation of the gospel in both word and deed. It judges the consistency and thus the credibility of the Christian witness of faith.

In the Lord’s Supper we recall that God has reconciled the whole world to Godself, and has established a new covenant of forgiveness and reconciliation through Christ. The love of God is the message to all humankind, and this

message has to find expression in the communication between those present in the Eucharist.

The interactions that happen in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper clearly have the potential for expressing and experiencing the forgiving and reconciling love of God and for discovering the meaning of these realities of faith.

A responsible attitude of hospitality, which includes Eucharistic hospitality, is an appropriate and much needed expression of Christian mission as it responds to the demands of interreligious dialogue and the challenges of a pluralistic, secular society.

#### Suggested Reading

KNITTER Paul, *Jesus and the Other Names. Christian Mission and Global Responsibility.* New York, 1996.

WELEER Michael, *What Happens in Holy Communion?* Michigan - Cambridge, 2000.

PRIMAVERSI Anne - HENDERSON Jennifer, *Our God has no Favourites. A Liberation Theology of the Eucharist.* San Jose, 1989.

Centre d’Études Ocuméniques (Strasbourg) - Institut für Ökumenische Forschung (Tübingen) - Konfessionskundliches Institut (Bensheim), *Abendmahlsgemeinschaft ist möglich. Thesen zur Eucharistischen Gastfreundschaft.* Frankfurt am Main, 2005.

Heike ERNSTING (1977) is an Evangelical-Lutheran from Germany. She graduated at the Irish School of Ecumenics (ISE) in Dublin, and presently is finishing her studies of Protestant theology. She participates in the Leadership Training of the United Evangelical Mission. She aims for ordained ministry and is interested in social justice, ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. Her email address is [Heikeernsting@gmx.de](mailto:Heikeernsting@gmx.de).

## WORLD STUDENT CHRISTIAN FEDERATION

### — EUROPE REGION —

The World Student Christian Federation (WSCF, established in 1895) is a global community of Student Christian Movements (SCMs) committed to dialogue, ecumenism, social justice and peace. Our mission is to empower students in critical thinking and constructive transformation of our world by being a space for: prayer and celebration; theological reflection; study and analysis of social and cultural processes; and solidarity and action across boundaries of culture, gender and ethnicity. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the WSCF is called to be a prophetic witness in Church and society. This vision is nurtured by a radical hope for God’s Reign in history.

We organise conferences, training events and solidarity activities, we publish books, reviews and journals. Our global ecumenical review is *Student World* (started in 1908); the Asia-Pacific Region publishes *Praxis*, and the Europe Region publishes *Mozaik*. Europe is one of the Federation’s six regions, with around twenty national Student Christian Movements. There are two subregions within Europe at the moment: the Nordic Subregion and the Central European Subregion. We have four interest groups: for theology, for culture and higher education, for solidarity and for gender.

WSCF Europe runs the *Lingua Franca Language and Leadership Training Project*. The essence of the project is that teachers, course organisers and students mutually ben-

efit from the course. Teachers arriving from different countries are teaching language for students in Central and Eastern Europe and beside this, they share the history and habits of their country – all this on a voluntary basis and in an ecumenical context. The teachers are fully hosted and get a unique insight into the everyday life, cultural and religious traditions of the hosting country.

**European Regional Committee (ERC):** Silke LECHNER (Chair, Germany), Markus OJAKOSKI (Treasurer, Finland), Damián Juraj MAČURA (Vice-Chair, Theology Interest Group Coordinator, Slovakia), Ingjerd JOSSANG (Executive Committee Member, Norway), Morten SKRUBBELTRANG (Executive Committee Member, Denmark), Suzanna VERGOUWE (Culture and Higher Education Interest Group Coordinator, Netherlands), Alessia PASSARELLI (Solidarity Interest Group Coordinator, Italy), Gyrid GUNNES (Gender Interest Group Coordinator, Norway), Nadzeya CHERKAS (Communications Coordinator, Belarus).

**Staff:** Hanna TERVANOTKO (European Regional Secretary, Finland), Rebecca BLOCKSOME (Central European Subregion Coordinator, Publications Intern, United States), Livia-Georgiana MIHALACHE (Lingua Franca Coordinator, Romania), LÉVAI Ildikó (Administrative Assistant, Hungary).

[regionalloffice@wscf-europe.org](mailto:regionalloffice@wscf-europe.org)  
[coordinator@wscf-cesr.org](mailto:coordinator@wscf-cesr.org)  
[wscf\\_linguafranca@hotmail.com](mailto:wscf_linguafranca@hotmail.com)  
[www.wscf-europe.org](http://www.wscf-europe.org)  
[www.wscf-cesr.org](http://www.wscf-cesr.org)

**Address:**  
 WSCF Europe  
 Kálvin tér 8.  
 HU-1091 Budapest,  
 Hungary  
 Tel: + 361 219 5166

