

IMAGINING RECONCILIATION:  
THE EUCHARIST AS RECONCILING ACTION OF GOD

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*Introduction*

Our proclamation as the Church of Jesus Christ is that the world was created in an original harmony. This harmony was centered in the fact that the creation, particularly the image God that is humanity, lived in harmony with its Triune Creator. We, however, live in a world of fragmentation in which this original harmony has been grossly disturbed, much like an out of tune - chaotic orchestra with the wrong director. In such a world of disharmony and fragmentation Eucharistically-formed Christians are to be people of reconciliation. Wesleyan, Roman Catholic, and other catechists have seen the necessity of the transformation of the imagination in making reconciliation happen.<sup>1</sup> Yet, theologians like William T. Cavanaugh and catechists such as Catherine Dooley have argued that this reconciliation is not happening. Part of the reason this is not occurring remains that catechists have not seen the *extent* to which the transformation of the imagination needs to take place. This “extent” of transformation by the practice of Eucharist is articulated by the Roman Catholic Theologian William T. Cavanaugh in his work *Theopolitical Imagination*.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I will connect Cavanaugh’s vision of the radical transformation of the imagination through the Eucharist with larger catechetical/mystagogical practice. This paper is written from a Wesleyan/Anglo-Catholic perspective, so the connection of Cavanaugh’s Eucharistic vision with catechetical/mystagogical practice will be construed liturgically through the Eucharistic rite of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*. This connection is important precisely for understanding the extent to which catechetical practice can transform Christians.

*Imagining Reconciliation: The Imagination of  
Eucharistically-formed Social Relationships*

During the past few decades of liturgical renewal there has been a connection of the liturgy with catechesis in various streams of the larger Christian Tradition. In this connection of liturgy and catechesis the role of *imagination* in our participation in liturgy has been an important area of discussion and liturgical renewal.<sup>3</sup> However, this can be misleading. It is no doubt true that our entry into full participation in the reconciliatory life given in the Eucharist requires a transformation and training of our imagination into the shape of the Paschal Mystery.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Mary Kelleher, “Liturgy and the Christian Imagination,” *Worship* 66 (March 1992): 124-148. See also his chapter “The Catholic Imagination” in Rausch, Thomas, *Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006) as well as “What is the Imagination” in Collins, Patrick W. *More than Meets the Eye* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 23-45.

<sup>2</sup> Cavanaugh, William T., *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovery the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (London: T&T Clark, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> For discussion on imagination and its role in liturgy see Thomas P. Rausch, *Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 20-35 and Patrick Collins, “What is Imagination,?” in his *More than Meets the Eye* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 23-45. See also Margaret Mary Kelleher, “Liturgy and the Christian Imagination,” *Worship* 66 (March 1992): 125-148.

Nevertheless, it is my contention that we are deceived if we believe that participation in the liturgy requires imagination while our participation in the “real world” of social relationships such as family, city, market, state, and so on *does not* require a particular forming of our imagination, as if these relationships were simply *rational* common sense, while our relationships in the Body of Christ, constituted by the Eucharist, are *imaginary*. This perspective rests on a false notion. It assumes the false opinion of modernity that there are simply universal, rational givens that any rationally thinking person adheres to, givens that are simply there, without question and without formation of the imagination. I do not mean to say there are no commonalities among humans. However, all of the aforementioned social formations<sup>4</sup> in all their complex vision require initiation into various visions of imagination.

Our various socio-political (“political” in the broad, classic sense, not limited to the modern sensibility that tends to limit the political to voting and governmental politics) relationships require a practice of imagination. These relationships, whether family, nation, city, culture, etc. are always, as William Cavanaugh so insightfully describes, the ‘art of the possible.’<sup>5</sup> As an example of this imaginary formation in the various social formations in which we participate Cavanaugh says,

How does a provincial farm boy become persuaded that he must travel as a soldier to another part of the world and kill people he knows nothing about? He must be convinced of the reality of borders, and imagine himself deeply, mystically, united to a wider national community that stops abruptly at those borders. The nation-state is...one important and historically contingent type of ‘imagined community’ around which our conceptions of politics tend to gather.<sup>6</sup>

The “state,” along with “civil society,” “the global market” and other similar notions are interrelated and disciplined ways of imagining time and space. The state as such really does not exist. What actually exists are border patrols, buildings, humans, airplanes, tax forms, and automobiles. These existing things are mobilized and organized into the project called the ‘nation-state’ by the disciplined imagination of a community. This community occupies a particular space and shares “a common conception of time, a common history and a common salvation form peril.”<sup>7</sup> It is a mistake to believe that this imagination is a symbol of something

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<sup>4</sup> My use of the term “social formation” to describe the social relationships of state, market, family, city, etc. is drawn from D. Stephen Long and his learned analysis of these realities in light of the social body that is the Church in his wonderfully illuminating work in D. Stephen Long, *The Goodness of God: Theology, The Church, and Social Order* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (London: T&T Clark Ltd., 2005), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 2. Cavanaugh points out, and I quite agree, that the *modern nation-state* (which means that one is talking about the state formation of the last two to three hundred years that has come to dominate western Europe and North America, not necessarily the state *per se*) tends to be formed around a “false soteriology” or parody of the salvation of the social body of the Church. This story of salvation consists in the modern nation-state’s rescuing the body politic from the so called European “Wars of Religion”. This rescuing involves keeping religious people from killing one another by separating church and state and giving the power of ruling and the means of violence to the state. According to Cavanaugh however, this false soteriology is simply historically untrue. He somewhat convincingly makes the case that one can find a number of examples in the history

*Didache: Faithful Teaching* 9:1 (Summer 2009)

ISSN: 15360156 (web version) – <http://didache.nts.edu>

more real, like a non-material structure founded on a material base. We cannot separate cultural from material production. The socio-political imagination is the power or condition of possibility for the organization of human bodies into society or various forms of social relationship. Modern politics, such as the modern nation-state or global market, are not simply found or discovered by social scientific investigation in which there is the proper separation of the “secular” from the “sacred,” which had become confused, such as the chemist’s separation of the element iron from its ore. Modern politics was not in fact discovered as much as it was *imagined* or *invented*.

One may object that there is a difference between a modern-nation state and an ancient, definition of nation which is perhaps more based on biology. One may further make the case that the family is certainly not just imagined (even if imagination is given its legitimate place, in that we understand it is vital in the formation of social relationships and not *merely* imagination or fantasy) for it is clearly biological. Granted, there are more fundamental biological elements to these two social formations as compared to the modern nation-state. However, this does not mean that there is still not a significant power of imagination exercised in the organization of the more ethnic nation and family. For instance, what “family” are we talking about? Are we talking about the strict ‘nuclear family’ so prevalent in conservative evangelical or neo-conservative political discourse or are we talking about the *tribe* of Cherokee Indian culture or the tribe, and thus larger familial understandings, of ancient Israel? Furthermore, what about the concept of adoption and the belief of many parents that their adopted children are just as much family as their biological children? These various discourses are of course similar and related. They are not their own hermetically sealed language games. However, they are also not necessarily carbon copies of one another.<sup>8</sup>

The point in acknowledging the imagination of various formations of social relationships is to keep Christians from adopting the notion that living in *any* form of *unreconciled* relationship is *natural* at all. To live in unreconciled relation is also a product of imagination and, namely, the failure of the ability to imagine the possibility of the relationship being made right or reconciled. God created us as His Image in a primal unity which Christ came to restore and further to its telos. Therefore, it is necessary for us to now give the briefest of sketches of the Christian Story that the Church’s liturgy enacts in its drama. This drama exposes the perversion of large scale or small scale unreconciled or estranged relationship as false and enacts the restored relationship of Christ offered in the Eucharist as God’s intention for humanity.

As stated earlier, humankind was created in an original harmony, ordered by its relationship with its Creator. William Cavanaugh, in a tone similar, yet very different from Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*<sup>9</sup> says, “humankind was created for communion, but is everywhere divided.”<sup>10</sup> The

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of the so-called Wars of Religion where Catholics and Protestants were fighting on the same side. Cavanaugh makes the case that the Wars of Religion were not essentially about theological issues at all. Rather, the driving force of the wars was the *coming to formation* of the modern-nation state, which tells this false story of salvation in order to legitimate itself and form the imagination of its citizens. In addition to *Theopolitical Imagination* see William T. Cavanaugh, "A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House: The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State," *Modern Theology* 11, no. 4 (October 1995): 397-420

<sup>8</sup> Below we will examine how even biological relationships can be imagined in such a way that can fragment people from one another. The example we will explore is the case of racism and the modern creation of the idea of ‘race’ or ‘multiple races.’

<sup>9</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Willmoore Kendall (South Bend, IN: Gateway Editions, 1954).

banishment from the garden of Eden, Cain's fratricide, the scattering of the people and confusion of language at the Tower of Babel, and the wickedness of Noah's generation can only be properly understood against the larger backdrop of a natural unity among the human race. This unity is seen in the creation story found in Genesis one. The supernatural unity of the Body of Christ instigated in the Death and Resurrection of the Jesus, the sending of the Holy Spirit, and the furthering of this unity in the Eucharist finds its locus in the fact that in the Genesis narrative the whole human race is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Henri de Lubac sums up the anthropology of patristic theology by stating, "For the divine image does not differ from one individual to another: in all it is the same image." He goes on to say, "The same mysterious participation in God which causes the soul to exist effects at one and the same time the unity of spirits among themselves."<sup>11</sup> The unity, which Christ's reconciliation in the Cross and Resurrection restores, is such that, as de Lubac comments, we cannot talk about humans in the plural anymore than we can talk of God as three Gods. The human race as a whole is created in the image of God rather than simply individuals.<sup>12</sup> Through the Word that is the Second Person of the Trinity the entirety of the human race, not just individuals, is created and redeemed regardless of nationality, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. This essential unity in humanity's creation and redemption is the fundamental source of a Church that is truly Catholic and into which all are called.<sup>13</sup>

This primal unity is at the root of Paul's explanation to the Romans that 'sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned' (Rom. 5:12). Adam represents humanity as a whole and is not simply the first individual. However, Adam's disobedience to God shatters this original created unity. Adam and Eve's attempted seizure of God's position necessarily is accompanied by a disruption and fracturing of human unity. This is the case because, through the *imago dei*, our participation in God is a participation in one another. The broken relationship with God issues forth in broken relationships among humans. This disruption is seen in Genesis 3:12 when Adam attempts to blame Eve for the sin. Genesis 4-11 goes on to tell the story of the effects of this Fall as strife, division, and violence among humans. Cain kills his brother Abel and later, in Gen. 6:11, we hear that the 'earth was filled with violence.' The dynamic of the fall from unity is summed up in the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11: 1-9), for in the attempt to usurp God's position the race of humans is broken and scattered far afield. Again, this sequence of stories can be fully comprehended only against the backdrop of the assumption of the primal unity of the creation story.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, quoted in Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> This certainly does not mean that there is no place for talking of individuals as the image of God, and here Cavanaugh may be a bit too strong in his approach to talking of the collectivity of humanity as the *imago dei*. Nevertheless, even here, we should perhaps speak of individuals as *in* the image of God rather than being the image of God all alone.

<sup>13</sup> Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 12. For an insightful exploration of this original unity or *ontological peace* versus the *original violence* so often assumed in modern and postmodern political theory and other discourses see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2005), and David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003).

Henri de Lubac traces this theme of unity and fragmentation through the writings of the Fathers. Maximus Confessor understood the Fall as the disintegration of the created unity in which there could be no contradiction between what is thine and what is mine. Cyril of Alexandria says ‘Satan has broken us up,’ while Augustine portrays Adam virtually as if he were a china doll which has broken and shattered upon falling and these fragments are scattered throughout the world. de Lubac summarizes these and other passages:

Instead of trying, as we do almost entirely nowadays, to find within each individual nature what is the hidden blemish and, so to speak, of looking for the mechanical source of the trouble...these Fathers preferred to envisage the very constitution of the individuals considered as so many cores of natural opposition.<sup>15</sup>

So the effect of sin is the creation of individuals as such, the creation of an ontological distinction between the group and individual.<sup>16</sup>

Since sin is the fragmentation into mutual antagonism, at least in terms of humans toward God as well as amongst humans, then redemption takes the form of restoring harmony or unity through participation in Christ’s Body. Christ is the new or second Adam for in His Incarnation He assumes the whole of humanity. The salvation of individuals is only derivative of Christ’s salvation for the whole human race. In the Incarnation God takes on human nature as such and not simply the body of an individual human. It is certainly true that Christ is incorporated in a human body (otherwise how would we know He was truly human?), but correspondingly humanity is redeemed by being incorporated into the Body of Christ.<sup>17</sup> “The Body of Christ is the locus of mutual participation of God in humanity and humanity in God.”<sup>18</sup> It is through the practice of Eucharist that we are incorporated into Christ. However, the Eucharist is not simply a segment of the Church’s life. Rather, it is the central site or action when and where the Church both participates in Christ’s reconciliation of God and humans and humans to other humans, *as well as* the action through which the Spirit of God propels the Body of Christ into the world to be a *reconciling people*. The members of the Body of Christ are made into people who practice reconciliation in everyday life for the Eucharist becomes the lens through which we see all of life and all social relationships. We are united in the Body of Christ and then the Body of Christ extends into the world through us that all social bodies and all relationships may be incorporated into or mapped onto the Body of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

It is important, as we think about the Eucharist and reconciliation, that we remember that through incorporation into the Body of Christ we participate in the *restoration* of the original unity of the human race. This entails that the means and power for reconciling estranged relationships are available to us from the Father, through the Son, in the Love of the Holy Spirit. In the Anglican

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<sup>15</sup> de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 34, quoted in Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 12-13.

<sup>16</sup> Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 11-13.

<sup>17</sup> Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> For a lucid and sophisticated discussion of the ‘mapping’ of various social bodies onto the Body of Christ and the Church’s role in this see Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), 152-260.

Eucharistic Rites this is symbolized by the fact that the action of the passing of the peace of Christ comes immediately after the confession and forgiveness of sin and is just before the communion at the table.<sup>20</sup> This reminds us and enables us to participate in reconciliation with God and our fellow humans. This reconciliation is then consummated in the Eucharistic communion through the Body and Blood of Christ. Through incorporation into Christ's Body in the Eucharist the broken or tarnished image of God in humanity is restored. Col. 3:10 says, 'you have put on a new self which will progress towards true knowledge the more it is renewed in the image of its Creator; and in that image there is no room for distinction between Greek and Jew, between the circumcised and uncircumcised, or between barbarian and Scythian, slave or free.' Ephesians 2:14-16 beautifully expresses it in terms of the hostility between Jews and Gentiles:

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

This reconciliation anticipates the eschatological gathering of all nations or peoples to Israel, through whom all nations or peoples will be blessed, thus fulfilling Gen. 12:3.<sup>21</sup> The foretaste of this gathering that we experience at the table of the Eucharist is in anticipation of the new heaven and new earth (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). The fact that we experience a true foretaste at the table as we participate in the Body and Blood of Christ is a sign that this eschatological vision is already partially present. Our participation in this reconciliation is articulated powerfully by Rowan Williams when he states:

...Because of the death of Jesus, God and the world are no longer strangers to each other, and thus too the world is not divided into communities that are forever strange to one another. Peace is practically identical with the condition of the new universe, the wholeness that now exists where before there were only fragments of human reality at odds with each other.<sup>22</sup>

So in the continuation of the work of Christ, which restores and carries forward the original unity of the human race as *imago dei*, in the Eucharist we participate in Christ's reconciliation of God and humans and humans to humans. In the action of Eucharist we are swept up into the act of God and made reconciling people in order to live out this Eucharistic reconciliation in the world. With this general theology of the Eucharist in hand we will now look more intently at what has already been alluded to here in general. Namely, we will examine the Eucharist as *action* and particularly the Eucharist as the action through which the Spirit sweeps us up into Christ's reconciling of God and humans and lateral, intra-human relationships.

### *Caught up in the Reconciling Action of God: Eucharist as Symbolic Action*

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<sup>20</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 330-333.

<sup>21</sup> For an extremely helpful account and analysis of the Enlightenment Age creation of the modern notion of 'race' which is situated within a eucharistically-centered theology see the breathtaking work of D. Stephen Long, *The Goodness of God: Theology, The Church, and Social Order* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 197-204.

<sup>22</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 265.

This action is seen in the Anglican rite of Eucharist by the fact that the confession of sin involves the kneeling of our bodies; the passing of the peace involves the movement of bodies to one another and offering the peace of Christ to one another as well as reconciling if there be the need. The rite then moves to the table which is enacted through the bodily movements and words of the priest which ultimately lead the bodily movement of the congregation to the table to partake of the supper together, the consummation of communion in Christ and, therefore in one another. The liturgy then ‘concludes’ by not really concluding at all. Rather, the reconciling action of Christ in the Eucharist, into Whose action we have been incorporated, is extended out into the world for the priest sends us forth with the words “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” People respond “Thanks be to God.”<sup>23</sup> We are sent forth as the Body of Christ in the reconciling *peace* of Christ to serve the Lord in the world. This service is action that includes being people of reconciliation.

Nevertheless, the Eucharistic living out of Christ’s reconciliation is neither easy on a systemic nor a more intimate level. The past is often painful to recall, for it involves our complicity in systematic evil such as the history of racism in the United States or our participation in economic transactions that give us comfort and ease but are produced on the backs of people laboring for what the catholic tradition could never affirm as a just or living wage. It involves our scars from being betrayed by those whom we trusted and abuse that we have received. It involves love lost and our failure to live up to the commitments that we made to that loved one. It involves our betrayal of those who trusted us. It involves us in the memory of leaving our families, burning those bridges of relationship and destroying virtually all the gifts of relationship. And yet, as the Anglican Holy Eucharist: Rite Two calls us, we continue to confess the mystery of faith, “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.”<sup>24</sup> All of our painful yesterdays, all of our tomorrows, are placed within the context of this redeeming story. Christ has welcomed us into his resurrection life and made possible a life in which the last word is never our sin against God or one another, the last word is His forgiveness and reconciling Love. In other words, the last word is never death, the last word is Life, God’s Life.

Jesus has been raised from the dead and a future of reconciliation is open to us as His Body, as humans, indeed His reconciliation holds a hopeful future for the entire cosmos. This is true because this is the Kingdom, the New Reality of reconciled communion that is instantiated in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and which is now continued by His Spirit in the action of the Eucharist. Participating in this Eucharistic living where brothers who have wasted everything as contemporary prodigals are reconciled to those they have hurt commands us as the Church toward an intentional mystagogy. We are called to mystagogy in which we, through pastoral moments in the liturgy such as instructing the people to use the passing of the peace as a time to reconcile with those in the congregation with whom they are estranged, and times of intentional, communal reflection on the action of the Eucharist tell one another the stories of the Scriptures, the Tradition, and contemporary stories of reconciliation. We must take the reconciled life seriously enough to stop eating for a time in order to cultivate the mystagogy, the practices of

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<sup>23</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 340.

<sup>24</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 363.

Eucharistic living in order to ensure that we are ‘discerning the body’ and truly living reconciled lives that reflect the reconciling love enacted in the Eucharistic meal.

### *Conclusion*

In this essay we have explored the Christian liturgical rite of the Eucharist as the central site for the continuation of the reconciling work of Christ through His Body, Church. We have investigated how our imagination of reconciliation is enacted and shaped by the symbolic action of the Eucharistic liturgy. In this reflection we have found that we must understand Eucharist as Spirit-empowered *action* in which we are incorporated into the Body of Christ. This *reconciling action* of God in Christ is then carried forth in and through us as the Body into the world as we live out Christ’s reconciliation in the various social formations in which we participate, whether that be the Body of Christ (which is our orienting center), the family, the market, the city, or the state. This being a reconciling people or living Eucharistically requires an intentional mystagogy within the liturgy and in communal reflection on the liturgy and living the liturgy. It is not an easy task, but by the Spirit’s power may we be the Body of Christ, witnessing in our life together to a new reality, a Kingdom where prodigal sons and faithful daughters are reconciled, where sinners are forgiven, the hated are loved...and the dead are raised.

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