

One Body, Wherever We Are

IN THE LITURGY WE ACT OUT THE REIGN OF GOD,
where we are without distinction treated like we have never been treated anywhere else,
equally loved and honored and invited to make our own the revealed truth of God's word,
equally sharing the holy food and drink. Liturgy is where we experience the liberation and
reconciliation in God *which are also our mission in this world of ours*. How can we keep from
singing, when we experience with our sisters and brothers the kind of world we hope for...?
ROBERT W. HOVDA¹

Imagine yourself there. The people are gathering, as they do on the first day of every week --
the elderly, others in middle years, young people, and children squirming in their places. Soon
a book is opened, from which an ancient letter is read, one written centuries ago to a gathering
quite similar to theirs.

After some singing, they stand, and one from among the community reads what has come to
be called "the Good News." Following some reflections, and prayers for the world and church
and loved ones, all gather around a table with the simple food of bread and wine laid upon it,
and pray a Great Thanksgiving. Soon the bread is broken, the cups are filled, and all share
together in the living presence of Christ. Indeed, they say that, by God's grace, all of them
have *become* the body of Christ in the world, so intimately has God joined them to one
another.

They have been praying in English.

On the other side of the world, on the same Sunday, another community of believing people
gathers in their humble church building, listening to the same ancient letter, and standing to
welcome the same Good News. They speak their Thanksgiving in Arabic. And they too share
in -- and become -- the Body of Christ.

To the passing observer, so much appears to divide the two assemblies: language and culture,
the disparity between the rich and poor, and even more glaringly, the differences between their
governments and the threat of war. But those who have been gifted with new sight, through the
regular practice of the Eucharist, have been enabled to see something surprising: beyond
every difference, in face of the world's violence, in the midst of all that would deny life, we have
become one body because we share the one bread.

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This is the ancient tradition of the church, most faithful to Jesus of Nazareth. To the earliest
Christians, the rampant violence of their society was an immense challenge to their faith. Saint
Cyprian, bishop of Carthage in North Africa, wrote in the mid-Third Century, "The world is
soaked with mutual blood, and where individuals commit homicide, it is a crime; but it is called
a virtue when done in the name of the state. Impunity is acquired not by reason of innocence,
but by the magnitude of the cruelty."²

These men and women -- our forebears in faith -- believed that being incorporated into the
body of Christ in baptism, and renewing that identity through the Eucharist, had plenty to say to
the war and injustice of their world. They could see, in the poor and wounded around them,

that the deeds of war *reversed* the works of mercy, violating the great commandment to love God and neighbor. These disciples insisted that the making of war *stops* where the community of the church begins. And they believed that the gospel's vision of God's reign gave them, not something to kill for, but something to give their lives for.

In Antioch, John Chrysostom spoke these words to his community: "The Lord has fed us with his own body. What excuse shall we have if, after feasting at his table, we become wolves... if we behave as if we were ravaging lions? This sacrament requires that we should be innocent not only of violence, but of all enmity, for it is the sacrament of peace."³ We may not destroy the body and blood of other human beings.

What of us? Will we bring such a faith to bear upon our present situation?

Since the summer, the Bush administration has been steadily moving toward war against Iraq. In September, the administration unveiled its new national security "doctrine," proposing pre-emptive, unending -- even nuclear -- war to assure U.S. military and economic supremacy.

The United States military is already spending nearly \$400 billion per year -- approximately \$750,000 *per minute* -- on armaments and preparations for war.⁴ Yearly, the United States trains 100,000 foreign soldiers, in the United States and in 180 other countries -- despite a lengthy history of gross human rights violations. In our time too, "the world is soaked with mutual blood."

We must wonder what kind of nation we are becoming, and what kind of world our violence is spawning. If we claim to be shaped by the good news of Jesus, even more urgent questions for us must be: What kind of persons are Christians to be? How are we to live? What is our primary allegiance, if we are followers of Jesus? Is not the new national security "doctrine" idolatrous, and in conflict with the teaching of the gospel?

The present crisis demands that we confront an anemic, privatized form of Christianity. Peter Maurin, co-founder with Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement, once wrote, "We have taken the dynamite of the church, wrapped it in clever phraseology, placed it in hermetically sealed containers, and have sat on the lids. The time has come to blow up some of the dynamite of the church."⁵ That "dynamite" is a life of creative, gospel-inspired nonviolence, nourished by the practice of the Eucharist

We profess that we have been gathered as the Body of Christ, not for ourselves alone, but to be a *sacrament of peace for the sake of the world*. If this is so, we are challenged to practice our eucharistic vision of peace out in the world. When we are told that there are no realistic alternatives to war, we have the responsibility of speaking a new language, and of *living* the alternatives. The Eucharist will lead us to imagining and working for a world of peace.

As we have seen, the early church took its practice of Eucharist very seriously. Their faith was robust and vital. They knew that what the Eucharist proclaimed was indeed revolutionary -- the end to fratricide, the triumph of reconciliation, the gift and task of peace. To celebrate the Lord's Supper with any honesty required a commitment from them. Saint Augustine once reminded his newly baptized brothers and sisters that, in sharing the Body of Christ, we *become* what we receive.

Once again, what of us? Will we bring such a faith to bear upon the present situation of the world? During this Christmas season, we affirm that in Jesus, God and humanity have become irrevocably one. This mystery of the Incarnation overflows to embrace the whole of humanity. So intimately has God joined us to one another, that we are now one flesh, one body. A sacrament of peace for the world. Wherever we are.

1. Robert W. Hovda, *The Amen Corner*, edited by John F. Baldovin, S.J. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994) viii, ff.
 2. Cited in Eileen Egan, *Peace Be With You: Justified Warfare or the Way of Nonviolence* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999) 36.
 3. Cited in Egan, *op. cit.*, 39.
 4. Jack Nelson Pallmeyer, "By the Sword." *The Other Side*, November-December 2002, page 24.
 5. Quoted in Michael Baxter, CSC, "Catholic Radicalism From a Catholic Radicalist Perspective," in *The Church as Counterculture*, ed. Michael Budde and Robert Brimlow (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000) 196.
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