

Ecclesia de Eucharistia – on the criteria for intercommunion

ABSTRACT

In contemporary ecumenism, papal encyclicals are read and assessed as ecumenical theological statements on matters of grave importance. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, released in April 2003, is penned by John Paul II and concerns itself with the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church. Since the day it was released, various initial reactions from different Christian churches have begun pouring in. Virtually all of these statements highlight what the respective denominations identify as the most critical as well as lamentable section: the pope's remarks on the longstanding ecumenical discourse on Eucharistic hospitality (or sharing). This article focuses on *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* for an ecumenical critique of the relevant statements around intercommunion as well as its impact on future ecumenical relations.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the afternoon celebration of the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Maundy (or Holy) Thursday in Rome, April 17, 2003, the current pope signed his latest encyclical letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (On the Eucharist in its relationship to the Church). This internal papal document is addressed to "the Bishops, Priests and Deacons, Men and Women in the Consecrated Life and All the Lay Faithful on the Eucharist and Its Relationship to the Church" and has been published to this point in English, German, Italian, Latin, Spanish, French and Portuguese. It is clearly a warm but firm theological statement on the meaning and role of the Eucharist, comprising an introduction (§ 1-10), six chapters (§ 11-58),¹ and a conclusion (§ 59-62).

Ecumenical critiques are still forthcoming, but an array of initial reactions has started to pour in.² Most statements reflect disappointment with the ecumenical import of *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. These revolve mainly around the pontiff's ongoing reluctance to sanction Eucharistic hospitality (or sharing) between Roman Catholics and the ecumenical churches (cf § 34-46). John Paul II

1 The encyclical's six chapters are as follows: The Mystery of Faith (§ 11-20); The Eucharist Builds the Church (§ 21-25); The Apostolicity of the Eucharist and of the Church (§ 26-33); The Eucharist and Ecclesial Communion (§ 34-46); The Dignity of the Eucharistic Celebration (§ 47-52), and At the School of Mary, "Woman of the Eucharist" (§ 53-58).

2 Given this early phase since the release of the encyclical in April 2003, initial reactions are only available through a number of ecumenical and denominational internet websites and electronic news services. Several of these reactions and sites are discussed in a recently published article also in response to the latest encyclical in *Ecumenical Trends*; see Le Bruyns (2003). Two months earlier the following article appeared in the same publication, which represents one of the few incoming substantial responses to the encyclical: Thomas Looney, Ecumenical "Lights" and "Shadows" in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, in *Ecumenical Trends*, Vol 32, No 7 (Jul/Aug 2003), 1-12.

points out with renewed emphasis the all-important intrinsic criteria for any meaningful shift towards intercommunion, that the Eucharist be celebrated in a communion that maintains “the bonds of the profession of faith, the sacraments and ecclesiastical governance” (§ 44; cf § 35, 38ff). For those churches engaged in intense and longstanding bilateral conversations with the Roman Catholic Church, especially on the subject of intercommunion, these dampened hopes seem understandably justified.

This article provides a basic theological critique of the pope’s requirements for intercommunion in the light of the Roman Catholic Church’s commitment to the path of ecumenism.³ It elaborates on the meaning of these statements in Roman Catholicism, seeks to analyse the ecumenical legitimacy of these remarks, and then to recommend a viable course of action that could contribute to an ongoing dialogue on the Eucharist between the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. The pope has rightly presented a papal letter on a critically important matter in contemporary ecumenism, a longstanding theological “bone of contention” that demands renewed reflection and discussion in order that it once again becomes a treasure of the Christian faith.⁴

2. THE ECUMENICAL NATURE OF PAPAL ENCYCLICALS

Papal encyclicals are formal papal letters, bearing the full authority of the Vatican, and designed to both instruct and maintain the unity of the membership of the Roman Catholic Church. These papal texts are instructive in that they focus “on doctrinal, moral, social or disciplinary matters” and, *ipso facto* in principle, serve “as a means of maintaining unity of ‘faith and morals’” (Stransky 2002:393). Herein lies its essential ecumenical nature, that of protecting and preserving the Roman Catholic Christian community. Recent popes have released encyclicals concerned with, *inter alia*, such issues as justice and peace, human life, evangelisation, human labour, and even unity itself.⁵

3 The oft-repeated encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (1995) by John Paul II applies here, where the pope confirmed and reinforced the direction of Roman Catholicism inaugurated at Vatican II (1962-1965) in regard to its commitment to ecumenism as “irrevocable” or irreversible. All ecumenical statements, initiatives, and engagements within the Roman Catholic Church find its point of departure in the biblical tradition and in the revolutionary campaign of renewal at Vatican II.

4 It is ironic that a sacrament, such as the Lord’s Supper, was essentially indicative of Christian community and oneness in the biblical tradition but, in theological and ecclesial history, has become nothing less than a visible symbol of Christian division, fragmentation, and hostility. One of the fundamental tasks and challenges of the modern ecumenical movement is to recapture the essence of the Eucharist as that great and profound treasure of the Church. Interestingly enough, this is to a large extent the intention of John Paul II in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. The pope points out right at the outset, “The Church draws her life from the Eucharist” (§ 1), which he notes is “the heart of the mystery of the Church” (§ 1). Later on he acknowledges his primary intention in his letter, “to rekindle this Eucharistic ‘amazement’” (§ 6) and involving “the whole Church more fully in this Eucharistic reflection” (§ 7). The pope’s appreciation of the Eucharist as a glorious gift of God to the Church and world is highlighted continually, and his personal experience of this gift is most telling (cf § 8).

5 For example, John XXIII wrote several encyclicals, including *Mater et Magistra* (1961) on modern social questions, and *Pacem in Terris* (1962) on peace and justice concerns. Paul VI’s encyclicals include *Populorum Progressio* (1967) on social justice for developing countries, *Humanae Vitae* (1968) on artificial birth control, *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971) on urbanisation, racism, the environment and Marxism, and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) on evangelisation of the modern world. The current pope, John Paul II, is best known for his 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* on the Church’s commitment to ecumenism, but also penned such important encyclicals as *Laborem Exercens* (1981) on human labour and *Centesimus Annus* (1991) on the church and economic life.

A significant “widening of the web” occurred, however, in the readership these encyclicals aim to address in recent decades, moving from a focus solely on the Roman Catholic community to now include “all people of good will” (cf Stransky 2002:393). This is clearly a critical shift for the churches at large as the broader community of Christians are thus included in this designation. That means that encyclical letters cannot be assessed merely as Roman Catholic theological documents. Any valid assessment must give serious attention to how it addresses, instructs, and also maintains the unity of other ecclesial traditions. In this sense, too, papal encyclicals are ecumenical documents by its very nature.

So, in reflection on the current encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, it is necessary to interpret it first and foremost as a Roman Catholic Church document. John Paul II is earnest in his attempt to give attention to a matter of grave importance in Roman Catholicism. He unashamedly restates with renewed vigour the teaching of his Church on the Eucharist, drawing deeply from the wells of his Church’s tradition – the Council of Trent, the Second Vatican Council, Canon Law codes, different papal encyclicals and, even further, weaving together insights from the wide variety of ancient Christian traditions – John Chrysostom, Ephraim, Ambrose, Cyril of Alexandria, the Liturgy of St James, and a hymn of Thomas Aquinas. The evidence he presents is aimed at displaying the continuity of the Roman Catholic faith with its earlier tradition. In this regard, therefore, what the pope releases is meant to restate and confirm Roman Catholic teaching, albeit in a new and fresh way, as opposed to interpreting it as a new teaching on the Eucharist.

This notwithstanding, and proceeding to the other side of the ecumenically-textured coin of the latest encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* is in a secondary manner a teaching for the ecumenical churches at large. The papal text restates the rich teaching on the Eucharist for Roman Catholics, but now also for Anglicans, Protestants, and the Orthodox tradition. The papal text shares various concerns about the Eucharist with the Roman Catholic community,⁶ but now also takes cognisance of various concerns still shared by Protestants, for example, on the nature of the Eucharist.⁷ The papal text is undoubtedly a Roman Catholic product, penned by its current pastor and leader, but it is in no lesser manner a product written for the interest, knowledge, and benefit of the broader Christian community and their leaders.

With this crucial background in view around the ecumenical nature of papal encyclicals in general and *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* in particular, an ecumenical critique may now be engaged in response to the current encyclical’s remarks on the delicate matter of intercommunion. Eucharistic hospitality or sharing is of utmost importance and relevancy for the broader community of churches in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. Numerous bilateral conversations at the

6 For example, the pope talks about “shadows” in Eucharistic practice (§ 10) as he laments over the practice of Eucharistic adoration being almost completely abandoned in some places, as well as the abuses that have occurred in several parts of the Church, “leading to confusion with regard to sound faith and Catholic doctrine concerning this wonderful sacrament” (§ 10). Moreover, he complains about how the sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist is reduced to a mere “fraternal banquet” (§ 10). John Paul II, while deeply appreciative of the many ecumenical initiatives among the churches, grieves over those practices of the Eucharist that are “contrary to the discipline by which the Church expresses her faith” (§ 10). His final words in the introductory section of his encyclical are emotionally charged, “How can we not express profound grief at all this? The Eucharist is too great a gift to tolerate ambiguity and depreciation. [Therefore] It is my hope that the present Encyclical Letter will effectively help to banish the dark clouds of unacceptable doctrine and practice, so that the Eucharist will continue to shine forth in all its radiant mystery” (§ 10).

7 These Protestant concerns include, for example, the notion of transubstantiation and the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist (cf § 6), as well as the sacrificial meaning of the sacrament (cf § 12ff).

national and international levels have taken place since Vatican II, whether to a greater or lesser extent in the different traditions respectively. Undoubtedly it is, as John Martin states, “the sharing and receiving of Eucharistic hospitality that is the strongest indicator of where we are up to in the ecumenical journey and that tells us that there’s some way to go yet” (Longenecker & Martin 2001:106).

3. INTERCOMMUNION IN *ECCLESIA DE EUCHARISTIA*

The pontiff’s firm discussion of the Eucharist in the context of Eucharistic hospitality is found as a distinct section in the fourth chapter of the encyclical (§ 34-46). John Paul II introduces this chapter with the concept of an “ecclesiology of communion” (§ 34)⁸ that he readily employs to underline the fundamental nature of the Church, “The Church is called during her earthly pilgrimage to maintain and promote communion with the Triune God and communion among the faithful” (§ 34). Asserting that the Eucharist features “as the culmination of all the sacraments in perfecting our communion with God the Father by identification with his only-begotten Son through the working of the Holy Spirit” (§ 34), he therefore urges that “it is good to *cultivate in our hearts a constant desire for the sacrament of the Eucharist*” (§ 34). Ultimately, though, the pope anticipates no sharing in the celebration of this “most holy sacrament” between the Roman Catholic Church and other ecclesial communities unless certain criteria are met: “communion in the teaching of the Apostles, in the sacraments and in the Church’s hierarchical order” (§ 35).

3.1 The meaning of the pope’s statements

What the pope means is located in his explanation of the relation between the Eucharist and ecclesial communion. “The celebration of the Eucharist,” he contends, “... cannot be the starting-point for communion; it presupposes that communion already exists, a communion which it seeks to consolidate and bring to perfection” (§ 35). In other words, when Roman Catholics and other Christians join together in Eucharistic celebration (hypothetically speaking, it is assumed!), this cannot rightfully deepen community between the churches. On the contrary, there is no fullness of community among them to anticipate any deepening of community. Therefore, Eucharistic sharing – which presupposes a prevailing communion – is an invalid ambition and ritual.

John Paul II proceeds to describe what it is this sacrament expresses. He points out that, in its “invisible dimension”, the Eucharist expresses the bond of communion between the Church and God, as well as between one another within the Church (cf § 35). In its “visible dimension”, he notes, this communion is found in congruency with apostolic teaching, the sacraments, and right ordering in the Church (§ 35). “The profound relationship between the invisible and the visible

8 In par 34, the pope draws apt attention to this notion as the hinge upon which the doors of Vatican II open and close. He refers to one of the Council’s final reports as it appears in the Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano*, 10 Dec 1985, 7. It is noteworthy to observe how ecumenically popular the notion of “ecclesiology of communion” has become in subsequent times. For a brief overview of the meaning of the key elements of this phrase in Roman Catholicism, see Fiorenza and Galvin (1991:30-43). For a resourceful theological window into the manner in which this notion plays out in church and ecumenism, see Volf (1998). In an address several years ago, former Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity president, Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, talked about the future of ecumenism and readily presented this phrase as an important code for deeper ecclesial communion (1975:134ff). The veracity of this notion was reinforced in my conversations with the revered Roman Catholic ecumenism Kilian McDonnell during a research sabbatical period at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research (Collegeville, MN, USA) in 2002.

elements of ecclesial communion is constitutive of the Church,” the pope argues, and then remarks with stinging frankness, “Only in this context can there be a legitimate celebration of the Eucharist and true participation in it. Consequently it is an intrinsic requirement of the Eucharist that it should be celebrated in communion, and specifically maintaining the various bonds of that communion intact” (§ 35; cf § 38, 44, 45, 46).

The pontiff, continuing in the spirit and force of this logic later in the chapter as he homes in more specifically on “the *relationship of the Eucharist to ecumenical activity*” (§ 43), candidly reiterates the Church’s position,

Precisely because the Church’s unity, which the Eucharist brings about through the Lord’s sacrifice and by communion in his body and blood, absolutely requires full communion in the bonds of the profession of faith, the sacraments and ecclesiastical governance, it is not possible to celebrate together the same Eucharistic liturgy until those bonds are fully re-established. Any such concelebration would not be a valid means, and might well prove instead to be *an obstacle, to the attainment of full communion*, by weakening the sense of how far we remain from this goal and by introducing or exacerbating ambiguities with regard to one or another truth of the faith. The path towards full unity can only be undertaken in truth (§ 44).

All in all, what this means for the ecumenical movement is simple. From the Roman Catholic perspective, its “irrevocable” commitment to ecumenism affirmed at Vatican II and in *Ut Unum Sint* will not lead Rome to engage in a false or cheap unity that requires it to abandon or undermine a church teaching of inestimable worth. It does not view theological compromise as a legitimate option in its current conversations around the subject of the Eucharist and intercommunion. Only once the bonds of communion that the encyclical highlights are re-established, then only is Eucharistic hospitality a realisable treasure.

This viewpoint inevitably presents the ecumenical churches with an ongoing dilemma. After all, is a Protestant communion with the pope, for instance, not a still far-off ecumenical attainment? If so, how very disillusioning for the churches at large who will never taste the wholesome but broken bread and the sweet but costly wine with their Roman Catholic brothers and sisters!

3.2 The legitimacy of the pope’s statements

What the pope has said is true in what it affirms but troubling in what it denies. John Paul II rightly affirms the lack of consensus in the matter of the sacraments, *a fortiori* the Eucharist. Bilateral dialogues between the Roman Catholic Church and Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Reformed, Mennonites and Pentecostals all agree: the ecumenical churches lack the fullness of communion, *inter alia*, because of extant disagreements or misunderstandings of the Eucharist.⁹ Typical Protestant reservations with the Roman Catholic celebration of the Eucharist, as noted earlier, include the issues of transubstantiation and the notion of sacrifice in the Mass.

The pope is clearly aware of these problems in ecumenical discourse. He takes these problems and the faith of other churches extremely seriously in his encyclical. As one case in point, the pope

9 Bilateral dialogues in mind here are those with Roman Catholics that include participation by the Anglicans (eg 1971, 1979), Lutherans (eg 1968, 1970, 1978), Methodists (eg 1971, 1976, 1981), Disciples of Christ (eg 1968), and Reformed (eg 1977). The subject of the Eucharist in ecumenical discourse continues at present.

is careful with his tone in this encyclical. While he is indeed firm in reiterating the Roman Catholic position on the issues at stake, John Paul II maintains a personal, warm, sensitive, respectful, and affirming (of others) tone throughout his papal letter.¹⁰ He is not argumentative or hostile, neither is he compromising or patronising. Instead, he chooses to overemphasise his wonderment and enthusiasm with the Eucharist, as he understands it. Moreover, he does not employ derogatory language in his letter to discredit the viewpoints of other churches. On the contrary, the pope employs the oft-repeated terms of Vatican II – “these separated brethren” (§ 30) and “our brothers and sisters from other Churches and Ecclesial Communities” (§ 43).

Furthermore, John Paul II takes seriously the concerns of other churches in regard to the Roman Catholic celebration of the Eucharist. There can be no meaningful unity apart from deeper understanding. Ignorance and misunderstanding features prominently in earlier church history but, with the Second Vatican Council and the 1995 encyclical, the Roman Catholic Church inaugurated and renewed its commitment respectively to an authentic path of deeper communion through understanding. One example of how seriously the concerns of other churches are viewed by the pope is found in his description of the sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist (§ 12ff).

Aware of the Protestant repugnance at what they assume to be the re-crucifixion of Christ in the Mass, the pope attempts to put their fears to rest by affirming the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ and the fact that the Eucharist by no means seeks to crucify Jesus again. Rather, he asserts, citing Saint John Chrysostom, “We always offer the same Lamb, not one today and another tomorrow, but always the same one. For this reason the sacrifice is always one ... Even now we offer that victim who was once offered and who will never be consumed” (§ 12). A thoughtful reflection on this encyclical brings out such affirmations that should hopefully cultivate a renewed appreciation for the irenic tone and gracious determination currently characterising Roman Catholic ecumenism.

But, on the other hand, there are some serious concerns with what the pope has stated in support of his sanction against intercommunion. He has rightly provided various crucial affirmations in his encyclical, but there are also several troubling statements that deny other churches their proper ecclesial status. Firstly, his claim that the Eucharist presupposes communion and that only in the context of a communion that is congruent with apostolic teaching, the sacraments and ecclesiastical governance, is intercommunion possible, seems inconsistent and even flawed (cf § 35, 38, 44, 45). For instance, it seems to contradict to some extent the teaching of Vatican II, which affirmed the communion between Roman Catholics and other churches as real, albeit imperfect.¹¹ Vatican II recognised that a real bond of communion prevailed, since the Holy Spirit was present in other churches, too, and that elements of sanctification could, therefore, be found also in these other churches.¹² But it also recognised that this communion was not in all its fullness. Various issues still keep them apart, issues that feature as crucial topics in subsequent dialogues.

How, then, can the pope continue to advocate an unconstitutional teaching¹³ of the Roman Catholic Church – one that clearly implies that the imperfect communion is invalid and

10 Consider, for instance, the prevailing warmth and wonder in his personal remarks in par 8.

11 Cf *Unitatis Redintegratio*, § 3.

12 For this reason according to Fiorenza and Galvin (1991:69), “Many theologians prefer to use the expressions *eucharistic sharing* or *eucharistic hospitality* rather than *intercommunion*, a word that is ambiguous if one thinks of the *koinonia* or *communio* that already exists among different Christians on the basis of their baptism in the same Holy Spirit.” Cf *Lumen Gentium*, § 8; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, § 3.

13 I use the word *unconstitutional* deliberately. The fact that the sentiment of the pope at this point seemingly goes against the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) makes it unconstitutional.

illegitimate? Moreover, the pope seemingly contradicts himself by later in the chapter affirming that the Eucharist, in fact, “*creates communion and fosters communion*” (§ 40). Just several paragraphs earlier he asserted that it presupposed unity (§ 35). While the truth of the matter rests with the reality of both dimensions – a presupposed unity and a fostered communion, the encyclical clearly elevates the former dimension to an unwarranted pedestal in ecumenical relations. Instead, while recognising the tremendous unifying potency of the Eucharistic celebration in community, the Roman Catholic Church should abandon ship on either count.¹⁴

Furthermore, the encyclical is troubling as well in treating certain secondary matters as primary beliefs.¹⁵ While they do fulfil a primary role in the Church of Rome, it is questionable to assume that such teachings as the Eucharist or the papal office (cf § 38, 39, 44) are cardinal doctrines of faith in God. On the papacy, for instance, it is a platitude that this aspect of Roman Catholic faith represents the greatest ecumenical “thorn in the flesh” in church relations that continue even to this day. The encyclical notes that the communion in view around the Eucharist “is a communion with its own *Bishop* and with the *Roman Pontiff*” (§ 39). To celebrate the Eucharist “without true communion with the Bishop” (§ 39) is regarded as “a great contradiction” (§ 39). *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* firmly points out, therefore, that communion with the Bishop of Rome “is intrinsically required for the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice” (§ 39).

3.3 The reception of the pope’s statements

These statements by the pope have already generated a host of initial reactions from the ecumenical churches. Some, like the general Roman Catholic representatives, will identify a

14 To elaborate somewhat, I agree with the Roman Catholic emphasis on a communion that is already present within the Eucharistic celebration, which is what *Unitatis Redintegratio* affirmed – the *real* though imperfect communion between the churches. But I have strong reservations with how the Roman Catholic teaching then seems to say that this communion with the Ecclesial Communion of the West is not real enough. Is this not a contradiction of terms? Vatican II rightly underlined the fragility of this communion – it is imperfect – but still affirmed its reality. Why, then, does this encyclical proceed in continuity with the Church’s longstanding tradition give in *vis-à-vis* acknowledging the prevailing communion? The key point should, rather, be this, “The seeds of disunity, which daily experience shows to be so deeply rooted in humanity as a result of sin, are countered by *the unifying power* of the body of Christ. The Eucharist, precisely by building up the Church, creates human community” (§ 24).

15 The terms *primary* and *secondary* are all-important theological baggage in my own understanding of ecumenical theology and relations. The former refers to those cardinal, fundamental, non-negotiable beliefs that, if compromised, corrupt or destroy the very fabric and foundation of the Christian faith. Examples include the belief in the existence of God, Jesus as the mediator between God and humanity, discrimination of people on the basis of race or gender, etc. In ecumenical engagement I argue that these doctrines are teachings about which we agree not to disagree. The latter refers to those negotiable beliefs that, should there be differences in viewpoints, there is necessarily no problem posed to the fundamental integrity of the Christian faith. Examples include issues such as the mode of baptism, the eschatological timetable, etc. In ecumenical engagement I suggest that different ecumenical communions should agree to disagree on these subjects, without feeling that it jeopardises the integrity of the Church. The problematic reality in theological history is that our respective churches typically make secondary issues primary. To return to the encyclical on the Eucharist, I am contending that the Roman Catholic Church is employing a secondary issue (that is, the Eucharist and its accompanying interpretations) in a primary sense and, as such, continues to hold the ecumenical churches captive to its own theological agenda. I am certainly cognisant of the attractive fashion in which the pope has presented the teaching on the Eucharist and definitely believe that Protestant churches have much to learn concerning the seminal value and role of the Eucharist. This notwithstanding, we are not going to get very far in ecumenism if we are not prepared to keep secondary issues secondary and primary issues primary. The dilemma, of course, is that Rome may assert that the Eucharist and how we understand it is indeed primary. Perhaps more work is called for in this area on this particular matter in ecumenical theology.

meaningful continuity with earlier church teaching. They will, therefore, find a fresh recapitulation of a doctrine they hold very dear. But the more ecumenically conscious members, along with the pope, will also recognise the ongoing ecumenical pain of still being out of full communion with other churches, coupled with a renewed determination and hope to see Eucharistic communion a reality in the future Church,

The path taken by the Church in these first years of the third millennium is also a *path of renewed ecumenical commitment*. The final decades of the second millennium, culminating in the Great Jubilee, have spurred us along this path and called for all the baptised to respond to the prayer of Jesus “*ut unum sint*” (Jn 17:11). The path itself is long and strewn with obstacles greater than our human resources alone can overcome, yet we have the Eucharist ... The treasure of the Eucharist, which the Lord places before us, impels us towards the goal of full sharing with all our brothers and sisters to whom we are joined by our common Baptism.

On the other hand, many Protestant and Anglican ecumenists are not pleased with the pope’s reiteration of the continuing ban on intercommunion. They are disappointed and cannot identify anything of ecumenical import and significance in the recent encyclical. In the light of many bilateral dialogues focusing on the Eucharist and its sharing across denominational boundaries, this disappointment is inevitable.¹⁶ Other ecumenists, though, remain optimistic about the ongoing ecumenical sojourn, viewing the encyclical as a catalyst for spurring continuing efforts to find a future intercommunion.¹⁷

More time is certainly required before a proper appreciation of this encyclical is realised – more responses (less reactions), more literature, more discussions, more questions. However, a few areas are already discernible that demand renewed attention. These include ongoing work on the Eucharist, but also other sacraments. But perhaps even more outstanding among the items is the subject of the papal office. Protestants and other faith traditions, participating in current ecumenical discourse on Eucharistic hospitality and anticipating intercommunion with the Roman Catholic Church, should pay special attention to the subject of the Petrine ministry in ecumenism.¹⁸ Not only because Roman Catholic teaching is not going to change on this point, but especially because of the new dialogue on the Petrine ministry in present ecumenical talks, Protestants and other faith communities would do well to focus more of their energies and efforts in this direction. A future recognition of the pope by Anglicans and Protestants – whether a communion under, or a communion with not under – will provide a strategic and significant setting for readying the broader community of churches for Eucharistic *koinonia*.

16 For example, Bishop Christopher Epting, the Episcopal Church’s deputy for ecumenical and interfaith relations lamented, “I must say I fail to see how *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* takes notice of the enormous progress made by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) or our Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue here in the United States (ARC-USA). That is particularly disappointing, given all the years of work by these bodies since the Second Vatican Council.” See Le Bruyns (2003) in which these sentiments by Protestants and Anglicans are referred to briefly.

17 In my own reading of *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, I have attempted to draw attention to, *inter alia*, six critical points that substantiate the claim that this encyclical is indeed resourceful for its ecumenical import, notwithstanding the remarks on intercommunion. See Le Bruyns (2003).

18 See Le Bruyns (2002) for an overview of the new dialogue on the papacy in Protestant-Roman Catholic relations, where I highlight the role of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Lima document (1982), and *Ut Unum Sint* (1995) in tilling the ecumenical soil for an anticipated harvest on a longstanding theological dilemma (cf 2002:496).

4. CONCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS

Among the various notable and resourceful contributions by the pope to the ongoing ecumenism around Eucharistic sharing, two are of special note. Firstly, the pope has aptly shed the spotlight on a liturgical practice that is common to virtually all Christian traditions. Herein lies a most significant ecumenical moment of opportunity for renewing ecumenical discussions and relations. Insisting on the call to unity, the pope refers to the Eucharist in ecumenical perspective,

We should all give thanks to the Blessed Trinity for the many members of the faithful throughout the world who in recent decades have felt an ardent desire for unity among all Christians ... Our longing for the goal of unity prompts us to turn to the Eucharist ... In the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice the Church prays that God, the Father of mercies, will grant his children the fullness of the Holy Spirit so that they may become one body and one spirit in Christ (§ 43).

Secondly, the pope has cautioned the churches not to trivialise this great sacrament, but instead to explore its propitious nature in empowering individuals and churches for more meaningful and effective living and witness. Herein lies an even greater ecumenical opportunity for mutual engagement and cooperation in Christian faith and ministry within the *oikoumene*. Ironically the pope employs Mary as a role model vis-à-vis the propitious role of the Eucharist in the faith and life of the believer and, *ipso facto*, in the faith and life of the Church. The most Marian of all popes, John Paul II suggests that “we cannot neglect Mary, Mother and model of the Church” (§ 53), since she “can guide us towards this most holy sacrament, because she herself has a profound relationship with it” (§ 53). The pope then proceeds to illustrate how “*Mary is a ‘woman of the Eucharist’ in her whole life*” towards a model that the Church should emulate (§ 53).

With this in mind, the pope reflects on his primary intention in releasing this encyclical – that of strengthening the faith of the Church through the Eucharist out of a heart of deep emotion and gratitude (§ 59). He continues, “At the dawn of this third millennium, we, the children of the Church, are called to undertake with renewed enthusiasm the journey of Christian living ... The implementation of this programme of a renewed impetus in Christian living passes through the Eucharist” (§ 60). In poignant and pastoral fashion, John Paul II urges,

Every commitment to holiness, every activity aimed at carrying out the Church’s mission, every work of pastoral planning, must draw the strength it needs from the Eucharistic mystery and in turn be directed to that mystery as its culmination. In the Eucharist we have Jesus, we have his redemptive sacrifice, we have his resurrection, we have the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have adoration, obedience and love of the Father (§ 60).

The pope, a few paragraphs later, ends off the fourteenth encyclical in his 25-year pontificate. His remarks on the criteria for intercommunion are nothing new, and the ecumenical churches do not easily receive these sentiments. And yet in the ecumenical tone, enthusiasm, warmth, commitment and desire within the papal letter, one senses that the ongoing dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church is far from over. On the contrary, it has been energised and repositioned for realisation in the future. As a start the ecclesial communities of the West may need to give greater personal attention to the question: what does it mean to live a Eucharistic life? Therein, I suggest, rests a seminal seed for a harvest of fruitful engagement between the churches on an old theological and liturgical dilemma, yet one that is in divine reality a beautiful and transcendent treasure of the Christian faith, purchased with Christ’s own life.

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