

The Eucharist and the Church in the Thought of Henri De Lubac and Rowan Williams: Sacramental Ecclesiology and the Place of the Church in the World

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Henri de Lubac and Rowan Williams have, in different ways, insisted upon the bond between the eucharist and the church. For both theologians, the eucharist is not simply the product of the ecclesial gathering but rather is instrumental in the realization of the ecclesial body of Christ. Likewise, both theologians have, in different ways, asserted that the church must resist introversion but recognize its responsibilities to the world beyond it. This essay examines the connection of the eucharist and the church in the thought of de Lubac and Williams and traces aspects of their resultant ecclesiologies before considering how their thought might facilitate the church's ongoing interaction with the wider world.

Introduction

There is a striking affinity between Henri de Lubac and Rowan Williams in their respective assessments of the relation between the church and the eucharist. Both de Lubac and Williams have written extensively on the church and have each laid emphasis upon the bond between the eucharist and the church. For both, the celebration of the eucharist is not simply and exclusively the product of the ecclesial gathering but is, in some way, instrumental in realizing the formation of the ecclesial body of Christ. Also, both de Lubac and Williams insist upon the relevance of the church to the broader society within which it has its life.

This essay has two goals: (i) to examine the rejuvenation of an ecclesiology that is deeply rooted in the sacraments through analyses

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of relevant aspects of the thought of a significant Roman Catholic theologian of the twentieth century (de Lubac) and a significant Anglican theologian of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (Williams); and (ii) to follow the lead of both theologians in beginning to examine the implications such a sacramentally focused ecclesiology might have for the interface between the church and secular society as we approach the third decade in the twenty-first century.

Henri de Lubac and Rowan Williams

Henri de Lubac (1896–1991) is a pivotal figure in the development of Catholic theology in the twentieth century, not least for his instrumental role in preparing the way for the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and for exercising significant influence in the resulting conciliar texts. A significant focal point at which different aspects of his thought can be seen to converge is the doctrine of the church.¹ The rejuvenation of the relationship between the eucharist and the church is a core distinctive of Lubac's ecclesiology.² De Lubac emphasized the intrinsically social nature of Christianity against contemporary conceptions of Christianity as a private and individualistic proclivity characteristic of the Third Republic (and subsequently the Vichy Regime from 1940) and of the neo-Thomist notion of the "state of pure nature" (a dualist account of the relationship between nature and grace that conceived of humanity without reference to their supernatural telos), which de Lubac considered to be an anthropology conducive to secular humanism, ill-equipped to challenge the reductive nationalism of Vichy ideology. This essay draws primarily on de Lubac's two early works, *Catholicisme: les aspects sociaux du dogme* (1938) and *Corpus Mysticum: L'Eucharist et l'Église au moyen âge* (1944).

With a well-established and distinguished academic career, Rowan Williams (1950–) was appointed to the See of Canterbury in the early twenty-first century. His theological contribution in general and his account of the relationship between the doctrine of the church and the eucharist in particular are deeply affected by his analysis of

¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac: An Overview*, trans. Joseph Fessio, SJ, Michael W. Waldstein, and Susan Clements (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 1991), 105.

² As demonstrated by Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edinburgh, U.K.: T&T Clark, 1993).

late twentieth and early twenty-first century society. Williams's ecclesiology draws an antithesis between the church and the exploitative relations manifested in the globalized economy. His ecclesiology is also deeply christocentric. For Williams, the church is the divinely appointed society, which is established by Christ, who is the ultimate sacrament of God (that is, Christ alone both manifests and is the medium of God's redemptive action), and in being appointed by Christ itself, the church becomes a sacrament in a derivative sense through embodying the gift of communion it has received by the initiative of God.

In what follows, I set out the relationship between the eucharist and the church in the thought of de Lubac and Williams in a comparative study of overlapping themes in their work. I draw implications from this comparative analysis concerning the relationship of the eucharist and the church and what this may entail for the relationship of the church and the world.

Origins

The different ways in which de Lubac and Williams engage with the theme of the relationship between the church and the eucharist emerge from different societal pressures and different theological influences.

The purpose of *Catholicism* was to respond to the individualistic conception of Christianity that placed emphasis on the internal spiritual life over the communal nature of the church and its involvement in all aspects of human life by showing that "in reality Catholicism is essentially social . . . not merely in its applications . . . but first and foremost in itself in the heart of its mystery, in the essence of its dogma."³ Drawing on the patristic and medieval tradition, de Lubac demonstrates that the Catholic Church is relevant to every aspect of human life and it could not be marginalized as a convention that existed solely for the personal succor of some,⁴ which the church in France became in the Third Republic and also in the Vichy regime. De Lubac's thesis is striking for its christocentricity. The relevance of Christianity to all

³ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (London: Burns and Oates, 1950), 15.

⁴ Fergus Kerr, "French Theology: Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac" in David Ford, ed., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 1997), 108.

facets of life is derived from the universal significance of Christ as the meaning of history as the revelation of the purposes of God.⁵ The church as the body of Christ, de Lubac argues, shares in Christ's universal relevance as the place of the gathering of redeemed humanity through whom the whole world are to be reconciled to God.⁶ Such an exalted ecclesiology is antithetical to a conception of the church as a ritualistic vehicle to facilitate the private spirituality of individuals, withdrawn from the affairs of the world.

De Lubac perceived the introverted and individualistic spirituality of his age to be a product of a dualistic account of the relation of grace and nature characteristic of the neo-Thomist notion of the "state of pure nature." This dualism is established on Cajetan's interpretation of St. Thomas Aquinas's notion of the natural desire for the beatific vision: for Cajetan, Aquinas recognized the possibility of a wholly natural desire for a destiny with God within natural limitations, predicated upon a distinction between human nature per se and human nature as called into union with God. The latter is capable of supernatural desire, but the former is capable of desire for a destiny that is proportionate to human natural existence.⁷ According to de Lubac, this led to a fissure between the natural and the supernatural, which in turn generated a muscular secular humanism and an introverted spirituality. In *Surnaturel*, de Lubac argues that the entirety of the Catholic tradition (prior to what he considered to be this neo-Thomist misreading of Aquinas) stands against this, stressing the eschatological nature of human existence (and so not endorsing the concept of a wholly natural telos for humanity), which, as the image of God, is innately orientated to receive God's grace in a wholly proper supernatural desire.

De Lubac's stress on the connection between the supernatural and the natural is pertinent to the problem of individualism and ecclesial introversion in relation to the eucharist. De Lubac argues that "the unity of the Mystical Body of Christ, a supernatural unity, supposes a previous natural unity, the unity of the human race."⁸ The supernatural unity of the church is grounded in the antecedent natural

⁵ de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 27, 44–47, 170, 181, 269.

⁶ de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 191, 242, 279.

⁷ See, for example, *Summa Theologica*, 3a 9, 2 ad 3.

⁸ de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 25.

unity of humanity as made in the image of God.⁹ For de Lubac, therefore, the sacraments are not part of the arsenal of an internal piety, but rather are integral to the church's communal nature as the saved people of God, continuous with the prior natural unity of the saved as human beings. This reveals a unitive impulse in de Lubac's sacramentology: "since the sacraments are the means of salvation they should be understood as instruments of unity."¹⁰

Second, De Lubac's ecclesial understanding of the eucharist is part of his confrontation with neo-Scholastic theology. Neo-Scholasticism is a late-nineteenth century reappropriation of the medieval Scholastic tradition (especially St. Thomas Aquinas). It re-deployed Scholastic methodology (dialectical reasoning through conceptual analysis leading to conclusions drawn by valid inference) in reaction to the theological and philosophical *modus operandi* of luminaries such as Descartes, Kant, and Hegel. As such, neo-Scholasticism may be understood as the effort to restore conservative Roman Catholic doctrines articulated in the Scholastic theology of the late Middle Ages regarding God, reality, and anthropology. In his second major work, *Corpus Mysticum*, De Lubac reassesses Roman Catholic ecclesiology and doctrine of the sacraments in its neo-Scholastic form through a reappropriation of the whole Catholic tradition. He affirms the mutually causative bond between the eucharist as sacramental body and the church as ecclesial body. Integral to de Lubac's criticism of neo-Scholasticism was the inappropriateness of its continued use of dialectical reasoning in its understanding of the sacraments. According to de Lubac, the dialectic is not an appropriate intellectual mechanism to discern and describe the presence of Jesus in the eucharist, which is both (and at the same time) real *and* mystical, intelligible only within the symbolic-realist framework found in Augustine. Therefore, de Lubac's rediscovery of the ecclesial sense of the eucharist not only challenged the settled notions of the sacrament but was part of a broader struggle against the very way neo-Scholastic theology operated.¹¹ In relation to these societal and theological issues, de Lubac insisted upon a reassessment of the sacraments in general, and of the eucharist in particular, which included a re-envisioning of the church as a social entity, as opposed to an exclusively institutional one.

⁹ See also McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church*, 19.

¹⁰ de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 35.

¹¹ Kerr, "French Theology," 105–106.

Williams's theology is deeply rooted the context of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century society. Into this context, Williams articulates his idea of the church as a divinely appointed society that is formed in connection to Christ and re-presents Christ to the world. In many ways, Williams's description of an ecclesial community gathered around our common participation in the self-offering of Christ and established in a communion of mutually beneficial relations resembles a protest against aspects of contemporary society. In Williams's view, the world of the early twenty-first century is characterized by pronounced inequality and indifference, in which it is possible for people to adopt an attitude in which "I am not affected by the pain of other people; living where I do I am not affected by the poverty of those on another continent."¹² Globalization has proved to be a catalyst of this, which Williams describes through a pointed contrast between (i) the purported self-interest that comes through a globalized economy and (ii) the third mark of the Church: catholicity. The catholicity of the church, Williams argues, pertains to the absence of boundaries; the church is for the whole human race and for the whole of every individual person.

The catholicity of the church is really a kind of great protest against globalisation; the really catholic is the opposite of the globalised, because the catholic is about wholeness, about the wholeness of the person. . . . It's not like the global economy, in which people are drawn into somebody's story and somebody's interests which in fact makes the others poor and excluded. The catholic is the opposite of the globalised because the catholic is about everyone's welfare, everyone's growth and justice. And particularly in our globalised world this witness to what I would call the truly catholic is perhaps more important than ever. The affirmation, the rights and liberties of local persons . . . the Christ-touched dignity of every person and every culture. That is what the catholic church honours in its fullness and that is why the catholic church protests

¹² Rowan Williams, "Lambeth Conference Retreat Address II," July 17, 2008. <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1355/the-archbishops-retreat-addresses-parts-i-ii>.

about a globalised system that works in the interests of a minority whether in the church or in the world.¹³

Ostensibly, Williams equates the effect of the rapid development of transnational interests with the domination of stronger economies over world trade, with the associated threat to cultural diversity. So far as Williams is concerned, a globalized economy has proved to be antithetical to what the church stands for, which is care and concern for the whole human race and the whole range of needs of each individual. For Williams, therefore, it is integral to the very nature of the church to be opposed to any societal practice that exploits one for the sake of the other.¹⁴

Moreover, unlike de Lubac, Williams's engagement with the relationship of the eucharist and the church is informed by the Orthodox tradition. Williams has had a lifelong interest in Russian culture,¹⁵ and he established himself as a significant British interpreter of the Russian Orthodox tradition, completing his doctoral work on the Russian Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky in 1975.¹⁶ Williams is also a major reviewer of John Zizioulas's *Being as Communion*, which makes explicit mention of the centrality of the eucharist to a doctrine of the church.¹⁷ While a detailed analysis of the relationship between the eucharist and the church in Russian Orthodox thought is not possible within the parameters of this essay, some comment is required. Nicholas Afanassiev provoked a significant reassessment of Orthodox ecclesiology through asserting that the primitive ecclesiology of the Christian tradition centered on the eucharist, in which the communion

¹³ "One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church: Archbishop's Address to the 3rd Global South to South Encounter in Ain al Sukhna," October 28, 2005. <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1675/one-holy-catholic-and-apostolic-church>.

¹⁴ Rowan Williams, "General Synod: Speech in Debate on the Windsor Report, February 17, 2005." <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1680/general-synod-speech-in-debate-on-the-windsor-report>.

¹⁵ Phoebe Taplin, "What the Russian Orthodox Church Can Teach the West," January 13, 2008. https://www.rbth.com/arts/people/2017/01/13/what-the-russian-orthodox-church-can-teach-the-west_680411.

¹⁶ Rowan Williams, "Eastern Orthodox Theology," in David Ford, ed., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 572–587.

¹⁷ Rowan Williams, book review of J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 42, no. 1 (1989): 101–105.

of the eucharist constitutes believers as the body of Christ. Moreover, it is impossible for the body of Christ to only be present in part, and so wherever the eucharist is celebrated, the whole body of Christ is made present.¹⁸ As such, *catholicity* is a function of the eucharist.¹⁹ A more direct influence on Williams, John Zizioulas has articulated an alternative to the eucharistic catholicity of Afanassiev, predicating his own ecclesiology on the notion of *koinonia* (communion).²⁰ It is Zizioulas's foundational contention that communion is an ontological category on account of which personhood is constituted by relationship of orientation toward the other.²¹ The trinitarian personhood of God is, therefore, the center of Zizioulas's theological ontology, and a human *individual* can become a *person* only by entering the trinitarian communion by participating in the relational position of the Son to the Father.²² To be "saved," therefore, is to "participate in the unique relationship between the Son and the Father,"²³ and so transcend a "biological hypostasis," which expresses itself in individualization,²⁴ and enter an "ecclesial hypostasis," which expresses itself in right relations. The essence of the church is communion in and with the triune being of God through participating in the relation of the Son and the Father through the eucharist. This has profound implications in Zizioulas's ecclesiology: the church is not one institution among others, but rather is the manifestation of a new mode of being in which communion is essential.²⁵ Williams's particular approach to the relationship between the eucharist and the church and its implications for the church-world dynamic demonstrates some significant overlap with the perspectives of Zizioulas, particularly regarding the connection between the church and communion and the creation of a divinely appointed society.

¹⁸ Nicolas Afanassiev, "Una Sancta," *Irékion* 36 (1963): 459.

¹⁹ Jerome J. Holtzman, "Eucharistic Ecclesiology of the Orthodox Theologians," *Diakonia* 8 (1973): 14.

²⁰ John Zizioulas, *The One and the Many: Studies on God, Man, the Church and the World Today* (Arcadia, Calif.: Sebastian Press, 2010), 382.

²¹ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Yonkers, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 27–65. See also Scott MacDougall, *More Than Communion: Imagining an Eschatological Ecclesiology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 65–72.

²² John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 240.

²³ MacDougall, *More Than Communion*, 70.

²⁴ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 105.

²⁵ MacDougall, *More Than Communion*, 86.

The Sacraments and the Church

Both de Lubac and Williams considered there to be a causative relationship between the sacraments and the church. For his part, de Lubac insisted that the sacraments have a unitive function.²⁶

As [the sacraments] make real, renew or strengthen man's union with Christ, by that very fact they make real, renew or strengthen his union with the Christian community. And this second aspect of the sacraments, the social aspect, is so intimately bound up with the first that it can often be said, indeed in certain cases it must be said, that it is through his union with the community that the Christian is united to Christ.²⁷

Through sacraments as the instruments of unity, the unity of the Christian community is actualized and strengthened. For example, baptism incorporates the believer into the body of Christ, the church. Paradoxically, de Lubac argues that the sacraments, which are the instruments of the unity of the church, are efficacious only in the corporate context.

Thus it has been said that the causality of the sacraments is to be found not so much "in a paradoxical efficacy, in the supernatural order of a rite or perceptible action, as in the existence of a society, which under the appearances of a human institution hides a divine reality". All the sacraments are essentially sacraments of the church; in her alone do they produce their full effect.²⁸

The sacraments are the means of grace through which believers are united in Christ as the ecclesial body of Christ, and yet the sacraments are only efficacious in the church. In this connection, de Lubac articulates his complex understanding of the relationship between the Church and the sacraments: "through each one of us this one Church ever appears as the chief object as well as the chief minister of the

²⁶ de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 81.

²⁷ de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 35.

²⁸ de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 35.

sacraments. *Sacramenta faciunt ecclesiam.*²⁹ The church is both caused by and causes the sacraments. In effect, de Lubac has described a causal relay in which the sacraments are the cause of the church and the church the cause of the sacraments. For de Lubac, then, the church and her sacraments intersect on the focal points of sacramental communion and the ecclesial communion: “For in the same way that sacramental communion is always at the same time an ecclesial communion, so also ecclesial communion always includes, in its fulfilment, sacramental communion.”³⁰

This causal relay between sacraments and the church is intensified with respect to the eucharist. Indeed, for de Lubac, while it is the case that (i) the eucharist is the sacrament of unity that makes the church, (ii) the church is also the institution that makes the eucharist. In demonstrating that the eucharist is the sacrament that makes the church, de Lubac describes the eucharist as the sacrament that is “especially the sacrament of unity: *sacramentum unitatis ecclesiasticae.*”³¹ That is to say, the eucharist has a unitive function, and the unity of Christian believers through a common sharing in the eucharist constitutes the ecclesial body. De Lubac contends that to prioritize the eucharist as the sacrament that creates the unity of the church is consistent with the consensual patristic tradition and the early medieval period. “Whatever the exact relationship that they work out between the ‘body born of a virgin’ and the Eucharistic body; whether in their assertion of the sacramental presence they place the emphasis on *mysterium* or *veritas*; all are agreed in this: the result of the sacrament is unity.”³² Disagreements over the nature of real presence are relativized by the fundamental accord in the whole Catholic tradition that the “result” of the eucharist is the unity of believers. Similarly, “Thus the bread of the sacrament led them directly to the unity of the body. In their eyes the Eucharist was essentially, as it was already for St. Paul and for the Fathers, the mystery of unity, it was the sacrament of conjunction, alliance and unification.”³³ De Lubac’s point is that (regardless of how one conceives of the specific mechanics of the presence of Christ at

²⁹ de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 37.

³⁰ Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 13.

³¹ de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 38.

³² de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 41.

³³ de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 17.

the eucharist) the eucharist is the sacrament in which “the community of the baptized faithful are made one body.”³⁴

However, de Lubac did not consider the church itself to simply be the communion of believers. In his concept of *ecclesia mater*, de Lubac identified the church as a concrete, *personal* reality, with its own existence aside from the believer.³⁵ Certainly, de Lubac’s connection between the eucharist and ecclesiology means that the church cannot be defined on juridical criteria alone (that is, by analogy to civic society or the “body politic”), which de Lubac considered to impoverish the doctrine of the church.³⁶ “Thus everything points to a study of the relation between the Church and the Eucharist, which we may describe as standing as cause to each other. Each has been entrusted to the other, so to speak, by Christ; the Church produces the Eucharist but the Eucharist also produces the Church.”³⁷ De Lubac should not be understood as saying that the visible church is an addendum to its identity as the mystical body constituted by the eucharist. Instead, for de Lubac, the visible Catholic Church is integral to the efficacy of the sacrament. For de Lubac, there exists a complementary relationship between the church as institution within which the eucharist takes place and the church as the body of Christ constituted by its partaking in the sacramental body of the eucharist.

Williams’s ecclesiology is deeply irenic,³⁸ envisioning the church as the society constituted by God’s action and embodying (however imperfectly) social perfection. As with de Lubac, the eucharist is essential to the drawing together of this divinely established society. For Williams, the church is the body of Christ, which is characterized by sharing in one common life within which members enables one another to make their full contribution to that same common life.³⁹ In this connection, Williams’s ecclesiology is thoroughly *heterocentric*. “So believing in the Church is really believing in the unique gift of the

³⁴ Lisa Wang, “Sacramentum Unitatis Ecclesiasticae: The Eucharistic Ecclesiology of Henri de Lubac,” *Anglican Theological Review* 85, no.1 (Winter, 2003): 147.

³⁵ de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 48–49, 53, 64.

³⁶ de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 114–116. Henri de Lubac, *The Splendour of the Church* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius Press, 1999), 127–131.

³⁷ de Lubac, *The Splendour*, 133.

³⁸ Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 8.

³⁹ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 106, 108.

other that God has given you to live with. The New Testament sees the church as a community in which each person has a gift that only they can give into the common life."⁴⁰ In several places, Williams, either explicitly or implicitly, describes the church as a sacrament, "an effective, compelling symbol able to live by sharing and by loving, reverent mutual attention,"⁴¹ a visible sign of a divinely appointed society of the new humanity to be witnessed by the world, which Williams considers to be marred by utter societal poverty.⁴² The eucharist is an intrinsic (but not independent) aspect of the generation of this divinely appointed society.⁴³ In his excellent study of the compatibility of the concept of sacrifice in the eucharistic liturgy with the absolute priority of Christ's agency, Williams argues that the church defines itself as founded upon the Father's self-giving to humanity and the self-offering of Christ back to the Father in which the church participates, creating a common life of a covenanted priestly nation, the people of God gathered around the eucharist.⁴⁴ The church as the body of Christ is the divinely appointed society that is the sign of God's realized purpose to be in communion with humanity and thereby to fulfill human life.⁴⁵ For Williams, it is precisely this community that re-presents Christ to the world: "The believing community manifests the risen Christ: it does not simply talk about him or even 'celebrate' him. It is the place where he is shown."⁴⁶

A major theme in the ecclesial society that shows the risen Christ to the world is the concept of "mature" relations, relations in which Christians are responsible for and committed to the flourishing of one another.⁴⁷ The sacraments are central at this point. The church is not

⁴⁰ Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, 106.

⁴¹ Rowan Williams, *The Truce of God* (London: Fount Original, 1983), 31–32.

⁴² Rowan Williams, "Doing the Works of God," in *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), 253–266.

⁴³ Bryce McProud, *Common Experience and the Accommodation of Differences: The Foundation for Unity in Rowan Williams' View of the Church* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 26.

⁴⁴ Rowan Williams, *Eucharistic Sacrifice: The Roots of a Metaphor* (Bramcote, U.K.: Grove Books), 1982.

⁴⁵ Rowan Williams, "The Church as Sacrament," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 11, no. 2 (2011): 116–122.

⁴⁶ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982), 3.

⁴⁷ Rowan Williams, "One Church, One Hope: Freiburg Lecture," August 9, 2006. <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2115/one-church-one-hope-freiburg-lecture>.

simply a human institution constituted by the contingencies of human relations in the light of the teaching of Jesus Christ. For Williams, the church is established by God as a gift; it is a society of “mature” relations, united in common dependence on the grace of God experienced through the sacraments.⁴⁸ At the heart of this, for Williams, is the eucharist.⁴⁹ The church is delimited by its eucharistic character; he argues that a distinctively Christian identity is characterized by “incorporation into a worshipping—a ritual-celebrating—group,” with the eucharist as its central ritual.⁵⁰

It is possible, and indeed, to say that the Church is most truly itself when it is engaged in sacramental worship; that when above all it meets for the Eucharist, it exists simply as it should and expresses its deepest identity. This is true in the sense that what happens in the Eucharist is the act of God which brings about his long hidden purpose, “Christ in us the hope of glory”. The visible sign in which this purpose is made known . . . is the assembly who have been identified in baptism with Christ praying his Spirit-filled prayer so that the food which unites them at the material level becomes the life and agency which unites them with the Father and so unites them afresh with one another. . . . The sacrament of Christ’s body is equally the food through which the life of Christ consolidates the unity of the community and the community that is thus consolidated.⁵¹

For Williams, then, it is in the eucharist that the Christian community is gathered in common dependence on Christ and the need to receive from his fullness, “a sacramental sign in its admission of poverty in respect of God.”⁵² In this act, dependence is expressed and also the meeting of that need is fulfilled from the riches of Christ;

⁴⁸ See also Bryce McProud, *Common Experience and the Accommodation of Differences: The Foundation for Unity in Rowan Williams’ View of the Church* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 26.

⁴⁹ Williams, review of Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*.

⁵⁰ Rowan Williams, “Authority and the Bishop in the Church,” in Mark Santer, ed., *Their Lord and Ours: Approaches to Authority, Community and the Unity of the Church* (London: SPCK, 1982), 95, 94.

⁵¹ Williams, “The Church as Sacrament,” 118.

⁵² Williams, “The Church as Sacrament,” 119.

a community is formed around the mercy of God and “human relationships and potentialities are set free from the paralysing and self-intensifying consequences of hostility and aggression to each other and to ourselves, from the lethal symbiosis of violence and guilt.”⁵³

Williams’s point is that the eucharist is the sacrament through which this ecclesial community is unified by a common dependence on the grace of God, liberated from the self-interest that Williams discerns to be such a destructive and isolating force in modern globalized cultures and economies. Moreover, it is this ecclesial community that itself acts as a sacrament, a visible sign of divinely enabled, mature relations.

The Body of Christ and the Eucharistic Community

Both de Lubac and Williams recognize a significant connection between the sharing of the body of Christ at the eucharist and the forming of a eucharistic community.

In stressing the bond between the eucharist and the church, particularly with respect to the relationship between the eucharistic body and the ecclesial body, de Lubac drew deeply on a facet of Augustine’s thought. Specifically, de Lubac attributed eucharistic significance to Augustine’s précis of Jesus’ teaching: “You shall not change me into yourself as bodily food, but you shall be changed into me.”

When with St Augustine, [previous Christians] heard Christ say to them: “I am your food, but instead of my being changed into you, it is you who shall be transformed into me,” they unhesitatingly understood that by their reception of the Eucharist they would be incorporated the more in the Church.⁵⁴

De Lubac has understood Augustine to have meant that in incorporating Christ into himself or herself at the eucharist, the believer would not transform the sacramental body of Jesus into their own body, but would rather be incorporated into the body of Christ, that

⁵³ Rowan Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 205.

⁵⁴ de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 99–100. De Lubac cites Augustine, *Confessions*, 7, 10, 16.

is, the church.⁵⁵ Ostensibly, as McPartlan points out, it is a Platonic dynamic at work in that the sign (the eucharistic elements) participates in the reality of the thing signified (the actual body of Christ). The eucharist is properly the *mystical* body of Christ, the body of Christ in sacramental form;⁵⁶ in receiving the mystical body of Christ, the followers are incorporated into the true body of Christ (the church), corresponding to the Platonic notion that the receiver is incorporated into what has been received.⁵⁷ In other words, it is in the celebration of the eucharist that the community of the ecclesial body of Christ is formed, and the presence of Christ is “real” in the eucharist in that in participating in the mystical body, the ecclesial body is formed.⁵⁸ This line of thought leads de Lubac to identify the church as the actual *res ultima* of the sacrament; no longer a sign of anything else, the church is actually the final effect of the sacrament.⁵⁹ In this sense, as the body brought into being, it was, de Lubac contends, natural to identify the church as the *corpus verum*, the true body of Christ.⁶⁰

Therefore, de Lubac presents Augustine as having conceived of the appellation “the body of Christ” as instantly one, but operating on several interconnecting levels, lubricated by symbolic inclusions: (i) the historical body of Christ born of the Virgin Mary is (ii) sacramentally present in the eucharistic elements (the mystical body,) which (iii) believers incorporate, and through incorporating the mystical body of Christ are assimilated into the ecclesial body of Christ (the true body).⁶¹ Accordingly, the eucharist as the mystical body of Christ has a pronounced ecclesial significance, and the church as the ecclesial body of Christ has an intrinsically eucharistic character.

In *Corpus Mysticum*, de Lubac criticizes what he perceives to be the obscuration of these symbolic inclusions through the dominance of a method based on dialectical antitheses. De Lubac conducts this study through a historical analysis of the term *the body of*

⁵⁵ Raymond Moloney, SJ, “Henri de Lubac on the Church and Eucharist,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005): 331–342, at 333.

⁵⁶ de Lubac, *Corpus*, 249–250. See also Paul McPartlan, “The Body of Christ and the Ecumenical Potential of the Eucharist,” *Ecclesiology* 6 (2010): 148–165, at 159.

⁵⁷ McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church*, 4.

⁵⁸ Moloney, “de Lubac on Church and Eucharist,” 339–341.

⁵⁹ de Lubac, *The Splendour*, 132–133.

⁶⁰ de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 189.

⁶¹ de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 23–28.

Christ, noting how its unified and threefold character as historical, sacramental, and ecclesial began to disintegrate through an ever more precise attempt to differentiate and define the different levels of the *corpus triforme*, resulting in inflexible definitions incompatible with the fluidity of the Augustinian symbolic model.⁶² As a consequence, the church as the ecclesial body was not understood in relation to the eucharist, but rather as analogous to juridical or political bodies,⁶³ leading to the conceptual separation of the eucharist and the church.⁶⁴

The trigger of this disintegration of the *corpus triforme* was the Berengarian controversy, which was the point of crisis at which the sacramental union of sign and reality in the eucharist was subjected to improper dialectical analysis. The application of dialectical reasoning pressed the church to conceive of Jesus' sacramental presence in opposition to Jesus' real presence, thereby obviating the patristic emphasis that because Jesus is present sacramentally in the eucharist, he is present in reality by realizing the union of the *true* body of Jesus, the church. Resultantly, the church affirmed the true, literal presence in the sacraments, and the designation *true* body that had once described the church was transposed to the eucharist. This left the church distinguished from the sacramental body through the unsatisfactory appellation *mystical*,⁶⁵ and "the essential tie which bound the eucharistic cult to the unity of the church has disappeared."⁶⁶

This situation was compounded by the identification of the eucharist itself as the true body of Christ, which led to the eucharist becoming viewed as the ultimate moment of the ecclesial gathering in which the church existed for the sake of celebrating the eucharist, rather than the eucharist and the church existing in a mutually causative union. Against this uniquely institutionalized understanding of the church, in which priests make the eucharist for the private faith of the individual, de Lubac insisted that the eucharist makes the church. Both the church and the eucharist are the same body of Christ.⁶⁷

⁶² de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 267.

⁶³ de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 114–116.

⁶⁴ de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 75, 102–104. Hans Boersma, "Sacramental Ontology: Nature and the Supernatural in the Ecclesiology of Henri de Lubac," *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1015 (2007): 242–273, at 257–258.

⁶⁵ de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 116–121.

⁶⁶ de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 282–283.

⁶⁷ de Lubac, *The Splendour*, 157.

In his own analysis of the bond between the eucharist and the ecclesial community, Williams, ostensibly, draws upon a different facet of Augustine's thought and brings it into creative tension with Orthodox influences. Williams articulates a theory of sacraments that emphasizes semiotics and the calling into being of a divinely appointed society gathered around the eucharistic feast, with Christ as the primary host. Williams begins his 1987 study, "The Nature of a Sacrament," in abstract, analytical terms, exploring the relationship between the sacrament as a *sign* and the society called into existence through that sign (the church). Williams's elaboration of sacraments in relation to signs suggests that Augustine's notion of a sacrament as a sacred sign is beneath the surface of Augustine's thought. Augustine's semiotics is characterized by close association between the sign and the things signified: a sign is a "thing which, over and above the impression it makes on the senses, causes something else to come into the mind as a consequence of itself."⁶⁸ For Augustine, a sign reifies the thing to which it signifies, and for this reason "things are learnt by means of signs."⁶⁹ Theologically, the foundation of this semiotic theory is the incarnation as the Word of God.⁷⁰ The incarnation demonstrates that the uncreated may be mediated through the created. Sacraments, as sacred signs, are capable of conveying the divine mystery. Such a semiotic theory in relation to the eucharist is in the broad tradition of Williams's approach. However, Williams elaborates upon this by drawing on more modern semiotic theory, which focuses on the intersection between *sign* and *society*. It is here that Williams's influence from the Russian Orthodox tradition, with its own distinctive conception of the relationship between the eucharist and the church, converges creatively with Williams's Western heritage to form a conceptually rich and contextually powerful ecclesiology established on the eucharist.

Williams's anthropology includes the perspective that progressive change and cultural refinement is the generation and continuation of a cultural story integral to all human societies.⁷¹ Time, therefore, is an important element through which memory and hope become incorporated into the very structure of language within which meaning is

⁶⁸ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.1.

⁶⁹ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.2.9.

⁷⁰ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.13.12.

⁷¹ Williams, "The Nature of a Sacrament," 198–199.

communicated, “part of that human belonging that makes us the sort of beings we are.”⁷² Through this cumulative and self-reflective world interpretation, Williams argues, societies have formed: “we make signs, and make ourselves through signs.”⁷³ The history of a society, therefore, is the history of its signs.⁷⁴

The sacraments of the religious community, Williams argues, are the signs of a community that owe its origin to the promise and act of God. This is demonstrated, Williams asserts, by the gathering of a disparate people group, who were liberated from slavery to a pharaoh of the eighteenth (or nineteenth) dynasty, and made into a national, distinct unity by this liberation and came under the covenant of God, and manifested this through their cultic and civic practices.⁷⁵ In this, Williams understands there to be a

pervasive and organized “sacramentality,” a sign-making consciously extended to an enormous range of activities. The sense Israel seeks to make of its life is bound to the conviction that for it to be there at all is miraculously surprising, the work of God: so its enacted reflection, in the forms of speech and practice, is meant to “re-work” its world in order to show the face of the holy and liberating God.⁷⁶

That is to say, the people of Israel are “sign-makers in their observance of the Law,” whose signs indicate (i) that they are a people made by the gracious act of God and (ii) that they “embody the nature of the God who has so acted.”⁷⁷

This provides the necessary context for understanding the relationship between Jesus, the sacraments, and the church. From this angle, Williams presents Jesus as the sign maker of a community yet unformed, for Jesus announced the kingdom of God, a point of crisis, which brings a new people into being that is both identical with and discontinuous from the Israel that already existed.⁷⁸ This continuity and discontinuity is most evident in Jesus’ appropriation of the

⁷² Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” 199.

⁷³ Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” 199–200.

⁷⁴ Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” 201.

⁷⁵ Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” 202.

⁷⁶ Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” 202.

⁷⁷ Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” 203.

⁷⁸ Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” 203.

Passover meal for announcing the establishing of the new covenant in his blood.

The Last Supper is not a simple, primitive fellowship meal; as far back as we can go in the tradition about Jesus, it is seen as “intending”, meaning the event that finally sets Jesus and his followers apart from the continuities of Israel and makes the beginnings of a new definition of God’s people. Maundy Thursday *means* Good Friday and Easter, the sealing of the everlasting covenant. In the costly gift of his chosen and beloved to the risk of rejection and death, God uncovers the scope of his commitment in a way that alters the whole quality of human trust and commitment to him: he creates *faith*. And he creates a community of faith called, exactly as Israel is called, to show his nature in their life by following out the logic of Torah itself.⁷⁹

The act of God creates faith through the intensification of the revelation of God’s covenantal faithfulness to his people sealed in Jesus’ sacrificial death and resurrection. In this way, the governing sacrament of all is Jesus himself, a sign that both points to God and also is “the medium of divine action for judgement and renewal.”⁸⁰ In his life and death, Christ both proclaims the imperatives of the kingdom of God and actualizes them and “so begins to make possible the community actual in the post-Easter experience of his followers.”⁸¹ In other words, Williams links the sacramental body of Christ with the ecclesial body under the covenant-sealing activity of the historical Jesus. The gathering around the eucharist is the gathering of the society formed by the act of God in the person of Jesus Christ, given its signs of self-understanding through the sign-maker Jesus Christ, who completed and actualized that sign in his death, resurrection, and ascension (that is, the signs *of* Christ take their meaning and potency from the sign that *is* Christ).

Moreover, this newly gathered society is to “be a sign . . . of a gift given for the deepening of solidarity,” which become “signs of

⁷⁹ Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” 203–204.

⁸⁰ Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” 204.

⁸¹ Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” 205.

the radical self-gift which initiates the Church.”⁸² Jesus, therefore, is envisioned as the sign maker who initiates the Christian community and gives to it its signs of self-understanding. “In [the performance of the sacraments] the Church ‘makes sense’ of itself, as other groups do, and as individuals do; but its ‘sense’ is seen as dependent on the creative act of God in Christ.”⁸³ Accordingly, for Williams, the Christian sacraments have a transitional significance in the formation of a “bonded community,” who are “covenanted” to God and to each other,” a new kind of society established by the initiative of God.⁸⁴ Two points are particularly significant here. First, Williams notes that it is a covenant community established by grace where the betrayers of Christ at the Last Supper are treated as guests: “the other becomes the object of love and trust because ‘invited’ by God, and so, in some sense, trusted by God.”⁸⁵ Second, Williams notes that the material elements of the eucharist represent both the divine self-effacement and self-giving for humanity. The bread and the wine carry their fullest significance as material elements when they are understood as the medium of the *gift* of God’s self for the generation of a community not constituted by self-choice or by self-interest, but by the initiative of God.⁸⁶

For Williams, this eucharistic character of the ecclesial society is relevant to the contemporary situation.

Sacramental practice seems to speak most clearly of loss, dependence and interdependence, solidarities we do not choose: none of them themes that are particularly welcome or audible in the social world we currently inhabit as secular subjects. . . . Our liberty to choose and define our goals as individuals or as limited groups with common interest is set alongside the vision of a society in which almost the only thing we can know about the good we are to seek is that it is no one’s possession, the triumph of no party’s interests. The

⁸² Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” 204.

⁸³ Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” 205.

⁸⁴ Rowan Williams, “Sacraments of the New Society” in *On Christian Theology*, 209–221, at 209.

⁸⁵ Williams, “Sacraments of the New Society,” 217.

⁸⁶ Williams, “Sacraments of the New Society,” 218.

search for my or our good becomes the search for a good that does not violently dispossess any other.⁸⁷

That is not to say that the church is an exclusively political, collectivized society engaged only in inspiring political attempts to change society. Rather, as a divinely initiated society gathered around the eucharist that signifies the true sign of the incarnate Son's self-gift, the church inhabits a common life that communicates the act of God to the surrounding society.⁸⁸

Conclusion: The Church, the Eucharist, and the World

De Lubac and Williams share some pronounced areas of affinity. For both, the relationship between the eucharist and the church is delineated in a manner rooted in their respective contexts. For de Lubac, an ecclesiology developed in stereo with the eucharist addresses the stultifying atmosphere of the Vichy regime and the dichotomy of the natural and the supernatural in contemporary theological circles. For Williams, the eucharist is the creation of a divinely appointed society that demonstrates Christ to the world, a society that addresses the pressures and shortcomings of a globalized economy.

For both de Lubac and Williams, any doctrine of the eucharist that does not intersect with ecclesiology (and vice versa) is not fit for purpose. For both, although arguably this is stressed to a greater degree in de Lubac, the context and the end of the eucharist is the ecclesial assembly. De Lubac approaches this matter through reappropriating the Augustinian motif that in consuming the sacramental body, the church is realized as the body of Christ. Williams, meanwhile, has drawn on a different facet of Augustine's thought regarding the sacrament as a sacred sign. As such, Williams approaches the interconnection of the eucharist and the church from two directions: (i) an anthropological analysis of the role of sign making in the formation of human societies; and (ii) an assessment of the sign making of Jesus Christ that inaugurated the people of the new covenant, sealed in his sacrificial death and resurrection. It is noteworthy that in stressing the bond between the eucharist and the church, de Lubac and Williams have drawn on different facets of Augustine's thought.

⁸⁷ Williams, "Sacraments of the New Society," 219.

⁸⁸ Williams, "Sacraments of the New Society," 220.

With an eye on ecumenical relations, this stressing of different facets of a common tradition should not go unnoticed. However, Williams includes perspectives from contemporary Orthodox thought, wherein the church itself becomes a derivative sign to the non-Christian world of a divinely appointed communion.

For both de Lubac and Williams, the relationship between the sacrament and the church means that a retreat into self-imposed obscurity is not a valid option for the church. However, their thought follows different trajectories. For de Lubac, connection between the life of the church and the life of secular society is predicated on (i) the reconceptualization of the church as a social and societal entity, (ii) on the universal significance of Christ, and (iii) on the repudiation of the dualism between the natural and the supernatural. Williams's concerns are different, perhaps owing to his influences in the Orthodox tradition. He presents the church as a divinely appointed society within the world that is to manifest the purposes and character of God through itself. Williams, therefore, goes further than de Lubac does in describing how the church may positively relate to contemporary society as a derivative sacrament: it is a sign of the new covenanted people of God, brought into being by the act of God in Jesus, and is characterized by "mature" relations in direct contrast to the relations that are manifested in contemporary society. In this sense, the church presents Christ to the world and embodies a new paradigm for society predicated on the view that the community is a gift given by God. In this society, the other is a gift to that community to be contributed to such that they may give fully to the common life of the church. It seems to me that the distinct emphases of de Lubac and Williams are not mutually exclusive and should be held collaboratively.

Indeed, in holding together the inherently societal nature of the church and the universal significance of Christ, a robust foundation may be laid for conceiving of the relation of the church to the world in the current age. The church has become Christ's body by the eucharist and the divine appointment of the ecclesial community through its common participation in the Son's sacrificial self-offering to the Father. Our contemporary situation is characterized by political flux. Within some societies, there is a growing antipathy to aspects of globalization both economically and culturally. Certainly, such themes have characterized the public debate in Europe and America in recent years. Nations oscillate between a reaffirmation of the embattled

liberal values and economics at one pole, and an increasingly powerful nationalism at the other. As de Lubac has shown, it is not sufficient for the church to retreat into a sacred space of spiritual introversion in the face of these facts. It is my view that one aspect of the church's interface with the world as it is beset by these issues must be to affirm the bond of eucharist and church, and present a society established by the initiative of God representing the purpose of God to be in communion with humanity for the perfection of human life. Both de Lubac and Williams have much to teach us about this. On the one hand, this insulates the church from nationalism, with its elective unity based on nationhood and the lure of affirmation of the church as an institution embodying national identity. On the other hand, this protects the church from an easy but self-defeating identification with liberalism (with its own more subtle mechanisms of self-interest and self-aggrandizement), for we are not gathered around a constellation of open-minded principles, but around the communion table of the Lord Jesus Christ.

