The *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani* (2000), a revision of *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM), as well as the *Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion Under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America*, provide us with occasion to recommit ourselves to the theological and pastoral reforms promulgated by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), as well as to the subsequent Catholic scholarship on the origin and meaning of the Eucharistic Prayer and our Common-Union, that is, participation in the Bread of Life and the Cup of Eternal Salvation. To situate our current pastoral reality and in order to facilitate judgments regarding pastoral practice, the following is a reflection on our corporate history, the contributions of Catholic biblical and liturgical scholarship, and some encouragement.

**Remembering**

These forty years of liturgical life since the promulgation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy demonstrate ample proof that we read and hear anything from out of the knowledge that we have at the time. For most of us at the time of Vatican II, that knowledge was permeated by a set of assumptions that affected every corner of our Catholic minds and hearts. For example, while we believed that grace, the Holy Spirit, was always present to us, we presumed that the sure sources of grace were the sacraments, especially the reception (note the passive) of the Blessed Sacrament, or prayer before the exposed or reserved sacrament. In the chapters treating “The Holy Eucharist,” “The Sacrifice of the Mass,” and “Holy Communion,” the pre-Vatican II *Baltimore Catechism* literally made no reference to the gathering of the Baptized Assembly, to the Liturgy of the Word, or to the Eucharistic Prayer, but did indicate that the faithful should be properly disposed for the reception of Communion. We presumed that “the most important parts” of the Mass were the “offertory by the priest,” the “words of consecration by the priest” (not the entire Eucharistic Prayer), and the “communion of the priest.” Given these emphases, some of us asked how late we could be and still fulfill our Sunday obligation to “hear Mass.”

Pre-Vatican II assumptions bolstered notions that what preceded and followed “the words of consecration” was ceremonial, that the priest was playing the role of Jesus at the Last Supper, that the priest...
offered the Sacrifice, and that we “received the fruits of the Sacrifice.” It was that powerful set of assumptions that the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy addressed.

Where Is the Risen and Ascended Christ?

As I have come to appreciate these dispositions, it seems clear that our assumption about the relation of the Risen Christ to the Church made all the difference in this world regarding our eucharistic sensibilities, indeed upon our very reading of the Scriptures and any other ecclesial documents. With the death of Augustine and the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West (476 C.E.), the influence of Neoplatonic philosophy washed over the Catholic imagination. The presumption inherent in that philosophy, that there existed some pure spiritual realm of being, would lead us to imagine, contrary to the Scriptures, that the resurrection and ascension of the Risen Lord implied that he had left history, now dwelling in that spiritual realm with his risen body. If that were the case, then we needed to give our theological efforts to articulating how it is that we encountered him, now seated (understood in a rather physicalist way) alone at the right hand of the Father, in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

During the ninth- and tenth-century eucharistic controversies, it was clear that Christian thinkers had rather uncritically absorbed the “spiritual realm (real)/history (shadow)” dualism of Neoplatonic philosophy. Theological treatises on the Eucharist showed the consequences of this conceptual severing of Christ from his Body, the Church, by way of questions such as these: How can Christ alone in heaven become present alone on our altars under the forms of bread and wine? What do we receive? Can the one Christ be present on many altars at the same time? At what moment does Christ alone become present? Is the whole Christ “contained” in the bread alone and the wine alone?

In short and contrary to biblical and patristic witness, the theology of “the Eucharist” during the second millennium until the modern biblical and liturgical movements concerned itself with the “real presence of Christ alone, body, blood, soul and divinity, under the forms of bread and wine.” The further absorption of Aristotelian philosophical categories such as substance and accidents only served to reinforce theological attention to the “moment of consecration,” with its corollary attention to the role of the priest. In their time St. Paul and St. Augustine would have thought these questions and issues absurd, un-hearable, because they did not account for the active faith of all present.

It is not that theologians were necessarily wrong in using the language of philosophy(ies) to articulate the faith of the Church, but that these philosophical systems became the lens by which to interpret the Scriptures. As well, and as is clear from the contents of the GIRM and Norms for Communion, these language categories are presumed to be the best ones to articulate the faith in a postmodern world. Yet, since Descartes in the seventeenth century, persons decreasingly operate according to these concepts.

Catholic Scholarship

Since the issuance of Divino Afflante Spiritu by Pope Pius XII in 1943, we note increasing tension between the contents of official ecclesial documents and the fruits of the biblical and liturgical scholarship encouraged by that encyclical. The Constitution on the Liturgy revealed the impact of liturgical textual studies and related biblically rooted theological reflection on the entire celebration of the Eucharist by stating that “Christ is always present in
His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations" (art. 7). If the Christ is always present, then theological reflection is free to explore the meaning of the action of Christ and his members in the entire gathering for Eucharist.

Of particular import is the scholarship of Enrico Mazza on the origin of the Eucharistic Prayer. Within Jewish practice, the blessing of God over bread and partaking of it implied participation in the corporate “body” of the people, sharing in their destiny, reaffirming corporate identity. The blessing of God over the cup and partaking of it implied participation in the blood of the lamb whose sacrifice at Sinai brought the people into existence. For Jesus to have reinterpreted that eating and drinking in terms of his own life and death is of profound import for the meaning of what we do in addressing God in the Eucharistic Prayer and in partaking of Bread and Cup.

Clearly, the early Church combined the two blessings within the context of one prayer of praise and thanksgiving, the Eucharistic Prayer. Therein, we recall to God the acts by which we have been saved throughout history, especially the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, who, at the Last Supper, transformed our prayer and the meaning of eating and drinking.

This has profound implication for our action of Common-Union. Now, to partake of the Bread of Life is to participate in the sacrament of Christ and his members. Now, to partake of the Cup of Eternal Salvation is to participate in the sacrament of the Cross, the origin of the Church into which we have been baptized. St. Augustine had retained this biblical meaning in his admonition to “Look upon this Bread and this Cup and see the mystery of yourselves, and become what you eat.” To hear the Word speak to us, to proclaim the Eucharistic Prayer, to have koinonia, participation in the sacrament of the Body and the Blood, is to engage in corporate ethical action for the sake of the peace and salvation of all the world.

Encouragement

As Dickens would say, “these are the best of times and the worst of times.” They call us to active trust that the Spirit who has guided the Church to the New Pentecost of Vatican II is not sleeping. We might feel like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, matters not having turned out quite as we had hoped. Yet, the Christ continues to interpret our lives to us in the assembly through his Word, and a perfect offering continues to be made to the glory of God’s name. We continue to say Amen to the Body of Christ onto which we have been grafted. We continue to drink from the Blood of the Cross, our origin and our hope. And so, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess 5:16-22).

Reference