

# GRIST

Diocese of New Ulm      Social Concerns Office      January, 2007

## **The Mass and Peace: What Body Do We Belong To?**

*by Joel Schorn*

in the spring 2006 issue of *The Sign of Peace*  
[www.catholicpeacefellowship.org](http://www.catholicpeacefellowship.org)

When we talk about the Mass and peace, we tend to think first of the moments in the liturgy when the ritual literally refers to *peace*. At the Sign of Peace: “Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your apostles, ‘I leave you peace, my peace I give to you.’ Look not on our sins but on the faith of your Church, and grant us the peace and unity of your kingdom, where you live for ever and ever.” In the Eucharistic Prayer II: “For our sake [Jesus] opened his arms on the cross; he put an end to death and revealed the resurrection.” In the Eucharistic Prayer III: “Lord, may this sacrifice, which has made our peace with you, advance the peace and salvation of all the world.” And at the end of Mass, where the various forms of the words of dismissal all include, “Go in peace.”

Note how none of these moments give us detailed instructions for bringing about peace. They *do* show how God has made peace with humanity, and humanity with itself, through Christ. As Saint Paul wrote, Christ “is our peace (Ephesians 2:14) because he brings humanity together and gives us “peace with God” (Romans 5:1) “by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Colossians 1:20).

At the 2005 Notre Dame Center for Liturgy conference, political theologian William Cavanaugh of the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul gave a talk on “The Social Meaning of the Eucharist.” He argued that the Mass cannot be boiled down to a single message, like justice, or, I would add, peace; its “meaning” cannot be exhausted by a single concept. Nor should we try to see it or celebrate it in terms of one thing. In fact, Cavanaugh continued, to look at the Mass in terms of extracting a “meaning” from it is a bit misguided.

What is important about the Eucharistic liturgy is not what it *means*, but what it *does*. And what it does, Cavanaugh said, is create – recreate, really – the world. When it comes to justice, for example, the Mass does not *primarily* teach us about justice or inspire us to do justice, though in a way it does do these things; rather, it shows us what God’s justice looks like in the world. Christian liturgy reveals how human life and the world are really supposed to be.

Especially in the Eucharist, Christians join themselves to Christ’s body. We shift our allegiance, as Cavanaugh said, from other “bodies” to which we can and do become members, like the state, the market, the corporation, to the Body of Christ, the primary body to which we belong.

I would like to suggest Cavanaugh’s insights about the Eucharist and justice apply as well to thinking about the Eucharist and *peace*.

*We cannot reduce the Mass to one thing.* In itself the Mass is many things at the same time: sacrifice, commemoration, thanksgiving, communion, sacred meal, real presence, transformation, and anticipation of the end of time. It has never been only one of these dimensions. In a similar way, we cannot say the Mass is *only* a celebration of peace, or justice. We distort it if we make it an anti-war protest, just as we distort it if we use it to bless nationalism. Such misuses border on self-worship, which is idolatry. The Mass celebrates reconciliation and communion. In our participation in the Mass we become people through whom justice and peace flow.

But that is not to say peace does not hover over the Mass like the dove of God’s Spirit. *The Mass does as much or more than it means.* Cavanaugh’s point about the liturgy recreating and revealing more than only instructing and inspiring strongly recalls a statement that Virgil Michel, the Benedictine pioneer of the American liturgical movement, made decades before. Speaking of the liturgy

and social and economic reconstruction, Michel wrote, “The liturgy does not offer a detailed scheme of economic reconstruction. But it does give us a proper concept and understanding of what society is like, through its model, the mystical Body of Christ.”

The liturgy does not tell us how to recreate the world; it shows us what the recreated world looks like. The Mass does not give us a program for peace; it reveals a world remade in the ways of peace.

The Eucharist forms us, in William Cavanaugh’s words, to absorb violence, not perpetuate it. To be vessels of reconciliation, not of violent aggression or retaliation. In a 2005 Lenten meditation, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, the preacher to the papal household, said that because of the Eucharist, “God’s absolute ‘no’ to violence, pronounced on the cross, is kept alive through the centuries.” The Eucharist also “appears, positively, as God’s ‘yes’ to innocent victims, the place where every day blood spilt on the earth is united to that of Christ...” Citing the work of Rene Girard, Cantalamessa pointed out how Christ broke the connection between the sacred and violence. “Christ defeated violence,” Cantalamessa said, “not by opposing it with greater violence, but by suffering it and laying bare its injustice and uselessness.”

The Mass perpetuates Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, in which by becoming a victim of violence, Jesus destroyed forever the ultimate power of fear, violence, and death and gave absolute value to the blood of victims. By joining ourselves to Christ’s self-sacrifice in the Mass, we are called to continue that sacrifice into daily life. We conform ourselves to Christ when, struck on one cheek, we offer the other – when we put away our sword rather than muster armies of retaliation.

Whether we are dealing with conflicts in our homes, families, workplaces, communities, or on the global level of terrorism and the “war on terrorism,” Christians must ask themselves to what body they belong: to the body that exploits others, that blindly supports the state and its wars, that kills in the name of God, that sheds blood to achieve political goals? Or do we belong to another body, the Body of Christ, the Church, made really present in the Eucharist, a

body that gathers the world into a community of reconciliation, that refuses to initiate or continue the cycle of violence, that names violence but insists that its ways are wrong and a lie – that has a resurrection faith in God’s peaceable kingdom, the way the world really is to be?

Into this Body the Eucharist gathers us and forms us to be its members. In putting on Christ, we become instruments of peace in the world. Go in peace.

“I give you a new commandment: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another” (John 13:34). Love that is in the Spirit of Christ, love that is imitative of Christ, love that is Christ-like, love that is “as I have loved” is a nonviolent love of friends and enemies. The New Commandment is so placed in the Gospel as to be presented as the supreme and solemn summary of all of Jesus’ teachings and commands. It contains the entire Law of the Gospel (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1970).

The very name for Holy Thursday, Maundy Thursday, comes from the Latin *mandatum*, which means a command, commission, charge, order, injunction. It is a direct and exclusive reference to the New Commandment given at the Lord’s Supper. The New Commandment is there from Day One of the Eucharist and it is there in maximal solemnity and seriousness. So, also, rejection of violence, love of enemies, prayer for persecutors, and return of good for evil are an irrevocable part of the history, scripture, and authentic memory of the Sacrifice of Love on Calvary. Refusing the protection of the sword (Mt 26:52), healing the ear of the armed man who was to take Him to His death (Lk 22:51) and crying out for God’s forgiveness for those who were destroying Him (Lk 23:34) is the memory the Gospels give to humanity of the victimization of Christ.

To love the Eucharist is to live the Eucharist, and the Eucharist is a *mandatum* of Truth, Peace, and Love.

*Fr. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy*