

FIRST THINGS

WHAT HAPPENS IN GERMANY

by
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In *The Making of Martin Luther*, the Cambridge scholar Richard Rex notes that 1518, not 1517, marks the real birth of Luther's public profile. Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* hit the wider German market in January 1518. He wrote his *Instructions for Confession* and his *Sermon on the Proper Preparation of the Heart for the Reception of Communion* in the spring of the same year. The *Sermon*, especially, bore the early seeds of Luther's later full-blown attack on Catholic sacramental theology—a fact that Cardinal Thomas Cajetan had already sensed when he met with Luther and pressed him to recant his more problematic views in Augsburg in October 1518.

Luther declined. The rest of the story is well known.

Exactly 500 years after Luther's *Sermon*, communion is again a matter of debate in Germany. This time the disputants are the bishops themselves. Munich's Cardinal Reinhard Marx and other German bishops seek to allow Protestant spouses of Catholics to receive communion under certain conditions, so long as they "affirm the Catholic faith in the Eucharist." Cologne's Cardinal Rainer Woelki and six other German bishops oppose the effort. They have sought clarification from Rome. The Vatican, however, has declined to intervene and returned the matter to the German bishops, urging them to arrive at a conference-level agreement.

Heat around the issue spiked earlier this month at a national German Catholic gathering. The country's president, along with a major television personality and others, publicly sided with Marx. Cardinal Marx argued that "When someone is hungry and has faith, they must have access to the Eucharist. That must be our passion, and I will not let up on this." Cardinal Woelki disagreed, noting that "whoever says 'yes' to the real presence of Christ in the [Catholic] Eucharist" also "naturally says 'yes' to the papacy, and the

hierarchical structure of the Church, and the veneration of the saints, and much, much more”—all typically rejected in Protestant belief. Woelki further stressed that “we [in Germany] are a part and parcel of the universal Church. There can be no German exceptionalism.”

Being human, bishops often disagree. Internal differences are common in any episcopal conference, and they’re handled—no surprise—internally. But two things set the German situation apart: the global prominence of the controversy and the doctrinal substance of the debate. Who can receive the Eucharist, and when, and why, are not merely German questions. If, as Vatican II said, the Eucharist is the source and summit of our life as Christians and the seal of our Catholic unity, then the answers to these questions have implications for the whole Church. They concern all of us. And in that light, I offer these points for thought and discussion, speaking simply as one among many diocesan bishops:

1. If the Eucharist truly is the sign and instrument of ecclesial unity, then if we change the conditions of communion, don’t we in fact redefine who and what the Church is?
2. Intentionally or not, the German proposal will inevitably do exactly that. It is the first stage in opening communion to all Protestants, or all baptized persons, since marriage ultimately provides no unique reason to allow communion for non-Catholics.
3. Communion presupposes common faith and creed, including supernatural faith in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, along with the seven sacraments recognized by the perennial tradition of the Catholic Church. By renegotiating this fact, the German proposal in effect adopts a Protestant notion of ecclesial identity. Simple baptism and a belief in Christ seem to suffice, not belief in the mystery of faith as understood by the Catholic tradition and its councils. Will the Protestant spouse need to believe in holy orders as understood by the Catholic Church, which is logically related to belief in the consecration of the bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ? Or are the German bishops suggesting that the sacrament of holy orders might not depend upon apostolic succession? In such a case, we would be confronting a much deeper error.
4. The German proposal severs the vital link between communion and sacramental confession.

Presumably it does not imply that Protestant spouses must go to confession for serious sins as a prelude to communion. But this stands in contradiction to the perennial practice and express dogmatic teaching of the Catholic Church, the Council of Trent, and the modern *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, as well as the ordinary magisterium. It implies, in its effect, a Protestantization of the Catholic theology of the sacraments.

5. If the teaching of the Church can be ignored or renegotiated, even a teaching that has received a conciliar definition (as in this case, at Trent), then can all councils be historically relativized and renegotiated? Many modern liberal Protestants question or reject or simply ignore as historical baggage the teaching on the divinity of Christ from the Council of Nicaea. Will Protestant spouses be required to believe in the divinity of Christ? If they need to believe in the real presence of Christ in the sacrament, why would they not need to share the Catholic belief in holy orders or the sacrament of penance? If they do believe in all these things, why are they not invited to become Catholic as a means to enter into visible full communion?

6. If Protestants are invited to Catholic communion, will Catholics still be barred from Protestant communion? If so, why would they be barred? If they're not barred, doesn't this imply that the Catholic view on holy orders and valid Eucharistic consecration is in fact false, and if it is false, that Protestant beliefs are true? If intercommunion is *not* intended to imply an equivalence in the Catholic and Protestant conceptions of the Eucharist, then the practice of intercommunion misleads the faithful. Isn't this a textbook case of "causing scandal"? And won't it be seen by many as a polite form of deception or of hiding hard teachings, within the context of ecumenical discussion? Unity cannot be built on a process that systematically conceals the truth of our differences.

The essence of the German intercommunion proposal is that there would be a sharing in holy communion even when there is not true Church unity. This strikes at the very heart of the truth of the sacrament of the Eucharist, because by its very nature, the Eucharist is the body of Christ. And the "body of Christ" is both the real and substantial presence of Christ under the appearances of bread and wine, and also the Church herself, the communion of believers united to Christ, the head. To receive the Eucharist is to proclaim in a solemn and public way, before God and in the Church, that one is in

communion both with Jesus and with the visible community celebrating the Eucharist.

An intrinsic link therefore exists between “being in communion” with a community, and “receiving communion” in that community. These realities point to each other.

Many things unite us with Protestant Christians. The age of bitter polemics is over, and among the blessings in my life are the presence and example of Protestant friends of great Christian character, erudition, and dedication to the Gospel. Nothing I write here is meant to diminish their extraordinary witness. But it’s also true that important things still divide us, and the issues that separate us are not merely the verbal artifacts of a bygone era. Our separation is a wound in the unity of Christians, and it is not willed by God; but it is a reality that we need to acknowledge. To insert a falsehood into the most solemn moment of one’s encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist—to say by one’s actions, “I am in communion with this community,” when one is demonstrably not in communion with that community—is a lie, and thus a serious offense before God.

In his 2003 encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, John Paul II wrote:

The celebration of the Eucharist ... cannot be the starting-point for communion; it presupposes that communion already exists, a communion which it seeks to consolidate and bring to perfection. The sacrament is an expression of this bond of communion both in its invisible dimension, which, in Christ and through the working of the Holy Spirit, unites us to the Father and among ourselves, and in its visible dimension, which entails communion in the teaching of the Apostles, in the sacraments and in the Church’s hierarchical order. The profound relationship between the invisible and the visible elements of ecclesial communion is constitutive of the Church as the sacrament of salvation. 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.

What happens in Germany will not stay in Germany. History has already taught us that lesson once.

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