



CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction

Derived from the Latin word *commūnis* meaning “mutual participation,” Holy Communion is a central act in Christian worship and doctrine that celebrates the eating and drinking of bread and wine in commemoration of the Lord’s Supper. It is recorded in Matt. 26: 26-8, Mark 14: 22-4 and Luke 22: 17-20 as a demonstration of the enduring fellowship with God between Christ and his disciples (John 14:23), the power of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1), as well as the solidarity of Christian believers with one another (Eph. 4:1-6).

Considered one of the holiest and most important occasions in a Roman Catholic’s life, the Sacrament of the Eucharist (from the Greek word meaning “to give thanks” or “to show favor”) is very often seen as the move towards full membership in the church and the person’s initial steps toward adulthood.

More than the symbolic act of receiving the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine symbolizing the body and blood of Jesus Christ, most Catholic children receive their First Communion when they're seven or eight years of age because it is considered the age of reason. My memory of my own first Communion roughly 30 years ago is somewhat vague, but there are some issues that were powerful which I believe resonate with the foci of World Communion Sunday. A few months before receiving my Eucharist, I recall that I was so excited by the prospect that I had begun my own make-believe Mass at home using oatmeal cookies and milk in imitation of the wafers and wine used by the priest.

As the time drew closer for me to receive the sacrament for the first time, a number of other significant issues came to mind. The adults made it painfully clear that we always had to fast the night before receiving that special meal because we had to purify and prepare ourselves in order to receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Before anyone received communion—regardless of age, background, or tradition—the priest reminded the congregation that we had to examine ourselves thoroughly to make sure we were worthy of the Lord's Supper and the supreme sacrifice it represented. Typically, once absolved of sin by the priest, he or she is ready to receive his/her First Communion. Each woman, man, and child was supposed to make certain that they had confessed and renounced their sins, resolved any grudges and grievances, and fully embraced Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior before even contemplating partaking in the celebration of Communion. The clergy impressed upon us that failure to do any of these things in a sincere and truthful manner prior to consuming the communion feast was tantamount to eating condemnation upon oneself.

When seen in such a light, the Lord's Supper—the particularities of a given congregational and/or denominational approach to the ritual notwithstanding—is clearly deeply tied to the core of Christian faith and experience.

II. Origins of World Communion Sunday

World Communion Sunday is typically celebrated in October on the first Sunday. The day has taken on new relevancy and depth of meaning in a world where globalization often has undermined ecumenism, brotherhood and justice. Established by the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1936, World Communion Sunday was originally called "World Wide Communion Sunday." The event was held in order to celebrate a growing sense of Christian unity worldwide. From the inauguration of World Communion Sunday, it was coordinated and structured so that other Christian denominations could incorporate the celebration into their respective calendars. Thus, after a few years, World Communion Sunday eventually became associated with the Federal Council of Churches (a forerunner to the National Council of Churches) where, in 1940, Jesse Bader, executive secretary of the Department of Evangelism for the Federal Council of Churches, led the expansion of the event to numerous churches worldwide.

Faced with the looming threat of another global war, especially one that was steeped in racial hatred as well as religious prejudice, the initial timing of this celebration was by no means an accident. Thinking about the need for finding a religious celebration to bring

together a global community of Christians for the first time in a world that was on the verge of being terrorized and threatened by Nazi Germany, fascism, and imperialism, the Presbyterian churches in the United States and overseas unified in the celebration of the Lord's Supper at a time when fear divided God's people across the world.

When viewed in this light, this special day has extraordinary significance for African American women, men, and children. Whereas the rightful and righteous call was being made by white American church leaders who might have looked and saw a world desperately in need of peacemaking, more than likely there were many black Christians who were enduring the brutally dehumanizing effects of second-class citizenship that has been referred to by several scholars as "Jim and Jane Crow" racism in this country. Therefore, while white Christian brothers and sisters in the United States might have seen this sharing of Holy Communion (or Holy Eucharist in Catholic terms) across borders and oceans as a move toward unity for all humanity, the question of what that meant for black people in general, and black Christians in particular, was not settled. In American society in the late 1930's and early 1940's, wherein African Americans were ever mindful of the profound distance and difference that separated their experiences from those of their white counterparts due to the harsh realities of lynchings, hate crimes, race riots, degrading exploitation, and segregation, this celebration known as World Communion Sunday most certainly had a bittersweet quality to it. In this spirit, the stirring words of the African American poet Langston Hughes' "I, Too" are appropriate:

I, Too, Sing America

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed--

I, too, am America.¹

Much like the darker brother (and sister) of whom Hughes speaks in his poem, African Americans—whether they are steeped in the historic black church tradition or part of a

predominantly white American denomination—can now move from the outskirts of Christian fellowship with holy boldness to participate more fully and freely at the communion table that is a literal, as well as figurative, symbol of World Communion Sunday thanks to many of the hard-won victories that have occurred in the more than 70 years since this special day was first celebrated.

Moreover, much like the narrative found in John 6: 24-35 suggests, believers in Christ, both then and now, would be fed by a form of heavenly sustenance that not only would help them grow strong and healthy individually, it would also bind them closer together regardless of their perceived differences.

III. Ritual Customs for World Communion Sunday

“Moment for Mission” and Global Greetings

Several churches across racial and cultural lines have found that incorporating a live “Moment for Mission” enhances their worship services. It can be fascinating to hear how Christians worship and serve in another part of the world. Make arrangements with international peacemakers or missionaries and set aside time during the World Communion Sunday worship service so that your congregation can make contact with them via telephone, television, or even internet connection with persons serving in a different part of the world.

Ecumenical Connections

In January 2002, the Presbyterian Church (USA) joined nine other denominations in the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) to form a new ecumenical organization called “Churches Uniting in Christ” (CUIC). Unlike its predecessor, the CUIC is not an attempt at a denominational merger but instead is an intercommunion agreement whereby each member church—including historic black church denominations, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church—recognizes the others as part of the true church and validates the rites of those fellow churches (most notably baptism and communion) as legitimate.

Sharing of the Peace

“Sharing the peace” is essential to the World Communion Sunday worship service. It teaches the importance of reconciliation within the local church as well as the worldwide church. Even in times of conflict, it is crucial that Christians should be able to greet one another in the hope of God’s peace which surpasses all understanding. As one pastor informed his congregation, “sharing the peace” is not a time for chitchat, lengthy conversations, making business connections, or speed dating. By extending the most common greeting in American culture--a handshake or hug accompanied by a word of peace--African American Christians remind one another of the need to pass on God’s loving spirit to each other by such gestures. The typical call-and-response for sharing the peace is as follows:

Leader: Because we know God's grace through Jesus Christ, we know God's peace. As a sign of that peace, let us share it with one another. The peace of Christ be with you.

People: And also with you.

No matter the form of the greeting, the central message of sharing the peace is reconciliation between sisters and brothers united by God's love, grace, and mercy in ways usually denied during our daily encounters with others. As important as it is to receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion, it is equally vital in many local African American churches to extend signs of love and peace to one another in a direct fashion.

IV. Celebrating World Communion Sunday in Song

In order to promote and celebrate a special day such as World Communion Sunday, it is perfectly logical to incorporate communion-themed songs such as "Let Us Break Bread Together," "There Is A Fountain," and "We Come To This Table" that will usually be familiar to many church members.

Let Us Break Bread Together

Let us break bread together on our knees, (on our knees)
Let us break bread together on our knees. (on our knees)
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me. (on me)

Let us drink wine together on our knees, (on our knees)
Let us drink wine together on our knees. (on our knees)
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me. (on me)

Let us praise God together on our knees, (on our knees)
Let us praise God together on our knees. (on our knees)
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me. (on me)

Let us praise God together on our knees, (on our knees)
Let us praise God together on our knees. (on our knees)
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy if you please. (if you please).²

There is a Fountain

There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins
And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains
Lose all their guilty stains, lose all their guilty stains
And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains

Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood shall never lose its power
Till all the ransomed church of God be saved, to sin no more
Be saved, to sin no more, be saved, to sin no more
Till all the ransomed church of God be saved, to sin no more
E'er since, by faith, I saw the stream Thy flowing wounds supply
Redeeming love has been my theme, and shall be till I die
And shall be till I die, and shall be till I die
Redeeming love has been my theme, and shall be till I die. ³

We Come to This Table

We come to this table, O God, with thanksgiving.
We lift up our hearts, we remember, we pray.
We hear Jesus' welcome-- inviting, forgiving;
We know your Spirit's peace as we feast here today.

We dine at your table as sisters and brothers,
Diverse in our cultures, yet nourished as one.
The bread and the cup that we share here with others
Are gifts uniting all who are claimed by your Son.

We grieve for your world here; we cry, "How much longer?"
We pray for the cycles of violence to cease.
Yet here, in Christ broken, we're fed and made stronger
To labor in his name for a world filled with peace.

We rise from this table with new dedication
To feed the world's children, to free the oppressed,
To clear out the minefields, to care for creation;
We pray, O God of peace, that our work will be blest. ⁴

Notes

1. Hughes, Langston. The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes. Eds. Rampersad, Arnold, and David E. Roessel. New York: Knopf, 1994, p. 46.
2. Let Us Break Bread Together. African American spiritual. Adapted and arranged by William Farley Smith, 1986.
3. "There Is a Fountain Filled With Blood." By William Cowper in "Conyer's Collection of Psalms and Hymns" (1772).
4. We Gather Together. By Adrianus Valerius. Tune, by Edward Kremser. The Presbyterian Hymnal Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990. #559