

Eucharist in retreat

Andrew Hamilton

SHORTLY AFTER PINOCHET SEIZED POWER IN CHILE I heard a university chaplain speak of his work there. By his account the chaplaincy had been a vibrant centre. The students were generally sympathetic to Allende's reforms. They responded to a socially committed theology and they brought their hopes and commitments to a fervent and creative celebration of the Eucharist.

After Pinochet's coup many students in the chaplaincy wanted to form groups which would oppose the military dictatorship. They included the most generous and active of the students. The chaplain's response had a rigour that surprised me at the time. He insisted that any student who wished to become involved in proscribed political activity should first give thirty full days of their time to make the Spiritual Exercises. Although the seriousness was impressive, I thought the demand to be extraordinarily heavy.

Twenty-five years later, however, when the systematic brutality of the regime has been uncovered, the requirement seems modest. Those who opposed the regime faced torture and disappearance. Like the Christians facing martyrdom in the early Church, activists needed to be well prepared for what they would face and to have found a self-aware faith. There was no place for light-hearted enthusiasm.

What I found most impressive in this story at the time, and what I continue to reflect on, was that at this time the sacramental life of the chaplaincy, the commitment to follow the Jesus of the gospel and programmes of spiritual development were so tightly integrated. The energy of the chaplaincy came from the students' desire to follow Jesus' path, even to dangerous places. The commitment to the gospel gave life to the celebration of the Eucharist, which in turn strengthened the students in their commitment to follow Jesus. As a result they became aware of their need for spiritual depth. The Spiritual Exercises which they consequently undertook confronted them again with the reality of following Jesus' path to Jerusalem and also brought an added depth to their celebration of the Eucharist.

In untroubled times the relationship between liturgy, spirituality and a shared commitment to the gospel is often slack, so that it can appear that those who emphasize one or other facet of faith are separated from

those who make other emphases. In Chile, the Eucharist, spirituality and public commitment were inseparable.

This has been the case also in other times of crisis in which Christians must struggle to be faithful to the gospel. In third-century Christian Africa, for example, Christians faced a persecution that targeted them systematically. The effects of persecution were as disquieting as they were in Chile. Many Christians, including ministers in the Church, compromised with power and preferred their security to the demands of the gospel. They sacrificed to the state. But as Cyprian represents it, the life of the church became tightly focused on the task of resisting persecution. The Eucharist was the focus of discipleship, while pastoral strategy focused on forming and encouraging people to confront honestly the reality of martyrdom, and on equipping them to face it. As in Chile, Jesus' path was sharply mapped for a later world, with the result that the unity of Church, gospel, Eucharist and spirituality was clearly defined.

The threefold body of Christ

The relationship between the community, the following of Jesus and the Eucharist has also been brought out in some modern theologies of the Eucharist which return to insights current in the early Church. In particular, they explore the image of the threefold body of Christ.

When early Christians spoke of the body of Christ, they moved easily between the body of Jesus who lived, died and rose again, the body of Christ in the Eucharist, and the communal body of Christ which he makes up of those who are his members. We usually focus on the differences between these senses of Christ's body. We see the body of Jesus who preached and journeyed through Galilee as different from his risen body. We find it hard to believe that the personal body of Jesus Christ is continuous with the Church which is his mystical body. We know that the way in which Jesus Christ is present in his eucharistic body is different from the way in which he was present in his historical body. Early Christians delighted more in the continuity in the body of Christ. In a sermon to an ordinary congregation, to show how community and Eucharist were connected as the body of Christ, Augustine could urge his hearers to 'become what you eat'. For him, it was a case of becoming what we already were. He and his contemporaries were so convinced that the Church was the body of Christ that in following centuries, the Church was described as the true body of Christ, while the Eucharist was called the mystical body of Christ.

Underlying the vision of continuity between Jesus' personal body, the eucharistic body and his body of which we are members is the understanding that wherever we meet Jesus Christ, we meet him as the Risen Christ. The story of doubting Thomas shows that he carries with him in his risen body the wounds of his life and death. Because his risen life is freed from the constraints of space and time, he can be present within the Eucharist and the community.

Fragmentation of the body

In later centuries, the imaginative facility to move easily between the personal body of Christ, the eucharistic body and the communal body of Christ was largely lost. Theologians, in particular, lost an instinctively symbolic approach to the world that enabled them to explore the continuity between the different senses of the body of Christ. As a result they focused on and analysed the differences. In the process they privileged some senses of the body over others. In the western medieval world, they insisted in debate that Christ's eucharistic body was identical with his physical body, and in practice they regarded the identity of Christ's body with his Church as more ethereal and metaphorical than this. It is significant that the Eucharist became known as the true body of Christ, while the Church was described as his mystical body.

Popular stories about the Eucharist, too, picked up theological concerns. Many stories described devout individuals receiving visions in which they saw, not bread, but human flesh. The stories indicated that Christ's presence in the Eucharist had come to be seen as a challenge to and a test of the individual's belief, whereas in earlier times it had been seen as the nourishment of a shared commitment. The medieval view of the Eucharist is not entirely dead: many people would still believe that the Eucharist is the body of Christ in a more real, remarkable and tangible way than is the Church.

This change from the early Church eucharistic vision to that of the medieval world was more than a neutral change of emphasis. It represents a decline. It is important to recover the imaginative ability to hold together the different ways in which the Risen Christ is present in his body, because then we recognize intuitively that to follow the way of Jesus in the gospel, to put our bodies where he was, to celebrate the Eucharist, and to be members of his body are inseparable. From such a perspective, for example, it would be inconceivable that a community, which at the Eucharist remembers the tortured body of Jesus Christ when receiving his eucharistic body, should accept without protest the

inclusion of members whose professional task was to dismember the communal body of Christ by torturing and making others of his members disappear from his body. We would see that even to make an argument for such inclusiveness would only be possible if we treat as two separate bodies the eucharistic body of Christ and the body of Christ which is the Church.

The identity between the bodily life of Christ, the reception of Christ's body in the Eucharist, and the body of the community also suggests a criterion for evaluating the celebration of the Eucharist. This does not have to do primarily with conventional assessments of reverence or of beauty, but with the extent to which the community is strongly and practically committed to the following of the way of Jesus Christ.

A mass for East Timor

The quality of commitment, of course, is intangible, and offers no encouragement to entrepreneurs who might like to draw up a five star guide to the best masses in town! But the criterion does explain why we are able accurately and often to our surprise, to recognize particular extraordinary celebrations of the Eucharist to be exemplary. One such liturgy was a mass celebrated for East Timor in the Melbourne Cathedral. It took place in the middle of the violence that followed the referendum about independence. In Australia, this was an intensely emotional time, when people who had invested high hopes in the transition to a peaceful, free and prosperous East Timor were left helpless, angry and grieving. The overflowing congregation brought together East Timorese refugees who feared that members of their families had been murdered, with people from many different churches and other groups. Those who took part remember the congregation as an assembly of stricken faces. The choir was provided by the Trade Union Movement; the celebrant was a bishop who had pleaded for justice in East Timor since 1975. He had lost many friends killed in the violence.

The liturgy itself expressed solidarity. Representatives of other churches were in the sanctuary. They and members of other groups offered prayers. At the beginning of the Eucharist, the president invited all the congregation to hold hands while singing the Trade Union solidarity song. At the end of the mass, all were invited to seek out the East Timorese in the congregation to express their sympathy and support. Such gestures that crossed conventional boundaries were instinctively right. But the rightness of the celebration ran also at a

deeper level. Here, the Eucharist was evidently the celebration of a body of people which had been brought together by their horror at the brutal dismemberment of the body of Christ in East Timor, and by their commitment to follow the way of Jesus Christ in remembering his wounded body. The preparation, solemnity and the beauty of the liturgy helped the celebration, but its seriousness of purpose and prayerfulness were not created by art, but flowed – as they should – from a community deeply committed to the gospel. The community recalled the life of Jesus and expressed their practical commitment to the needs of the wider body of Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist. The body of Christ was integrated.

The celebration for East Timor and the Chilean experience may also be pertinent to discussion of the proper relationship between the Eucharist and the Spiritual Exercises. They suggest that the proper celebration of the Eucharist and the proper conduct of the Spiritual Exercises do not ultimately have to do with technique or with style but with their integration within a community which remembers in its body the Jesus Christ whose body it forms. They are properly conducted when they embody in practical ways the different aspects of the body of Christ. So, to describe the proper ways of celebrating the Eucharist in the Spiritual Exercises, and what the wider Church can learn from these celebrations, we need first to ask how the conduct of the Spiritual Exercises builds up the body of Christ to follow the way of Jesus Christ.

How the Spiritual Exercises embody such a community is a complex question, because the conduct of the Spiritual Exercises normally does not come out of the life of a single community. They bring together people from many communities, including that of the retreat centre and the worlds of the various retreatants. We could answer this question adequately only if we examined how each of the communities represented among those giving and receiving the Spiritual Exercises was engaged as Christ's body following his way. This would be an impossible task.

Relevance or transcendence?

The focus on the communities of the Eucharist and of the Spiritual Exercises, however, shows why an emphasis on the style and thematic content of the celebration of the Eucharist is misplaced, even if the proposals which arise prove quite sensible. We might be led, for example, by the continuity between the Eucharist and the Church as the body of Christ to lament the introspection and personal focus of retreats. That might lead us to build the celebration of the Eucharist

around the theme of social commitment by choosing apt readings, organizing the prayers of the faithful around the topics of the day and current catastrophes, and by filling the walls of the chapel with images of contemporary oppression and misery which then become the subject matter of homilies.

Most of us will have suffered from similar approaches. It is customary to dismiss them because they discourage personal meditation, erode the sense of mystery and dismiss the Eucharist as a sign of transcendence. This judgement would be true but trivial. It sees symptoms but ignores the root weakness of such approaches, namely that they offer a cheap fix to a deep challenge. They try to make the Eucharist the sign of commitment while declining to ask how the communities brought together in the Eucharist are living as the body of Christ. Although the attempt to make the retreat and the Eucharist relevant to social causes recognizes the continuity between the eucharistic body of Christ and the body of the gospel Jesus given for the world, it does not attend deeply enough to the way in which the ordinary threads of the life of the community must be woven into the life patterns of the gospel Jesus. It offers band-aids where only transplants will do. Where the community does not live practically as the body of Christ, silence in celebrating the Eucharist would be a better symbol, providing that it is the silence of compunction for leaving the body of Christ unarticulated.

But if a focus on commitment in the celebration of the Eucharist is inadequate unless it looks to the way in which the community embodies the body of Christ, so an emphasis on prayerfulness could be equally superficial. We might be led by the importance of recollection to say that the Eucharist celebrated during the retreat should help the prayerfulness of the participants, deepen their interiority and feed their prayer life. We would see the intrusion of public events outside the agenda of the retreat into the retreat Eucharist as regrettable, and indeed hold the world of the retreat to be public in a deeper sense, because the participants are bound together by a shared commitment to prayer. The celebration would therefore have much to offer the wider Church, because the retreat represents the Church at its most spiritual best.

Now, while this approach to the celebration of the Eucharist arrives at good practical conclusions, it does so for the wrong reasons. It correctly states a link between spirituality and the Eucharist, but it spiritualizes both the body of Jesus Christ of the Gospels and the communal body. In this account, the body of Jesus of the Gospels is described in terms of interiority and prayer and not in terms of the

public world and conflict of the gospel. The communal body is made up of people linked to Christ by their interiority and not by their bodiliness. As a result, the fragmentation of the public world is not seen as pertinent to the Eucharist because the body of Christ as Church is not identified with the body which Jesus Christ gave for us publicly. This point is worth developing, because much contemporary commentary on the Eucharist complains of the loss of transcendence, interiority, reverence and of mystery in the celebration of the Eucharist. The same commentators often see the Spiritual Exercises as occasions ideally designed to recover these qualities. While these aspects of celebration are clearly important, however, it would be easy and mistaken to seek them at the expense of a practical commitment to the communal body of Christ.

The sense of transcendence and of mystery arises properly out of the urgency with which the community comes to the Eucharist in its need and commitment. Reverence for the mystery of Christ in the Eucharist flows naturally out of reverence for his broken body in the world, the privileged place where we find God. It was tangibly present in the mass for East Timor; it is the expression of the community that is the body of Christ which it receives, remembering in its life and commitments Jesus who, as head of the body, gave his body for the world.

Church, retreats and Eucharist

The Eucharist and the Spiritual Exercises, then, are linked most deeply through the community. There the eucharistic body of Christ is integrated with the bodily following of Jesus. Spirituality nourishes the commitment of the body. So, while retreats recall to mind the great gift out of which discipleship flows, they also bring to deeper awareness the reality of the community and world within which retreatants and guides together are committed. We do not step out of this world or out of the passion of the world when making retreats, but enter more deeply the lives of those to whom we are joined as the body of Christ.

The relationship between the Eucharist and the Spiritual Exercises must also take account of the way in which the practices and relationships of the retreat communities and centres involved in giving the Exercises represent the body of Christ. The gratuity of ministry, the social location of the Exercises, and the practical ways in which the communities attend to the dismembered body of Christ are only a few of the considerations that affect the celebration of the Eucharist in the Exercises.

The style in which the Eucharist is celebrated respects the movement of the Exercises. Spiritual Exercises deepen the reflectiveness, freedom and commitment with which those who take part help to shape a community aware of itself as the body of Christ. The Eucharist deepens prayerfulness and awareness of the mystery, and so demands a proper reverence for the Word of God. But the Word of God takes us back to the mystery of the community which in its daily life and commitments is the body of Christ.

The orientation both of the Eucharist and of the Spiritual Exercises to the body suggests what the larger Church might learn about the celebration of the Eucharist from its celebration in retreats, and vice versa. Both Church and retreat groups face the challenge to recognize the relationship between the eucharistic body of Christ, the bodily life of Jesus and the communal body of Christ, and to express it in the celebration of the Eucharist. But each form of celebration offers its own gift. The regular practice of the Eucharist in church communities emphasizes the ordinariness and earthiness of the body. It shows the pretensions of any spiritualized or clericalized celebration of Eucharist. The celebration of the Eucharist in retreats points to the depth to which our membership of the body and our association with those who are dismembered call us. As the Spiritual Exercises undertaken by the Chilean students shows, it is an index of seriousness. Where the Eucharist in church community or in Spiritual Exercises are celebrated by people whose commitment is intense, a sense of mystery and transcendence will naturally follow.

The stories of the Eucharist

But ultimately, we do not gauge the health of the relationship between the Eucharist and Spiritual Exercises by the style of celebration. A deeper and more real criterion is to be found in the stories which gather around the Eucharist and Spiritual Exercises. If these stories speak coherently of a Risen Christ who gave his body for the world's salvation, who gives himself in the Eucharist, and who is present in his body within humanity, they are good stories and indicate good practice. By this test, the gospel stories which have eucharistic overtones – and which, presumably, reflect the practice of the Eucharist in the early Church – are good stories. In the stories of the feeding of the crowds, for example, the disciples are forced to realize that as followers of Jesus they have responsibility to these people. When they begin with their few loaves and fish to feed the crowd, Christ's power compensates for the inadequacy of their gifts and resources. Inasmuch as this story

has eucharistic associations it suggests that Jesus is identified with the food that is given, with the community of disciples who offer food, with the crowd that is fed, and with the feeding which embodies Jesus' teaching and way of life.

In the Fourth Gospel the account of the last supper dwells on the patterns of Jesus' bodily life which are to be characteristic of the body of his disciples. Jesus' life and death are described in terms of service; the disciples' life is to be lived in the same terms. When we read the story, as in the Church we cannot help reading it, in the light of the institution narratives in the Synoptic Gospels, the eucharistic body of Christ is identified with the body of disciples and with the following of Jesus.

In the story of the journey to Emmaus, the breaking of the bread brings the story to a climax which integrates the crucified body of Jesus which hangs over the first part of the story and the body of disciples to which the disciples return at its conclusion. The connections between the Eucharist and the body can also be seen in the accounts of the early Christian community in Acts, where the breaking of the bread is associated with the sharing of possessions and the giving to those in need. These stories flesh out for the Christian reader Paul's appeal to the different senses of the body of Christ when he demands that the Corinthians adopt eucharistic practices that respect their incorporation into Christ.

Compared to these gospel stories, later stories of the Eucharist are often thin and ungenerous. The point of many stories of late antiquity and of the Middle Ages is simply to identify the eucharistic body with the historical body of Jesus. Some of the most repeated stories are repugnant: they tell of Jews desecrating the host, only to find that it turns to bleeding flesh. Those who fail to recognize the real presence or to treat the consecrated species with reverence, moreover, are often punished by painful and unexpected deaths. The eucharistic body here is associated with an exclusive social body whose boundaries are vindictively patrolled. The identification of the eucharistic body and the church body with the patterns of Jesus' bodily life has become much weakened, with the result that reverence for the transcendent mystery of the Eucharist inculcated in such stories is separated from respect for the living body of Christ. While these stories were until relatively recently a staple in popular teaching about the Eucharist, much better stories were those told of the celebrations in penal times, where much was risked to celebrate the Eucharist in a community which was being dismembered. The same stories are the staple of faithful communities

in Central America. Where such stories are generated, respect for the one body of Christ in its different manifestations is guaranteed.

The stories of the Spiritual Exercises

Stories told about the Spiritual Exercises display a similar variety. In the New Testament, stories of spiritual formation have to do with serving the body of the people. When Jesus goes into the desert to be tempted, his spirit is taken to Jerusalem to seductive ways of living his ministry. Similarly, in the ecstatic vision of Tabor, when the great figures of Israel's tradition appear, Peter's attempt to privatize the vision is dismissed almost contemptuously. In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's preparation for his ministry is also public. The central point of such stories is not the protagonists' inner life but the public direction which their lives will take. Even in the desert tradition, which in popular understanding celebrates the withdrawal to solitude, the context of the stories is public. They deal with relationships with spiritual teachers, with the public world to whom the monks had responsibility to speak the word, and with the shape of a shared monastic tradition.

Within the Ignatian tradition, too, the Exercises have to do with a way of life. The early stories tell of guides and retreatants who alike live in the public world of home and Church. In the Exercises, the retreatants' imagining of their public world is central to the process. The call to serve God in the world and to make a difference to the communal body of Christ is always prominent.

As retreats became more professionalized and centred upon special places and trained people, the stories told about the Exercises often featured the holiness of individuals: the spiritual gifts of guides and the interior gifts of retreatants. In the popular imagination, retreats were associated with prolonged silence, and the capacity of religious to bear it furnished many lay people with an adequate sign of their superior holiness! The focus of the retreat prayer fell on the struggle for interiority by battling against distractions. Stories grew of the withdrawal from the maelstrom of daily life to a deeper and privileged world of silence.

This approach to retreats is still current, although in different forms. The implicit stories told by retreat brochures often associate retreats with Sabbaths or holidays, with a time out from ordinary associations, with quality time, and with deepened relationships. The brochures are fine. But if that is the only story-line, the common body of Christ is placed in the background, and the connection of its clamant injustices

and needs is divorced from the body of the earthly Jesus. Retreat stories need to go beyond individual interiority.

Fortunately, the stories told by those who engage in the Spiritual Exercises are often stories of awakening to the reality of injustice, stories of a deepened public commitment, stories about the getting of courage as well as of wisdom, stories about solidarity, stories about the body of Christ received and accepted as a shared commitment. These stories embody the presence of Christ in Eucharist and in community.

Andrew Hamilton SJ teaches theology at the United Faculty of Theology in Melbourne. He has been involved in refugee issues and with refugee communities.