

THE ECUMENICAL CELEBRATION OF THE
'EUCARISTIE-AVONDMAAL' IN LEIDEN AND OEGSTGEEST

Jean Sonnenfeld
Iona College

In the Christian Church the highest moment of worship comes in the Eucharist or Lord's Supper. Yet it is precisely at this central moment of one's faith that Christians are told that they must keep apart. In 1 Corinthians 11 where Paul talked of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper, he spoke of eating and drinking without discerning the body. If Paul were alive today he would surely say that the body of Christ is divided and broken by the denominational divisions of the Church universal that prevent Christians from celebrating the Eucharist or Lord's Supper together.

On the other hand, if Paul visited certain congregations in Leiden and its suburb Oegstgeest, he would find Roman Catholics and Protestants who have broken down the dividing wall and are celebrating the sacrament together.

Church officials may be uneasy about this apparent disregard for ancient church tradition, and may actively oppose these ecumenical celebrations, but certain lay Christians as well as clergy are asking different questions from church officials, and are finding their answers either within, or on the fringes of, or outside of the official churches. Essentially, they are asking why, since we worship the same Christ, we must be divided when we celebrate the sacrament of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper.

Outsiders would answer that the beliefs of the different churches are important enough to keep them apart - beliefs about what happens to the nature of the bread and wine during the sacrament, and about the sacrifice of

Christ - whether it is repeated in each mass or not. These questions are also asked within the churches. But the main question being asked within the churches, and especially the Roman Catholic Church, concerns the office of the priest vs. that of the minister. In the Roman Catholic Church the hierarchy from the Pope down through Cardinal Willebrands and through Bishop Simonis of Rotterdam is concerned that the person who consecrates the elements of bread and wine in the mass must be a priest in the apostolic succession handed down from Christ through his apostle Peter.

These problems that would stand in the way of the ecumenical celebration of the Eucharistie-Avondmaal (Eucharist-Lord's Supper) have been resolved in three different ways by three different churches that I visited in Leiden and Oegstgeest in 1973 and in 1976.

The "middle-aged generation" have been celebrating a combined Eucharistie-Avondmaal in the Groene or Willibrord Kerk in Oegstgeest once a month since 1972. The lay people remembered how Protestants and Roman Catholics had worked together as Christians during the difficult days of World War II. The bitter divisions that had kept them apart during the three centuries since the Eighty-Year Wars of Religion were forgotten then. Since World War II Christians from all churches had continued to work together in social service and in missions. Once a year in January they worshipped together during the Week of Christian Unity. They asked why they could not go one step further and celebrate the Eucharist or Lord's Supper together.

In the Netherlands the Roman Catholic Bishop of Rotterdam, Bishop Simonis, is considered a conservative. The work group that organized the joint celebration of the Eucharistie-Avondmaal had wanted to alternate between the Roman Catholic Willibrord Kerk and the Hervormde Groene or Willibrord Kerk. In view of Bishop Simonis' misgivings the monthly celebration of the Eucharistie-Avondmaal is always

held in the Hervormde Kerk. Appropriately, the parish dates back to the eighth century and the time of Willibrord, who was the first Christian missionary to the Netherlands. At the time of the Reformation the church, along with its clergy and congregation, became Protestant. Now the Christians of Oegstgeest are rejoicing that Protestants and Roman Catholics are worshipping together in a church that played such an important part in both traditions. The Gereformeerde Kerk, which broke away from the Hervormde Kerk in the 1880's, is interested to the point of sending an observer to the work group, and members of the Gereformeerde Kerk, including the minister, do participate. Co-operation is not without its ups and downs. Two years ago a new priest came to the local Roman Catholic church and did not want to participate in the Eucharistie-Avondmaal. However, after a year he changed his mind and now participates each month, in spite of the disapproval of the Bishop and the Cardinal.

In the conduct of the sacrament every effort is made to satisfy the religious traditions and beliefs of both the Roman Catholics and the Protestants. Priest and minister stand together and say the words of consecration or institution and the benediction together. It is hoped that people of both denominations are satisfied by the action of their own clergyman performing his necessary office. That is, people see the clergyman of their own denomination who has been ordained according to the traditions and beliefs of their church consecrating the elements according to their own beliefs. Similarly, both priest and minister along with lay people from both the Roman Catholic and Hervormde Churches distribute the bread and the wine. The congregation are free to take the sacrament from whomever they choose - priest, minister or lay person.

The service itself is an "Oecumenisch Ordinarium" composed by the van der Leeuw-Stichting. It is not specifically in the Roman Catholic or Hervormde tradition, and so is new to

everyone who attends.

This service is not a side-by-side celebration of the sacrament, where Protestant and Roman Catholic maintain their divisions by looking toward their own clergyman. Rather, it is the recognition that Christ is truly present in the sacrament. Different denominations have different beliefs as to how he is present - either physically or spiritually or both. Thus all are free to worship together once a month, and worship separately in their own churches the rest of the month. Those who disapprove simply stay away from the ecumenical Eucharistie-Avondmaal.

Downtown at Leiden University the students were asking other questions. They have the feeling that the Eucharistie-Avondmaal in the Willibrord Kerk does not go far enough because it falls short of integrating Christians of different denominations completely. The people who celebrate the Eucharistie-Avondmaal in Oegstgeest reply that people's differences must be respected while they all concentrate on what they have in common.

The married students at the university were unhappy with their churches. Some young couples were being told that they were not supposed to partake of the sacrament together, because one partner belonged to the Hervormde Church while the other was a Roman Catholic. The students who attended the services sponsored by the different chaplaincies could not see why they could not worship together. They could not understand why the churches could divide the body of Christ at its most central point - in the sacrament of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper.

In 1969, in response to the demands of the students, the chaplains of the Roman Catholic, Hervormde and Gereformeerde Churches met together as friends and co-workers. After consultations with both the Hervormde Synod and the Roman Catholic Bishop, they decided to alternate services each week between the Hervormde and Roman Catholic Churches. Every

other week for two years one of the churches closed down and all the students worshipped in the other church, using the liturgy of that denomination. During that time both students and chaplains had a chance to observe each other's traditions and beliefs, and to get to know one another.

Once they knew and trusted each other they felt ready for the next step, to worship together in one ecumenical service conducted alternately by one of the seven chaplains. At first each chaplain used his own particular liturgy for the service of Word and Table. When sufficient trust had developed, the next step was for the chaplains to take turns serving on a committee of two to arrange the services. The several denominations represented by the seven chaplains then became completely integrated in the Leidse Studenten Ecclesia.

As if the free attitude toward belief and ritual were not enough, the situation in the Studenten Ecclesia is complicated by the fact that one of the Roman Catholic priests is married. Although he has not been asked to leave the priesthood, his position is extremely uncomfortable within his own church, and, most important for the Studenten Ecclesia, his church does not allow him to consecrate the elements in the sacrament. The other six chaplains have asked where in Scripture does it mention that a minister or priest must say the words of consecration? After much heart searching they came to the conclusion that the Lord's Supper is the expression of the belief of the whole community. For a while the liturgy was arranged so that the clergy would leave the table and the whole congregation would say or sing the words of consecration together. Now the liturgy has developed so that often nobody says the words of consecration, and nobody mentions the story of the institution of the sacrament. (1 Corinthians 11:23 f.)

Instead, the Studenten Ecclesia tries to express three essential elements in its table-songs during the sacrament. Firstly, the significance of our Lord Jesus Christ is expressed

in song in the traditional memoria Christi or anamnese. Secondly, in word and action the congregation and clergy express the communio sanctorum. Thirdly, the eschatological significance of breaking bread together is expressed, in the hope that in the world of tomorrow we can all break our bread together and live together in joy. There is always the epiklese, the praying for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Congregation and clergy believe in the real presence of the Lord during the celebration, but they do not believe the Lord's presence can be restricted to the one moment of the words of consecration or institution, nor do they believe his presence can be restricted to one place - the bread and the wine.

This integration of belief challenges the dearly held traditional beliefs of all denominations. The Roman Catholic Bishop of Rotterdam refuses to allow the worship to be called Eucharistie or Avondmaal. He maintains it is a love-feast or agape; that is, a service in which the bread and wine are shared but where the words of consecration are not properly said, and where the celebrant is not properly ordained. So the Studenten Ecclesia goes along with him and calls it an agape, because it feels that what is happening is more important than the label.

What is happening is that many people who have become disenchanted with the ordinary churches attend the Studenten Ecclesia regularly. The congregation is half student and half non-student, with an average attendance of 600-700. Services have to be held throughout the summer, even when there are no university classes.

The Hervormde and Gereformeerde Churches give their consent, though not their full approval, to the Studenten Ecclesia, while the Roman Catholic Church disapproves entirely but dares not forbid the services and risk alienating such a large number of its own people who are asking serious questions.

As the clergy and students move out around the church to distribute the bread and wine their faces are alight with smiles. There is no funereal atmosphere in the Eucharistie-Avondmaal of the Studenten Ecclesia. The students have made it plain to church officials that they do not believe that Christ's funeral is the centre of their faith. As the participant receives the bread and wine he cannot help smiling back, in the realization that he is partaking of the body and blood of the risen Christ, whose living presence is made known in this celebration.

The first child of the Leidse Studenten Ecclesia sprang to life in the middle-class apartment suburb of Merenwijk. In 1969 when the Leiden Council of Churches was discussing whether the churches should go into Merenwijk separately or co-operatively, they decided to co-operate from the beginning. Their denominational boards agreed to let them form one ecumenical church. One of the Roman Catholic chaplains from the Studenten Ecclesia was appointed co-pastor along with a minister of the Gereformeerde Church, who received his appointment from both his own denomination and from the Hervormde Church. At present there is a minister of the Hervormde Church working with the Roman Catholic priest. The pastors in this venture and in the Studenten Ecclesia are anxious to maintain their links as appointees of their own denominations. Otherwise, they say, their ecumenical churches could become splinter groups and eventually new denominations.

When the Merenwijk Church held its first service in 1971, the co-pastors led the congregation through a service of the Word and Table that they had worked out themselves as an expression of their common belief and worship. Now two services are held every Sunday, and at every service the Eucharistie-Avondmaal is celebrated. The local parish council is made up of representatives of the different co-operating denominations. There is also a theological

advisory committee made up of professors and ministers. The council and the committee arrived at a happy compromise that would maintain the ecumenical nature of the Eucharistie-Avondmaal, and yet would please the Roman Catholic Bishop. One of the services is always led by an ordained Roman Catholic priest, but the preacher of the morning, who leads the other morning service, can be from any of the three co-operating denominations. Thus one service is officially Roman Catholic, though certain liturgical forms and gestures may be missing. Different forms of service are used indiscriminately by the ministers and priests, but the service of the Table always includes the words of institution or consecration.

The feeling of the ordinary church members, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, is that they do not care about ordination, but rather they accept the things that happen or are said to be real and true if they themselves experience them as real and true.

The Merenwijk Church has been worshipping in a local school ever since it was organized. It is coincidental that the non-liturgical atmosphere of a school auditorium brings with it none of the trappings of any denomination that could affront a member of another denomination. However, the Merenwijk Church has now launched a building programme, and whenever finances are involved there is an opportunity for the hierarchy to step in and try to attach conditions. The Roman Catholic Bishop used the occasion to write a stiff letter to the local parish council. The parish council persuaded him to discuss the matter with both themselves and the theological advisory committee. When they all sat down together they were able to reach the happy compromise of the two services.

The Merenwijk experiment appears to represent the best and truest ecumenical celebration of the Eucharistie-Avondmaal. The three denominations are completely integrated

in one congregation, while at the same time the traditional form of the Eucharist is celebrated every week. There are other ecumenical celebrations of the Eucharistie-Avondmaal in the Netherlands, usually in the suburbs or in a student church. In the suburbs basis-gemeenten (basic congregations) can also be found where believers worship together with no attachment to any church.

In the Netherlands the unofficial oecumene is flourishing. If the church leaders find the joint celebration of the Eucharistie-Avondmaal to be a problem for them, they are not dealing with the problems that the ordinary church members care about or understand. The atmosphere of joy in worship is the best testimonial to the fact that the participants are experiencing the presence of the living Christ whose unbroken body is known to them in the ecumenical service.