

TWO REFLECTIONS ON THE EUCHARIST BY RONALD ROLHEISER FOR THE FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI

Taking our wounds to the Eucharist

Recently a man came to me, asking for help. He carried some deep wounds, not physical wounds but emotional wounds to his soul. What surprised me initially was that, while he was deeply wounded, he had not been severely traumatised either in childhood or adulthood. He seemed to have just absorbed the normal bumps and bruises that everyone has to absorb: some belittling, some bullying, never being the favourite, dissatisfaction with his own body, unfairness within his family and siblings, career frustration, unfairness in his workplace, the sense of being chronically ignored, the sense of never being understood and appreciated, and the self-pity and lack of self-confidence that results from this.

But he was a sensitive man and the combination of all these seemingly little things left him, now in late mid-life, unable to be the gracious, happy elder he wanted to be. Instead, by his own admission, he was chronically caught up in a certain wounded self-absorption, namely, in a self-centred anxiety that brought with it the sense that life had not been fair to him. Consequently, he was forever somewhat focused on self-protection and was resentful of those who could step forward openly in self-confidence and love. "I hate it," he shared, "when I see persons like Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul speak with such easy self-confidence about how big their hearts are. I always fill with resentment and think: 'Lucky you! You haven't had to put up with what I've had to put up with in life!'"

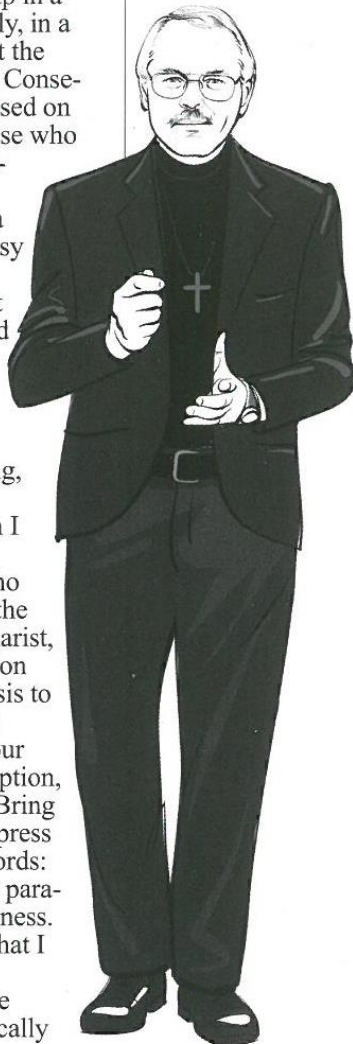
This man had been through some professional therapy which had helped bring him to a deeper self-understanding, but still left him paralysed in terms of moving beyond his wounds. "What can I do with these wounds?" he asked.

My answer to him, as for all of us who are wounded, is: take those wounds to the Eucharist. Every time you go to a Eucharist, stand by an altar and receive Communion and bring your helplessness and paralysis to God. Ask him to touch your body, your heart, your memory, your bitterness, your lack of self-confidence, your self-absorption, your weaknesses and your impotence. Bring your aching body and heart to God. Express your helplessness in simple, humble words: "Touch me. Take my wounds. Take my paranoia. Make me whole. Give me forgiveness. Warm my heart. Give me the strength that I cannot give myself."

Pray this prayer not just when you are receiving Communion and being physically



We should not allow ourselves to be paralysed by self-pity and hypersensitivity



touched by the Body of Christ, but especially during the Eucharistic prayer, because it is there that we are not just being touched and healed by a person, Jesus, but we are also being touched and healed by a sacred event.

This is the part of the Eucharist we generally do not understand, but it is the part that celebrates transformation and healing from wound and sin. In the Eucharistic prayer we commemorate the "sacrifice" of Jesus, that is, that event where, as Christian tradition so enigmatically puts it, Jesus was made sin for us. There is a lot in that cryptic phrase. In essence, in his suffering and death, Jesus took on our wounds, our weaknesses, our infidelities and our sins, died in them, and then through love and trust brought them to wholeness. Every time we go to the Eucharist we are meant to let that transforming event touch us, our wounds, our weaknesses, our infidelities, our sin and our emotional paralysis and bring us to a transformation in wholeness, energy, joy and love.

The Eucharist is the ultimate healer. There is, I believe, a lot of value in various kinds of physical and emotional therapies, just as there is immeasurable value in 12-step programmes and in honestly sharing our wounded selves with people we trust. There is too, I believe, value in a certain wilful self-effort, in the challenge contained in Jesus's admonition to a paralysed man: "Take up your couch and walk!" We should not allow ourselves to be paralysed by hypersensitivity and self-pity. God has given us skin to cover our rawest nerves.

But with that being admitted, we still cannot heal ourselves. Therapy, self-understanding, loving friends and disciplined self-effort can take us only so far, and it is not into full healing. Full healing comes from touching and being touched by the sacred. More particularly, as Christians we believe that this touching involves a touching of the sacred at that place where it has most particularly touched our own wounds, helplessness, weaknesses and sin; that place where God "was made sin for us". That place is the event of the death and rising of Jesus, and that event is made available to us, to touch and enter into, in the Eucharistic prayer and in receiving the Body of Christ in Communion.

We need to bring our wounds to the Eucharist because it is there that the sacred love and energy that lie at the ground of all that breathes can cauterise and heal all that is not whole within us.

Visit ronrolheiser.com

RONALD ROLHEISER - THE MANY FACES OF THE EUCHARIST

Christians argue a lot about the Eucharist. What does it mean? What should it be called? How often should it be celebrated? Who should be allowed to fully participate?

There are lots of views on the Eucharist:

- For some it is a meal, for others it is a sacrifice.
- For some it is a ritual act, sacred and set apart, for others it is a community gathering, the more mess and kids there the better.
- For some it is a deep personal prayer, for others it is a communal worship for the world.
- For some its very essence is a coming together, a communion, of those united in a single denominational faith, while for others part of its essence is its reaching out, its innate imperative to wash the feet of those who are different from ourselves.
- For some it is a celebration of sorrow, a making present of Christ's suffering and the thus place where we can break down, for others it is the place to celebrate joy and sing alleluia.
- For some it is a ritual remembrance, a making present of the historical events of Jesus' dying, rising, ascending, and sending the Holy Spirit, for others it is a celebration of God's presence with us today.
- For some it is a celebration of the Last Supper, something to be done less frequently, for others it is God's daily feeding of his people with a new manna, Christ's body, and is something to be done every day.
- For some it is a celebration of reconciliation, a ritual that forgives and unites, for others unity and reconciliation are pre-conditions for its proper celebration.
- For some it is a vigil act, a gathering that is essentially about waiting for something else or someone else to appear, for others it is a celebration of something that is already present that is asking to be received and recognized.
- For some it is understood to make present the real, physical body of Christ, for others it is understood to make Christ present in a real but spiritual way.
- Some call it the Lord's Supper, others call it the Eucharist, others call it the Mass.
- Some celebrate it once a year, some celebrate it four times a year, some celebrate it every Sunday, and some celebrate it every day.

Who's right? In truth, the Eucharist is all of these things, and more. It is like a finely cut diamond twirling in the sun, every turn giving off a different sparkle. It is multi-valent, carrying different layers of meaning, some of them in paradoxical tension with others. There is, even in scripture, no one theology of the Eucharist, but instead there are various complementary theologies of the Eucharist.

For instance, we already see variations among the apostolic communities as to how they understood the Eucharist, what it should be called, and how often it should be celebrated. Some early communities called it the Lord's Supper, connected its meaning very much to the commemoration of the Last Supper, and celebrated it less frequently. Whereas the apostolic community that formed around John connected its theology and practice very much to the concept of God feeding his people daily with manna and they celebrated it every day, given that we need sustenance daily.

As well, we see some of its paradoxical elements right within its central symbols, bread and the wine: Both are paradoxical: Bread is both is symbol of joy, togetherness, health, and achievement (the smell of fresh bread and the primal beauty of a loaf of bread) even as it is made up of broken kernels of wheat who had to be crushed in their individuality and be baked in fire to become that bread. Wine is both a festive drink, the drink of celebration, of wedding, even as it is crushed grapes and represents the blood of Jesus and the blood and suffering of all that is crushed in our world and in our lives.

How does one put this all together? That depends upon how one defines that.

During my theological training, I took three major courses on the Eucharist and, afterwards, decided that I didn't understand the Eucharist. But the fault was not in courses, which were excellent. The fault, which is not a fault at all but a marvel, lies in the richness of the Eucharist itself. In the end, it defies not just theology professors, but metaphysics, phenomenology, and language itself. There is no adequate explanation of the Eucharist for the same reason that, in the end, there is no adequate explanation for love, for embrace, and for the reception of life and spirit through touch. Certain realities take us beyond language because that is there very purpose. They do what words cannot do. They also are beyond what we can neatly nail down in our understanding.

And that is true of the Eucharist. Any attempt to nail down its full meaning will forever come up short because it will always eventually get up and walk away with the nail!