Ecumenical ‘Lights’ and ‘Shadows’ In Ecclesia de Eucharistia

BY REV. THOMAS P. LOONEY, CSC

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- Rev. Thomas P. Looney, CSC is Assistant Professor of Theology at King’s College, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania and is a frequent contributor to Ecumenical Trends.

On Holy Thursday during the Mass of the Lord’s Supper, John Paul II signed the encyclical, Ecclesia de Eucharistia. The decision to promulgate the encyclical within the context of the celebration of the institution of the Eucharistic mystery, the “source and summit of the Christian life”, testifies to the importance of this encyclical in the mind of John Paul II. Throughout his twenty-five year pontificate John Paul II has made ample use of symbolic gestures to underscore his message. Thus, the signing of the encyclical within the context of the celebration of the Eucharist calls for a careful examination of its contents.¹

The encyclical proposes to rekindle “Eucharistic amazement” among the faithful by calling for a deeper appreciation of the gift of the Eucharistic mystery and its relationship to the Church. In a profoundly personal testimony, John Paul II commented on his experience of celebrating the Eucharistic every day for over half a century. “Each day my faith has been able to recognize in the consecrated bread and wine the Divine Wayfarer who joined the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and opened their eyes to the light and their hearts to new hope (cf. Lk 24:13-35)” (EE, 59). In order to share in the “Eucharistic amazement” that is at the heart of the life of the Church, John Paul II proposes the necessity of a proper understanding of the nature of the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church, as well, as its proper liturgical celebration.

In speaking of post-Vatican II developments in Eucharistic theology and liturgical praxis, John Paul II uses the images of “lights” and “shadows” to designate positive and negative developments, respectively. While several of the lights and shadows refer specifically to teachings and practices that have developed within the Church itself, others pertain specifically to the ecumenical movement. In this regard, for example, he speaks of the Catholic Church’s commitment to ecumenism as a light, and he refers to “ecumenical initiatives which, albeit well-intentioned, indulge in Eucharistic practices contrary to the discipline by which the Church expresses her faith” as a shadow (EE, 10). In keeping with the custom of the Church’s encyclical tradition, the text does not refer to specific theologians, dialogues or occasions that John Paul characterizes as shadows. The encyclical’s endorsement of ecumenism and its caution concerning some theological and
liturgical developments within ecumenical theology invites an examination of this text from the perspective of ecumenical concerns.

The present essay will examine the encyclical, Ecclesia de Eucharistia, in light of its implications for ecumenical theology and practice. In so doing I will borrow the metaphor of lights and shadows employed in the encyclical itself to designate those aspects of the encyclical that are positive and problematic in regard to the concerns of ecumenical theology, respectively.2 First, I will examine a series of “lights” contained in the encyclical that I believe provide important insight and direction concerning the future ecumenical exploration of the theology and celebration of the Eucharist. Second, I will propose a series of “shadows” contained in the letter that I believe present obstacles to the ongoing ecumenical exploration of these issues.

‘LIGHTS’ FOR ECUMENICAL EXPLORATIONS OF A THEOLOGY OF THE EUCHARIST

Although the first references to ecumenism in the encyclical are found in a section outlining the “shadows” that have obscured the fullness of the Eucharistic mystery, the encyclical is replete with references to a series of “lights” in regard to ecumenical conversations on the Eucharist. The following paragraphs examine these lights under three principal headings: “Eucharistic Theology and Conformity to the Catholic Principles of Ecumenism”; “Echoes of Eucharistic Theology in Ecumenical Conversations”; and “Theological Paths for a Deepened Ecumenical Conversation on the Eucharist.”

Eucharistic Theology and Conformity to the Catholic Principles of Ecumenism

The encyclical’s presentation of Eucharistic theology and its relationship to the Church accords with several significant ecumenical principles espoused in the Decree on Ecumenism. First, John Paul II affirms the goal of the full visible unity of the Church that is to be preceded by and prepared for by a deepened spiritual ecumenism. While firmly asserting that Eucharistic communion cannot be shared by churches and ecclesial communities that do not share in the fullness of the bonds of unity, John Paul gives thanks to the Triune God for the efficacious grace that has inspired Christians to set out on the path of ecumenism. The burning desire for Eucharistic sharing that Christians experience is itself a prayer and is an expression of the growth of unity among Christians (EE, 44). John Paul attributes a profound efficacy to prayer for the full unity that will enable Christians to celebrate the Eucharist together when that prayer is offered in the context of the Eucharist itself.
When the Church gathers for the celebration of the Eucharist and intercedes for the gift of unity, “the Church believes that she will be heard, for she prays in union with Christ her Head and Spouse, who takes up this plea of his Bride and joins it to that of his own redemptive sacrifice” (EE, 43). While the efficacy of the Church’s prayer is not to be doubted, John Paul II strongly asserts that the sharing of Eucharistic communion ought not to be entered into prematurely. The value of spiritual ecumenism, including the liturgical celebrations of Christians not in full communion with the Catholic Church, must be respected as an integral aspect of the journey to the fullness of visible unity and Eucharistic sharing (EE, 30). The encyclical affirms both the goal of full visible unity and the principle means of attaining the goal, spiritual ecumenism.

Second, the encyclical challenges the Catholic faithful to reform itself in terms of growing in appreciation of the Church’s Eucharistic faith and practice. This challenge accords with the principles that all ecumenical endeavors must to the reformation of its own life and witness. This challenge is present on several fronts. The encyclical affirms the Church’s faith in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and proclaims adoration of the Blessed Sacrament as a “light” that manifests the truth of the Church’s faith and nourishes the hearts of believers. The absence of Eucharistic adoration in some areas is described, on the other hand, as a “shadow.” The encyclical affirms the growth of a conscious, full and active participation in the liturgy by all the lay faithful that was espoused at the Second Vatican Council, but calls for the curtailment of liturgical abuses that accompanied the liturgical renewal (EE, 10). In light of the theological principle, lex orandi, lex credendi, the Church must ensure that its celebration of the Eucharistic mystery accords with its faith in the Eucharist. And the encyclical suggests that for the Catholic tradition one aspect of self-reform includes a deepened appreciation of the manner in which the Eucharistic sacrifice expresses and reinforces the unity of the Church on earth with the Church in heaven (EE, 19). As the Church seeks the full visible unity of all Christians in the one Church of Christ, she must remain faithful to her own faith, life and witness through a continual process of self-reformation.

Third, the encyclical provides a concise and comprehensive presentation of several significant aspects of the Church’s faith concerning the Eucharistic mystery and its relationship to the Church. In this regard, the ecumenical principle that demands an integral and uncompromising presentation of the faith held by a Christian tradition as it enters into conversation with other Christian traditions is upheld. The clearest representation of this principle in the encyclical is John Paul II’s reiteration of the Catholic tradition’s teaching that Eucharistic communion requires full communion in the bonds of faith, life and witness. “Precisely because the Church’s unity, which the Eucharist brings about through the Lord’s sacrifice and by communion in his body and blood, absolutely requires
full communion in the bonds of the profession of faith, the sacraments and ecclesiastical governance, it is not possible to celebrate together the same Eucharistic liturgy until those bonds are fully reestablished” (EE, 44). The pope argues that concelebration of the Eucharist prior to the attainment of full unity will be an obstacle to the attainment of full unity because of the ambiguities such a celebration would introduce. “The path to full unity can only be undertaken in truth” (EE, 44). The encyclical affirms that the path to full unity requires of all Christians a faithful and clear exposition of their doctrinal heritage.

Although the encyclical is addressed to Christians in communion with the Roman Catholic Church, it conforms to several key principles of Catholic ecumenism. In so doing it provides Roman Catholic theologians who are specifically engaged in ecumenical theology and dialogue with helpful guidelines for their theological endeavors and signals the inherently ecumenical dimensions of all Christian theology. In the following sections I will examine some of the ways that the encyclical echoes aspects of ongoing ecumenical conversations on the Eucharist and establishes some parameters for the exploration of potentially helpful theological venues.

**ECHOES OF EUCHARISTIC THEOLOGY IN ECUMENICAL CONVERSATIONS**

Following the promulgation of the *Decree on Ecumenism* at the Second Vatican Council members of the Roman Catholic tradition have participated in numerous bi-lateral and multilateral ecumenical dialogues. In several dialogues the Eucharist has received significant attention. The present encyclical echoes several positive developments that have emerged between the Roman Catholic Church and her sister churches and ecclesial communities. These echoes include: the nature of the once for all sacrifice of Christ; the importance of the link between Eucharistic reservation and the Eucharistic liturgy; the relationship between the Eucharist, justice and the integrity of creation; and the understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. These echoes are valuable for they signify the progress that has already been made and point to avenues of further progress in ecumenical discussions concerning the Eucharist.

**The Eucharist: Memorial of the Once for All Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross**

First, the encyclical presents the Church’s teaching on the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist in a manner that affirms the once and for all nature of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The Eucharist is described not only as a reminder of the passion and death of Christ, but as the sacramental representation of Christ’s self-offering on the cross. In the Church’s celebration of the Eucharistic mystery, entrusted to her by the Lord, the paschal mystery becomes “really present and ‘the work of our redemption is carried out’“ (EE, 11). John Paul describes this aspect of the Eucharist as a
“mystery of mercy” that demonstrates God’s love for us that is beyond all measure, and as “the universal charity of the Eucharistic Sacrifice” (EE, 11 and 12). At the institution of the Eucharist Jesus expressed not only the reality of the gift of his own body and blood, but its sacrificial meaning and saving efficacy. The sacrifice of the cross is “so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father only after he had left us a means of sharing in it as if we had been present there” (EE, 11). The Church’s teaching concerning the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist is at heart an expression of a fundamental conviction concerning the mercy of God towards his people. The Church’s offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice is not a new sacrifice added to the one sacrifice of Christ, but a participation in the once for all sacrifice of Christ, a sign of the mercy and love of God. This perennial making present of the paschal mystery and its saving effects in history expresses “a mysterious ‘oneness in time’ between that Triduum and the passage of the centuries” (EE, 5).

“The Mass makes present the sacrifice of the Cross; it does not add to that sacrifice nor does it multiply it. What is repeated is its memorial celebration its ‘commemorative representation’ (memorialis demonstratio), which makes Christ’s one definitive redemptive sacrifice always present in time. The sacrificial nature of the Eucharistic mystery cannot therefore be understood as something separate, independent of the Cross or only indirectly referring to the sacrifice of Calvary” (EE, 12).

In the Eucharist the Church celebrates its faith that the sacramental representation of the one sacrifice of Calvary that Jesus offered in obedience to the Father has been entrusted to the Church so that the Church may offer itself in union with Christ’s sacrifice to God. In a profound gift of mercy and charity the Lord Jesus has provided the Church, his Bride, with the opportunity of uniting herself intimately with his self-offering so that the saving efficacy of the paschal mystery may come to fruition. The mass is a true sacrifice, not because of what the Church does, but because of what Christ does in the Church.

The encyclical’s presentation of the Church’s teaching on the sacrificial nature of the Eucharistic mystery echoes ecumenical concerns that seek to safeguard the once and for all nature of the sacrifice of Christ for the salvation of the world. The sacrificial nature of the Eucharistic mystery is not a new work of those who offer it, but a mysterious transcendence of time effected by the Lord who has intimately united the Church to himself as his own body and Bride.

**The Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reserved Eucharist**

Second, while affirming the importance of the worship of the Eucharistic mystery outside of the
liturgical celebration of the Eucharist, the encyclical affirms that this worship is intimately and intrinsically linked to the Eucharistic celebration. The worship of Christ in the reserved Eucharist “is strictly linked to the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice” (*EE*, 24). As the Eucharist is celebrated so that the faithful may partake of the body of Christ in communion, so the Eucharist is reserved for the purposes of communion. The encyclical proposes that the “presence of Christ under the sacred species reserved after Mass—a presence which lasts as long as the species of bread and wine remain—derives from the celebration of the sacrifice and is directed towards communion, both sacramental and spiritual” (*EE*, 2.5). Thus, the Eucharist is reserved following the liturgical celebration of the Eucharistic memorial for the sacramental communion of the sick and for the spiritual communion of those who spend time in adoration. The encyclical affirms that the Eucharist is given to the Church for the purpose of nourishing and sustaining its members in communion with Christ. The encyclical teaches, “The saving efficacy of the sacrifice is fully realized when the Lord’s body and blood are received in communion” (*EE*, 16). Sacramental communion embraces the full meaning of the gift of the Eucharist, but it does not exhaust its meaning. The Eucharist is not objectified in its reservation for the Eucharist remains always the presence and action of Christ drawing the faithful into communion in the life of the Triune God.

The encyclical’s presentation of the intrinsic connection between the Eucharistic sacrifice and the reserved Eucharist, and of the goal of communion as the principal purpose of Eucharistic reservation echoes ecumenical concerns to safeguard communion in the body and blood of Christ as an essential element of the Eucharist. While ecumenical conversations have stressed the aspect of the sacramental communion of the sick and those unable to participate in the communal celebration of the Eucharist as the principal reason for Eucharistic reservation, the encyclical grants equal importance to the spiritual communion of the faithful. In addition, the encyclical affirms the abiding presence of Christ in the Eucharistic species as an expression of the Church’s faith in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. This affirmation would certainly challenge those ecclesial communities who affirm a real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic but only for the duration of the celebration. Thus, as the encyclical echoes some of the principal concerns of ecumenical conversations on the Eucharist, it also affirms aspects of the faith of the Church that have not been fully acknowledged as common expressions of faith in those conversations.

**The Eucharist and Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation**

Third, the encyclical articulates a profound relationship between the Eucharist, justice and the integrity of creation. This relationship is presented from two fundamental perspectives: the cosmic character of the Eucharist and the gospel call to build a more just and human world. John Paul II
proposes that the cosmic character of the Eucharist is rooted in the incarnation. The Word became flesh in order to restore all of creation and to offer creation redeemed in thanksgiving to God the Father. John Paul II writes, “truly this is the *mysterium fidei* which is accomplished in the Eucharist: the world which came forth from the hands of God the Creator now returns to him redeemed by Christ” (*EE*, 8). In the mystery of the incarnation the Word embraces all of creation and sanctifies it by his obedience to the Father in his paschal sacrifice. The bread and wine, symbols of the created order, are transformed in the Eucharistic celebration by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into the body and blood of Christ, and are offered in thanksgiving to God. Although the encyclical does not elaborate on the ecological implications of Eucharistic faith, its profound valuation of the created order certainly points in that direction. In the incarnation the Word embraces creation and in the Eucharistic memorial this embrace continues to be celebrated and proclaimed.

The embrace of creation by the Word in the incarnation also provides a foundation for the valuation of human action in the cause of justice. Our hope for salvation rests in the incarnate Word who has given his life for us, and continues to share the gift of his paschal mystery in the Eucharist. While the celebration of the Eucharist unites the community of faith in a profound way with the Church in heaven, it does not permit a Christian escapism, but rather requires a deeper responsibility for the world. The celebration of the Eucharist ought to move believers to embrace their responsibility to build “a more humane world, a world fully in harmony with God’s plan” (*EE*, 20). The inseparability of communion in the body of Christ and service to the world is illustrated by the foot-washing narrative in John’s Gospel, which is presented as a corollary to the institution narratives in the Synoptic gospels. Communion in the body broken for us requires service to the broken body of Christ present among us in the world’s oppressed. In a passionate plea for Christian involvement in the cause of justice, John Paul writes, “And what should we say of the thousand inconsistencies of a ‘globalized’ world where the weakest, the most powerless and the poorest appear to have so little hope! It is in this world that Christian hope must shine forth! For this reason too, the Eord wished to remain with us in the Eucharist, making his presence in meal and sacrifice the promise of a humanity renewed by his love” (*EE*, 20). The Eucharist is entrusted to the community of faith as gift and task; it is the gift of the restoration of all things in Christ that all Christians are called to embrace and to live.

The encyclical’s presentation of the intrinsic relationship between the Eucharist, justice and the integrity of creation echoes the sentiments of various ecumenical conversations. The created order redeemed by Christ continues to yearn for its ultimate fulfillment in the new creation. Christians believe that they are called to witness to the redemption won by Christ and to offer their lives in
service of the unfolding mystery of the new’ creation. The encyclical proclaims that the presence of Christ and his paschal mystery in the Eucharist announces the hope of a world renewed and summons Christians to the transformation of the world. In addition, the Eucharist offers the efficacious grace that enables the Church to be the body of Christ and as such to be a source of leaven and transformation in the world.

The ‘Real Presence’ of Christ in the Eucharist

Fourth, the encyclical echoes the attempts of various ecumenical conversations to explore the meaning of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The encyclical proclaims the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist in three principal ways: by affirming the teachings of the Council of Trent and Paul VI, in its language of fullness, and by its pneumatological understanding of the Eucharist. John Paul II speaks of the Church’s admiration for Trent’s “Decrees on the Most Holy Eucharist and on the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass” and speaks of them as “a dogmatic reference-point for the continual renewal and growth of God’s people in faith and love for the Eucharist” (EE, 9). John Paul II quotes Trent’s teaching concerning the change of the whole substance of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, respectively, at the Eucharistic consecration including the statement: “and the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called this change transubstantiation” (EE, 15). It is significant, however that John Paul II speaks of Trent’s teaching as a “dogmatic reference-point” and acknowledges that the unfathomable depths of the Eucharistic mystery “has stimulated theology to strive to understand it ever more deeply” (EE, 15). Thus, while theology must be about the task of understanding the faith of the Church, authentic Catholic theology of the Eucharist, John Paul II argues, must be guided by the parameters established by Paul VI in his “Solemn Profession of Faith.” “Every theological explanation which seeks some understanding of this mystery, in order to be in accord with Catholic Faith, must firmly maintain that in objective reality, independently of our mind, the bread and wine have ceased to exist after the consecration, so that the adorabe body and blood of the Lord Jesus from that moment on are really before us under the sacramental species of the bread and wine” (EE, 15). Thus, the encyclical encourages a deepening of theological speculation on the mystery of the Eucharist and sets forth parameters for the guidance of that speculation.

The encyclical also acknowledges that the Church’s teaching concerning the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is not a claim of exclusion, but of fullness. John Paul II once again quotes the teaching of Paul VI. The presence of Christ in the Eucharist “is called ‘real’ not as a way of excluding all other types of Christ’s presence as if they were ‘not real’, but because it is a presence in the fullest sense: a substantial presence whereby Christ, the God-Man, is wholly and entirely
present” (EE, 15). Drawing on texts from the Gospel of John, John Paul II asserts that Jesus’ words concerning his flesh as food and his blood as drink provide biblical warrant for the Church’s faith that the Eucharist is “no metaphorical food” (EE, 16). The unique mode of Christ’s presence in fullness in the Eucharist does not stand in isolation from other modes of Christ’s presence. Christ is present in the proclamation of the Word, in the assembly of believers, and in the Church’s minister. Two fundamental truths underlie these various modes of presence. First, each of the modes of Christ’s presence is real. These modes of presence are not mere signs that point to something beyond themselves, but real symbols that contain within themselves the reality they signify. Second, each of the modes of Christ’s presence is not the work of men, but the work of God through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The presence of Christ in the midst of the community of believers is always a gift to which the community is called to unite itself.

In addition to speaking of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as the means by which the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ, the encyclical points to the transforming work of the Spirit in those who share in the Eucharistic mystery. In its Eucharistic prayer the Church begs the outpouring of the Spirit upon the Eucharistic elements and upon the assembly of the faithful. Communion in the body and blood of Christ “increases within us the gift of his Spirit, already poured out in Baptism and bestowed as a ‘seal’ in the sacrament of Confirmation” (EE, 17). The Church’s faith concerning the Eucharist and the Church are an expression of its trust in the promised gift of the Spirit. The Church is the Body of Christ and the Eucharist is the Body of Christ due to the work of the Spirit, whose presence is Christ’s abiding gift.

The encyclical’s presentation of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements, the manifold presence of Christ in the community of believers, and the pneumatological foundation of these modes of Christ’s presence echo key concerns of ecumenical conversations on the Eucharist. At the heart of ecumenical concerns about the Eucharist is the assertion that the Eucharist is the work of God given for the life of the Church. The encyclical underscores this truth of faith by its assertion that since the transformation of the elements is the work of the Spirit the presence of Christ is not dependent on the subjective disposition of the recipient. The Church employs the ontological language of transubstantiation to underscore the power of the Spirit to make all things new in Christ.

The preceding paragraphs illustrate four key areas in which Ecclesia de Eucharistia echoed ecumenical conversations on the Eucharist. These echoes provide a significant affirmation of the Catholic Church’s participation in ecumenical conversations concerning the Eucharist. While establishing parameters that ought to guide Catholic theologians who participate in ecumenical
conversations, John Paul II affirms the need for an ongoing reflection on the mystery of the Eucharist. In and of itself the assertion that the Eucharist is a mystery whose depth needs to be continually explored is a catalyst for ongoing ecumenical conversation.

THEOLOGICAL PATHS FOR A DEEPENED ECUMENICAL CONVERSATION ON THE EUCHARIST

A third series of “lights” concerning the Eucharist and ecumenism can be discerned in John Paul II’s presentation of a hermeneutic principle concerning the Church’s Eucharistic faith and in four key Eucharistic themes. The hermeneutic principle concerning the development of the Church’s Eucharistic faith is presented below in the section entitled, “Perhaps Not.” The Eucharistic themes are treated under the following headings: “The Eucharist: Gift of Communion,” “The Eschatological Nature of the Eucharist,” “Real Presence and Real Action in the Eucharistic Mystery,” and “The Eucharist and the Triune God.”

Perhaps Not

The encyclical reflecting on the historical experience of the Church’s articulation of its Eucharistic faith presents a key hermeneutic principle for the Church’s ongoing ecumenical conversations on the Eucharist: the development of doctrine as an unfolding of the mystery of faith. The encyclical underscores the reality of the Church’s coming to faith and growth in the expression of the meaning of that faith by placing a process of grasping the truth of faith concerning the Eucharist in the experience of the apostles. John Paul raises and answers a significant question concerning the apostles’ faith in the Eucharist. “Did the Apostles who took part in the Last Supper understand the meaning of the words spoken by Christ? Perhaps not. These words would only be fully clear at the end of the Triduum sacrum, the time from Thursday evening to Sunday morning. Those days embrace the mysterium paschale, they also embrace the mysterium eucharisticum” (EE, 2). The statement “perhaps not” followed by the assertion that the Eucharist embraces the fullness of the paschal mystery suggest that at the moment of its institution the apostles had not fully grasped the meaning of the gift entrusted to them by Christ. The apostles’ appreciation of the Eucharist is portrayed as developing over the course of the unfolding of the paschal mystery. The encyclical’s assertion that the words of Jesus became clear to the apostles at the end of the Sacred Triduum may well suggest a grasping in faith without any accompanying theological articulation of the meaning of the mystery. If the apostles’ faith in the Eucharist developed over time, however brief, the foundation for a sense of the ongoing development of the Church’s understanding of the Eucharist is truly apostolic.
The hermeneutic principle that affirms an ongoing development of the Church’s understanding of its Eucharistic faith is also underscored by the encyclical’s affirmation that the Eucharist has been the object of the Church’s “lively concern” (EE, 9). The Church’s lively concern to foster a deepening appreciation of the Eucharistic mystery is evident in its various magisterial teachings, and in the lives of the saints whose lives reflect the wonder of the Eucharist. John Paul II proclaims that the Eucharist is a mystery of faith that surpasses our understanding and must ultimately be received in faith. He writes, “Before this mystery of love, human reason fully experiences its limitations” (EE, 15). Yet, as the Church stands in reverent awe before the mystery of the Eucharist it is moved to seek a deeper understanding of this mystery of faith. The encyclical praises those efforts that “join critical thinking to the ‘living faith’ of the Church, as grasped especially by the Magisterium’s ‘sure charism of truth’ and the ‘intimate sense of spiritual realities,’ which is attained above all by the saints” (EE, 15).

The encyclical’s articulation of the ongoing development of the Church’s understanding of the gift of the Eucharistic mystery provides support and encouragement for the continuation of this theological endeavor. Thus, ecumenical conversations on the Eucharist need to attend both to the established doctrinal parameters by which the Church expresses its faith in the Eucharist and to developing new theological constructs that enable a deeper appreciation of the Eucharistic mystery. In the present encyclical the pope underscores several significant aspects of the Eucharistic mystery that would be helpful to ongoing ecumenical conversations.

**The Eucharist: Gift of Communion**

The opening sentence of the encyclical indicates its central theme and theological foundation. “The Church draws her life from the Eucharist” (EE, 1). In his exposition of the relationship between the Church and the Eucharist, John Paul II emphasizes the efficacy of the Eucharist in forming, nourishing, and signifying the unity of the Church. In this framework the Eucharist is presented as the action of Christ that establishes the Church itself or sacramentally anticipates its foundation. In the communion of life and love that the Eucharist effects, the Church experiences itself as a communion. The Eucharist and the Church are inseparable gifts for the Eucharist is given for the establishment and building up of the body of Christ. “While the encyclical will argue that full communion is required for common celebration of the Eucharist among separated Christians, the emphasis the encyclical places on the Eucharist as gift provides an important “light” for further ecumenical conversation.

In his reflections on the institution of the Eucharist, John Paul II proposes a “causal influence” to
the Eucharist in the establishment of the Church. Jesus not only offers to the Twelve the gift of his body and blood, but by doing so he also “mysteriously involved them in the sacrifice which would later be completed on Calvary” (EE, 21). The institution of the Eucharist, the sacramental representation of the sacrifice of Calvary, anticipated the foundation of the Church. Thus, the Eucharist, even though it is taken up and celebrated by the Church, remains the foundation of the Church’s existence. The Church cannot exist without the Eucharist.

The Church’s celebration of the Eucharistic mystery both expresses and effects the communion of life that is the Church. When the Church gathers for the Eucharist in conformity to the Ford’s command, the Church gives expression to its establishment in the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross and receives nourishment from its communion in the body and blood of Christ. The sustenance that the Church receives is the life of Christ himself for “we can say not only that each of us receives Christ, but also that Christ receives each of us” (EE, 22). The Eucharist nourishes the faithful by effecting a mutual abiding of Christ and each of his followers. This communion in the body of Christ is simultaneously a communion with one another in Christ’s body, the Church. The Church’s celebration of the Eucharist effects this communion for the Eucharist itself is the work of Christ and the Spirit given to “confirm the Church in her unity as the body of Christ” (EE, 23).

The gift of the Church’s communion of life with Christ effected and celebrated in the Eucharist enables the Church to become “a ‘sacrament’ for humanity” (EE, 22). The Church does not exist for itself, but rather to be an instrument of Christ’s redemptive presence in the world. Thus, the Eucharist is both the source and summit of the Church’s life and mission. The celebration of the Eucharist effects and nourishes the bonds of communion between Christ and all the faithful and empowers the Church for its mission of evangelization. As a communion in Christ, the Church is called to be an instrument of “the communion of mankind with Christ and in him with the Father and the Holy Spirit” (EE, 22).

The encyclical emphasizes that the unity and communion that the Eucharist signifies and effects responds to the “yearning for fraternal unity deeply rooted in the human heart” (EE, 24). As grace builds upon and perfects nature, so the Eucharist builds upon and perfects the longing for fraternal communion that God has placed in the hearts of all humankind. As gift of divine grace, the Eucharist effects a unity that far surpasses the experience of human beings gathered together for the simple fellowship of a common meal. The Eucharist in building up the Church creates the deepest of human communities, and enables the Church to be “a sign and instrument of intimate unity with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (EE, 24).
As the encyclical presents the Eucharist and its gift of communion with Christ as the founding, sustaining and unifying reality of the Church’s life and witness, it declares that the celebration of the Eucharist presupposes communion. The communion that is necessary for the celebration of the Eucharist consists of both invisible and visible elements. The invisible elements include the life of grace and the practice of the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. The visible elements include “communion in the teachings of the Apostles, in the sacraments, and in the Church’s hierarchical order” (EE, 35). The proposition that the common celebration of the sacrament that founds, sustains and signifies the communion of the Church requires that communion already be present in fullness appears at first sight to be problematic. If the Eucharist brings about and deepens communion in the body of Christ, the Church, how can one require that that very communion exist as a prerequisite for its celebration? The encyclical’s answer to this question, I believe, is an important “light” for ongoing ecumenical conversations on the Eucharist. The celebration of the Eucharist presupposes fullness of communion for the fullness of communion itself is a gift from the Lord.

The encyclical’s insistence that the Eucharist, while entrusted to the Church as its most cherished possession, remains a gift to and for the life of the Church summons the Church to constantly and actively pursue Eucharistic communion. Thus, the Church cannot be content with an ecumenism that waits for the other to “satisfy” the Church’s understanding of what full communion requires. Rather, the Church, claiming fullness of communion as gift from the Lord, must actively seek to share its gift of communion with others. Thus, Catholic ecumenism must be characterized by an active and humble charity that seeks to establish communion with those churches and ecclesial communities separated from her. It seems that this charity must extend to exploring ways of understanding the Eucharistic celebrations of ecclesial communities as sharing in the gift of Eucharistic communion entrusted to the Church by Christ. Catholic ecumenism cannot be characterized by a passive complacency that proclaims what it understands to be essential to Eucharistic sharing without assisting other Christian communities on the path to the fullness of communion.

The Eschatological Nature of the Eucharist

The Church’s faith that she has received both the gift of the Eucharist and the fullness of communion that enables her to celebrate that gift from the Lord as nourishment for the journey to the kingdom provides an existential experience of the eschatological dimension of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist the Church celebrates all that she is called to be in the fullness of kingdom life, and yet recognizes that her journey to the kingdom is ongoing. The eschatological dimension of the
Eucharist underscores the tension between the present state of the Church in the world and its fulfillment in the kingdom. As such the eschatological dimension of the Eucharist provides a common ground for the ecumenical movement for it announces that all believers in their ecclesial realities, even those who are fully incorporated into the one Church of Christ, are still yearning for the fullness of the kingdom.

The encyclical proclaims that in the celebration of the Eucharist the Church experiences “a foretaste of the fullness of joy promised by Christ”, and possesses the “first fruits of a future fullness which will embrace man in his totality” (EE, 18). In the celebration of the Eucharist the Church is reminded of all that it is called to be for it “expresses and reinforces our communion with the Church in heaven” (EE, 19). The Eucharistic mystery is a pledge of the fullness of kingdom life for in the Eucharist the faithful receive the body of the risen Lord. The encyclical speaks of the Eucharist as a “glimpse of heaven appearing on earth” that “pierces the clouds of our history and lights up our journey” (EE, 19). The Church’s hope concerning the fullness of kingdom life rests solely in the Lord, who provides a foretaste and glimpse of kingdom life in the Eucharist.

As the Church celebrates the Eucharistic pledge of the fullness of life in the kingdom of God, the Church necessarily turns toward the world in mission. The Eucharist as the possession and pledge of the kingdom, reminds the Church of the extent to which the kingdom has yet to come to fullness. Thus, the celebration of the Eucharist ought to increase the Church’s “sense of responsibility for the world today” (EE, 20). John Paul states that the absence of peace, justice, solidarity and respect for human life from conception to natural death cries out for the gift of Christian hope. The pope claims that Christ “wished to remain with us in the Eucharist, making his presence with us in meal and sacrifice the promise of a humanity renewed by his love” (EE, 20). The Eucharistic mystery summons all believers who partake in it to align their lives with Jesus’ commitment to the service of the poor and the oppressed. To participate in the Eucharist demands a commitment to the transformation of the world.

The celebration of the Eucharist simultaneously reminds the Church of the gift of new life she has received and of the necessity of a deeper appropriation of that gift. The Church cannot turn in mission to the world without deepening its own commitment to the conversion of its members. As the Church embraces its own call to deeper conformity to the Eucharist it celebrates, it must turn to those Christian churches and ecclesial communities separated from it and acknowledge the Church’s own need for ongoing conversion. In addition, the Church must explore the implications of the eschatological tension inherent in the celebration of the Eucharist for its understanding of the Eucharistic celebrations of those communities separated from it.

Real Presence and Real Action in the Eucharistic Mystery

The eschatological tension manifested in the celebration of the Eucharist underscores the need for the fruits of Christ’s redemption to be at work in the world. The encyclical’s presentation of the Eucharistic mystery as the real presence and real action of Christ affirms that the power of the redemption wrought by Christ in his once for all sacrifice remains present and active throughout the ages. There is never a moment when the ongoing history of the world is not met with the redeeming presence and action of Christ. The Eucharist is a gift that reminds the Church that all is gift; especially its call to participate in the mission of Christ to reconcile all things in himself by the blood of the cross.

The encyclical’s presentation of the intrinsic relationship between the real presence and the real action of Christ in the Eucharist provides a significant avenue for ongoing ecumenical conversations on the Eucharist from a variety of perspectives. First, the dynamic interrelationship between real presence and real action does not permit a static understanding of the Eucharist. Even when the reserved sacrament is adored by the faithful, it is a dynamic and saving reality that they encounter and worship. In the Eucharist, the Church celebrates the presence of Christ who saves. Second, the dynamic inter-relationship emphasizes that the Eucharist as an action of the Church remains first and foremost the action of Christ. The Eucharist is a saving mystery for it is the paschal mystery that the Lord establishes as the mystery at the heart of the Church’s life. The Church celebrates only what it has first received. Third, the dynamic inter-relationship provides a foundation for the pneumatological dimension of the Eucharist. As the work of Christ was accompanied by the abiding presence of the Spirit, so the work of Christ that is the Eucharist is the work of the Spirit. These three avenues are significant for ongoing ecumenical conversations on the Eucharist for they emphasize in various ways the dynamism of the Eucharistic mystery. The Eucharist manifests the Church’s faith that the efficacy of Christ’s redemption continues to be present and active in the world. The Church is not called to perform a work in addition to Christ’s sacrifice, but to allow its whole life to be taken up into the efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice. When Christians come together to discern the meaning of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist that conversation cannot be divorced from discerning the meaning of Christ’s saving action in the Eucharist and in the world.

The Eucharist and the Triune God

The real presence and real action of Christ in the Eucharist that is effected by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit point to the Trinitarian dimension of the Eucharistic celebration. The encyclical teaches
that in the reception of the Eucharist Christ effects a real communion between himself and the believer. Thus, the intimate union of life that Jesus shares with the Father and the Spirit, the life of the Triune God, is shared with the believer (EE, 16). Communion in the body and blood of Christ is a communion in the life of the Triune God.

The Trinitarian dimension of Eucharistic communion receives special emphasis in the encyclical’s fifth chapter, “The Dignity of the Eucharistic Celebration” when John Paul II reflects on Rublev’s icon of the Trinity. The icon depicts the three persons of the Trinity encircling the Eucharistic bread symbolizing that the gift of the Eucharist entrusted to the Church is the gift of communion in the very life of God. Through its celebration of the Eucharist the Church receives the gift of trinitarian communion and thus becomes an icon of the Trinity (EE, 50). The Church is called to be a communion of mutual indwelling and profound intimacy. The pope’s use of a work of Christian art to highlight the trinitarian dimension of the Eucharist is significant on two levels. First, it underscores that the Eucharist is a work of art that draws the believer into the contemplation of its mystery. Through the Eucharist the divine artist shares the gift of the communion of God’s life with us. And second, it underscores the importance of the Church’s work of being an artist of communion in the world. Communion in the Eucharist must become the inspiration and foundation of the Church’s work to be God’s instrument of communion in the world.

The Trinitarian dimension of the Eucharist is an important venue for ongoing ecumenical conversations on the Eucharist for it emphasizes the ultimate purpose for which the Eucharist was given, communion of life in the Triune God. As Christ was sent by the Father in the power of the Spirit for the reconciliation of all things, so the Eucharist manifests the Father’s continual gift of the presence of his Son in the power of the Spirit. The ultimate purpose of Eucharistic communion, communion in the life of the Trinity, reminds and challenges the Church to manifest its own communion of life in the world. In addition it challenges the Church to recognize the communion bestowed as gift upon the churches and ecclesial communities that do not share in full communion with the Catholic Church and to discern the Eucharistic implications of that real though imperfect communion. The communion of the Church gathers around the Eucharistic bread as a sign that the divine life of God’s communion truly lives in it as gift that yearns for fullness.

The encyclical, Ecclesia de Eucharistia, is replete with a series of lights concerning the future of ecumenical discussions concerning the nature of the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church. These lights include: the encyclical’s implementation of the principles of Catholic ecumenism; the manner in which the encyclical echoes key ecumenical conversations on the nature of the Eucharist; and various Eucharistic themes that lend themselves to significant ongoing ecumenical
conversations.

‘SHADOWS’ FOR ECUMENICAL EXPLORATIONS OF A THEOLOGY OF THE EUCHARIST

Although the preceding analysis of the encyclical has discovered it to be profoundly positive, a true series of ‘lights’ for ecumenism, the encyclical also contains a series of “shadows” when studied with an ecumenical focus. These shadows include three elements present within the encyclical and one significant omission or lack of adequate theological development. The three elements that raise ecumenical concerns include: the emphasis accorded to linear apostolic succession in articulating the apostolic nature of the Church and the Eucharist; the emphasis on the role of the priest in the Eucharistic assembly; and the significant development of the Marian dimension of the Eucharist. The element that lacks sufficient development in the text is the theological significance of the implications of the gift of unity constituted by the sacrament of baptism. The following paragraphs will examine each of these items.

In the encyclical John Paul II proposes an important analogy drawn from the Church’s faith that the Eucharist builds the Church and that the Church makes the Eucharist. He argues that the intimate relationship between the Church and the Eucharist enables the Church to express its faith in the Eucharist by analogy to its faith in the Church. Thus, John Paul argues that if the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic then the Eucharist must be one, holy, catholic and apostolic as well. In order to respond to questions concerning Eucharistic sharing, John Paul II develops this analogy from the perspective of the apostolic nature of the Church. If the Church is apostolic, its Eucharistic celebration, the source and summit of the Church’s life, must be apostolic as well.

In order to develop an understanding of the implications of the apostolic nature of the Eucharist in terms of the issue of Eucharistic sharing, John Paul II draws upon the teaching on the apostolic nature of the Church as it is presented in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The *Catechism* speaks of the apostolic nature of the Church in three principal ways that correspond to the apostolic nature of the Eucharist. First, the Church is apostolic for it was built on the foundation of the apostles, who were chosen by Christ himself. By analogy the Eucharist is also apostolic for Christ entrusted its celebration to the apostles. Second, the Church is apostolic for it keeps and hands on the faith entrusted to the apostles. By analogy the Eucharist is also apostolic for it is celebrated in conformity to the faith of the apostles. Although the Church’s doctrinal articulation and celebration of the Eucharistic mystery has been expressed in various forms, the faith of the Church and the essential elements of the Eucharistic celebration have remained unchanged. Third, the Church is
apostolic for it continues to be taught, guided, and sanctified by the successors to the apostolic ministry assisted by priests. Succession in the ministry of the apostles is conferred through episcopal ordination. By analogy, the Eucharist is also apostolic for its celebrants are the successors to the apostles, the bishops, assisted by the priests. The valid celebration of the Eucharist requires the presidency of a priest, who by virtue of the sacrament of ordination is enabled to offer the celebration in the person of Christ. The sacrament of Holy Orders is absolutely necessary for the valid celebration of the Eucharist for the Eucharist “is a gift which radically transcends the power of the assembly” (EE, 29). The Eucharist cannot be offered by the community of its own initiative, but only by the minister, who “is a gift which the assembly receives through episcopal succession going back to the Apostles” (EE, 29).

The encyclical’s presentation of the apostolic nature of the Church and its implications for the apostolic nature of the Eucharist is a “shadow” from an ecumenical perspective. Ecumenical dialogues have sought to understand the apostolic nature of the Church primarily from the perspective of conformity to the faith of the apostolic Church. In this perspective linear succession is viewed as a secondary element of the apostolic nature of the Church. Thus, the potential to discern an apostolic ministry and potentially an apostolic Eucharist in the ecclesial communities that are not in full communion with the Catholic Church is present. The encyclical, on the other hand, provides no hierarchy in terms of its presentation of the apostolic nature of the Church and of its Eucharist. In this purview the lack of linear apostolic succession precludes any attempt to understand as apostolic the Church and Eucharist of those ecclesial communities that lack apostolic succession.

A second “shadow”, namely, the encyclical’s emphasis on the role of the priest in the Eucharistic assembly and its virtual lack of attention to the role of the assembly, is linked to the encyclical’s presentation of the apostolic nature of the Eucharist. The apostolic nature of the Eucharist requires the presidency of a validly ordained minister. On the one hand this assertion is quite positive when viewed from an ecumenical perspective for it underscores the truth that the Eucharist is not the possession of the local assembly, but a gift from the Lord (EE, 29). It seems, however, that the document does not stress in an equitable fashion that the Eucharist is not the possession of the ordained minister either. The encyclical’s presentation of the absolute necessity of a validly ordained minister for a valid and apostolic Eucharist leads to the neglect of the role of the lay faithful in the liturgical assembly. In fact, the encyclical proceeds to draw an analogy between the central importance of the Eucharist to the life of the whole Church and its central importance in the life and ministry of priests (EE, 31). However, it does not draw a similar analogy concerning the life
and spirituality of the lay faithful. The encyclical reminds the lay faithful, who belong to parishes without the ministry of a priest, that their liturgical celebrations that involve sacramental communion of the reserved Eucharist bear a “sacramental incompleteness” (EE, 32). Thus, prayer and concerted efforts for the promotion of priestly vocations is recommended. While acknowledging the theological legitimacy of this assertion, and the importance of the priestly vocation to the Christian community, it seems that theological reflection on the dignity and importance of the assembly of the lay faithful for the fullness of Eucharistic celebration would be helpful.

The encyclical’s emphasis on the role of the ordained minister and its lack of specific attention to the role of the lay faithful is problematic for ecumenical conversations for it appears to divorce the ministerial priesthood from the priesthood of all believers. If the ministerial priesthood exists for the service of the community of the baptized, and celebrates the Eucharist as an essential aspect of that service, it seems that the instrumentality of the whole Church in mediating the priestly vocation needs to be presented. The ministerial priesthood, while remaining always the gift of God to the Church, exists for the service of the Church. In addition, since the praise and worship that characterizes the Eucharistic liturgy is enacted by means of a dialogue between an ordained priest or bishop and the baptized, this dialogical aspect of the Eucharist needs to be the object of theological reflection. The encyclical tends toward an understanding of the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice as an action of the ordained priest on behalf of the assembly, when, in fact, it is an action of the entire assembly. The implications of the Church’s faith that all believers are called to full, active and conscious participation in the Eucharistic liturgy need to be addressed.

A third “shadow” in the encyclical from an ecumenical perspective is the inclusion of its sixth chapter, “At the School of Mary, ‘Woman of the Eucharist’”. In this chapter John Paul II describes Mary’s life as a model of the Eucharistic amazement that he hopes will be found in the life of every believer. John Paul II acknowledges that even though there is no direct biblical evidence that Mary participated in a Eucharistic celebration, the Scripture does attest to Mary’s presence at the prayer of the apostolic community, which included the breaking of the bread. The key episodes of Mary’s life are portrayed as expressions of her Eucharistic faith. As by her Fiat, Mary received Christ into her womb, so by his or her “Amen” the believer receives “under the signs of bread and wine, the Lord’s body and blood” (EE, 55). As by her Magnificat, Mary proclaimed the gracious love of God that brings about the establishment of justice, so by the experience of the eschatological tension of the Eucharist, the Church is called to proclaim and to work for justice (EE, 58). The encyclical also argues that since the Eucharistic memorial is a re-presentation of the sacrifice of Calvary, “all that
Christ did with regard to his Mother for our sake is also present” (EE, 57). Thus, in the celebration of every Eucharist Jesus gives Mary to the Church as her mother.

The encyclical’s presentation of Mary as a model of Eucharistic amazement does not necessarily constitute an obstacle to ongoing ecumenical conversations on the Eucharist because its presentation is primarily devotional and not doctrinal. The sixth chapter is a meditative exploration on the biblical texts that refer to Mary, and reflects the profound Marian devotion that informs John Paul II’s spirituality. The very presence however, of such a lengthy meditation on Mary in an encyclical devoted to exploring the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church will give pause to Christian traditions that are not characterized by Marian piety or devotion.

The fourth “shadow” from an ecumenical perspective is the encyclical’s lack of attention to the theological implications of the gift of real though imperfect communion that exists between the Catholic Church and her sister churches and other ecclesial communities. Although the encyclical affirms that the concept of an ecclesiology of communion as the “central and fundamental idea of the documents of the Second Vatican Council”, it does not develop the implications of this concept in terms of the relationship between the Church and the Eucharist. If the sacrament of baptism initiates all those who receive it into fellowship with Christ’s body, the weight of this assertion must be brought to bear on the question of Eucharistic fellowship. The encyclical’s clear assertion that Eucharistic fellowship requires fullness of communion in faith, sacraments and governance, while helpful in terms of establishing normative practice, needs to be held in tension with the gift of communion that all believers have received through baptism at the hands of its one Lord.

CONCLUSION

An examination of the encyclical, Ecclesia de Eucharistia, reveals both a series of “lights” and “shadows” in regard to ecumenical conversations on the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church. It is a sure sign of hope for the ecumenical enterprise that the “lights” significantly outnumber the “shadows.” It seems that continued theological reflection on the series of “lights” presented above will provide the light that will enable further progress toward the goal of the full, visible unity of the Church. It is the probing of the unity and communion that all believers share through the gift of baptism that will enable all else to be understood in the light of truth.

Notes:
1. A significant point in this context is that in the encyclical itself John Paul II calls for a great fidelity to the liturgical norms in the celebration of the Eucharist (EE, 52). The liturgical norms for the celebration of the Mass of the Lord’s Supper, or for other celebrations of the Eucharist, do not provide norms for such occasions.

2. My use of “shadows” to speak of some aspects of the encyclical does not carry the same negative connotation that the term “shadow” has in the encyclical itself. I use the term “shadows” to designate problematic areas that need to be addressed if ecumenical progress toward Eucharistic sharing and full ecclesial communion is to be realized.