



INTEGRALITY IN THE COMMUNITY: THE EUCHARIST AND THE SERVICE OF AUTHORITY

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Introduction

In preparing my contribution [to the Seminar], I tried to keep in mind the four words that form the title of the topic assigned to me, namely: *integrality*, *community*, *Eucharist* and *authority*. These are four basic coordinates which, to my way of thinking, not only define the ambit of the subject but also help to clearly guide one to an understanding of it.

The hypothesis, or perhaps better, the presupposition contained in the title, in fact, states with sufficient clarity that it is possible to attain integrality in the community through the Eucharist and the function of authority. Or, to put it another way: integrality in the community depends on the Eucharist and is entrusted to authority.

But these attempts to clarify the meaning of the title should not deceive us: even though they may appear to be clear and immediate, in reality they aren't because they lie beneath a series of questions that are not secondary. For example, what do we mean by *integrality* in the community? How is it possible to bring together the Eucharist and authority? Can their significance for community life be placed on the same level?

Let us begin with the first question, relative to the way we understand the concept of *integrality in the community*. I have to admit that this language seemed so strange to me that, not able to understand why the word *integrality* was used, I began to read everything I could on Fr. Alberione so as to better grasp his spirituality. In his writings, I found not only the term *integrality* but I also came to understand (at least in a general way) the basic meaning this expression has in the Pauline spiritual experience, which is completely centered on the invitation of your Founder *to live the Gospel in its entirety; to make one's own the whole Christ, to live completely in Christ, the Divine Master*.

To put it briefly, I came to understand that the expression *integrality in the community* sounded odd to me simply because I was not familiar with the Pauline spirituality!

Integrality in the community, therefore, is a reference to the *all*– «that very important word» as Fr. Alberione defines it– «that *all* on which one's holiness depends». That *all* must shape the personality of the disciple: his/her witness, proclamation and way of living the communal life.

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And if the purpose of this Seminar is to allow us to approach the subject of *integrality* from various standpoints, then the reference to the community adds a further essential tile to the mosaic inasmuch as it specifies that the possibility of integrality in the spiritual and apostolic life is also linked to the unity of the community in which a fundamental role is played by the Eucharist and authority, as can be inferred from the words of Fr. Alberione himself: «You will be efficacious to the degree that you are united and draw your strength and light from the Eucharist».

I think with good reason that this felicitous synthesis of Fr. Alberione points out to us the path to follow, namely: that the Eucharist and the service of authority are entrusted with building the community, which plays a fundamental role in helping a person achieve integrality.

This gives rise to the basic stages of my talk, in which I will first look more deeply into the relationship between the Eucharist and communion, and then examine the role of authority in reference to communion.

1. THE EUCHARIST AND *COMMUNIO* ²

The pairing of the *Eucharist and communio* is certainly essential and fundamental, but this is so true that it runs the risk of dangerous reductionisms. I am referring to the fact that it is normally resolved by the simplistic thinking that participation in the sacrament of the Eucharist constitutes the possibility of sacramentally living our communion with Christ and among ourselves, as we request in the second invocation of the Holy Spirit, in which we ask him to descend on the assembly so that we might become the one Body of Christ. This vision, although correct, runs the risk of impoverishing the communal mystery of the Eucharist, which requires, instead, attention to two fundamental aspects:

1. The Eucharist as the celebrational experience of a community (*communitas*)
2. The communal quality of the community that celebrates.

The Eucharist as the Celebrational Experience of a “Communitas”

The institution of the Eucharist within the Jewish ritual meal celebrated by Jesus has a decisive character. In fact, Jesus did not limit himself to performing certain gestures and words over the bread and cup; he did this, instead, within the context of a meal. So his words, «do this in memory of me», should not be interpreted as a magic formula to bring about the transformation of the Eucharistic species—something which, perhaps unconsciously, we might be prone to think due to our at times excessive and exclusive concentration on the words of consecration.

Instead, if on the one hand it is clear that the words and actions of Jesus make possible the symbolic and sacramental Paschal Mystery of his death and resurrection, it should be underscored with equal clarity that the framework of a meal exalts, or to put it more precisely, brings about the relational and communal character that he wanted to give the event. In fact, participation in the meal allows his disciples to participate in his death and resurrection, or, even more exactly, it allows them to participate in the *sacrifice* of Christ, in the offering he makes of his body and blood on the cross. At the same time, however, it is precisely participation in the meal that brings about the *communitas* of the disciples: «the gift-sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, anticipated and symbolically carried out at the Last Supper, becomes the relational and communitarian event par excellence...because it is capable of bringing about a union that involves the whole person in his/her relationship with God and with other people in his/her communitarian relationships».

² In this talk, *communio* (*communion*) is used in the sense of intimate fellowship or rapport, not in the sense of reception of the Eucharist.

It is essential to point out something here, namely that the profound communion that the disciples experience at the Last Supper is not simply the fruit of a particular atmosphere in which relationships become closer due to the intensity of the moment they are living. *Communitas* is triggered as a result of what Jesus wanted to express and anticipate: the sacrificial gift of his life. It is the sacrifice of Christ that produces the profound relationships that his disciples experience. His self-gift is the event that triggers *communitas*—a *communitas* that is complete because it does not touch just the relations of the disciples among themselves but also and above all the relations of human beings with God.

All the same, it is not a secondary matter to highlight that in order for the communiality triggered by the gift-sacrifice of Christ to be truly such requires that his disciples play an active role in the event through sharing and co-participation. The efficacy of Christ's sacrificial gift is to be found within a communitarian and communial consensus created by his disciples.

Where does this insistence on the essential bond between Christ's self-offering and the communion among his disciples lead?

It leads to what I think seems to be a first and fundamental acquisition relative to the idea of *communitas*. The Eucharist is not only the sacrificial gift of Christ, just as it is not just a parenthetical invitation to create bonds of communion among ourselves. The Eucharist is the sacrificial gift of Christ, the creator of communion, because communion is made possible only through the sharing of a *gift*.

Making it very clear that it is impossible to translate the term *communion* /*communitas* as simply communion, Gisbert Greshake, a noted contemporary theologian, reminds us of the two «figurative characteristics» that derive from the lexical origin of the term, namely: *cum moenia* and *cum munus*.

Leaving aside for the moment the first significance to which Greshake refers, the derivation of *communitas* from *cum munus* gives significant determining factors for our understanding of communiality the chance to emerge.

In fact, *munus* means «office, duty, service, but also grace and gift». The coexistence of these meanings gives us a clear and important indication as to how to understand *communio*. «One who is in *communio* is bound to mutual service, but in such a way that this service is preceded by that prior gift he/she has received so as to be passed on from one to another. In this way, the concept of *communio* is implicit in that of *dedication*. It is only in receiving and passing on [what was received]—or starting from the other and in view of the other—that each person fulfills his/her essence as an individual and as a member of the *communio*».

In my opinion, this definition of *communio* pointed out by Greshake, even though it might seem theoretical, translates in a general way the experience of *communitas*, inasmuch as it focuses on the intrinsic relationship that exists between communion and the dynamism of dedication and reciprocal service made possible by the gift received and shared. Nevertheless, in its relationship with the Eucharist, this meaning is further specified in that *communio* or *koinonia*, according to the Greek term introduced by Paul in the NT, means precisely *communion with someone through participation in something communal*. And this *something communal* is the body that Christ offers, that is to say, what, in the biblical mentality, is the fundamental means of relationship and communication.

I think it would be helpful to emphasize as much as possible the interpretation of *communio/communitas* as the participation of everyone in something communal—a participation, as we said, that triggers the dynamism of dedication and service as a response to the gift received, as was experienced by the disciples during the meal in which Jesus instituted the Eucharist.

In fact, on closer inspection, this model of interpretation frees us from all those interpretations that tend to make Christian communion appear as a vague rapport among us, according to the not-always-understood (or unclear) language of *becoming one in Christ*, overcoming every division in such a way that «the personal self finds fulfillment in the community». This language, I repeat, runs

the risk of pointing to an interpretation of Christian communion that is not always correct, according to which this communion would involve that «the self be absorbed in the collective *us*».

I don't think this is the way to understand the “*all*” to which Fr. Alberione is referring. I don't think this is the horizon that can be reconciled with the integrality of a person called upon to achieve communion.

This communion can spring only from the awareness of having received a gift—the life of Christ himself—a gift that cannot be kept for oneself but that must be shared in a concrete relationship with another person, while concreteness refers back to the real distinction and diversification of the journey of those who enter into communion with one another. This is so true that the Celebration depends on and manifests the quality of the community celebrating it.

The Communion Quality of the Community that Celebrates

In a recent study on active participation in the Eucharistic Rite, Zanchi says:

One can immediately see from the Liturgy celebrated in a Christian community what Christian ‘language,’ what hermeneutical categories, what recurring themes, what specific concerns, what rapport with Scripture, what familiarity with it, what capacity to articulate the essence of the Gospel message in terms of contemporary culture, what attitude is adopted to assimilate the innovations of Christian revelation passing through the filter of the anthropological question, dominates its construction. One can immediately see from the Liturgy celebrated in a community the kind of relations on which the community's ordinary life, overall climate, internal dynamics, subdivision of roles, complementarity of ministries, care for members of the group and occasional guests, are founded.

This lengthy observation has the merit of recalling our attention right away to an undeniable truth: the [Eucharistic] Celebration inevitably reflects the real quality of the communal bonds of its participants. Beautiful celebratory strategies are worthless; indeed if they are implemented by a community that in actual fact doesn't even exist, then the result is that the limitations of the Celebration are even more evident.

It means courageously facing the consequences that go hand in hand with the category of *dedication*, which, as we saw, is structural for the *communitas* celebrating the Eucharist.

In fact, *dedication* involves commitment to a genuine process of community-building founded on a sharing of the Word and mutual love, without which the Celebration runs the risk of expiring in external formalism.

Let me try to explore this dimension more deeply, citing here a somewhat provocative statement of Andrea Grillo concerning the common priesthood of the faithful. He says that the offering of our bodies as a living sacrifice (Rm. 12:1) should not be understood simply as the offering of life but as the offering of the *life of communion*.

You may not agree with his interpretation, but you cannot ignore the implication it contains because the difference between the offering of life and the offering of a life of communion is not insignificant. Don't our Eucharistic assemblies constantly betray the admonishment to not celebrate the Eucharist *alone*? This can be seen even if one looks only at the postures of the participants, [many of whom are] always seated toward the back, a little isolated, almost hidden....

We know very well that the fact of simply standing/sitting/kneeling alongside another person is not enough to prevent us from participating in the Eucharist individually, oblivious to the fact that we are connected to all the other participants.

It is clear that if one does not move from the offering of life to the offering of the life of communion, then these problems cannot be overcome. The Eucharist requires a true journey of community building, which is perhaps the most complicated test for attaining a correct idea of how to live in Christ in an integral way.

It could be said that it is one's relationship with others that verifies the faith of those who take part in the Eucharist. In 1Co. 11:28-33, Paul urges the faithful of the community to *examine*

themselves (v. 28) before taking part in the Eucharistic banquet. It is not an invitation to a general examination of conscience. Instead, its meaning is determined and specified by the invitation to wait for one another: «When you come together to eat, wait for one another» (v. 33).

Not waiting for one another is not only a sign of discord, of cold relationships that signify that the unity of the Body is wounded; it is also, more simply, a refusal to allow another person to participate in my life while thinking that I can participate with him/her in the life of Christ.

One cannot adopt categories and forms of service and giving to others while continuing to believe that it is possible to participate in the Eucharistic Celebration alone. Isn't the integrality of one's life in Christ constantly threatened by the temptation to reserve the Celebration to one's personal relationship with Christ, almost as if taking on *the burden of the others* were an impoverishment? In contrast, might not this be a way of offering an authentic *life of communion*?

There is an aspect of the Eucharistic Celebration that should make us more aware of this call to community building: the presentation of the gifts—concretely, the offering of bread and wine. As we know, the meaning universally attributed to bread is that of survival: bread is a metaphor of food, of nourishment. In fact, to be without bread means not having anything on which to live. Thus bread is one of the needs of the human being. Wine, instead, is not necessary for survival—one can live without it. Instead, it belongs to the order of gratuity because it is a symbol of joy and celebration. As such, wine needs the community, sharing, relationships.

And so we arrive at an ulterior aspect that is a constitutive element of the Eucharistic Celebration and indicative of the meaning of the integral offering of one's life, “brought to the altar,” to put it in traditional language. This ulterior aspect is *gratitude*—the primary meaning of the word Eucharist. On the part of Jesus, accepting the bread and wine is first of all a *receiving* for which he is grateful, for which, in fact, he thanks the Father. In the Father-Son relationship, the sacrifice of Jesus, which manifests his incomparable generosity in *giving*, is preceded by his awareness of *having received everything from the hands of the Father*. It is not a coincidence to say with Pagazzi that it is precisely *gratitude* that distinguishes the hands of Jesus. Whereas Adam and Eve took without gratitude, Jesus instead accepts everything, beginning with his very life, as *a gift received and for which to give thanks*.

In the same way, those who participate in the Eucharist *individually*—those who do not know how to offer God a life of communion—are not aware of having received; they think only about what they must give. This is correct but insufficient. This one-way attitude, which is often a characteristic of our spiritual life, contains a serious loss—we fail to remember our need of the others.

Each of us needs others. Each of us had someone who, sooner or later, hooked his/her small history to that of the Congregation, the community, the Church—someone who enabled us to share this journey. Participating in this journey, we all learned a *significant memory*, that is, we learned to recognize that we are recipients of God's Word.

Guided by the *significant memory* of our community, we learned to follow Christ and allow ourselves to be shaped by the Spirit. Urged on by the wisdom of the generations that preceded us, we were taught to decipher the yearnings of our heart, to choose between good and bad, to study the signs of the times so as to understand how to serve others. In our faith—that faith without which no listening, no encounter is possible—the faith of others also resounds. Our faith must be nourished by the faith of the community.

There is no doubt that we understand well the role the religious community plays in the realization of our vocation. Our understanding of this is realistic because within the community we are at times exposed to conflictual ways of living. But we also know very well how helpful the mutual acceptance and attention offered us by our brothers and sisters can be, along with their communion, fraternal correction, help and encouragement—the whole collection of realities that Pope Francis defines as «the mysticism of living together».

However, what is often lacking in our concrete daily lives is the awareness that before we can give something to others, we first have to receive from others and from the Church. Without this awareness, in the long run we will end up incapable of gratitude. One who thinks he/she is called to

only give cannot be grateful. Those who, in their religious communities or in the local communities to which they are sent, think they are called to only “do” for others, to donate themselves and who never stop to realize how much they have received and continue to receive—these people will sooner or later end up feeling that they are essential, irreplaceable. They will become persons full of pretensions and instead of serving their communities they will use their communities to serve their self-fulfillment. Even before what we are called to give, we must recognize that we have received. The Eucharistic Celebration teaches us this particular way of living with others, nourished by significant memories.

In the end, what we offer at the altar reminds us that our fullness is achieved through sharing, which here takes on the form of the capacity to offer the Father a life of communion, which we must learn by developing it in our daily life.

The day-to-day journey of community building requires that we not only take others with us but that we also feel responsible for their prayer, for their capacity to also offer a common life. Only in this way can community building be considered genuine.

2. THE ROLE OF AUTHORITY

If, at first sight, in moving on to consider the role of authority one has the impression that we are completely changing gear, the reference to the other significant characteristic of the term *communio* that Greshake speaks about highlights the relationship between authority and integrality in the community.

In fact, the other etymology of the term is found in the expression *cum moenia*. Based on this expression, the meaning of *moenia* (“city walls”) allows us to interpret *communio* as being together inside walls, that is to say: within a well-defined common living space in which the existence of one person is tied to the existence of another. A common sphere of life precedes and creates communion.

But what do we mean by “common sphere of life”? Certainly the concrete life of our communities, which however, on closer inspection, have reason to exist only if we take as a starting point the sharing of a charism. Charism is precisely the “common living space” in which communion is realized as participation.

Here we already find a key indicator: if it is true that each one participates and realizes the charism in the concrete circumstances in which he/she lives, it is equally true that it is the community that builds *moenia*, that is to say, it is the community that safeguards the charism and its meaning as “a gift for the building up [of something].”

In my opinion, it is from here that we can draw the fundamental meaning of the service of authority in the community: authority is in function of unity.

The authoritativeness of the service of the superior and the limits of that service find their *raison d’être* precisely in relation to this service of unity, both horizontally (within the life of the community) and vertically (with history—the tradition within which the community is immersed).

The CIVCSVA Instruction “Faciem tuam”, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, expressly states that the duty of the superior of a community is to ensure the dynamics that foster communion. For this reason, authority has at its disposition the valuable instrument of discernment—valuable because it helps superiors keep constantly in mind that they are not permitted to do whatever they like with regard to those who owe them obedience. They can do only what guarantees the preservation of unity.

Furthermore, the reference to discernment allows us to grasp the important dimensions of what it means to preserve unity, which absolutely must not be confused with consensus. On the contrary, unity is the fruit of a journey of knowledge, for which the superior is responsible, and it requires the ability to listen and dialogue, to meet the world of the other, who is called to exercise co-responsibility in the journey of building fraternity.

The attainment and preservation of unity is definitely a challenging task—one that goes beyond mutual acceptance so as to reach the point of genuine encounter.

I think that this dimension of the service of authority cannot be fully understood if one does not keep in mind the meaning obedience assumes by way of mirror-image. If authority is called to safeguard and foster growth in unity, obedience is justified to the extent that, in its turn, it ensures and safeguards communion.

I would like to illustrate this by means of Francis of Assisi's *Third Admonition*. In this complex text, Francis is dealing with the relationship between authority and obedience within a fraternity in which he says diversity should be promoted, not eliminated.

It is precisely against this background that he proposes three levels of obedience in growing intensity among themselves: an obedience that is *true, loving* and *perfect*.

True obedience carries out the will of the superior, resulting in a communion of *intentions*. The attainment of communion in good is the fundamental criterion for requesting obedience and living it. One should not require obedience because of personal preferences but because what is asked through obedience brings about communion in the fraternity. On the other hand, one does not obey simply because it makes good sense to do so or out of a passive attitude, but because one is aware that to do what is requested serves to build up the fraternity.

On the second level, that of *loving obedience*, Francis is well aware that at times the subject sees things better than the superior. But what is best for obedience is not efficiency at any cost; it is not achieving the best result at any cost, but in preserving communion, even if this means giving up one's own will. The most important good is to live in fraternal communion, which also requires giving up intuitions that seem to be optimal from the apostolic, pastoral, etc., point of view. For Francis, this means that fraternity does not rest on a competitive rationale (the one who is right can impose his/her will on others; the one who has more creativity should be listened to....), but on the desire to achieve communion. Obedience does not mean giving up one's intelligence; it is the conscious choice of what builds unity.

Therefore, loving obedience pleases God because it is modelled on the obedience of Christ, who always sought the will of the Father. But what is "the will of the Father"? Precisely this: to bring about communion in mutual love.

Finally, on the third level—that of *perfect obedience*—Francis considers an extreme situation, which, however, might sometimes arise in our fraternities, namely: that the superior might request something that cannot be obeyed because the order is against conscience. In this case the order leads to division in the fraternity, creating alliances against the person in charge.

With truly evangelical courage, Francis says that in this case too communion must be preserved by forgiving the superior, not abandoning or grumbling about him/her. This desire to remain united to the superior even when he/she is mistaken could provoke anger, rebellion or persecution on the part of the others. These reactions too should be accepted and endured rather than forsake communion. This is perfect obedience because it is a clear way of conforming oneself to Christ.

For Francis, obedience is a matter of love more than faith, as is the service of authority.

After all, isn't this why the truth of the communal relationship guaranteed in the authority-obedience dynamic finds its truth in the Eucharist?