Landas 38:1 (2026) 149–169

PRAYER AND SELF-COMMUNICATION: REVISITING JOSEPH RATZINGER'S EUCHARISTIC ECCLESIOLOGY

Antonio Esquillon

Abstract. This article explores the Eucharistic Ecclesiology of Joseph Ratzinger, which takes its bearings from Christology. It discusses how Ratzinger understands the Church as fundamentally originating from the prayer of Jesus, which assumes its supreme expression in His Eucharistic self-communication. The communication and communicability of the Body of Christ finally draws out the intrinsic connection between Christology, Pneumatology, and Ecclesiology, so central in Ratzinger's Eucharistic Ecclesiology.

Keywords: Ratzinger, Eucharistic Ecclesiology, Prayer, Self-communication, Communion

Introduction

The overarching ecclesiology that emerged from Vatican II was *communio* ecclesiology. "*Communio* ecclesiology" is a term with complex and nuanced meanings that has currency in Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic theologies.[1] The 1985 extraordinary

[1] For a synthesis of communion ecclesiology in the Orthodox communion ecclesiology, see Philip Kariatlis, *Church as Communion: The Gift and Goal of Koinonia* (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2011). John Zizioulas has also been a central figure in the development of Eucharistic ecclesiology in the Orthodox tradition. See

https://publications.lst.edu

Synod of Bishops synthesized the ecclesiology of Vatican II under the category of *communio* ecclesiology, identifying it as the interpretative key for the conciliar documents.[2] *Communio* ecclesiology understands the Church, in her inner mystery and visible structure, as communion. The communion ecclesiology of Henri de Lubac, which centers on the interconnectedness between the Church and the Eucharist, can be summed up as follows: "The Eucharist builds the Church and the Church makes the Eucharist."[3]

In Joseph Ratzinger's perspective, *communio* represents the fundamental concept that expresses the very essence of the Church. *Communio* refers to "the eucharistic center of the Church and thus anchors our understanding of the Church in the most intimate encounter between Jesus and mankind, in his act of giving himself to us."[4] In this way, Ratzinger's understanding of *communio* ecclesiology is, in its inmost nature and supreme expression, a eucharistic ecclesiology.

> The Church is a *communio;* she is God's communing with men in Christ and hence the communing of men with one another - and, in consequence, sacrament, sign, instrument of salvation. The Church is the celebration of the Eucharist; the Eucharist is the Church; they do not simply stand side by side; they are one and the same.

John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1993).

[2] "The Final Report of the Extraordinary Synod of 1985," *Origins* 15 (December 19, 1985): 444-50. See also Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Endeavors in Ecclesiology*, trans. Michael J. Miller et. al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 17.

[3] Henri De Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 134. Dennis M. Doyle offers a synthesis of de Lubac's communion ecclesiology. See Dennis M. Doyle, "Henri de Lubac and the Roots of Communion Ecclesiology," *Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 209-227. The insights of de Lubac significantly influenced Ratzinger's own ecclesiology. See Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics*, 17.

[4] Joseph Ratzinger, "Eucharist-Communio-Solidarity," in *Collected Works*. Vol. 11, *Theology of the Liturgy*, ed. Michael J. Miller, trans. John Saward, Kenneth Baker, Henry Taylor, et. al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 360.

https://publications.lst.edu

> The Eucharist is the *sacramentum Christi* and, because the Church is *Eucharistia,* she is therefore also *sacramentum* – the sacrament to which all the other sacraments are ordered.[5]

The relationship between the Church and the Eucharist thus provides the inner content of Ratzinger's *communio* ecclesiology, which this article seeks to explore in two phases. In the first, I outline Ratzinger's thesis that the Church is founded on the prayer of Jesus through his exegesis of two Gospel events: the Calling of the Twelve and the Last Supper. Following this, I discuss Ratzinger's understanding of Jesus' self-communication in the Eucharist by which the intrinsic connection between Christology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology is established, and through which his Eucharistic ecclesiology becomes coherent.

The Church Founded on the Prayer of Jesus

As a foundational insight into this idea, Ratzinger highlights the event following the multiplication of the loaves (see Mark 6:45-52; Matt 14:22-33). Jesus withdraws to the mountain to pray while the disciples set out on the lake, struggling on the water without making any progress against the wind. The account continues: "when he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea." (Mark 6:48)[6] Ratzinger comments on the ecclesiological symbolism in this text:

> The decisive point is this: in his prayer, when he is with the Father, he is not absent from them. In his prayer, he sees them. Where Jesus is with the Father, the Church too is present. Here, the problem of the Second Coming of the Lord is taken onto a deeper, trinitarian level and transformed: Jesus sees the Church in the Father, and on the basis of the Father's might, in the power drawn from his speaking with the Father, he is present to the Church. It is precisely

[5] Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 53.

[6] Scripture passages quoted are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE) translation.

https://publications.lst.edu

> his speaking with the Father, his being on the mountain, that makes him present, and so we can say that the Church is, as it were, the object of the conversation between the Father and the Son and is thereby anchored in theology.[7]

Ratzinger emphasizes the fact that Jesus still sees the disciples within his prayer to the Father. It is an existential concretization of his *homoousios*: Jesus is with the Father and yet remains present to His disciples. The Church, therefore, is amidst the eternal dialogue of the Father and Son as the object of their communication. From this foundational insight, let us proceed to examine two events that demonstrate how the Church finds its origin in the prayer of Jesus: the calling of the Twelve and the Last Supper.

The Calling of the Twelve

The calling of the Twelve is recounted in all the Synoptic Gospels (See Mark 3:13-19; Matt 10:1-4; Luke 6:12-16). While Mark situates the calling on the mountain, the stress lies on the vocation of the Twelve: "to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message." (Mark 3:14) Commenting on this Markan text, Ratzinger observes that "their primary task is simply to be the community of the Twelve,"[8] to be in fellowship (*koinonia*) and communion with Jesus. It is from this being-with-Jesus that they are enabled to be sent out to proclaim the Gospel. In Matthew, the calling of the Twelve attains a distinctly apostolic and missionary thrust. Ratzinger points out that "in Matthew, the calling of the Twelve follows Jesus' exhortation to 'pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest' (9:38). The choice of the Twelve appears as the first answer to this prayer. It is as though Jesus himself were anticipating the response that the divine authority would subsequently make to the prayer of his disciples."[9]

---

[7] Joseph Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ: Meditations on the Triune God*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 90.

[8] Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 25.

[9] Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 90-91.

https://publications.lst.edu

In Luke, however, the calling of the Twelve clearly arises from the prayer of Jesus (see Luke 6:12-17). Ratzinger reflects that "the calling of the Twelve proceeds from prayer, from the Son's conversing with the Father. The Church is born in that prayer in which Jesus gives himself back into the Father's hands and the Father commits everything to the Son. This most profound communication of Son and Father conceals the Church's true and ever-new origin, which is also her firm foundation (Lk 6:12–17)."[10] The origin of the Church from the eternal dialogue between the Father and the Son is a fundamental and recurring theme in Ratzinger's ecclesiology: the *communio* that is the Church is ever-born from the Trinitarian *communio.*

All this indicates that, in Ratzinger's reading, the Twelve represents the Church. In light of the Pentecost event, the Twelve is the origin and foundation of the new Israel that is sent into the world to proclaim the Gospel.[11] In the Twelve, Jesus is inaugurating the "People of God" in a new way, such that their calling is the theological locus of the beginning of the Church.[12] Their primary vocation was none other than to be that compactly knit core, that clearly delineated community which attains its inner thrust from being in communion with Jesus.[13] It is precisely from this being-with-Jesus that they are then taken into and participate in the prayer of Jesus.

The participation of the Twelve in the prayer of Jesus is recounted in Luke 9:18: "Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him." According to Ratzinger, this apparent contradiction in which Jesus is "alone" and yet "with the disciples" conceals a deeper theological meaning that must be interpreted in light of the subsequent confession that Peter offers.[14] The fundamental stance of the Twelve

[10] Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One.* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 18.

[11] See Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 25.

[12] See Ratzinger, *Behold*, 18.

[13] See Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 24-25.

[14] See Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 92.

https://publications.lst.edu

towards Jesus–their response to his "who do the people say that I am?"–is disclosed at the very moment they had begun to share in the hiddenness of his prayer.

> In this way, the Evangelist makes it clear that Peter had grasped and expressed the most fundamental reality of the person of Jesus as a result of having seen him praying, in fellowship with the Father. According to Luke, we see who Jesus is if we see him at prayer. The Christian confession of faith comes from participating in the prayer of Jesus, from being drawn into his prayer and being privileged to behold it; it interprets the experience of Jesus' prayer, and its interpretation of Jesus is correct because it springs from a sharing in what is most personal and intimate to him.[15]

It follows that participation in the prayer of Jesus leads to the profession of faith in his true identity as "the Messiah of God." (Luke 9:20) Ratzinger asserts that "if the profession of faith is to grow, it must share in Jesus' solitude, in being with him where he is alone with the Father."[16] This points to the very nature of the Christian faith, which cannot be reduced to mere propositions but is, in the final analysis, prayer. Only prayer yields the inner meaning of the Christian faith and the confession of Jesus' true identity.[17] The Church lives by this confession and is united in it, "which is why the Simon who makes it is called Peter, designated and appointed the rock of unity. Thus, the confession and the Petrine office, the confession of faith in Jesus and the unity of the Church, are inseparably linked together with Peter and centered on him."[18] In this way, faith in Jesus Christ, the faith confessed by the Twelve, constitutes an essential dimension of ecclesial communion.

Ratzinger notes that this faith is never just an individual confession but made within the context of the Church–it is an ecclesial faith.

---

[15] Ratzinger, *Behold*, 19.

[16] Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 92.

[17] See Ratzinger, *Behold*, 19.

[18] Ibid., 18.

https://publications.lst.edu

Sharing in Jesus' praying involves communion with all his brethren, in which the individual "I" is taken into the collective "I" of the Church.[19] Communion with Jesus, which proceeds from participation in his prayer and thereby constitutes the all-embracing fellowship that Paul calls the "Body of Christ," is never an isolating event; rather, it is the locus from which the Church originates and in which the members of His Body are gathered together, an event fully realized in the Eucharist.

The Church Founded in the Last Supper

The prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper is a defining moment in which the Church is constituted and formed: "The Church came into being when the Lord had given his body and his blood under the forms of bread and wine, whereupon he said, 'Do this in memory of me.'"[20] Here, Ratzinger is merely specifying the first aspect of de Lubac's Eucharistic ecclesiology: the Eucharist builds the Church. Insight into Ratzinger's understanding of the transformation of the Passover in the Eucharist and the self-communication of Jesus in the Eucharist leads to a further exploration of this ecclesiology.

The foundational acts of Israel were accomplished with the Passover and the covenant at Sinai.[21] Yet the Passover was not simply a historical event that led to the deliverance of Israel from their bondage in Egypt (see Exodus 12); rather, it remained a "perpetual ordinance" (Ex. 12:14), a memorial in which the divine power of the original event

[19] The collective dimension of faith is also explained by Ratzinger: "Belief in the Trinity is *communio*; to believe in the Trinity means to become *communio*. Historically, this means that the "I" of the credo-formulas is a collective "I," the "I" of the believing Church, to which the individual "I" belongs as long as it believes." Ratzinger, *Principles*, 23.

[20] Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 75.

[21] Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 27. See also Joseph Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 40.

https://publications.lst.edu

was remembered and drawn upon in the present.[22] Joachim Jeremias writes that

> the Passover at the time of Jesus looked both backwards and forwards. God's people remember at the feast the merciful immunity afforded the houses sprinkled with the blood of the paschal lambs and their deliverance from servitude in Egypt. But that is only one side. At the same time, the Passover is a looking forward to the coming deliverance, of which the deliverance of Egypt is the type. This typology is a concept that 'most comprehensively determined already in early times, as no other concept did, the form that the doctrine of final salvation took.' The Messiah comes on this night![23]

The Passover that Jesus celebrated with his disciples (see Mark 14:12 ff; Matt 26:17ff; Luke 22:7ff) was thus a transhistorical event in which the past and present are always bridged through the remembrance of God's enduring blessing. Jesus prays within the heart of Israel's tradition that embraces the covenant, the Temple, and the prophets. Specifically, he integrates Himself within the Passover *Haggadah*, the prayer of thanksgiving at the heart of Israel's worship in which the great works of God are remembered and praised.[24] In so doing, he transforms the Passover into an entirely new worship: Jesus prays his new prayer within the Jewish liturgy.[25]

---

[22] See Thomas J. Nash, *Worthy is the Lamb: The Biblical Roots of the Mass* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 74-77.

[23] Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. Arnold Ehrhardt (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1955), 137-138.

[24] See Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 26-27 and Ratzinger, "The Eucharist–Heart of the Church," in *Collected Works*, 265. Ratzinger further states that "in the period in which Jesus lived, there was a growing consciousness of the Passover Haggadah as being at the real heart of Israel's worship, as being the true offering to God." Ibid.

[25] See Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 26. The action of Jesus at the Last Supper is – as Ratzinger puts it – "something new" that is woven into the context of the Jewish Passover celebration, "but it is clearly recognizable as an independent entity." Ratzinger, The *Feast of Faith*, 40.

https://publications.lst.edu

At the heart of this transformation, Jesus understands Himself to be the true Paschal Lamb that dies vicariously for the whole world, a self-understanding which provides the inner content and meaning of the words of institution: "This is my body, this is my blood." While these words contain a radical novelty which only Jesus can bestow, they are nonetheless "taken from the Israelite language of sacrifice, which designated the gift offered in sacrifice to God in the Temple. If Jesus makes use of these words, then he is designating *himself as the true and ultimate sacrifice,* in whom all these unsuccessful strivings of the Old Testament are fulfilled."[26] Moreover, in these words are gathered the inner content of the Law and the Prophets, echoing in particular Exodus 24–the sealing of the covenant on Sinai–and Jeremiah 31–the promise of the new covenant.[27] As Jesus prays within the tradition of Israel, he "elevates the meal in which his flesh is eaten and his blood is drunk to the status of the true, definitive Passover meal. That means that this meal has no other meaning than the one that was once characteristic of the Jewish Passover celebration. So, it follows automatically that this meal appears as *the source and basis of a new Israel* and as its abiding core."[28] Just as the Sinai covenant constituted Israel as the people of God, so the new covenant Jesus institutes at the Last Supper is the foundation of the new Israel.

The transformation of the Passover at the Last Supper can only be understood in the context of Jesus' unceasing prayer to the Father, which reaches its culmination on the Cross. Ratzinger firmly holds that the Evangelists all agree on this fundamental fact: Jesus died praying

[26] Ratzinger, "The Eucharist–Heart of the Church," in *Collected Works*, 253-254.

[27] See Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: Part Two: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 127, 130-131.

[28] Maximilian Heinrich Heim*, Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology: Fundamentals of Ecclesiology with Reference to* Lumen Gentium, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 272. Emphasis mine.

https://publications.lst.edu

Psalm 21, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"[29] The Evangelists are thus in agreement that

> the last words of Jesus were an expression of his devotion to his Father, and that his cry was not uttered to anyone, anywhere, but to Him, since it was of his innermost essence to be in a dialogue relationship with the Father. Thus, they all agree that his dying was itself an act of prayer, his death was a handing-over of himself to the Father. Finally, they all agree that Jesus prayed in the words of Scripture and that Scripture became flesh in him, became the actual Passion of this Righteous One; and that he thus inserted his death into the word of God, in which he lived and which lived in him, declaring itself in him.[30]

In the context of Jesus' prayer, the intrinsic and indissoluble link between the Last Supper and the Cross is made clear: his dying words fuse with His words at the Supper; the reality of the Cross and death fuses with the reality of the Supper. Jesus' act of communicating and sharing His Body and Blood is actually fulfilled on the Cross in such a way that the Supper anticipates His death and transforms it into an act of love.[31] Ratzinger stresses this internal unity between the Supper and the Cross: "the death without the Supper would be empty, without meaning: the Supper without the actual realization of the death it anticipated would be a gesture without reality. Supper and Cross together are the only inseparable source of the Eucharist."[32] Yet a final step needs to be made: for the death of Christ on the Cross and the words uttered at the Last Supper would remain meaningless if the resurrection had not come about. Thus, Ratzinger claims, "the

[29] See Ratzinger, *Behold*, 24: "Common to all the Evangelists is the conviction that psalm 21 - in its entirety - was connected in a special way with the Passion of Jesus, with its actuality as well as with Jesus' acceptance of it."

[30] Ibid., 24.

[31] See ibid.

[32] Joseph Ratzinger, *Journey Towards Easter*, trans. Dame Mary Groves (Homebush, NSW: St. Paul Publications, 1987), 105.

https://publications.lst.edu

three belong together: the word, the death, and resurrection."[33] These three constitute the mystery of Easter, and it is here that the source and origin of the Eucharist is to be found.

This leads us to reflect on the words in the institution narrative of Mark and Matthew: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." (Mark 14:24; Matt 26:28) The "for many" incorporates the tradition of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53,[34] which understood that the "suffering of Israel is the true sacrifice, the great new form of worship, with which it could come before the living God on behalf of mankind, on behalf of the whole world."[35] Inherent to the Suffering Servant tradition is the notion of Israel's vicarious and universal vocation for the nations. Since this vocation was never completely accomplished on account of Israel's sin and guilt, it opened up the expectation for the true Suffering Servant of God. This is fully realized in Jesus, who identifies with Isaiah's Suffering Servant:

> He is suffering for the many, and he shows, thereby, that in him this expectation is fulfilled: that this great act of worship on the part of mankind comes to pass in his suffering. He himself is, so to speak, the pure representative, the one who does not stand on his own behalf but stands before God on behalf of all.[36]

Jesus, the Suffering Servant, is the one representative *for many*. Though he prays within the tradition of Israel, it becomes clear that in the new worship He inaugurates in His person and suffering, He opens Himself up for all, on behalf of all. In so doing, Jesus "did not destroy the letter of the Old Testament, i.e., the common religious tradition of

[33] Ratzinger, "The Eucharist–Heart of the Church," in *Collected Works*, 261.

[34] "Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." (Is 53:12.) See also Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: Part Two*, 134-138.

[35] Ratzinger, "The Eucharist–Heart of the Church," in *Collected Works*, 255.

[36] Ibid.

https://publications.lst.edu

Israel, but showed its real depth for the first time, 'fulfilled' it."[37] Jesus fulfills Israel's expectations by bestowing on it a universal character. This is significant when considered in the light of ecclesiology:

> "This universalization of the tradition is its ultimate ratification, not its abrogation or replacement. If we grasp this, it becomes clear that Jesus did not need to start by founding a People of God (the "Church"). It was already there. Jesus' task was only to renew this People by deepening its relationship to God and by opening it up for all mankind."[38]

Let us now synthesize all these insights with the prayer of Jesus as our foundational lens. In the Last Supper, Jesus celebrates the Passover with his disciples, thereby praying within the Tradition of Israel. By understanding Himself as the true Paschal Lamb and the Suffering Servant, Jesus transforms the Passover into an entirely new worship, which finds its inner content and meaning in His death on the Cross. In Jesus' prayer, His death is transformed into an act of love and worship. The Supper and the Cross thus form an intrinsic unity and are together the only inseparable source of the Eucharist. The Supper-Death dynamic, which happened once and for all in history, is thus ritualized and sacramentalized in the Eucharist, which contains the ultimate prayer-word of Jesus to the Father, His complete self-communication. In the Eucharist, Jesus universalizes the tradition of Israel, establishes the new covenant, and thereby renews the People of God such that the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper becomes the origin of the New People of God, the Church.[39]

---

[37] Ratzinger, *Behold*, 29.

[38] Ibid., 29-30.

[39] See also Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics*, 17-18: "Jesus' Last Supper can now be recognized as the real act of founding the Church: Jesus gives to his disciples this liturgy of death and of his Resurrection and thus bestows on them the feast of life. In the Last Supper he renews the covenant of Sinai, or rather: what was then only a symbolic start now becomes total reality—the communion of blood and life between God and man. When we say this, it is clear that the Last Supper anticipates the Cross and Resurrection and at the same time necessarily presupposes them, for otherwise everything would remain empty gestures. That is why the Church Fathers could say, in a very beautiful image, that the Church

https://publications.lst.edu

The Self-Communication of Jesus in the Eucharist

To understand how Jesus communicates Himself in the Eucharist, let us explore further the meaning of "body" in the context of the words of institution, "This is my body," (Mark 14:22, Luke 22:19, 1 Cor 11:24) and the resurrection of Jesus. The Hebrew notion of the body refers to the entire person, since there is no distinction between body and soul in the Hellenistic sense.[40] Yet from the perspective of relationality, the body also becomes both a boundary from and a bridge to others. Ratzinger thus comments that

> the body is a boundary that makes us opaque, impermeable to each other, which sets us beside each other and prevents our being able to see or to touch each other's intimate selves. But there is a second thing: The body is also a bridge. For we meet each other through the body; through it we communicate in the common material of creation; through it we can see ourselves, feel ourselves, come close to one another. In the gestures of the body are revealed who and what the other person is. We see ourselves in the way the body sees, looks, acts, and offers itself; it leads us to each other: it is both boundary and means of communion in one.[41]

The bridging dimension of the body implies that communication and communicability take place in and through the body. The body grounds communication in realism and sensibility such that bodily existence can be lived "as opening oneself up, as the developing freedom of a person who shares himself."[42] This opening and sharing of oneself reaches a culmination in Jesus' Eucharistic self-

---

sprang from the Lord's wounded side, from which blood and water flowed. In reality that is the same thing, merely expressed from a different perspective, as when I say that the Last Supper is the beginning of the Church."

[40] See Ratzinger, "The Eucharist–Heart of the Church," in *Collected Works*, 287-288. See also Barnabas Mary Ahern, "The Christian's Union with the Body of Christ in Cor, Gal, and Rom." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (1961): 199-209, at 200-201.

[41] Ratzinger, "The Eucharist–Heart of the Church," in *Collected Works*, 288.

[42] Ibid., 289.

https://publications.lst.edu

communication. Ratzinger thus interprets Jesus' words at the institution of the Eucharist as follows:

> 'In this bread I give myself'–that is the meaning of *soma*–'I give myself up for you, through it I am in your midst and there for you,' whereby this expression 'for you' specifies and defines what is proper to Jesus' 'I,' so to speak, the genuine substance, the core of reality … his whole existence. The 'I' of Jesus is precisely in its most authentic reality the act of self-giving, of service, of being open for all.[43]

These words particularly indicate Jesus' mode of being as one of existing-for-others, of pro-existence: Jesus does not live for himself but *from* God and *for* humanity.[44]

Jesus' Pro-Existence in the Holy Spirit

In the Eucharist, Jesus continues to live "for the life of the world" (John 6:51) by being shared out to others in sheer pro-existence. Since the Eucharist originates from the Paschal Mystery, the body that Jesus gives is His crucified and resurrected body. Ratzinger reflects on the significance of the opening up of Jesus in the piercing of his side (see John 19:34):

> Jesus' side is opened, and from it come forth blood and water, that is, the two fundamental sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, and therein the Church. From this open side comes the fact that Jesus now exists as otherwise only spirit can exist, namely, as the one who is opened, the one who at all times can be there and is there for

[43] Joseph Ratzinger, "Kirche als Tempel des Heiligen Geistes," in *Vom Widerauffinden der Mitte: Grundorientierungen: Texte aus vier Jahrzehnten*, ed. S. O. Horn, V. Pfnür (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1997), 151, quoted in Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church*, 239.

[44] See Ratzinger, *Behold*, 21-22. De Gaal comments that "Proexistence belongs to the very essence of Christianity, inseparably combining selfless glorification of God the Father with magnanimous service to humankind." Emery De Gaal, *The Theology of Benedict XVI: The Christocentric Shift* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010), 141.

https://publications.lst.edu

> everyone. And that means, in biblical terminology, that the *soma* of Jesus, that is, his form of corporeality, is *pneuma*.[45]

This pneumatic interpretation of the Paschal Mystery means that Christ communicates Himself to us *as* Spirit and *in* the Spirit. For Ratzinger, such a pneumatic interpretation "brings out the connection between Christology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology: Christ communicates himself to us in the Holy Spirit."[46] In this way, the Holy Spirit is operative in the sheer openness of Christ's pro-existence, especially in the resurrection in which Paul describes the risen Christ as "a life-giving spirit." (1 Cor 15:45)[47] In the Holy Spirit, the resurrected body of Jesus ceases to be a boundary that sets Him off against others, becoming, instead, pure communicability and openness. Ratzinger maintains that

> to have risen from the dead means to be communicable; it signifies being the one who is open, who gives himself. And on that basis we can understand that Jesus, in the speech about the Eucharist that John has handed down to us, puts the Resurrection and the Eucharist together, and that the Fathers say that the Eucharist is the medicine of immortality.[48]

Only in light of the Spirit-filled risen body of Christ do we grasp the inner meaning of Jesus' action of breaking the bread at the Last Supper. The absolute openness and transcendence of the risen body of Christ allows it to be shared beyond the limits of place and time. Yet this act of being broken and shared is paradoxically the means through which

---

[45] Ratzinger, "Kirche als Tempel," 152.

[46] Ratzinger, *Behold*, 48-49.

[47] Ratzinger's exegesis of the Eucharistic discourse in John 6 and the Pauline notion of the resurrection in 1 Cor 15 leads to his understanding of the risen body of Christ as a spirit-flesh dialectic. See Patrick J. Fletcher, *Resurrection Realism* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2004), 165-67. See also Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 169-70.

[48] Ratzinger, "The Eucharist–Heart of the Church," in *Collected Works*, 289. See also Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: Part Two*, 244.

https://publications.lst.edu

humanity is gathered into communion with God in Jesus. Ratzinger asserts that "it is the act of distributing that creates community. This archetypally human gesture of giving, sharing, and uniting acquires an entirely new depth in Jesus' Last Supper through his gift of himself. God's bountiful distribution of gifts takes on a radical quality when the Son communicates and distributes himself in the form of bread."[49] The designation of the Eucharist as the "breaking of bread" in Acts 2:42 expresses this communal and social dimension of the Eucharist, wherein the Church shares in Jesus' mode of being as pro-existence.[50] It is precisely through this Eucharistic self-communication in the Holy Spirit that the Church is both gathered and formed. The intrinsic connection between Christology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology, constitutes the inner core of Ratzinger's Eucharistic ecclesiology. As a final move, let us now focus on how the Church is formed and gathered as a communion in the Eucharistic Body of Christ.

The Church as a Communion in the Eucharist

The Pauline passage concerning the notion of *Soma Cristou* (σῶμα Χριστοῦ) is of central concern here: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." (1 Cor 10:16-17). Ecclesial unity is thus achieved through the members partaking in the one bread by which is constituted the one ecclesial Body of Christ. The outward action of eating in the context of the table fellowship is "the expression of that intimate penetration of two subjects."[51] Ratzinger interprets this reality of communion through the lens of assimilation.

[49] Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: Part Two*, 129.

[50] See Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 43: "We must further add that the designation of the sacrament as the 'breaking of bread' expresses the social requirement of the Eucharist, which is not an isolated cultic act but a way of existence: life in sharing, in communion with Christ, who gives the gift of his very self."

[51] Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 37.

https://publications.lst.edu

Communion means the fusion of existences; just as in the taking of nourishment the body assimilates foreign matter to itself and is thereby enabled to live, in the same way my "I" is "assimilated" to that of Jesus, it is made similar to him in an exchange that increasingly breaks through the lines of division. This same event takes place in the case of all who communicate; they are all assimilated to this "bread" and thus are made one among themselves—one body.[52]

In this process of assimilation in the Eucharist, the initiative belongs to God: "We do not assimilate it into ourselves, but rather it assimilates us into itself, so that we are conformed to Christ–in Paul's words, as members of his body, one in him."[53] Ratzinger's use of assimilation brings to mind the Platonic Form, the perfect pattern into which the individual objects assimilate themselves. From this perspective, the Eucharist is the Form not only of individual existence, but of the Church herself.[54]

This assimilation, or fusion of existences, into Christ necessarily leads to communion with others who also partake of the same Eucharist. In Christ, the members of the Church also become members of one another, for "to be in communion with Christ is by

[52] Ibid., 37. *In Behold the Pierced One*, Ratzinger also speaks of assimilation as a fusion of existences: "The man who eats this bread is assimilated by it, taken into it; he is fused into this bread and becomes bread, like Christ himself. 'Though many, we are one body, for we are one bread.' The result of this insight is quite clear: Eucharist is never merely an event *a deux*, a dialogue between Christ and me." Ratzinger, *Behold*, 89.

[53] Ratzinger, "Eucharist-*Communio*-Solidarity," in *Collected Works*, 362.

[54] "'He who eats me will live because of me' (Jn 6:57). These words of Jesus make us realize how the mystery "believed" and "celebrated" contains an innate power making it the principle of new life within us and the form of our Christian existence." Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 70. In this way, St. Irenaeus says that "our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking." St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haereses*. 4,18,5 (PG 7/l.1028).

https://publications.lst.edu

its very nature to be in communion with one another as well."[55] The assimilation about which Ratzinger speaks with regard to Eucharistic communion should not be construed as a kind of identity-negating collectivism. He insists that "the eucharistic fellowship of the Church is not a collectivity, in which fellowship is achieved by leveling down to the lowest common denominator, but fellowship is created precisely by each of us being ourselves. It does not rest on the suppression of the self, on collectivization, but arises through our truly setting out, with our whole self, and entering into this new fellowship of the Lord."[56] Communion seen as assimilation in the Eucharist does not deny the individual's freedom or identity. The many is not drowned out in the process of becoming one, just as the Eucharist is not reduced to collectivism, and the Church is not reduced to a federation.

In the final analysis, the Eucharist is the locus of communion with Christ and with those who also partake of the same Eucharistic bread. Since the Eucharistic bread, which forms the Church, is one, the Church is also one. The intrinsic unity of the Church obtains because she

> originates in the one bread, in the one Lord, and thanks to him, she is first and foremost and everywhere the one and only Church, the one body that comes from the one bread. She does not become one through a centralist form of government; instead, one common center for all is possible because she is always derived from the one Lord, who in the one bread makes her to be the one body. That is why her unity goes deeper than any human union could ever go. It is when the Eucharist is understood in the full intimacy of the union of each individual with the Lord that it automatically becomes also a social sacrament in the highest degree.[57]

[55] Ratzinger, *"Eucharist-Communio-Solidarity,"* in *Collected Works*, 362. Ratzinger also asserts that "Communion with Christ is of necessity a communication with all those who are his: it means that I myself become part of this new "bread" which he creates by transubstantiating all earthly reality. Ratzinger, *Behold*, 89.

[56] Ratzinger, "The Eucharist–Heart of the Church," in *Collected Works*, 290.

[57] Ibid., 363.

https://publications.lst.edu

This being the case, the unity of the Church is not imposed from without as if it could be achieved through human efforts and based on human criteria. Such a sociological understanding of the Church would reduce it to a mere association or club in which the verticality of communion is disregarded.[58] Instead, the unity of the Church belongs to and is constitutive of her very nature as *communio.* The unity of the Church finds expression in the twofold dimension of communion: vertical and horizontal. As Ratzinger states,

> It is vertical unification, which brings about the union of man with the triune love of God, thus also integrating man in and with himself. But because the Church takes man to the point toward which his entire being gravitates, she automatically becomes horizontal unification as well: only by the impulse power of vertical unification can horizontal unification, by which I mean the coming together of divided humanity, also successfully take place. The Fathers summed up these two aspects—Eucharist and gathering—in the word *communio*.[59]

For Ratzinger, the primacy and priority belong to the vertical dimension of communion: the union of humanity with the Triune God. Only in and from this vertical communion can horizontal communion among persons find its true grounding.[60] Horizontal communion depends on vertical communion, for the true criterion and inner impulse for communion comes from God. The one Lord, who gives Himself in the one Eucharistic bread, gathers and forms the one Church that is also His Body: "The Church, which is built upon the sacrament of the Body of Christ, must herself be a body. And she

[58] See Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 157-165.

[59] Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 76.

[60] See Ratzinger, *Behold*, 88-89: "The Christian 'community' cannot be explained in a merely horizontal, essentially sociological manner. Its existence presupposes this relationship to the Lord as its origin and goal. Indeed, we can say that the Church, of her essence, is relationship, a relationship created by the love of Christ, and she in turn founds a new relationship between men."

https://publications.lst.edu

must be a single body, corresponding to Jesus Christ's uniqueness."[61] In this way, the unity of the Church is expressed in her "bodiliness," in her being in the form of the one Body of Christ. Such unity demands visible, concrete, and even institutional unity.[62] For Ratzinger, the understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ is the underlying image that sustains his Eucharistic ecclesiology.

Conclusion

The hermeneutic key to understanding Joseph Ratzinger's Eucharistic ecclesiology is the notion of *communio,* the intimate union between God and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Ratzinger's fundamental assertion is that the Church originates from the Triniatrian *communio,* the eternal dialogue between the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, which enters history in the prayer of Jesus Christ. This dialogue attains its supreme expression of in the self-communication of Jesus in the Eucharist, in his self-giving "yes" to the Father and humanity summed up in the words of institution: "This is my body, which is given for you." By these words, Ratzinger concludes that Jesus' mode of being is one of pro-existence: He does not live for himself but *from* God and *for* humanity. Since the Holy Spirit is operative in Jesus' self-communication and pro-existence, the Body of Christ now becomes pure communicability and openness. By masterfully weaving the key threads of Christology and pneumatology in light of the Paschal Mystery, Ratzinger establishes the foundation of his Eucharistic ecclesiology.

As the Eucharist is the event of gathering the members of the Body of Christ in the Holy Spirit, the Eucharist is the *fons et culmen* where the Church comes to be through the self-communication of the Lord. Indeed, it is in the Eucharist that "the Church is most compactly

[61] Ratzinger, *Behold*, 94.

[62] See Ratzinger, *Behold*, 93.

https://publications.lst.edu

herself—in all places, *yet one only*, just as he is one only."[63] In the final analysis, Ratzinger's Eucharistic ecclesiology affirms the inner unity of the Church – a unity that obtains from the one Lord and the one Eucharist. Let us give Ratzinger the last word: "The Church is built up from the Eucharistic meal, and conversely the whole purpose of the Eucharist is to gather people into the Body of the Lord and thus into the Spirit of the Lord, to transform them into the living Body of Christ, the place of the concrete and mighty present of Christ in the world."[64]

About the Author: Antonio Esquillon is a doctoral candidate at the University of Notre Dame, Australia. His dissertation explores Joseph Ratzinger's notion of interculturality, under the supervision of Prof. Tracey Rowland. He received his STB from the Pontifical Urban University (Urbaniana) and his MA in Systematic Theology from the Divine Word Seminary in Tagaytay City. His research interests include Christology, ecclesiology, and the evangelization of culture. He recently presented at the "Christology at the Beginning of the Third Millennium" Conference in Sydney on the relationship between Christology and anthropology in *Gaudium et spes*.

[63] Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 37. Emphasis mine. See also Ratzinger, *Behold*, 88.

[64] Joseph Ratzinger, "Einleitung," 10.

https://publications.lst.edu