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# THE ROMAN CATHOLIC EUCHARISTIC LITURGY AND THE CHALLENGE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

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## Abstract

*The Eucharist is often described in the Roman Catholic Christianity as the source and summit of Christian spirituality. The understanding points to the fact that at the very centre of the Roman Catholic Church's self-understanding is the Eucharistic gathering of people. Based on this understanding the Catholic Church sees the Eucharist as the central act of worship that is both prophetic and connected to social justice. In fact, it is most times submitted that full communion with God and others, enacted in the Eucharist, is incompatible with any sort of injustice. Yet within this context of self-understanding and justice activity, the Roman Catholic Church, particularly in Nigeria is caught in a web of tackling unjust systems and the necessity of alleviating the immediate sufferings of people. Thus, the paper examines the biblical development of the Roman Catholic Eucharistic liturgy and the various shifts that have taken place over time. The paper identified the points at which the Eucharist became disconnected from social-justice issue today. And it advocates that it is the return to the sources of the Eucharistic tradition that would again show the connection between the Eucharist and social-justice issues in the world and Nigerian society in particular and through such return the reign of God's kingdom may become nearer to us.*

**Keywords:** Eucharist; Liturgy; Social Justice; Church.

## Introduction

One of the practical out-comes of the Vatican II Council (1952-1965) was the renewal of the ritual of Eucharistic celebration. The schema,

instructions and guidelines for Eucharistic celebration in the Roman Catholic Church are contained in a document called "*Sacrosanctum Concilium*" in Latin, "the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy" in English. With the approval and release of "The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy" the Roman Catholic Church affirms that the Eucharistic liturgy is "the summit toward which the activity of the church is directed and it is also the source from which all her power flows" ( Flannery,1980). Within this context, the Eucharist is seen as most central aspect of the Roman Catholic worship of God. It is the point from which Catholics discover and rediscover what it means to engage in social justice in the spirit of Jesus Christ, thereby be a Christian.

While the Eucharist is about a liturgical celebration that takes place in a church building, more generally it pertains to the church's holistic participation in all aspects of justice that transform the world. When the Eucharistic liturgy is not understood in the light of the larger context of this justice engagement, the liturgy becomes flamboyant ritual that does little to address the real conditions of people, change hearts, or renew communities. Eucharistic liturgy, then, becomes disconnected from social justice issues of the day. Thus, what this paper seeks to examine is the Biblical development of the Roman Catholic liturgy and it various shifts overtime. The paper also aims at identifying the various points at which the Eucharist became disengaged from social justice issues of today and the challenges therein.

## Explication of Terms

For the purpose of focus and understanding, it is important to explicate some words used in this paper. The key words in this paper are "Roman Catholic", "Eucharist", "Liturgy" and "Justice". When we use the expression "Roman Catholic" we refer to the Catholic Christianity or church that has her seat of governance in Rome. The institution is generally known as the Roman Catholic Church and the Church enjoyed the favour of the Western emperor, Valentinian III (425-455) who enhanced the authority of the pope in the West by means of a decree which he issued as far back as 445AD. The decree read thus,

in as much as the pre-eminence of the Apostolic See is assured by the merit of St. Peter, the first of the Bishops, by the leading position of the city of Rome and also by the authority of the Holy Synod, let not presumption strive to attempt anything contrary to the authority of that See..., we



decree by perpetual edict that nothing shall be attempted by... bishops, contrary to the ancient custom, without the authority of the venerable pope of the eternal city (Bettenson, 1963:8).

In the light of the above, Vatican II emphasized the catholicity and apostolicity of authority in the Roman Catholic Church. The Council provided a cohesive understanding of how the pope and the bishops function within the community of believers.

The word "Eucharist" comes from the Greek root "*Eucharistein*". The word means "to give thanks". According to the Roman Catholic tradition, in celebrating the Eucharist, the church gives thanks to God for His action in the world, especially through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Throughout history, the Eucharist has been understood in various ways. It is understood as a meal that recalls the last supper. It is understood as a sacrifice that commemorates how Jesus endured his passion and death for the good of all people. The Eucharist is also understood as communion that brings people together with Christ in a community. It is as well understood as a Mass, which comes from the Latin "*Missa*," meaning "sent". In summary, the Roman Catholic Eucharist is the summation of all that Jesus taught and stood for in his earthly life, and also all he was in himself, the living presence of God among people. In this regard Nwabekee (1993) adds that,

Aside, all Church's activities tend toward the Eucharistic Liturgy, and the Eucharistic Liturgy in turn brings the Christian together and nourishes them. There is no wonder it has been called such names as; the apex of the church's life, the highest sacrament, the greatest gift of Christ to his church, and the most efficacious prayer of man on earth (p. 8).

Among all these essential understandings of the Eucharist, one in particular stands out in terms of the focus of this paper on social justice: the Eucharist reflects those for whom Jesus has special affinity, the poor, rejected and the oppressed. "It was within the Passover meal celebration that Christ instituted the Eucharistic Liturgy" (Nwabekee, 1993). Thus, the

socio-cultural and religious contexts of the Eucharistic meal has rich heritage of "resistance to and freedom from oppressive rulers, which celebrated Israel's liberation from bondage under the Egyptian Pharaoh." (Horsley, 2002).

The term liturgy comes from two Greek words: "*Laos*" and "*Ergon*" meaning people and service respectively (Nwabekee, 1995). Coined in civil society setting; liturgy has to do with work on behalf of the people. Overtime, the early church used the term to speak about liturgy as "service of God." Gradually, liturgy became known as the action of Jesus Christ on behalf of the people and the work of people in service of God. In both civil and religious usages, liturgy, by nature, was understood as a public event directed toward the common good of all people. For this reason, Koester (2002) argued that, the intrinsic relationship between liturgy and justice is critical to the ongoing renewal of church life and the created world.

If liturgy referred to service in general rendered to God by a designated person to sustain divine-human relationship, then justice would be the efforts put in place to establish that divine-human relationship. However, the justice in focus here is scriptural justice. Justice in the Bible is about "God's overflowing and uncalculating love, which brings people into right relationship again with God, others, self, and the environment" (Groody, 2009). This is so, since evil and sin normally put people and institutions in wrong relationships. The justice of God aims at bringing about righteousness and right relationship. Through the process of divine justice, God brings healing, order, peace, and reconciliation; this is celebrated in the Eucharistic liturgy.

Again, it is noted here that justice can be understood in many other ways. In most general sense, justice stands for the Latin phrase "*suum cuique*" meaning "to each his/her due". There exist many variations to this understanding of justice since the time of Aristotle and Plato, through Locke and Marx, down to this present time. The general sense of the concept of justice is strictly legal. Thus,

The legal profession sees to it that just laws foster the common good, that human rights written into laws are protected, that the scales of Lady justice are not weighted in favour of the rich and powerful, that men and women remain



innocent until proven guilty, that punishment fits the proven crime (Burghardt, 2004:2).

In legal justice, love is absent and justice needs love to achieve peace, to guarantee cooperation for the common good.

Another aspect of justice is ethical justice. The ethical justice, from Catholic perspective, is predicated on commutative, distributive, and social justice. "What distinguishes these three modes of justice is the specific type of human relationship and interdependence to which each refers" (Burghardt, 2004).

As noted earlier, the focus of this paper is on biblical justice within the social setting. It is the type of justice which Donahue (1977) proposed a working definition with succinctness thus,

In general terms, the biblical idea of justice can be described as fidelity to the demand of a relationship. In contrast to modern individualism the Israelite is in a world where "to live" is to be united with others in a social context either by bonds of family or by covenant relationships. This web of relationships-king with people, judge with complainants, family with tribe and kinfolk, the community with the resident alien and with the suffering in their midst and all with the covenant God-constitutes the world in which life is played out (Donahue, 1977:68-69).

Right relationships or covenant relationship is at the heart of the biblical justice. Thus, the Psalmist says:

In you, Lord, I take refuge;  
Let me never be put to shame;  
In your justice deliver me. Ps. 31:2

And further in Psalm 89:14 is noted:

Justice and judgment are the foundation of your throne; love and loyalty march before you.

Therefore, for an Israelite, to be just was to be properly postured not only toward God but also toward all people within the community.

### **Biblical Development of the Roman Catholic Eucharistic Liturgy**

The Roman Catholics have an enriching liturgical tradition made up of varied ritual parts that communicate central beliefs and doctrines. The purpose of such liturgy is to, may be, enable one to relate to the Being in whom we have ultimate hope in. The focus here is on Roman Catholic Eucharistic Liturgy and its development overtime.

The Eucharist has passed through various phases throughout history. The phases could be summed up as: Jewish background and New Testament background. Under New Testament background, one may identify Mark-Matthew tradition and Paul tradition.

The Jewish background of Eucharistic liturgy reflected the celebration as a memorial meal of liberation from oppression and injustice. It was called Passover meal. Its origin dates from the time of Jewish slavery in Egypt. It forms part of the Exodus from Egypt after being there for many years as slaves (Nwabekee, 1995:9). The information about the Jewish background of the Eucharistic liturgy is detailed in the Book of Exodus chapter twelve. The Eucharistic liturgy is an old Jewish celebration but with a new dimension. Therefore, within the context of liberation from slavery commemorated in the annual feast of Passover, Jesus Christ instituted the Eucharistic liturgy is the New Testament.

The New Testament contains some references to the Eucharistic Liturgy. The references can be seen in the Synoptic Gospels, I Corinthian chapters ten and eleven. These references mentioned specifically the institution of the Eucharist and the ritual act performed by Jesus Christ to that effect. In this regard, one identifies Mark- Matthew tradition and Paul tradition.

Mark- Matthew tradition of the Eucharistic liturgy is embedded in the passion narrative of Jesus Christ. According to Mark 14: 12ff:

on the first day of unleavened bread, when the Passover lamb was sacrificed, his disciples said to him where do you



want us to go and make the preparation for you to eat the Passover.

A similar account is seen in Matthew 26:28. The interpretative words emphasize the body and blood of Jesus Christ as the atoning power. Adam (1992) alluded to this fact when he submitted that,

entering into time and manifested in history in the bloody offering on Golgotha, it is become (sic) the sacrifice of our redemption. In it culminates the redemptive ministry of Jesus for... the many. It is... the act of Christ... in which he proves himself the saviour of mankind (Adam, 1992:268-269).

The earliest account of the institution of the Eucharist is recounted to relate what Jesus did on the night of Passover feast with what happened to him on the cross of Calvary.

Paul tradition recounts the Eucharistic liturgy to the Corinthians to counteract the gross abuses and injustice that had arisen among the believers. 1 Cor. 11: 23-24 states,

for this is what I received from the Lord, and in turn pass onto you; that on the same night he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread, and thanked God for it, broke it and he said, "This is my body, which is for you, do this as memorial of me.

For Paul, the bread and wine are the body and blood of Jesus Christ and to partake of it is to stand for all that Jesus Christ stood for during his earthly life. Paul's testimony of what he had received from the Lord was given because the injustice-prone Corinthians did bring their ill ways of life into the gathering of Christians, "even into the Eucharistic liturgy itself" (Nwabekee, 1995).

As a memorial of Jesus Christ that welcomes the excluded and announces good tidings to the poor, the Eucharist becomes a challenge that enables people to partake actively in the life-giving relationship they are celebrating. This is contrary to what was obtainable in Corinth during the time of Paul. Nwabekee (1995) strongly noted that the well placed in the society even used the occasion of the Eucharistic liturgy to perpetuate inequality. According to him,

The rich men use this as their usual picnic, even getting drunk and leaving nothing for the poor who often come late from work. This action of some of the well-to-do men is sacrilegious and consequent of severe punishment from God (Nwabekee, 1995:12-13).

Celebrating the Eucharist means not only witnessing bread and wine change into body and blood of Jesus Christ, but also it means becoming what one receives: a sign of love and justice for all people.

### The Various Shifts Overtime

The patristic scholars of church history in the third and fourth centuries understood the Eucharist as a sign of unity. The Roman Catholic Church of this period was very concerned about unity and orthodoxy or sound teaching. This concern was heightened by the wind of heresies of that period. The consequence was the fact that celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy became more catechetical and disconnected from the issues of justice in any form. Speaking of a sect called Gnostics, one of the teachers of that period says: "They abstain from the Eucharist and prayer, because they confess not that the Eucharist and prayer is the flesh of our savior Jesus Christ" (Gibbons, 1980:243).

Ignatius of Antioch addressing the Christians of Philadelphia in Asia Minor says: "Be resolved to celebrate one Eucharist only; for there is only one flesh of the Lord Jesus Christ and only one chalice for unification with his blood, only one altar, as there is only one bishop with the presbyters and the deacons".

Tertullian notes that by participating in the Eucharistic food one participates in Christ's sacrifice. Irenaeus of Lyons (AD 140-203), on his own part, emphasizes the ultimate effect of the Eucharist as implanting in the bodies of people the seed of resurrection. The development of the Early Fathers of the church on the Eucharist was insistence on the cult of unquestioned mystery. They reinforced this by the use of a sacred language, an obscure ritual performed on behalf of a passive congregation, and an aura of hushed silence in usually dimly-lit buildings (Hellwig, 1992:69). Many Catholics became accustomed to the shifts and today most of them find it unreasonable to link the Eucharistic liturgy with social justice issues.



### The Eucharist and Social Justice

The link between the Eucharistic liturgy and social justice could be first seen in the socio-religious context of the ritual institution by Jesus Christ. As noted by Groody (2009),

When Jesus celebrates the Passover with his disciples the night before he dies, he invites his disciples to "pass-over" with him from injustice to justice, from alienation to reconciliation, from death to life. So significant is this last event that Jesus calls his disciples to celebrate this meal in memory of him, for he lived as he died, and he died as he lived (Groody, 2009:277).

The Roman Catholic Church therefore structured her Eucharistic liturgy on Jesus' liberating works of salvation.

The climax of the Eucharistic liturgy is the sharing and reception of communion which make believers one with Jesus Christ. This aspect of the liturgy expresses people's sharing of the life of Christ in bread and wine (1 Cor. 11:17-34). It stands for human solidarity and corporate responsibility for the acts of justice. "To reach out and take Eucharist is to adopt a lifestyle that involves an aggressive search for justice, for the unloved and unneeded ones of the earth." (Mckenna, 1997:112) Gutierrez (1996) buttressed this fact when he strongly argued that,

Without a real commitment against exploitation and alienation and for a society of solidarity and justice, the Eucharistic celebration is an empty action, lacking any genuine endorsement by those who participate in it (Gutierrez, 1996:150).

The issues of social justice remain a challenge to people's disposition to Eucharistic celebrations. John Paul II (1987) insisted that the quality of the Eucharistic liturgy can be measured only by the community's commitment to all aspects of justice. Thus, Eucharistic liturgy must be used "as an occasion to make a serious commitment to fight the tragedy of hunger, the affliction of illness, the loneliness of the elderly, the hardships of the unemployed and the struggles of the immigrants." (John Paul II, 1987:28) Relating the Eucharistic liturgy to social justice, what Martin Luther King said about religion in general could apply. Ansbro (1994) quoted him saying that,

religion must be concerned not merely about mansion in the sky, but about the slums and the ghettos in the world. A proper religion will be concerned not merely about the streets flowing with milk and honey, but about the millions of God's children in Asia, Africa... who go to bed hungry at night (Ansbro, 1994:167).

The Church's liturgy as the work of God, then, is not just to celebrate the rituals of the church. It ought to include justice activity which addresses the unjust systems that are the sources of the symptoms of the hunger, homelessness, warfare, and environmental threats that plague the world of 21<sup>st</sup> century. The symptoms of the unjust aspects of our political, economic, social and religious systems became yet a hopeless matter when the media reported cases of cholera spread in Bauchi, Borno, Lagos, and Yobe States of Nigeria. Among other things, the media quoted Adamu Isa (2010), the State Coordinator of the World Health Organization (WHO), as saying that,

the situation was worsened due to lack of Public Health Laboratory (PHL) in the entire North-East sub region for gram staining and to carry out culture and sensitivity to ascertain whether or not it is gastro-enteritis or cholera (Musa, 2010:3).

Christian commitment to Eucharistic liturgy needs a method to regularly examine structural system, whether they are economics, social, political or religious, to ascertain whether they are compatible with the gospel message. In so doing, we would be concretely linking Eucharistic liturgy to social justice issues of the day.

### Summary and Conclusion

The paper has argued that Eucharistic liturgy is not only a sacrifice about Jesus Christ on the altar in the church, but it is also about Christians and all people offering themselves to others on the altar of social justice. Unlike today's overly individualistic interpretation of the Bible, first-century Eucharistic liturgy had little to do with personal salvation. Rather it represented a public commitment to proclaim and live a lifestyle that revolves around the reign of God, a time when "justice and peace shall kiss" (Ps. 85:11) and justice shall flourish... (Ps. 72:7). Finally, the people of God need to be reminded often that there are ethical demands in participating in



the Eucharistic liturgy. Therefore, there is need to return to the sources of the Eucharistic tradition.

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