

THE EUCHARIST: SIGN AND INSTRUMENT OF HOPE FOR A DIVIDED NIGERIA.

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Introduction

The great Dominican friar and theologian, Herbert McCabe (d. 2001), opens his important book, *The New Creation* (1964, 2010), with the following incisive remark regarding the Eucharist and the human condition:

Christ is present to us in so far as we are present to each other. We are born with a constitutional inability to live together in love; we achieve a precarious unity only with great difficulty and for a short time; there is a flaw in the very flesh we have inherited which makes for division between us. The very thing which makes us one, the fact that we come into existence as members of one family, is the source of our isolation. The nature in which we are born is twisted and tends to isolate us from each other. Whatever community we try to set up by purely human means, whether it be the family or the political community, we fail to reach real unity. This is the story of Babel; in the city built by men to reach to the heavens, the tongues of men are confused and they fail to understand one another....Already, because of the resurrection of Christ, the new humanity exists. His risen body is the foundation of the new human race. Already, moreover, we can belong to the new creation, not physically but sacramentally; our bodies make contact, real contact, with the risen Christ through the mysteries, symbols in

which he is present to us. In these same mysteries we are able to be really present to each other.¹

The wounded and divisive human condition which McCabe references above is the enduring state of moral frailty stamped on all humans, from birth, by Original Sin. The remedy for that moral debilitation and the pledge of a more harmonious existence is the saving death of Christ on the cross, the merits of which come to us through the administration of the sacraments; the chief of which is the Eucharist – the most holy sacrament (*De Sanctissimum*) in which the total Christ is received- body, soul and divinity.

Today, the continued corporate existence of our country, Nigeria, is being openly called into question as never before. From the agitations of members of the Movement for the Survival of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) led by Ralph Uwazuruike to the sharper rhetoric of Nnamdi Kanu's Independent Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) a serious desire for the exercise of the right of self-determination is being expressed for the peoples of the defunct Republic of Biafra, or at least, for its Igbo component. The addition to the mix of the periodic violence unleashed on innocent farmers across the country by headstrong and rampaging herdsmen (mainly of Fulani extraction), and the ongoing terror campaign being waged by Islamic fundamentalists, aka Boko Haram mostly in northeastern Nigeria, cause serious concerns in the minds of thoughtful people across the country. The palpable discomfort of segments of the country regarding lop-sided appointments to important government positions and the imbalance in the allocation of infrastructural projects by the federal government, and the

¹ McCabe, H. (1964/2010) *The New Creation*, (London: Sheed & Ward, / Continuum,), xi-xii.

Kaduna Declaration of Arewa Youths giving the Igbo resident in different parts of northern Nigeria three months –starting June 6th 2017 –within which to return to their home states of origin have combined to bring critical urgency to the situation. In the face of these mounting challenges, this researcher wishes to argue that the Eucharist – the sacrament of Christian unity – can provide hope in this complex and challenging situation. I shall start explaining the sacramental character of the Eucharist: a sacrament in general, and specifically one of Jesus Christ. Then, I shall proceed with how it functions both as a sign and an instrument of unity –first of the Christian people and of humankind. I shall then conclude with how the retrieval of the meaning of this vital symbol can jump-start a new way of living between Nigerian Christians themselves and the non-Christian community in Nigeria.

Sign and Symbol.

Perhaps, the first step toward understanding the Eucharist is to locate it within the context of the church's sacramental system which belongs to the world of signs and symbols. Of course, sacramentality, that is, the use of visible, tangible symbols to mediate encounters with the divinity is a character shared by all religions; though only in Christianity does one find a fully developed and explicitly named sacramental system.² The word 'sacrament' was derived from the Latin '*sacramentum*' which was first used to refer to the pledge money deposited by litigants before the shrine in ancient Rome which was to be forfeited by whoever lost the case. Later it came to be used in reference to the oath of allegiance taken by Roman soldiers. Christian writers

² Martos, J. (2001) *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church*, Revised and Updated, (Missouri, USA: Ligouri/Triumph), 3.

adopted the term and applied it first to the primary Christian ritual of Baptism through which one became a member of the faith community of the Church. The term was also employed in translating the Greek term *mysterion*, which the New Testament used in designating Christian rituals which were hidden from non-Christians. "A mystery," writes William Barclay, "is something, usually in itself quite simple, which is completely obscure to the outsider, but completely meaningful to the initiate. To the uninitiated, it is meaningless; to the instructed it is the vehicle of truth and grace."³

The sacrament is a sign, but not just any kind of sign. The nature of the sign is to point out something other than itself. There are natural and artificial or conventional signs. Natural signs are those which occur in ordinary course of events; they do not need to be learned or rather, they are taught by the ordinary course of life. For instance, smoke is a sign of fire. Natural signs have easily understood relationship with that which they point out. Conventional signs, which are sometimes referred to as symbols, have no natural relationship with that which they point out. They have been so established through social conventions and thus have to be learnt as such. Such is the symbolic character of a country's national flag, for example. The sacraments are largely of the character of conventional signs, even though they also share something of the character of natural signs as well.

The specific character of sacraments as signs is that they are *efficacious*: they actually bring about that which they signify. Thus, Augustine is famous for having described sacraments as "efficacious signs" (*signum efficax*) of inward grace, established by Jesus Christ. In his incisive study of the sacraments, American New Testament scholar and convert to Catholicism,

³ Barclay, W. (1967) *The Lord's Supper*, (London: SCM Press), 10.

Scott Hahn, details how he gradually came to appreciate the sacraments, through bible study, after first deriding them as boring. After being shaken off of his complacent attitude toward the sacraments by his wife, he explains: "I was struck by certain details I had always glossed over. Now I noticed that God had a particular characteristic way of dealing with his people down through the ages. He made *covenants* with them, and He always sealed those covenants not with an abstract lecture on the nature of salvation, obligation, and law but with an outward sign, a *physical* sign."⁴ Thus there was the rainbow in the sky for the covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:12), circumcision for that with Abraham (Gen. 17:10), and blood sprinkled on the people for that with Moses and the people of Israel (Ex. 24: 8). Reflecting further on the data of scripture, Hahn observes the realism of its teaching on the sacraments and that they are, in fact, much more than mere signs or symbols. In his own words:

The Bible, in both the Old and the New Testaments, seemed to speak of God's sacraments with a powerful realism. These actions were symbolic, but they were more than just symbols. They were memorials, but they were not just reminders. They were rites of passage, but they were more than just rituals. The sacraments were divine actions on the order of the creation of the universe. They marked the moments in history – world history, salvation history, and personal history –when God was making a new start with His people.⁵

The Eucharist is, perhaps, the prime example of the kind of realism Hahn refers to regarding the sacraments in the pages of

⁴ Hahn, S. (2004) *Swear to God: The Promise and Power of the Sacraments*, (New York: Doubleday), 5f.

⁵ Ibid, 7.

scripture. In Chapter six of John's gospel, we find the theology of the Eucharist enunciated. It was its utter realism which was cause of scandal and nearly overturned the earthly mission of Christ. Jesus had astonished the people with the following claims: "I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats this bread he will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (vv. 48-51). The reaction of the Jews was immediate and hostile: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" In response, Jesus became more insistent: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (vv52-54). To all that, many of disciples replied: "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" (v.60). They went ahead to register their protest by parting ways with Jesus: "After this, many of the disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (v.66). Rather than retract, Jesus turned to the twelve with a pointed and decisive question: "Do you also wish to go away?" It was Peter who answered for others: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have come to know you are the Holy One of God" (vv.67-69).

Sacrament of Jesus Christ

According to Flemish theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx, the man Jesus was the sacrament of encounter with God, the "primordial sacrament," that is, the primary or fundamental sacrament of God. "The man Jesus, as the personal visible realization of the divine grace of redemption, is the sacrament, the primordial sacrament, because this man, the Son of God himself, is intended by the Father to be in his humanity the only

way to the actuality of redemption.”⁶ In the man Jesus, God (who is invisible because He is a spirit) became visible and tangible. Thomas Aquinas explains that the human nature of Jesus Christ is our way to God, since “men are freed from their sins through Christ’s humanity”⁷. The man Jesus was the face of the redeeming God turned mercifully toward us.

From the moment of the Ascension, however, there arose an existential crisis for the Christ’s ministry of redemption: how was this going to continue since God was no longer given to us in the tangible form of the man Jesus? The church, the faith community of the followers of Jesus (which keeps his memory alive), is the answer to this problem. This church has an intimate and unbreakable connection with the mission and person of Christ. As Klemens Richter explains: “The decisive sign of Gods’ presence is Jesus Christ, the central sacrament of the divine salvific will, the first and fundamental sacrament. In him and in his actions we are given an image, a picture of God. Since Christ, by sending the Holy Spirit, continue to live and work in his Church, the Church is a basic sacrament of that saving will: it is a fundamental sacrament.”⁸ In the same vein, Schillebeeckx writes, stressing the necessary role of the Church: “From the moment that, by his ascension, the “primordial sacrament” leaves the world, the economy of the “separated sacraments” becomes operative in consequence of the incarnation and as its prolongation. From Scripture we learn that while none of twelve Apostles who enjoyed immediate contact with the “primordial

⁶ Schillebeeckx, E. (1963) *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God*, (Wisconsin, USA: Sheed & Ward), 15.

⁷ Aquinas, T. (1993) *Light of faith: The Compendium of Theology*, (New York: Book of the Month), 215.

⁸ Richter, K. (1990) *The Meaning of the Sacramental Symbols: Answers to Today’s Questions*. Trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press), 9.

sacrament” himself was baptized, St. Paul, the “thirteenth Apostle,” who had not encountered the earthly Christ in faith, was in fact baptized. Sacramentality thus bridges the gap and solves the disproportion between the Christ of heaven and unglorified humanity, and makes possible a reciprocal human encounter between Christ and men even after the ascension, though in a special manner. A permanent sacramentality is thus an intrinsic requirement of the Christian religion.”⁹

The import of this is that each of the seven sacraments of the Church is, in fact, an encounter with the risen Christ and, therefore, an offer of Christ’s redemption. Thus the sacraments constitute the earthly prolongation of the mission of the incarnate Son. Each of the sacraments is thus not only acts of the church, the mystical body of Christ, but acts of Christ himself. “In an earthly embodiment which we can see and touch, the heavenly Christ sacramentalizes both his continual intercession for us and his active gift of grace. Therefore, the sacraments are the visible realization on earth of the Christ’s mystery of saving worship. ‘What was visible in Christ has now passed over to the sacraments of the Church’.”¹⁰ Of all the sacraments, the most exalted, the most holy, the most potent is the Eucharist in which is given (though hardly obvious) all the spiritual treasures of the Church: Christ, body, soul and divinity.

Sign and Instrument of Unity

Reflection on the Eucharist and searching the scriptures and the Church’s tradition easily reveal the sacrament to be both a sign and an instrument of unity. First, the elements. The Eucharist is confectioned using unleavened (in the Latin rite churches) or

⁹ Schillebeeckx, *ibid*, 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 45.

leavened wheat bread and wine made from vine grapes. Fulton J. Sheen gives three reasons why he thinks these substances are suitable for being the elements of the sacraments, apart from their having been used by Christ himself. One, since bread and wine have been the traditional nourishment of humanity, in offering them we are equivalently offering ourselves. Two, more than any other those elements represent unity: bread is made through the crushing together of several grains of wheat and mixing them with water and taking them through the heat of the bakery; while wine is made by pressing together several grapes of vine and subjecting them to the winepress.¹¹ We learn from Paul in 1 Cor. 10: 17 that "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."

From various sources of the Christian tradition, the theme of the unity is at the centre regarding the Eucharist. In the *Didache*, for example, the following prayer is made over the Eucharist: "As this broken bread was scattered on the mountains, but brought together was made one, so gather your Church from the ends of the earth into your kingdom."¹² In the second century, St Ignatius linked the Eucharist to the office of the bishop as a sign and instrument of ecclesial unity. Writing to the Symrnaeans he offers the following exhortation: "Let no one do anything of concern to the Church without the bishop. Let that be considered a valid Eucharist which is celebrated by the bishop, or by one whom he appoints. Wherever the bishop appears let the people be there; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church."¹³ Similarly, in the third century, St Cyprian (ca. 200-

¹¹ Sheen, F.J. (1965) "The Sacrifice of the Mass" in *This is the Mass, New and Revised*. As described by Daniel-Rops. Trans. Alastair Guinan, New York: Hawthorn Books, 19.

¹² *Didache*, 19,1.

¹³ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Symrnaeans*, 8,1.

258), who lived in difficult and polemical circumstances, saw the Eucharist as both a sign and an instrument of ecclesial unity: it both manifests and strengthens the unity of the Church. He writes: “Even the very sacrifice of the Lord bespeak a Christian unanimity bound to itself by a firm and inseparable charity. When the Lord calls bread from the union of many granules his Body, He points out our people, whom He betokens as made one; and when He calls wine, which is pressed from many grapes, His blood, again He signifies our flock; joined together by the blending together of a multitude into one.”¹⁴ St Augustine, the greatest of the Church fathers in the West, links partaking in the Eucharist with membership of the structured unity of the Church.

He, then, that is in the unity of Christ’s body, that is, in the structured Christian membership, the sacrament of which body the faithful communicating at the altar, are accustomed to receive, the same is truly said to eat the Body of Christ and to drink the Blood of Christ. And consequently, heretics and schismatics, separated from the unity of this body, are able to receive the same sacrament, but with no benefit to themselves – indeed, more to their own harm, in that rather than being liberated more slowly they are judged more severely. For they are not in the bond of peace which is expressed by that sacrament.¹⁵

Ambiguity and Signification

Like all symbols of identity, the Eucharist is also marked by ambiguity. For whereas it unites and marks out those who belong to what Augustine calls the “structured Christian membership” it

¹⁴ Cyprian of Carthage, *Letter to a certain Magnus*, 69 (76), 5.

¹⁵ Augustine, *The City of God*, 21, 15, 2.

also separates – distinguishing those who belong from those who do not. This ambiguity is one of the most significant characteristics of religion in history. For whereas religion binds people much more firmly than any other social phenomenon, it also divides, creating sometimes unbridgeable fissures between peoples and cultures. Elsewhere, this writer has argued that,

At the sociological level, the formation of an in-group always creates an out-group of those who do not belong. Thus, group identity is always affirmed in terms of a binary opposition of 'us' versus 'them'. Because of the sense of belonging which membership of an in-group provides, people tend to be very protective of their in-group and would go the length of doing harm to others (non-members) in order to defend the in-group...Since all humans harbour within them some measure of insecurity, we all look out to others for affirmation, validation and security. The in-group provides one with a circle of significant others where one feels safe and protected. In order to continue to enjoy this protection from the group, people will do whatever it takes to secure their own safety and advantages through the security of the in-group.¹⁶

As the most potent source of such group identity and solidarity, religion easily lends itself to abuse of the most despicable type. For, as Blaise Pascal once observed, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."¹⁷ And this is what breeds the social phenomenon which Jonathan Sachs characterizes as "*altruistic evil*": that is,

¹⁶ Ngwoke, E. (2016) *The Gospel and Church in Service of Society*, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension), 266f.

¹⁷ Quoted in Sachs, J. (2015) *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton), 3.

“evil committed in a sacred cause, in the name of high ideals.”¹⁸ This is the kind of evil which the world confronts in acts of terror which look up to religion for validation.

The genius of Christianity is not that it is immune to such manipulations and co-option for ideological purposes but that it has an innate and ineradicable orientation to the universal, away from the particular. The Eucharist, for example, is both a sign and an instrument of ecclesial unity; but this unity is directed towards the whole world both as its sign and its instrument. In the Eucharist, Christians find a unity which transcends their diverse and divisive particularities of race, class, tribe and gender. While it unites those of one faith (irrespective of those other limiting particularities of historical origin and social situation), it separates them from those who do not yet share the same faith. But not absolutely: its ideal of brotherhood and solidarity remains universal. “By this will all men know you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13: 35). But this love cannot be restricted only to the followers of Jesus, as he demonstrated in several of his most important teachings: the parable of the Good Samaritan and the parable of the last judgment. In the former, the hero of the parable is the stranger (a Samaritan) who took pity on the man who had fallen into the hands of robbers and had been badly manhandled because he proved himself a neighbour to the man in need. Jesus ends the story by challenging his followers to “go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37). In the latter, Jesus identifies favours done to whoever was in need as done to him: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40). Again, in a rather dramatic incident during his public ministry, Jesus deliberately relativized the importance ethnic and

¹⁸ Sachs, *ibid.* 9.

parochial attachments to him, privileging submission to the will of God. To those who drew his attention that his mother and some family members were looking for him, Jesus replied: "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mark 3: 33f).

It is within the Pauline corpus, however, that one finds a sustained attempt to work out a theology for overcoming the particularity of creedal, racial and ethnic affiliations to embrace the indiscriminating universality of the Gospel. In his study of Pauline theology, N.T. Wright draws attention to the apparent paradox that belief in one God entails the unity of the human race, but that in order to receive fully the blessings bestowed by God, one has to belong to a "tribe"¹⁹ From Wright's analysis in *The Climax of the Covenant*, Miroslav Volf makes the following postulations. One, that, in the name of the one God, Paul relativizes the Torah: that the Law which is incapable of uniting all humankind into one people cannot be the final revelation of the one God. Two, that, for the sake of equality, Paul does away with genealogy: the promise of God has to be won through faith; otherwise some would inherit, not by grace, but through race. Three, that, for the sake of all the families of the earth, Paul embraces Christ: the crucified and risen Christ is the "seed" of Abraham in whom "there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female" (Galatians 3:28). In Christ, all the families of the earth are blessed on equal terms, fulfilling the promised

¹⁹ Wright, N.T. (1992) *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 170.

single family of Abraham.²⁰ Summing up St Paul's enormous theological contribution in this respect, Volf writes:

Paul's solution to the tension between universality and particularity is ingenious. Its logic is simple: the oneness of God requires God's universality; God's universality entails human equality; human equality implies equal access by all to the blessings of the one God; equal access is incompatible with ascription of religious significance to genealogy; Christ, the seed of Abraham, is both the fulfilment of the genealogical promise to Abraham and the end of genealogy as a privileged locus of access to God; faith in Christ replaces birth into a people. As a consequence, all peoples can have equal access to the one God of Abraham and Sarah on equal terms, none by right and all by grace.²¹

The Eucharist and National Unity

From the preceding discourse, it should be obvious that even though the Eucharist may not be the silver bullet which can do away with Nigeria's exploding social problems, it can provide an important jump off point for finding solutions to its many ills. And this, of itself, is by no means alien to the Eucharist. To start with, the Eucharist is a liturgy -from the Greek *leitourgia* – meaning any work done for the public good. Of its very nature, the Eucharist has a public character which goes well beyond the immediate, private and parochial needs of its participants: every

²⁰ Volf, M. (1996) *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), 44f.

²¹ *Ibid*, 45.

Eucharist is a celebration of the whole Church, led by Christ in the person of the priest or bishop. First, the Eucharistic elements – bread and wine – are offered to God as “fruit of the earth” and “work of human hands”. As “fruit of the earth,” those elements represent the whole earth –animate and inanimate alike –being offered up to God their creator through Christ. As “work of human hands,” offering of those elements signify the sanctification of human labour –through which humans participate in the perfection of God’s creation. From those elements alone, one can thus argue to the universal orientation of the Eucharist toward the redemption of all creation. By participating in the Eucharist, Christians join their own imperfect sacrifices to the perfect sacrifice of Christ (offered once and for all at Calvary) and re-presented to God whenever the Eucharist is celebrated.

More importantly, the Eucharist embodies an ethic that is at once empowering, liberating and heart-expanding. The context of the last supper (where the Eucharist was first offered) has been a matter of much scholarly interest, a setting which provides a rich cultural matrix for understanding the import of the sacrament. After examining the available evidence and the arguments of scholars regarding the setting of the Last Supper, William Barclay concludes that “the evidence that the last Supper was a Passover meal is stronger than the evidence that it was not, and that the objections which are raised to its Passover character can be met.”²² At any rate, the Church has always held on to the Passover as the proper ritual and cultural context of the Last Supper and this is borne out by many of the prayers of the liturgy, especially during the Easter. In order to better understand the Eucharist, we can learn something about the Passover from

²² Barclay, W. (1967) *The Lord's Supper*, 29f.

the Jews which might be quite helpful. Jewish rabbi and British public intellectual, Jonathan Sachs, explains the significance of unleavened bread – the Passover bread and the bread of the Eucharist in the Latin rite – as follows:

The unleavened bread represents two things. It is food eaten by slaves. But it is also the food eaten by the Israelites as they left Egypt in too much of a hurry to let the dough rise. It is the bread of affliction, but also the bread of freedom. When it is eaten alone, we taste in it all the sufferings of the human condition. But when we offer to share it, we taste something else; the sense of a freer world that God promised we can create. One who fears tomorrow does not share his bread with others. But one who is willing to share his food with a stranger is capable of fellowship and hope. Food shared is no longer bread of affliction. Whenever we reach out and touch other people's lives, giving help to the needy, and hope to those in despair, we bring freedom into the world, and with freedom, God.²³

The principal challenges confronting Nigeria today -apart from an economic meltdown, compounded by mounting unemployment - have to do with Islamic fundamentalism, the fear of Islamization, the growing violent clashes between farmers and herdsmen, and the rising threat to national unity occasioned by perceived marginalization and the consequent invocation of the right to self-determination for the different constituent units of the country. It is important to draw a sharp line of demarcation between Islamic militancy perpetrated by fundamentalist ideologues (like Boko Haram activists) and the so-called threat

²³ Sachs, J. (1995) *Faith in the Future*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd), 144.

of Islamization- that is, the attempt to force the spread of Islam either through legislation or some other form of pressure, apart from legitimate persuasion.

The first bobby trap to avoid is the temptation to paint all Muslims with the brush of fundamentalism. Judaism, Christianity and Islam have a common ancestry in the faith of Abraham, and they are all of Semitic origin. There is thus an understandable sibling rivalry between the three faiths, especially between Christianity and Islam since both are missionary religions while Judaism is not. When Christianity was born, Jews looked upon it as a Jewish heresy, tried to stamp it out through persecution – a move which drove the faith into the imperial city of Rome within its first decades- thereby giving it worldwide cogency within a very short timeframe. Similarly, at the birth of Islam in the seventh century, Christian Europe regarded it as a Christian heresy which could be beaten back like many others before it.²⁴ Islam has returned the compliment of its older sister religions by subordinating their truth claims to its own. Whereas the intent of spreading Islam through persuasion is legitimate, just as evangelization is an intrinsic part of the Christian faith, Islamic fundamentalism is the symptom of a disease within the heart of Islam. For there is a civil war going on within the worldwide Islamic community (*umma*). Apart from the division of Muslims into two rival sects, the Sunni (90 percent of the *umma*, led by Saudi Arabia) and the Shiite (the remaining 10 percent, led by Iran –the successor of the proud Persian Empire), there is an ongoing battle for the soul of Islam. Who will speak for the *umma*? The fundamentalists or the regular leaders of the faith? That is the question. Christians will be doing the country a great service by encouraging regular Muslims to courageously

²⁴ Fletcher, R. (2003). *The Cross and the Crescent: Christianity and Islam from Mohammad to the Reformation*, (New York: Viking), 17.

stand up to those fundamentalists in the Muslim community. Lumping all Muslims together as fundamentalists would be playing into the hands of the terrorists, giving traction to their twisted logic of hate, and delaying their defeat –thereby prolonging misery for all.

Although the Eucharist is not primarily the sacrament of reconciliation, nevertheless it provides ample motivation for its participants to seek reconciliation in order to be worthy of offering the sacrifice. For Jesus ordered such reconciliation as a condition for making an acceptable sacrifice: “So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5: 23f). It needs to be understood that conflicts between Christians and Muslims are rooted in their competing truth claims and missionary orientation. Past wrongs and clashes invest such conflicts with a measure of atavism, thereby rendering the relationship highly suspicious. The way out here is to embrace what Jonathan Sachs terms the “dignity of difference,” that is, the understanding of difference not as threat to be defeated, but as a gift to the gratefully accepted. As Sachs argues:

The truth at the beating heart of monotheism is that God transcends the particularities of cultures and the limits of human understanding. He is my God but also the God of all mankind, even of those whose customs and ways of life are unlike mine. That is not to say that there are many Gods. That is polytheism. Nor is it to say that God endorses every act done in His name. On the contrary: a God of your side as well as mine must be a God of justice who stands above us both, teaching us to make space for one another, to hear each other's

claims and to resolve them equitably....Only such a God could teach mankind to make peace other than by conquest and conversion, and as something nobler than practical necessity.²⁵

The persistence of clashes between farmers and herdsmen across Nigeria is simply evidence of a failure of nerves, a lack of political will and proof of irresponsible leadership. So far, the federal government has failed to do the needful, to provide equal security and protection within the law for all citizens of Nigeria. Rather, the unfortunate impression is given that the herdsmen are a special breed of Nigerians who have a license to violate other people's rights, destroy their property and, sometimes (as has happened in several parts of the country in the past few years) take their lives -without being held to account. Already, the governments of Benue and Nasarawa states have taken the lead by enacting bills prohibiting the free grazing of cattle in any part of their respective states. What is necessary now is for other states which are similarly affected to enact bills with similar provisions so that free cattle grazing may be eliminated in the entire country and cattle breeding in the country harmonized with international best practices around the world.

About marginalization felt by some sections of the country, the problem will not be resolved simply by granting the right of self-determination to any or all parts of the country. The basic issue is one of reckless competition for scarce and fast disappearing resources, while little effort is being made to develop alternative sources of revenue for the country. Even though there may be much to say in support of restructuring the country in order to enhance efficiency and reduce tension, not much would be

²⁵ Sachs, J. (2002/2004) *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, (London/ New York: Continuum), 65.

achieved without a drastic change of attitude on the part of the Nigerian citizenry. It is impossible to build a sound economy on a culture of impunity which disdains a disciplined work ethic and sidesteps the law and established procedures at every available opportunity. Nor can the sinews of a vibrant society develop except citizens are imbued with a sense duty, solidarity and social responsibility. The Eucharist can help in the development of this community spirit. For as St Pope John Paul II wrote:

The Eucharist is not merely an expression of communion in the Church's life; it is also a project of solidarity for all humanity....There is one point which I would like to emphasize since it affects the authenticity of our communal sharing in the Eucharist. It is the impulse which the Eucharist gives to the community for a *practical commitment to building a more just and fraternal society*....We cannot delude ourselves: by our mutual love and, in particular, by our concern for those in need we will be recognized as true followers of Christ (cf. Jn. 13:35; Mt. 25: 31-46). This will be the criterion by which the authenticity of our Eucharistic celebration is judged" (emphasis in original).²⁶

Conclusion

As the central Christian ritual, the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life. At its best, it can be the foundation of the renewal of the social order in our country. The sacrament, through the context of its foundation – the Jewish Passover – which furnishes the deepest cultural roots for its meaning – through its elements and its ethics is truly the sacrament of unity or communion. It bears witness to already existing communion

²⁶ Pope John Paul II. (2004) *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, 27, 28.

within the Christian faith community, but it also points out further possibilities for deepening and expanding that communion to embrace the wider society. By participating in the Eucharist, Christians are bound together by the saving blood of Jesus –which begins to course through their veins – making them participants in the divine life. More importantly, it also binds them to a life committed to solidarity with one another and with the wider human society. In the Eucharist, Christians come as close as is ever possible to sharing life with Christ and with the divine Trinity. But the real proof of this participation in the divine life is a life lived with active love and concern for the integral wellbeing of the other –irrespective of creed, sex or colour. For God is truly present to us in Jesus Christ –the crucified and risen savior – only when we are each present to the other as genuine brothers and sisters – in solidarity and communion.