

# MISINTERPRETING and POLITICIZING the EUCHARIST



By Tarcísio Beal, S. T. L. Ph. D.

The one sacrament that spells out the central meaning of Christian discipleship is the

Eucharist. Yet it has been traditionally misinterpreted by a literal reading of the Scriptures and now turned into a political weapon by a large number of American bishops and their far-right followers. Until Vatican II, Catholics were led to believe that, after the priestly consecration during mass, the species of bread and wine are turned into the body and blood of Christ so that they could not be touched by any lay person and that even the priests could only touch them while wearing a sacred stole; communion, that is the reception of the eucharistic bread in the mouth, could be received only after a minimum of eight-hours fasting from food and water, and most adults were advised to make a sacramental confession before receiving the Eucharist. Fact is that in the Letters of Paul and the practices of the early Church, the Eucharist was a gathering of the community to share the bread and the wine as sacramental symbols of the presence of Christ to empower them to love and care for one another.

Major changes in the understanding of the Eucharist came during the 4th century, when the Church became increasingly associated with the power of the Roman empire, especially during the pontificate of Damasus I (366-384), who gathered the Council of Constantinople (381). In fact, in the New Testament, and especially in the Letters of Paul, the followers of Jesus are never divided between what later, after the second century, came to be called clergy and laity.

I took my first communion at the age of seven along with some 25 other children. That morning, after the nun in charge of the preparations finished all the instructions, she voiced one final question: “Did any of you eat or drink anything after yesterday’s midnight?” One little girl raised her trembling hand and said: “Yes, Sister, I drank some water this morning after washing my teeth!” – “I’m sorry, child, but you cannot receive communion today!” The poor girl was taken away from the group in tears. And the rest of us, children, stood there stunned, wondering what sin had she committed to be denied the joy of her first communion...

This kind of magic interpretation of the Eucharist was a constant in the education of the clergy until Vatican II. I recalled watching an old French movie that exemplified such a view of the Eucharist: A priest suspended of his duties by his bishop was dining in a Paris restaurant when he decided to use the powers received in his ordination. He “consecrated” the bread and wine served at the table, saying “This is my body,” “This is my blood.” Immediately both the bread and the wine began bleeding profusely, horrifying the witnesses, as if they were the body and blood of Jesus..

In 1962, while a student of Theology with the Franciscans of Southern Brazil, I was playing the organ up in the church’s choir on a Sunday morning, surrounded by three other friars, while

Felipe Alves, a newly-ordained priest, was celebrating mass. In those days, the churches’ interior was constructed with a genuflectory (a kneeler, or barrier, separating the altar area from the congregation) where the faithful had to come and kneel to receive the Eucharistic bread. Well, communion time arrived and Rev. Alves came to place the host in the mouth of the communicants. As he approached a young lady with a beautiful bosom somewhat exposed, his hand trembled and he ended up dropping the host into the woman’s bosom. What to do now?!? He told the lady to stay there and not to touch the host that he would pick up and place on her tongue after the end of the mass. After mass, Rev. Alves came down with a small towel and, closing his eyes, grabbed the host from the woman’s bosom and placed it on her mouth. Up in the choir, the young friars looked stunned, hardly believing what they had just witnessed.

**Now, in 2021, quite a number of American bishops, still viewing the Eucharist merely as clerical, male monopoly, have fully politicized the Eucharist by proposing that it be denied to all Catholics who are pro-choice (a woman’s right of abortion), highlighting it all with the case of President Joseph Biden.**

Led by Los Angeles’ Archbishop José Gomes, Secretary of the American Bishops Conference, and contrary to the position taken by Pope Francis and of the CDF (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), these hierarchs want to make President Biden their main target as an example of their anti-Democratic campaign. A faithful Catholic, Biden supports all pro-life legislation, but also the right of abortion in some cases. The Far-Right crowd is funded by wealthy evangelicals and by Catholic billionaires such as Rupert Murdoch, owner of Fox News television channels and financial contributor of the EWTN (Eternal World Television Network) and of the Napa Institute, two well-known archconservative, reactionary Catholic organizations.

Besides Archbishop José Gómez, the following are among the most prominent prelates who stand up against President Biden: Salvatore Cordileone, Archbishop of San Francisco, Samuel Áquila, Archbishop of Denver, Joseph Naumann, Bishop of Kansas City, Thomas Holstead, Bishop of Phoenix, and Thomas Paprocky, Bishop of Springfield, Illinois. There is no surprise, then, that these hierarchs have been supporters of former President Donald Trump, especially because of his supposed pro-life stance and his moves to free the churches from taxation. Sadly notorious has also been Joseph Strickland, Bishop of Tyler, Texas, who publicly contradicted Pope Francis and the Vatican on the

morality and necessity of the Covid-19 vaccine. Strickland also appeared on a video arguing that one cannot be a faithful Catholic and also a Democrat and, this past December, at the “Stop the Steal” rally, in Washington, D. C., echoed Trump’s and the republican party’s false claim that the presidential reelection was stolen by the Democrats.

To say that Christianity in America is in deep crisis is to state the obvious. Even worse is to politicize the Eucharist in the name of an interpretation that misrepresents its profound spiritual and social meaning. It is nothing short of tragic that some Catholic and Evangelical leaders and their followers make up the legion of hatemongers of the Jewish, Black, and Asian Americans and continue to support policies which betray Christian, democratic ideals, and the value of each human life, besides misrepresenting the grand ideals of the Founding Fathers. The use of the Bible in order to justify discrimination and hatred, or violence against human life, is never justified.

In the Eucharist, the faithful gather in love and solidarity to receive the bread and the wine, the mysterious and visible symbols of the real and mystical presence of Christ in the midst of the community. It is essentially a communal, social rite/sacrament. In order that he have life, Christ gave his own. Our modern society has constantly failed to denounce social, structural sin, and most religious denominations center their attack on individual sin, arguing for the need of individual prayer and repentance. But the New Testament denounces “the sin of the world in its structures: the synagogue, the empire, slavery, that is, the sin which today is committed within socio-political and economic structures that marginalize and victimize millions of human beings. Pedro Casaldáliga, ex-Bishop of São Félix do Araguaia, Mato Grosso,

## CAN JOE BIDEN RECEIVE HOLY COMMUNION?



Brazil, reminds us that the prayer of the Offertory of the Catholic mass (“This bread we offer, which earth has given and human hands have made”) clearly indicates that the Eucharist is a social sacrament that brings the community together to celebrate the presence of Christ, who unifies and activates the faithful by the power of the Spirit.

Theologian Ched Myers (Binding the Strong Man – A political Reading of the Gospel of Mark – Orbis, 1991, p. 364) notes that the last time Jesus met with his disciples around the table has become the center of the Catholic liturgy, namely, the Eucharist. However, Mark’s narrative of the Last Supper is not – as the words of consecration during mass seem to imply - a backward-looking remembrance of Jesus’ sacrifice by the apostles and future generations – but rather a call for forward-looking action: “Mark articulates his new symbolic center, and overturns the last stronghold of symbolic authority in the dominant order, the high holy feast of the Passover. In place of the Temple liturgy Jesus offers his “body,” that is, his messianic practice in life and death.”

Let’s hope that the Conference of American Bishops stop contradicting the Vatican, follow the example of Pope Francis, and that their final “Instruction on the Eucharist,” which is due in November, will stay away from the partisan politics that they have been playing these last five years. The Eucharist is and must be gathering of the Christian people

In the presence of the Trinitarian God

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## Lauryn Harold Farris July 8, 1956 – July 27, 2021

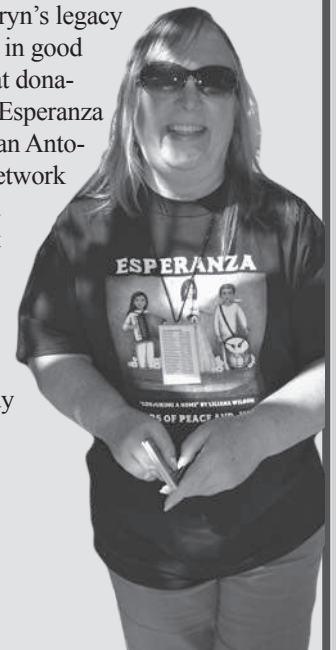


Lauryn Farris, a dedicated queer activist and Esperanza buena gente touched many lives. In her lifetime, she saw same sex marriage legalized allowing her and her wife, Kerry Farris, of 39 years to be legally married in 2015.

Locally, Lauryn worked on the passage of the San Antonio Non-discrimination Ordinance in 2013 and worked with groups like PFLAG San Antonio, the Transgender Education Network of Texas, CAUSA and the Queer Corazones of the Esperanza Center. A lead organizer for *Son Tus Niños También: Trans Kids Back To School*, Lauryn facilitated discussions between teachers, parents and their children on how best to work with trans children in the schools. As buena gente of the Esperanza, Lauryn helped out at the annual Peace Market, the Big Give Campaign and the monthly Noche Azul concerts.

Lauryn’s wife, Kerry, and their children, Mark and Harold, and two grandchildren, Austin and Theo, will continue Lauryn’s legacy of activism fighting for those who have been silenced or felt

voiceless. They will continue to extend love to all no matter their race, sexuality, religion, or gender expression. A beloved Nana, parent, child and activist, Lauryn’s legacy will live on in those that can still get in good trouble. The family has requested that donations in her memory be made to the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, PFLAG San Antonio or the Transgender Education Network of Texas. The Esperanza staff, board and buena gente extend our heartfelt sympathies to Lauryn’s family and community. Her spirit will endure in all whom she touched and her shining light will not be diminished. ¡Lauryn Harold Farris, presente! May she rest in power and pride!



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