

Richard Kearney

Two Prophets of Eucharistic Hospitality

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Often in our Church today the Eucharist is a site of conflict and division, as in nervousness about intercommunion or refusal of the Eucharist to divorced and remarried Catholics. Here I would like to reflect on the work of two visionary priests whose deep sense of the Eucharist as sacrament of the widest human fraternity may have much to teach us. Both of them learned in Asia a wide outlook on humanity and the cosmos which led them to rethink the Eucharist in a breath-taking way, and their witness stands as a challenge to any restrictive handling of the sacrament as the identity-marker of a closed community rather than as a gift to be shared with all humanity.

Abhishiktananda (Henri le Saux)

In 1948 the Benedictine monk, Henri le Saux, left his monastery in Brittany and sailed to Pondicherry. Like several missionaries before and after him, Henri le Saux (renamed Abhishiktananda in India) felt compelled to reflect on some of his Catholic dogmas when confronted with 'strangers.' He reached some quite radical conclusions as he pursued his contemplative prayer bringing the Advaita of Śankara into dialogue with the Fourth Gospel. 'The discovery of Christ's I AM,' he declared, 'is the ruin of any Christian theology, for all notions are burned within the fire of experience' (Stuart, 349).

It is no accident, it seems to me, that it was after his encounter with a spiritual culture deeply foreign to his own, that his approach to the Christian Eucharist underwent genuine questioning and finally issued in a radical

opening to other faiths. One such opening occurred in 1972, during an Easter Saturday Vigil in Pune. His friend and disciple, Sara Grant, a Sacred Heart sister from Scotland and a fine theologian in her own right, described the ceremony as a major 'breakthrough' in interreligious communion. She writes of how her Christ Prema Seva ashram at Pune—a 'multi-religious household' functioning as a center of liturgical 'experimentation'—hosted a particularly meaningful Eucharist with Abhi and a Hindu Panditji, as well as other Hindu and Jewish guests during that Easter weekend. The ritual was performed out of conviction that 'liturgical celebration is the setting par excellence for reflection on the mystery of Christ in the light of both biblical and non-biblical scripture' (Grant, 72).

Though Abhishiktananda was the chief celebrant, he himself seems to have written little or nothing about this event—though there are some telling hints in diary entries which we shall consider below. It was Sara Grant who provided the best account, describing the Vigil as a genuinely 'trans-cultural celebration' which was much more than just a 'preparatory para-liturgy.' While the sharing of scriptures from different biblical and Hindu sources was central, what was most striking for her personally was the 'bodily aspect of the being and the fact that we experienced it *as community*.' She explains: 'Suddenly we realized that until his death, Jesus was bound by history and its limitations, but through his death and resurrection he had burst the bonds of space and time and could be recognized as not only Lord and Christ but as *Sat purusha*, the archetypal Man of Vedic tradition in whom every member of the human race can recognize the truth of his or her being' (*ib.*).

While I have not been able to locate any explicit reference to this 'breakthrough' event in Abhishiktananda's published works, I did discover the following journal entries which provide some revealing context for what transpired. On Good Friday (31 March 1972), the eve of the sharing between Abhi, Grant, and their Hindu guests, Abhi writes: "The disciple of Jesus does not "boast" that in the Cross he knows some higher secret of wisdom. He lives in conformity with his experience of the Cross and in all humility he gives an account of it to anyone who asks him.' On Easter Sunday (2 April), the day after the Vigil, he added this interreligious insight: 'Grace is the answer of both the Christian and the *bhakta* (seeker of God)... Jesus is still only understood by Christians as the guru who is other—*anya iva*—as the Purusha, Creator, Sacrificer, Saviour. Only too rarely has the flash of "That art Thou" (*tat tvam asi*) shone forth and the I am! (*aham asmi*) sprung up simultaneously.'

Six days later, still reflecting back and forth across Christian and Hindu scriptures, Abhi expands on this idea that Christianity discovers its true self by journeying out through the other, the stranger, the outsider. He describes this pilgrimage from self to other as a revolution of the Spirit: 'Truth cannot be formulated... Christianity is neither knowledge, nor devotion, nor ethics and ritual—nor is it duty, religion (formulas, institutions). It is an explosion of the Spirit. It accepts any religious basis (*jñāna/bhakti/karma*) to the extent

necessary in each case... But what makes the Christian inspiration distinct? Why this search for distinction, for identity?... Christianity is the discovery of myself in the other' (8 April).

On 25 October of the same year—just one year before his death (6 October 1973), Abhi's interreligious hospitality stretches to more explicit formulations: 'Do I call him Christ? Yes, within one tradition, but his name is just as much Emmanuel—Purusha. Can he be Krishna? Rama? Shiva? Why not, if Shiva is in Tamilnadu the form of that archetype which seeks to become explicit at the greatest depth of the human heart?' And while Abhi normally refrains from mentioning the actual role of the Mass as such (silence being his preferred voice), on 1 November he explicitly addresses the question of the Eucharist, making the bold claim that 'when you pass beyond the *namarupa* (external forms), the mystery takes all forms (*sarvarupam*). The clash is not with a particular *namarupa* but with those who absolutise it. The Church is so immense a mystery that the apologists water it down in trying to make it fit into their narrow historical views!' Then, at this crucial point of critical reflection, he poses the question: 'The liturgy, the Mass—is it not a necessary compensation for the drastic *neti*, negation of *advaita*?'; and he suggests that 'psychic health spontaneously (unconsciously) calls for this complement... to keep one's balance! However liturgy, Mass, should never be forced. Read the breviary, celebrate the Mass, never out of duty, but as if by instinct, spontaneously.' The Mass is conceived here, in other words, as a kataphatic corporeal counterpart to the apophatic emptiness of 'beyond God.' It is the affirmation which accompanies negation, the resurrection after the kenosis of the Cross, food and wine after hunger and thirst, the sharing of Emmaus after the solitude of Gethsemane. But there is more.

As death approaches, Abhi's interreligious sentiments become bolder and clearer. On 17 February 1973, he claims that 'the mythos of the Purusha (Spirit) is wider than that of Christos; not only does it include the cosmic and metacosmic aspect of the mystery, but it is also free from the attachment to time entailed by the mythos of Christ. Rather it recognises all the symbolic value contained in the mystery of Time, but refuses to compress the absolute separately into a particular point of time... The Purusha is, is simply there, like the Atman, Sat, Brahman, once the human being awakes to himself. "Before Abraham was, *I am*.'" In short, the mystery of the divine is greater than any particular confessional mythos in time, place, and history. It is transconfessional and transhistorical, without denying the indispensable need for symbolic, ritual instantiations. In the same entry, Abhi goes on to see the 'symbols of Christ' as 'bearers of universality.' He explains: 'They radiate their Catholicity (ecumenism = universality). They exist *ad* (towards) the totality, *pros* (towards) the totality = *sarvam prati*!' And he follows this immediately with one of his most radical claims for inclusive communion: 'A restricted Eucharist is false. "Leave your offering before the altar!"... Whoever "loves" his brother has a right to the Eucharist.'

Several weeks later, struggling with illness as he prepares a series of

lectures for the Jesuit faculty at Delhi (Vidyajyoti) on Christology, Abhi records some startling reflections on the unicity and uniqueness of Christ. His insights are complex, subtle and daring. He suggests that the most elective 'only one' contains the most expansive 'Only One.' The ostensible paradox contains a sacred mystery. He recommends a delicate balance between singular election and universal embrace which he formulates thus: 'If Christ is the 'only one' for me... may I discover in him the glory of the Only One. And what does it matter if I discover the glory of the Only One in whatever created form there may be! For the glory of the Only One is in all one. This alone is important: that Christ should be Everything for me... Let every human being be the only one for me, my everything to whom I give myself totally. In this alone I will have the experience of the Only One' (22 March 1973). In other words, the point of most intimate exclusivity (Christ is the only one) becomes the most ultimate inclusivity (Christ is each 'only one,' that is, every one I welcome in their singular uniqueness and 'thisness'). It is not stretching things, I submit, to hear echoes here of Christ's identification with each stranger in Matthew 25.

On 21 April 1973, one year after the interreligious Easter Vigil with Sara Grant at Pune, Abhi returns to the idea of intercommunion. Perhaps it was the lapse of time, providing a certain interval of reflection, which enabled him to return to the 'breakthrough' experience after the event, *après coup*. The repetition of the Paschal ritual, one year later, seems to have triggered a revisiting of the original event—an event as ineffable as it is profound: 'Easter night, night of the awakening to being (*sambodhi*). The vigils of *Sakyamuni* which culminate in the Awakening... Neither Jesus nor Buddha described their Awakening.' And it seems that Abhi is going to follow suit. Yet on 28 April, he breaks his silence and strives to say the unsayable in the following terms: 'People are converted... they become Christian, Muslim, Sufi, Vedantin etc. All those are superimposed forms. Whereas the essential thing is to strip oneself of all that is superfluously added... The *advaita* formulation is just as much a superimposition as are the Koranic or the Trinitarian formulations. And people fight to defend their own formulations and to condemn those of others!' Two days later, brushing the limits of 'negative theology,' he touches on the anatheist notion of a God who is reborn after the death of God. Citing John of the Cross's notion of the Night in which we witness the 'disappearance of God', Abhi observes that 'the God that I project, the God of superimposition is surely dead...'; and, as a consequence, he claims that out of this demise, emerges—paradoxically and mysteriously—the 'dazzling light of the true "I."' From this flows a refusal of all dogmatic apologetics and a revolutionary affirmation of interreligious pluralism: 'One who knows several mental (or religious and spiritual languages) is incapable of absolutising any formulation whatever—of the Gospel, of the Upanishads, of Buddhism, etc. He can only bear witness to an experience—about which he can only stammer.' But out of this apophatic stammering may arise, Abhi insists, the Awakened person who 'rides upon the Spirit.' And such awakening is an 'open space' (4 May 1973).

We must say that the initial Body of Christ, his *primary body*, is confined to the species of bread and wine. Can Christ, however, remain contained in this primary Body? Clearly, he cannot. Since he is above all omega, that is, the universal 'form' of the world, he can obtain his organic balance and plenitude only by mystically assimilating all that surrounds him. The Host is like a blazing hearth from which flames spread their radiance. Just as the spark that falls into the heather is soon surrounded by a wide circle of fire, so, in the course of centuries... the sacramental host of bread is continually being encircled more closely by another, infinitely larger Host, which is nothing but the universe itself—the universe gradually being absorbed by the universal element. Thus when the Phrase '*Hoc est Corpus meum*' is being pronounced, '*hoc*' means '*primario*' the bread; but '*secundario*,' in a second phase occurring in nature, the matter of the sacrament is the world, through which there spreads, so as to complete itself, the superhuman presence of the universal Christ. (16-17)

Teilhard leaves the reader in no doubt as to which 'host' has ultimate priority, from both an historical and eschatological perspective. 'The world,' he insists, 'is the final and the real Host into which Christ gradually descends, until his time is fulfilled. Since all time a single word and a single act have been filling the universality of things: "*Hoc est Corpus meum*." Nothing is at work in creation except in order to assist, from near at hand or from afar, in the consecration of the universe' (17).

When word reached Teilhard in 1926 of the 28th International Eucharistic Congress to be held in Chicago, he wondered if there would be one voice in all the thousands of theologians, priests and scholars present who would even try to explain the 'true extensions of the Eucharist and its animating place in human work'; and he prayed to be given just ten minutes in the giant Chicago stadium to be able to shout aloud what it means to 'sympathise' (*ib.*)! A rhetorical prayer, perhaps, but not a sentimental one. For Teilhard such *sympathy* was no devotional piety; it was a radically transformative pathos extending not only to fellow humans—acting and suffering—but to all living, organic, sentient beings in the universe. Though Teilhard was no partisan of Buddhism (he was even somewhat critical of its acosmic tendencies), his capacious understanding of Christian *caritas* often seems co-extensive with Buddhist *karuna*.

It was during a visit to China in the same year, 1926, that Teilhard began to practice and write about what he called a 'Mass upon the altar of the world'—its purpose being to divinize each new day in a 'Sacrament of life animated by God' (20). The original Eucharistic offering and gift was, he emphasizes here, that of Jesus of Nazareth, but extending and expanding outward from that is an evolving 'Sacrament of the World' (title for a major work he planned but never completed). For, he explains, 'as our humanity assimilates the material world and as the Host assimilates our humanity, the Eucharistic transformation goes beyond and completes the transubstantiation of the bread on the altar' (21).

From 1926 on Teilhard worked ceaselessly on what came to be called *The Mass on the World*; but it was on New Year's day 1932 that he first wrote explicitly of celebrating this Mass with non-Christians on an expedition to the Gobi desert. He was the only Christian present but every member of the scientific trip attended. His sermon on that day contained the following prayer of universal sacred presence, embracing not only those present but also absent friends and fellows. Again we witness the expanding circles of incorporation: 'What we ask of that universal presence which envelops us all, is first to reunite us, as in a shared living center with those whom we love, those who are so far away from us here, and themselves beginning this same new year... I offer to (God) this Mass, the highest form of Christian prayer' (23). Teilhard does not speak here of consecrating and distributing hosts; but it is clear from the context, and from his ongoing thinking about cosmic Eucharistics, that the Host is the real presence that includes all those attending his desert Mass and those remembered or imagined during its celebration.

Teilhard did not see Eucharistic communions as discrete isolated performances but as successive 'contacts' and 'assimilations' to the power of the Incarnate Word—a whole developmental theogenesis ultimately coextensive with the duration of a life. 'All the communions of our life are only successive instants or episodes of one single communion—in one and the same process of Christification' (28). Well into the 1950s—during further work expeditions and travels to Africa and America—Teilhard recorded ever new versions of his 'Mass.' And in the weeks leading up to his death in 1955, he enters a final account of his faith that 'the words of the Consecration (be) applied not only to the sacrificial bread and wine but, mark you, to the whole Mass of joys and sufferings produced by the Convergence of the World as it progresses' (32). On April 7, Holy Thursday, Teilhard cited three verses of Paul that ended with the aspiration 'that God may be all in all' (1 Cor 15:28). And at Easter Sunday dinner, celebrated with his close friends, Rhoda de Terra and her daughter in their New York apartment, Teilhard passed away. His Paschal passing may be interpreted as a true fulfillment of his prayer, expressed in *The Divine Milieu*—'Teach me to treat my death as an act of communion' (33). His life of the Eucharist included death itself.

Teilhard's view of the Eucharist informed several of his other theological views. First, it vindicated his childhood conviction that God exists already in rocks: the persuasion that it is through touching, tasting seeing, and sensing matter that the divine enters our world, and only secondly through knowing. Hence his alertness to the material findings of the sciences, especially anthropology, archeology, and the forensic research which discovers the universe in a grain of sand or curve of bone; see 'The Spiritual Power of Matter' (1919) (cited, King, 129). Teilhard fully endorsed Tertullian's view that Christ must be present in the full carnal particularity of 'shaped bones and cross-veined hands.' For if we can *believe* without seeing and sensing, we cannot *adore*. Teilhard was with Thomas and Mary Magdalene: he wanted to touch the body of God. He believed that matter would achieve its 'definitive

salvation' in the words of the Mass: 'This is my Body.' Christ had claimed the cosmos as his corpus and it is for humans to eucharistically respond, one way or another.

Even if for Teilhard there was only one Christ, there were many ways to Christ. His own Church's 'Roman theologies' had, he felt, reduced the Christ of universal and multiple 'adoration' to an increasingly restrictive code, 'too small to be adored' (133); they had placed doctrinal belief over seeing, touching, eating, tasting—the deeply corporeal idioms of the Eucharist itself. (Christ, after all, spent his last hours sharing food, washing feet, and undergoing passion—and the Risen one is portrayed as feeding his disciples with fish by Lake Galilee and with bread in the inn at Emmaus!)

One problem with contemporary Christian society, for Teilhard, was that it separated the world of belief and the world of work, the extraordinary world of faith and the ordinary world of sensible experience. He held, by contrast, that the Eucharist was the crossing of these worlds. And at one point he even claimed that his everyday work on fossils and bones was nothing less than the work of God. 'Adoration's real name', he wrote, 'is research!' (133). Indeed for himself he believed that without scientific research and experiment there was no possibility of 'real mystical life' (134). Moreover, he also understood the appeal of Marxism and vitalism as a recall to the things themselves, the working of the Word through the material world of acting and suffering flesh; and here too Christ needed to be rediscovered and revered. This is what the cosmic Christ of St Paul originally meant. The world serves as the altar of matter becoming 'Christifiable' (135). But this cannot happen without us, each one of us, becoming its poets, mystics, servants, researchers, and priests. As he put it later in life, 'the communion with time,' understood as the communication with the *becoming of things*, 'is the supreme form of adoration.

Equally radical was Teilhard's reinterpretation of priesthood. All of humanity—'believer and unbeliever alike'—is, he held, possessed of a single desire and hunger: the longing for a great communion. And those who work as scientists, scholars and in other activities that serve the growing unification of human kind, may thus be viewed as priests of a kind, for 'every work of discovery is in the service of Christ, which thus hastens the growth of his mystical body, shares in his universal priesthood' (103-4). Teilhard boldly declared that lay people may also be 'true priests' who can offer their spiritual Mass on the World. Genuine prayer enables us to contemplate—and touch—the world not as a 'veil but as flesh.' Even the red earth of China looked like the 'wounded flesh' of the crucified and risen one. The entire world, he insisted, becomes the 'flesh of Christ' for those who believe. Thus anticipating the philosophical claims of fellow French thinkers, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gabriel Marcel, Teilhard argues that we do not see the spirit of anyone or anything except through their flesh (voices, gestures, movements, hesitations, glances). When we recognize Christ as the soul within people and things, matter becomes animated as 'flesh.'

In short, flesh is the 'divine milieu' of the world. Teilhard inscribes himself

in a long tradition of religious poets from the Shulamite's sighing for her beloved in the *Song of Songs* to the theo-erotic musings of John of the Cross, Teresa of Avilla, and the Beguines, right down to the mystical poetics of George Herbert or Gerard Manley Hopkins, not to mention the 'cosmotheandric' tradition running from St Francis to Raimon Panikkar. Yet Teilhard was keenly aware of the dangers of indifferentiation and warned against the 'destructive fusion of which pantheism dreams,' preferring instead a unity that differentiates. 'Within us without being us' (*in nobis sine nobis*), was his catch-cry. Life for Teilhard was a divine milieu increasingly differentiating even as it simultaneously mutates—in joy and pain—towards unification.

There is no denying darkness, death or depression (from which Teilhard himself greatly suffered at key periods in his life). Wrestling with both *thanatos* and *eros* one struggles towards communion. 'To bring Christ by virtue of a specific organic connection, to the heart of realities that are esteemed the most dangerous, the most unspiritual, the most pagan—in that you have my Gospel and my mission' (123). Flesh, the focus of the divine milieu and signal of Eucharistic transubstantiation, is what animates life as single life, in each particular instance, and resists the temptation of indefiniteness. Even the tension of remaining within a specific, historically and hierarchically determined church—one which limited, confined, and censored him—was for Teilhard part of the work of differentiation and dialogue. If everything is declared materially one in premature fusion, there is no room for sacred eros, love, desire, hunger, friction. There is the boredom of sameness. 'Unity differentiates' is Teilhard's final word.

Present Perspectives

What message should we take from these two visionary figures for Eucharistic praxis today? Though clearly revolutionary in their desire to extend and share the Eucharist, both priests were also cautious and limited at times. In Teilhard's case, one does not find formal interreligious invitations to concelebrate communion in a reciprocal way: non-Catholics were invited to become guests, rather than hosts, at the Mass on the World; and he rarely if ever spoke of what he as a Catholic priest might have learned from the Taoists or Buddhists of Asia which might have altered his own Christian understanding of the Eucharist. Indeed Teilhard was, as noted, quite critical of what he saw as the non-incarnational character of much Asian spirituality. Nor did Teilhard, nor Abhi to my knowledge, ever contemplate inviting women (50% of the human race) to concelebrate at the Eucharistic altar; although both had deep spiritual friendships with women (Lucile Swan and Rhoda de Terra in the case of Teilhard and the Bäumers, Sara Grant, Sister Vandana, and Shirley du Boulay in the case of Abhi). The question of women's ordination did not seem to preoccupy them as it would so many in the Catholic

Church today. Nor, at a more theoretical level, did they reflect critically on questions of the incommensurability of religious 'language games,' the hermeneutic diversity of faiths and attendant sense that Eucharistic hospitality requires that each 'host' respects the strangeness of each stranger, the otherness of each guest—in order to avoid the temptation of totalizing inclusivism. Indeed, there are moments when Abhi and Teilhard seem to accept a standard version of Catholic supersessionism: though for the most part they anticipate and announce the more open Vatican II acknowledgements of the legitimacy of non-Catholic and non-Christian faiths. Teilhard and Abhi were more fieldworkers than theologians, they were doing rather than teaching, acting rather than preaching, experimenting and improvising in far flung lands rather than strategizing and networking in Vatican corridors about doctrinal innovation, though they both wrote prolifically and their voices certainly influenced some of the most creative reformers of Vatican II—Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, Hans Küng.

Just as Jesus engaged with Samaritans and Paul with Gentiles, it was amongst strangers that both Abhishiktananda and Teilhard worked towards opening the Eucharist to those beyond the fold. There is a long and venerable tradition of voices from the mystical and monastic margins inspiring the ecclesiastical center, keeping it open and attuned to ever new acoustics of the Spirit. Vatican II sought not to impose 'rigid uniformity' in the liturgy but to 'respect and foster the qualities and talents of the various races and nations' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* #37), so that 'the art of our own times from every race and country shall also be given free scope in the Church' (#123). Like all works of art, the universality of the Eucharist, is embedded in particular times and places, rooted in the specificities of distinct historical cultures. So if we are invited to see the Eucharist as Christ's gift to the world, we cannot receive this art-work without 'creative re-imagination.' In a more flexible and pluralistic Eucharistic hermeneutics, Christ's 'instituting' the Eucharist can be seen as the opening up of a creative space of celebration, which we keep open by generous imaginative thinking centered on embracing the stranger and welcoming him or her to share in the banquet. 'The Eucharist is thus not simply a once-off creation. A pluralism of interpretations marks its development. As a contingent artifact, composed by Jesus in creative interaction with the conditions of his culture, it is exposed like any work of art to a plurality of perspectives in the process of its reception and interpretation, as it is transmitted in different cultural and historical horizons' (O'Leary, 93).

Mono-eucharistics should, I submit, increasingly give way to poly-eucharistics, understood as a centrifugal expansion in ever widening circles from the consecrated host on the altar to the carnal host of the world. There seems to be some new openings in Catholic thinking today and still more in Catholic practice for seeing Eucharistic intercommunion as a proleptic enactment of the full communion between the Christian churches toward which we strive; many saw this as dramatized in Cardinal Ratzinger's giving of the Eucharist to Brother Roger of Taizé at Pope John Paul II's funeral Mass.

It seems to me that we need to find ways of linking the Eucharist to the wider interreligious ecumenism that is so vibrant a dimension of Catholic life today, so that the Church can boldly proclaim not only to an inner circle but to all humanity Jesus's own self-presentation: 'I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh' (Jn 6:51).

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