

Author : Patient Ilunga Yav dit Jean Paul

Eucharistic Meal

Introduction

This paper consists first of presenting the communal meal of circumcision feast in the “Lunda” culture, then it will present the Eucharistic meal and its implication in Christian life in the building up of the Church. After which, it will compare the two meals showing the differences and similarities.

I. The circumcision feast and meal in the “Lunda” culture/ DR Congo

The celebration of circumcision feast marks the transition from boyhood to manhood in the Lunda society. Many cultures in Africa give a particular importance to the practice of circumcision. The Lunda people in the DR Congo consider circumcision as the climax of initiation rites that enables a person to take part fully in all the aspects of the community’s life. As soon as boys get circumcised, they can then attend all adult’s meetings to get more wisdom and advice from elders on how to live well as men, and how to take care of their families. A man who is not circumcised is considered not normal. In this respect, circumcision is highly valued and promoted in the “Lunda” culture which explains why a big banquet is held to celebrate this event of passage from youth to adulthood.

The preparation of the circumcision feast is not only the business of the circumcised but the whole village is involved as well for the success of the event. The focus here will be only on the banquet or the party on the very day of circumcision. As we have said earlier that circumcision is of great value for the “Lunda” people. And it does not matter whether you are rich or poor. It is a big party that involves everybody.

Before the actual day of circumcision, people come to dance in the evening for two weeks or three weeks depending on the time of initiation in the bush. All families in the village bring contributions in the form of goats, sheep, chicken and other animals for slaughter, mealy meal, rice and beans as well as money. Some people also bring local beer and local soft drinks. As the celebration takes place in an open environment, seats are brought for the guest, while the rest sit on the ground.

The very day of circumcision, in the morning, many people escort the circumcised from the bush to the village others stay in the village to prepare food, the place and all the

necessary things for the party. When the young men arrive near the village the chief of the village (Mwant Yav) with the elders come to welcome them at the entrance of the village. Beer and soft drinks are offered to them outside the village. As soon as they arrive in the village, the circumcised young men with their masters who circumcised them are given a little meal. This food is very symbolic: it expresses the joy of the village to welcome the young men who have started a new life of adulthood.

However, not every member of the village is allowed to eat with the newly circumcised. It is those who have been circumcised. Women are not allowed to approach the newly circumcised. Other people can be served food and drink outside the place prepared for the big celebration. One person or two people stand at the entrance to welcome the guests, while other two or four people stand not far with jars of water for the guest wash their hands upon arrival. When almost everybody has entered, then the newly circumcised come in with an escort of young people in front dancing with music. Then the master of ceremony, the chief of the village, welcomes them and all the guests. These young people who dances in front of the newly circumcised are the candidates for future circumcision. After escorting their elder brothers, they have to go outside the royal palace.

Note that when people enter the royal palace each person is welcomed with a drink or beer before they are served food. Before people are served and start eating, the Master of ceremony tells the guests the reason for which they have been invited to the party. When they have finished eating, the young circumcised are requested to come forward to open the floor with a dance, others later join them in the dance. A second round of beer and drinks is served to send off the guests. Those who want to continue dancing can do so, but others who want to can go back home.

II. THE EUCHARIST: The Eucharist as Bread of life and Blood of the new covenant

In his book “Eucharist, the Body of Christ,” McPartlan gives a good analysis of the Eucharist. He contends that the Christian message is about sin and forgiveness, death and life, love and hatred and light and darkness. Christians have to follow the Way, Jesus Christ who is Life, Truth, Love, and Light of the world (Cf. Jn10: 10. 11: 25-26). The centre of Christian faith and yearly festivals is Easter celebration when Christ conquered life. Therefore, the resurrection is the ground of our faith and the source of our hope” (Cf. 1Cor 15: 12-19). Life has overcome death in Christ Jesus (Rm 6: 9).

McPartlan points out that the Eucharist is the food for people who share in Christ's death and resurrection through Baptism. They live a new life and are invited at the table of fellowship with the Lord. The Eucharist is the apex of our Christian initiation rite. "In Baptism we die to sin, but alive for God in Christ Jesus (Rm 6: 10-11). It is a journey on which we need food. That is why, Christ has given us his Body and Blood as a sacrament in order to nurture and strengthen what he has given us in Baptism. The life that was given in Baptism is sustained, renewed and deepened by the food of life which is the Eucharist. St Ignatius of Antioch points out that to share in the one common breaking of bread is "the medicine of immortality and the sovereign remedy by which we escape death and we live in Jesus Christ for ever."¹The Eucharist is the gift of God to the world in the person of Jesus Christ himself as our food and drink. "For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (Jn6: 33). And "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. As the Father sent me and I draw life from Him, so whoever eats me will also draw life from me" (Jn6: 56 – 57).

We do not only draw life from Jesus but we have life in him by listening to his Words and eating his flesh and drinking his blood, (Cf. Jn6: 63). That is why in the Eucharistic celebration, the Pulpit is intimately linked to the altar. In the Eucharistic celebration we relive the experience of the disciples of Emmaus, whereby Jesus opens and interprets the Scriptures to us and we recognize him in the breaking of the bread (Lk24: 13-33).

The Eucharist plays a key role in the Christian community as De Lubac contends: "the Eucharist makes the Church" and in support Ratzinger urges that "the Church is the celebration of the Eucharist, the Eucharist is the Church."² The Church is therefore the Eucharistic community that celebrates the Eucharist in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Church will cease to be the Church when it ceases to be a Eucharistic community.

According to McPartlan, the Eucharist is the celebration of the life that overcame death. It is a constant renewal of Easter grace and Easter joy amid the difficulties and struggles of life. As we proclaim during mass: "when we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, Lord until you come again." Jesus died for our sins; we are not spectators of what happened on Calvary, but participants through the mystery of the Eucharist. "Christ redeeming death and resurrection took place once in history...yet we believe that this once for

¹ St Ignatius of Antioch, Smyrnaeans,

² P. McPartlan, Eucharist 7

all event of salvation becomes effectively present for us through the power of the Holy Spirit every time the mass is celebrated”³ The Fathers of the Council of Trent insisted in the real change of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ: “the sacrifice of mass is not only one of praise and thanksgiving or a mere commemoration of the sacrifice enacted on the cross and itself appeasing... It is offered for the living and for the dead.”⁴ In the Eucharist, Jesus Christ offers himself to us so that we may offer him as acceptable and pleasing sacrifice to the Father as he did on Calvary. The Last Supper is the doorway into the mystery of sacrifice. By eating and drinking his body and blood we participate in his passion, death and resurrection. The Mass is the re-enactment of the Last Supper in accordance with Jesus instruction “Do this in remembrance of me” (Lk 22: 19; 1Cor 11: 24-25).

The sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus offered it and returned to the Father. St Cyprian attested that “The passion of our Lord is the sacrifice we offer.”⁵ By eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ, we too enter into the mystery of his sacrifice. God renews his bond of unity and the new covenant sealed by the blood of Jesus (Mt 26: 28, Lk22:20). This mystery of the death of Jesus on Calvary, as celebrated on Good Friday and the Easter Sunday, both are celebrated in one single Eucharistic celebration as fulfilment of the Holy Thursday. In this regard McPartlan urges that Jesus instituted the Eucharist not just in anticipation of his sacrifice on Good Friday but also totally trusting that God would uphold him and raise him up. The celebration of the Eucharist gives us hope of a new life in the Risen Lord.

Jesus died not only for the Jewish nation but “for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them into one” (Jn11: 52). The death of Jesus was reconciliatory: it has brought humanity in communion with God and with one another. According to McPartlan, “the Eucharist makes the Church to be what it is, a great sacrament of communion with God and of unity among people.”⁶ This reconciliation is expressed in the sign of peace we give to one other in mass before receiving the Communion. The Church is called to be icon and image of the Trinity. Even though we receive the Eucharist individually, it is truly communities and the whole Church that Christ feeds. Ignatius of Antioch understood well the meaning of the Eucharist in saying that “Christians should not split into factions to celebrate

³ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England, One Bread One Body 23

⁴ Trent, <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct13.html/> 26/03/15

⁵ Cyprian, Letter, 3. (Quoted in McPartlan)

⁶ P. McPartlan, Eucharist 14

the Eucharist just with their families or friends.”⁷ We are called to be aware of our brothers and sisters with whom we receive together the body and blood of Christ and with whom we undertake to witness together to the unity and peace of the Trinity. As St Augustine puts it: “the body of Christ which we take into ourselves actually takes us out of ourselves into communion of the Church”⁸

The image of the Church as the body of Christ comes from the experience of St Paul on the road to Damascus. He realised that Jesus the Risen Lord lives in his followers so as to lay hand upon them, is actually laying hand upon him. Christ unites all the Baptised together to make them members of one Body (Cf. Eph4: 25; Rm 12: 5). The blessing cup we share is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ and the loaf of bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ (Cf. 1Cor 10: 16).

By means of bread and wine we participate in the body and blood of Christ himself. And by receiving the bread, which has become body of Christ, we are united to his body, the Church. As Augustine says “the Eucharist is the parable of the Church: Many once scattered people who have now been united by the water of Baptism and the fire of the Spirit in confirmation.”⁹ This points out what St Paul proclaimed in saying that “as there is one loaf, so we are, although there are many of us, we are one single body for we all share in the one loaf” (1Cor10:17). The Eucharist is sign of unity of the community of faith responding to the prayer and invitation of Jesus “that they may be one”. In support, Cooke says that the “presence of Jesus in the Eucharist...can be the force that urges us to unity...gives Christians the sense of belonging, of sharing and of being united.”¹⁰ It is only when we have listened to the word of God and said yes to it that we can enter into communion with him at the altar.

The unity of the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist can be traced back in (Ex 24: 3-8) and is plainly seen (Lk24: 13-33). In the sacrificial meal of the Eucharist, we renew the everlasting and new covenant, we commit ourselves to obey and live accordingly in communion with God and with one another. This renewal is the participation in the Sacrifice of Christ on Calvary and the bread and wine that we bring, express the response in our hearts. In the Eucharistic sacrifice, we offer ourselves to God with Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the wine is transformed into the blood of Christ. And St Ambrose terms that “when the

⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, Smyrnaeans, 8(Quoted in McPartlan)

⁸ St Augustine, Sermon, 7 (Quoted in McPartlan)

⁹ St Augustine, Confession, (Quoted in McPartlan)

¹⁰ B. Cooke, The Eucharist, Mystery of Friendship 43.

moment comes for bringing the most holy Sacrament into being, the priest does not use his own words any longer: he uses the word of Christ... it is Christ's words that bring the sacrament into being".¹¹ McPartlan sheds more light saying that, the idea of blood is inherited from the Old Testament, but the fact that this blood should now be Christ's own blood is new.

Another new element is that instead of being sprinkled on people, this blood is to be drunk to give life to people and unite them to God. The idea of the new covenant comes also from the prophet Jeremiah (31:31). The law would no longer be written on tablets of stone but upon human heart. The blood of the new covenant is not to be thrown over people but to be drunk deep within and renews the gift of the Holy Spirits received in Baptism.

McPartlan urges that the people of God have been a covenant people formed as people by covenant that was ratified in blood. That ancient ritual was given a new and definitive form by Christ at the last Supper and now today in mass. The Church as a community and people of God is fed and built up by the body and blood of Christ. And so by receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, God unceasingly fashions his people in a new and definitive form. That is why "the sign of communion is more complete when we receive under both kinds, since in that form the sign of the Eucharistic meal appears more clearly."¹² The eating the body of Christ and the drinking his blood has a deep meaning in Hebrew mind. The body is what a human being is: the personality; in Greek 'soma' meaning the whole person. When Jesus says "this is my body", he means this is his whole being. In the Eucharist Jesus gives himself to us, his own self gift to the Father.

Moreover, blood has a peculiar meaning in the Biblical language. The "life of the creature is in the blood" (Cf. Lev. 17:11). It is life itself, blood is sacred because life comes from God. As McPartlan singles it out, when Jesus says this is my blood, signifies that "this is myself, my very life, the life that God gave him, he in turn, is giving to them so that his life might be in them and they in him, might dwell in God."¹³ McPartlan contends that we receive the body and blood of Christ, so that we may become what we receive: the Body of Christ.

In the Catholic tradition, sacraments are theophany and their effects build up the Church. The grace helps us participate in "the life of God himself as members of the body of Christ,

¹¹ St Ambrose,

¹²P. McPartlan, Eucharist 22

¹³ P. McPartlan, Eucharist 20.

that so being strengthened and deepened.”¹⁴ Grace transforms people who receive it into the Body of Christ. If God’s purpose is to transform us, it follows that the Eucharist we receive centres upon our transformation into Christ himself. Our participation in the Eucharist already gives us a foretaste of Christ’s transfiguration of our bodies. The conviction that there is a radical change of bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ is the key to believing that God’s whole purpose in Christ is to make the whole creation new.

The presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is real as the presence of Jesus in the Church as Paul discovered it on the road to Damascus. Jesus said to Paul: “the Church is me.” “Why are you persecuting me?” In the same way he says to his followers: the “bread and wine is me”. That is why the Council of Trent affirms that “In the venerable sacrament of the Eucharist the substance of the bread and wine does not remain together with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ: there is a unique change of substance of the bread into the body and of the whole substance of the wine into the blood.”¹⁵ It follows that when we receive the body and blood of Christ, we receive Jesus Christ himself and become his sacrament individually. This implies that when you touch one of the baptised you have touched at the same time Jesus Christ himself and one of the members of his body: the Church. The Eucharist is therefore God’s holy gift for God’s holy people.

a) The Eucharist as memorial

The Eucharistic celebration is the remembrance of the death and resurrection of Jesus in the past, the actualisation of his redemptive death and resurrection in the present and the anticipation of the future glory in the heavenly Jerusalem. According to Vatican II, the Eucharist is the perpetuation of the sacrifice of the Cross, and it cannot be repeated as we saw it earlier. Christ died once and for all for our sins, but it is made present in different manner: under the species of bread and wine which he himself instituted as his body and blood to seal the new and everlasting covenant. In this way the “liturgy gives us the foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem” (SC, 8).

- **The mass is more than what we see**

During the liturgy we are lifted up in the heavenly liturgy. We join together our voices to the ones of the angels as we sing “Holy, holy, holy lord God of hosts” (Is 6). Jesus stands at

¹⁴ 25. P. McPartlan, Eucharist

¹⁵ Trent, <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct13.html/> 26/03/15

the centre of that heavenly Assembly, as the bridegroom. With his precious and purifying blood, he mediates the new and everlasting covenant. Calvary will never be forgotten, as we celebrate with the choirs of angels and sing: “worthy is the lamb that was slain to receive power, riches, wisdom... honour, glory and blessing” (Rev5: 15).

Therefore, the mass celebrated on earth by the Church perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross throughout the ages: “we proclaim your death and confess your resurrection until you come again” (Roman Missal). Note that Christ no longer bears the mark of the passion; his wounds have become trophies of Victory. In the Eucharistic celebration, Christ shares his risen life with us and so gives hope for the future glorification with Christ.

III. Comparison between the circumcision feast and the Eucharistic meal

a. Similarities

A meal is the most basic and most ancient symbol of friendship, love, and unity; food and drink taken in common are signs that life is shared. In both Eucharist and circumcision feast banquet it is not a meal to be eaten by one person but to be shared. They are communal Meals and communal activities. The Eucharist was called the Breaking of Bread meant to be shared as Jesus did with his disciples at the last Supper. The circumcision banquet expresses unity and brings about unity among those who take part in it. This is the meaning of the Eucharist: communion and unity among believers. In this situation, there is always someone who invites people for the meal. In the Lunda culture, it is the chief of the village and in the Christian feast it is Christ who is the host. Both meals are meant to build up the community in charity, joy and love.

b. Differences

- **The Eucharist**

The Eucharist is the Meal of Covenant between God and his people. A Meal of Reconciliation: Identifying the Communal implications of Sin and propitiatory sacrifice of the Cross. A Meal of Mystical Power: Experiencing the real presence of Christ. A Meal of Participation: Including everyone in the ritual action: offered for the dead and the living. It is sacrificial meal celebrated by the priest with the community in “persona Christi”. A Meal of Hope: Proclaiming Christ’s death and resurrection until his second coming in glory.

A Meal of Transforming Love: Serving the Poor and Oppressed. It is a memorial meal: celebration of the Paschal Mystery in the Past, its re-enactment in the present and the anticipation of the future glory.

The Eucharist is a Sacrament that confers grace. It is the perpetuation of the Sacrifice of the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries. It is Jesus himself who is present substantially and really in the Eucharist under the species of bread and wine. It is the One and for all sacrifice of Christ on Calvary offered for the forgiveness of sins which is still daily offered in mass.

The Eucharist has a universal, ecclesial and cosmic character, the Eucharist celebrated in a particular community, is celebrated for the sanctification of the whole universal Church and the all creation. It is therefore a mystery of faith, Mystery of light and Paschal Banquet and the face of Jesus of Christ: his Body and Blood given to us to strengthen and sustain the gift of Baptism until we arrive to the end of our pilgrim in the Holy City of Jerusalem.

- **Circumcision feast banquet**

It is only a meal of one day and single event. It can be celebrated with the people in a particular village and friends alone. This food is neither sacrificial nor memorial meal. It is a celebration of integration in the community whereas the Eucharist is the celebration of love between God and humanity. It does not confer grace therefore it is not a sacrament. This meal is limited to a particular village or community and area.

Conclusion: In conclusion, we can say the two meals bring about love unity and fellowship among people. They build up the community life through the sharing of food and drink or bread and wine, hence the sharing of life. However, the Eucharist differs from the party because it is sacrificial meal and the celebration of the Paschal Mystery. The bread and wine is truly the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ therefore source and summit of Christian life.

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