

EUCHARIST:

THE SACRAMENT OF COMMUNION

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Introduction

Unity in diversity is the law of the visible universe. The variety of colours in the rainbow does not reduce its beauty but together they enhance it. A combination of different colours gives liveliness to a painting. A variety of flowers, of different sizes, colours and fragrance, together gives life and adds to the beauty of a garden. Similarly in human life we observe a pluralism of languages, cultures, faiths, ideologies and peoples. Today societies are becoming more and more pluralistic. Pluralism is the irreversible law of human life, present as well as future. People of various nations, races, religions, cultures, languages, and ideologies are to live together in harmony and peace. We need, therefore, to evolve new models of such living together.

Variety is evident in the Christian community as well. Our faith, as Christians, is centred on God the Trinity. Our life is lived in and through the Trinitarian communion. Communion emphasizes that the Church is basically a “communion” or fellowship among human beings and God.¹ The Church under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit continues the task of Jesus Christ. Christians derive their faith content from the communion of the Trinitarian God. Our worship, prayers, basic living itself begins and ends in the Trinity.

For centuries, the leading and most influential ecclesiological model in the Catholic Church was that of a hierarchical institution. The Second Vatican Council has given us the self-understanding of the Church as Communion which has its roots in the New Testament and has been frequently appealed through the centuries even though its focus of concern has at times notably shifted. The Council describes the Church as a sacrament or sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humankind. It is also an instrument to achieve such union and unity (*LG 1*).² At the Extraordinary Synod of 1985, Communion ecclesiology was proposed in an official Catholic document as “the central and fundamental idea of the

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Council documents.”³ The communion model of ecclesiology has great importance in the present context of pluralism of faiths, cultures and Churches.

In this article I would like to highlight the understanding of the Church as the communion of Churches, which is unity in diversity, so that we could recognise and accept the individuality and equality of the Churches in India and that this communion may serve the cause of mission. Through this study I would like to present communion ecclesiology as a model of unity for the Catholic Church in India, which has been overwhelmed with inter-ritual problems. The Second Vatican Council affirmed that the Church is a communion of churches. However the inter-relationship of the individual Catholic Churches in India in the past does not witness adequately to this communion. Nobody can deny the fact that there is a climate of mutual distrust, rivalry and unhealthy competition in the present relationship among the individual Churches. This climate has adversely affected the effective communication of the message of the gospel and thus jeopardized the overall mission of the Church in India. The understanding of the Mystery of the Church as communion and its profound interrelatedness has important implications not only for the relationship among individual Catholic Churches but in the context of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue as well. In concrete the local churches as communities of faith must share and live the Christian experience with the people of other faiths meaningfully and relevantly. This calls for a total transformation in the ecclesial expressions. By a positive outlook towards the people of other faiths, constructing participatory structures that will respect the apostolic responsibility of each individual and by a total commitment to the poor and the weak of the society, local churches begin to exist in a new way. This is a challenging task and an ongoing process. This is a new vision and a new hope for the existence of the Church in India.

The Present Situation of the Church in India

The Church has existed in India from the apostolic period. And since then she has in many ways contributed to the better living of the people of this country, especially in the fields of education and health care. She has to a certain extent tried to reduce the sufferings of the poor people through different developmental programmes. The context of my study is the Catholic Church in India which has been blessed with three individual catholic Churches, namely, Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara and Latin. The Second Vatican Council, in

Orientalium Ecclesiarum, affirmed that the Church is a communion of separate Churches or rites (*OE 2*).

However, the history of relationship of the individual Churches in India does not witness adequately to this communion and the growth of Christianity is very poor in the country. Divisions in the Christian community occurred due to historical, ecclesial as well as political reasons and at present there exist different Christian Churches and ecclesial communities in India. Communion will be the principle for unity and fellowship between these Churches, so that they may effectively witness to Christ and fulfil their mission. Instead of being a sacrament of communion the Indian Church has been a counter witness to it. The challenge for the individual Churches today is to find new ways of being “the ‘sign and instrument’ of the full realization of the unity yet to come” (*EA 24*)⁴ in India. This is our prime task and yet the reality remains the same. For a greater witness to Jesus Christ the communion of the Churches is to be understood deeply and practiced properly.

The Question of Rites

The term ‘Rite’⁵ is of western origin, and it has a reference to liturgical rites. The usage of this term may imply a wrong understanding of the Church, that the Catholic Church means one Church with different liturgical ‘Rites.’ This makes one think that the reality of the different individual Churches is only a matter of a few liturgical differences.⁶ But this understanding was corrected by Vatican Council II, which reaffirmed the communion nature of the Church in its Decree, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*.

The holy Catholic Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ, is made up of the faithful who are organically united in the Holy Spirit by the same faith, the same sacraments and the same government. They combine into different groups, which are held together by their hierarchy, and so form particular churches or rites. For the Catholic Church wishes the traditions of each particular church or rite to remain whole and entire, and it likewise wishes to adapt its own way of life to the needs of different times and places (*OE 2*; cf. *LG 13, UR 14*).

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The Churches according to rites are different not only in liturgy and discipline, but also in their theology, spirituality, ministerial structures and organizational set-up. The one Church of Christ exists in the different individual Churches, which are equal in dignity, rights and obligations. Hence the full reality of the individual Church cannot really be expressed by the term ‘Rite.’ The new Latin code has not completely eliminated the word ‘Rite,’ but has in fact qualified it by “Ritual Church *Sui-juris*” or “Autonomous Ritual Church”⁷ (cf. Canon 111:1; Canon 112:1-2).

1. EUCHARIST: THE SACRAMENT OF COMMUNION

The Church as Communion of Ecclesial Communities finds its highest expression and realization in the unity of shared participation in the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity and bond of love. The primary sacramental expression of this *koinonia* was the earthly Jesus’ sharing of table fellowship with the socially unacceptable and outcasts.⁸ For Paul and for the Church Fathers as well, the Church as the body of Christ has always been inseparably linked with the Eucharist. The Church is therefore especially understood as a communion in the Sacrament of Eucharist.

Communion is the main thrust of Vatican II and its aftermath. We shall now deal with how this communion has its roots in the Eucharist. Communion essentially means participation, more precisely, participation in the blessings of salvation bestowed by God; but above all, in the Eucharist.⁹ The Church as communion, which is founded on the unity of God himself, finds its “highest expression and realization in the unity of shared participation in the Eucharist.”¹⁰ “Communion” is not just the most common expression for the “reception of the Eucharist” but also the “community” resulting from the Eucharistic celebration of those participating in it. This meaning of communion is foundational in the writings of the Apostle Paul (1Cor. 10:16). For the Fathers of the early Church, the Eucharist was a “sign of unity and bond of love.” One of the major and wide-ranging new orientations given by

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Vatican II is the emphasis given to the Eucharist¹¹ and the Church. Adrian Hastings affirms this remarkable change brought about by the Council, “Where post-conciliar theology will say that the Eucharist gives the Church its unity, pre-conciliar theology would undoubtedly have been most likely to declare that it was the papacy that did so.”¹² The Eucharistic celebration is the centre and culmination of the life of the Christian community (*CD* 3). The Church is the body of Christ and it is the Eucharist which forms the ecclesial body (*LG* 3). The Mystical body, the Church, is a corporate body of Churches, which are Eucharistic communities. It is this emphasis upon the Eucharistic ecclesiology that provides the basis for the theology of the local Church. In fact, today many non-Catholic Churches are discussing the importance of the Eucharist as well. Eucharistic ecclesiology is receiving more and more attention in these Churches.

The Second Vatican Council further articulates the idea of Eucharistic communion as the basis of ecclesial communion. *Lumen Gentium* states, “Really sharing in the body of the Lord in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with him and with one another” (*LG* 7). The Eucharist is the high-point of the Church’s *communio*. It is the “source and summit of the Christian life” (*LG* 11, *SC* 10, *CD* 30, *AG* 9.). Therefore we cannot think of ecclesial communion without basing it on the *communio eucharistica*.

My aim in this section is to grasp the centrality of the Eucharist as the source of life and unity of the Church. Basing my study on the table-ministry of Jesus in the gospels, I would like to do the following: a) consider Jesus’ table fellowship as a primary sacramental expression of the divine initiative, which nurtures *koinonia*; b) see how St. Paul and the Fathers of the Church give witness to such activity in the early Christian communities around the Eucharistic table and how the different theologians of the last century reflected on the Eucharist; and finally, c) consider the renewed understanding of the ecclesial dimension of the Eucharist.

1.1. The Eucharist- Source and Summit of Ecclesial Life

The Eucharist is the Source and summit of the Christian life (*LG* 11). The Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch (*PO* 5). The Eucharist has its origin in the many table fellowship meals that Jesus had during his

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ministry. “Table-fellowship is a fellowship of life. Table-fellowship with Jesus is even more,” writes Joachim Jeremias.¹³ Jesus’ ministry was characterized by the special place he gave to table-fellowship. Table-fellowship signifies unity, friendship, love and sharing. With this in mind Jesus chose the occasion of a meal, and not just any meal, but the Passover meal, with the meaning it signified, to offer himself in the Eucharist as the bread of life for the community.

1.1.1. The Eucharist is the cause of communion and Unity

The Eucharist is the sum and summary of our faith. The name ‘*Eucharist*’, because it is an action of thanksgiving to God, and its connection with the supper which the Lord took with his disciples on the eve of his passion. Most of the modern New Testament scholars agree that the Eucharistic origins are to be sought within the context of a complete communal meal and are closely linked to Jesus’ own ministry of the table fellowship.¹⁴ A phenomenological approach “The Eucharist is the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1325). To approach the Eucharist as a meal helps us to recognize how God’s grace is present in the context of a fellowship meal. In different communities a meal is in itself a common and effective symbol of union and fellowship.

To eat is to welcome into our lives, and to be gratefully united to, the numberless men and women of every sort whose toil and sweat lies behind the bread, and is the bread; the many trades and professions whose care and cooperation have gone into the making of the meal and are present in it.¹⁵

In its depths men and women meet and mingle in the joy of their creativity and power, and build up one another. One can also situate the Eucharist within the entire pattern of a family meal. An analysis of this everyday phenomenon of the family meal leads to an insight into the meaning and intelligibility of the Eucharist. The thrust of this phenomenological approach is to focus on the wider dimension of interpersonal activity that is restricted by the Eucharist. Phenomenology reminds us that we are not alone in this world. We are with others. This is existentially actualised in the human action of a meal, of people

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eating together. In the Indian context a meal is a very strong symbol of unity, where new relationships are created and bonded together. In the tradition of many Indian religions and cultures personal relationships are deepened and intensified by eating a meal together.

In the primitive religions some sacrificial rituals involved eating sacred food, and most meal rituals were connected with food which had been sacrificed or consecrated in some way. Usually the sacramental function of the meal was to affirm and intensify a bond of unity among the participants, or between them and others who were not physically present.¹⁶ In ancient Israel the most important ritual meal was the one which celebrated the Passover. This Passover supper was fundamentally a sacramental meal, a re-enactment of sacred events by means of which those events became real and present to the people who shared it. Through the narration of the story and the sharing of the meal, they not only remembered the events of the Exodus but in a way relived those events. And it made the God of Israel present to them. The Passover meal was, thus, a complex symbol where Jews could encounter the God of their ancestors. Besides the meals of sacrifice and the Passover Supper, there were also other ritual meals known to the Jews. Religious groups within Judaism were accustomed to sharing a meal of fellowship on the day before the Sabbath and other religious feasts.¹⁷ Jesus and his disciples formed one of a number of such groups in ancient Palestine.

1.1.2. Communion: “Take this and eat it, all of you”

Jesus addresses an invitation to us, urging us to receive him in the sacrament of the Eucharist. “Holy Communion augments our union with Christ. The principle fruit of receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion is an intimate union with Christ Jesus” (CCC 1391). The inspiration for all the Christian Eucharistic rituals is the farewell supper Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before he died. As the biblical writers describe it, Jesus treated this meal with extreme reverence and care. He took pains to prepare for it, gave important final instructions, and invested certain gestures with great meaning. At the end he said: “Do this in remembrance of me.” The last Supper, however unique, was not an isolated event in the life of Jesus.¹⁸ The Eucharist has always carried the memory of Jesus’ meals with tax collectors and sinners. Perhaps even more than the Last Supper of Jesus, what inspired

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the early Christian fellowship meals, which developed into the Eucharistic celebrations that we have today, was the memory of the meals that Jesus ate with his outcast disciples. Jesus' table fellowship has great significance in our discussion of communion. We observe that *communion* entails *communication*.¹⁹ Communion is an invitation by God to relationship with himself and the created reality. Any invitation to relationship, for that matter, requires expression, the mediation of sign and gesture.²⁰ God's own initiative for relationship required communication. His creative "Word" became incarnate and was communicated through the mediation of material signs and gestures. Bernard Prusak describes God's communication in Jesus as follows:

If the ultimate meaning of Christian *koinonia* is a relationship with the Father given gratis in and through Jesus, its primary sacramental expression was the earthly Jesus' sharing of table fellowship with both the socially acceptable and outcast. God's love and mercy were actualised and concretised in Jesus' table association with sinners.²¹

Indeed the Last Supper was only the last of a series of fellowship meals that Jesus had during his earthly ministry. He was a guest at meals with the well to do and respected (Mk 14:3) and with the scorned (Mk 2:15-17). He participated in wedding feasts (Jn 2:1-11), and shared meals with his friends and disciples (Lk 10:38-42). Jesus' eating habits became a byword: "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'"(Mt 11:19). His table-fellowship with all was a way of proclaiming God's forgiveness for everyone. Jesus' table behaviour seems to be a conscious modification of a banquet then prevalent in Messianic expectation.²² Jesus is the bridegroom (Mk 2:19-20; Mt 25:1-13; Jn 3:29) who has been awaited. The Gospel of John will even locate the start of Jesus' public ministry at a wedding feast in Cana (Jn 2). One of his favourite themes was that of the heavenly wedding banquet. This stress lent an eschatological significance to his own meals. Jesus spoke of his presence among his disciples as a wedding banquet (Mk 2:19), and told the crowds that open table fellowship would now

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be rewarded in the “resurrection of the righteous” (Lk 14:13-14). Those who imitate Jesus’ example of service at table will eat and drink with him in the kingdom (Lk 22:30). The eschatological significance is brought into the Last Supper in Jesus’ promise not to eat or drink until the Kingdom of God comes (Mk 14:25; Lk 22:15-18).²³

The feeding of the multitudes is also part of the preparation for the Last Supper and the celebration of the later Church.²⁴ Mark records two stories of the miraculous multiplication of bread and fish, portraying Jesus as the one who feeds all, both Jew (Mk 6:34-43) and Gentile (Mk 8:1-9). All were satisfied and there was still food left over, symbolizing the fullness and plenty of the messianic kingdom inaugurated by Jesus. In narrating these stories, the evangelists draw the connections with the Last Supper: “He blessed, broke, gave to the disciples” (Mk 6:41); “Having given thanks (*eucharistias*) he broke them and gave them to his disciples...” (Mk 8:6).

1.1.3. The Eucharist commits us to the Poor

Various authors have discussed Jesus’ table fellowship extensively. George Soares-Prabhu asks, why is it that scholars give such importance to what would seem to us no more than mildly scandalous behaviour on the part of a would be ‘holy man’? For Soares-Prabhu, “One reason for this is that intensive sociological and anthropological studies of the first century have taught us that in the social world of Jesus ... a seemingly harmless practice like dining with outcastes would have been an extraordinary revolutionary act, fraught with radical consequences, and holding important lessons for us who wish to follow Jesus in India today.”²⁵ In the Gospels we read that the table-fellowship for Jesus transcended all socio-economic barriers. Jesus dined with all: rich, poor, unclean, Pharisees, publicans, tax collectors, and sinners. He made it a point to criticize the exclusiveness of the privileged. He said: “When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.”(Lk 14:13) While sophisticated society, riddled with prejudices, excludes some, the Eucharist embraces

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all irrespective of social standing.²⁶ Truly for Jesus, table fellowship meal was a starting point for a community that rises above all social inequalities.

Jerome Kodell observes that for Jesus to share a meal was not just sharing of food but of life. It was a particular form of intimacy that had to be protected.²⁷ When Judas betrayed Jesus, this was interpreted as a violation of the special covenant formed by their meals together: “He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me” (Jn 13:18). It meant not only sharing of food but of life. In giving himself to all, Jesus was expressing God’s openness and his own vulnerable servanthood. The ultimate goal of Jesus is the universalist, inclusive community with eschatological Israel becoming the vehicle and sacrament of God’s inclusive community for all people.²⁸ That Jesus’ vision of the inclusive community embraces all humanity is clear in the threat that Jesus issues to Israel, (Mt 8:11-12; Lk 13:28-29) which warns of the many who will come from all over to participate in the eschatological banquet prepared for Israel, whereas the Israel that rejects Jesus will be expelled into outer darkness.

1.2. The Eucharist Makes the Church

Those who receive the Eucharist are united more closely to Christ. Communion renews, strengthens, and deepens the incorporation into the Church, already achieved by Baptism. In Baptism we have been called to form but one body. The Eucharist fulfils this call (CCC 1395). We should pay special attention to the liturgical assemblies in the early Church and to their worship because firstly, it is to the apostolic community that we look for a model. Secondly, this period of origins has its place in the history of the Eucharistic liturgy. Thirdly, the worshipping community played an important role in the formation of the New Testament. Luke gives us a picture of the Christian community in Jerusalem. “And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people” (Acts. 2:46). Here we see a community participating in the temple worship, breaking bread and praising God. Luke further adds that after the Ascension, the disciples “returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising God” (Lk 24:53). The temple which is the place of worship was very much part of the early Christian community (Acts 3;

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5:12). Our fullest information regarding early Christian assemblies comes from Corinth. In this city there were in fact two distinct forms of Christian assemblies. One was for the celebration of the Lord's Supper to which only believers would be admitted. The other was the general assembly for prayers, hymns, exhortations, etc. (1Cor. 11:17-33). St.Paul is our earliest witness to Christian Eucharistic practice and understanding, taking us into the Corinthian celebration of the Lord's Supper in the middle of the 50s. "He calls it *the Lord's Supper*, describes it as *the Breaking of Bread*, and interprets it as *Communion* in the Body of Christ."²⁹ Speaking on the main concern of St.Paul for the early community Martin McNamara says, "But apart from dogmatic considerations, St.Paul had to see to it that the Eucharist fulfilled its purpose of building up the Church. Practice had to be consonant with belief and be such that believers and outsiders were edified by it."³⁰ St.Paul sees the gathering for the Lord's Supper as an activity and a realization of the unity in the body of Christ.³¹

This model and the life of the early Christians as shown in the New Testament strongly motivate us to emphasize that the Eucharist makes the Church. D.E. Aune points out that the early Christian worship had two functions. Firstly, it was a model and celebration of the distinctive moral ideals of the Christians. Secondly, it had an anticipatory function, which provided a vehicle for actualising the perfect future realization of these religious ideals in the present.³² The intimate relationship between the Eucharist and life inspires us to say that it was the Eucharist that made the early Church. To quote Enda McDonagh: "This basic connection between Eucharist and life shaped the early Church. Christian life was that of a member of Christ's body into which Christians were integrated in baptism and by which they were nourished in the Eucharist."³³ According to St.Chrysostom, the Eucharistic community is identified with the Church. The early Church originated in the Easter faith and through the outpouring of the Spirit, continued to come together to celebrate the Lord's Supper even after

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the death of Jesus following the mandate given by Jesus: “Do this in remembrance of me.” The Lord’s Supper as its central liturgical celebration was an inalienable and integral part of its life. The early Church could not have imagined a Christian life outside this community, which assembled for the celebration of the Eucharist. We celebrate the Eucharist, and the Eucharist forms us as the Church.³⁴

1.2.1. The Eucharist and the Unity of Christians

We need to find the lost consciousness of the early Church concerning the decisive importance of the Eucharist in ecclesiology. John D. Zizioulas suggests, “The rediscovery of this consciousness, lost in the tortuous paths of medieval scholasticism, presupposes that we give up envisaging the Eucharist as one sacrament among many, as an objective act or “means of grace” or “administered” by the Church.”³⁵ It means that we go back to the biblical and patristic understanding of the Eucharist. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, begins with two chapters entitled “The Mystery of the Church” and “The People of God.” By applying the terms “Mystery” and “People of God” to the Church, the Second Vatican Council offered scope for a renewed self-understanding of the Church and of the world. It emphasized the communitarian nature of the Church and the salvation it represented. They indicate a vision of the Church as communion. According to M.G. Lawler, “The emphasis intended by placing chapters on mystery and the people of God before one on hierarchy, provide ample evidence of the Council’s conviction that the Church is a mysterious vertical communion between God and believers, and a horizontal communion between believers, before it is a hierarchical institution.”³⁶ This vision of the Church as “mystery” (*LG 1*) and pilgrim people of God (*LG 9*) before it has an external and hierarchical structure (*LG 18*) is not a *new* vision, but a *renewed* vision from the apostolic Church.

In our attempt to see the significance of the Eucharist in the Church we shall also look at the official teachings of the Church. The second article of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy indicates that the real nature of the Church is expressed through the celebration of the Eucharist and it daily builds up the people into a temple of God.

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For it is the liturgy through which, especially in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, “the work of our redemption is accomplished” and it is through the liturgy, especially that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church ... The liturgy daily builds up those who are in the Church, making of them a holy temple of the Lord, a dwelling place for God in the Spirit, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ. (SC 2)

Although the Constitution emphasizes that the entire activity of the Church is not exhausted in the liturgy, (SC 9) immediately after that we also find the statement about the liturgy as “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows.”(SC 10) According to the Constitution the liturgy is not only placed at the pinnacle of the Church, but it is manifested as the source of the Church.

The Constitution also declares that the liturgy is the pre-eminent epiphany of the Church, whereby its members are built into a holy temple of the Lord, a dwelling place for God in the Spirit. It is the action of Christ the priest and of his body, which is the Church (SC 7, 26, 41 & 42). In the Catechism of the Catholic Church we see a deliberate and more meaningful attempt to bring out the real nature of the Church. There, worship is said to be the first act of religion, (CCC 2096 & 2135) and it eloquently teaches that the Eucharist makes the Church (CCC 1396).

The Eucharistic ecclesiology helps us to understand the Church as a community of churches that are in communion with one another. In every celebration of the Eucharist, the resurrected Lord is truly and essentially present and gives himself whole and entire. The Council therefore says,

This Church of Christ is really present in all legitimately organised local groups of the faithful, which in so far as they are united to their pastors, are also quite appropriately called Churches in the New Testament... In them the faithful are gathered together through the preaching of the Gospel of Christ, and the mystery of the Lord’s Supper is celebrated “so that, by means of the flesh and blood of the Lord the whole brotherhood of the Body may be welded together.” (LG 26)

1.2.2. Eucharist as a Sacrament of Communion: Contemporary Theological Thinking.

We consider a few theologians of the Churches to examine their views on the significance of the Eucharist and its relation to the Church. There are theologians both in the West as well as in the East, like Henry de Lubac and John Zizioulas,³⁷ who speak

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emphatically about Eucharistic ecclesiology. In the last century, the notion of Eucharistic ecclesiology was first expressed by Russian Orthodox theologians in exile, in particular Nikolaj Afanasjew (1893-1966). His basic ecclesiological principle is “Wherever the Eucharist is, there is the Church.”³⁸ From the Orthodox perspective, Afanasjew’s Eucharistic ecclesiology was further developed and corrected in essential respects by Alexander Schmemmann (1921-1983) and John Zizioulas (b.1931). In the realm of Catholic theology, it was primarily Henri de Lubac (1896-1991) who paved the way for the Eucharistic ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council.³⁹

According to Henri de Lubac, the Church, the people of God, is a community of worship. He puts the Eucharist at the centre of the life of the Church. “The totality of the body is the Church united to her Lord like members to the head and the bride to the bridegroom.”⁴⁰ For him it is in the Eucharist that the mysterious essence of the Church receives a perfect expression. De Lubac emphasises the centrality of the Eucharist in the Church. He affirms that Christ in the Eucharist is truly the heart of the Church. He emphatically teaches that the Eucharist gathers and constitutes the Church. Christ and Spirit are at work in the Eucharist forming the ecclesial body, the Church.⁴¹ The Eucharist makes the body of Christ, and the head and members make one single body.

The head and members make one single body; the Bridegroom and Bride are “one flesh.” There are not two Christs one personal and the other “mystical.” And there is certainly no confusion of Head with members; Christians are not the “physical” (or Eucharistic) body of Christ and the Bride is not the Bridegroom. All distinctions are there, but they do not add up to discontinuity, the Church is not just a body, but the body of Christ.⁴²

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For Henri de Lubac the Eucharist and the Church stand as cause to each other. “Each has been entrusted to the other, so to speak, by Christ; the Church produces the Eucharist, but the Eucharist also produces the Church.”⁴³

John Zizioulas, who has been described as one of the most profound theologians of our times, is a promoter of the Eucharistic ecclesiology in the Greek Orthodox Church.⁴⁴ For him the ecclesial identity in its historical realization is Eucharistic. The Eucharist is a historical realization and manifestation of the eschatological existence of the human person. It is a movement, a progress towards this realization. Assembly and movement are the two fundamental characteristics of the Eucharist. According to Zizioulas it is the eternal design of the holy Trinity to draw the human person and creation to participation in God’s very life. The concrete existential form of this participation is the participation in the Eucharist. The celebration of the sacraments especially the Eucharist is for the Church more crucial than the preaching of the Word. Eucharist for him is not something that takes place within a certain gathering. To quote his own words: “Thus the Eucharist was not the act of a pre-existing Church; it was an event *constitutive* of being of the Church, enabling the Church to *be*. The Eucharist constituted the Church’s being.”⁴⁵

Zizioulas talks about the Orthodox tradition, where the basic ecclesiological principle applying to the notion of the local Church is that of the identification of the Church with the Eucharistic community. According to him, “The concept of the local Church derives basically from the fact that the Eucharist is celebrated at a given place and comprises by virtue of its catholicity *all* the members of the Church dwelling in that place.”⁴⁶ Therefore, for Zizioulas the two basic ecclesiological principles are, firstly, that each Eucharistic assembly should include *all* the members of the Church of a particular place and, secondly, it - and through it the Church – is always a community of some place (for example, the Church of Corinth, of Antioch, of Jerusalem). Therefore, the local Churches were communities of believers who had the Eucharist as the centre of their Christian lives. The celebration of the

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Eucharist by the early Church was both the manifestation and realization of the Church. “All the fundamental elements which constituted her historical existence and structure had, by necessity, to pass through the Eucharistic community to be “sure” or “valid” and “canonical”, that is, to be ecclesologically sure.”⁴⁷ The Eucharist, therefore, was not the act of a pre-existing Church; it was an event *constitutive* of the being of the Church, enabling the Church *to be*.⁴⁸ The Eucharist constituted the Church’s being.

Karl Rahner gives us a clear understanding of the importance of the Eucharist and the Church. For him the Eucharist makes the world important:

Consequently what happens in worship of this kind is not something that does not occur or has not permanently occurred elsewhere in the world, but something that occurs always and everywhere or has occurred for all time and for everywhere in the world, and is explicitly celebrated, stated and appropriated. This ecclesial worship is important and significant, not because something happens in it that does not happen elsewhere but because there is present and explicit in it that which makes the world important, since it is everywhere blessed by grace, by faith, hope, and love, and in it there occurred the cross of Christ which is the culmination of historical explicitness of this history of grace.⁴⁹

Michael Skelley, in his study of Karl Rahner’s understanding of worship concludes: “The only complete manifestation of our communion with one another and with God in history will be the kind of communion that takes place when the Church gathers to worship.”⁵⁰ Here one should not forget the fact that for Karl Rahner the function of the Church, which is the basic sacrament,⁵¹ is to enable communion with God and with one another. Karl Rahner, in his book *Church and the Sacraments*, considers the Church as the fundamental sacrament. The Church is “most manifested and in the most intensive form, she

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attains the highest actuality of her own nature, when she celebrates the Eucharist.”⁵² According to him, the sacrament of the Eucharist effects the most profound incorporation into the unity of the body of Christ. Christ is present in the Eucharist “as bond of unity, as the foundation of the covenant between God and human persons, as the Church’s unity therefore.”⁵³ In his words the Eucharist “is the sacrament of the heart of Christ” and so “the source of our love for our brothers and sisters.”⁵⁴ It is a “meal of brotherly (sisterly) solidarity” (*GS* 32). “When we receive the body and blood of Jesus, it really is we who are received and incorporated”⁵⁵ affirms Rahner.

According to Hans Kung the Church is fundamentally a Eucharistic community. God’s service to the Church, and the Church’s service before God take place in worship. To quote his own words:

Christ is present in the entire life of the Church. But Christ is above all present and active in the worship of the congregation... In this congregation there occurs in a special way God’s service to the Church and the Church’s service before God... This is fundamentally where the Church is, where the Church, the community, the congregation, happens.⁵⁶

He further goes on to emphasize that since Christ is entirely present in every congregation of worship, every congregation of worship held by the local community is in the fullest sense God’s ecclesia, Christ’s body.⁵⁷

Jean-Marie Tillard, a professor in Theology at the university of Fribourg and Ottawa, is a consultor for the pontifical commission on promoting unity, a specialist on *koinonia*, and a member of the Orthodox and Catholic dialogue. According to him, “The Universal Church is immanent in the local Church through communion in the Eucharistic body. And

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correlatively, the local Church, when it celebrates the Memorial of the Lord, is in a sacramental way communion of the Church in its totality, a totality which embraces all times ‘since the just man Abel,’ all places, all situations.’⁵⁸ When tradition asserts that the Church is Eucharistic or that “*Eucharist makes the Church*”, it proclaims this profound sense of unbreakable unity of the Church of God. Wherever there is true Eucharist, there is truly Church. Wherever the local Eucharistic community gather together there is the local Church.⁵⁹ The nature of the Church, as early Tradition understands it, is, therefore, summed up in *communion, Koinonia*. It is the *communion of communions*, appearing as a *communion* of local Churches, spread throughout the world, each one itself being a *communion* of the baptized, gathered together into communities by the Holy Spirit, on the basis of baptism, for the Eucharistic celebration. This existence as *communion* constitutes its essence.⁶⁰

Some people dream of a unity very near to uniformity, and others cling to the defence of a pluralism, which is almost without limitations. But uniformity suffocates communion, whereas certain differences on fundamental points make it nonviable. Unity without diversity makes the Church a dead body: pluralism without unity makes it a body, which is dismembered.⁶¹

From the above viewpoints we observe that most of the theologians teach very emphatically that it is the Eucharist that makes the Church. The Eucharist is sacrament of the assembly (1Cor 11:18). The very word *ekklesia* means “a gathering” or “an assembly.” This gathering is Eucharistic wherein the “Lord’s Supper” is accomplished and wherein the Eucharistic “breaking of the bread” takes place.⁶² To gather around the table in the Eucharist is a sign of unity. The tablefellowship at the Eucharist leads to mutual service and love. “The Lord’s Supper,” “the breaking of the bread” is inseparable from the call to mutual service in Justice and Love,⁶³ which is the goal of the Eucharistic celebration. Through the Eucharist the

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unity and communion in the church are nourished and maintained. Where the Word is proclaimed and believed, where the Eucharist is celebrated and where love is practiced, there the Church is.⁶⁴ For St. Paul, there cannot be any meaningful celebration of the Lord's Supper when the members of the faithful are divided among themselves (1Cor 11:17ff). This unity was of importance even to the Fathers of the Church who affirmed that where division is found, God is not present⁶⁵ and the Eucharist ratifies the presence of unity only when it is received in unity.

When we compare both the contexts of Corinth and Kerala, what was happening in Corinth is surely no worse than what is happening in many churches in Kerala today. There in Corinth the Eucharistic community was divided by class divisions, so that rich and poor coming together to affirm their oneness in Christ were kept apart by the different kinds and amount of food they ate, or the different times or places in which they ate it. But such class divisions are far less damaging than the ritual, caste, racial, economic, social, and cultural divisions we have brought into our Eucharistic communities. Today we need to ask ourselves, how is it possible worthily to celebrate the Eucharist in the Kerala context, in a manner consonant with the character of Jesus' own Eucharist and the table fellowship meals? Eucharist is an invitation to participate in the life of Christ and a challenge to break the barriers that separates human beings. It invites us to look at the connection between Eucharistic worship and the communion of our brothers and sisters.

In this section we have been trying to understand the intrinsic relationship between the Eucharist and the Church. The Eucharist invites the community to be united and be formed into the community of Christ. The Eucharist is the source and expression of the life of the Church. The Eucharist touches the fundamental aspects of human life. The Eucharist unites the worshipping community with God, with nature, with humans and their life situations. The early Christian community was a Eucharistic community which was called the *ecclesia*. We conclude this chapter with the words of Pope John Paul II on the Eucharistic origin of the Church: "The Church was founded, as the new community of the people of God,

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in the apostolic community of those twelve who, at the Last Supper, became partakers of the body and blood of the Lord under the species of bread and wine.”(*Dominicae Cenaе, 4*).

As we have seen, the Eucharist is the source and expression of life of the Church. It touches the fundamental aspects of human and spiritual life. The Eucharist unites the worshipping community with God, with nature, with humans and their life situations. The early Christian community was a Eucharistic community, which was called *ekklesia*. In the teachings of Vatican II we have re-discovered this lost identity. The inseparability of communion and mission is most visible in the Church gathered together to celebrate the Eucharist: “To gather and to go, assemble and disperse, is the rhythm of the Eucharistic Church, like beating of the heart.”⁶⁶ Communion gives vision and strength for mission and mission aims at gathering the world into communion with its Creator. The Eucharist reminds us that the communion experienced within its celebration is a call to mission. “The Eucharist is mission because after the communion celebration, the faithful are sent forth to fulfil God’s will in their daily lives.”⁶⁷

Conclusion

Communion is a living reality and God’s gift, which has its very source in the Trinitarian communion. God became human to reveal this reality. The Church was founded for sharing this eternal communion. The abiding presence of the Spirit of God builds up the Church in communion. For this Jesus continues to be the everlasting source of life and light which infallibly leads us to the eternal communion. Jesus’ inmost desire for the unity of his disciples and a communion of Churches is vividly manifested in his prayer in Jn 17:21-23. The Apostles and the early Church experienced this unity and love, they shared it with others (1Jn 1:1-4), and they also lived in communion and fellowship (Acts 4:32-35; 2:44-47) witnessing to the Gospel values of the Kingdom of God.

As we have seen in the earlier pages, Christianity in India, especially the catholic community, is a divided family. They need to come together in a spirit of repentance and reconciliation. The Church is called upon to be the sacrament of salvation to the world. But since she has to carry out this mission in an ever-changing world, she must undergo a

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constant renewal, that is, on-going self-criticism and necessary transformation from time to time.

The Church is called to be the sacrament of salvation and instrument of communion among human beings themselves as well as in their relations with God and the world. As Jesus Christ is the sacrament of God⁶⁸ so also the Church on earth is a sacramental reality - a visible sign of an invisible reality (*LG 1*). It has a societal character, but is not, and cannot be reduced to a mere human-made organisation. “The Church exists for building up the eternal communion; for which the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit is, and ever shall be the permanent source of inspiration, life and strength. Human made structures shall not obstruct this unity in diversity.”⁶⁹

The unity, which is a bond based on eternal communion, is manifested in her diversity (*OE 2*). Individual Churches are Eucharistic Churches. Therefore we need to ask ourselves, how is it possible to celebrate the Eucharist meaningfully in our context in a manner consonant with the character of Jesus’ own table fellowship meals? The Eucharist calls for the abolition of all forms of separation and exclusiveness among human beings. The community of the Eucharist is inclusive and universal, cutting across barriers – the barriers constructed by caste, class, rites, etc. In the context of India, Eucharistic communion is a challenge to create a climate where the members of the three different Individual Churches can co-exist and work together peacefully.

Ecclesial communion should never lead to domination or alienation. The acceptance of the concept of communion, and the communion of Churches, and an ecumenical openness to the heritage of the different Churches will lead to a better understanding of the Churches in India, which will enable every believer to understand well, and appreciate, the catholicity of the Church, that is its unity in diversity. The inability to accept this reality of the Church, and the attempts to achieve unity through uniformity, leads to conflicts and divisions.

The Church today realises its nature as a communion of Churches. “The Church as a communion constitutes a community in the Spirit, in a complex of mutually supporting ministries, in profound relation in the Eucharist, in the simultaneity of the individual and the

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universal, and in the profound relation between the Pope and the college of the bishops,”⁷⁰ and in the fellowship and oneness of the believers. Communion expresses presence, participation, sharing, oneness, fellowship, community and commonality.

Here the role of the religious, especially the clergy, who exert a great influence over the faithful, becomes very important. It is they who should take the initiative in leading the faithful towards communion. The Church is called to be the sacrament of communion, not a sign of division. The self-understanding of the Church as communion challenges the members of the individual Churches to be instruments of reconciliation, peace, harmony and fellowship. While emphasizing unity and communion among the churches, their diversity and uniqueness must be safeguarded and promoted at all costs, so that the catholicity or wholeness of the Church may be enhanced. The existence of the different local churches is the best manifestation of the Church as communion.

As a minister of the Church participating in the ministerial leadership I have to be at the service of the people. Being Indians we also have the responsibility to be sensitive to the Indian context at large. Increasing poverty, corruption and exploitation, diminishing moral and social values, destruction of ecology due to increasing globalization, modernization and industrialization are now part and parcel of the Indian context. Therefore a preferential option for the poor and preservation of creation are relevant aspects of the Church’s mission in India for the realization of wider communion. The task of the Church is the realization of communion at all levels of her Christian life, so that she will truly witness to Christ in this land. This is my hope and vision. I believe that sooner or later, with a commitment for mission of communion and communion for mission the Church in India will become new.

Notes:

1. J.M.R.Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ, At The Source of the Ecclesiology of Communion* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 1-12.
2. In this paper the documents of the Second Vatican Council are cited from Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Mumbai: St.Pauls, 2004).
3. Susan Wood, “The Theology of Communion as an Ecumenical Source,” *Ecumenical Trends* 18, no.110 (November 1989): 150.
4. Jacob Kavunkal, “Mission as Inculturation,” *Vidyajyoti* 63, no.11 (November 1999): 864.
5. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* (Mumbai: Pauline Publications, 1999). Hereafter referred to as *EA*.
6. The term ‘rite’ is very often used to refer to the external aspects of the Church’s liturgy and organization-gestures, vestments. But it also signifies all that has to do with liturgy and hierarchical

- Orders as well as with other aspects of Christian life. It indicates the particular way of existence of a given Christian community. Eastern and Western Churches are two patterns of expression of the same universal Church. There is equality between them and belong to each other. And in each the whole mystery of Christ is realized. Xavier Koodapuzha, "Communion of Churches in the Indian Context", *Jeevadhara* 7, no.40 (July-August 1977): 352-354.
7. Kuncheria Pathil, "Vatican II and the Rite Question in India," in *Quest for an Indian Church: An Exploration of the Possibilities Opened up by Vatican II*, ed. Kurien Kunnumpuram & Lorenzo Fernando (Anand, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1993), 120.
 8. Pathil, "Vatican II and the Rite Question in India," 120.
 9. Jacob Kavunkal, "Mission as Inculturation," *Vidyajyoti* 63, no.11 (November 1999): 864.
 10. Walter Kasper, "Church as *Communio*," *Communio* 13 (1986): 106-107.
 11. *Ibid.*, 4.
 12. Eucharist is "Lord's Supper" (1Cor 11:20); at which the people of God eat its "spiritual food" and consume its "spiritual drink". (1Cor 10:3-4) In this it manifests itself as the community of the new covenant (1Cor 11:25), and it shares in "the table of the Lord". (1Cor 10:21)
 13. Adrian Hastings, "Key Texts," in *Modern Catholicism, Vatican II and After*, ed. Adrian Hastings (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 59.
 14. Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1982), 204.
 15. Jerome Kodell, *The Eucharist in the New Testament* (Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1988), 17.
 16. Samuel Rayan, "The Eucharist and a New Personalism for India," in *India and the Eucharist*, ed. Bede Griffiths and others (Ernakulam: Lumen Institute, 1964), 37.
 17. Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred* (Missouri: Triumph Books, 1991), 207.
 18. Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 208.
 19. Kodell, *The Eucharist in the New Testament*, 17.
 20. Richard W. Gilsdorf, "Koinonia: Communion or Fellowship," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 87 (1986): 27.
 21. Bernard Prusak, "Hospitality Extended or Denied: *Koinonia* Incarnate from Jesus To Augustine," *The Jurist* 36 (1976), 90.
 22. Prusak, "Hospitality Extended or Denied: *Koinonia* Incarnate from Jesus To Augustine," 91.
 23. *Ibid.* For example, cf. Isaiah 25:6.
 24. St.Paul highlights this aspect in his own way by interpreting the Lord's Supper as the proclamation of the death of the Lord "until he comes" (1Cor 11:26).
 25. Kodell, *The Eucharist in the New Testament*, 18.
 26. George M. Soares-Prabhu, "The Table Fellowship of Jesus, Its Significance for Dalit Christians in India Today," in *Biblical Themes for a Contextual Theology Today*, ed. Isaac Padinjarekuttu (Pune: JDV Theology Series, 1999), 223.
 27. Cedric Rebello, *The Other Eucharist* (Bangalore: ATC, 1985), 60.
 28. Kodell, *The Eucharist in the New Testament*, 17.
 29. George Keerankeri, "The Eucharist and India's Quest for Community," in *Body, Bread, Blood; Eucharistic Perspective from the Indian Church*, ed. Francis Gonsalves (Delhi: Vidyajyoti, 2000), 21.
 30. Samuel Rayan, "My Body for You," in *Body, Bread, Blood, Eucharistic Perspectives from the Indian Church*, ed. Francis Gonsalves (Delhi: Vidyajyothi, 2000), 191.
 31. Martin McNamara, "The Liturgical Assemblies and Religious Worship of the Early Christians," *Concilium*, 2 (February 1966): 14.
 32. Vincent Branik, *The House Church in the Writings of Paul* (Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1989), 100.
 33. D.E. Aune, "Worship, Early Christian," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol.6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 975.
 34. Enda McDonagh, "Liturgy and Christian Life," *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter E.Fink (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 743.
 35. Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Eucharist* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1968), 141.
 36. John D. Zizioulas, *Being As Communion* (New York: St.Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 20.
 37. Michael G.Lawler and Thomas J.Shanahan, *Church: A Spirited Communion* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 3.
 38. Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes The Church, Henri De Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), xiii-xxiii.
 39. Zizioulas, *Being As Communion*, 24.
 40. Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes The Church, Henri De Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1993).
 41. Henri de Lubac, *Christian Faith: The Structure of the Apostles' Creed* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1986), 101.

42. Henri de Lubac, *The Splendour of the Church*, trans. Michael Mason (London: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 105-113.
43. *Ibid.*, 112.
44. *Ibid.*, 92.
45. Partlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church*, xxii.
46. Zizioulas, *Being As Communion*, 21.
47. *Ibid.*, 247.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*
50. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: 1983), 147.
51. Michael Skelley, *The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner's Theology of Worship* 137.
52. Skelley, *The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner's Theology of Worship*, 141.
53. Karl Rahner, *Church and the Sacraments* (London: Burns & Oats, 1966), 84.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*, 176.
56. *Ibid.*, 178.
57. Hans Kung, *The Church* (London: Search Press, 1976), 235.
58. *Ibid.*
59. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, 26.
60. *Ibid.*
61. *Ibid.*, 29.
62. *Ibid.*, 320.
63. The phrase "When you come together" repeated five times in vv. 1Cor 17-22 and 33-34, is one of the key phrases that hold the argument together. Given its similar usages in 14:23 and 26, it had probably become a semi-technical term for the "gathering together" of the people of God for worship. Cf. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 539.
64. Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread: the witness of the New Testament* (New York, Paulist Press, 1987), 539.
65. Karl Rahner, *The Church after the Council* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1996), 48.
66. *Dominicae Cenaе*, no.4.
67. McPartlan, *Sacrament of Salvation*, 61.
68. P.Arokiadoss, "A Broken and Bleeding Eucharistic Communion: A Dalit Perspective," in *Body, Bread, Blood; Eucharistic Perspective from the Indian Church*, ed. Francis Gonsalves (Delhi: Vidyajyoti, 2000), 276.
69. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 70.
70. Xavier Koodapuzha, *Communion of Churches*, 71.
71. Joseph Kallarangatt, "Communion Ecclesiology: In the Light of the Second Vatican Council," *Communion of Churches*, ed. Xavier Koodapuzha (Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, 1993), 94.

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