

Stealing Jesus: A Protestant takes communion at mass

My ecclesiastical criminality has been going on for 45 years. It all started at a Trappist abbey in Virginia.

by [Wesley Granberg-Michaelson](#) in the [July 20, 2016](#) issue



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Last Monday I was stealing Jesus again, this time at Santa Maria de la Paz, near my home in Santa Fe. Occasionally I drop by for the 12:15 Eucharist. My ecclesiastical criminality has been going on for 45 years.

It all started at Holy Cross Abbey, a Trappist community nestled in the hills near Berryville, Virginia, about 70 miles from the nation's capital. In December 1972, psychologically and spiritually exhausted from that fall's elections, which were still shadowed by the Vietnam War, I drove anxiously to Berryville. Over the phone Father Stephen, the abbey's guestmaster, had warmly welcomed my hesitant inquiry.

The next six days changed my life. A spiritual, mystical encounter revealed that I could rest in the reality of God's love. The vigils beginning at 3:30 a.m., followed by silence anticipating the rising sun, culminated in a morning service of Eucharist where Christ's flesh and blood became tangible, real, and irresistible.

Back home on Capitol Hill, my days were punctuated by surreptitious sojourns to St. Joseph's Catholic Church on 2nd Street, just down the block from the U.S. Senate offices. The 12:10 mass filled the space others filled with lunch. Periodically on my morning commute, I'd stop at St. Augustine's Catholic Church on V Street.

I went back to Berryville for a month as a "retreatant in community," sharing food, prayer, work, as well as bread and wine with the monks. I never disguised my Protestant identity—and the body and blood of Jesus were never withheld. The guestmaster, abbot, and others who presided never hesitated to welcome me at their tables, whether nutritional or eucharistic.

As a child growing up in an independent evangelical church, I knew something special was happening with Jesus when the Welch's grape juice and Wonder bread were passed down the aisle, after our pastor read a few words from Paul. Jesus was really present.

At my ordination as a minister of word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America, I presided at the Lord's Supper for the first time as one sanctioned to do so by a wider church body. I used the Lima Liturgy, developed in conjunction with the meeting of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches held in Lima, Peru, which produced the influential text *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. The most widely printed and translated document in WCC history, the BEM report tried to clarify and narrow the gaps in understanding these three crucial dimensions of the churches' life.

Yet differences stubbornly remained, as I discovered when, four years after my ordination, I joined the staff of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. Planners for its Seventh Assembly in Canberra in 1991 decided to hold a eucharistic service within the official program, even though Orthodox Christians, who had been WCC members since 1961, could not participate (nor could the Catholic observers). Among the historic Protestant and Anglican churches, several had reached theological agreements officially allowing the sharing of this sacrament, and other member churches didn't think they needed negotiated agreements to share the table, since it was not theirs, but the Lord's. The Canberra service was powerful and moving—and irresistible to some delegates, who came forward to receive the bread and wine even though their own churches disapproved.

The result was an ecumenical backlash against eucharistic sharing. At the next WCC Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1998, it was simply announced that on Sunday the delegates could worship at one of their respective denomination's local congregations. Each denomination would partake at its own Lord's Table. This was the WCC's version of "separate but equal."

Theological work toward a joint understanding of the Eucharist continued in many circles after BEM, but official ecumenical practice in this area seemed to move backward. At the Ninth WCC Assembly held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2006, what previously had been called "worship" was now reduced to "common prayer" in response to Orthodox objections. Communion was not attempted. Likewise, at the Tenth WCC Assembly held in Busan, South Korea in 2013, eucharistic hospitality was off the official table (although Sharon Watkins, president and general minister of the Disciples of Christ, offered an unofficial communion service for those who could come).

Many who witnessed the continuing denominational imprisonment of the Lord's body and blood experienced ecumenical agony. The late Emilio Castro, the WCC general secretary who hired me, was a Methodist pastor who yearned for eucharistic sharing. He would say, "I'm not even asking the Catholics (or Orthodox) to recognize the validity of the Lord's Supper that we Methodists celebrate. I'm simply asking them to accept that I see the body and blood of Jesus Christ fully present in *their* Eucharist."

In spring 1994 I sat in a restaurant with Castro and his longtime Orthodox friend and WCC colleague Ion Bria, a priest in the Romanian Orthodox Church. The two lifted their wine glasses and said to each other with tears in their eyes, "Someday, before we die, we shall be able to share the body and blood together, with our churches' blessings." But they never did. Nor, if they were still living, could they do so today.

So I returned to ecclesiastical disobedience. That became more complicated once I was elected general secretary of the Reformed Church in America. When I assumed that post, I didn't know all that would be demanded of me as general secretary, but I knew I couldn't go forward without retreating. I knew I needed regular times away, with a spiritual director, and the nourishment of Christ's body and blood. A Carmelite retreat center near my home in New Jersey provided all this.

As a church official, I wanted more than ever to show absolute respect for my Catholic hosts. But their invitation to receive at the table was unambiguous. On my retreat days, I'd often be invited to read one of the scriptures at their eucharistic service.

When the RCA's governing council directed me to finish work on a vision statement, I took a small group to St. Benedict's Trappist Monastery high in the mountains at Snowmass, Colorado. Meeting with the guestmaster upon arrival, I explained carefully that we were Protestants who wished to participate in their rhythm of worship and prayer but would certainly respect any boundaries they maintained around the Eucharist. He smiled and said, "Up here we don't believe Jesus shared bread and wine just with Catholics."

This pattern of transgressing ecclesial boundaries persisted as I continued to seek out Catholic retreat centers. These institutions seemed to understand spiritual formation better than my Reformed tradition, which in this area jettisoned more than it needed to 500 years ago. When my soul wanted to be replenished, it seemed unnatural to withhold the sustaining sacramental gifts which were vehicles of Christ's real presence.

One might argue that the most serious criminality was not being committed by me but by my Catholic hosts, who were directly disobeying the teachings and instructions of their church. That argument raises issues of sacramental theology, ecclesiology, and the authority of ordained ministry—the battlefields where formal arguments about the Eucharist have been waged between Catholics and Protestants, Anglicans, and Orthodox.

I take these issues seriously, trying hard to understand differing views which have a bearing not just on how I think, but on what I partake of. The Catholic view restricting the Eucharist only to those who are part of the Catholic Church can be summarized like this: Catholics believe that in the Eucharist the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus Christ, which happens only through the ministry of those ordained and given the authority, through apostolic succession, to preside at the table. The Eucharist also serves as the tangible symbol of a united church, so that it can be shared only by those baptized Christians who have become visibly joined to the Catholic Church.

On each of these points, reams of theological documents and numerous books have been written. Some have softened what historically were sharp, delimiting points of difference.

Recently, in preparation for an event commemorating (not celebrating) the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, an official group of Catholics and Lutherans recognized that their churches already can say that “the Eucharist is an essential sign of the unity of the church, and that the reality of the church as a community is realized and furthered sacramentally in the Eucharistic celebration. The Eucharist both mirrors and builds the church in its unity” (*Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry and Eucharist*). In light of this agreement, this group recommended that occasions for sharing the Eucharist together could be “offered more clearly and regulated more compassionately.”

To regard the Eucharist not just as a sign of unity achieved but as an expression of the quest for such unity changes the conversation. However, when Catholics or Orthodox insist that this sacrament can be received only by those who are visibly and organically united in one church, eucharistic sharing is posited as but a distant eschatological dream.

Sincere and faithful Catholics maintain that sharing in their Eucharist means that you accept their understanding of the sacrament and their formal understanding of ministerial authority. As one Catholic said, “If you want to receive the Eucharist from us, you’ve got to accept the whole enchilada.” That’s also why a Catholic ecumenist, upon listening to earnest but naive pleas from Protestants to change their eucharistic practice, replied, “I’m surprised to learn that so many Protestants want to be in full communion with the bishop of Rome.”

Yet the official Catholic position is not as airtight as many assume. These matters are governed by canon law, and canon 844.4 provides certain conditions for the sharing of the Eucharist with other Christians in exceptional circumstances of “grave necessity.” In such matters, the diocesan bishop is given some measure of latitude, according to understandings of the conference of bishops to which he belongs.

Such occasions, carefully prescribed and restricted, are subject to a range of interpretation and practice that often seems neither consistent nor clear. For instance, an RCA pastor whose mother is a devout Catholic told me of permission granted by a bishop to regularly receive communion with her. Something similar

might happen for weddings or funerals. Within clear constraints and limitations (the recipient must be baptized, for example) a Catholic bishop has some latitude to determine where exceptional circumstances are present, constituting a “grave necessity.” So in those cases, it seems, the Eucharist can be shared where the normally restrictive understandings of the sacrament do not fully apply.

This provision is made even more complex when one learns that canon law allows the administration of the Eucharist “to members of Eastern Churches which do not have full communion with the Catholic Church if they seek such on their own accord and are properly disposed” (canon law 844.3).

I’ve been part of the official Reformed–Roman Catholic dialogue which in recent years has been focused on sacraments and authority. We reached official agreement on the common recognition of baptism a few years ago, a major step forward. The dialogue is now addressing how we understand authority and ministry, which of course relates directly to the Eucharist. And this dialogue has been going on since Vatican II, for 50 years.

Recently Pope Francis met with Metropolitan Kirill, the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church—the first such meeting in history. Although a deep animosity and conflict remain between some of the Orthodox churches and the Catholic Church, and the two bodies share no agreement on mutual recognition of baptisms, nevertheless Eastern Christians, from the Vatican’s view, can receive the Eucharist. Meanwhile Reformed, Lutheran, and other Protestant groups that have worked earnestly to address differences with Rome and have found important points of agreement even on baptism still wait in line.

Practical realities already push beyond the provisions of canon law. When Pope Francis visited the United States, one of his outdoor masses was held outside the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. A former Catholic woman now preparing for ordination as a minister in the Reformed Church in America was in attendance and sent me a text. She deeply wanted to partake of the Eucharist and asked what to do. “Don’t ask, don’t tell” was an easy response. Nothing in the theology of the RCA would hold her back, I said; if she had a clear conscience, and a deep respect and conviction that she was partaking of Christ’s body and blood, she should be so guided.

Orange umbrellas popped up throughout the massive crowds that covered the grounds of the basilica. Beneath each, a priest distributed the communion elements. Hundreds of people like my RCA friend were there that day, stealing Jesus. Whenever massive outdoor celebrations of the Eucharist take place, non-Catholics who hunger for communion are present and are filled. Moreover, everyone knows this, including, I am certain, Pope Francis himself. Even though a printed notice may be passed around saying the Eucharist is only for Catholics, this isn't much of a deterrent for those seeking to be fed.

In many areas of Francis's pontificate, his emphasis has been not on changing traditional doctrine but on liberating actual practice. That usually is the path to real change: we act our way into a new way of being. This happens through the feet we wash (and kiss!), the children we bless, and the hungers we meet.

In regard to the isolated Trappist monasteries where Protestants gather with Catholics around the table or the public masses where tens of thousands partake of bread and wine, the Eucharist is by no means a sign of the unity these Christians have already achieved. But one could say that the Eucharist is serving as a gift that nourishes the unity for which these Christians hunger.

This tension in how we understand the Eucharist is one that, remarkably, Pope Francis himself has acknowledged. Last November he met with a Lutheran congregation in Rome and responded to one member, Anke de Bernardinis, who is married to a Catholic and who asked what it would take for them to receive the Eucharist together. The pope's spontaneous ten-minute answer was revealing, unprecedented, and even stunning.

Francis said, "I ask myself the question. To share the Lord's banquet: is it the goal of the path, or is it a *viaticum* (food or provision accompanying one on a journey) for walking together?" He posed that question rather than give the doctrinal response—that she could either become Catholic or continue to pray with her husband over the pain of a divided church.

Pope Francis went on to focus on baptism. "I ask myself. But don't we have the same baptism? If we have the same baptism, shouldn't we be walking together?" Then he went further. "The supper? There are questions that only if one is sincere with one's self and the little theological light that one has, must be responded to on one's own. See for yourself. This is my body. This is my blood. Do this in

remembrance of me—this is a *viaticum* that helps us to journey on.”

And Francis didn’t stop there, going on to address the classic dividing line over the meaning of Christ’s “real presence.” The pope recalled a Protestant pastor and friend who told him, “We believe that the Lord is present there.” So he said to the Lutheran woman, “You believe that the Lord is present. And what’s the difference? There are explanations and interpretations, but life is bigger than explanations and interpretations.”

Having noted the trademark tension between official policy and actual practice, Pope Francis concluded by saying he would not “dare to give permission to do this” but then repeated, “One Lord, one faith, one baptism. Talk to the Lord, and then go forward. And I wouldn’t dare—I don’t dare say anything more.”

In ecumenism, as in diplomacy, ambiguity can be a helpful tool, allowing room for movement on issues where formal agreement is not yet possible. Pope Francis opened the door more than a crack.

So my own ecclesiastical disobedience will continue, with discretion but without reservation. I take to heart the counsel that Pope Francis gave to Anke de Bernardinis.

Yet in the long run, “Don’t ask, don’t tell” isn’t a satisfying solution for eucharistic sharing. We need more public movement toward sharing.

The 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 could provide such opportunities. Plans are already well developed for global commemorations by Lutheran, Reformed, and other confessional bodies. The Lutheran World Federation in particular has worked closely with partners in the Vatican to develop guidelines for occasions of joint worship. The year will be filled with seminars, conferences, and times of joint prayer, including even confession, with gestures of reconciliation.

Wouldn’t such occasions offer times when Catholic bishops could exercise the prescribed flexibility granted to them in light of the “grave necessity” wrought by 500 years of division, combined with decades of dialogue resulting in the recognition of common baptism? Couldn’t they authorize specific times, in the course of events during the year, when Catholic celebrations of the Eucharist could be shared with Protestant brothers and sisters? Couldn’t even the bishop of Rome do the same?

Of course, serious theological differences would remain. But wouldn't this act be a powerful sign? Sharing the body and blood of Jesus Christ between Catholics and other long-

separated Christian brothers and sisters then would be understood not only as a sign of eventual unity, but, as Pope Francis suggested, as indispensable food for our journey together toward that end. And we'd be journeying with the resurrected Christ, who always breaks through what was intended to constrain and hold him.