

Thomas O'Loughlin, *Eating Together, Becoming One: Taking Up Pope Francis's Call to Theologians*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press 2019, 175 p., ISBN: 978-0-8146-8458-0

Alexandru-Marius Crișan*

Thomas O'Loughlin's (born in 1958) book provides a theological, historical but mostly spiritual and practical perspective on a thorny issue avoided by many theologians: inter-confessional Eucharistic communion, approached in this study from a critical Catholic point of view. The author, an Irish-born professor of historical theology at the Nottingham University, is initially trying to approach historic or Eucharistic liturgical themes¹ nor ecumenical themes² through books, studies or articles. If we are to consider inter-communion a courageous theme, we must mention that previously, the Catholic theologian Thomas O'Loughlin already dealt with some other taboo questions such as: the credibility of the Catholic Church,³ the absence of women in the Roman-Catholic worship service⁴ or clerical celibacy.⁵

As the author himself admits, the idea for this book can be traced back to the invitation from Rome by Pope Francis addressed to theologians in the German Lutheran church in November 2015 to explore the question of inter-confessional Eucharistic inter-communion (p. IX). O'Loughlin intended to answer this question through a unified "theological, liturgical and pastoral" approach. To a large extent the author managed to reach his goal.

From the very outset we have to stress that the theological, historical and liturgical analyses of this book are mostly found in many studies previously published by the author. There are similarities between some chapter titles and previously published studies. The originality of this book lies not

* Alexandru-Marius Crișan, Research Fellow, Institute for Ecumenical Research, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, str. Mitropoliei nr. 30, 550179, Sibiu, RO, alexandru13marius@gmail.com.

¹ See: *The Eucharist. Origins and Contemporary Understandings* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015); *The Didache: A Window on the earliest Christians* (London: Baker Academic, 2010); *Making the most of the Lectionary: A User's Guide* (London: SPCK, 2012); *Explaining the Lectionary for Readers* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2008).

² See: "Foot Washing, Remembering, and the Search for Unity among Christians: a Reflection on the Logo of One in Christ," *One in Christ* 51, no. 2 (2017): 189–201; "Sacramental Languages and Intercommunion: Identifying a Source of Tension Between the Catholic and the Reformed Churches," *Studia Liturgica* 47, no. 2 (2017): 138–50.

³ "The Credibility of the Catholic Church as a Public Actor," *New Blackfriars* 94 (2013): 129–47.

⁴ "Reforming the Lectionary, and the Invisibility of Women," *Scripture in Church* 195 (2019): 119–26.

⁵ "The Catholic Church and the Celibacy: An Approach from Historical Theology," *The Japan Mission Journal* 67, no. 3 (Autumn 2013): 201–9.

so much in presenting historical and liturgical facts regarding the Eucharist but rather in a pastoral reflection on the question of inter-communion in light of the current ecumenical situation. O'Loughlin does not openly admit this in the *Introduction* but the *Bibliography* (p. 162-163) lists no fewer than nineteen of his own studies. Thus, he is actually the most quoted author in his own book.

The book is divided into an *Introduction*, 11 chapters, and a relatively short (compared to the size of the chapters) *Conclusion*. The sequence of the chapters shows a profound pedagogical style covering more general ideas in the beginning regarding history, anthropology and liturgy and more specific ones further on, regarding philosophical, theological and pastoral reflections. Almost every chapter is written in the systematic style of a lecture: there is a short summarizing Introduction ("in the last chapter I tried to look at..." or "In the last chapter we imagined..." and so on) followed by a clear division on the themes presented and, finally, a summarizing conclusion.

Already in the *Introduction* the reader can understand that O'Loughlin's interpretation of Eucharist and ecumenism is definitely not a traditional Catholic one: "It is certainly my own conviction that inter communion is not a matter of church relations but a witness to the nature of the new covenant that has been established with us in the Christ. We share because he has already made us one in him in our baptism" (p. XIII). So the ecumenical and eucharistic theological thinking of the author is inspired by a baptismal ecclesiology, close to the *branches theory* common in the Protestant World; but this book, as we shall see further, is more than a simple contradiction or recognition of certain past or present ecclesiological views. Already in the *Introduction* the author announces that he intends to balance an academic approach (without giving up on it) by taking into consideration the complex ecumenical situation of today, and by turning to the future, where he hopes for a "renewed practice" (p. XIV) of the Eucharist.

The first chapter, entitled "Why this book now?", sets the main directions of the Author's reflection. It could easily be considered a second Introduction. At first glance, the reader may have the impression of a rebellion against a traditional Catholic ecclesiology. There is too much "thou shalt not" (p. 2) according to the author, who considers Catholic ecumenical speech too self-centred: "the binary self-focused, *us* and *the rest* is captured in the distinction of Catholics on one side, and then all others as 'non-Catholics'" (p. 4). Even if he emphasizes that eucharistic ecumenical remarks should not be too general (p. 9), the author himself is inclined to generalize through the presented stories. From the very first chapter, O'Loughlin tends to be very personal, a feature which characterizes the entire book: personal

stories or experiences are recounted, and too many personal pronouns and verbs in the first person singular grammatical form. From the first pages of the book, those stories partially reveal the vision of the author regarding ecumenical reality and a presumptive inter-communion: Orthodox do not recognize even the Baptism of the Catholics, Anglicans are frustrated that their orders are not recognized by Catholics and Catholics have the impression that ecumenical dialogue could force them to ignore their story (p. 6-8). The experienced professor behind the author manages to introduce the reader to complicated ecumenical relations – “a theological minefield” – especially when it comes to the Eucharist. Thomas O’Loughlin tries to familiarize the reader with documents such as *BEM, One Bread One Body* or to commissions such as *ARCIC (Anglican and Roman-Catholic International Commission)*.

The second chapter is the true departure point of the book’s argumentation. The author reflects on the Eucharist starting from the basic rules of sharing a meal, which he symbolically calls “the grammar of meals” (p. 21). “Can we treat Eucharist as a meal” (p. 31) where people really eat and share food? is the brilliant question posed by the author. The Eucharist is “sacred” and “sacramental” but remains at its very foundation a human meal where normally people should eat. Even if one could hardly believe that eucharistic hospitality could be supported because of these anthropological arguments brought into discussion by O’Loughlin, the author deserves great credit for underlining, in a way comprehensible to all and interesting to theologians, the meal aspect of the Eucharist which was ignored especially in medieval Western Eucharistic theology and it is until today to a certain extent in most of the Christian ecumenical reality.

The third chapter, entitled “Pray My Sisters and Brothers,”⁶ continues to build a religious and mostly Christian layer on the anthropological meal idea presented in the previous chapter. The author offers general explanations of the eucharistic liturgy based on the intimate link of brotherhood or sisterhood. Some remarks regarding inter-communion tend to be pious and devotional or linked to precise pastoral situations. These remarks allow the reader to observe an emotional approach, even if the author is aware that inter-communion could “damage and build” (p. 40) at the same time.

The fourth chapter (“Fictive Families – Real Churches. The Spirit and Inter-communion”) and the fifth one (“The Ecumenical Meal of Mission”) bring together both anthropological and theological aspects of the Eucharistic

⁶ The title is inspired by the words that inaugurate the second part of the II Vatican Council Mass: “Pray brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father”. The modern direction of the author can also be easily observed the change in the traditional order of the words *sisters* and *brothers*.

meal. Biblical arguments from both Old (the food sacrifices from the Temple or the Sabbath Meals; p. 51) and New (Peter struggling regarding pure or impure food; p. 61-62) Testaments or historical arguments (The *Didache*, Pliny the Younger Testimony about early Christian worship; p. 56-57) are discussed in order to strengthen as much as possible the meal aspect of the main act of Christian worship; the author insists on this idea but omits a sacramental approach. O'Loughlin turns the reader's attention to the anthropological aspect of a meal and draws a simple and logical conclusion: Eucharist is a meal, so everyone present should eat. He fails, though, to mention and explain the legality or illegality of transferring all the basic rules of the meal to Eucharist, especially in the divided Christianity or inter-religious society of today. From Apostolic times the Eucharistic meal was more than a simple meal and the author omits biblical or historical examples of Christians banned from this meal on the basis of moral or faith issues. When suggesting such a Eucharistic openness, in order to be credible, one should also discuss aspects such as: the Eucharist viewed as a moral instance or as a visible sign of local or universal Christian unity.

The sixth chapter ("Building upon Baptism") comes back to the question of the centrality of Baptism. Thomas O'Loughlin constructs, with the help of some theological quotations or some pastoral examples, a relatively simple logical argumentation: if the Eucharist is the Christian meal and Baptism is the doorway to Christianity then, every Christian could receive Communion in any community. This chapter confirms more than any other part of the book the Baptismal, ecclesiology-minded, theological direction of the author which is more than convincing enough for most of the Catholic or Orthodox theologians or hierarchy. Going back to the event that inspired this book, the author underlines that Pope Francis' answer to Anke de Bernardinis question regarding inter-communion with her Catholic husband is also dominated by a Baptismal theology: "Don't we have the same baptism? And if we have the same Baptism we must walk together. (...) We have the same baptism. (...) They are remedies to keep Baptism alive. When you pray together, that Baptism, it becomes strong..." (p. 81-82). Hardly anyone could accuse O'Loughlin of manipulating the words of Pope Francis. Even if the Pope doesn't openly admit inter-communion on the basis of the common baptismal recognition, his answer to this question related to inter-communion is clear. Maybe this rather than the first chapter would have been the right place for the author to put all his negative remarks regarding the eucharistic Catholic interpretation. This would have allowed the reader to compare the Pope's answer with a traditional Catholic interpretation (even a post-Conciliar one) strongly criticized in the first pages of this book.

In the Orthodox Church the suspicion of the presence of such a theological approach in the Document on Ecumenical Relations of the Holy and Great Council from 2016 led to some dispute and disproof regarding the Document and the Council.⁷

The seventh chapter entitled “The Eucharist and the Pilgrims Journey” departs from the question of Pope Francis expressed on the occasion already mentioned: “I wonder: is the sharing of the Lord’s Supper *the end* of a journey or *the viaticum* to journey together? I leave the question to the theologians, to those who understand” (p. 85). These words, which stand as a motto, almost suggest that this chapter assumes the Pope’s mission entrusted to theologians: to read deep into the sense of the Eucharist and analyse the possibility of inter-communion departing from a possible tension between two characteristics of the Eucharist. Despite being an uninspired choice to quote because it gives the impression that the author assumed for himself the testamentary words of Pope Francis (“I leave the question to (...) those who understand”), the Pope’s remarks could suggest the existing of a total incompatibility between two aspects of the Eucharist: a final (read also as *eschatological*) sign of unity and a supply for the personal or common (understood here as *ecumenical*) spiritual journey. Actually, the Eucharist was deeply understood in both of these ways⁸ and there is no real theological opposition among these two aspects, but the author is interested here in exploring this tension in order to emphasize a forgotten aspect of the Eucharist. Beyond criticizing this attitude of O’Loughlin, we do admit the great value of this chapter in underlining with historical and liturgical arguments a facet of the Eucharist that was mainly lost: that of a daily (or weekly-Sunday) common reality. Professor Thomas O’Loughlin describes some of the scrupulousness that appeared throughout history, much of which contributed to a wrong attitude towards the Eucharist. The Mass was regarded simply as a ritual where eating and drinking were not important anymore, people even being discouraged from receiving Communion (p. 86-90). A new contrast arises in the author’s argumentation: the Eucharist as a meal versus the Eucharist

⁷ The case of Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, a well-known Greek-Orthodox Metropolitan representative of the traditional wing of the Church is relevant. He described the Document on Ecumenical Relations of the Holy and Great Council as being “dominated by the ecclesiology of the branches, baptismal theology and especially the principle of inclusiveness”; see: Hierotheos Vlachos, “Intervention and Text in the Hierarchy of the Church of Greece (November 2016) regarding the Cretan Council”, available on: <https://orthodoxe-thos.com/post/intervention-and-text-in-the-hierarchy-of-the-church-of-greece-november-2016-regarding-the-cretan-council>, accessed March 21, 2020.

⁸ For a complex study regarding these two aspects of the Eucharist see: John Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop During the First Three Centuries* (Brookline MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001).

as a ritual that should not include eating; so, the Eucharist Adorations are criticized (p. 89-93). The lost aspect of the Eucharist as a festal community meal is far away from being just an ecumenical issue, and seems to be forgotten by the author. It primarily constitutes a local and internal problem of most Christian communities. An Orthodox eye would observe that the Middle-Eve Latin attitude towards the Communion presented in this chapter is what the Orthodox Church also experiences now with some tiny exceptions. Although one of the richest chapters in historical and liturgical information, the author's argumentation developed here does not create a true link between the internal Eucharistic crisis inside the reality of every Church and the relevance of the inter-communion. In some sort of way, O'Loughlin seems aware of this: "Looking back on past Catholic attitudes to eating and drinking at the Eucharist might seem far from approaching the question of inter-communion between various churches going forward" (p. 88-89).

The eighth chapter brings into discussion the question of the freeness of the Communion related of course to the same *viaticum* aspect of the Eucharist. O'Loughlin recommends avoiding the moralistic or fundamentalist interpretation of Jesus parables, because the Christian kerygma is: "There is a free lunch" (p. 111).

The ninth chapter could easily be considered a direct continuation of the precedent one because the author tries to deepen and explore the tension between the two mentioned aspects of the eucharist: meal/ritual. Some historical and liturgical evidence are considered. O'Loughlin apposite analyses the final eschatological image of unity that could inspire Christians to "generously share with all who are present" (p. 192). The chapter, and with it this part of the author's argumentation, ends without an obvious solution to the meal/ritual tension, even if a valuable key is offered in the many references to Resurrection.

The "Phenomenon of Conflicting Theologies" is approached by the Author in the tenth chapter, already opening the way to the final reflection. Exploring different aspects of the link between theology (doctrine), identity and ideology, Thomas O'Loughlin tries to criticize the Catholic interpretation of the requirement of having a certain set of beliefs in order to be admitted to Eucharist. Actually what the author does is to apply the open-to-all meal idea on the relation Believing/Understanding – being a full member of the Church/Receiving Communion. It is a pity though that the author's reflection does not mention the Orthodox practice of giving the Eucharist to infants who of course could not confirm their faith.

The eleventh chapter constitutes in fact the beginning of the final reflection concluded with an easy-to-predict enthusiastic solution: inter-

communion practice should be implemented with the price of some adjustments and the rediscovery of lost aspects of Eucharist. Thomas O'Loughlin is though not naive; he names five reasons why there is little chance that his book will *convert* somebody to inter-communion: the existence of people who already do this, old clergy, traditionalist young seminarians and theologians, the idea that the "Francis phenomenon" will pass according to some bishops, and the existence of other disputes that seem to be more urgent or of greater importance.

The text of the Conclusions surprises continues the final Reflection begun in the previous chapter. Thomas O'Loughlin sustains his support for inter-communion, summarizing three themes already mentioned in his book: the Eucharist is the spiritual (fictive) family of those baptized, the need to rediscover the basic rules of the Grammar of Meals, and, finally, a theological reflection on the eschatological aspect of the Eucharist. Entitled "Non-Catholics at the Table, Now or Never", the text of the Conclusions remembers that the reflection is a Catholic centred analysis from the part of a Church insider.

Looking back at all the argumentation developed by Thomas O'Loughlin, we could say that it contains more levels: anthropological, liturgical, historical, theological and pastoral. It is a complex, original and courageous approach to an inconvenient theme. Liturgical and historical passages have a great value, being an interesting lecture for both theologians and non-theologians. The author has the merit to turn the attention of the reader towards unconventional approaches to the Eucharist, constructing interesting theological reflections and a logical argumentation. Being such a complex theme, every kind of interpretation of the inter-communion would of necessity be limited. Thomas O'Loughlin's book has the distinction of being not only an analysis on the possibility of receiving non-Catholics to Catholic Eucharist but almost a general reflection on inter-communion, especially in the first chapters. Still, notable information regarding the Orthodox Church is missing. Some arguments are too specific or too personal. A great merit of this work lies in identifying much scrupulosity regarding the Eucharist. An omitted part of the reflection consists of mentions regarding the Tradition of the Church and so questions remain unanswered: How could this favourable interpretation of the inter-communion reconcile with the long Tradition of the Church? An answer to this question would make the author's argumentation definitely more credible in the eyes of conservative groups of different Churches.