

ARTICLE

The Parish Communion Movement: The Body's Discipleship

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Abstract

This essay explores the corporate and social dimensions of discipleship by examining the theological vision of the Parish Communion movement of the last century. It outlines what the Parish Communion movement sought to achieve liturgically and how that was undergirded by its underlying ecclesiology. Elements of the theology underpinning the movement are examined, including its corporate Body theology and its social theology. How these themes contribute to contemporary elaborations of discipleship are then explored, including a reflection on the legacy of the movement in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: body, communion, discipleship, ecclesiology, social thought

This essay explores the corporate and social dimensions of discipleship by examining the theological vision of the Parish Communion movement of the last century. After a brief outline of what the Parish Communion movement sought to achieve, some of the elements of the theology that underpinned it are examined so that some themes that will contribute to contemporary elaborations of discipleship can then be explored.

The Parish Communion movement (henceforth PCM) has more recently been subject to criticism for helping to create an ecclesial culture in which a pattern of worship was normalized that is now regarded as unsustainable. That is, as the story goes, the emphasis on the centrality of the Eucharist and the concomitant need for priests, has left a problematic legacy in the context of declining clergy numbers and created a deficit in effective engagement with lay forms of ministry. The article will not, of course, provide neat solutions to any of the challenges facing the Church of England today. It will, however, argue that we would be unwise to neglect what the movement wanted to exemplify: the fact that Christianity is at its very heart a social

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creed and a social life. The movement had key teachings about the nature of worship, the social body created through worship and, consequently, the social vocation of Christian discipleship. It was, in fact, an attempt to revivify a theology of the whole people of God actively participating in worship and engaged in service in the world.

What Was the Parish Communion Movement?

In the 1930s, the usual pattern of worship in most parish churches would have been an early morning said Communion with a late morning Choral Matins and then Evensong. In the High Church tradition, where there was a desire to emphasize the centrality of the Eucharist, the second morning service might have been a non-communicating High Mass. Where it was judged important to maintain the laudable devotional practice of fasting before receiving the sacrament, committed communicants would come at 8.00 am or 8.30 am to receive the sacrament, and then return for the main service later in the morning after breakfast.²

The PCM emerged out of the consensus of those who wanted to see a service of Communion for all as the principal corporate act of worship on Sunday morning. It would be one that was early enough to allow for fasting and yet late enough that it would not be unreasonable to expect attendance. It would enable families to attend together and those who worked would not feel that it was too early on their day of rest. It would draw people in by encouraging a fuller participation of the laity in corporate prayer and liturgical actions (such as bearing the chalice). It may even pave the way for at least some modest liturgical reform of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*.³ A hallmark of the movement was that following the Parish Communion there might also be a Parish Breakfast. This would be welcomed by those who had been fasting, allow families to know themselves to be part of the wider Family of the Church, encourage fellowship, and give some opportunity to receive news and plan events for the good of the parish more broadly.

The PCM can sound like a 'fresh expression' of worship for its day, the liturgical intentions of which were pragmatic and context-bound. If so, it was very successful. By the time of the introduction of the *Alternative Service Book* in 1980, a Parish Communion service had become the presumptive main act of Sunday worship.

The movement to restore the Parish Communion was also driven by immediate cultural circumstances. The chaplains who returned from the trenches in 1918 were all too aware of the lack of religious understanding among the men they served; men who were largely alienated from the life of the Church. The new industrial and urban classes were suffering various degradations which the Church of England

²For studies on the emergence and development of the PCM see, for example, Donald Gray, *Earth and Altar: The Evolution of the Parish Communion in the Church of England to 1945* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1986); Christopher Irvine, *Worship, Church and Society: An Exposition of the Work of Arthur Gabriel Hebert to Mark the Centenary of the Society of the Sacred Mission (Kelham) of which He Was a Member* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1993); P.J. Jagger, *A History of the Parish and People Movement* (Leighton Buzzard: Faith Press, 1978).

³Donald Gray argues that the continental liturgical reform movement and the PCM were simply coincident (Gray, *Earth and Altar*, pp. 190-91) although Christopher Irvine argues more convincingly for its direct influence on the PCM's key proponents (Irvine, *Worship, Church and Society*, p. 98).

had scarcely begun to address and the worship of the Church remained a foreign land to them. Moreover, those who were architects of the Parish Communion could see that the world around them was clamouring for some sense of social cohesion and the need for truer forms of fellowship and co-operation. Their hope was that the restoration of a Communion service with greater lay participation and more attractive worship, alongside appropriate forms of catechesis, would allow the Church more effectively to reach society with its gospel of charity.

Far from being merely a reform of liturgical practice in the context of social changes, however crucial that was, the movement thus had greater ecclesiological ambition. It wanted to restate the very nature of the Church, and therefore its purpose, in order to further its mission. As Donald Gray convincingly demonstrates, behind the PCM lay the rich resources of the traditions of Anglican social teaching and, more specifically, sacramental socialism:

For the sacramental socialists the pattern was quite clear: they were convinced that the *Corpus Christi*, which is the Church, needs to feed together in fellowship on the *Corpus Christi*, which is the Body and Blood received in the Eucharist, in order that it may fulfil its role to be the *Corpus Christi*, the loving hands, feet, and eyes of Christ active and incarnate in his Servant Church.⁴

The PCM was thus a concerted effort to restore a primarily social vision of the Church by the renewal of its worshipping life. It was fuelled by a desire to rekindle the essential link between Eucharistic worship and the formation of the Church as a corporate body which lives out its discipleship by participating in Christ's loving service of the world.

Ecclesiology was thus not a function of missiology. Lying behind the ecclesiology of the PCM is an intuition that the Church is not instrumental – a temporary means for bringing souls to Christ – but is a sacramental sign of the very purpose of creation, which is communion. The author of the letter to the Ephesians writes:

[H]e chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. (Eph. 1.4-6)

God's good pleasure is to adopt his people as his children and this is his will before there is a world to be the stage of that adoption. The Church – as a set of redeemed and loving relationships – is thus the purpose of creation and, whilst as yet still a penitent and pilgrim people, it is also a sign of that eschatological fullness when all God's people will be in communion with one another and in communion with him. It is a sign of the social fact of salvation and thus its mission is to restore a fallen world to the joy of communion.

⁴Gray, *Earth and Altar*, p. 3.

The Theology of the Parish Communion

A Corporate Faith

One of the key advocates of the movement was the Kelham Father, Gabriel Hebert. In 1937 he was prevailed upon to edit *The Parish Communion: A Book of Essays*. It gives a good overview of the concerns and hopes of the PCM and includes contributions by luminaries such as Austin Farrer, Gregory Dix and Henry de Candole, another of the movement's prolific apologists. Two years earlier, Hebert had published a more sustained theological essay: *Liturgy and Society: The Function of the Church in the Modern World*.⁵ The title itself gestures to his primary concern to restore the fundamental link between the Church's worship and the essentially social form of its life for the sake of its mission.

Hebert's Christianity could never only be concerned with the conversion of an individual's soul or mind. The Christian faith brought the believer before God in the company of others in order to adore the God who had come amongst his people in Jesus and empowered them in the Spirit. Worship was about God and God was concerned with the whole of his creation. As a corporate response to God's saving actions, worship was a holistic offering up of the whole of life, body and soul, including the worshippers' actions, their associations and relationships, their work and their leisure. In short, the liturgy was an offering up of the entirety of an inescapably social existence. Yet it was also an induction into a particular form of social life: the life of the Church as a corporate body, sustained through and constituted by inter-relational charitable and redemptive practices.

Hebert's Body theology was characteristic of the period. The years immediately preceding the Second World War and into the postwar period saw a number of works across the churches that sought to re-examine and commend the corporate dimension of the Church's existence in the face of various dehumanizing forces and rival solidarities. On the one hand, there was evidence of a growing social atomism where people were increasingly unmoored from the political and religious beliefs that, for good and ill, provided forms of effective social cohesion. Yet on the other hand, there was a growing fear of those tyrannical collectivities like State Socialism and Nazism that divinized a generalized human potential at the expense of freedom and flourishing of each and all.

The themes of works by thinkers as diverse as John A.T. Robinson, Eric Mascall and Michael Ramsey, from an Anglican perspective, chime with the works of Catholics like Henri de Lubac and even the Orthodox philosophical theology of Sergei Bulgakov.⁶ These all offered investigations into the social and corporate

⁵A.G. Hebert (ed.), *The Parish Communion: A Book of Essays* (London: SPCK, 1937); A.G. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society: The Function of the Church in the Modern World* (London: Faber & Faber, 1935).

⁶John A.T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1952); Michael Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009 [1936]); E.L. Mascall, *Christ, the Christian and the Church: A Study of the Incarnation and its Consequences* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1946); E.L. Mascall, *Corpus Christi: Essays on the Church and the Eucharist* (London: Longmans, 1953); Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages* (trans. Gemma Simmonds, CJ; London: SCM Press, 2006 [1944]); Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sr Elizabeth Englund, OCD; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988 [1947]); Sergei Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (trans. Lydia Kesich; Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989 [1935]); Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* (trans. Boris Jakim; Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 2002 [1945])

aspects of the Church. From differing perspectives, each argued that the true nature of the Church was a corporate participation of God's people in the activities of Christ in his world.

John Robinson's study of the Body in Paul's theology emphasized the shocking crudity of Paul's identification of Christ with his Church:

The Christian, because he is in the Church and united with Him in the sacraments, is part of Christ's body so literally that all that happened in and through that body in the flesh can be repeated in and through him now.⁷

Eric Mascall parsed this in terms of a theology of incorporation:

[I]ncorporation into Christ is incorporation into the Church, since the Church is in its essence simply the human nature of Christ made appropriable by men, that all the thought, prayer and activity of Christians, in so far as it is brought within the sphere of redemption, is the act of Christ himself in and through the Church which is his Body.⁸

We can see that Hebert's own contention is of the same order:

Here is the central aspect of Christianity: the manifestation of the Divine Goodness in the flesh, in Jesus as the Son of God first, and then through the Holy Spirit in the members of His mystical Body.⁹

Note that this corporate emphasis did not seek to deny the reality of the person nor, indeed, the importance of practices of individual devotion and discipleship, but to emphasize that the person only finds her true nature in inter-dependence, communion and solidarity.

The various Body theologies of the period identified changes in the understanding of the Church in the medieval period that continued to have negative ramifications. For De Candole, the Church should be seen primarily as a fellowship rather than as an institution, as a relationship with Christ who stretches forth his hand in fellowship, drawing the believer into the sphere of his life. This relationship, which De Candole described as 'the beginning of discipleship', is thus an incorporation into a social existence which is fully a participation in Christ's own activity.¹⁰ De Lubac's own more rigorous investigations, which bore resemblances to those of the historian Ernst Kantorowicz, argued that such a social and organic conception of the Church had receded in the face of its increasing institutionalization in

⁷Robinson, *Body*, p. 47. I have not removed the regrettable gender exclusivity from the quotations.

⁸Mascall, *Christ, the Christian and the Church*, p. v.

⁹Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, pp. 94-95. Similarly, E.W. Southcott, a practitioner of the PCM's key ideas, wrote: 'The Word is to become flesh in the Church, which is the extension of the Incarnation' (*The Parish Comes Alive* [London: Mowbray, 1956], p. 42).

¹⁰Henry de Candole, *The Sacraments and the Church: A Study in the Corporate Nature of Christianity* (London: A.W. Mowbray & Co., 1935), p. 6.

the later medieval period.¹¹ The Church had begun to see itself as a power which rivalled that of secular institutions. An accompanying clericalization conferred power on its representatives who manufactured a Eucharistic miracle. As the Eucharist became more the spectacle of a miraculous object and less a participation in a shared action, devotional practices shifted to emphasize individual piety over corporate co-existence. In short, as the host became the primary referent of the Body of Christ it overshadowed an understanding of the Church itself as that Body – visible, tangible and active in the world. Instead, De Lubac hoped to restore the earlier theology of the mutually constitutive relationship of the Eucharist (the mystical body of Christ) and the Church (the real/true body of Christ), notably stating: ‘The Church produces the Eucharist, but the Eucharist also produces the Church’.¹² It was a hope which was largely fulfilled through his influence on the theology of the Second Vatican Council, as can be seen in the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium*.¹³ At about the same time, the Benedictine theologian Odo Casel, whose thought would also influence that Council, was elaborating a theology of the ‘Mystery of Christ’. This Mystery, which is Christ and the saving events of his life, passion and resurrection, is made manifest and present in Eucharistic worship. This Mystery then abides in the life of the Body, which is incorporated into that saving Mystery at the altar, and by its form of life that Body makes the Mystery present to the world.¹⁴

Similarly, Hebert wrote of the Church becoming a ‘hierarchical quasi-political institution of immense power’ which robbed it of an understanding of itself as ‘Christ’s mystical Body, God’s universal Family, God’s building composed of living stones’, as a common life that was to be realized in and through worship.¹⁵ In a darkening world in which truer forms of association and loving social relations were desperately needed, it was thus crucial to recapture the Church’s true nature.

For Hebert, the Church was always to be defined by what it *does*. It is not an organization that simply brings together individuals or just a legally established institution but ‘a society with an organic life’.¹⁶ The Church thus does the truth

¹¹De Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*; Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997 [1957]). See also similar conclusions drawn by Gregory Dix, OSB, in his ‘The Idea of “The Church” in the Primitive Liturgies’, in Hebert, *Parish Communion*, pp. 95–143. For further discussion see: Chad Pecknold, *Christianity and Politics: A Brief Guide to the History* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), pp. 51–68; William T. Cavanaugh, ‘The Mystical and the Real: Putting Theology Back into Political Theology’, in *Field Hospital: The Church’s Engagement with a Wounded World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), pp. 99–120; William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 205–52.

¹²Henri de Lubac, *The Splendour of the Church* (trans. Michael Mason; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006 [1953]), p. 133.

¹³https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (last accessed 29 January 2023), see, for example, chs. II and IV.

¹⁴See Odo Casel’s *The Mystery of Christian Worship and Other Writings* (ed. Burkhard Neunheuser; London: Newman Press and Darton, Longman and Todd, 1962 [1960]). For an accessible introduction to Casel and the ramifications of his liturgical theology see George Guiver, CR, *Pursuing the Mystery: Worship and Daily Life as Presences of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 55–74 and Stephen Platten, *Animating Liturgy: The Dynamics of Worship and the Human Community* (Durham: Sacristy Press, 2017), pp. 105–18.

¹⁵Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 122.

¹⁶Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 13.

as much as it confesses the truth. Similarly, the Eucharist is an action that Christ has given to his people to perform. It is a participation in the saving action of Christ. Actions speak louder than words and Hebert saw that they appealed to the full affective and sensory range of human imagination, much more so than the teaching of dogma. Indeed, to learn to be a Christian one practises charity, confession, forgiveness. This is why Christ, for remembrance of him, instituted the sharing of a meal.¹⁷ As a practice it shows that the presence of Christ is discerned when we live together in love.

Indeed, writing of his experiments in instigating a Parish Communion at St John's, Newcastle, Henry de Candole wrote:

Unconsciously we discovered ourselves becoming 'the Church'. We became a family by worshipping and communicating together, and practice taught us our theory. To be 'the Church' then became the clue to all our pastoral work, and the Eucharist its centre. More and more we came to emphasise the building of 'a family' out of diverse elements.¹⁸

It was about enabling God's people to enter into a form of worship that would bring them back to an understanding of the essentially corporate dimension of the faith. He argued that to be a Christian is to live in the Church:

The Church's purpose is expressed most fully in the Church's eucharistic worship, and that the meaning of worship (and therefore of the purpose of the Christian society) is to be learned best by sharing in worship.¹⁹

The very existence of the parish churches and the liturgies performed within them provided, then, a fundamental form of witness to the world, that of a new social life. Hebert put it starkly: those who are to encounter Christianity must 'reckon with the fact of the Church'.²⁰

It is evident that what was at stake was not merely a more conducive arrangement for parish worship but the very idea of the Church itself. Worship was a matter of the incorporation of all into Christ and not a mere aggregation of the like-minded. In Patrick Hankey's succinct maxim, the Church's belief was that it was 'a worshipping body, not a body of worshippers' (more a lump than a pile).²¹ When we pray, we pray together and for one another. We believe together in our common creed. We learn to love one another as Christ loved us in the Church. We learn together and teach one another. When we are saved, it is as members of one another in the Church:

¹⁷See De Candole, *Sacraments and the Church*, pp. 127-29.

¹⁸Quoted in Peter J. Jagger, *Bishop Henry de Candole: His Life and Times 1895-1971* (Leighton Buzzard: Faith Press, 1975), p. 73.

¹⁹Henry de Candole, 'Instruction in Worship', in Hebert, *Parish Communion*, pp. 233-55 at p. 235.

²⁰Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 42.

²¹C. Patrick Hankey, 'Liturgy and Personal Devotion' in Hebert, *Parish Communion*, pp. 145-64 at p. 150.

God has created and established a unity for mankind, through Christ, to draw men out of loneliness, isolation, and enmity with one another, into the fellowship of His universal Family, a fellowship which the Church exists to express.²²

This essentially social understanding of the Church's corporate and participatory discipleship would, of course, have ramifications for the understanding of the Church's mission in the world.

Redeeming Social Life

Underpinning the PCM was a strong theological anthropology that emphasized the social nature of human existence. In worship, the truth of God's purposes for humanity could be discerned. The Church was recognized as the sphere in which true social relations would be learnt and expressed. If the Good News of the faith centres on God's goodness and love manifested in the flesh, in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, then for Hebert it was clear that 'it is the function of the Church's Liturgy to interpret and express her life, and to exhibit the aim and meaning of human life in the light of the Incarnation'.²³ Service in daily life was only possible because worship illuminates the mundane with the light of eternity.

In the previous century, F.D. Maurice argued that the gospel revealed that the true order of society consisted in fellowship, mutualism and cooperation, and not in antagonism, competition and selfishness. For the Christian Socialists, 'socialism' received its true meaning in the charitable relations of Christ's own society. A life that participated in the life of God could be nothing other than a participation in holy charity. In worship, people learned that if they are brothers and sisters in church then they are also brothers and sisters at labour, at play, in politics, and at home. The Church could never, therefore, be lukewarm in the face of social and societal degradation. In its corporate witness, and through the life of its individual members, it would seek to participate in Christ's love of his world. Christianity, in short, was a social action. Worship that placed Communion at its centre would form a people passionate to see society coming to participate in the Kingdom of God.

The theological vision of the PCM was thus socialist and personalist. Christ had revealed divine love in his person and he had called individuals out of isolation into relationship with one another and into union with him. Finding themselves to be persons-in-communion, the members of the Body would seek to draw others into truer communion so as to discover themselves as persons:

The Church stands as the witness, against the world, of the right of a man to be treated as a human being.²⁴

This was necessarily also an integralist vision, one in which the whole sphere of human being was involved. Just as the worship belonged to the whole people, so

²²Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 148.

²³Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 159.

²⁴Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 158.

the whole of life should be hallowed through worship. Hebert's incarnationalism required one to see that Christ reigns over the whole of human life:

It involves the redemption of the body, and therefore also of the social relations of the life lived in the body, and of the whole social, economic and political structure.

If God's Kingdom was not *of* the world it was very much *in* the world and thus the whole sacred/secular divide was illusory. Thus to think that Christianity was about only the soul or the holy few was actually the denial of the Incarnation. 'Christianity is deeply concerned with "secular" activities,' Hebert continues, 'not so that the sacred becomes secularised, but so that the secular activities are redeemed to God.'²⁵ Thus the Eucharist must be seen as expansive and inclusive, not just a Sunday devotion, but the fount of all Christian life. So, describing this vision of an integrated liturgical living, J.F. Lovel Southam could write:

For the worthy reception of the Holy Communion is not only to be followed by the faithful witness in the factory, office, or workshop; that faithful witness is in very truth part of, and one with, the Eucharist itself.²⁶

One can see how the idea of the Parish Breakfast would serve such a vision, for it would provide 'an expression on the ordinary social level of that fellowship of grace which has been found first at the altar' and 'produces social life that is Christian'.²⁷ More than just an extension of 'coffee after church' it would provide an opportunity for the newly constituted fellowship to plan how it might be salt, light and yeast in the immediate locale and serve the neighbourhood.

What the PCM was emphasizing was that the Church, as the Body of Christ, had a priestly vocation that would mediate between God and all his people in his world.

Offering and Sacrifice

In his essay in *The Parish Communion*, Charles Smyth contends that in the sacrament it is 'not we who make sacrifices, but we who are made a sacrifice'.²⁸ In the writings of the PCM, language of offering and sacrifice, which can elsewhere be misconstrued as primarily about the believer's action, always focuses on the work of

²⁵Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 191. A phrase that aligns with De Lubac's thesis on how grace supernaturalizes the natural, see Henri de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace* (trans. R. Arnandez; San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1984 [1980]).

²⁶J.F. Lovel Southam, 'Ideals for the Parish', in Hebert, *Parish Communion*, pp. 165-82, at p. 189. Compare William T. Cavanaugh, 'The Church in the Streets: Eucharist and Politics', *Modern Theology*, 30.2 (2014), pp. 384-402 at pp. 399-400: 'In the Eucharist Christians are incorporated into Christ and they become Eucharist for a hungry world.'

²⁷Lovel Southam, 'Ideals for the Parish', p. 181.

²⁸Charles H. Smyth, 'The Church in the World', in Hebert, *Parish Communion*, pp. 289-308 at p. 306.

Christ – in which we participate.²⁹ Neither is the Eucharist ever focused solely on the objective presence of Christ but on his action.

Hebert, among others, was keen to rehabilitate lay participation in the offertory procession.³⁰ In bringing up the gifts which would then be presented to God on behalf of the people, the people showed their desire to bring all that they were before God. The gifts represent ‘the whole substance of our lives, all our joys and sorrows, our plans for the future, our hopes and fears.’³¹ In the Eucharist, these offerings become a corporate oblation which become effective by means of being gracefully drawn into a participation in the self-offering of Christ to the Father. By uniting our broken offerings to his perfect response to the Father, Christ brings our lives before the Father’s face. There they are redeemed and transformed and seen anew in the light of God’s purpose for them. The substance of daily life, its very real environments, activities and interests, are laid on the altar so the people can see how they form an indispensable part of the life of God’s whole family and his purposes for his world.

The Eucharist therefore demonstrates that the discipleship of Christ’s Body, the Church, has a priestly nature. Christ, as the great High Priest, comes as God to reveal God to us, and to lift us to God so that we may once again approach God through his grace. The whole people is the royal priesthood which the ordained priesthood exists to exemplify and serve.³² So in its priestly aspect, the Church lives to witness, ‘carrying on Christ’s work of revealing the Father’ and exists for worship, ‘carrying on Christ’s work of offering man’s rightful self-oblation to the Father’.

In both aspects, it is only through the grace of Christ in the power of the Spirit, drawing us into the Father’s presence, that the Church can fulfil her vocation:

In truth, we do not rightly know the needs of our neighbour till we have looked to God and seen them in His eyes; nor are we fit to present God to our neighbour, the world, save coming from His Presence.³³

This corporate act of worship, which comprised both offering and communion, was thus a living picture of the life of the Church. For De Candole the very purpose of that life was clear:

²⁹On Christ’s priesthood, and the form of this sacrifice in which he is both priest and victim, see Simon Cuff, *Priesthood for All Believers: Clericalism and How to Avoid It* (London: SCM Press, 2022), pp. 22–43.

³⁰See, for example, the reflections on lay participation in the offertory in Southcott, *The Parish Comes Alive*, pp. 36–39.

³¹Gabriel Hebert, ‘The Parish Communion in its Spiritual Aspect’, in Hebert, *Parish Communion*, pp. 1–30 at p. 11.

³²Simon Cuff notes that although believers are called to be a ‘living sacrifice’ (Rom. 12.1) as part of this priestly Body, each one has different gifts according to the grace given to them (Rom. 12.6). The ordained priest serves to recall the company of the baptised to their priestly ministry as the Church but each member contributes to that whole with their own particular charisms. Ordained priestly ministry should release all to fulfil their particular ministries according to their own callings. See, Cuff, *Priesthood for All Believers*, pp. 47, 53, 58, 121.

³³De Candole, *Sacraments and the Church*, p. 113.

The Church is the Body of Christ, that is the instrument he uses to continue down the ages his work of redeeming man to God and reuniting man with man.³⁴

Only in worship that unites us to Christ can we worship truly and only in worship that unites us to one another can we witness faithfully. Worship was, in other words, the one remedy against the ever-present sin of idolatry, whether that was service of self, party, nation, power, success, lust, comfort or any other power that humanity could make the centre of its existence:

The individual is perpetually seeking to find in himself the end of his existence and the object of his worship, and mankind is perpetually seeking to make for human society some centre of unity other the unity which God has made for it. This, precisely this, is Original Sin.³⁵

For Hebert, it was in the Eucharist that humanity discovers God as the source of all goodness and love and the proper horizon of all human being. Here God is worshipped as the source of true unity and where the Church receives both its own existence and the grace by which it can be Christ to a broken world.

The Parish Communion Movement's Lessons for Discipleship

We have noted that by 1980 the normal pattern in churches, across traditions, was that advocated by the PCM. If the pattern by and large persists, what remains of the incarnational Body theology, with its focus on corporate participation and offering, communion with our brothers and sisters, and a concomitant social activism?

The need to maintain (pretty) buildings, the desire to sustain traditional ways of life, or the pressure to maintain an ailing institution, can take precedence in the priorities of a local parish. Even those who are passionate about the Church, and not just the church building, are sometimes happier to celebrate it in its mystical abstraction than in the presence of the members of the Body whom they suffer in the pews.

More damningly, Michael Marshall wrote of the wider PCM that:

[It] has done more than any other single movement to unchurch the people of the United Kingdom. It insisted on one sort of service (exclusively the Eucharist) for one sort of people at one sort of time.³⁶

Relying as it does on the presence of ordained ministers in every parish, the legacy of the ubiquitous Parish Communion may well have led to an over-reliance on the clergy (now declining in number) and a concomitant decline in other para-Eucharistic lay-led devotional observances. Moreover, what we might call the

³⁴De Candole, quoted in Gray, *Earth and Altar*, p. 207.

³⁵Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 184.

³⁶M. Marshall quoted in Alex Hughes, *Public Worship with Communion by Extension: Some Pastoral and Theological Issues* (Alcuin/GROW Joint Liturgical Studies 53; Cambridge: Grove Books, 2002).

'chips with everything' complaint is that frequent and sometimes uninspiring Eucharistic worship, with little or no variation or attention to context and circumstance, has led to fatigue and a dulling of its lessons for discipleship.

Even a priest as catholic-minded as Michael Ramsey had reservations. First, it was possible that with overly frequent communion, people could learn to equate worship with the receiving of communion alone. (What has been called the 'holy biscuit' misconception, of reception without transformation and inter-communion.) Secondly, he felt that the over-use of the term 'fellowship' invited believers to look for a feeling of general *bonhomie* rather than a radical participation in the offering of Christ crucified and risen ('the holy huddle' misconception). Thirdly, he worried that an emphasis on lay participation in the offertory procession invited the misunderstanding that this was our offering and not ours in Christ, as if presenting our 'holy things' rather than bringing our gifts to be received back sanctified and renewed.

If the Parish Communion is to teach us anything about the nature of the Church's corporate discipleship then it will always be necessary for the Eucharist to be celebrated well. We should remember that the whole intent of the movement was to move from a pattern of worship which could obscure the Church's essence and purpose to one which would, indeed, allow the Church to once again be the Church. Hebert was clear:

We must never express ourselves as though it were for us to make the Eucharist into a sacrament of the Church's unity; for it is so, always and of its own nature . . . But it is for us so to order the ceremonial and other arrangements as to express the true nature of the rite.³⁷

As he maintained, it is certainly true that the best way to learn to worship is to join in with worship. Yet perhaps we need to acknowledge that, alongside forming our celebrants well, suitable forms of catechesis (guided liturgies, shared study, sermons) are necessary where we have begun to lose our ability to truly engage with our forms of worship.

Marshall was wrong to paint the Parish Communion as just a (failed) context-bound liturgical innovation. The apparently modest changes to the regular liturgical habits of the Church which Hebert and his contemporaries were seeking to effect were driven not only by a desire for a better experience of worship but to revivify the liturgical service that revealed the very purpose of the Church; that showed that the human vocation to love is practised socially and exemplified corporately.³⁸ While a mixed offering of liturgies is no doubt crucial, we should not settle for liturgical economies in which the Eucharist is just one service amongst many. It is the source of all else we do. It is crucial to do better that form of worship which we have been given to do. Otherwise, we may well lose our grasp on the corporate calling and corporate mission that reveal the social heart of the gospel.

³⁷Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 214. For further reflection on making parish liturgies come alive see Guiver, *Pursuing the Mystery*, pp. 188-210.

³⁸Simon Cuff argues that the ordained priesthood should enable the diversity of particular lay ministries within the Body (and will not therefore fall foul of needlessly 'clericalising the laity') when its focus is always Christ-ward, and this should be the case in Eucharistic liturgies done well. Indeed, priesthood should be an exercise in 'radical solidarity' that allows the whole to flourish when each and every one is able to flourish in their own callings. See Cuff, *Priesthood for All Believers*, pp. 1-9.

Discipleship and Corporate Worship

The PCM put worship at the centre of its conception of discipleship. In the Eucharistic drama, the gathered believers are united by the Spirit to Christ in his offering to the Father of his whole human life in its full corporate reach. They are drawn into the Trinitarian drama of exchanged charity; participants in the divine life.

Discipleship could thus never be only of the What Would Jesus Do variety in which Jesus, the sage, is emulated in all his moral exemplarity. Rather, discipleship is participation. What Hebert and his contemporaries showed was that this participation does not happen alone. In the same movement that we make our offering of ourselves in Christ, we are given our communion with one another. Loving union with God is possible only insofar as we are also united in love to our brothers and sisters. We are formed into a people, a Body, which is engaged in actually being that which Jesus is doing in the world. We are empowered together to be the agency by which Christ's active presence is mediated to the world.

By means of the common meal, Christ makes the Church – this community of peace and love – out of the disparate sinners who gather before the altar. He gathers them into the sphere of his existence. It is then a people who is sent out to participate in Christ's mission.

Discipleship and Social Action

As together we are drawn into the life of the triune God, constituted anew as a people, and sent out as that communion, now dispersed but no less one, the heart of the gospel is revealed to be loving relationship, where relationship is understood as mutual participation. Discipleship is relationship with Christ, which is also relationship with one another. This is a witness to the world of what it is truly called to be, but it is also that which drives the social activity of the Church, seeking to draw the world into the sphere of Christ's love by enabling encounter with him in flesh and blood.

The Parish Communion and Parish Breakfast witness to what Andrew Rumsey calls a 'vocation to proximity':

The biblical command to love our neighbour – literally, the one who is near or 'nigh' – invests social proximity with divine potential. In the teaching of Jesus, when people perceive themselves as neighbours, their environment is transformed into a potential theatre for acts of love and service.³⁹

In the Eucharist we learn to be brothers and sisters and, in so doing, learn that to be disciples is to learn to love those who are nearby. The Parish Breakfast was to be the first fruits of Communion in immediate social fellowship. Secondly, it was also the venue in which acts for corporate service could be planned and reviewed. Eucharistic discipleship thus concerns attention to the mundane and secular and brings them before God so that we may discern the Kingdom and participate in its growth.

In his *The Parish Comes Alive*, Ernest Southcott offered a description of the life of a 1950s parish that was practically working out many of the convictions of the PCM. For him, the Breakfast that follows the Eucharist carries further the meaning of the

³⁹Andrew Rumsey, *Parish: An Anglican Theology of Place* (London: SCM Press, 2017), p. 122.

dismissal at the end of the service.⁴⁰ He sets out the importance of the ‘Breakfast’ as a parish meeting, which is an occasion to meet in fellowship, to detail all that is of concern in the wider parish and the world and to discern how to be the Church for the world.⁴¹ It is more than just one more sectional interest group, such as a youth group or a men’s club, but an occasion when any and all have a voice.

The idea of the Parish Breakfast after the service may not be manageable everywhere, or even for many parishes, but at its heart the idea of the ‘Breakfast’ meeting does speak of the way in which the discipleship of the Church seeks to show that all life should be Eucharistic. Following on from the idea of the Breakfast as an outworking of Eucharistic practice, the way we see our food serves as an example to show how a Eucharistic vision flows out into social activism. In the light of the Eucharist, every meal, every social gathering, has the potential to manifest the divine. They are moments of sustenance and blessing, of hospitality and sharing, moments for which to be thankful and that draw us together. In the light of the Eucharist, we desire to feed the hungry and so churches organize foodbanks or their members volunteer in shelters. Churches raise money for Christian Aid and for link dioceses in areas of the world suffering from food poverty. Churches can invest time and energy into pressing for healthier food through programmes in schools or, nationally, by lobbying government to help foster more sustainable and environmentally responsible farming methods. Churches draw attention to Fairtrade products and might promote lifestyles that reduce reliance on single-use plastics. By supporting local producers and local economies they could also help to reduce carbon footprints. The ‘Breakfast’ here names the way the Church demonstrates that the mundane and temporal can be seen to be the sphere of divine action once it is seen in the light of the Eucharist.

Perhaps one version of a Parish Breakfast would also importantly involve organizing meetings that draw in other agencies, professionals, volunteers or representatives from other churches, faith communities and local groups. These could be forums for community organizing, for lament or organizing protests, or simply opportunities for hospitality and celebrating events and holidays by feasting together. Such initiatives and events make visible the reach of the Church’s ambition for the transformation of social life.

The Parish Breakfast, broadly so conceived, could thus also be seen as the liminal meeting place between those at the margins of the Church – or, indeed, from outside the Church – and the worshipping life of the gathered Church.⁴² In their challenging and important book, *Being Interrupted*, Al Barrett and Ruth Harley have called for the need for the Church to be ‘interrupted’, especially when it continues to perpetuate forms of Whiteness and patriarchy, unjust economic or class-based structures,

⁴⁰Southcott, *The Parish Comes Alive*, p. 41.

⁴¹Southcott, *The Parish Comes Alive*, pp. 45-57.

⁴²It is important not to draw the boundary between Church and locality too starkly for the congregant is often also a parishioner. In some recent explorations of pioneer ministry, parallels with parish ministry are being noted, especially in rural areas. As pioneers are sent out to minister in the context of local cultures so the church members in a village are also wholly embedded in their locality. The engagement of the Church with the local society happens in multiple and complex ways in which distinctions and boundaries between the Church and the locality are difficult to draw (I owe this insight to personal correspondence with Mark Rodel, Mission Learning and Innovation Lead in the Diocese of Ely, discussing the work of James Butler, assistant coordinator of Pioneer Mission Training for the Church Mission Society).

child-marginalization or ecocidal practices.⁴³ Their argument is that the Church should not be so identified with its invisible or eschatological form that it is seen as being the sole locus of Christ's presence. Instead, the Church must learn to be interrupted from the margins, seek penitence and hear Christ in the other.

This crucial insight must also be balanced by a vision of the Church as that sign of salvation-as-essentially-social. The Church is given to be at the Eucharist, and it is in the light of the Eucharist – 'in the eyes of God' as Candole argued – that the other can be discerned to be Christ and not to be the alien, the competitor, the threat. The Eucharistic centre illuminates for us the epiphany at the margins. Nonetheless, from a divine perspective, the centre and the edge coincide, for Christ is equally present to the whole. The Church is both ordered 'vertically' by virtue of its worship but is also ordered 'horizontally' by virtue of its service, and on both axes Christ reveals himself in and to the Church as it is newly constituted. The Church does not so much take Christ to the margins, which are then absorbed into a pristine centre, but it grows as the Body insofar as it penitently seeks to recognize that the Kingdom has come near at the margins too.⁴⁴ Each new voice, each person encountered, each new revelation of Christ, will reconstitute the Body anew and invites the Church to understand itself afresh. The necessary and crucial attention to neglected margins must also recognize that the foundation for doing so well is reception of the gift of communion. The margins will reveal Christ once we set aside the belief that the gathered Church is institutionally guaranteed and instead lay hold of the Church as the joyful gift of relationship and communion. It is then that we can discern the stranger as neighbour, receive Christ's mission from the margins, grow as the Body and understand the reach of the Church's catholicity.

The 'Parish Breakfast' could be seen as one of those meeting places which render the division between inside and outside otiose, for it is an extension of Christ's hospitality at the altar. The Eucharist reveals the purpose of existence as communion but it also thus reveals our need of redemption.

Discipleship and Redemption

Regular communion makes visible redemption and witnesses to the fact that it takes time. Christ's work is complete but we need to learn to lay hold of it. Learning to be a redeemed people is a labour that requires practice and confession of failure. The PCM was not seeking to promulgate an idea of the ideal church or to make claims that exceeded the grasp of actual Christians. It sought to show that the Church is the gift of God, it is his creation, and he is the one who mends, transforms, sends and sustains it. The Eucharist exemplifies the fact that discipleship requires us to gather before God in our sinfulness, in order that we might be sent out again to be Christ to others. As De Candole noted:

⁴³Al Barrett and Ruth Harley (eds.), *Being Interrupted: Reimagining the Church's Mission from the Outside, In* (London: SCM Press, 2020).

⁴⁴Simon Cuff (*Priesthood for All Believers*, pp. 93-108) sees the purpose of the diaconate, as a commissioned ministry to the margins, to enable the centre to be continually troubled by the margins and to hold the Church to account for its own sins of marginalization. The margins are folded into the Eucharistic heart of the Church (p. 97) just as, we might say, the gathered Church is folded into the same Eucharistic heart by its social encounter with Christ at the margins.

The imperfection of the Church is partly due to the very fact that she is not only the home of saints, but the refuge of penitent sinners, the nurse of the weak and the tempted, the educator of the young and immature.⁴⁵

What the Eucharist makes visible for us and for the world is nothing less than redemption, the transformation of the disparate into one Body, the penitent into the forgiven, the lonely into the loved.⁴⁶ It is the sphere of action in which we witness disciples being formed. The Church, which is the Body of Christ, is still also a pilgrim people who are on the way. Penitence is required and so the people gather at the altar, the Church is there reproduced and reconstituted by the Eucharist and dispersed as the Body in mission.

Discipleship and the Digital Body

But what happens when access to the altar is suspended or impossible? I first began to prepare this essay at the beginning of 2020. As the Covid-19 pandemic set in, church doors were locked and gathering itself became illegal. The Church's worship soon became a digital phenomenon. There were hitherto relatively few experiments in 'iChurch' and it became clear that gathering as a solely digital Church and worshipping online was not merely about curating an approximation of in-person worship; it required experiment and imagination. Clergy and laity swiftly 'up-skilled' to allow for streaming and dissemination of resources by social media.

Regrettably, the Church publicly laid out its diverse understandings and disagreements about sacraments, priesthood and the nature of the Church – largely on social media – revealing an anxiety about how to 'deliver' Eucharistic worship. Could a priest celebrate alone? Could people make a spiritual communion by watching a priest celebrate online? Others attempted to share Communion by asking people to share bread and wine at home while online.

However, rather than being a moment for anxiety about Eucharistic celebration, it was actually the moment for the revival of domestic lay devotion and para-Eucharistic practices.⁴⁷ The Church that was now dispersed was still the Body formed at the altar. If the potential for gathering again was deferred then what was made visible was the Church's social vocation as a Body sent out from the altar: both as a people of God sent out to pray, read the Bible, lead Offices and acts of worship, and also sent out to tend to those in need in the local communities by delivering prescriptions, for example, or simply by keeping in touch. As Ernest Southcott, an advocate of the PCM, noted in a well-known purple passage:

⁴⁵De Candole, *Sacraments and the Church*, p. 40.

⁴⁶On this theme see the excellent essay by William T. Cavanaugh, 'The Sinfulness and Visibility of the Church: A Christological Exploration', in *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 141-69.

⁴⁷See Matthew Bullimore, 'Eucharistic Discipleship: Participating in the Body', in Andrew Hayes and Stephen Cherry (eds.), *The Meanings of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 2021), pp. 136-49.

The holiest moment of the church service is the moment when God's people – strengthened by preaching and sacrament – go out of the church door into the world to be the Church. We don't go to church, we are the Church.⁴⁸

Whether or not it is quite the holiest moment, the dismissal should not be seen as just the beginning of a period of waiting for the next moment of reception but as the moment the Church exists in its mode as servant.

Digital worship was also able to offer something newly inclusive – at least for those with the means to access it – in that the neurodiverse and the disabled who for many reasons could not attend in-person worship could now be a visible part of the Church's worship. Similarly, the Church's catholicity was evident as worshippers could tune in to many churches around the world. Zoom worshippers also reported increased levels of inter-personal engagement, somewhat forced by the medium's one-by-one method of communication, in the post-service 'coffee' time.

Yet there were also many disadvantages – from the loss of bodily cues to it being a method of communication that frustrates speaking in unison or multi-layered conversation. There is also a danger that an over-emphasis on the digital alone can be a capitulation to the convenient, siloed and atomized behaviours by which we are formed more broadly: how many people have opted not to return to church when it is much easier to watch online? What digital worship alone struggles to provide is the bodily, the sensual and the visibly corporate: for example, taste, physical welcome at the door, liturgical space, inter-generational engagement, song. To be in-person is to know ourselves as part of something bigger than ourselves alone; a living, organic, inter-personal Body. Gathered worship witnesses to the fact that Christianity is ineluctably social.

More than half a century on from the work of the proponents of the PCM we live in a situation in which social cohesion is no less a critical and pressing worry. The world contains oppressive and deforming authoritarian regimes, populist regimes based on exclusion, and cultures that further compound our atomization. Social media is at least as divisive as it is integrating. If the Church does, indeed, bear witness to a renewed social existence in the face of all these pressures then it must certainly include and embrace – and gracefully transform – all of the modes by which social life is conducted today. There are many benefits to a mixed ecology of digital and in-person worship. But what the Church must not lose is a Eucharistic focus that shows how the social life given at the altar gives the light by which our dispersed and digital lives must be guided.

⁴⁸E.W. Southcott quoted in Walter B. Knight, *Knight's Treasury of Illustrations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), p. 46. In *The Parish Comes Alive*, p. 33, Southcott outlines the flourishing of lay-led devotions in his parish as an outworking of the Parish Communion, and also details his vision for a Rule of life for the whole parish (pp. 109-10). Southcott also sets out a wider vision for house churches – 'the Church in the house' – as cells of the Church at the parish level, just as parishes could be seen as cells of the Church at diocesan level (pp. 58-82). These expressions of the Church in microcosm include lay devotions and Bible study but the vision also included using homes in the parish as venues for celebrations of the Eucharist, making the Church gathered at worship visible on every street, just as it was visible in its social witness.

Conclusion: Discipleship and the Body

Although the Parish Communion movement has been criticized for its emphasis on a rite which requires a priest to lead the people, it should not be forgotten that the entire focus of the movement was to restore a conception of the Eucharist as the celebration of the whole people. It sought greater lay liturgical participation but also renewed an understanding of the corporate nature of the Church as a set of relations rather than as a clerical institution. This was a theology of the laity as the Body of Christ with all that that entails.

The PCM understood that discipleship is a corporeal and corporate matter. We are given to be a Body which, through the bodies of its members, is the visible and active presence of Christ's body in his world. It knew that bodies are permeable and social, affected by and affecting others. They are dependent on others as others depend on them. Bodies are social and political, individual and corporate, and bodies are material. There can be no sphere of material existence, then, to which the Church's discipleship should be neutral. At the heart of the faith is the Body of God – crucified and risen – into which we are incorporated at the altar. Discipleship is, then, learning to live out together the ramifications of God's embodiment.

For the PCM, discipleship was a participation in charitable living. Redemption, which is to be brought into relationship with God and to share in his life, is made visible in a people who celebrate together, who are gracefully invited to join the offering of the whole of their lives to Christ's offering of himself to the Father, in order that all things may be renewed and redeemed. Discipleship is the corporate practice of those who are made one so that they can witness to the fact that the human vocation is thoroughly social. This corporate Body, sent out into the world, dispersed but united, witnesses to that social vocation and seeks, through acts of charitable living, to participate in Christ's work of restoring the world to its true nature. The Eucharist nourishes a discipleship which acknowledges that all of life is Eucharistic.

It may be that we cannot sustain weekly Parish Communion in every church. But even if it is a monthly occurrence, or a benefice service, we would do well to ensure that we find ways to celebrate it well as our principal service. For it is the foundation and fount of our life together, the activity which teaches us that discipleship is a matter of the body, the Body of Christ.