**On the Table-Servers: Ministry in the Assembly**
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Ministry: Saying and Doing the Gospel in Assembly

For a moment, try saying it this way: Christianity is a meal-fellowship. I know there are other ways to speak of the Christian movement. But, for a bit, I invite you, try this one. At root, Christianity is not just an idea. It is a specific meeting around food and drink. It is first of all not a religious inclination that an individual might have, not a philosophy nor a technique to equip an individual to engage with spiritual realities. In any case, it is certainly not a consumer good that an individual might or might not choose to buy in the marketplace of religious ideas. Rather, quite concretely, quite *physically*, Christianity is a *meeting*. Or, more profoundly, Christianity is a very specific kind of meeting: it is a *meal-fellowship*. As such, it is an invitation for us together to see both God and the world anew from the perspective of that table, of that shared food.

Christianity came into existence at table. The earliest churches — that is, the earliest assemblies — seem to have continued the meal tradition of Jesus, the meal tradition with which the gospels are filled: "Behold a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and of sinners," went one description of Jesus (Luke 7:34). Christian communities struggled to understand and maintain Jesus' remarkable open commensality — his astonishing, God-signifying, religiously offensive and politically dangerous eating and drinking with the *hoi polloi*, his critique of the dining-room practice of the closed circle, his re-working of meal-meaning. And then it was at table that those earliest assemblies seem to have come to understand and trust that the now crucified and dead Jesus was risen, was among them distributing the Bread like Joseph giving grain and forgiveness to his brothers, was assuaging their thirst as if he himself were now the water-giving Rock. It was with his death and his presence among them at table that they came to believe this word: "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27).

"Who is greater," they came to say that he had asked, "the one who reclines or the one who serves the food?" Surely you know, the question implies. Surely you understand the power that is expressed at virtually all tables, understand the cultural form of that power as it was enacted at the time. The greatest is of course the person among the elite who recline, the person who is served. Such a person is far greater than the slaves and the women, the children and the prostitutes who come in and out on the fourth side of the *triclinium*, the ancient three-sided dining room, to put food on the tables of the reclining rich, far greater than the low-class table-servers and table-entertainers and forced table-companions who would never recline at their own table. "But," the crucified risen one now says, "I am among you as a *diakonos*, as one who serves the food at table." I am among you, reversing all values, like a master who has his slaves recline and girds himself to serve their table (Luke 12:37).

So great was this Christian critique of the dining room — like Paul's explicit critique in 1 Corinthians — that such closed-circle reclining slowly disappeared in the meetings of the

Christian assembly. But *serving food* did not. The growing assembly stood. The distinction between eaters and servers declined. A small table was brought into the midst of an increasingly larger room. Food was set out. The shared loaf and the common cup that framed a meal were accentuated, so much so that all the other food could finally be given away as table-service to the poor and hungry of the world, so much so that, when forced by persecution and state pressure, the community could move the Bread and the Cup and the collection for the poor to a morning meeting.

Christianity came into existence as a meal fellowship. The food itself was now the very presence of Jesus, his encounterable body in our midst, his covenant-making blood on the lintels of our bodies. The meal was the taste of the feast on the mountain, the Spirit-given end of death itself, the gathering of all peoples to eat and drink, like Abraham and Sarah, with the Holy Trinity. The gathering was now the *qahal*, the *ekklesia*, eating and drinking with God and sending portions to those for whom nothing was prepared. The bath that we call baptism can be considered as a washing that joined people to this meal-company. Sunday came to be the communal meal-keeping day, the Lord's Day because it was the day of the Lord's Supper. Even the scripture read in the assembly and the words of the preaching were a feast, a scroll to eat, covered with lamentation and mourning and woe — with the death of Christ and the truth of our need — and yet sweet and life-giving, the very feast of God. Indeed, the words as well were to be *served up*, like food, like Bread of Life, by table-servers of the word, as the twelve call themselves according to Acts (6:4; cf. 1:17,24), by table-servers of the word of God's reconciliation with the world, as Paul call himself in 2 Corinthians (5:18-19).

This table-fellowship continued. It was as a dangerous supper-club that Pliny and Trajan tried to suppress Christianity in the early second century. It was as a host at table — and as one gifted for prayer at table, for table-service — that old Bishop Polycarp came into view in the account of his martyrdom from the same century. And, in the same century, it was with a hugely important and characteristic meal-account that the apologist Justin closed his defense of the faith. Christians remind each other that they are baptized, he wrote to the emperor Antoninus Pius, by repeatedly meeting together, by giving thanks over what they eat, and by sharing that food with the hungry and the poor. The Sunday meeting for word and table, received from Jesus-the-crucified and celebrating both God's creation and Jesus' resurrection, was the pre-eminent example of such repeated meeting, such thanksgiving over food, such sending of food into the hungry streets and wretched prisons of Rome.

No wonder, then, that house churches were especially remodeled to make room for the communal feast of the word, the communal word of the feast. And when Christians came to use the great public buildings of the empire, the basilicas, those buildings were re-oriented to godly purpose by placing a table in the midst, on the pavement, among the people. Indeed, Anscar Chupungco says (Worship and Culture in Dialogue, 96) that the bishop may have arrived in the room with ceremony befitting a magistrate, ceremony borrowed from court ritual — with attendants and incense and insignia and lights — but for centuries that same bishop then continued by doing what Christian leaders most characteristically do: serving food from the table, enacting the domestic service, thereby

utterly re-focusing a new kind of imperial meaning around the meal of Christ given away to the whole assembly, around leaders who serve, and around significant relief for the poor. Bishops may have sometimes *looked* like magistrates, but they *served*. And they were assisted not by courtiers and bureaucrats, but by people who came to be called *deacons*, people who brought to expression and assisted in the vocation of the bishop to serve at the table of the word, the table of the eucharist and the table of the poor.

So, here is a useful thing for us to note, a fragment from the past that floats down to us now amid the flotsam of oddities in the various streams of time that make up history, a gift that may surprise us into seeing anew, a gift we may actually use: Christianity came into existence as a meal-fellowship.

And, when it is healthy, Christianity is a meal-fellowship still.

If you have participated in the liturgical movement, then you have joined in the recovery of this meal: eucharist every Sunday as the principal service of the congregation; the altar called a table and placed more and more clearly in our midst; the word of God read and preached in juxtaposition to the gift of this table, from a reading desk set strongly amidst the community of this table; preaching interpreting the word in the light of the table; indeed, the table of the word itself set with richer fare, as the lectionary has drawn more deeply from the whole banquet of the scripture. These have been themes of that movement. These themes are important not just as historical recoveries, but because the gospel itself is a life-giving Bread and a saving Drink, because the identity of Jesus Christ and the meaning of his death are given and known in his meal gift — "My body for you; my blood of the new covenant" — and because the Holy Trinity itself is indeed like that expression of Catherine of Sienna — God is our Table, our Food, and our Waiter — or like that icon of Andrei Roublev: Abraham and Sarah's three guests around the Cup, with — astonishingly — room for us at the table.

This theological seriousness has meant that there have been yet further table-themes alive in the liturgical movement: baptism as introduction into the community of the table and the table as the continual remembrance that we are baptized; candidates for baptism — the catechumens — learning to join the community in feeding the poor; the whole baptized assembly — children and adults, rich and poor, firm and infirm, insiders and outsiders — as welcome to the table; the food of the table as genuinely shared food — a common loaf, a shared cup; this simple food set out and held and consumed with great reverence; stronger and stronger thanksgivings at table, the presider truly giving thanks as well as she or he can, drawing all of us into the thanksgiving; the food of this thanksgiving-table taken away in haste and love to those of the community who cannot be here, because they are sick or in prison or engaged in communally important work; and the urgent, visible unity between Christians as unity at this table, as "full communion." These themes for renewal are not gone, nor are they fully achieved. But note: they are table themes, meal-keeping themes.

And now the liturgical movement has recovered yet further themes around the table, ancient and still crucial themes: the collection at the table becoming genuinely a

collection for the hungry and the poor, as already Paul and Justin knew; the food of the table, the Bread and Cup, witnessing to the goodness of creation and to our inseparable engagement with the well-being of the earth, as already Irenaeus knew; the economy of the table, the economy of both abundance and of "just enough"for everybody who is there, the economy of sustainable consumption, as an economic proposal to the world, as already Ambrose and Chrysostom — and also Benedict! — knew; and the community of the table being now sent away as itself Body of Christ, given away to our neighbors in the world, as already Ignatius and Polycarp — but also Luther! — knew.

So, for a moment, try saying it this way: Christianity is a meal-fellowship. And the meal of the word, the word of the meal is itself a witness to the world of God's love for the world, is itself the very mission of God in the world.

But if this is true, then a very particular thing needs to be said about the form of leadership in Christian communities. There are lots of patterns for religious leadership in the world that are not appropriate for Christian purposes. Christian leaders are not to be judges or shamans, though there are perhaps a few interesting analogies that might be drawn between these functions and the work of Christian elders and priests. But Christian leaders are certainly are not to be monarchs or hierarchs, potentates or princes. And, in a more modern version of such power, they are not to be licensed deliverers of unchallenged monologues on subjects of their own choosing. Nor are they to be talk-show hosts or celebrities or entertainers.

Rather, Christianity is a meal-fellowship. And Christian leaders are table-servers.

It is fascinating that the privileged New Testament words for "ministry," "minister," and "to minister" are *diakonía*, *diákonos*, and *diakonéo*: "table-service," "table-server," and "to serve food," in their basic meanings. Certainly, other words than this relatively rare set — even odd set — were available at the time of the origins of Christianity for leadership and office in a religious or a secular community. But these are the words that are centrally used, in the gospels and in the epistles. While this complex of words comes to mean simply "service" or even "office of service," the concrete meaning of actually serving at table, according to Kittel's *Wörterbuch* (II 82), continues to echo in all their figurative, abstract and metaphoric meanings. So, while we may translate Acts 6 to the effect that the twelve want to devote themselves "to prayer and to serving the word," we may lose the sense — present in the Greek — that the twelve want to serve the word as food is served to a meal-community. At the center of the meaning the *diakonía*-complex is always the setting out of food or, in a wider sense, the giving way of concrete relief, as food to the poor. That connotation hovers about in any use of these words.

And these are the words that we translate as "ministry," "minister," and "to minister." This Latin-originating, English complex of words certainly did once carry the same connotation. "Of that food, he gave to them all, this new meat most uncouth. . . ministering it into their mouth," says one secular fifteenth century English text. "Scarcely could the ministers have room to bring the meat and drink to the table . . .," says another from the sixteenth century. But such a sense has practically disappeared, the concrete

meaning no longer echoing in its religious use. “Ministers” hardly are servers any more. They are rather religious figures, hierarchs, addressed with the title “Reverend” or “Most Reverend.” And that hierarchical sense is *our* “uncouth meat.”

No. Let it be the gospel that is set out *as* food, *in* the food, and *in the relief* to the poor. Let the ministers be *diákonoi*. For Christianity is a meal-fellowship. And *diakonía* is its unique idea about leadership.

We would do well to recover the concrete meaning and the concrete connotations of “ministry.” The words for this recovery, of course, are words from the heart of the gospel tradition: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and table-server of all” (Mark 9:35) and “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your table-server, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served at table but to serve the table, and to give his life a ransom for the many” (Mark 10:43-45). Finally, the great table-service of Christ to the world is the cross. There, by holy mercy, he is the server and the food, the very fruit from the tree of life for faith to receive and eat and live and also the very famine-relief of God served up to all the needy world.

But, formed by the Spirit poured out from his cross and resurrection, we too may serve this table. Our service may be like that of Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:29) or of the women who followed Jesus (Mark 15:41; Matthew 27:55; Luke 8:3) or of Martha who set that table in Bethany (John 12:2). In the gospel books, it is only Jesus and the women — and the angels, in Mark and Matthew — who get it about service. It is as if the men have read Plato (*Gorgias* 491e): “How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?” What belongs to a man is ruling, not serving. The gospel tradition directly counters this proposal. So, going the way of Jesus and of the gospel-women, our service may be like Paul, who served up the table of the word of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19) while he was also collecting the relief — the table-service — to take to the poor of Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:1,12-13; Romans 15:25,31). Or it may be like the seven, who according to Acts did serve food-tables and distribute relief — and also *preach*! — as well as like the twelve who served the table of the word (Acts 6; cf. 1:17,25). Or it may be like that of the angels themselves, who came to the fasting Christ in the wilderness and set out food to him there (Mark 1:13).

But “ministry” will be table service.

For a moment, say it like that. But if we do so, there will be at least five profound implications which flow from such an understanding.

First, the business of ministry will be to serve not just any food, but to set out, in holy service to the gathered assembly, the *gospel* of Jesus Christ, the witness that God is continually coming toward us in our famines with life-giving food. The business of ministry will be to set out that gospel in words that are like bread and a cup, in the Bread and Cup themselves, and in the witness to the truth of God and the world, alive in bread given to the hungry. It is fascinating to note that, according to Justin, these three tasks

were the focused role of the presider in his second century assembly: to preach a sermon from the texts, serving the food of the word we might say; to give thanks as well as he could, serving the table; and to see to it that the collection was distributed to the wretched and the hungry. All three are table service.

Thought of as *diakonía*, as table-serving-ministry, these tasks of the assembly's presider ought still be held together, only rarely being parsed out to different persons, though all of us are involved in each of the three, the presider only exercising serving leadership in our opening the word, our giving thanks and helping each other to eat and drink, and our sending and being sent to those in need. And thought of as *diakonía*, as table-serving-ministry, the authority of the preacher should be seen simply as the awesome authority of one beggar giving other beggars bread in a hungry world. If it is not really the bread of Christ that he or she is giving out, then it is no authority. Indeed, like the scroll that both Ezekiel and the elder John ate, the preacher should speak with nearly edible words that are both full of true lamentation and mourning and woe — the law — and are at the same time sweet and life-giving — the gospel. The preacher should say, in the concrete images of the texts of the day, the same thing that the Bread and the Cup of the Supper are saying: "My crucified body and blood are life and hope for you." And the point of this preaching is that the assembly should eat and drink — both here in the words and in the Supper itself — and so come to trust God again as the giver of the Bread of Life exactly in those places where we have only known death. The preaching is to be famine relief. So is the Supper, the Eucharist, the Mass. At the table, in the unity of the Spirit, through and with Jesus Christ, the presider is to lead us in proclaiming with thanksgiving how God gives life where we find only death, and then she or he is to see to it that even the least one in the assembly is served with the food of this trinitarian thanksgiving. Preaching is to lead us to the Supper as to the visible word and then invite us to turn in faith toward the famine in the rest of the world — begging for and signing God's great relief in the prayers of intercession, in the collection, and in the sending. The collection and the sending are also famine relief, *diakonía*, and the presider is to see to their faithful distribution.

Ordained ministry is table-service. That is why we ordain people. We train them. We invite them to come deeper into the life-giving meaning and the world-reversing discipline of the gospel-table. We urge them to consider and interiorize the paradox that we seek to have strong leaders who are table-servers. Then, at the invitation of a concrete assembly and in communion with as much of the church as possible, we pray for them to be used by the Spirit in the life-giving order of the table: gathering, word, meal, sending.

But, second among the implications, this table-service of the gospel does not just belong to the ordained. There are rightly many ministries — many table-services — in the assembly of God. Their diversity expresses the rich variety of the gifts of God and the rich diversity of the assembly itself. Their common work at the table expresses the assembly's unity. Presiding — focusing a participating meeting on the table of the word, table of the eucharist, table of the poor — is indeed one of the services deeply needed by the assembly. There are many others. Cantors and readers and prayers and communion-servers and door-keepers and altar-guild-members are also table-servers. So are catechists

who lead catechumens to the table and teachers who help us reflect on the meaning of the table and deacons who distribute the collection from the table and visitors who care for those separated from the table and social activists who, sent by the assembly's sending, fight for the justice of the table in the world. So are all of us together, sent as food to our neighbors.

Here, too, it is not just any food we are invited to set out. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ, set out like food on the table of the word, the table of the eucharist, the table of the poor. Take the example of the table service, the ministry, the *diakonía* of the cantor. Say it first negatively: Cantors, too, are not to be licensed deliverers of unchallenged musical monologues or choral numbers on themes of their own choosing. That would be to take the way of unbroken power. "It shall not be so among you." Rather, they are to help us sing around the table — around the gathering to the table which is the bath, around the table of the word, around the table of the eucharist, and around the sending to the table of the poor. They help us sing around the gospel in these places, help us sing the gospel of Jesus Christ to each other. That is their service. With their own bodies, with their own voices and hands, and together with the rehearsed voices of the assembly, they are to help us do the whole table-ordo together, in harmony, in dissonance and resolved dissonance, communally, beyond ourselves, praise-fully, woe-fully, *musically*. We sing at this table of Christ. And cantors help us.

We could say something like the same thing about each of the ministries.

A special concern might be expressed for that ministry actually named "diaconal ministry" or the "office of the deacon." There have been such officers in the history of the church, whether or not you think that the "three-fold ministry" belongs to the best ecclesial structure. There are such officers now, some of them here among us. In fact, as should be clear from all that I have said, I think that there is something deeply, uniquely, surprisingly Christian about having an office called "deacon" or "table-server." There is also something confusing about it, since "ministry," *diakonía*, "table-service," belongs to each of the various leaders of the assembly. And there is also a ministry, a *diakonía* of the whole people of God. I think that insofar as deacons or diaconal ministers bring the vocation of the bishop and of the whole church to focused and iconic expression, proclaiming the gospel at the table of the word, serving the cup at the table of the eucharist, and distributing at least some of the collection of the church at the table of the poor (and thus being enabled to lead us intelligently in urgent intercessions for the needs of the world), their office can be a refreshing and remarkable gift. They can remind us of the table-vocation of us all, the table-character of the whole Christian movement. But, if the office of deacon supplants other legitimate ministries, always setting aside lay assisting ministers in the liturgy, for example, or becoming the only ones of us who actually visit the sick or imprisoned, or if assigning the bishop's table-concerns to the deacon sets the bishop free to be a potentate again, then the office of deacon ceases to be a gift. When we recover this office, it must be in the former sense.

Then, third, all of our leaders will be invited to be servants. Leaders, of course, have power. Leaders invested with religious-symbolic meaning have extraordinary power. In

Christianity, leaders must constantly be turning that power to the purposes of the assembly, to the honoring and loving and serving of each of the people, especially of the little and least ones. This assertion is not the same as saying that our leaders must always be seeking the good opinion of others, must always be currying favor with other powerful people in a congregation, for example, or must draw new power to themselves by the appearance of humility. No. Christian leadership has appropriate authority. And we ought not fool ourselves: our leaders, our pastors, our cantors, do have power. It is just that power, in Christian use, is always to be broken, turned to service, turned toward assembly-building, turned toward love. And the business of these servants is to set out the food of the gospel, to yield the importance of themselves in favor of the importance of that food and the assembly around that food.

But then, fourth, the table-service-character of ministry will carry with it two related further implications. All of the church's table-servers, all of its ministers, will need themselves also to be guests, also to be served. "Insofar as I am a bishop," wrote Augustine, "I am in danger. Insofar as I am one of the faithful, I am safe." Bishops, pastors, presiders, and all ministers, will also sometimes need to be safe. Let the presider also be served from the holy table by another, receiving the proffered Bread and Cup preferably last, after the others, a current sign of hospitality and the goodness of the food but also a sign of the presider's neediness. More: let all the ministers come as beggars, hands out for Bread, to that same table. They cannot always, always serve. Only Christ can do that, and he also serves them. And, further, ministers who are responsible for table-service in the church need to work on extending a life of hospitality into the flow of their own daily existence. Also at home, "welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15:7).

And, finally, fifth, minsters who are table servers will continue to work, together with us all, on that list of table-related reforms that we have already mentioned. Here are at least some of those reforms that could be named again:

1. Teach and love and lead until the Holy Communion is the principal service of every congregation on every Sunday.
2. Use and teach the lectionary as a banquet of scripture, and learn its gifts and structure.
3. Preach (or urge and help your pastor to preach) so that the word is edible, so that the sermon says the same thing the Bread and Cup says: Jesus Christ for you; life amidst our death.
4. Have a single reading desk in the midst of the assembly as a table of the word.
5. Make local intercessions for the urgent famines of the world.
6. Let the table of your assembly be a strong and beautiful table, set out so that the assembly has a sense of gathering around it.
7. Set out a loaf of real bread and a cup of good wine, and deal with these gifts and with all of the communicants with deep reverence. I am hoping that you have already worked on the recovery of the cup in your assembly, on the use of this most profound and most clean of the methods of common drinking. But there is still some wafer-host use in the Latin-influenced west, in our churches. It is also

long past time that all of us would be done with this western medieval malformation, based upon the Carolingian reading of the requirement for a pure priestly bread of the sacrifice, and that all of us recovered the ancient and profound Christian practice of sharing a loaf of recognizable bread.

8. Make thanksgiving at the table — or join your presider in making thanksgiving — as well as you are able. Use the remarkable new treasury of the church's prayers. Then ask the Spirit to teach us to pray and so pray in that prayer of Jesus for bread and forgiveness.
9. Welcome all of the baptized to eat and drink at the table. All of them. And do not be afraid if one who is not baptized is drawn to this table of Christ. Feed them. Then welcome them to come deeper and deeper into Christ through baptism. And, let me say this as my own conscience-bound witness at the moment, welcome candidates from among all the baptized — men and women, gay and straight — to become candidates for the ordained table-services of the assembly. Welcome all of them. Train them and discern their gifts. Care about their faithful lives. Know that all of us are sinners who live from grace. But welcome them all.
10. Send the holy Bread and Cup to those who are absent, and do it as soon as possible, preferably as an extension of the Sunday liturgy.
11. Make a collection for the hungry and the poor. "Remember the poor," said the first Jerusalem council of the church, unwilling to add any other burden to the Gentile mission. "Remember the poor," Paul willingly repeats in the Galatians letter at the beginning of his collections. "Remember the poor," our eucharists may now conclude. Do not fool yourself that you are solving the world hunger problem or finally doing justice. You are rather making a sign of the truth of God that you yourself have received in this meal. And then send the collection in a responsible and faithful way.
12. Be sent yourself, with all the assembly, as famine relief in the world.
13. Sing your way through this whole table-ordo, Sunday after Sunday. If you are a cantor, use your best skill to help us sing around the table, to set out the food of the gospel in song.
14. Labor for full communion between the churches, and — to the extent possible — celebrate full communion in your local community.
15. Teach and use baptism as the way someone is introduced into this meal-assembly, and let the meal assembly, its thanksgiving and its sending to the poor remind you that you are baptized.
16. Help those who are catechumens to learn the meal-ways of the church, including the Christian interest in feeding the hungry and the outsiders.
17. Teach and teach that this meal practice of the church is both an economic and an ecological proposal to the world: sustainable consumption within the fragile and beautiful limits of God's good earth. This continuing reform is immensely important. These proposals can be lost amid the use of the Supper as if it were an individually received religious consumer good, as if it were only the concern of private piety.
18. Finally, resist those who publicly wish to make of Christianity something else: a marketed technique for individual self-realization combined with a powerful, political, lobbying connection with the current Imperium; an institution that

establishes the power of the religious leaders, publicly accentuates sentimental religious issues, and ignores the actual famines; or a world-wide monarchy with a single king and royal pronouncements, especially on personal sexual issues. No. Christianity is a meal. Let all the beggars come. Then let all the political chips fall where they may. For, astonishingly, the holy Triune God is setting out the food.

19. And know that you will fail. Come yourself, with your hands outstretched for the bread of life and mercy.

So, say it this way: Christianity is a meal-fellowship. And ministry is table-service. I know there are other ways it could be said. Christianity is a great washing, for example, with our meetings being a constant re-immersion in that bath. Or Christianity is a movement around a word that does what it says. But the interest, here, in ministry, in *diakonía*, brought us inevitably to the table. So, say it this way: Christianity is a meal-fellowship. And ministry is table-service.

Only, I know that you have done far more than just say this or think it for a moment with me. I know that you, here, have lived it. Then please hear this lecture as encouragement and as an homage of thanks for your table-service. We cannot live without it.

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