

# Church divided over defining 'communion'

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

For most Catholics, especially in the middle-to-senior generations, the first meaning of the word "communion" is eucharistic.

Communion is something one receives at Mass or upon a sickbed, and the word is usually modified by the adjective "holy." Holy Communion is the body and blood of Jesus Christ under the appearances of bread and wine.

In more recent years, the word "communion" has taken on an ecclesiological meaning as well. That is, it refers not only to the sacrament of Holy Communion, but also the reality of the church itself.

Indeed, *The Final Report* of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in 1985 concluded that the "ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the council's documents."

But this must seem very abstract to most readers. Words such as "ecclesiology" and expressions such as "ecclesiology of communion" have an academic ring to them.

What does "ecclesiology of communion" mean, and what practical difference does it make on our understanding of the nature and mission of the church?

To speak of the church as a communion means, among other things, that the church is a body of people who are interiorly united with God in Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The communal nature of the church, in this sense, is expressed and deepened sacramentally, particularly in the Eucharist.

In the celebration of the Eucharist and in the reception of Holy Communion, the

church becomes more fully aware of what already is: a communion of grace.

This is the *vertical* dimension of communion. But there is another dimension as well.

To speak of the church as a communion is also to speak of the church as a fellowship of believers.

Our union is not only *with* Christ; it is also a union with one another *in* Christ. By reason of our shared faith, baptism, and grace, we become in the church one family, one body, one fellowship.

As such we are the church — laity, clergy, and religious alike. All of us share in the life of the church. All of us are

responsible for its mission.

This is communion's *horizontal* dimension.

Unfortunately, some Catholics — including a few high-ranking Vatican officials — have been interpreting the "ecclesiology of communion" more narrowly.

For them, the communion has only a *vertical* dimension. It refers exclusively to the church's union with God in grace and to the union of the local churches and their bishops with the Holy See.

At the same time, they are unsympathetic with Vatican II's teaching that the church is people of God because, for them,



## ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

such an emphasis runs the risk of making the church too human and too democratic.

For these Catholics, everything in the church comes from the top down — from God, ultimately, and from the pope. In the final analysis, no one else really counts.

Needless to say, this is an incomplete and one-sided understanding of communion.

# A councilman regrets not speaking out for Jesus

By Cindy Bassett  
Courier columnist

Joseph of Arimathea met no one in the streets of Jerusalem as he trudged toward Caiaphas' house. It was the day after the Sabbath. There were two possible reasons why Caiaphas had summoned him at so early an hour.

First, Caiaphas would demand to know why Joseph had not come to the council meeting on Friday morning to cast his vote on such an important matter. Second, Caiaphas was well connected with the Romans. He was certain to know that Joseph had gone to see Pilate concerning the body of Jesus.

Joseph sighed heavily as he imagined Caiaphas poised like a cat ready to pounce on him with his questions.

So much had happened since Thursday night that Joseph's mind was racing in a hundred directions at once. That night, Caiaphas had hastily assembled the council at his house to decide once and for all what to do about Jesus.

At first, no one could find any charges that would stick against Jesus. He had been arrested and brought in to stand before council as they deliberated.

"Jesus claims to be the Messiah, the King of the Jews," someone offered.

Caiaphas turned to Jesus who had remained silent all of this time. "Well, are you the Messiah?" he asked pointedly.



"I am, and from this time on you will see the Son of Man at the right hand of God," Jesus told him.

Caiaphas' expression was triumphant. "What say you?" he asked the council.

"Guilty! Jesus must die!" they shouted. "We will take Jesus to the Romans and tell them he seeks to overthrow their government."

It was finished after that. All that was required was an official vote by the council during the daylight. What would one vote on the side of Jesus have done?

"If I do not raise my voice for you, then I am against you," Joseph said aloud just before he entered Caiaphas' house.

"You seem well today," Caiaphas said to Joseph.

"I am," Joseph said, his face set grimly. "Some people may wonder about your present state of mind," Caiaphas said.

"Especially if they knew about your actions in the past few days."

Joseph's silence was deliberate.

"You hold an important seat on the council," Caiaphas continued. "And yet,

you did not come on Friday to cast your vote with the other members?"

Joseph could keep silent no longer. "The council was like a lynch mob Thursday night! Your vote was a mere formality," he cried. "You, Caiaphas, had already decided the fate of Jesus before you even convened us. Did you fear Jesus had grown too popular for your own sense of power?"

Caiaphas remained unruffled by Joseph's charges. "Is that why you went to Pilate to request the body of Jesus so you could place it in your own tomb? Did you really think you could keep this from me?"

"In case you have forgotten, our law prohibits the burial of criminals in family tombs," Caiaphas said.

"Jesus was no criminal! He may well have been the Messiah. And if he was, his blood is on your hands," Joseph said.

"Joseph, don't get any more foolish ideas," Caiaphas said. "At my request, Pilate has posted Roman guards at your tomb. You can tell his followers not to bother trying to steal the body so they can claim that Jesus rose from the dead."

Scripture reference: Matthew 27:57-66.

Meditation: "If anyone declares publicly that he belongs to me I will do the same for him before my Father in heaven. But if anyone rejects me publicly that he belongs to me I will do the in heaven." (Matthew 10:32-33).

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