

Divided at the altar



Questions for discussion

1. Is Eucharist celebrated in your church tradition? If so, how?
2. What is the meaning of the Eucharist?
3. This story is especially relevant in regions where mixed marriages are common. Is this true of your community? How do the churches try to minister faithfully in meeting such difficult pastoral problems?
4. How does participating in the Eucharist relate to the social life?
5. In the history of the Church there have been various attempts to understand the mystery of the real and unique presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Which interpretation has been most common in your tradition?
6. Are you aware of any regulations in your church about receiving communion in other churches?
7. Have you ever participated in or observed the Eucharist in a Christian tradition different from your own? If so, what were your impressions?

On Eucharist...

Robert looked sad at the breakfast table as his wife and children left to attend mass without him. Certainly it has not been an easy decision for him to make. He simply was no longer able to participate throughout the entire liturgy, knowing that at the end he would not be allowed to take communion with his family anyhow. And why? Because he belonged to the same Reformed Church in which he had worshipped since his childhood.

His thoughts went back over the years to their wedding. Coming from different church backgrounds, Marguerite and he had talked a lot about their faith before they decided to marry. As a devout Roman Catholic, she naturally wanted the celebration to take place in her home parish. He agreed and was very grateful when Fr Martin had especially invited the pastor of the neighbouring Reformed congregation to participate in the ceremony. How happy all their relatives had been to be able to praise God in the same church celebration! Both Marguerite and he had prayed that the two of them would soon be able to commune together on a regular basis especially after all the ecumenical progress made during the years at the Second Vatican Council. Pope Benedict XVI kept smiling at them daily from his picture hanging in their hallway.

At the first Holy Communion of their son Charles, however, Robert could not go to the Lord's Table. The experience of their family divided at the altar had been so painful to him that at the first Holy Communion of their daughter Monique in another parish, Robert resolutely advanced towards the altar. While he was not refused the sacrament, the priest afterwards explained his church's official teachings in a kind but firm way.

It was also made clear to the family that Marguerite and the children could not commune in Robert's congregation. Its Holy Communion could not be recognized as a full Eucharist, the priest said, since it was administered by Reformed pastors who had never been ordained by Catholic bishops.

Now to be fair, Robert had to admit to himself that none of this came as a surprise. Fr Martin had already explained it fully before they were married. Nevertheless, as the years passed, he and Marguerite found it increasingly difficult to accept the impossibility of communing together in each other's churches. They were certainly no theologians but they believed essentially the same things about the Eucharist. Indeed, hadn't the Second Vatican Council declared that the Eucharist in the Reformed Church celebrated the memorial of the death and resurrection of the Lord? Why couldn't Marguerite commune there simply by believing what the Council affirmed, even if she were also convinced of the fullness of the Catholic Eucharist? And if the Council could accept his Christian baptism within the Reformed Church as authentic, what necessarily prevented his participation at Holy Communion?

After quickly swallowing the last mouthful of coffee that had long since gone cold, Robert hurried through the hallway to drive down to his church—alone. In his haste, he did not even notice the smiling face of Pope Benedict XVI in the picture on the wall.

Adapted from the book "[Growing Together in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry—A Study Guide](#)," William H. Lazareth. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982, pg. 55-57 & 61