

“Hooking Up” with God? The Problem of Casual Communion



In her recent book *Hooking Up*, Laura Sessions Stepp describes how today’s young women are treating intimacy casually. Stepp has infuriated feminists with her conclusion that casual sexual relationships demean women and allow men to be callous. This frivolous treatment of intimacy has insinuated itself into mystical matters as well.

The trivialization of the conjugal act is paralleled on the spiritual level

in current casual attitudes towards Communion. In Protestant churches, Communion is reduced to a symbol of “fellowship.” Consequently, Protestants often wonder why they are barred from the Catholic Eucharist, and why Catholics do not partake of their Communion since “it’s just a symbol anyway.”

Just as today’s “open sexuality” creates painful situations and destroys true intimacy, “open table”

Communion – practiced by some Evangelical, mainline Protestant, and quasi-Catholic groups – begets all sorts of uncomfortable situations, and negates the spiritual unity the sacrament is intended to reflect.

Spiritual Promiscuity

As a religion reporter, I have attended many churches that have “open table” Communion. I once attended a church service in which the presider and his boyfriend were upset that I remained in my pew instead of receiving Communion; they boasted that their table was open to all. (They correctly guessed that I was Roman Catholic.)

On another occasion, I attended St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in

San Francisco, which is famous for its liturgical dancing. During Communion, the people formed a ring around the altar. I made a discreet exit, knowing that refusing Communion would be awkward during “circle time.”

“Open table” Communion promotes a kind of spiritual promiscuity, and has an element of coercion to it. Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, who condemn sexual promiscuity, insist that when it comes to Communion, “having Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior” is all that counts. One may engage in church-hopping or even outright heresy, and still receive. When Communion has no meaning beyond what each communicant gives it, there is no need for group solidarity.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. The Eucharist’s reality requires a real, rather than symbolic, response. In order to receive the Body of Christ truly as our beloved, our emotional, mental, and intellectual reservations must be resolved if we are to receive all the available graces.

A Graceless Sacrament

Casual Communion has a number of spiritual consequences.

It offers a “placebo” instead of spiritual medicine. If the bread and wine are merely symbolic, the matter itself is irrelevant. I’ve seen crackers, matzos, and freshly baked bread used



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for Communion. One Presbyterian Church, on their World Communion Day, had a variety of breads that the Sunday school children had baked. On another occasion at a Baptist church, a woman saved part of her Wheat Thin for me because I had not taken Communion. (I refused.)

When Communion is deprived of its scriptural, theological, and historical context, its transforming power in our lives is negated; it is no longer a sacrament. For example, many Protestants have an “any bread will do” attitude – in contrast to canon law, which requires unleavened wheat bread for the Eucharist, following the historical precedent of Passover.

However, if Communion is “symbolic,” valid matter is beside the point. But once again, don’t real things matter? Would a doctor prescribe his patients placebos instead of medicine? Would a customer pay with Monopoly money at the grocery? As Our Lord said (Matthew 6:9-10), “What man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?” Denying the truth of the particularity of things denies reality, and this denial is the “deal breaker” of relationships.

Its focus is the past, rather than present. Many Protestant churches refer to Communion as a “memorial,” as if it were a “celebration of life” for our dearly departed Lord. Communion is reduced to simple nostalgia, a memory that has no bearing on the present. This sentimentality reduces Communion to a transitory emotion, rather than a response of faith.

In real relationships, “love” is more than a feeling or sentiment; it demands that individuals relate in the present moment, regardless of their feelings. Our Lord did not instruct His disciples to reenact a “Passion Play,” but called for a specific liturgical recollection. Liturgy is a formal rite; the proscribed form and matter of a sacrament is a fact beyond all our

fleeting feelings. The body Christ gave us the concrete means to have a genuine, ongoing relationship with Him. It is no wonder, then, that the Church makes Sunday Mass an obligation, since real relationships require “face time.”

No Casual Encounter

The Eucharist, in all its particulars, calls for commitment. It is not a casual encounter. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1323), “At the Last Supper, on the night he

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was betrayed, our Savior instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood. This he did in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross throughout the ages until he should come again, and so to entrust to his beloved Spouse, the Church, a memorial of his death and resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity...”

The Eucharist has cosmic significance since it is truly Our Lord’s Body and Blood. In contrast to a casual Communion with Wheat Thins,

it “anticipates the wedding feast of the Lamb” (CCC 1329). It is more meaningful than our vague sentiments about our relationship with the Lord. He insists in John 6 that He is the Bread of Life, whether His audience is receptive or not. In doing so, Our Lord insists on the facts and doesn’t “water down” His reality in the Eucharist for those who could not accept it.

The Eucharist calls for the same single-hearted devotion as marriage. It is not a “hook up” to satisfy one’s emotional cravings, but a commitment for the long haul – eternity. One cannot try different types of Communion, just as a spouse cannot philander. The Eucharist is Our Lord giving Himself to us. The Church has always understood the relationship between Christ and His Church to be a nuptial one, and Communion can be “fruitful” only when it is both real and faithful. We must be able to say (Song of Songs 8:6-7), “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is as strong as death, jealousy is cruel as the grave... Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.”



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