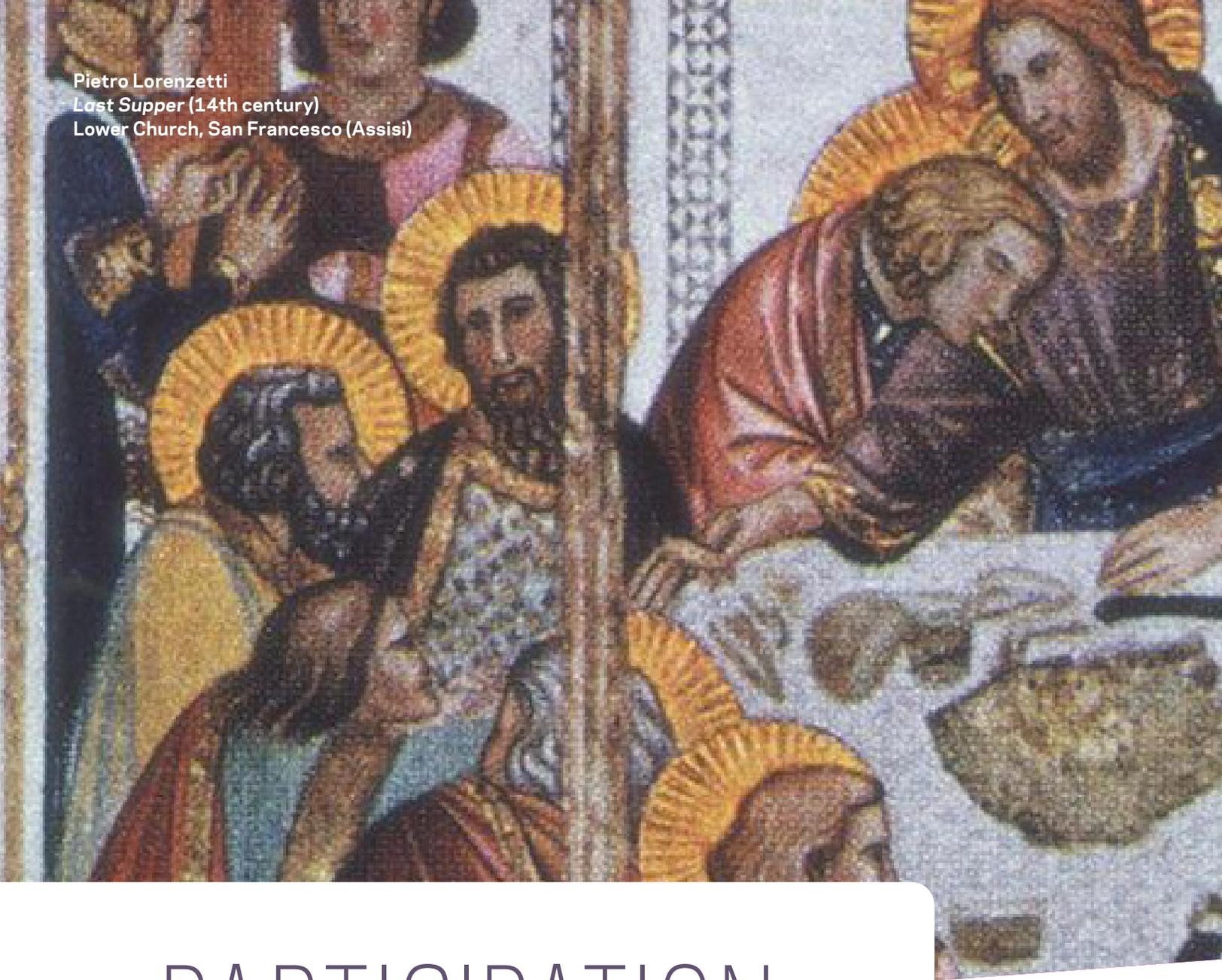


Pietro Lorenzetti
Last Supper (14th century)
Lower Church, San Francesco (Assisi)



PARTICIPATION OVER IMITATION:

COMMUNION IN CHRIST AND CATECHESIS
FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

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Today it is rare that one finds a depiction of catechesis before Vatican II that does not paint the picture of rote, mechanical learning and dry memorization of doctrine after doctrine—a catechesis that reached the head but failed to sink into the heart. No doubt there were exceptions to this rule, and some profited greatly from the likes of the *Baltimore Catechism* and its questions and answers. But according to most accounts, a remedy was needed for a view of the Catholic faith in which it seemed external to life itself. Indeed, the advent of the Council was considered an affirmation of the need for renewal in a situation—of which catechesis was only one aspect—in which the faith was known but not lived.

Still, if such was the potential flaw of preconciliar catechesis, then perhaps it can be said that we would be equally at fault today if we were to merely swing the pendulum to the other extreme, grasping for relevancy by teaching solely from students' lives and experiences while relegating the teachings of the Church to insignificance. Doctrines are, after all, "lights along the path of faith" (*CCC*, §89), ways of encountering the life-changing impact of Jesus Christ and sure helps to living in the effect of this encounter. To maintain that such teachings were somehow opposed to a catechesis based in life experience, therefore, would be to dismantle the intrinsic Christian unity of the "way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). It is an error, Blessed John Paul II reminds us, "play off orthopraxis against orthodoxy," likewise to "to campaign for the abandonment of serious and orderly study of the message of Christ in the name of a method concentrating on life experience," for "Christianity is inseparably both" (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 1979, §22). Thus, the faith is meant to penetrate to the very depths of earthly life. This is part of the Catholic sacramental understanding of reality.

But how does a catechist, in practice, manifest this unity in his or her teaching? In the face of modern doctrinal illiteracy one might be tempted to return to the days of the *Baltimore Catechism*. Yet to do so would be tantamount to putting new wine into old wineskins. Rather, as history suggests, it is necessary for catechists to find a way to reconnect the truths of the faith with their living center. The reconciliation of faith and life was an overarching goal of the Second Vatican Council, and it remains the goal of catechesis in the New Evangelization.

I would like to suggest that one way in which to bridge this gap is to place a renewed emphasis on the biblical notion of participation in Christ. It is only *in Him* that catechesis finds its rightful foundation

and its goal. It is participation in Christ, and not merely imitation of Him, that provides a substantial bond between faith and human life. In the following I aim to provide a description of this notion of participation as given in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the Scriptures. I will then show how participation plays a fundamental role in the Church conceived in itself and in its relation to the world. Then I will end with how the recovery of this notion can influence catechesis in two practical situations.

Partakers of the Divine Nature

In a section aptly titled "Why Did the Word Become Flesh?" paragraphs 457-460 of the *Catechism* explain the four reasons for the Incarnation. The first two reasons are perhaps more widely known and could most likely be deduced by anyone familiar with Christianity, even if only by cultural contact: Christ came to save us from our sins (§457) and to reveal the depth of God's love (§458). But it is the last two which garner our attention here.

First, the *Catechism* notes that the Word became flesh "to be our model of holiness" (§459). Undoubtedly, this is an important aspect of the Incarnation, for Jesus Christ is not only fully God but is also fully man. We are right to look to Him as the model of how to be human. Imitation of Christ, to use the title of Thomas á Kempis' famous devotional, would then be a great help to living an upright life.

However, imitation alone, apart from any notion of participation in Christ, would make Christianity a mere moral code, one open to the charge of being a works-based religion. That is to say it would simply be the product of human effort. Imitating a righteous figure

is, by nature, an act which undoubtedly takes great struggle and determination, yet one which requires no divine assistance.

As such, the *Catechism* offers the final reason for the Incarnation by way of a provocative phrase: the Word united Himself to human flesh that we might become “partakers of the divine nature” (§460, cf. 2 Pet 1:4). This idea of partaking in God’s nature is drawn from the Second Letter of Peter, though it is found elsewhere in Scripture as well. For instance, Paul speaks in the letter to the Romans of the Holy Spirit uniting us to Jesus’ own sonship—thus we are, to use the patristic phrase, sons and daughters in the Son (cf. Rom 8:9-17). Galatians 4:6-7 echoes this notion, and Hebrews 3:14 likewise refers to our ability to share in Christ. One can see direct links between this partaking and the Church’s understanding of baptism, for in baptism, Paul writes, Christians enter into Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom 6:3-11). Indeed, all who are baptized participate in Christ to the point that they are considered parts of His body (1 Cor 12:13).

The biblical witness testifies to the fact that participation is intrinsic to the very nature of being a Christian. To be a disciple of Christ, the Scriptures and the *Catechism* remind us, is not merely to imitate Him, but to enter into communion with Him.

I believe that this contrast between imitation and participation bears great importance for any discussion of the unity of faith and life, so necessary for the catechetical mission of the New Evangelization. For a Gospel of imitation makes Christ and the Catholic faith *extrinsic* to the way humans are to live. Jesus is the model, yes, but the moment the content of His example is learned, He can be discarded. Life continues apart from Him, the lesson learned, and Jesus becomes one of the great teachers of humanity, no doubt one of many such exemplars. But a Gospel of participation

is one in which Jesus Christ is *intrinsic* to the nature of being Christian. One can only be united to God by being united to the One who unites humanity with God in His very Person. By participation in Christ, even human life itself becomes one that is lived in the power of God: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

Participation in Christ: Importance for the Church and the World

With the notion of participation now identified, I would like to shift focus to the overall role it plays both in the Church’s constitution and in the Church’s relationship to the world. This is especially important in this Year of Faith proclaimed by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI—for, as the former Pope noted, there is an intrinsic connection between the present moment of New Evangelization and Vatican II, the Council which sought to re-present the faith for Catholics and for the world. Thus, any integral renewal of catechesis during this New Springtime must address both aspects of the Council’s vision.

Regarding the nature of the Church itself—there are no doubt many ways in which this idea of participation in Christ is manifested in the Church’s constitution, but I would like to focus specifically on the way this participation is effected through the liturgy. In particular, I have in mind what it means to be initiated into Christ through the Holy Eucharist.

Around the turn of the fifth century, St. Augustine preached to some of the newly baptized of his flock on the meaning of the journey they had undertaken to become Christians. It was a journey that began

with their initial evangelization, then moved into the catechumenate and Lent, and finally culminated in the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil. We are, of course, familiar with these steps in our own day by way of the renewal of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), but I believe that returning to one of the original sources of the catechumenate can provide fresh understanding.

Augustine, playing upon the symbolic imagery of the Eucharist, likens the journey of his hearers to the creation of a loaf of bread: their evangelization was when they, as wheat, were threshed and separated from the chaff; the catechumenate was when they were stored and preserved in the granary; throughout Lent they were ground and sifted by fasts and exorcisms; in baptism they were moistened and kneaded into dough; and in confirmation they were baked by the fire of the Holy Spirit (*Sermo* 229.1; cf. *Sermo* 227).

The setting for this evocative explanation was the liturgy itself—the bishop’s homily stirred his listeners, for they knew the significance of the imagery of which he spoke. They most likely recalled their previous lives—regretting past faults—and how they were set apart from their old ways. They remembered the period of intense learning in the catechumenate. They shuddered at the difficult fasts and exorcisms of Lent they had undergone. Their eager anticipation of the sacraments of initiation was brought to mind. And, in the midst of this homily, how could they not be reminded of their first taste of the Bread of Life? Indeed, this bread would soon become present once more, offered on the altar near where Augustine was now speaking.

All of these things were evoked by the bishop’s words, and he marvelously weaved them together with the actions of the liturgy itself. This was a keen insight indeed. For it is the very “logic” of the liturgy to consider the community in worship, gathered under the

form of bread. We bring loaves, along with wine—both representing our lives—to the altar in the presentation of the gifts. Such gifts speak of unity: a loaf made from many grains, wine pressed from many grapes. Then, through the ministry of the priest, we offer ourselves in the bread and the wine to the Father, who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, transforms them into the Body and Blood of Christ. The symbolism is clear: not only do the bread and wine become Christ, but we—offered in these gifts—are to become Christ as well. Thus Augustine declared to his newly baptized: “Be what you see. Receive what you are!” (*Sermo* 272).

The Eucharist, therefore, is not simply the prize for being initiated into the Church. No, it effects this very initiation. It enables one to participate in Jesus Christ: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Cor 10:16-17).

If this participation experienced in the Mass lies at the heart of the Christian life, it likewise must play a vital role in how the Church relates its faith to the world. A way of approaching this topic, especially in light of the New Evangelization, is to ask: Does the faith add anything to human life? For if it does not, why would anyone bother with becoming a Christian?

In his first encyclical, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI recalled the reform of Julian the Apostate, the Roman emperor who, being impressed by the charity of Christians, attempted to reestablish the ancient Roman religion with a practice of charity on par with that of the “Galileans” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 2005, §24). The emperor saw, as many in history have before, that the love of Christians made them stand out from the rest of society. Indeed, Christians are supposed to be known by love (cf. Jn 13:35).

This is not to deny that non-Christians, whether religious or non-religious, can be quite virtuous. Many of us undoubtedly know non-Christian friends who dwarf our own human virtues, and we likewise recognize when we fall short of love ourselves. But participation in Christ is, as the best examples of our tradition show, a healing balm to our weaknesses and an elevation of our strengths. Participation in Christ allowed the son of an Italian merchant to overcome his impetuosity and the illicit selling of his father's property to become a man who lived in poverty in order to give everything to the poor. Participation in Christ allowed a selfless Polish priest to sacrifice his own life for a Jewish man in the midst of the horrors of Auschwitz. As Francis of Assisi, Maximilian Kolbe, and many others show, a life in Christ is not a hindrance to all that is good in the world, but it is the affirmation and elevation of it. Yes, it is quite possible for one who does not know Christ to do great things; yet, in Christ, that person can overcome faults and, further, surpass his or her previous limitations. Ultimately, such participation even allows one's actions to be joined to the redeeming work of Jesus Christ Himself—it allows one to, literally, do the work of God (cf. Jn 14:12).

The examples of the saints likewise show us that, though the world has much to offer—and Catholics are no strangers to worldly pleasures—its goodness always points to what is infinitely more. The Christian philosopher and famed mathematician Blaise Pascal once penned that human beings harbor “an infinite abyss that can only be filled by an infinite and unchangeable object” (*Pensées*, 425). By experience Pascal knew what every person feels at certain moments: that we have an insatiable drive for happiness; that no finite thing can fulfill a seemingly infinite desire. Indeed, the enjoyment of good and beautiful things always causes the desire for more goodness and beauty. Christians, therefore, can offer the world the fulfillment of that longing. And, it is

important to note, we do so not from the position of didactic do-gooders who stand in judgment of the rest of the world. Rather, as a wise deacon (and founder of a ministry to male prostitutes) in Chicago once told me, we do so as “beggars who want to let other beggars know where we found the bread.”



Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn
Head of Christ (ca. 1648-50)
 Gemäldegalerie (Berlin)

Participation in Christ: Importance for Catechesis

Participation in Christ, then, has great importance for the Church and for the world. But, practically speaking, what are some of the ways in which this notion of participation can help in our catechetical endeavors? There are two that immediately come to mind, and they are situations that parallel the dual concern for the Church in itself and in its relation to the world.

First—and here I am thinking of both the priest/ deacon who preaches a homily and the catechist who is charged with giving a talk on any aspect of the Church’s teaching—teachers of the faith must be sure that their teachings exemplify the importance of participation in Christ rather than manifest, whether consciously or not, a theology of imitation. In homilies, the priest or deacon must transcend the well-intentioned method of recounting the Gospel reading, then utilizing what Jesus did in order to make the case that Christians should do likewise. This can unintentionally present the Christian life as mere moralism, a life of imitation—because Christ was forgiving in the Gospel passage, we too must be forgiving. Such a method is beneficial but incomplete. Instead, as St. Paul epitomizes, the preacher must place Christ at the very center of his preaching (cf. 1 Cor 2:1-2). Christ must be the beginning, the means, and the goal of the Christian life. To approach preaching in this manner is only to follow the way of the Master Himself, for the Scriptures tell us that Jesus always referred back to Himself in His teaching (cf. Lk 4:20-21 as one example among many). Thus, the person of Jesus and His teaching are inseparable—to accept His teaching is therefore to give oneself over to Him, to enter into His life, to participate in Him.

Catechists, too, must root their teachings in the very person of Jesus. It is perhaps the common failure of the past to highlight a doctrine of the Church, to even cover it thoroughly, and yet to fail to connect that doctrine to life in Christ. One can speak of the sacrament of confession, painstakingly going through its various elements, but if it is not placed within the framework of Christ’s redemption and merciful love, the lesson is like a resounding gong. It is condemned to become the facts of trivia, like the names and dates of a history book that are often forgotten in a short while. In this light I often use the analogy of someone telling me about my wife to explain the necessity of

reconnecting doctrine to the person of Christ. If I had never met my wife, the simple facts about her—her eyes, the color of her hair—could be spoken to me such that they entered my mind but did nothing to move my heart. But, in knowing her and experiencing the beauty of her person, the fact that her eyes are green or her hair is brown has the power to captivate me. Every truth about her is another reason to love her more. In a similar way, then, every truth about Christ must be more than a passing fact—it must become another reason to love Him more. What we as catechists teach is “not a body of abstract truths. It is the communication of the living mystery of God” (*Catechesi Tradendae*, §7).

Second, and turning to the relationship of the Church with the world—it has been particularly important and a strength of catechesis in the United States to emphasize social justice as an aspect of our teaching. This is in part for the good of the students (for there is a part of learning which must come from doing, which is to say, from the *living out* of teaching); but further, it is clearly for the good of others, for service to the world. Nevertheless, the message we give to our students and the world is incomplete if it remains solely on the level of human works. We must teach those students that our good works are efficacious when born from faith, from participation in Christ. In acts of service we do not simply try to act like Jesus but, as St. Teresa of Ávila says, we *are* His hands and feet: “Christ has no body but yours; no hands, no feet on earth but yours” (*Cristo No Tiene Otro Cuerpo...*).

Thus, the important work done in Christian social justice programs must be integrated into the Christological center from which they derive their power. Then social justice will truly be a source of formation in catechesis. Furthermore, the Church's witness given to the world will be transformed: only experience can show that works which stem from faith point to Christ in a way which good works alone cannot (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, §21). By serving in communion with Him, then, not only will Christ be the source of our work, but He will be the end of it—for the one who works in the vineyard of the world must always be ready for the time when Christ must be spoken not only in action but in word. “News proclaimed by witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, §22).

To conclude, I think a word on the spiritual life of the catechist can help provide another way of expressing all I have said above. The catechist, we know, must be imbued with the Spirit of God and must know the all-surpassing love of Jesus Christ in a deeply personal way. Simply put, in doing the work of God, we cannot give what we have not received ourselves. The catechist, then, most likely knows from experience that participation in Christ is of the utmost necessity for effectively practicing the ministry of the Word. For what catechist has not experienced in the depth of his soul the desire to speak words greater than his own? Or what herald of the Good News has not felt that her prayer must be amplified, that she longs for a way to thank, praise, and ask that transcends her own abilities (cf. Rom 8:26)? These experiences, lying at the core of who we are as persons affected by the love of Christ through His Church, all speak the same truth of the power of “partaking of the divine nature.” For in this participation, we are able to accomplish what we could not do when left to our own devices. By faith, St. John of the Cross happily speaks to our hearts, “the soul . . . the more it is united to God, gives back to God, as it were, God himself” (*Llama de Amor Viva*, III.90).

