

THE LORD'S SUPPER AND THE EXTERNAL DEBT

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Some years ago I had a discussion with a senior American missionary about the social implications of Holy Communion, Eucharist or Lord's Supper, whichever name you prefer. The man has long ago retired, but he was well known and highly respected throughout Northern Nigeria in his day. Some of us will know him if I were to mention his name. At any rate, during a discussion we had, he thought it both somewhat humorous and shocking to talk about the social implications of this sacrament. Why, he argued, this is a holy sacrament, a sacred religious institution that we should not defile by mixing it up with social and political affairs. We should keep it sacred, holy, undefiled, purely spiritual and religious.

Till this day I have high respect for the man's service, but I disagree with him very strongly on this particular issue. Yes, the Lord's Supper is sacred, it is holy and we need to keep it undefiled. However, to talk of its social implications is not to defile it but to deepen it, to broaden it.

This is a celebration of the Lord's body and blood. Of Him whom we all recognize was deeply concerned for those who are suffering. Of Him who said He came to free us from oppression. Of Him, whose mother said that He had come to disperse the oppressors and to lift up those of low status.

This means that celebrating His memory and gathering spiritual strength from it means we also gather strength to carry on His ministry with the same concerns that He had. It will not do to celebrate His memory and then to turn around by reducing His concerns for ministry to the narrowly spiritual or ecclesiastical. That would not be honoring Him.

There is another aspect to this celebration. Participating in the Eucharist is an expression of unity, an expression of the Body, His Body, an expression of solidarity with all members of that body, with all those who claim Him as their Lord and Saviour. And that Body is not restricted to one locality, one country or one continent. It encompasses the world Church of Christ, the Church universal, the Church of all ages. When we celebrate this holy sacrament, we are expressing our unity with all our brothers and

sisters in every place and every age. We are expressing our solidarity with them, a solidarity not created by us, but by Him whose sacrament we are celebrating.

Within that one body there is solidarity. When you weep, we all weep together, right across the globe and across the ages. When you laugh, we all rejoice together. In that context, it is impossible that some members should be oppressing others. It is simply unthinkable. It cannot be, for that would be the end of our solidarity and unity. Then some members would laugh because of the tears of other members.

In fact, that anomaly, that unthinkable is actually taking place today. It is happening among us here in Nigeria. It is happening on a world-wide basis, where some members profit from our tears. It is making a mockery of the unity of the Body and it is making a mockery of the sacrament itself.

So, brothers and sisters, as we close this conference with this celebration, let us do so in the Spirit of the Lord, taking home His concerns for the poor and weak and making them our own. Taking home our concern that there are unthinkable contradictions in this body on a world-wide basis and that we are going to try to undo those contradictions. We are going to contact our sister churches in other countries and on other continents and make them aware of these unthinkable works that many of their members are doing without realizing it.

This celebration then is fitting at the end of a conference on the external debt. It should increase our resolve to go home and work.

And with these words I invite Rev. Luther Cishak, Vice President of the Christian Council of Nigeria and outgoing President of The Church of Christ in Nigeria, to guide us through this holy sacrament.