

# Spirituality of Communion and Disability

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Although the theological concept of *koinonia*/communion is an ancient one in the Christian tradition, it is not well known.<sup>1</sup> There has been a revival of this theology in the western Christian tradition this century and in particular after the Second Vatican Council. The revival is not confined to Roman Catholic theology and renewed interest can be found in Protestant and Orthodox traditions. In this article I will attempt to do three things. Firstly to outline the spirituality and theology of *koinonia* and explore ways in which this theology can give us a method of thinking and talking about disability. Secondly I will examine the relationship between *koinonia* and inclusion, suggesting that inclusion is the heart of the self definition of Church and not a special project for communities. Thirdly I will briefly examine the role of the Eucharistic assembly as the realisation of inclusion and *koinonia*. I will attempt to conclude by drawing out some of the consequences and challenges of the theology of *koinonia* for disability.

## Koinonia

*Koinonia* is a biblical word and is variously translated as solidarity, participation and communion. At its most fundamental level it refers to the *koinonia* of the Trinity, which is a communion of love. God invites us into *koinonia* with the life of the Trinity through Baptism. As we shall see below being baptised into Christ is not an individualistic moment but one of being transformed into a deeper level of communion and being. Baptism literally makes us part of the Body of Christ; we enter into the life of the Trinity through this relationship. Archbishop John Bathersby writes; “The Trinity is not merely a model for communion but because of the incarnation is the very communion itself in which we live.”<sup>2</sup> The spirituality of *koinonia* is a relational spirituality that takes us to the heart of the mystery of God revealed as a *koinonia* of persons and our own personhood which is also discovered in relationship with others. We are born into and sustained by a multitude of

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article I will revert to the Greek form of the word, *koinonia*, rather than the English, communion, because communion is used as a synonym for Eucharist in many Churches. Eucharist is a dimension of *koinonia* but this usage does not exhaust the full meaning of the term.

<sup>2</sup> John Bathersby, Archbishop of Brisbane; *Spirituality of Communion and the Body of Christ*. Pastoral Statement 2005.p1

interdependent relations. A central tenant of the Christian tradition is that salvation is the story of a community not primarily of individuals. Privatised and individualistic representations of Christianity and a retreat to a private sphere of existence disconnected from the demands of life in the world are false and ultimately destructive. John-Paul II challenges the representation of Christianity as being concerned with private salvation when he writes, “we must reject the temptation to offer a privatised and individualistic spirituality which ill accords with the demands of charity, to say nothing of the implications of the Incarnation.”<sup>3</sup>

On the road to Damascus Paul of Tarsus had a most unusual insight into the nature of the God’s work among us. The voice that he heard on the road said to him; “Saul, why do you persecute me?” He came to recognise that voice as the voice of Jesus. Paul tells us that he never met Jesus in his own life time and yet this experience was to become the foundation for his conversion and a profound understanding of the mystery of God. Paul had been persecuting the followers of Christ and yet Jesus identifies these people so completely with himself that those who are baptised into Christ are literally his body. As Paul writes to the Church of Rome; “so we who are many are one body in Christ and individually we are parts of one another.” (Rom 12:5)<sup>4</sup>

*Koinonia* in Christ has a horizontal dimension, connecting us with others who are Baptised and rippling out through other, sometimes less obvious connections. It is through this *koinonia* in Christ that we really discover our true nature, for Christ reveals not only God to us but humanity as well. The life of the Trinity is such that “each [person] nourishes and sustains the being of the other”<sup>5</sup> and so it must be for the life of the Baptised who have also embarked upon such a life. John-Paul II described this horizontal dimension of *koinonia* as, “an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within a profound unity of the mystical body [of Christ] and therefore

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<sup>3</sup> John-Paul II; *Novo Millennio Inuente*, St Paul Publications, Strathfield, 2001, #52

<sup>4</sup> All scripture quotation is taken from *New Revised Standard Version (Catholic Edition)* Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Bathersby; *Spirituality of communion*; p1

those who are part of me.”<sup>6</sup> This spirituality of *koinonia* means that we know how to make room for our brothers and sisters and to bear each others burdens.<sup>7</sup>

The Scriptures are full of images of *koinonia*. The Church is called the People of God, the Body of Christ (Ephesians 5:22), a priestly people (1 Peter 2:5, Rev 5:10) a people made one in the Spirit and a living Temple (1 Peter 2:5). Each image is of a corporate identity and communitarian existence and not individualism and independence.<sup>8</sup> Through our *koinonia* with one another in Christ we discover a whole new way of being. Our full humanity is discovered in being parts of one another not in isolation and independence and individualism. It is in *koinonia* that we discover who we really are and begin to live as God intended us to live. *Koinonia* is a deeper reality than simply working together or collaborating together or even trying to form communities. *Koinonia* is about discovering the real purpose of our being and recognising at the fundamental level of our being that we are each parts of one another. Already you may begin to sense the importance of this concept for the disability sector as we shall see it unfold below. Because *koinonia* operates at the level of being it breaks down barriers of loneliness and gives people a sense of freedom. The images, which link us to the corporate nature of existence, also deepen our sense of *koinonia* in the body and our capacity to accept differences.<sup>9</sup>

In one of the most profound passages about *koinonia* in the letters of Paul he writes; “There is no longer Jew, nor Greek, slave nor free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28) To this we could add able and disabled. It is not that these differences disappear; but that in Christ we have a new relationship with one another. In Christ we are all parts of one another. From the perspective of *koinonia* we are not really talking about inclusion of people with disability but a transformation of the consciousness of the community, a Eucharistic moment when we can see ourselves as a whole person. Inclusion can imply that people with disability do not already have a place and are not already a part of the Church, which is Christ’s body. (Col 1:18) When we think in terms of *koinonia* if we

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<sup>6</sup> John-Paul II; *Novo Millennio Inuente*, , #43

<sup>7</sup> John-Paul II; *Novo Millennio*, #43

<sup>8</sup> It is not the place in this essay to give a detailed account of why each of these images is an image of *koinonia*. This question is one of Biblical scholarship.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Vanier in Kathryn Spink; *Jean Vanier and L’Arche: a communion of love*. Darton, Longman and Todd. London 1990.

exclude others then we have not really discerned nor received the body of Christ. As Paul warns us when we assemble we must be careful to discern the Body of Christ (1 Cor 11:29) otherwise we risk dishonouring that in which we come to participate.

## **Koinonia and inclusion**

“In Jesus Christ, God heals divisions, reconciles the alienated, gives hope those who have none, offers forgiveness to the sinner, and includes the outcast. In the end God’s love and mercy are altogether inclusive...”<sup>10</sup> Christ is the one in whom “all things hold together” and the one “through whom God reconciles the world to Himself.” (Col 1: 17, 20) We should not overlook or under estimate the significance of what it means to be baptised into Christ, to put on Christ. We, as a community, are immersed into the very life of God which is a life of *koinonia*. “When we live for God, in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we cannot help but give hope to others and we cannot help but be inclusive.”<sup>11</sup> Block believes that the Church, as the Body of Christ is the quintessential inclusive community.<sup>12</sup> It is inclusive because all who are baptised “are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor 12:27) So intimate is the relationship between the members of the Body of Christ that; “If one suffers all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured all rejoice together with it.” (1 Cor 12:26)

The spirituality and theology of *koinonia* enables us to discover the person with disability as another self. Each person bears the image of God and participates in the life of the Trinity and by extension with my life through baptism. *Koinonia* calls us toward a new attentiveness that enables us to look beyond images of health, well-being and success, presented in our society as the model of strength and beauty. When we enter more deeply into the truth of God and the reality of our own being as Church we discover that disability is not something to be avoided or shunned. “On the contrary the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater dignity.” (1 Cor 12:22) If the community of the baptised does not include those with

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<sup>10</sup> Catherine La Cugna; *God For Us: the Trinity and Christian Life*. Harper Collins. 1991 p388

<sup>11</sup> Jennie Weiss Block; *Copious Hosting: a theology of access for people with disabilities*. Continuum. New York. 2002. p 132

<sup>12</sup> Block; *Copious Hosting*, p132

disabilities the whole body is diminished as result. Inclusion is not just “a nice thing to do” or a “project” for the parish to take on it is about realising our true nature as the one Body of Christ.

The incarnation seen within the theology of *koinonia* is not a one off historical process whereby the Word took flesh and became man (John 1:14). Incarnation is both an event and an encounter with the divine in the here and now of today, a reality which includes and embraces women and men today. It is an event to the extent that the Word had historical existence in the life of the Son in Palestine at a given time in history. It is an encounter in that this same Word assumes life in the concrete life of a community of the baptised.

“For by his incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each person. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will and with a human heart he loved. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin.”<sup>13</sup>

## **Koinonia, Eucharist and Disability**

Gathering for Sunday Eucharist is the central expression of *koinonia* in the life of the Church. It is here that the community most visibly expresses what it has become and receives what it has become: the Body of Christ. What is done in our public worship realises what we are to be in our life relationships. If we believe that in baptism we have become the body of Christ then those who assemble on Sunday constitute this body in this particular place. It is here that every one of the Baptised has a place to belong and we most clearly see who we are. Each one receives the Body of Christ and participates in the great Eucharistic miracle of a community transformed into one people, one body in Christ. Saint Augustine exhorts his congregation to look deeply into what they accept into their hand at communion time, “it is your own mystery that you receive.” It is a worthwhile meditation to arrive early and sit at the back of the Church on a Sunday and watch as the Church slowly fills. As each new person takes his or her seat, or positions a wheelchair say to yourself “the Body of Christ”, and really look closely at him or her. Notice the shapes, colours, ages and other

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<sup>13</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* #22 in Austin Flannery (Gen Ed); *Vatican II: the Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*. Veritas Publications, Dublin 1981

characteristics of the Body of Christ as it assembles in the Church. The differences are not lost or subsumed into some amorphous blob of humanity, any more than the unity obscures the identities of each person of the Trinity in the *koinonia* that is God. The way into the life of the Trinity is through the incarnation of Christ and his Risen body which is the Church. Through the humanity of Jesus we find a way into the divinity and new identity with one another.

In one of his homilies to the newly Baptised Augustine of Hippo asks, “What is it you say amen to when you receive Eucharist and the ministers says, the Body of Christ?” He says, in response to his own rhetorical question, there are three things: first you say amen to the minister of communion who recognises in you the Body of Christ, secondly you say amen to the Body of Christ which you receive in the Eucharist and finally you say amen to the Body of Christ into which we are all being transformed. The great Eucharistic miracle is this transformation of a group of individuals into a single people, a corporate existence as the Body of Christ in the world. This is not an idealised body, but real flesh and blood. It is the very people gathered before your eyes. To the extent that people with disabilities are absent from the celebration the community assembled experiences a diminished worship experience. If we only see the Body of Christ assembled as those without obvious disability or known disabilities then we may come to believe that this is what the body looks like when it is assembled.

Liturgy should form us in our capacity to be hospitable, inclusive and compassionate. When congregations are faithful and honest enough to name their discomfort and their delight in the participation of people with disability, they take the first steps toward maturity. Discomfort is not to be dismissed because the very struggle with it, for persons who have no experience of disability, is itself a window opening to new dimensions of the grace of God.<sup>14</sup> The struggle reveals the weakness within those who would claim the title strong and those who would not think of their own limits and ultimate frailty. To struggle with prejudice and fear means also to acknowledge our own vulnerability. It is in fact a way into our common humanity. When we begin the process of acknowledging people with disability in our midst as a worshipping

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<sup>14</sup> Don Saliers; *Toward a Spirituality of Inclusiveness*; p29 in Eisland and Saliers (eds) *Human Disability and the Service of God*. Abingdon Press. Nashville. 1998

community we lose some of our capacity to objectify those who have a disability. If we enter more fully into the mystery of *koinonia* then we see those with disability as a part of me. We move from sympathy and misguided paternalism toward compassion. The basis for compassion is that the other is a part of me. *Gaudium et Spes* puts it this way; the joys and hopes, the fears and anxieties of men and women of our times are the joys and hopes, fears and anxieties of the followers of Christ, in fact nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.<sup>15</sup> Loving the other and oneself for the sake of God is a profound capacity that requires that we enter deeply into our common humanity.

## Conclusion

A deepening sense of being Church is a consequence of entering on the path of inclusion. When we set out to become a consciously inclusive community, along the way we discover we are having a lesson in what it means to be Church, to be the Body of Christ. As we enter more deeply into inclusion we are being transformed into what it is that we have become at Baptism and what we are and receive at Eucharist. Entering more deeply into a spirituality of *koinonia* we move from conscious inclusion to recognition that we are parts of one another. In a sense we are at an intermediate step when we first have to think about how we will include people with disabilities. We are unconsciously assuming that we have to do the including, as if people with disability did not always belong in the body of Christ. This step is necessary because we have not reached a state of perfection where we fully realise our new identity as the Body of Christ. Most of us objectify the Church, as something other than ourselves. We often talk about what the Church believes, says or does as if at the same time we are not talking about ourselves. But that is what Church is, ourselves. When we objectify Church in this way, it is little wonder that we fail to see those with disability “as part of me”. The path of inclusion is at the same time a path into a deeper appreciation of what it means to be Church a discovery of our identity in Christ; a *koinonia* in the life of the Trinity and with each other.

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<sup>15</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* #1

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### Abstract

Although the theological concept of *koinonia*/communion is an ancient one in the Christian tradition, it is not well known. There has been a revival of this theology in the western Christian tradition this century and in particular after the Second Vatican Council. The author considers how this theology gives us a way of understanding inclusion not as a project to be under taken by parishes but as a step along the way to discovering our true identity as Church, as the Body of Christ.