

Eucharistic Unity in a New Viewpoint: Perspectives of Human Sciences in the Ecumenical Dialogue

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Abstract

The Eucharist is the central mystery of Christian faith and worship, and therefore one of the cornerstones of ecumenical rapprochement. The documents and theological agreements of the ecumenical dialogue that unfolded in the 20th century clearly show that the rapprochement between the churches took place primarily in a dogmatic – and partly liturgical – approach. Although these efforts are indispensable, they result in slow progress on their own, as the emphasis is often placed on seeking theoretical consensus, while the lived, experiential, and communal dimensions of the Eucharist are pushed into the background.

The basic premise of this study is that Eucharistic ecumenism can become more fruitful if, in addition to dogmatic discourse, it consciously incorporates the findings of contemporary human sciences, especially anthropology, psychology, sociology, and pastoral psychology. These disciplines point out that shared rituals shape identity, have healing and community-building powers, and are capable of conveying an existential experience that goes beyond mere intellectual understanding.

Within this framework, the study examines several ecumenically relevant dimensions of the Eucharist: the Eucharist as a rite and a place of encounter; the symbolic interpretation of the Eucharist; the Eucharist as thanksgiving; the relationship between the Eucharist and spiritual health; and the eco-theological perspectives of the Eucharistic spirit. These themes highlight that the Eucharist is not an isolated teaching or a dogmatic question in itself, but a complex liturgical process in which the event of salvation becomes experiential in the celebration of the community.

The study concludes that the Eucharistic approach cannot be based solely on rational-intellectual considerations, but must address the whole person: emotions, openness to community, physicality, and the dimensions of symbolic experience. An interdisciplinary approach allows the Eucharist to be not merely a subject of debate, but a shared spiritual reality that can promote the path towards Christian unity.

Keywords

Eucharist, ecumenical dialogue, ritual, symbol, pastoral psychology, spiritual health, thanksgiving, eco-theology

Introduction

The Eucharist is the central event of Christian worship: the commemoration of Christ's self-sacrifice, which is a place of encounter with God, a form of community, and individual spirituality at the same time. It began its history as a sign of unity, but theological and liturgical differences over the centuries have led to division, so that the Lord's table remains one of the most sensitive points of ecumenical dialogue today.¹ The 20th century, the 'century of the Eucharist', rediscovered the spiritual and community-building power of the sacrament, but the ecumenical reconciliation is slow because it has been reduced to dogmatic and ecclesiastical disputes.

In the early Church, the Eucharist was a living, communal experience, not a mature theological system: it was a celebration of the history of salvation, a symbol of the unity of the faithful.² The Eastern and Western paths of the Middle Ages developed different emphases, and then the new interpretations of the Reformation further deepened the separation. The emphasis gradually shifted to the words of the rite and theological definitions, while the communal and experiential dimensions were pushed into the background. As a result, the interpretation of the Eucharist increasingly focused on the validity of the words of institution and the independent theological definition of the sacraments, while the entire liturgical process and the celebratory and salvific experience of the community called together by Christ gradually receded into the background.³

My assumption is that ecumenical discourse can become more fruitful if it does not merely strive for dogmatic consensus, but also involves the findings of contemporary human sciences in exploring the experiential and communal dimensions of the Eucharist. Psychology points to the identity-strengthening and healing power of shared rituals; according to the sociology of religion, the Eucharist is capable of building bridges between communities with different backgrounds; and cultural anthropology shows that the sharing of food is a universal human experience that opens up space for transcendence.⁴

The aim of my paper is to explore how these scientific perspectives can contribute to ecumenical reconciliation in Eucharistic teachings. The aspects of ritual, symbolism, spiritual health, thanksgiving, and eco-theology offer new opportunities for renewing dialogue. Thus, the Eucharist remains not only a subject of theological debate, but can also become a shared spiritual experience capable of building bridges between different Christian traditions.⁵

Eucharist and Ritual

In religious studies, ritual (Latin: *ritus*, Greek: τελετή) refers to a recurring, formalised sequence of actions that expresses and maintains a connection with the sacred. Classical theories of ritual approach this reality with different emphases: according to Gerardus van der Leeuw, ritual is the basic form of encounter with the sacred;⁶ Mircea Eliade sees ritual as an opportunity to step out of profane time and return to the primordial time of creation;⁷ Victor Turner interprets ritual as a liminal space where the identity of the individual and the

¹ Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 54–60.

² Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 30–38.

³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 192–198.

⁴ David M. Wulff, *Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Views* (New York: Wiley, 1997), 489–495.

⁵ John A. Radano, *Celebrating a Century of Ecumenism: Exploring the Achievements of International Dialogue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 303–309.

⁶ Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1933), 381–412.

⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1957), 68–95.

community is renewed and a new community (*communitas*) is born.⁸ Modern ritual theory emphasises the dimensions of performativity and identity formation: ritual not only expresses but also shapes.⁹

In the early Church, the ritual of the Eucharist was rooted in the form of a communal thanksgiving meal (*Didakhé*). Patristic theology interpreted this mystagogically: through the *mysterion*, the believer truly participates in divine life.¹⁰ During the Middle Ages, the emphasis shifted to sacramental realism and dogmatic precision, while the Second Vatican Council rediscovered the principle of *actuosa participatio*, or active participation, as the essence of liturgy.¹¹ Catholic theology continues to emphasise the objective efficacy of the rite (*ex opere operato*), while Orthodox theology, following John D. Zizioulas, sees the Eucharist as the 'ontological basis' of the Church, which leads the believer on the path to theosis (deification).¹² In the Protestant tradition, Martin Luther accepted rituals as long as they did not obscure the gospel; Ulrich Zwingli, on the other hand, viewed the Lord's Supper as a symbolic act of remembrance. Jürgen Moltmann places the Eucharist in an eschatological perspective: according to him, the rite is 'a foretaste of the future community',¹³ while Walter Brueggemann interprets the liturgy as 'a space for the re-creation of communal justice'.¹⁴

In ecumenical dialogue, the rite is a particularly promising meeting point. Even if the dogmatic interpretation of the Eucharist differs from denomination to denomination, the liturgy itself, as a communal experience, is capable of building bridges. Robert F. Taft points out that despite the differences between Eastern and Western liturgical approaches, 'the rite as a place of encounter' can create dialogue.¹⁵ Alexander Schmemmann describes the Eucharist as 'the liturgy of the sanctification of the world': a sacred act in which created reality is offered up to God again and the church joins in cosmic thanksgiving.¹⁶ According to Roch A. Kereszty, the Eucharistic rite is a key space for shaping communal identity.¹⁷

Pastoral psychology also sheds new light on the significance of ritual. According to Gábor Hézser, liturgical repetition helps restore inner order and identity in crisis situations;¹⁸ James E. Dittes attributes a 'psychological order-creating' function to ritual;¹⁹ Mary Douglas emphasises the symbolic connection between the body and community structure;²⁰ while Jonathan Z. Smith points to the space-making and sanctifying function of ritual.²¹ Peter Roppelt calls the Eucharist 'a ritual space for spiritual gratitude and transformation of creation'.²²

Together, these approaches suggest that ritual is not merely a vehicle for theological teaching, but a shared spiritual and psychological experience capable of calling Christians to a

⁸ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 94–130.

⁹ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 69–103.

¹⁰ Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), 188–203.

¹¹ Odo Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1962), 33–51.

¹² John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 142–165.

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 243–260.

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 101–118.

¹⁵ Robert F. Taft, *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding* (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1992), 201–226.

¹⁶ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 27–45.

¹⁷ Roch A. Kereszty, *Wedding Feast of the Lamb: Eucharistic Theology from a Historical, Biblical, and Systematic Perspective* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 155–177.

¹⁸ Gábor Hézser, *A rítusok pszichológiája* (Budapest: Kálvin Kiadó, 2004), 55–84.

¹⁹ James E. Dittes, *Reconciling the Differences: A Theory of Faith and Practice* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 121–137.

²⁰ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Routledge, 1970), 67–86.

²¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 89–114.

²² Peter Roppelt, *Sakramentale Anthropologie* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2016), 77–95.

deeper unity. This is precisely what could offer new opportunities for ecumenical dialogue: liturgy, as a ‘space of encounter’, can transcend the boundaries of purely dogmatic debates and present unity as an experience rather than merely a theoretical consensus.

The Eucharist as a Symbol

In modern culture, the understanding of symbols is increasingly being pushed into the background. The logic of rationality, functionality, and measurability has become dominant, while the deep-rooted signs that convey religious experience are losing their communicative power.²³ This process also poses a challenge to the Christian tradition, as the essence of faith often becomes accessible through symbolic realities. For this reason, it is particularly timely to rethink the symbolic dimension of the Eucharist: symbols are capable of creating a common language that transcends denominational boundaries and opens up new perspectives in ecumenical dialogue.

The original meaning of *symbolon* – the joining together of the pieces of a broken object – is an expressive metaphor for what symbols do: they unite the visible and the invisible, the finite and the infinite, human experience and divine mystery.²⁴ Christian liturgy has always functioned in this sense: a gateway to the transcendent opened by visible actions and material elements (bread, wine).

According to Paul Tillich’s classic definition, ‘A symbol participates in the reality which it points to.’²⁵ While a mere sign only refers to something, the symbol – as a dynamic carrier of meaning – makes transcendent reality present. According to Tillich, ‘Religious symbols open up levels of reality which otherwise are closed to us. They open up our souls to dimensions of the divine’, and are capable of transforming human existential experience.²⁶ In this light, the Eucharist is not merely a teaching ritual or remembrance, but a dynamic symbol of God’s presence in the world: an event in which grace is not only a theoretical reality but an experience that can be lived.²⁷

Gerd Theissen examines early Christian Eucharistic practice from a psychological and sociological perspective, which he believes represented a radical ‘ritual taboo-breaking’: the symbolic consumption of blood was unthinkable in the Jewish religious world, yet it became the bearer of a new identity and created a community that transcended cultural and social boundaries.²⁸

Karl Rahner emphasises that the sacraments – including the Eucharist – are forms of communication that fit with the symbolic nature of human beings: human existence itself is symbolic, and therefore the grace of salvation becomes present through symbols. The sacrament is not merely a memory or a sign, but the presence of divine reality, which touches the deepest layers of human experience.²⁹

Pastoral psychology also supports the transformative power of symbols. Gábor Hézser points out that symbols open up emotional and identity-forming dimensions that cannot be conveyed by verbal language alone. Symbolic action – especially in the form of ritual – can

²³ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 68–92.

²⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1958), 311–336.

²⁵ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 41–67.

²⁶ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 53–76.

²⁷ Ray S. Anderson, ‘Liturgy and Tillich’s Theory of Symbols’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46, no. 3 (1978): 273–288.

²⁸ Gerd Theissen, *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 91–116.

²⁹ Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 88–105. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 416–430.

help build inner order and a new identity in times of crisis. In this sense, the Eucharist is a healing, identity-forming, and community-building experience.³⁰

From an ecumenical perspective, the symbolic approach is particularly promising. Although ontological differences remain between denominations, symbols can offer a shared existential experience.³¹ Bread and wine are thus not merely the subject of doctrinal disputes, but bear deep human and spiritual meaning: they are the concrete scene of acceptance, belonging to God, and the experience of salvation.³²

Eucharist as Thanksgiving

The term 'Eucharist' comes from the Greek verb *eucharistein*, meaning 'to give thanks'. According to the New Testament, Jesus 'gave thanks' at the Last Supper (Mt 26:27; Lk 22:19) when he offered himself to the Father and his disciples in the bread and wine. This gesture is deeply rooted in the Old Testament tradition of sacrificial offerings of thanksgiving. The Passover feast commemorated Israel's deliverance from Egypt and was an expression of gratitude to God the Redeemer, while the todah sacrifice served as a personal or communal thanksgiving when someone experienced God's deliverance or healing.³³ At the Last Supper, Jesus fulfilled these Old Testament prefigurations in a new form: thanksgiving for deliverance, creation, and redemption became a celebration of the new covenant opened by Christ.

From the beginning, Christian tradition has viewed the Eucharist as an act of thanksgiving in which the Church, as the body of Christ, praises and thanks the Father for all his gifts, from creation to the work of redemption.³⁴

Patristic writers particularly emphasised the cosmic dimension of this thanksgiving. Sts John Chrysostom and Irenaeus both interpreted the Eucharist as the ascension of the created world towards God: it is not only man who gives thanks, but the entire cosmos becomes praise. Joseph Ratzinger calls this perspective 'creation-thanksgiving', in which man, by offering back to God the goods of the world – the earthly reality symbolically present in bread and wine – reconnects with the Creator and restores the order of creation.³⁵

The tradition of the Protestant Reformation also preserved the emphasis on thanksgiving, albeit in a different theological framework. For Martin Luther, the Lord's Supper is not merely a remembrance, but a grateful acceptance of God's grace: man responds to God's gift through faith.³⁶ The Orthodox liturgy expresses this dimension in a very unique way: the entire Eucharistic prayer is an anaphora, that is, an offering and thanksgiving. According to Orthodox theology, the liturgy itself is an act of cosmic thanksgiving, in which man and the created world rise together towards God.³⁷

However, gratitude is not only a theological force, but also a deeply psychological and spiritual one. According to psychologist Robert Emmons, gratitude consists of two steps: first, we recognise the goodness in our lives, and then we acknowledge that its source lies outside ourselves.³⁸ This approach reduces anxiety, increases resilience, strengthens community bonds,

³⁰ Gábor Hézszer, *A vallási szimbólumok pszichológiája* (Budapest: Kálvin Kiadó, 2004), 47–73.

³¹ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1957), 179–192. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 83–98.

³² David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 188–205.

³³ László Boda, *Eucharisztia teológiája* (Budapest: Sapientia Főiskola, 2015), 21–59.

³⁴ Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, 91–110.

³⁵ Benedict XVI [Joseph Ratzinger], *A föld sója – A kereszténység jövője* (Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 2007), 145–162.

³⁶ Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, 201–212.

³⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 123–140.

³⁸ Robert A. Emmons, *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 3–25.

and promotes inner peace. According to Henri Nouwen, liturgy ‘re-centers’ people: it helps them return with a grateful heart to their inner connection with God and their true identity.³⁹ Pastoral psychology points out that the regular ritual practice of gratitude has healing power: it helps us process crises, strengthens our identity, and builds community cohesion.⁴⁰

From an ecumenical perspective, gratitude is a universal language: it is capable of connecting different traditions because it is a deeply human and spiritual experience.⁴¹ Pope Francis also emphasises this connecting power in his encyclical *Laudato si’*, when he points out that a grateful Eucharistic spirit ‘teaches us to accept and care for creation’. Giving thanks for the created world is thus not only a spiritual renewal, but can also be a common spiritual source for ecological responsibility and social dialogue.⁴²

Spiritual Health and the Eucharist

In our time, the modern concept of health has become increasingly holistic: as early as 1948, the WHO defined health as ‘not merely the absence of disease, but a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being’; in 1998, the spiritual dimension was officially added to this definition.⁴³ George L. Engel’s biopsychosocial model also points out that physical, mental, and social processes are closely interrelated, and that healing cannot be understood on a purely biological level.⁴⁴ Numerous studies in religious psychology and pastoral psychology confirm that religious practices offer a structured framework for hope, identity reinforcement, and spiritual healing.⁴⁵

From the beginning, the Christian tradition has interpreted health in terms of wholeness (*holos*): human integrity is realised in God and in community. St Augustine calls the Eucharist ‘medicine for the soul’ (*medicina animae*): ‘The bread you see on the altar, consecrated as the body of Christ... strengthens, heals, and sustains you.’⁴⁶ Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, calls the Eucharist ‘the medicine of immortality’ (*pharmakon athanasias*),⁴⁷ while Ephrem the Syrian calls it ‘living medicine’, which is ‘the bearer of fire and Spirit’.

Particularly noteworthy is the therapeutic thinking of St Gregory of Nyssa, who interprets Eucharistic healing as an antidote to the ‘spiritual poisoning’ caused by sin. Gregory compares the beginning of human history to a process of poisoning: the sin committed in the Garden of Eden – the consumption of the forbidden fruit – brought about a ‘toxic’ change that affected both body and soul. If eating and drinking were the means of man’s downfall, then, according to Gregory, healing must also come through eating and drinking, that is, through the Eucharist.

In chapter 37 of the *Oratio Catechetica Magna*, he writes: ‘Just as those who have taken poison neutralize its effects with another medicine, so too does the body become one with and mingle with its Savior in another way.’⁴⁸ For Gregory, the Eucharist is therefore a therapeutic agent that acts as an antidote: it not only grants forgiveness, but also restores the disturbed inner

³⁹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 95–111.

⁴⁰ Michael E. McCullough, Shelley D. Kilpatrick, Robert A. Emmons, and David B. Larson, ‘Is Gratitude a Moral Affect?’, *Psychological Bulletin* 127, no. 2 (2001): 249–266.

⁴¹ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 188–205.

⁴² Francis, *Laudato si’ – Áldott légy* (Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 2015), 224–230.

⁴³ World Health Organization, *WHO Definition of Health – Revision Including Spiritual Dimension* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1998), 1–4.

⁴⁴ George L. Engel, ‘The Need for a New Medical Model: A Challenge for Biomedicine’, *Science* 196, no. 4286 (1977): 129–136.

⁴⁵ Harold G. Koenig, ‘Religion, Spirituality, and Health’, *ISRN Psychiatry* (2012): 1–33.

⁴⁶ Augustine, ‘Enarrationes in Psalmos 98.9–10’, in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* (Turnhout: Brepols), 398.

⁴⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistula ad Ephesios*, *Patrologia Graeca* 5, 654–660; Ephraem Syrus, *Hymni de Fide* 10–12.

⁴⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio Catechetica Magna* 37, in *Sources Chrétiennes* 453 (Paris: Cerf), 312–316.

balance (*krasis*), reorders human nature, and integrates the body, soul, and the transcendent. John David Penniman points out that Gregory's thinking is consciously linked to ancient medical and dietary terminology, which is why he saw the effect of the Eucharist as not merely metaphorical, but truly healing.⁴⁹

This patristic approach is still relevant today, especially in contrast to the fragmented approach of modern medicine, which often treats the body and soul separately. If we interpret the Eucharist purely as a 'spiritual practice', we can easily lose sight of its physical and communal dimensions. However, as the Apostle Paul warned the Corinthians, the Eucharistic celebration also has moral and physical consequences: 'Whoever eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself' (1 Cor 11:29). Healing, therefore, is not merely an internal experience, but an event that affects our entire human reality.

Empirical research also confirms this holistic dimension. According to Kathryn Croskery Jones' qualitative studies, regular Eucharistic participation has a profound healing power in times of grief and crisis: it provides a framework for processing loss and offers hope for the future.⁵⁰ According to Mokgoatšana and Mudyiwa's field research in Zimbabwe, the ritual of breaking bread together was able to initiate psychological regeneration and community reconciliation even in the midst of political and social trauma.⁵¹

From an ecumenical perspective, the question of healing can offer a new language. Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant communities alike profess that the Eucharist gives hope, restores broken lives, and creates new community. This approach offers an opportunity for ecumenical dialogue to seek not only dogmatic consensus, but also to discover the holistic healing experience of the Eucharist as a common ground.⁵²

Eucharist and Eco-theology

The ecological crisis of the 21st century – global warming, dramatic loss of biodiversity, exploitation of natural resources, and environmental injustices – is not merely a scientific or political issue, but also a deeply spiritual and theological challenge. For the Christian faith, creation is not merely 'raw material', but a gift from God and a bearer of His presence.⁵³ Eco-theology calls us to recognise this: to view the world in a sacramental way, where every creature is part of the revelation of God's glory.⁵⁴

Liturgy plays a key role in this. The Eucharistic celebration is not only a commemoration of Christ's sacrifice, but also a thanksgiving for the created world in which we live and which we offer to God.⁵⁵ This act inspires a new kind of responsibility: bread and wine, as fruits of the earth and fruits of human labour, symbolically embody the entire created world.⁵⁶

Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'* emphasises: 'the world is a liturgical space where every creature proclaims the glory of God'.⁵⁷ The Eucharist is not only an act of redemption, but also the fulfilment of creation, because when the community offers up creation embodied in bread and wine with gratitude, it recognises that the world is God's gift and that we have a

⁴⁹ John David Penniman, 'Blended by the Savior: Gregory of Nyssa and the Therapeutic Power of the Eucharist', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 25, no. 2 (2017): 211–236.

⁵⁰ Kathryn Croskery Jones, *Eucharist and Healing: A Qualitative Study on Religious Experience and Well-Being* (St Andrews: University of St Andrews, 2016), 112–140.

⁵¹ S. Mokgoatšana and M. Mudyiwa, 'Healing Through the Eucharist in the Context of Postcolonial Trauma in Zimbabwe', *Theologia Viatorum* 46, no. 1 (2022): 77–91.

⁵² John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 213–226.

⁵³ István Bán, *Ökoteológia és liturgia* (Budapest: Sapientia Főiskola, 2020), 35–62.

⁵⁴ Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 113–143.

⁵⁵ Boda, *Eucharisztia teológiája*, 145–171.

⁵⁶ Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith: The Change of Heart that Leads to a New Way of Living on Earth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 45–67.

⁵⁷ Francis, *Laudato si'* – *Áldott légy.*, §§96–236.

responsibility for it.⁵⁸ This dynamic of thanksgiving re-teaches humanity to accept and care for creation, and communal celebration can be a concrete spiritual response to the ecological crisis.⁵⁹

The concept of eco-spirituality suggests that our relationship with nature is not only an ethical responsibility, but also a deeply transcendent experience.⁶⁰ Elizabeth A. Johnson speaks of a 'community of creation' in which humans are not rulers but stand alongside other living beings as brothers and sisters, and the Eucharist 'expands into the liturgy of the created world'.⁶¹ According to Kevin W. Irwin, liturgy involves the entire cosmos in the event of salvation, transcending the anthropocentric view.⁶² Leonardo Boff sees the Eucharist as an 'act of cosmic reconciliation', where both the poor and nature are recipients of divine love.⁶³

From the beginning, the Orthodox tradition has emphasised the sanctity of the material world and the cosmic dimension of liturgy.⁶⁴ Here, the Eucharist is not merely a church celebration, but the offering and deification of the world.⁶⁵ In Western Christianity, St Francis of Assisi, by addressing the created world as 'brother', and Hildegard von Bingen, with her mystical cosmology, set an example of Eucharistic gratitude towards nature.⁶⁶ These traditions can serve as a source of inspiration for ecumenical thinking today.⁶⁷

From the perspective of pastoral psychology, the Eucharistic celebration can help to process what is known as 'ecological grief' – the emotional burden caused by the climate crisis, the destruction of nature, or anxiety about the future. According to Panu Pihkala, communal rituals can provide hope and emotional support in the midst of the ecological crisis: shared thanksgiving and prayer can open up new resources in the struggle for sustainability.⁶⁸ A practical example of this is the Green Sisters movement, in which women's monastic communities develop sustainable lifestyles, agricultural ecology, and liturgical eco-spirituality based on a Eucharistic spirit.⁶⁹

This eco-theological approach is therefore not merely a theoretical framework, but also a spiritual and ecumenical opportunity. The Eucharist can provide a new language for experiencing responsibility for creation and offer a common space for different Christian traditions through thanksgiving, care, and transformation.⁷⁰ While denominations may disagree on the ontological details of the Eucharist, they can agree that Eucharistic celebration can heal the wounds of creation, shape humanity's ecological consciousness, and inspire hope for a more just and sustainable world.⁷¹

Conclusion – Renewal of the Ecumenical Approach to the Eucharist

One of the most painful points of division in Christian unity today is the Eucharist: what the early Church experienced as a visible sign of community and unity has, over the centuries,

⁵⁸ Kevin W. Irwin, *A Commentary on Laudato Si'* (New York: Paulist Press, 2018), 101–132.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 253–275.

⁶⁰ Panu Pihkala, *A Hopeful Theology of Ecology* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki Press, 2020), 64–82.

⁶¹ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 253–275.

⁶² Irwin, *A Commentary on Laudato Si'*, 101–132.

⁶³ Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 113–143.

⁶⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 93–118.

⁶⁵ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 342–369.

⁶⁶ Francis of Assisi, *Canticle of the Sun*, in Franciscus Assisiensis Opera Omnia (Florence: Quaracchi Editiones, 1225), 234–236.

⁶⁷ Dénes Farkasfalvy, *Teremtés és megváltás* (Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 2017), 87–106.

⁶⁸ Pihkala, *A Hopeful Theology of Ecology*, 64–82.

⁶⁹ Anne Marie Schneider, *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 221–242.

⁷⁰ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 99–127.

⁷¹ Thomas Messias, *Liturgy and the Earth: Toward a Sacramental Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 115–148.

become a source of division due to dogmatic disputes, liturgical differences, and ecclesiastical discipline. I am convinced that the search for theological and dogmatic consensus alone is not sufficient to make real progress in Eucharistic ecumenism; it is necessary to involve the achievements of contemporary human sciences, which are capable of opening up new areas of dialogue for the search for unity.

Religious psychology and pastoral psychology point out that shared rituals shape identity, help people cope with crises, and offer spiritual healing. In Christian tradition, the Eucharist has been known since ancient times as ‘medicine for the soul’ (Augustine) and ‘the medicine of immortality’ (Ignatius), and these healing experiences can still provide new language for ecumenical discourse today. The sociology of religion and cultural anthropology can also contribute to understanding: Gerd Theissen pointed out that the early Christian Eucharist brought about a radical social breakthrough, creating a new community that was able to connect people from different cultural backgrounds. This insight can also offer a bridge between denominations in today’s pluralistic society, when the Eucharist appears not only as a teaching but also as an identity-forming, inclusive community event.

Symbol theory and hermeneutics open up further possibilities. According to Paul Tillich, religious symbols do not merely refer to reality, but participate in it, opening human consciousness to the infinite. The Eucharist, as a dynamic symbol, can thus offer a shared existential experience even when dogmatic formulations differ. The rediscovery of symbolic language can liberate dialogue from the narrow confines of purely definitional debates and help us to experience the deeper reality of the sacrament. Eco-theology and liturgy, as well as Alexander Schmemmann’s liturgical thinking, point out that the Eucharist is not only redemption, but also a thanksgiving offering for creation. Shared responsibility for the created world can provide a spiritual and ethical basis for ecumenical cooperation, going beyond a purely theoretical approach.⁷²

It is becoming increasingly clear that ecumenical thinking needs to move beyond exclusively dogmatic debates. George Hunsinger’s works also show that, although classical theological-dogmatic questions remain crucial, the inclusion of shared spiritual and cultural experiences can create new convergences.⁷³ An interdisciplinary approach allows the Eucharist to be not only the subject of theoretical debate, but also to appear as a shared spiritual reality: as a rite, a symbol, a healing communal experience, and a responsible thanksgiving for the created world. If ecumenical dialogue is open to these dimensions, the Eucharist can once again become a living and renewing source of our unity in Christ.

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⁷² Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 28–45.

⁷³ George Hunsinger, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let Us Keep the Feast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 15–37.

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