

Spring 1989

Umberto Eco and the "Habit" of Family Communion

Vaughan S Roberts

Umberto Eco and The “Habit” of Family Communion

Vaughan S. Roberts

The Church of England is in crisis. The question is: which one? Doctrinal, financial, moral, ecclesiological, or perhaps there's something new? If the headlines are any guide then the Church seems to be constantly veering away from one precipice only to find itself perched precariously over another. Its imminent fragmentation has been predicted as a consequence of everything from theological revisionism to women priests to the advent of AIDS.

At this point some comments by Umberto Eco, Professor of Semiotics at the University of Bologna, novelist and columnist, might put things into some kind of perspective. Reviewing the history of the crisis of reason he wonders whether the problems are not so much with the concept of *reason*, as with the concept of crisis. After all, "Crisis sells well. During the last few decades we have witnessed the sale (on news-stands, in bookshops, by subscriptions, door-to-door) of the crisis of religion, of Marxism, of representation, the sign, philosophy, Freudianism, presence, the subject (I omit other crises that I don't understand professionally even if I endure them, such as that of the lira, of housing, the family institutions, oil)."¹ So is it that the Church of England merely finds itself subject to market forces, and the product that is selling well at the moment is crisis? But are there any actual *positive* signs to suggest that the Church is not in terminal decline? There is one Christian tradition in particular which is growing in this country. The evangelical wing of the Church of England and other evangelical groups, like the House Fellowships, are experiencing an increase in numbers. How is it that *they* are able to flow against the tide?

Conventional wisdom argues that people have deserted the traditional Anglican parish church in favour of these eclectic congregations because they are offering "certainties in an uncertain world"; the sort of certainties that the Church of England has reneged upon. It is a common view, but it can be challenged and further comments from Eco will be the catalyst for much of this article. First however, we have to recognise the enormous change that has taken place at parish level on Sunday mornings. The pattern now in many traditional Anglican churches is for the Parish Eucharist to form the focus of both the day's and the week's worship. Whatever the liturgical and theological strengths of this development, it now means that at the heart of parish life is a service of *exclusion* as opposed to *welcome*. To take part fully in worship, you have to be a member of the "club". The act of taking, or of not taking communion, marks out two distinct classes of people. There are

strong echoes of this in both the Tiller report on the Church's ministry, where the notion of Church of England becoming a thoroughly "associational" church and eucharistic sect" is discussed;² and in the report on admitting children to communion before confirmation.³ Meanwhile, the more equitable and open service of Evensong has tended to limp along, if it hasn't already been amputated, like Mattins.

To be fair, this process of exclusion has not gone totally unrecognised. Many churches, not necessarily of evangelical tradition, have instituted, experimented with "family" services. This is often a non-eucharistic alternative, perhaps as the main service on the first Sunday of the month. As Kenneth Stevenson notes, these services are aimed at 'fringers' - those who are possibly less committed and those who are not confirmed.⁴ But here we have a prime example of a serious problem which affects the Church of England at many levels. Eco talks about the confusion caused by our "codes of communication" and in his example he notes how the phrase 'no more' can be understood in completely different ways by those interpreting with English-language code and by those interpreting with the Italian-language code.⁵ It is possible to see the same problem occurring in the Church, at a more significant level, even when the *same* language code is being used. Michael Perham has drawn attention to the difficulties over the use of word 'family':

The Eucharist is *the* family worship and is often advertised as *Family* Eucharist or Family Communion. The term can be misunderstood ... because people think it is *for families* and can be quite insensitive when it seems to be catering for them alone. Many loyal Churchgoers are single people, some are widows, quite a number come along with difficulty leaving behind other members of their family ... If the word family is to be used about the Eucharist, it must only be as part of a constant education about the fact that it is Eucharist *of the family*, that is of the Church congregation, rather than a Eucharist *for families*.⁶

His conclusion seems optimistic. The word 'family' is so fraught with pitfalls that there is a very good case for abandoning it altogether. There is far much room for misunderstanding in the code-word. In addition to examples mentioned, the word can also cause feelings of rejection for one parent families. The highly ambiguous nature of the term can mean nobody is sure whether families are meant to be there or not. So, the main act of worship in the traditional parish is a service of exclusion, but even when there is more open worship, it is not at all clear from the signals, who the service is for.

A further problem has a good deal to do with what might be called Cultural context'. The eucharist in many Anglican Churches is still, by large, a 'serious' event; something of a

performance. 'Serious' events are approached in a particular way. Again, as Eco notes, one of the characteristics of the 'serious' cultural event is that the audience must not participate. It sits and listens or watches; in this sense a spectacle can become 'serious' when the public takes no active part but simply attends passively. So it is possible that the audience of Greek comedy watched while spitting out fruit pips and taunting the actors; but today, in a dutifully archeologized amphitheatre, the same comedy is more cultural entertainment and people keep quiet.⁷ There is a striking similarity between that statement and a comment on Anglican liturgy from the report *To A Rebellious House?* quoted recently by Bryan Spinks: "The Liturgy of The Church of England, does not speak to the people, it seems to be a formality, words, ceremony and music, and it is very sophisticated. The congregation feels a bit like a theatre audience, watching a performance."⁸ In just the same way that there are different ways of experiencing what Eco calls the 'cultural debate', so there are different ways of experiencing Christian worship. But traditional worship in the Church of England has become locked into a narrow band based on a performance approach. It caters very well for people who listen to Radio 3, but lacks the wider appeal that the evangelical churches have tapped into.

This confusion over communication codes can be extended to the liturgical code and pattern of worship in many churches. While the ASB has made external alterations to the eucharist (everyone now says "we" instead of "I"; the president faces 'the people' instead of 'God'; everyone is invited to share the peace), in practice these changes have *remained* external because they require such a radical change in outlook that many have felt unwilling, or unable, to make. What has happened is that a service which places prime importance on an individual's relationship with God, has been replaced by one in which the focus of attention has been translated from the vertical to the horizontal. The emphasis is now on the community and the presence of God mediated in and through that community. The fact that the Church of England appears to be in a period of corporate schizophrenia is fundamental to its failure to reach out to other people. On the one hand, many of those attending church Sunday by Sunday are still, in themselves, worshipping along 'individual' lines, whereas the service itself is calling for a different approach. On the other, there are those who have been brought up worshipping along 'community' lines and who feel frustrated by this (from their point of view) constricting attitude to worship. The result is that *both* parties feel that their needs are not being met fully in one parish eucharist; meanwhile the Church is failing to resolve the conflicting signals.

However, another aspect arising from this confusion has received less attention. There are now families who have strong links with the Church of England and who have grown up with both the new services and the idea that weekly attendance at the parish eucharist is the desirable norm. Yet this group is often squeezed out of worship because of the pressure of the performance and the contradictory codes. Crying children and disruptive toddlers are far too intrusive on the 'serious' event which is dramatically re-enacted each week in many parish churches. So we return to the problem of exclusion. Not only is the Church of England not attracting young families on the fringe, it is, in places, turning its own families away. All of which is thrown into sharper relief, by some recent comments by Robin Green. He discusses studies in the Wandsworth and Merton deaneries, in South London, aimed at discovering the routes by which new Christians have come to active faith. These have revealed that: "the largest group (in each case over 50%) had come to faith through ministry given at a major turning point e.g. the birth of a child, bereavement, divorce, etc. Events like evangelistic campaigns or special services were quite insignificant compared with that group".⁹ This strengthens the idea that more open services for parents with babies and young children could be a major asset in Church growth. However, such services run against the grain of much of the worship that is now taking place in many of our churches. But it doesn't stop there.

There is an urgent need to abandon the notion of the parish worshipping together at one service, as *one* large family. Wesley Carr, in particular, has some serious criticism of using the family as a model for parish life. When that happens, he argues, "Family services and similar attempts to express the theme of the Church as a family will proliferate, but without much thought being given to this in relation to the Church's task".¹⁰ The image of the family can be narrow in its appeal and in its application, as we have seen. But it also has serious implications for those in their adolescent years and early twenties who are busy establishing their identity independently of their family. If the Church is using the family as its principal model for worship, it is hardly surprising that it's not attracting those who are still, at best, in transition, or even in tension with their own familial relationships.

If parishes do give up this model for their worship, then there is another much more biblical one waiting to take its place. We need to return to Paul's model of the Church being the *body* of Christ, where the parts are different, with different needs and functions - yet part of the whole. Again, it is possible to extend this model with the help of Umberto Eco. In his reflections on how the interior life is affected by exterior clothing, he advocates strongly in favour of the monk's habit: "Monks were rich in interior life and very dirty,

because,, the body, protected by a habit that, ennobling it, released it, was free to thin and forget about itself".¹¹ Liturgy in the parishes needs to break out of the family eucharist corset that it now wears. Like the monk's habit worship needs to be flexible and meet several needs, while maintaining a simplicity and unity. The habit relieves the parts of the body from unnecessary constriction and allows greater freedom for all.

Paul's image of the Church as a 'body' recognized that Christianity is not homogeneous collection of people who all look the same, act the same and feel the same. Churches are composed of individuals and groups who have divers needs and outlooks. Undoubtedly this has always been the case. There was, as James Dunn comments, "a marked degree of diversity within first century Christianity. We can no longer doubt that there are many different expressions of Christianity within the New Testament".¹² The tensions born of the need to recognize diversity and maintain group unity remain with us from New Testament times, and lie not far beneath the surface.

In the Pauline epistles we can see Paul wrestling with these tensions and attempting to manage the conflicting pressures of diversity and unity. That experience provides a model for the Church at large and for individual parishes - both are charged with finding the means, not to *resolve* the tension because by its nature it is unresolvable, but to *make* that tension a constructive force rather than a divisive one. As Carl Dudley and Earle Hilgert have recently argued in their perceptive book *New Testament Tensions and The Contemporary Church*:

A local church fussing with building plans or arguing over the expansion of their community ministry finds unity not despite the expression of their differences but because their cause is large enough to embrace their diversity. Many contemporary churches would suppress such conflict. In certain experiences of the early Church we see a more constructive use of conflict through a process characterized by open communication, mutual respect, coherence with the Church's mission and celebration of the Holy Spirit.¹³

There are strong parallels here with the place of worship in the life of a congregation. If the Church of England continues to use the model of the parish as a *one* large happy family, it will build up problems for the future because there is no place for individuals and groups to acknowledge and own their differences. The Church *must* recognize the diverse needs of the people of God.

To return to Echo's picture of the monk's habit, the basic materials for making a widely embracing parish liturgical habit are to hand in the services available both new and

traditional. The parish should not be seen as just worshipping at one main service on a Sunday, but over a range of services. There will be those who need a quiet reflective service, those who need a formal "performance" style of worship, others who want to worship God in a much more informal setting. Those who form the "fringe" of the body of Christ are as vital to its life as those who are at the eucharistic centre. The Book of Common Prayer and the Alternative Services Book can actually meet the needs for diversity and unity. They can be used in a very straightforward way, but with thought and planning they can also be imaginatively - as illustrated by the large *Church Family Worship* resource book¹⁴ and the new small service leaflet *Come and Worship*.¹⁵ The materials are to hand - the challenge is for each Church to become a garment maker.

Endnotes

¹ Umberto Eco, "On the Crisis of the Crisis of Reason" in *Travels in Hyperreality*, Picador, 1987, p. 126.

² J. Tiller, *A Strategy for the Church's Ministry*, CIO, 1983, p.61.

³ cf. "A quite young child is capable of perceiving, both the naturalness and the 'specialness' of sharing in the bread and wine ... A child can also feel a sense of exclusion from some which is obviously of importance to adults and which binds them together, leaving her or him out, and seeming to deny his or her awareness of love and belonging." *Communion before Confirmation*, CIO, 1985, pp. 27-28.

⁴ Kenneth Stevenson, *Family Services*, Alcuin Club Manual No. 3, SPCK, 1981, p.2.

⁵ Eco, "Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare", in *op. cit.*, pp. 135-144.

⁶ Michael Perham, *Liturgy Pastoral and Parochial*, SPCK, 1984, p.40.

⁷ Eco, "Culture as Show Business", in *op. cit.*, pp. 151-57.

⁸ Bryan Spinks, "Liturgical Stocktaking", *Theology*, Vol. XC, Jan. 1987, p.34.

⁹ Robin Green, *Only Connect*, DLT, 1987, p.65, n.9.

¹⁰ Wesley Carr, *The Priestlike Task*, SPCK, 1985, p.63.

¹¹ Eco, "Lumbar Thought", in *op. cit.*, pp. 191-195.

¹² J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, Westminster, 1977, p.372

¹³ Carl S. Dudley and Earle Hilgert, *New Testament Tensions and The Contemporary Church* Fortress, 1987, p.131.

¹⁴ ed. Michael Perry, *Church Family Worship*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1986.

¹⁵ *Come and Worship*, compiled by Leslie Francis, Mowbrays, 1987. See also Leslie Francis "Family Services" in ed. Leslie Francis, *Making Contact*, Collins, 1986, pp.32-40.