The Will to Communion as a Theological and Ministerial Virtue

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In the face of divisiveness in the church, a spirituality of communion can foster the virtue of the will to communion and promotes an embrace of plural unity within the church. The integration of this will to communion is vital for all theologians and ministers.

Virtue is never merely the knowledge of what is right and good. It involves the human will’s desire and intention to do what is right and good. Yet virtue’s strength comes when its inherent desire is most tested. This article seeks to make the case for the “will to communion” as an essential theological and ministerial virtue—essential now precisely because the current tone and tenor of the church greatly tests it. Perhaps the following scenarios will capture this point.

Scenario 1

It is October 2004, one month before the presidential election. Two ministry students (Sarah and Richard), who initially struck up a friendship, have retreated to their separate corners because they realized they could no longer talk to each other anymore about religion or politics. This left only peripheral matters for conversation. Sarah could not fathom how Richard could ever support a candidate who was pro-choice, especially a Catholic one. Further, she could not understand Richard’s anger toward certain bishops’ declaration that pro-choice
candidates should not be allowed to receive Communion. Richard is flabber-gasted that Sarah is too accepting of what certain church officials think. He believes only one’s conscience should be listened to in the voting booth, and to elevate abortion to the place of primacy in making up one’s mind about voting is only abdicating a true use of conscience to a bunch of single-issued, out-of-touch Catholic leaders.

Would Sarah and Richard ever be able to minister together?

Scenario 2

It is April 19, 2005: A crowd outside the Vatican awaits word of the election of a new pope. Michael, an American seminarian studying in Rome, stands amidst a group of seminarians, all in cassock and collar, keeping prayerful vigil. Michael proudly holds up a sign for the TV cameras that reads, “Loyalty Is Love for the Church!” Nearby, Rose stands amidst a group of American representatives from Call to Action who are also keeping vigil. She bears a placard that says, “The Church Belongs to the People!” Moments after the announcement of Cardinal Ratzinger’s election, Michael excitedly says to a TV interviewer, “This is a true sign from God that the church is to be returned to loyal Catholics and dissenters can go elsewhere.” Rose, in tears, says to another TV interviewer, “This election is a travesty for the church and a sign that the Holy Spirit is being ignored.”

Could Rose and the future Fr. Michael ever be together in the same parish around the same eucharistic table?

While the intensity of the above situations may have become somewhat muted in the intervening years, the divisiveness in the church has not. Thomas Rausch, in his book *Reconciling Faith and Reason: Apologetics, Evangelists, and Theologians in a Divided Church*, offers a very accurate analysis of the aura of divisiveness that seems to permeate the contemporary church, especially in the United States. After offering his own scenarios, he states:

We all have our own collection of anecdotes, from both sides. But beyond these, there are serious problems, groups and movements whose members are increasingly locked into angry, no-compromise positions. There are many today who are openly contemptuous of magisterial and particularly papal authority. Others reject the leadership of the American bishops and appeal over their heads to Rome. What is at risk is the life of the Church community itself as a community of faith, hope, and service. (2)

One need only think of the “liturgy wars” that began in the 1990s, the wrestling over “doctrinal content versus faith experience” in parish religious education programs, and the debate over how Catholic identity gets defined in Catholic universities, colleges, hospitals, and social service agencies. These flash points
have been highly contentious on both the national and local levels. While contention may be necessary at times, we need to remember the admonition of the late John Paul II. In his apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (NMI), the Pope prophetically stated: “To make the Church the home and school of communion: that is the greatest challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning if we wish to be faithful to God’s plan and respond to the world’s deepest yearnings” (no. 43).

Yet, as we know, this is not the first (nor will it be the last) time in Christian history that the church has had to face the threat to communion within itself. It is as old as the church itself. And perhaps the church’s first recorded efforts to deal with division and divisiveness can be paradigmatic for every time the church needs to deal with these problems, including today.

**Scriptural Paradigms for Communion**

Although the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles describe an idyllic scene of church unity, it is not long before elements of divisiveness begin to grow. It is, of course, the issue of accepting Gentile converts into the Way that brings everything to a head. While we are all familiar with the scenario, it is important to examine how the Spirit leads the church to a solution that renders the will to communion a fundamental virtue of discipleship.

Acts 15 recounts the opposition in Antioch to baptize Gentile converts. Luke describes how believers from the pharisaic party boldly claim, “unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:5). These are words of a dark spirit of divisiveness. Not even the conservative Judaizers opposing Paul in Galatia (see Gal 4:21; 5:2-4; 6:12-13) made the claim that an additional initiation into Moses is necessary for salvation (Johnson, 259). At the council in Jerusalem that follows, James offers the reasonable solution that the Gentiles are to “abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (Acts 15:20). These are tenets from the Levitical code for ritual purity and table fellowship. James’s decision is, therefore, meant to be a reconciling measure that would allow Jewish Christians to be at table with Gentile Christians because the Gentiles would not be engaging in practices of radical disharmony with the Jewish notion of table fellowship (Johnson, 73). From an important perspective, the decision agreed to by the Council of Jerusalem was a measure to keep the followers of Christ at table with one another.

The threat of division not only affected the early church as a whole but also the local churches. Corinth is one such example. Paul wastes no time, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, dealing with the issue of factionalism (1 Cor 1:10-15). It
seems that the community has become divided along party lines: the Pauline party, the Cephas party, the Apollos party, the Christ party. Returning to Thomas Rausch, we can find a good description of what may have characterized these parties. The Pauline party may have been the moderate or mainstream group not requiring Gentile converts to observe the Mosaic Law but did not prevent Jewish Christians from doing so. The Cephas party was made of the traditionalists who argued for a more Law-observant expression of Christian life. The Apollos party included the liberal intellectuals, the culturally sophisticated. Finally, the Christ party may have been a Gnostic group who thought themselves spiritually perfect and therefore above the law or perhaps members of a house church with Gnostic leanings (Rausch, 9).

Since Paul never really addresses these groups individually or by name in the rest of the letter, they may be seen as Paul's caricatures of the divisive elements in the Corinthian community. Paul then addresses this divisiveness forcefully, since it is so contrary to the Christian message and mission. As Rausch points out, Paul

urges and exhorts his difficult community, calling them back to his vision of their union as the body of Christ. The Church needs to be united for the sake of its mission. If we are to be faithful to that mission, we need to make a greater effort to understand each other. (10)

Paul's response stems from his appeal to the standard of the Cross, which is foolishness by the world's standards, and he reminds the Corinthians that they are called to this “foolishness” (1 Cor 1:18, 26-29). So the boasting by the different factions about their rightful prominence in the Corinthian community is a divisive energy that comes from worldly wisdom that seeks prominence, acclaim, and validation. But for those who embrace the Cross of Christ (which is Paul's way of speaking about discipleship), there is a unitive energy that comes from eschewing the need for prominence, acclaim, or validation—all the things that Christ surrenders on the cross. The act of Christ's surrender on the cross is a free act of self-offering to others who oppose what he is about because Christ has a deep confidence that his self-offering will ultimately create a deeper communion of broken humanity with God and with each other. Therefore, to embrace the Cross of Christ in discipleship is to surrender into communion. This is foolishness to the energies of division that often captivate our human motivations and fill the world around us, even the church.

These early efforts by the church to deal with divisiveness and threats to unity are paradigmatic for the church of every age dealing with the same issues. They remind us that communion is at the heart of discipleship. Communion is more than a creedal nod to the oneness of the church. It is to be the desire that motivates our theological enterprise and the outcome we seek from our ministerial praxis. This
means communion is to be something we deliberately, consciously, and wholeheartedly choose to be engaged in.

As a virtue, being engaged in communion does not mean that theologians and ministers should never disagree with each other; theologians should never speak or write publicly words that challenge other views in the church; everyone should just quietly acquiesce to magisterial pronouncements; prophets should not be valued anymore in the church; bishops should not say things that are difficult for their people to hear; the magisterium should not have clear positions about issues in the church. Communion does mean that no matter how strongly theologians and ministers disagree with one another, no matter how opposite people’s clear positions are from each other, no matter how prophetic or how disciplinary are the roles that people have within the church, they all need to stay at the table with one another.

Theology and ministry must be tables of communion. When theologians or ministers cannot remain at table with persons of opposing views, they risk becoming mere ideologues or “a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor 13:1). To walk away from the table of communion is to walk into the harsh energy field that often constitutes worldly wisdom and feeds off of divisiveness, condemnation, and self-promotion.

To stay at the table may seem like utter foolishness, but it is really a willingness to embrace the Cross of Christ. And it is the Cross of Christ because: (a) it can be very painful to listen to people whose positions we just cannot abide; (b) it is sometimes difficult to have positive regard for the person with whom we disagree and to try to discover whatever element of truth is lying somewhere in that other person’s position; (c) it is not easy to surrender the need to be right nor to risk discovering that something within our own absolute conclusions deserves to be challenged and to be rethought; (d) it can be disconcerting to trust that the Spirit of Christ is not always found in certainty and the feeling of being right, but is more often than not found in the muddy, murky middle of people’s questions, doubts, misgivings, and true life struggles that do not easily lend themselves to the storehouse of absolute answers we carry inside of us.

Theology and ministry, if they are truly the manner in which God’s Spirit is at work in us and the means by which we are drawn more fully into the wisdom of the Cross of Christ, must be tables of communion. When theologians and ministers lose their will to communion, then what they do lacks virtue. Their work ceases to be animated by the Spirit of God or marked by the Cross of Christ.
The Theological Foundations for the Will to Communion

A will to communion is a necessary theological and ministerial virtue; then, it must somehow be an essential expression of the nature of God. An analysis of God as Trinity offers a firm foundation for understanding the will to communion. In his classic essay “The Theology of Symbol,” Karl Rahner made the statement that all being possesses an inherent unity but expresses itself in multiple ways. Therefore, the unity of each being also possesses an inherent plurality (225–27). We can point to the Trinity as the ultimate example of this. The one God is necessarily expressed in a plurality of Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The plurality-in-unity nature of God renders the three Persons a communion of being. Rahner calls this “plural unity” (226), and this notion allows us to ground the human will to communion within the nature of God.

When we probe the nature of the divine communion, we find three important characteristics that will speak to the nature of theological and ministerial work. Peter Drilling, in his book *Trinity and Ministry*, defines those characteristics:

First, each person of the Trinity is equal to the others; there are no distinctions of superior and inferior. Second, each person within the Trinity has its own distinct personal identity, which is an identity only in relationship, but it distinguishes the person as real. In other words, each person of the Trinity is real in itself, but its reality consists in the distinctiveness of its relation to the others. Third, the persons of the Trinity act out their divinity in constant, mutual exchange of life and truth and love. (35)

Thus, the Trinity is a communion of equality, distinctiveness, and mutuality. Furthermore, these characteristics reveal communion as the heart of the very being of God. From this God chooses to create and to enter into communion with creation. We can call this God’s “will for communion” (Tillard, 39). God wills for all humankind, indeed all creation, to be drawn into the divine communion.

Jesus himself gives voice to God’s will for communion when he prays for the disciples on the night before he dies: “Holy Father . . . may they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me” (John 17:11, 21). Christ reveals the inner communion of the Trinity, but Christ also reveals that this inner communion is an offer and gift to all who believe in him. The very prayer of Christ, the final prayer of Christ, is a deep desire for communion in the world; for it is only through lived communion that the world will recognize and believe in the communion that is God and experience the ultimate expression of that communion—God’s love. Therefore, all theological and ministerial work must have connection to this divine desire for communion and express it in a manner that values plural unity.
The Church as Co-Agents of Communion with the Spirit

The Pentecost event (Acts 2:1-13) reveals the Spirit of Christ as the agent of the communion that God wills. The Spirit descends on the huddled group of believers and sends them out in a body as bold proclaimers of the power of God. The Spirit speaks through them many languages but one message of salvation. In this way the Spirit draws people of many languages into the one salvific hearing of God’s word. The plural unity of God becomes evidenced in the people of God drawn into the Pentecost event. The Spirit of Christ animates and establishes communion from the very beginning of the church and renders the church’s first ministers as co-agents of that communion.

It is no less important today for the ministers and theologians of the church to be Spirit-filled disciples of Christ who allow themselves to be co-agents of the Spirit’s work of communion. Furthermore, the church itself must be a communion, not only in some Platonic realm of ideas, but in the concrete and experiential reality of life. J.-M. R. Tillard rightly states in his book *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*:

> It is very obvious that Christian witness . . . is tied to the visible unity of the disciples of Christ. Because how can one announce truly and in a credible way the Gospel of reconciliation in Jesus Christ while presenting oneself to the world as disciples of Christ who are divided among themselves and who have put up new barriers? (36)

It is not only the separation of churches that violates the very nature of the church as communion, but it is also the growing ideological divisiveness within each church, including the Catholic Church. We may rightly wonder if we can truly call ourselves “church” if we participate in and further the energies that contribute to such ideological frenzy. We may also wonder if we can truly call ourselves one church, a holy, catholic, and truly apostolic church, if we do nothing to create communion in the midst of all the tension or if we walk away from communion because of the tension. The church will always have to struggle with this, as it has from the beginning, but the church must always be the Spirit’s co-agent of communion.

At the core of what it means to be the church is the will to communion. As Pope John Paul II wrote, “Communion must be cultivated and extended day by day and at every level of the Church’s life” (45). Furthermore, the Pope insisted that a spirituality of communion will prompt “a trust and openness wholly in accord with the dignity and responsibility of every member of the people of God [and supply] institutional reality with a soul” (45). This spirituality of communion fosters the virtue of the will to communion and promotes an embrace of plural unity within
the church. This does not make the church a place where the majority rules so there is peace, or where there must be unanimity or singularity in thinking. Instead, the church becomes the gathering of people who reflect what the Trinity is all about: equality, distinctiveness, and mutuality. All the members of the church are equal in dignity by virtue of their baptism, even those on opposite sides of an ideological divide. All members of the church will uniquely and distinctly express the life of grace. This means that the Spirit can be at work in those who felt a tremendous freedom and energy in the heady days after Vatican II when so many exciting changes were ushered in. And the Spirit can be at work in the fervent desire of some people today for more clarity and precision in the life of the church forty years after the council. Moreover, the Spirit can be at work in those who want more vibrant and creative liturgy as well as in those who want liturgy to follow the rubrics of the church as written. The problem is that the Spirit's work may not be what people are expressing or even aware of going on inside of them because the Spirit's work does not lead to harsh suspicion, accusation, or judgment of others. This is why an integrated spiritual life is always necessary for both theologians and ministers. Finally, all members of the church can only truly be members in mutuality. Discipleship is never a solitary path, nor is it a journey only with the like-minded. To be church is to recognize our need for and our bond with those who are temperamentally and theologically so different than we are.

The Virtue of the Will to Communion

As persons of theology and ministry, the virtue of the will to communion calls us to the same form of discipleship to which the Spirit led the early church. Yet it must come from a spirituality of communion. Concretely this means several things:

• We need to be less about apologetics that force people to take an ideological position and more about evangelization that invites people to be drawn together more deeply into the Gospel of Christ.

• We cannot operate out of apodictic positions that foster division; we need to seek understanding that leads to communion (true unity with those with whom we minister, teach, and disagree).

• We cannot strive for professional eminence (“I’m degree’d . . . I’m ordained . . . I’m commissioned, and so I am right about these things”); instead, we ought to strive for pastoral wisdom: What are the questions and needs arising out of the particular life experiences of these particular people with whom I am engaged as a theologian/minister? How can what I have learned and been trained in be brought to bear in this moment of their experiences?
• We need to surrender the motivating desire to be right and instead live from a desire to be faithful to what Christ calls us to do, allowing that others will respond to that same call in different but equally valid ways.

• We need to reject open polemics of judgment as well as the passive-aggressive subterfuge of disdain (which often comes from an unhealthy fear of disagreement) and instead embrace respectful disagreement and healthy confrontation.

• We can never reduce theology/ministry to only our work but need to remember that they are God at work in us. And while there is no contradiction in God, there is diversity within God. So God’s Spirit can be at work in the persons who are on opposite sides of an issue or at least appear to be at this moment (until perhaps a development in thinking reveals an underlying point of unity).

• We can never allow our anger to objectify other persons by reducing them to nothing more than the positions they espouse that so irritate us. Recall that Jesus dined with Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:31-35) even though the opposition with the Pharisees was mounting (Luke 7:30). Still, Jesus could sit with Simon at his household table.

• As recipients of the Spirit and co-agents of the Spirit’s work of communion, we always need to be willing to seek forgiveness, to offer forgiveness, and to forge reconciliation when, in our theological and ministerial work, alienation has occurred.

• We need to let the liturgy inform the manner in which we do theology and ministry, because we are centered in the Eucharist. To be drawn with others into the oneness of Christ at the table of Word and Sacrament means that our theology and ministry must also become tables of communion.

It is important to remember that none of these expressions of the virtue of the will to communion can truly develop apart from the habit of entering into prayerful union with God. Without this our own efforts at communion can easily become “mechanisms without a soul, ‘masks’ of communion rather than its means of expression and growth” (NMI, no. 43). In our own personal communion with God the virtue of the will to communion is nurtured and strengthened. It is from our own experience of being drawn into the heart of God that we find the capacity to stay at table with those with whom we disagree.
References


