

## Book Review

Aurelio C. Joaquin. *The Eucharist: Continuing Global Project*. Quezon City: Claretian Communications Foundation, 2023. 236 pp.

The book's 2024 Cardinal Sin Book Award for Best Book in Theology confirms it is not merely a local pastoral or devotional reflection, but an invaluable theological contribution to Eucharistic literature.

The author, Aurelio C. Joaquin, was ordained in 1968 and served as a diocesan priest for twelve years. In 1973, he obtained a *diplôme* from the Institut Supérieur de Pastorale Catéchétique at the Institut Catholique de Paris. Within the Diocese of Malolos, Joaquin founded and directed PASKA (*Pandiyosis na Sentro ng Katekesis*) and KRISKA (*Kristyanong Kapitbahayan*, 1974–1979), and coordinated the diocesan Commission on Formation (1976–1979). His previous publications include *Pope Francis' Unfinished Business* (2019) and *Sumasampalataya Ako: Isang Katesismo* (2016). Following his ordained ministry, he married and is now a father to two adult children.

The book's subtitle, *Continuing Global Project*, introduces a broad ecclesiological vision: The Eucharist is the sacrament of both the local community and the universal Church. Each celebration connects worshippers to a global network of believers united in Christ, serving as a vital sign of global communion that urges the Church to transcend cultural, economic, and political divisions.

Across ten chapters, Joaquin argues that the Eucharist must transcend cultic ritual to reclaim its missionary, communal, and praxic dimensions. Because he focuses on steering the direction of future theological

reflection, readers should not expect an exhaustive or dense synthetic work. Instead, Joaquin delivers a targeted challenge for theologians to re-examine the concept of salvation—implicitly criticizing traditional atonement frameworks and advocating for a paradigm shift.

Joaquin observes that over the centuries, the Church has progressively made the Eucharist as a predominantly cultic celebration. This shift, rooted in the third and fourth centuries, initially overemphasized sacrificial presence or atonement themes. Later historical developments—particularly post-Tridentine sacramental theology—accentuated metaphysical explanations of the Mass, fostering an inward-looking perspective about the sacrament. A clear example is how a localized focus on transubstantiation inadvertently detached the liturgical act from outward mission, rendering it self-referential rather than a communal participation in God's saving action.

To counter this reductionism, Joaquin proposes retrieving an earlier, broader vision of the Eucharist that integrates liturgical celebration with pastoral mission. He argues that the sacrament is not merely a representation of Christ's sacrifice, but a continuous historical movement of communion, solidarity, and mission.

Joaquin's book directly confronts this tension by proposing a theological rethinking of the Eucharist as a living historical process—one intended not merely for celebration, but for active worldly enactment. For him, persistent social fragmentation, violence, and inequality signal a profound misalignment between Eucharistic worship and Christian life. The Eucharist cannot be isolated from human struggles; it is an ecclesial event with concrete ethical and societal implications.

A key strength of the book is its integration of history and theology to drive pastoral commitment and action. Joaquin reconstructs how historical Eucharistic practices evolved to support contrasting theological meanings. Originally inseparable from communal life, earliest communities viewed the Eucharist through fellowship, teaching, and service, rather than as a rigid ritual. This tradition maintained a “twin emphasis” balancing Jesus’ life and words with sacrificial remembrance.

Over time, medieval scholasticism and the Council of Trent heavily favored sacrificial remembrance, fundamentally reshaping sacramental practice. While Joaquin does not explicitly reject transubstantiation—noting in a footnote that ordinary Catholics rarely understand its metaphysical complexities—he critiques how such rigid doctrinal formulations turned the Eucharist into an *end* rather than a *means*.

Like drama, ritual uses structured, symbolic actions to express a community’s core values. In the Eucharist, this celebratory drama is, in most cases, focused on transubstantiation—the transformation of bread and wine into a metaphysical, otherworldly substance. Because the focus is placed entirely on uniting the community with this mysterious, divine object, the ritual loses its emphasis on the community itself (the *ekklesia* = assembly). Rather than celebrating what the church should accomplish as the living body of Christ, the practice shifts the focus away from the transforming presence of Christ within the community. Pre-Vatican II produced clear explanations of the sacrament in metaphysical terms, but weakened the sacrament’s social character.

Vatican II addressed historical ecclesial imbalances by re-emphasizing the Church as the “People of God” and the Eucharist as the source of mission. Joaquin builds on this conciliar theology, arguing that while the Council

initiated the recovery of the Eucharist's communal character, the retrieval remains a work in progress. The most compelling dimension of Joaquin's work is his insistence that Eucharistic theology must directly confront social injustice. By explicitly linking the liturgy to the Church's engagement with the poor, he demonstrates how the sacrament propels believers outward toward societal transformation.

This framework resonates profoundly within the Philippine context, where deep-seated Catholic religiosity coexists with systemic poverty and inequality. Joaquin sharpens this critique into a direct challenge: Filipino devotions, processions, and frequent Mass attendance are hollow without active social commitment. Consequently, his work mirrors both *Laudato Si'* and liberation theology's preferential option for the poor. Rather than treating this call as mere social ethics, Joaquin grounds it in sacramental ontology—the Eucharist, by its very nature, demands justice.

The book's central insight is that the Eucharist actively creates Church unity rather than just symbolizing it. Joaquin argues that liturgical communion demands historical action, obligating Christians to show concrete solidarity with the marginalized. Drawing on Augustine and Chrysostom, he uniquely applies this patristic thought to a Filipino pastoral context. Consequently, separating Eucharistic devotion from social concern creates a theological contradiction. Ultimately, Joaquin reframes sacramental theology as an active ecclesial practice, presenting the Eucharist as ecclesiology in action.

The book bridges Catholic sacramental and moral theology by arguing that the Eucharist constitutes moral life. Joaquin shifts the Church's focus from performing rites to enacting Christ's mission, directly addressing Asian and Filipino realities like social inequality. Instead

of dismissing traditional doctrine, he re-situates it within a communal, missionary horizon.

The book highlights a critical pastoral crisis: abundant sacraments without social change. To address this, Joaquin redefines the Eucharist as memory, community building, and mission. The liturgy does not end at the final blessing; the dismissal extends the sacrament into the world.

Joaquin's work is a significant contemporary contribution to sacramental theology. Rooted in Vatican II ecclesiology and resonant with liberation theology, the work re-imagines the Eucharist as an ongoing historical mission rather than a static, self-contained ritual. The author poses a disarming question to the contemporary Church: if Christians truly share one bread, why do they not share one life? His response is both theological and pastoral, asserting that the Eucharist does not end at the altar but continues outward into the world.

For the baptized, this theology serves as an invitation to reclaim the Eucharist as the foundation of Christian existence, rather than just the center of weekly worship. Rigorously researched, insightful, and critically engaging, Joaquin's work is essential reading for Catholics seeking a deeply integrated Eucharistic spirituality. Consequently, this book is highly recommended as a primary theology textbook for Catholic seminaries and houses of formation, as well as a vital resource for lay ecclesial leaders.

Levy Lara Lanaria, PhD  
Member

*Damdaming Katoliko sa Teolohiya*  
(Catholic Theological Society of the Philippines)