

THE EUCHARIST: REPRESENTATIVE VIEWS

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This paper will attempt to show how we can come alive in Christ through a recovery of the sacrament of the Eucharist as seen through the eyes of the ancient Church.

It has been said that "spirituality is humanity wedded to holiness." What could be more visible and tangible in our experience of visual perception than bread and wine as images and symbols of the holiness of God?

Eusebius tells us that in the ancient Church Christians quite willingly went to the racks in order to partake of the Eucharist. They were willing to give up their lives for the celebration. What drove them to do this? Did they have a different understanding of the meaning of the Eucharist than we do today?

As we attempt this historical study let us ask this question: How does a gracious God give himself to man? This will help us to keep an open mind and will allow the Holy Spirit to bring us new truth, which he is so anxious to do. This will then spur us on to seek out the nature and importance of the event and how the grace of God is mediated through the Eucharist.

I. THE EUCHARIST IN THE ANCIENT CHURCH

In his fine chapter on the Eucharist in the ancient Church, Arthur Vööbus explores ten aspects that provide good insights for this study. I shall briefly summarize those most relevant to the discussion here, those dealing with the meaning and practice of the Lord's Supper.

To begin with, "no genre of literature treating the question of the Eucharist and its meaning existed in the Ancient church."¹ Apparently this was not a debatable issue in the early Church. References to the historical aspects of the Eucharist are scarce in the NT, as are those found in such other sources as the Church fathers. Because the primitive Christians felt Christ's presence so keenly in their midst, this was the main event. Everything else was secondary as far as structure is concerned.

Again, what was the meaning of the Eucharist in the earliest period? What was the meaning the primitive Christians gave to the Eucharist?

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¹ A. Vööbus, "The Eucharist in the Ancient Church," in *Meaning and Practice of the Lord's Supper* (ed. H. T. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961) 39.

We are faced with the dilemma of scarcity of material on the subject, making it difficult to give an adequate historical reconstruction.

Some key thoughts on the meaning given to the Eucharist in primitive Christianity are as follows: (1) The "breaking of bread" brought immense joy. Acts 2:46 states that "they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God." We conclude that these people experienced the presence of the risen Lord in their midst. "As the Risen Lord appeared to his disciples during a meal, so he was in their midst in their cultic meal of the Eucharist."² (2) The celebration of the Eucharist points forward to the consummation—that is, the messianic banquet when the Lord returns to establish his kingdom at the end of time. (3) The expression "This is my blood that was shed" gives another meaning to the Eucharist in the sense that it is also a sharing in the suffering of Jesus, who shed his blood for the cancellation of our sins.

We discover, then, that in the primitive Church sharp questions did not come into focus. "The theological reflection about what was celebrated was of secondary importance."³

A change in ideas completely reoriented the thinking of Christians as they viewed the Eucharist. Consequently "a total shift in the understanding of the Eucharist became inevitable."⁴ The shift in thinking occurred as follows: (1) The gift of the Eucharist came to be understood as granting access to the mysteries of the transcendental world. (2) Under Hellenism the emphasis fell on the relation between the Eucharist and the individual so that the Eucharist became a chief means for reconciliation. (3) When the Eucharist was cut away from its natural setting it was diverted to or subjected to a theological problem of the elements.⁵

II. THE MEDIEVAL DEVELOPMENT

It is important to dip into this time in history because it has valuable information regarding how often the Eucharist was celebrated in pre-Nicene times.

According to Gregory Dix, the "old corporate Eucharist was not normally celebrated daily" in pre-Nicene times.⁶ In the fourth and fifth centuries, due to the increasing collapse of civilization the Church became corrupted. But in spite of the social and educational ills of the Church during this time the need for frequent communions persisted. In the sermons of S. Caesarius of Arles (c. A.D. 500–530) a strong appeal is made to the laity to come more often to communion. Even in the eleventh century, Roman clergy were still encouraging the laity to frequent communions. According to the section on lay communion in Dix, elsewhere in

² Ibid. 47.

³ Ibid. 51.

⁴ Ibid. 55.

⁵ Ibid. 56.

⁶ G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre, 1960) 592.

the west holy communion became practically a clerical and monastic monopoly after the fifth century. By the twelfth century and down to the sixteenth, the priest was normally the only communicant.

"The seriousness of this disappearance of lay communion" brought about the demise of the layman's right to have an active part in the offertory. When the partial recovery of lay communion came in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the custom had lapsed, and the layman's offering of bread and wine at the offertory was not recovered. Then the layman lost his active participation in the rest of the rite. "He became a mere spectator and listener, without a liturgy in the primitive sense at all."⁷

This corruption of the Eucharist that took place during these centuries ripened the time for the doctrinal controversies about the Eucharist that took place in the sixteenth century.

We leave this historical aspect of the decline of the Eucharist—a far cry from the primitive form at this point. Before we depart from this subject, however, one more thing needs to be said to put the whole matter into focus. When the emphasis in the Eucharist shifted to the Lord's death, it became irrelevant to Protestant piety and was eventually replaced by a new theory of ethical progress. This was to be achieved by following the example of Christ's life, an idea brought about by the nineteenth-century theory of evolution. This cleared the way for that "largely non-eucharistic piety of modern popular protestantism, in which the Eucharist is an occasional and entirely optional appendage to a normal worship of 'edification.'"⁸

Indeed, the view of the Eucharist changed over the years from what it was meant to be as explained by the fathers and the NT. This view has been carried down to us today and has influenced the tradition of the Eucharist in Protestant piety and thought.

We will now attempt to look at some of the controversy that developed as the Church lost sight of the ancient view when the people experienced the presence of the risen Lord in their cultic meal. As noted earlier, when the Eucharist was cut away from its natural setting it was diverted to or subjected to a theological problem of the elements. Here is what happened.

III. THE ROMAN CATHOLIC POSITION

Before the Middle Ages, Church thinking had been to view the sacrifice of the mass as a memorial of Calvary. But during the Middle Ages the sacrificial notion gradually came to eclipse the memorial, which entailed the priest becoming an intermediary between God and man. Christ on the cross at Calvary was understood to have instituted a process by which the priest inherited power to manipulate God. This notion of the mass as

⁷ Ibid. 598.

⁸ Ibid. 602.

a sacrifice of Christ led to the idea of the priest distributing the literal body of Christ to the people.

By 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council the concept of a real, sensual body and real, sensual blood had been developed. Scotus and Ockham declared that the bread's substance remained but that Christ's heavenly substance was added to it. This "impanation" theory was an attempt to preserve something of a spiritual interpretation, and it was from this source that Luther was to gather germinal thoughts. The Reformers were all agreed upon two points: (1) Christ's sacrifice at Calvary was complete; (2) the doctrine of transubstantiation was erroneous and must be repudiated.⁹

IV. "REAL PRESENCE"

Max Thurian states: "The real and personal presence of Christ in the bread and wine, which are His body and blood, is a mystery which the church can never fathom or explain."¹⁰ The "real presence" in the Eucharist is a fact and must be defended against those who consider it magic or spiritualization. The Council of Trent affirmed the "real presence" when it met in 1551, at which time it considered the doctrine of transubstantiation. The term "conversion" was applied to the doctrine, which meant the reality of Christ's presence in the Eucharist.

Luther rejected transubstantiation but affirmed the "real presence" and the bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ. He wished to maintain, however, the integrity of the mystery. Although he accepted the idea of a "real presence" he qualified it by his emphasis on the ubiquity of Christ's glorified body.

Calvin and Reformed doctrine did not affirm the "real presence" in the Eucharist. Calvin's doctrine of the role of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist was that the Spirit was there as a kind of channel by which everything that Christ has and is is conducted to us.

In Calvin's understanding of the "real presence" the body of Christ was localized in heaven, and it is his Spirit that descends to us in the Eucharist. The Spirit is no longer so much the third person of the Trinity as an instrument of the Son, which means that the Spirit is no more than a "unifying power reducing the distance between Christ and the believer." Calvin aligns himself with the apostle Paul to explain away his ignorance of the mystery.

We can sum up the concept of the "real presence" with eight theses: (1) The body and blood of Christ, his whole humanity and deity, are truly, really and substantially present in the Eucharist. (2) Christ, even though he abides at the Father's right hand and abides in his humanity and deity, may also be met at the Eucharist. "How it happens that He is also present corporally in the Eucharist is a mystery and the work of the Holy

⁹ E. Ashcroft, "A Comparison of Eucharistic Theology at the Time of the Reformation" (unpublished article) 1-2.

¹⁰ M. Thurian, *The Eucharistic Memorial* (Richmond: John Knox, 1961) 108.

Spirit which the Church cannot define.”¹¹ (3) The chemical nature of the bread and wine are not changed. The nature remains that of bread and wine, but it must be recognized as the body and blood of Christ. (4) It is the Holy Spirit, according to the Father’s request, who makes the bread and the wine the body and blood of Christ. (5) The Eucharist is not a sacred object but an action and an act of communion. The signs of bread and wine are the vehicle of the “real presence” of the body and blood of Christ in us. (6) The body and blood of Christ that are objectively present in the Eucharist really come as a means of sanctification to those who receive them, to those who have a right intention. Those whose spirit is one of pride or egotism, or who lack faith and love, bring condemnation to themselves. (7) After the communion is over, all eucharistic remains should be consumed. The material basis of this presence has a right to our respect. (8) The Eucharist unifies and joins together the members of the body of Christ. Christ establishes the unity of his body in the communion of his eucharistic body.

V. THE EUCHARIST AS ACTION

Dix uses 2 Cor 4:10 as a summation of the conception of the Eucharist as action. It was a delight to discover that Dix gives credence to this verse in tying it in with the eucharistic rite: “Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.” By “this interpretation of the Eucharist as an entering into the self-offering of Christ to death” we proclaim the Lord’s death until the end of time by eating and drinking of the Eucharist. In other words, we take on the dying of Jesus in the Eucharist so that his life might be shown in our body individually or in the Church corporately.

Unfortunately, after the time of St. Thomas this understanding of the Eucharist passed more and more into the background of current teaching in the western Church, though it was still formally acknowledged by the theologians.¹² It is interesting to note that when the pre-Nicene Church thought and spoke of the Eucharist as an action, as something done, it conceived it primarily as an action of Christ himself, perpetually offering through and in his body the Church his flesh for the life of the world.¹³

How did Martin Luther view the Eucharist as action? He insisted that there is no sacrifice. The body and blood of Christ are not offered to God but to men. There is still eucharistic action—even an action of Christ in the Eucharist—but the Church does not enter into it. For Luther, then, eucharistic action was reduced to the act of communion alone, which each must do for himself.

Let us consider the action of the Holy Spirit. In communion we are to strive to become what we are meant to become, and we will find fulfillment in the Eucharist. The Holy Spirit, who is given to us in the sacrament,

¹¹ Ibid. 121.

¹² Dix, *Shape* 298.

¹³ Ibid. 254.

will help us to fulfill this idea of what we are so that we can go back into the world and represent Christ and live out our Christian experience: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed . . . , always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you" (2 Cor 4:7-12).

As Dix says, these verses apply to the Christian life in general, but for Paul the Eucharist is the representative act of the whole Christian life, the thought that Jesus is bringing to us life and that while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake. I wonder if Martin Luther had these verses in mind when in pleading for more frequent communions he said, "If you could see how many daggers, spears, and arrows are at every moment aimed at you, you would be glad to come to the sacrament as often as possible."¹⁴

Could this also be involved in the "action" of the Eucharist—Christ's "real presence" there not only supplicating for the Church and the unity of believers but also his healing and curing for individuals who need his healing touch and his exorcising demons who are trying to destroy and break down?

Thurian may have had some ideas similar to these when he spoke of the wonderful power of Christ in the Eucharist. Some healing would be taking place if, at the Eucharist, we would be ridding ourselves of divisions, misunderstandings and prejudices as Thurian suggests. If Jesus' "real presence" is in our midst at the Eucharist, he continues his earthly ministry in these areas and still performs miracles in order to continue to unify and heal his corporate body, the Church.

Louis Bouyer speaks to the Catholic tradition concerning the shape of the Eucharist. In his search for the permanent shape of the liturgy from traditional resources he reminds us that the mass, as found in liturgical tradition, is not to be reduced to any single thought or idea because the action in the mass is the perfect unity of a great living thing.

In light of this thought of "aliveness" in the mass, Bouyer refers us to the Catholic scholar Brilioth's work, *Eucharistic Faith and Practice* (1910), in which he believes that there are to be found at least four irreducible elements in the mass. According to Brilioth the whole celebration is not understood unless it is understood in all its parts and in their unity as related to the parts. He defines the four parts as follows: (1) *Communion* is a community meal in which the communicants come together to share with others in a common partaking of the holy things, the feast of wine and bread. (2) *Sacrifice* is to be understood not just as a special rite. It is the whole of the Christian life inasmuch as it is life in the divine love. As Christians partake of the Eucharist the whole Christian life of

¹⁴ Ibid.

each person is imbued with that sacrificial virtue, understood as God's absolute power over man and all things. (3) *Thanksgiving* responds to God for all his gifts including the whole of creation and our redemption in Christ, the consummation then reflected in the eucharistic meal of bread and wine. Thanksgiving also finds expression in the sacrifice of praise as man stands before God in the Church. (4) *Memorial* in the Eucharist reminds us of the Christian history that "led up to the Cross—not only from the birth of Christ, but from the sacrifice of Abel, the offering of Abraham . . . through the whole sacred history of the people of God." This brings us to the importance of the readings that lead up to the meal. They help us recall God's action of entering human history, redeeming it and fulfilling it from within, while the meal itself commemorates the climax of this process in the cross.

Two other important aspects regarding the communion are dealt with as well: (1) *Mystery* is not a new or separate element of the mass but a new depth. Roman Catholic Christians have concentrated too often on the "real presence" and have eclipsed the appreciation of the other four elements in the mass.¹⁵ (2) *Dual Eucharists* have been proposed, as in Lietzmann's *Messe und Herrenmahl*. Lietzmann claimed that one Eucharist came to us straight down from the community meals of the disciples when they had the Lord in their midst and that the other came to us directly from Paul, who reconstructed the Eucharist by putting emphasis upon remembering "the death of the Lord, until he comes."

This balanced view can give us spiritual maturity as we grasp the idea of the "real presence" of Christ among us.

VI. OTHER VIEWS

It is the view of the Anglican Church that "the Eucharist is always creating the church to be the Body of Christ; to do His will, and work His works and adore His Father . . . and in Him to be made one, and by Him in them to be made one with God. That is the consummation of human living and the end of man."¹⁶ This upholds the primitive Church's view that the Eucharist is the flesh of the Savior. The beliefs of the early fathers regarding various aspects of the Eucharist follow.¹⁷ For Ignatius, the Eucharist is a sign of the unity of the people of God. "There is one Eucharist as there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, one church, one bishop, one altar." For Augustine, "Christians are to see in the many grains, ground by the prayers of exorcism, moistened by the waters of baptism and now united in the one eucharistic loaf, the image of themselves as the Body of Christ, the Church." For many of the fathers, the eucharistic assembly is thus an image of the Church. For them, salvation lay within the Church. In fact no sure salvation lay without it. For the

¹⁵ L. Bouyer, *Liturgical Piety* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1964) 77.

¹⁶ Dix, *Shape* 734.

¹⁷ R. J. Halliburton, *The Study of Liturgy* (New York: Oxford University, 1978) 203.

fathers the Eucharist was the Christian sacrifice—that of surrendering heart and mind.

VII. SUMMARY

As we conclude, two important ideas emerge. First, in the sacrament of holy communion there is given to men the fullness of the gift that God gives in Jesus Christ. Described by Luther as forgiveness of sins, life and salvation, this fullness expresses the totality of the self-impartment of God's love.

Second, the direction of the sacrament is from God to man. The impartation is a gift from God. It is not only man offering his prayers, thanks and praises to God. Rather, it is God reaching down to man, Christ offering to us a gift that we are to keep and receive with gratitude and joy. In this sense, then, this sacrament is the gospel, a gracious God giving himself to man.

Is the sacrament only a memorial of a past event? If we apply the concept of time to the supper it no longer can be only a memorial of an event long past. The death on Calvary is recognized as Jesus' atoning for the sins of the world. His atoning death is then a present reality in the sacrament and not just a memory.

Let us touch again on the idea of the presence of Christ in the sacrament. Briefly stated, Jesus is in the sacrament itself, and his body should not be excluded as being thought of in some other place. The presence of Christ is, therefore, a presence of the total Christ. This indeed is a mystery. It is not our thanksgiving that makes the sacrament; it is God's giving of himself to us in the sacrament that makes the sacrament our thanksgiving. God comes down in response to man's need.

Regarding the importance for frequency in partaking of communion, it joins all believers together in the body of Christ. It is a corporate celebration that breaks all barriers and unites all sorts and conditions of men. It is the nurture of the body of Christ.

Thurian pleads for a weekly—yes, even daily—communion. He bases his plea not on a vague feeling of nostalgia but on the experience of the wonderful power of Christ in the Eucharist. He then goes on to tell how a pastor or priest can bring around the congregation to this view and concludes with the thought that the Eucharist is the sacrament of unity. The more we celebrate the Eucharist with the mystery of Christ in our midst the more we prepare for Christian unity. We can rid ourselves of divisions and misunderstandings. The dissolving of prejudices will thereby effect a spirit of unity. Once the wonderful power of Christ is experienced in the Eucharist, one can hardly wait for another celebration. When the love of Christ is so evident and his presence so keenly felt in the mystery, why do not the churches observe it more frequently? Is not this what the ancient Church experienced?

Because the Eucharist is so complex in meaning and because it is a mystery of God, man can never fully reach total understanding. Many

tensions still remain, and unfortunately they continue to divide the Church. Such has been the story from the ancient Church to the present day. But in spite of differences, eucharistic doctrine can be profoundly meaningful to people. Schillebeeckx puts it well when he says that "the sacramental approach to God is deeply rooted in man's religious and social psychology." As Dix reminds us: "Two archbishops of Canterbury have lost their lives, a third his see, one king has been beheaded and another dethroned. Many lesser men have suffered all manner of penalties from martyrdom downwards on one side and another."¹⁸

Is it no wonder that the Eucharist continues to be a source of tension in the Church? It is possible that someday the Lord of the Eucharist will be pleased to reveal further insights into the mystery that will bring renewed vigor on the part of communicants to want to partake of the Lord's supper more frequently than is now common in most of Protestant Christendom.

Luther battled for a weekly celebration as "being both the practice of the early church and necessary for the spiritual well-being of Christians." Calvin described the custom of once-a-year reception of the sacrament as unquestionably an invention of the devil and stated that the table of the Lord should be spread before each congregation at least once every week. Perhaps the ripples will eventually become tidal waves and we will see a return to the practice of the early Church in not allowing the Lord's Day to pass without celebrating Word and sacrament together.

¹⁸ Dix, *Shape* 614.