A Changeable Feast: The Evolution of the Eucharist, Part 2

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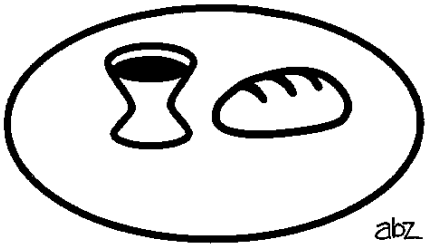
Ed. Note: In part one, we saw how various crises and events influenced the church's understanding of the Eucharist, resulting in "threads" of meaning which became permanent parts of later prayers, resulting in the complex prayers we are familiar with today.



Gnostics and the Incarnational Thread

Even while the Christians were suffering terrible persecution, this threat did not prevent the appropriation of its rich mythic elements by other religious groups. The kaleidoscope of sects which fall under the umbrella of Gnosticism found in the story of Christ a useful metaphor for their philosophies, causing a great deal of panic and confusion among the Christian ranks.

One teaching that the many varieties of Gnostics held in common was the belief in a radical dualistic split between matter and spirit. Gnostics held that the flesh and all things material were the creation of the wicked lesser god, Ialdoboth (otherwise known as Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews). Matter is therefore evil, and yet humanity contains a divine spark that longs to break free from its fleshly prison to enjoy divine union with the true God beyond this universe.

There were many Gnostic sects around at the time of Christ, and they lost no time in appropriating the Christian mythos to illustrate their beliefs. Even during the apostles' lifetime, Gnostic interpretations of the Jesus story were felt to be a threat. Gnosticism radically reinterpreted nearly every Christian belief, including the creation, the incarnation, the atonement, and Christ's resurrection.

Since there was very little developed theology in the Christian church in the first couple of centuries, anything that sounded plausible was a candidate for interpretation. Thus it was that the Apostles felt so strongly about the Gnostic threat. It relegated their God to the status of "pretender to the throne" of heaven, and made Jesus out to be an apparition bent on celestial espionage. This was so contrary to their experience that John, Peter, and Paul all forcefully attacked the heresy. Those who came after them would do the same, for nearly four hundred years.

What made the Gnostics' version so threatening is that they had developed a powerful and detailed Christology: an understanding of who Jesus was and what his mission was about. The church only had the stories of Jesus and the lives of their communities. Little systematic theology had been developed. There was no authoritative teaching regarding the nature of Christ or the meaning of Jesus' mission. Even the testimonies of the epistle-writers seemed to be at odds as to what salvation meant and how it was achieved.

Naturally, the elders of the church also began to shape its worship in an effort to reinforce the teachings they considered essential to "true" Christianity. One of the primary issues was, of course, the incarnation, which affirmed the Jewish belief in the goodness of Creation and the holiness of the body. Thus an "incarnational" thread began to wind its way through the history of the Eucharist.

The incarnational thread drew upon the Last Supper traditions where Jesus identifies the bread and wine as his body and blood. Christians began to see the Eucharist as an enacted "parable" wherein the mystery of the Incarnation is re-enacted in the sharing of the meal.

Since "the Word was made flesh and lived among us" in history, then the Word is made flesh again in the sacred meal. It was Irenaeus (130-200 CE) who is credited with first formulating this thread, making it clear to the people that if Jesus unites with these creatures of flesh, this bread and this wine on a daily basis before our very eyes, then of course he could have united with flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. The incarnation was thus reinforced through the use of the Eucharist for the early church, and orthodox teaching about the goodness of creation and the reality of incarnation was safeguarded. Unfortunately, this was done at a cost that could not have been forseen at the time: for it began the shift in the locus of the "Body of Christ" from the community to the elements.

Formerly, the Body of Christ was understood to be present in the community which met to pray with a holy meal, but now, slowly, it is the everyday elements of bread and wine which are

beginning to be seen as the vehicle (or the "host") of Christ's presence. While the early Christians could now say, "Not only is the Eucharist...a means of thanking God for creating the world with all things that are in it...it is also a vivid reminder of the reality of the incarnation,"[1] they had at the same time crossed a symbolic threshold from which the church has never returned.

This thread is, of course, evident in Episcopal worship since it requires the institutional narrative found in each of the Eucharistic prayers in the prayerbook, where Jesus says, "Take, eat, this is my body, which is given for you." This part is missing from some early liturgies.

The Metabolist Thread

Now that the rite had become in many places a re-enactment of the "mystery of the incarnation" for the benefit of those potentially swayed by Gnostic teachings, Christians began to speak of a "change" happening in the elements during the recitation of the Eucharistic prayer. By the fourth century this notion of "change" (*metabolé*) taking place in the elements was common in theological writing.

Precisely when this change in the bread and wine occurs, however, has long been a subject of some debate. According to Ambrose, it is the recitation of the words of Jesus at the Last Supper that affects the bread and wine. When the presider says, "This is my body," it is by the power of the Word (through the Holy Spirit) that the bread in fact becomes possessed of its divine character. Likewise with the wine. It is this view (that the "change" occurs at the exact point of the recitation of the Institutional narrative) that gained prominence in the West.

At the same time Ambrose was writing in Milan, Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, testifies to a different tradition, continued by the Eastern churches, which asserts that it is the *epiclesis*, the prayer which invokes the Holy Spirit upon the elements (and often upon the gathered assembly as well) which affects the change.

The *epiclesis* developed from a feature of the eschatological thread, specifically from the prayer that God would "gather the church from the ends of the earth" into a single body. Gradually this prayer asked for the Holy Spirit to act upon the assembled community, to fill them and to make of them the Body of Christ.

From there it is a relatively short leap to invoking the Holy Spirit in the same prayer to likewise transform the elements. Not necessarily tied to the Last Supper traditions, many early Eucharistic prayers emphasize the *epiclesis* to the total exclusion of the Institutional Narrative, as in the Liturgy of Addai and Mari. In the Liturgy of St. Mark (4th century) the *epiclesis* beseeches God to fill the offering with the Holy Spirit, but no mention is made of the offering becoming the "body" and "blood" of Christ.

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Another ancient prayer of the same period (3rd-4th centuries), contained in the Euchologium of Sarapion of Thmuis, is also unusual in its use of "body and blood" imagery. In this prayer it is asked that "God's Word may come upon the bread and chalice so that they may become the body of the Word and the blood of truth."

What is so striking about these examples is that in the rush of theological development—in which the idea that a change occurs in the elements caught on very quickly—there is a decided lack of consensus on what, precisely, the elements change into. While "the body and blood" of Christ were clearly the preferred identifications, even these took on manifold interpretations, with many ancient writers assigning their own, often surprising correspondences. For Ignatius of Antioch (35-107 CE), the bread became "faith" and the wine "truth."

In this, one of the church's most fertile periods of theological and liturgical innovation, churches were still free to discover what the elements meant for *them*, and it is quite clear that differing communities found meaning in a variety of ideas. The discovery of such diversity of interpretation can come to many contemporary Christians as something of a revelation, especially since for the majority of these early churches, celebrating the Eucharist in a way that made sense to them rarely cast doubts upon a community's orthodoxy, but instead spoke loudly for the vitality of the people's life of faith.

The Divinization Thread

With the advent of the metabolist perspective, Christians were faced with the dilemma of celebrating one thing (bread or wine) which they perceived to be something else entirely (in most cases, the body or blood of Christ). This was not as difficult as it might seem, since people in the ancient world were much less confused about the

relationship between the symbol and the signified than we are today. For them, the dominant philosophy of Platonism provided a ready vocabulary to describe what was occurring in the consecration of the elements. Christianity had never been a stranger to Platonism, of course; the writings of both John and Paul are replete with Platonic twists. But from the time of Justin Martyr (100-165 CE) onwards, Christianity was to be radically re-interpreted, and at the same time the Eucharist would once again be radically re-mythologized.

The early Christian Platonists discerned two levels of reality in the sacraments; the level perceived by the senses, the bread and the wine, which point to and participate in a spiritual reality, that of the divinized, resurrected body of Christ.

As we have seen in our analysis of the Eschatological Thread, the early church navigated its persecutions by looking forward to the messianic feast, prefigured in the Eucharistic meal. As its persecutions continued, however, and Christ's return was delayed, the church began looking backwards at the story of Christ for its inspiration and encouragement. This it found in the Resurrection.

Later to be termed the "Christus Victor" theory of the atonement, this tradition aided the early church by reassuring them that suffering is temporary and that God will triumph. In this tradition, Jesus is painted as "the conquering hero," recalling the Jews' anticipation of a militant messiah, but transporting the drama of the conflict to a more cosmic scale. Jesus sets himself up as bait for Satan, who "seeks to devour human beings" (1Pet. 5:8). When Jesus dies and is swallowed by death, he has craftily gained access to Satan's stronghold, the underworld. There, on his home turf, Satan is confronted with the messiah in all his glory; Satan is utterly overwhelmed and his power broken forever.

It is easy to see how such a myth might be attractive to those undergoing extreme persecution. To them such a theology said, "Be patient, something good will come of this." In this tradition, God is the all-powerful determiner of every event in life, and every event is part of a bigger picture—a plan that will end in triumph.

Naturally, this view was to have its effect on the Eucharist. Like the Eschatological Thread, the Divinization Thread offers a promise and a foretaste of a future and coming redemption; but it is not the messianic feast as such to which the meal points, but to a universal regeneration, a "general resurrection" of the cosmos.

In the Resurrection, the body of Jesus was transfigured and divinized. For the Christians of the fourth century, Christ's resurrection was a "down payment" on the eventual transfiguration of the entire created order. Christ's mission came to be understood in terms of God, through Christ, "assuming" the fallen created order into Godself, and beginning to heal what was lost. Just as Paul says, we who were enemies of God are now not just God's slaves, but joint-heirs with Christ. The Church saw the fallen created order joined irrevocably to its Creator in the Incarnation, and that the Resurrection set into motion a process of redemption, of "divinization." This process would eventually transform not only humanity, but the universe itself into the blessed Community of God, where the "Cosmic Christ" reigns in the heart of all things. What was broken by sin is, through the goodness and graciousness of God, not simply being healed, but embraced utterly and transfigured by divinity into something ineffably glorious.

The Eucharist thus became both the celebration and the means of this transfiguration. "The purpose of the liturgy [was] to sanctify, even to deify, humankind, bringing transfigured Christians to the Christ of the Transfiguration. Through the bestowal of grace in the liturgy, humanity [was] raised to the supernatural order and therefore into sharing the divine existence."[2]

In the resulting theology, Christianity took on a more transcendent tone than its parent religion, Judaism, had ever claimed, and championed a cosmology as cosmic and universal as the prevailing philosophies of the day. It was this philosophical sophistication that was to win for the church such able theologians as Justin and Origen, and which can arguably be said to be responsible for Christianity's growing intellectual credibility in the second through fourth centuries.

This thread is absent from later Western liturgies, since Western theology was founded on a sacrificial theory of the atonement. A good example of the Divinization thread can be found, however, in any Orthodox church even today, but we won't find any hint of it in our own, or any other Catholic, Anglican, or other Western liturgies. ▲

Next time: The Mystery Thread and the Sacrifice Thread in the West.

1 Bridge, Donald and David Phyper. *Communion: The Meal that Unites?* Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1981.
2 Davies, Horton. *Bread of Life & Cup of Joy: Newer Ecumenical Perspectives on the Eucharist.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994; pps. 151-152.

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