

A Changeable Feast: The Evolution of the Eucharist, Part 3

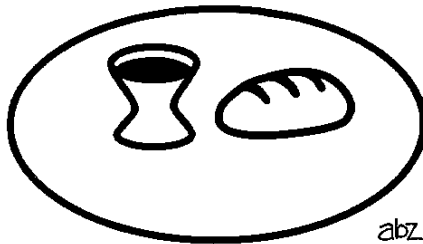
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Ed. Note: In our first two parts, we saw how various crises and events influenced the church's understanding of the Eucharist, resulting in "threads" of meaning which became permanent parts of later prayers, resulting in the complex prayers we are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

The Mystery Thread

The latter half of the fourth century brought about rapid changes that would have made the Christian church virtually unrecognizable to believers of just a hundred years previous, for with the advent of the emperor Constantine (d. 337 CE), Christianity was to suffer the greatest threat to its survival since the great persecutions: acceptance. Although Constantine did not make Christianity the official state religion as commonly believed, he did consider himself to be a convert, and raised the bishops of the church to a grand status within the Roman Empire. He erected the enormous basilicas of Sts. Peter and Paul, and rewarded conversion with political favor. The resulting swelling of ranks in Christendom changed the face of the church considerably, replacing small communities of deeply committed and faithful people with the imperial spectacle encouraged by the swarms of nominal converts, who sought to find in Christianity the lost splendor of the old Roman religion as well as the social vogue attached to the new cult.

In this period Jesus came to be seen as the militant "Emperor of the World," "trampling down death by death" in his triumphant resurrection, reflecting Constantine's military and political victories and embodying Plato's "Philosopher King." Accordingly, the church became



"Christianity on parade, with vast congregations meeting in large churches not only recognized by, but approved by the society surrounding it."¹

During the fourth century the churches became financially viable institutions, and clergy became increasingly full-time and professional in their approach to their vocations. The Eucharist took on the spectacle of imperial pageantry, and became more of an event at which large groups of worshippers were merely "spectators," rather than full participants in the liturgy.

Thus, instead of being performed at home with small groups of believers, celebrated in street clothes, with whatever plates and cups were handy, the Eucharist moved to huge government buildings called "basilicas." This is where we get our rich vestments and the high drama of the mass as we celebrate it today.

Now, this shift in venue was accompanied by a shift in the attitude of the more sincere believers that the church had been "sold out," and that the very precious gift that God had given them in their communities was being destroyed by the Church's cancerous acceleration and its assimilation of the popular pagan culture. Accordingly, there was a knee-jerk effort by the faithful to preserve the

holiness of their faith, manifesting in a desire to protect and maintain the mystery they had previously felt in connection with the Eucharist. Fortunately, such a reaction synchronized nicely with the needs of the new "converts." The many new adherents also brought into the church much that they held to be valuable in their pagan practices.

As a result, many of the actions associated with rituals in the Greek "mystery religions" began to crop up in the Eucharistic liturgy, incorporating the "appearances and disappearances of the celebrant, veiling and unveiling of the elements, opening and closing of the doors, and various gestures connected with the sacrament."² The Eucharist became like "an elaborate, complicated mystery play."³

The shift towards a "mystification" of the Eucharist was a far cry from the common meals shared by Jesus with the disciples. In its favor it must be said that in the complicated and dramatic rite there is found "the whole mystery of salvation, the Incarnation, the death and resurrection of the Logos, his glorification, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and its climax in the descent, the appearance, and the divine presence of the resurrected Christ," who enters the congregation as "King of the universe borne invisibly over their spears by the angelic hosts."⁴

What for the earliest Christians was a meal that emphasized God's immanence and proximity was transformed into a pageant which emphasized God's transcendence and imperial splendor, evoking fear and trembling instead of the ecstasy of freedom previously enjoyed by Christians.

Accordingly, the clergy began preaching sermons which emphasised fear and awe towards the Eucharist. This impulse towards hoarding the mystery of the rite eventually banned the uninitiated from not just participating in the Eucharist, but from even observing it.

The rite was divided into two parts. The “Mass of the Catechumens” came first. It consisted of the readings, the sermon and the prayers, and is analogous to the Jewish synagogue service and to the Liturgy of the Word as we know it in the West. Anyone was welcome to attend this portion of the service, and attendance was required for those who were preparing for baptism (the catechumens).

At the close of this part of the service, the priest cries, “The doors, the doors.” Having excluded everyone but the initiates, those “privy to the mysteries,” the service continues with the “Mass of the Faithful,” or the Eucharist.

The liturgies in use by the Orthodox churches today retain this terminology, although the unbaptized are no longer “shooed out” of the church. They are denied communion, but unlike their counterparts of the fourth century, they are at least welcome to witness the liturgy. The “mystery tradition” is strong in all of the liturgies from this period and those that developed in the Byzantine empire.

The Orthodox liturgies currently in use, the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom and the Liturgy of St. James, have retained much from this thread, and come down to us with only minor accretions, being one of the oldest continuous threads of tradition extant today. They are testament to the power of humanity’s urge towards transcendence and the necessity of mystical religion.

The West and the Sacrifice Thread

While the Divinization Thread would come to dominate the Eucharistic theology of the Eastern churches, the West took a very different turn. As the idea of the bread and wine actually “becoming” the body and blood of Christ (the

Metabolist Thread) gained ground, it was a short leap to the Eucharist becoming a sacerdotal, sacrificial ritual, where these “spotless and bloodless victims” are offered to appease God. Once the clericalism and the distancing took effect after Christianity’s acceptance into the mainstream of religious life, it is not surprising that the general populace’s familiar ideas of sacrificial worship—the norm in pagan society as much as in Judaic—began to surface in the church’s understanding of its own offering.

Sacrificial language had already been long associated with the rite. In the very early Eucharistic liturgy of Hippolytus, the oblation of the first fruits is mentioned. “Bread and wine are offered, but also milk and honey, water, oil, olives, fruit and flowers.” This usage is not connected to sin offerings, where a living victim was sacrificed, but to the ancient Judaic thank offerings, where wine and grain were offered up.

After several centuries, however, Christians began to speak of the Eucharist as the former kind of sacrifice. It was in the writings of Sts. Cyril and Ambrose that this “sacrifice” language first begins to appear explicitly. Cyril, writing in the late third century, described the Eucharist as “that sacrifice of propitiation, for the common peace of the churches, for the stability of the world, for emperors, for armies and auxiliaries, for those in sickness, for the oppressed.” Even more to the point, Ambrose set down a Eucharistic prayer which reads, “Remembering his most glorious passion and resurrection from the dead, and ascension into heaven, we offer you this spotless victim, reasonable victim, bloodless victim, this holy bread and this cup of eternal life.”

Here the locus of the offering is unmistakably narrowed from the whole assembly to the “bloodless, spotless and reasonable victim” of Jesus present in the form of bread and wine. This sacrificial thread began to see the Eucharist as a re-presentation of Christ’s death as a propitiatory sin-offering to the Creator “in the tradi-

tion of the sacrifices of the Old Covenant with the people of Israel.”⁵

The theology of this sacrificial thread presupposes a different soteriology from that of the Divinization thread. In the West the Christus Victor theory of the atonement (which still is the predominant view of the Eastern churches) was supplanted by the “Satisfaction” theory, which was most definitively articulated in the eleventh century by St. Anselm.

Anselm writes that “everyone who sins ought to pay back the honor of which he has robbed God and this is the satisfaction which every sinner owes to God.”⁶

But humankind is tainted and cannot pay the debt. Anselm said that, “Only by the death of God’s own Son could God receive satisfaction. God’s demand that sin be punished is fulfilled by the suffering of the innocent Jesus.”

As Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn explain,

God is portrayed as the one who cannot reconcile “himself” to the world because “he” has been royally offended by sin, so offended that no human being can do anything to overcome “his” sense of offense. Like [King] Lear, God remains estranged from the children God loves because God’s honor must be preserved... It is to free God that the Son submits to death, sacrificing himself...out of overwhelming love for the two alienated parties: God and the human family.⁷

Sometimes known as the “commercial” theory of atonement, this view emphasizes the crucifixion and Christ’s death as the crucial event in salvation history, rather than the resurrection. Far less abstract than the divinization theory, this theology would have been much more easily grasped and assimilated by pagan converts in the “barbaric” West for whom animal sacrifice was a more familiar context to understand the Eucharist than neo-Platonism.

We see this thread clearly in the Book of Common Prayer in Prayer I, Rite I: “Of thy tender mercy, [thou] didst give

thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption; who made there...a full and final sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world" (p. 334).

In the middle ages there arose some confusion about precisely in what way the Eucharist is a sacrifice: is it merely a commemoration of Christ's one and only sacrifice upon Calvary, or is Christ in some way sacrificed again in the ritual? The official teaching of the Western church is clear: the Eucharist is merely a re-presentation of a once and for all sacrifice accomplished by Christ on the cross, and as such, "if Jesus was offering his life to God, then his self-offering can be regarded as in some sense continuing, and the idea can be developed that in the Eucharist, Christ, through his body which is the church, is somehow re-presenting the sacrifice of his life to the Father."⁸

This is clearly stated in the Prayer Book as well, as we say (on the bottom of page four) that Jesus "did institute, and in his holy gospel command us to continue, a perpetual memory of that his precious death and sacrifice, until his coming again" (p. 334).

However fast the church's teachers were to hold to this position, it was not enough to satisfy the popular imagination. This in turn, could not help but influence the church's practice. As with other sacrifices, this one came to be thought of by the people as efficacious in a special way each and every time the ritual was performed.

The people began to see the Mass as a second Calvary, which somehow added value to the original. Theologians spoke of the "fruits" of the Mass in the Middle Ages. With that thinking came the idea that each Mass has a value all its own, and, no doubt, two Masses were better than one.⁹ Soon, more and more masses were being said, including "private" masses—previously an unthinkable religious observation.

Indeed, in the late Middle Ages, there were,

...votive Masses of the twenty-four

patriarchs or elders; of the fourteen, fifteen, and more "holy helpers"; of the seven joys and sorrows of Mary; votive Masses against sicknesses, including one against pestilence, one of Holy Job against syphilis, of St. Christopher against sudden death, one each of Saint Roch and Saint Sebastian against pestilence, one of Saint Sigismund against fever; votive Masses for special requests: in honor of the Archangel Raphael or of the Three Magi for a safe journey.¹⁰ . . . and so on.

Many of these concepts were present in some form from the church's beginning, yet they were always balanced with other imagery. Only gradually—and only in the West—did the Sacrifice Thread come to dominate the church. It is still the primary orientation of Western Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant. From a "sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving," to a virtual re-playing of events on Golgotha, the sacrifice thread has a long and complex history.

As the West continued to celebrate the Eucharist as a presentation of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross (whether as a memorial or, later, as being re-sacrificed in each and every celebration), the ecclesial aspect of the rite, the idea that the church is the body of Christ, was largely forgotten. Whereas for Paul and the Eastern Church, it is the entire liturgy which mediates grace, and by partaking of the holy elements the assembled believers themselves become the "Body" of Christ, in the West the focus is squarely upon the elements.

With the locus of Christ's presence thus pinpointed in the bread and the wine, late medieval Christianity would become obsessed with the question of precisely how Christ was present in the elements. As we have stated, the relationship between symbol and signified was not a concern to the patristic writers. Whereas in the Classical world, the symbol and the signified were co-inherent, with the symbol participating in and mediating the reality signified, the

Middle Ages saw the dissolution of such a presumption. The effect of this loss (of the assumed participation of the symbol in the reality it signifies) was an insecurity regarding the "reality" of Christ's presence in the Eucharistic elements. ▲

Next time: Transubstantiation, Real Presence, Spiritualist, and Communitarian Threads.

1 Horton Davies, *Bread of Life & Cup of Joy: Newer Ecumenical Perspectives on the Eucharist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 264.

2 John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987), 29.

3 Ernst Benz, *The Eastern Orthodox Church, Its Thought and Life* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1983), 34.

4 Davies, 166.

5 Max Thurian, *The Mystery of the Eucharist: An Ecumenical Approach* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 12.

6 Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, chapter nine, quoted in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, Joanne Carlson Brown, and Carole R. Bohn, eds. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 7.

7 Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in Brown and Bohn, 23.

8 Donald Bridge and David Phypers, *Communion: The Meal that Unites?* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1981), 65.

9 William R. Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1992), 124.

10 *Ibid.*

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