

EUCCHARISTIC PIETY

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AN imposing building remains the same though it may look different according to the side from which one views it. The same is true of the holy Eucharist. It is a sacrifice, a memorial, a thanksgiving, a sign of the new and eternal covenant, an epiphany and presence of Christ, a sacred meal. The human mind is too limited to grasp all these aspects simultaneously. Thus at different periods in the history of the Church, different facets of the Eucharist have been emphasised, as they corresponded to the need and atmosphere of each successive age. The veneration of the holy Eucharist has gone through diverse phases which may even seem to be almost contradictory, if viewed only from the outside. Yet it remains essentially the same piety, the same faith and the same reverence, though the expression varies. In the fourth century the communicant received the Lord's body in his hands and was careful that no crumb should fall to the ground since, according to the mystogogical catechesis of Jerusalem, he bore in his hands something more precious than gold and jewels. The same faith and the same reverence are shown when the Daughters of Perpetual Adoration kneel for hours and turn their eyes in prayer towards the monstrance, placed at the centre of the blazing candles.

The fact is that for centuries – one can say, for the first thousand years – the Eucharist, although forming the innermost kernel of christian piety, remained so much in the background that one cannot speak of a distinct eucharistic devotion. The main lines of the great eucharistic liturgies were of course already laid down, in their classical forms, and they conveyed the eternally valid mystery. The Eucharist was celebrated and received, but none of the hagiographers before the twelfth century thought of mentioning how often the saint went to communion or other similar details which would reveal his attitude to the Eucharist. The fact that priests said Mass often or even daily is sometimes noted in passing, but nothing analogous is expressly mentioned in the lives of holy layfolk. The Eucharist was an organic part of their spiritual lives and it was taken for granted. The Eucharist was indeed for them the central act in christian life, but this central act was not clearly singled out and

illuminated. The Eucharist was a kind of radiance around the central point, and other lights gleamed in this halo of light.

For many years the central point in christian life was baptism. Baptism is an illumination, a rebirth to divine life, the pascal resurrection with Christ, an incorporation into Christ and the Church. The Eucharist appeared as the obvious continuation of the life grounded and begun in baptism. This is why we find on the tombstones of the catacombs various pictures which refer to baptism: Noah in the ark, Moses striking the rock, the Samaritan woman by the well. We tend to say of a dead person that he was 'fortified by the rites of the Church', and we have in mind the Eucharist; but in the early period they were inclined to think of baptism. For this reason, the faithful who have died and whom we pray for at Mass, are still described today as those 'who have gone before us in the sign of faith'. They have gone before us marked with the seal of faith, baptism; their faith was confirmed and sealed by baptism. In the early creeds, then, where we do not expect an enumeration of the sacraments, baptism is mentioned, but not the Eucharist.

The early christians turned their minds principally to the starting-point of christian life, but also to its conclusion. Christianity is an invitation to the great marriage feast. It is the proclamation of the kingdom of God, to be realised at the end of time. It is the beginning of the marriage feast of the Lamb, spoken of in the Apocalypse.

In the last hundred years archeologists have discovered in the roman catacombs and elsewhere representations of meals. A few scholars have thought that they depict the Eucharist or at least the last supper or the multiplication of loaves or a love-feast. None of these interpretations is wholly satisfactory. They are certainly not historical representations of the multiplication of loaves or the last supper. The guests sit at a semi-circular table which was called *sigma*; bread and fish are on the table, jugs of wine stand nearby. It is certainly not an historical feast: the Eucharist is only its earthly beginning, and the *agape*, in particular the *agape* of the dead, is only a foreshadowing of it. It is the feast at the end of time. It is the great gift of divine grace alluded to in the postcommunions of the missal where, even after communion has been received, we further pray that we may receive even greater gifts. It is glory, which is why the antiphon *O Sacrum Convivium* describes the Eucharist as an earnest of glory to come. It is the *Maranatha* ('Come, Lord Jesus') of the early Church, conveyed in the language of images.

The early Church had a much stronger sense than we have of the

eschatological fulfilment, even when it no longer counted on the imminent return of the Lord. It prayed 'thy Kingdom come' with much more fervour than we usually do, and in the light of this hope the brightness of the Eucharist was almost overlooked.

Yet the early Church lived out the life of grace and the sacraments in the present too. And from this point of view the Eucharist occupied a central place. Since the eucharistic movement began, and especially since Pius X, the example of the early Church has often been proposed – their daily communions, their devout celebration of the sacred mysteries. The appeal to the example of the early Church is justified. Though there has undoubtedly been some idealisation born of over-enthusiasm, the facts we know are important and sufficiently eloquent.

It is true that they did not in general celebrate the Eucharist daily – for technical reasons this was scarcely practicable – but the Eucharist could be taken home after the Sunday celebration. There is evidence of a widespread custom of receiving daily the holy bread, 'before any other food'. The practice was taken for granted to such an extent that the prayer for daily bread in the Our Father was understood, in the earliest patristic exegesis, to refer primarily to the bread of the Eucharist.

There was no precept of the Church imposing Sunday celebration. But participation seems to have been so general that, as Justin reports, all came together on Sunday, townspeople and country folk; deacons bore the Eucharist to those who were prevented from coming. Further, there was great reluctance to forgo the Sunday liturgy when persecution broke out again and participation spelled mortal danger. For what caused the christians to be persecuted and threatened with death was not their faith – anyone could believe what he liked – but their particular form of divine worship, so early on Sunday morning, and so independent of the official pagan cult. Persecution was directed against the form of worship. Yet the christians held firmly to their eucharistic meetings. And when we read in the *Acts of the Martyrs* the defence of those who were accused during the Diocletian persecution, it expresses the feeling of many others: without the *dominicum* we could not exist. One can perhaps say that the majority of the martyrs of that period died because they held fast to the Eucharist.

And yet relatively little is said about the sacrament or about the presence of the body of Christ. But there is much about what should result from them. The sacred communion of the sacrament is the

force which binds into unity the communion of saints. The *communio* is repeatedly mentioned, but in a way which makes it impossible to know whether the sacrament or the community is meant.

St. Augustine should be mentioned in this connection. He has often been reproached with stressing so much the symbolic side of the sacrament that its particular content, the real presence of Christ's body and blood, was no longer properly expressed. Less has been heard of this complaint in the last few years, as new sermons of the great doctor have been discovered in which he makes his position clear. Nevertheless, it remains true that he scarcely ever speaks of the Eucharist without immediately indicating its social meaning, its power of uniting the community of the faithful: 'The meaning of the sacrament', he says, 'is unity, so that we who are taken up in his body as his limbs, should be what we receive'.¹ Christians receive the body of Christ that they may become the body of Christ.

The Eucharist was not considered in isolation as an object of veneration or as a particular form of christian piety, but rather as an essential part of christian living. Moreover, this view can be seen in the New Testament, where christians are invited to unite themselves with Christ: 'Draw near to him, the living stone . . . you too must be built up on him, stones that live and breathe, into a living temple, to offer up these spiritual offerings which God accepts through Jesus Christ'.² What are these spiritual offerings? Are they merely good works and a genuine christian life? Or is the Eucharist meant? Plainly, both are referred to. The offering of the christian life, that is the day to day work, endurance and suffering, is constantly gathered up and offered to God in the Eucharist, so that it is not so much the individual who achieves something remarkable, but rather that all together form a spiritual temple in which God is glorified.

The Eucharist was the celebration of the community. That is why the plural is used in the official prayers of the priest, and the dialogue between priest and people takes the form of invitation and acclamation. That is why until the late middle ages, at least on Sundays and holydays, the liturgy was the common celebration of all, and the clergy, gathered round a common altar, concelebrated and communicated together.³

Even so, there are traces in the early christian period of a piety that is directed, immediately and expressly, towards the sacrament

¹ Sermo 55, 7.

² 1 Pet 2, 4.

³ M. Andrieu, *Les Ordines Romani III* (Louvain, 1951), p. 178.

itself. This is true of Chrysostom, who has been described as the *Doctor Eucharistiae*. He praises the greatness and dignity of the sacrament. It is striking that in him (as already in some earlier christian writings) the sacrament is described as the 'awful' mystery and the altar as the 'fearsome' table. Although he concentrates his attention on the sacrament and loosens it to some extent from its context in the economy of salvation, he makes his hearers aware of the greatness of the divine mystery in its totality, and this is in fact given in the sacrament.¹

In the western Church a similar development came to dominate; and it was much stronger than in the East. The reverence due to the sacrament was increasingly emphasised – the early Church may perhaps have treated it too nonchalantly. But now more and more precepts and rubrics were laid down for the reception of communion; the prescriptions of ritual purity in the Old Testament were invoked; reverence grew, communion became more infrequent. Theological discussion sought to elucidate the nature of the eucharistic presence, and the question of the precise moment at which transubstantiation took place aroused interest.

It is most instructive to trace the development of one small ceremony. In the early middle ages the part of the Mass from the beginning of the preface to the Our Father was still thought of as a whole, as the eucharistic prayer, as thanksgiving to the divine Majesty to whom the sacrifice is offered. This was expressed in the rubric which instructed the congregation, at pontifical Mass, to bow when the celebrating bishop sang *adorant dominationes, tremunt potestates*. From that point onwards they were to remain bowed down throughout the whole canon until the concluding doxology.² When the *Sanctus* began, they had all to kneel down and remain on their knees, praying before God's majesty. Then the attitude changed imperceptibly. The change of posture was delayed. It was no longer placed before but after the *Sanctus*: thus the feeling grew that it is only with the *Te igitur* that the prayer of consecration begins; and the homage now goes to the sacrament. What precedes, so it is thought, is only an introduction, a 'preface'; only after it do we enter the realm of the sacred mystery. And so people begin to kneel down after the *Sanctus* in honour of the blessed Sacrament. It is certainly a possible and meaningful approach; but it differs from that of early ages.

¹ G. Fittkau, *Der Begriff des Mysteriums bei Johannes Chrysostomus* (Bonn, 1953), pp. 122 ff.

² J. A. Jungmann, *Gewordene Liturgie* (Innsbruck 1941), pp. 120-36.

A second development completes and reinforces the first. Germanic sensibility sought everywhere something visible and tangible. People wanted, for example, to see and venerate holy relics. Thus the desire to see the sacrament grew, and it was all the greater since people so seldom dared to receive it. So, within the Canon, the moment of consecration is singled out by raising the sacred host and letting the people see it. This undoubtedly significant custom began in Paris about the year 1200 and spread to the Rhineland. But towards the end of the middle ages the practice of being present only for the actual moment of consecration had become an abuse; people came in to look at the host and then left the church immediately.

The tendency to emphasise the holy sacrament and make it an object of special veneration remains, even after the reforms of the Council of Trent. The development is certainly justified and is an enrichment of the life of the Church, unless something more important is thereby disturbed and destroyed. The feast of Corpus Christi and Corpus Christi processions begin. The monstrance is introduced to display the blessed Sacrament to the faithful in a worthy setting. Exposition during vespers and during Mass is introduced. Holy hour and Benediction start. *Quarant' ore*, which from the earliest period had been used during Holy Week to recall the forty hours spent by our Lord in the tomb, is now transformed into forty hours of prayer before the blessed Sacrament. In church, the tabernacle takes the central place and outweighs the altar in importance. The idea spreads that a church is primarily the house of God, and only requires reverence when the lamp burns within it. A sacramental piety develops which, even within the Mass, values and understands only the consecration, because at that moment Christ becomes present.

Not all these developments can be approved. For the result of much far-reaching emphasis was to isolate the blessed Sacrament from the original context of its foundation. A static view of the sacrament became all too often predominant; the main interest centred on the abiding presence. The dynamic understanding of the mystery as thanksgiving, sacrifice and communion, as the taking up of human wretchedness into the transforming power of Christ's mystery, was considerably weakened.

Yet the Mass was maintained and continued in its inherited form with great fidelity; the texts and rites were preserved in their entirety. But the remarkable thing is that this admirably preserved

liturgy which harmonises all the important aspects of the eucharistic mystery, had little effect on the piety of the clergy. To the people, the liturgy became remote and alien; but clerics too, in spite of their fidelity to the rubrics, failed to grasp its meaning.

Early christianity, which laid the foundations of the eucharistic liturgy still visible today in all liturgies of East and of West, sought to enshrine two leading ideas: the Mass is the memorial of the Lord and it is the offering of the Church. These two thoughts are expressed, clearly, at a decisive point of the Mass as we know it today: *Unde et memores . . . tam beatae passionis . . . offerimus praeclarae majestati tuae hostiam puram . . .* This twofold prayer is found in the earliest eucharistic prayer which has come down to us, in the liturgy of Hyppolytus of Rome. Dating from about 215, the text reads, after the words of consecration: *Memores igitur mortis et resurrectionis eius offerimus tibi panem et calicem.* The idea expressed is this: what we have just done is a memorial of the Lord, in accordance with his command at the last supper. He handed over to us, as a memorial, the offering of his body and the out-pouring of his blood, so that we might never forget who is our hope and our salvation. There is a further idea: that we too should present to the heavenly Father the offering of his body and the out-pouring of his blood, as an expression of our own christian self-giving and worship of the divine Majesty.

This primitive form of eucharistic celebration expresses with clarity – heightened in the course of the celebration, that we are dealing with the body and blood of the God-man, and that the body and blood of the Lord are really here present. The mind did not, however, linger on the fact of presence, but pressed onwards dynamically to the reception of the holy food and the prayer of thanksgiving which concludes the feast.

As the eucharistic cult was self-explanatory and was itself the main form of eucharistic piety, it not unnaturally happened that the memorial and offering receded into the background; they were taken for granted as an inherited possession. In the explanations of the Mass given to the faithful and committed to writing, the memorial of the Lord is strongly emphasised. From the end of the eighth century the Mass was conceived as a dramatic representation of the history of salvation from the fall of Adam to the coming of the Redeemer and beyond that to his second coming at the last day. Later, the scope of the representation was gradually restricted to the sufferings of the Lord. So one can understand how *Corpus Christi*

mystery plays, which flourished at the start of the modern period, could incorporate extracts from the older passion mysteries. In the Bozen Corpus Christi play, tableaux of the sufferings of Christ were carried in procession, both in the form of Old Testament types and scenes from the New Testament. In this way the thought of the *anamnesis* was kept alive. Neither did the idea of sacrifice disappear. It was kept alive in the minds of the faithful chiefly through the offertory procession. For many years, every Sunday, there was the widespread custom of an offertory procession in which the whole community took part. In the late middle ages, the offertory procession took place at least on great feast days: on the four feast days which corresponded to the 'four seasons' – such was the general rule. There were also offertory processions on special occasions like funerals, weddings, guild and confraternity celebrations. One must admit that this practice, in which money had a certain part to play, was exposed to dangers of misunderstanding and formalism. People thought not so much of sharing in Christ's sacrifice as of sharing in the offertory gifts, about which some highly dubious theories were prevalent.

The offertory practices of the middle ages in decline roused the wrath of the reformers. Not only did they exclude the offertory procession from the Church's traditional liturgy, but they removed all traces of sacrifice from the Mass and left only the commemoration of the last supper; for they held that the Church cannot offer sacrifice; there is only one sacrifice, that made by Christ on the cross.

The Council of Trent and the theology derived from it insisted, in answer to the reformers' positions, that the Mass is not an independent sacrifice, but the re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice. They stress that Christ is the priest of this sacrifice as he was in the sacrifice of the cross, and yet that there is a true offering in the Mass and a true and enduring presence of the body of Christ, not simply *in usu*, at the moment of reception. The eucharistic interest of the last few centuries has thus been directed to the offering of Christ; the fact that the Church and the faithful have a part to play has been obscured. This is a reaction against the medieval view. Interest has also been concentrated on the real presence of the Lord in the Sacrament. The defence of the traditional, inherited, inalienable doctrine led to such an emphasis. It was at this time that the various forms of eucharistic cult we know so well were introduced. Eucharistic piety comes to mean veneration of the Eucharist, prayer before the blessed Sacrament exposed, Benediction, Mass

processions, holy communion – but with all the stress laid on the fervour needed in preparation for communion and thanksgiving after it. For the isolation of the Sacrament and the concentration on the real presence affected the view of communion. The idea of participation in the sacrifice, in the sacrificial food, loses ground – in the 18th and 19th centuries communion was distributed chiefly outside Mass – and communion is regarded as the visit of the Saviour who comes out of the tabernacle. Even when communion was received during Mass, devotion to communion was an independent thing which had hardly anything to do with the Mass.

Perhaps no age showed so much fervour and devotion in preparing children for communion as the 19th century. Tension was great, among the children and their teachers. Excitement reigned for weeks and months. First communion became the most beautiful day of one's life, for it was the child's first encounter with the Saviour. But is it really the first meeting with the Saviour? Some must have raised this question. For the first meeting, the great transforming encounter, has already taken place in baptism where the child is incorporated into the body of Christ, is received into the resurrection of Christ, becomes a christian. But the Eucharist, in which Christ is present, and communion, in which he is personally received, so overshadowed all the other sacraments that almost nothing more remained of them, even of baptism, than a prescribed rite through which certain effects of grace were mediated. Communion was an isolated peak, and therefore the devotion of communion became a separated thing.

The stimulus to frequent communion provided by Pius X did little to change this attitude, however much good it may have done in other respects. If the 19th century had stressed the veneration of the blessed Sacrament, the emphasis was now shifted to its reception, and this was indeed a great step forward. But even in catechisms of our own day, eucharistic doctrine is frequently presented under the following heads: sacrament, Mass, communion. Sometimes the order of presentation is: sacrament, communion, Mass. It is therefore legitimate to speak of the disintegration which has taken place in the conception of the Eucharist. All the elements are there. All the dogmas of faith are maintained and zealously confessed; but unity between them, a sense of the harmony of the whole doctrine, has been lost.

Yet we must admit that even with this form of piety, the blessed Sacrament has been the source of countless blessings – and great

strength. The sacrament is rich enough for people to live on a part of the great mystery: on, so to speak, a fragment of the host. It would not be difficult to draw up a long list of saints whose piety centred on the tabernacle: from St. Paschal Baylon whose relics were specially brought from Spain to the Munich Eucharistic Congress, to Damian de Veuster who said that he would have been unable to bear life among the lepers if the Saviour had not been present in the tabernacle of his chapel. These outstanding figures represent millions of devout faithful and zealous christians who followed the same path and became holy in the same way. We should not dare to criticise their piety or claim to be superior to them. Their devotional forms were good and, in their situation, inevitable and right, even if they were not the best possible.

Yet we can and must grant that the time had come to overcome the separation of the parts. In an age when life is increasingly secularised, when to many people God seems more and more remote, the Church must place before men the full power of her teaching and mysteries.

The liturgical renewal of this century is simply the attempt to restore the parts to the whole, and particularly to bring out the full, integrating meaning of the Eucharist. The historical studies of the preceding generation have enabled us to see more clearly the development of the liturgy and to grasp the process by which the partial aspects of the Eucharist were gradually divorced from each other. They likewise have enabled us to understand the ideal present at the beginning and so badly needed in our time.

The Eucharistic Congress held in Munich three years ago was perhaps the first great opportunity of making the newly discovered ideal known publicly. It was no longer simply the cult of the Eucharist on a vast scale; the celebration of the Eucharist was set in the context of the whole economy of salvation. For there we witnessed the Church, we saw how she celebrates and receives the Eucharist – and thereby we honoured the Eucharist. We witnessed the power the Eucharist has of uniting and holding together the people of God. The *Corpus mysticum* was seen in the full, ancient and complete meaning of the term. It is not by chance that this expression was first used of the Lord's sacramental body. We receive in communion the mysteriously hidden body of the Lord, the *Corpus mysticum* – such was the way writers spoke in the carolingian period. But the mysteriously hidden body can effect a fresh realisation, a new embodiment of itself in the visible human world; it can express itself in the multiple

limbs which make up the body of Christ, the Church. The Church is indeed the body of the Lord, it is the earthly revelation of what is contained in the sacrament and what will one day be perfected and fulfilled in heaven.

The discovery of the Church, the reawakening of the sense of the Church, is one of the most welcome aspects of the contemporary religious renewal. The strength which the sense of the Church has already attained appears most clearly in church architecture. The ecclesiastical architecture of the last decade may not be comparable to baroque architecture or to the great gothic cathedrals in its appeal to the aesthetic sense or its artistic richness; but it can be compared in meaningfulness and depth of religious feeling. In baroque the primary concern was to draw down to this earth the glory of heaven and the rejoicing of the Church triumphant; baroque sought to make the house of God reflect the glory of heaven. Human beings, here on earth, were only marginal figures in the plan, whatever the scale of the building. Modern church architecture has begun, rightly, to express the reality of the *ecclesia*, the sacred assembly, gathered together here on earth, its mind raised towards God and the coming of his kingdom, knowing that though it is called by him, favoured by him and nourished by the holy bread from the altar, yet it remains firmly in this world and gives glory to God in this precise place.

The new-found sense of the Church, one of the most welcome aspects of the contemporary religious revival, carries with it the recognition that the Church, gathered together and held together by the Eucharist, is not a vague, shadowy reality beyond time (though one often gets this impression when people speak of the excellence and divine qualities of the Church), but is the empirical Church here and now, drawn from this world, grouped around this altar, made up of men and women of all classes and ages. And this multitude of people, assembled to celebrate the Eucharist, is not raised above the earthly world into a sphere which has nothing to do with everyday cares; on the contrary, everyday life and the harsh realities of earthly existence are borne to the altar Sunday by Sunday, represented in the gifts of bread and wine, bread from our earthly fields, wine from our earthly vineyards. These gifts, offered in gratitude, are taken up in the all-embracing offering of Christ, spiritualised in him and transformed into a hymn of praise to the divine Majesty. That is precisely what we found at the outset, in the first epistle of St. Peter: the faithful are living stones built up into a holy temple, so as

to offer their whole now transformed lives through Christ to God.

The liturgical movement, it has been said, has reduced the honour paid to the Saviour in the Eucharist. That may be so. The main emphasis is now placed not on a partial aspect, a single truth in the wide range of doctrine, but rather on the specific and central focus of the whole doctrine. Our attention is directed to the central point, and this centre begins to shine with clearer light; but the surrounding areas, hitherto perhaps dull and obscure, are also illuminated. We understand the Church better, the Church which celebrates the Eucharist, and the unity of the Church which the sacrament calls for; we understand better baptism from which the Church is born; and scripture, the other table of God which nourishes us at the start of every eucharistic celebration, has acquired a new and richer relevance.

Enlightened thinking on the Eucharist knows well that salvation cannot lie simply in the frequency of eucharistic celebration, that the total of communions is not the best way to measure the spiritual state of a parish, that sacramental life must not be separated from the personal, spiritual, abiding encounter of the person with his God. A high esteem for the Eucharist suggests that it requires gradual preparation, that prayer in common outside Mass should also have a place in the devotional life of a parish: that there should be a place for the word of God and awareness of the good news which has been proclaimed; that preaching of the word and worthy divine service go hand in hand.

In fact, we need not worry about a special devotion to the Eucharist. If only it could be integrated into the whole of christian life, as it was in the early Church! We must see to it that the faithful understand the full richness of God's love, conveyed to us in Christ and answered by faith, hope and charity. Then they will of their own accord enter into the *Gratias agamus Domino Deo nostro*, the great *Eucharistia* which our Lord himself taught us. That is the healthiest and most durable form of eucharistic piety.