

# THE WORSHIP OF THE CHURCH

By KEVIN DONOVAN

THE CHURCH to which we belong, the new Israel, is a worshipping community. The worship of the Church is unique, but not because its central rites cannot be paralleled outside the christian faith. Even in antiquity, Justin noted the superficial similarity between the eucharist and the ritual banquets of the mithras cult. The Church's worship is unique because it was instituted by Christ. The Church does not worship in a haphazard fashion; she worships as Christ told her to worship.

The constitution on the liturgy is an expression of the Church's abiding concern to remain faithful to Christ's command. Where necessary, she has been prepared to alter the details of her practice where these impeded the loyal fulfilment of her Founder's wishes. Naturally, the Council is concerned with far more than just tinkering with rubrics or dragooning the faithful; the whole aim is to equip them, through a fuller participation in the liturgy, for their role as Christ's leaven in the world. It is not a question of harking back to some first century ideal, now in any case irrevocably lost, but of allowing room for pastoral manoeuvre in the widely differing conditions of our own time. In many cases, the changes now introduced do represent a return to an earlier practice; but it is vital for us to get behind these changes to the spirit that inspired them. 'Ritual change without a corresponding change in mentality will bear little fruit'.<sup>1</sup> It will help us here if we can reach a better understanding of how the first generations of christians regarded the eucharist.

## *The structure of early christian worship*

The early Church recognised that her distinctive worship stemmed from Christ himself. Luke records at considerable length the journey of the two disciples to Emmaus on the first Easter Sunday. On the way, they met Christ, who explained to them from

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, C., *Liturgy and Doctrine* (London, 1960), p 99.

Moses and the prophets that it was 'necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory . . . he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them . . . Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread'.<sup>1</sup> The 'breaking of bread' is already a set phrase for describing the eucharist, which was usually preceded by an apostolic discourse, as on the unfortunate occasion at Troas.<sup>2</sup> The pattern to be discerned in the accounts of the last supper, of Emmaus and of Troas is the same – the teaching of, or about, Our Lord, and then the breaking of bread. This is exactly how Luke summarizes the activity of the early Church after St Peter's first sermon at Pentecost: ' . . . those who received his word were baptized . . . And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers'.<sup>3</sup>

The Church, as we first discover her, is a community of believers who express their belief through common worship, whose central feature is the rite established by Christ, the breaking of bread. Few details of the way this was celebrated have been preserved, but from the beginning it was customary to meet on Sunday, the Lord's day, in order to celebrate his resurrection.<sup>4</sup> In a report to the emperor Trajan, the roman essayist Pliny mentions these regular meetings of christians in his province of Bithynia (c 112 AD), while a generation later, Justin gives a brief description of what took place at these assemblies on the Lord's day.

The proceedings opened with a reading from the scriptures, which were explained in the bishop's exhortation to the initiates. After public prayers together, the bishop pronounced a solemn prayer of thanks to God over bread and wine, which thereby became the body and blood of the Lord. All present replied 'amen' to this prayer, and the consecrated bread and wine were now distributed, a portion being set aside for the sick. The unconsecrated bread and any other gifts were given to the poor and needy. With scripture, homily, bidding prayers, and then the great eucharistic prayer, which the president alone recited, the general shape of Justin's assembly is recognizably the same as our Sunday mass, even down to details like the mingling of a little water with the wine. But one important feature, prominent in Justin and near-contemporary works like the *Didache*, is absent nowadays – improvisation.

<sup>1</sup> Cf Lk 24, 13–35.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 20, 7–12.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 2, 41–42.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 20, 7; 1 Cor 16, 2; Apoc 1, 10.

Not only did the amount of scripture read vary according to the inclination of the president and the time available, but the canon itself was improvised. This was still true even in the third century. We have a specimen in the *Apostolic Constitutions* of Hippolytus, the first 'anti-pope', who met a martyr's death in the slave camps of Sardinia in 235 AD. What makes this work fascinating is that it contains the earliest known text of the canon of the mass, although the term canon, with its suggestion of the recitation, hedged about with rubrics, of an unvarying prayer in a dead language, gives a totally false impression of Hippolytus' *anaphora*. Hippolytus used the language best known to the roman christians of his day, and this happened to be greek. When this was no longer sufficiently understood, the more familiar latin was substituted, much as aramaic had formerly given way to greek. Not merely could the people understand what the bishop or priest was saying: one might almost say that he understood it himself well enough to make it up as he went along.

*Through Christ to the father*

The present roman liturgy would probably gain from a greater degree of variety, even at mass. A wider measure of discretion could be left to the celebrant, for instance in the choice of readings and in the bidding prayers. It must be admitted, however, that we have lost the art of spontaneous prayer characteristic of the early Church, and which is still practised in some christian traditions – in the Free Churches, for instance. An improvised canon would therefore not always be an unmitigated blessing, and would certainly tax the resources of some celebrants too severely. There could be occasions, house eucharists and the like, when improvization along the lines of Hippolytus would be perfectly acceptable. In any case, we must not imagine that the early Church favoured a complete free-for-all. Hippolytus clearly proposes his *anaphora* as a model. A celebrant should follow its main lines, not indeed slavishly, but according to his own abilities and the needs of his congregation. The main lines are, however, important and worth examining. They represent the best example we possess of how the early Church prayed at mass.

After the usual introduction (*Sursum Corda* etc.) there follows a preface-type prayer, which proceeds, without any interruption, to the consecration and final doxology. It is not unlike the present day canon, but is free from the later accretions, such as the *memento*,

*communicantes* and *nobis quoque peccatoribus*, which have tended to blur the clearer outline found in the earlier prayer, with its strongly christological emphasis. The prayer is one of thanks, addressed through Christ to the Father. We thank him especially for sending his Son as saviour and herald of the divine will. He became man to make us God's people; and the night before his death, when he broke the power of sin, established the covenant and showed forth his resurrection, he took bread. Here follow the words of institution, and the explicit recognition that it is at our Lord's command that we now offer these gifts to the Father in thanksgiving. We pray that he will send his Spirit upon all who communicate, to strengthen their unity within the Church, and their faith in the truth, that so we may glorify God through Christ. And all reply, 'Amen'.

The fact that they do so indicates assent. We do not normally expect people to sign legal documents in a foreign tongue, and there is something equally incongruous about our 'amen' after the silent recitation in Latin of what was originally the most solemn of all public prayers. In a contract, both parties should know the terms of the agreement. The mass, in a real sense, is a contract – a contract or covenant between God and man. God freely binds himself to protect and save his people; in return they are expected to do his will. The ten commandments contain God's prescriptions under the covenant of the Old Testament. 'Love one another even as I have loved you'<sup>1</sup> is Christ's command in issuing the new covenant. Our assent to that covenant must be primarily expressed through our lives; but this concrete, living assent should be helped by the verbal expressions of it which occur in the mass.

In the eucharist, we also receive Christ in order to sanctify our daily lives until we become fully united with him after death. This individual sanctification involves personal commitment as well as group worship. It would be naive in the extreme to suppose that the Church's problems will be solved by the simple expedient of a refurbished canon in english. We must all take to heart one of the most frequently repeated lessons of Vatican II: the need and duty to offer ourselves along with Christ in the mass. The faithful are 'incorporated into the Church by baptism'. When 'taking part in the eucharist, which is the fount and apex of the whole christian life, they offer the divine Victim to God, and offer themselves along with it . . . both by the act of oblation, and through holy commun-

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 13, 34.

ion, all perform their proper part in this liturgical service, not indeed, all in the same way but each in that way which is appropriate to himself.<sup>1</sup>

Speaking of the role of the laity, the Council continues:

all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavours, their ordinary married and family life, their daily labour, their mental and physical relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne – all of these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (cf 1 Pet 2, 5). During the celebration of the eucharist, these sacrifices are most lovingly offered to the Father along with the Lord's body. Thus, as worshippers whose every deed is holy, the laity consecrate the world to God.<sup>2</sup>

This godward purpose of our existence is summed up thus: 'by offering the immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him, they should learn to offer themselves too. Through Christ the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever closer union with God and with each other, so that finally God may be all in all'.<sup>3</sup>

If we need to rediscover the early christian's awareness of the eucharist as the supreme social and religious event of the week, we need also to deepen the element of personal commitment to God's will which must accompany our communal worship of the Father. Without this daily commitment to love, our weekly worship risks degeneration into empty pharisaism.

*Prayer through Christ or prayer to Christ?*

While much of what has been said may seem, at least by implication, to have been critical of certain stages in the Church's usage, any suggestion that the Church's worship was only perfect for the first three centuries would be absurd. But if it is going too far to say that worship took the wrong turning, and has been on the wrong lines ever since, still, there have been questionable practices and a sometimes one-sided presentation of doctrinal truth, usually in the face of a specific error. Since an adequate treatment of the development of the liturgy from Hippolytus to John XXIII would call for a book of the dimensions of Fr Jungmann's great work,<sup>4</sup> only the

<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>3</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 48.

<sup>4</sup> Jungmann, J. A., *The Mass of the Roman Rite* (London, 1959).

briefest sketch can be attempted here, with the attendant dangers of superficiality and over-simplification. Two sets of influences were at work: the non-doctrinal and the more specifically doctrinal. Among the latter, the most important have been the reaction against arianism, and the re-affirmation of the doctrine of the real presence in the face of its denial by Berengarius in the middle ages and by the reformers in the sixteenth century. Jansenism also played its part.

Arius, in the early fourth century, taught that the Word, the *Logos* which became man, was not truly divine, but rather a kind of superior creature. Though frequently condemned, the heresy proved particularly stubborn. As a result, orthodox worship became somewhat chary of the formula 'through Christ our Lord', as it was susceptible of an arian interpretation. To stress the fact of Christ's divinity, prayer during the mass came to be addressed to him directly; just as later, by way of reaction against those who queried the divinity of the holy Spirit, prayer was also addressed to the Trinity as a whole. The change from the older style of liturgical prayer, *to the Father through the Son in the holy Spirit*, may seem almost insignificant, but the whole perspective of the incarnation, and of Christ's role as mediator, were in danger of being obscured. 'What is primarily the sacrament of love now takes on in the liturgy the characteristics of fear'.<sup>1</sup> The stress on Christ's divinity and on the real presence led to an emphasis on adoration. The need for holiness on the part of the recipient, rather than his need, as a sinner, for help, became the criterion where the reception of communion was concerned. Frequent communion inevitably declined. The adoration of the host at the elevation, a practice first introduced at Paris in the early thirteenth century, came to be thought of as the source of grace in the beholder. God can, of course, give grace in this way; but the fact remains that the host is there not to be adored but to be eaten.<sup>2</sup>

The Council of Trent produced an admirable summary of the Church's traditional teaching of the mass, but in the controversial atmosphere of the age it was inevitable that the Council Fathers should affirm most strongly those doctrines directly attacked by the reformers. This accounts for the tridentine emphasis on transubstantiation and the sacrificial character of the mass, but this

<sup>1</sup> Jungmann, J. A., *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer* (London, 1965), p 246.

<sup>2</sup> Cf St Pius X in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, Vol 38, p 401.

emphasis was reflected in a certain lack of balance in the catechisms which derived from Trent. Certain of the elucidations of the notion of sacrifice proposed by subsequent theologians were so involved as almost to turn the mystery into a conundrum. Then there was the baleful influence of jansenism. Though this was really a warped theory of grace, it had its effect in discouraging the practice of frequent communion. Arnauld's book on the subject was subtitled *Sancta Sanctis*, and in their desire to starve themselves of communion, the nuns of Port Royale went as far as to refuse the viaticum. During this lengthy period, attachment to the mass seldom waned – witness the martyrs who died for it – and there were solid advances in the realm of systematic theology and a lasting gain in devotion to the blessed Sacrament. But, in the words of a leading american liturgist, 'fifteen centuries of christians were deprived of frequent communion. There was no question of denial of truth; but the basic lesson of the sign (ie, the mass as a vehicle of communication) was not generally heeded. Consequently, values were out of focus'.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Non-doctrinal factors*

Among non-doctrinal factors the most far-reaching has probably been the language barrier. As latin became a dead language, fewer outside the educated (largely clerical) classes could follow the mass with any ease. Inevitably, the liturgy became the preserve of the cleric. The same happened with church music. In place of the psalms and hymns which all used to sing in the days of St Paul or St Ambrose, first the chant and then polyphony became too elaborate for the ordinary worshipper. Not invariably, perhaps, but all too often, the rightful singing role of the people was taken over by a specialist choir. Significantly, the reformers introduced vernacular congregational singing, thus combining excellent liturgical sense with faulty doctrine. Much of the clericalization of the liturgy is reflected in the architectural setting of the mass. Rood-screens cut off the faithful from the sanctuary. The altar itself echoes the change in devotional emphasis. Relics, triptychs, statues hold pride of place. Even side altars come to be dominated by dummy tabernacles. The high altar ceases to look remotely like the table for a eucharistic meal, or the stone block for sacrifice. Instead, it has

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<sup>1</sup> The Editor of *Worship*, Dom Godfrey Dieckmann, O.S.B., addressing the 1957 National Liturgical week of America. Reprinted in *Come, Let us Worship* (London, 1962), p 28.

become a great throne, occupying the whole of the back wall, and only coming into its own at *Quarant' Ore*. Much, too, could be said on the subject of allegorical interpretations of the mass. Inventive commentators like Amalair of Metz devised means of occupying the congregation during the silent parts of the mass. Vestments, their colours, gestures, words: everything was grist to the mill. The whole of Christ's birth, life and death, complete with Old Testament types and prophecies, was found encapsulated within the holy drama and lovingly itemised. The ritual of the mass, and its understanding by many of the faithful, had reached an unbelievably low ebb by the time of the Reformation. Trent removed the excesses and confusion of late gothic practice, but it did so at the cost of putting the liturgy into a straight jacket.

### *The Covenant*<sup>1</sup>

It is obvious that the understanding of the worship of the Church will go astray without an appreciation of the continuity of God's design in salvation history. It can be maintained that the key idea of the Old Testament is that used by our Lord himself when he instituted the eucharist – that of the covenant relationship between God and his people, of God freely choosing and calling, promising to protect his people if they remain faithful to his demands, and sealing his promise with a sacrificial meal of communion. At the last supper, our Lord took the cup and described it as the blood of the new covenant. Instead of being saved from Egypt, we have been saved the realm of sin and death. Our goal is not life in the promised land of Canaan, but the life of God's adopted sons in the kingdom of heaven. Christ's command that we love one another is far more exacting than even the loftiest formulation of the old law; but then he has sealed the promise in his own blood. The meal which is to establish communion between God and man is not mutton or beef, but Christ's own flesh and blood under the appearances of bread and wine. This will sustain us as no manna could. And because all generations of his followers must be brought into this saving relationship with God through Christ, he has left us the covenant in a form which can be renewed. 'The renewal in the eucharist of the covenant between the Lord and man draws the

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An excellent treatment of the Old Testament idea of covenant and its application to the mass is to be found in *Mass and the Christian Life* by Dermot Ryan, reprinted in *Moral Theology Renewed* (Dublin, 1965). Cf *Lumen Gentium* 9.



faithful into the compelling love of Christ and sets them on fire'.<sup>1</sup> Finally, just as there were visible signs of Yahweh's abiding presence in the pillar of cloud and the glory that accompanied the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies, so Christ remains sacramentally present with his people in the tabernacle. The old ark contained the tablets of the law; it reminded the israelites of their duty as the people of God's covenant. It was the centre of their national and religious life. Even so, 'the eucharist is kept as the spiritual centre of the religious community, the parish community, the universal church and the whole of humanity'.<sup>2</sup> The faithful should be reminded to 'offer themselves as an acceptable sacrifice for the Church's peace and unity'.<sup>3</sup> Devotion to the blessed sacrament can be seen in covenant terms – as an extension of, and not an alternative to, the new covenant which is the eucharist.

No short sketch can do anything like justice to the rich theme of covenant, but even an outline may serve to indicate a line of approach which unifies many of the diverse elements – the people of God, our individual responsibility and commitment, sacrifice and sacred meal – which are to be found in the worship of the Church.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Pius VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, english translation, Catholic Truth Society (London, 1965), 68.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.