

# The Eucharist. An Historical Study

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This pamphlet presents the text of four radio talks by Mr D. G. M. Jackson broadcast from Station 3AW, Melbourne, in the Catholic Hour during January, 1973. These talks describe, all too briefly, the historical setting of the central mystery of the Christian faith, the Blessed Eucharist. with the changing emphases of the passing centuries. -THE EDITOR

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## THE EUCHARIST: AN HISTORICAL STUDY

### I. THE LAST SUPPER: WHAT OUR LORD DID

The history of the Holy Eucharist begins, as you know, with the Last Supper on Holy Thursday. Our Lord and his disciples were celebrating the Passover, the greatest feast of the Jewish year, which had been ordained by Moses as the wonder of Israel's liberation from the "House of Bandage" in Egypt might never be forgotten. The Jews today still keep this joyful family feast, eating unleavened bread to recall the haste of their journey and also the flesh of the Holy Lamb. Like the sacrifices offered to the gods of Egypt long ago, the Passover was a ritualistic ceremony. A living creature was slaughtered, so that its blood - held to mean its life - might be offered to guard the people against destruction.

#### A New Rite

Jesus went through the joyful rite with due solemnity - observing the law, as the Holy Thursday hymn "Pange lingua" ['Sing, My Tongue, of the Saviour's Glory'] recalls. But after it, He introduced a new rite, unknown to the disciples, in words which foreshadowed and explained the tragedy of the next day when He Himself was to become the "Holy Lamb" of a Paschal Sacrifice, which was to be the end and fulfilment of all the sacrifices offered by His People through the ages. He took the bread, broke it and handed the pieces to the eleven - for Judas the traitor had gone. In doing so, He said simply "Eat this: it is My Body". After this He took the cup of wine, saying "This is My Blood", and speaking of a new alliance between God and His People to be made through the shedding of that Blood, as the first one had been made in the blood of the Sacrifice in Sinai long ago. The separation of Body and Blood, in the act of sacrifice, was symbolized in the act of Jesus: the meaning of it was that He was to die at the hands of men, "as a ransom of many" from the house of bondage in which all the race was involved.

Just what happened when these solemn words were pronounced has been a subject of theological discussion and speculation throughout the ages. Rationalist critics have talked much of primitive religions in which the eating of a sacred animal - or a human victim - was held to confer divine qualities. In Orphic and Dionysiac mysteries, "drinking of blood" was practised, we are reminded. Union with God, to be sure, has always been man's highest aim, and it finds barbaric expression in this "god-eating". But here there is no question of a magical operation - as Our Lord had earlier made clear, what is communicated as a gift is Christ in His self-surrender, the eternal reality of the Passion and Death of Our Lord. This is immortalized in a form which permits us to draw from it vitality for our own spiritual life as concrete as the food and drink from which we draw our bodily strength.

### A Living Memorial

As Moses had ordered that the Passover offering and communion feast of the Holy Lamb should be continued, so Our Lord told His disciples they were to carry on with this new rite, the Breaking of Bread and the offering of the Sacred Chalice, as a perpetual memorial of His saving Sacrifice and as a means of participating in its fruits.

The disciples were simple men, much more inclined to take Our Lord's words literally - if not with crude realism - than in what moderns call "a spiritual sense". Knowing this, He acted as He did: and - as the writing of St. Paul makes clear, the first Christians were taught and held that the New Rite gave to the people - including the unworthy - the very Body and Blood of the Holy Lamb of the New Covenant whom St. John saw "standing though slain", their Risen Lord Himself.

This bread was not merely symbolic and earthly like the manna in the desert - but real "Heavenly Food". The first Christians did not speculate about how this could be - they bowed before the "Mystery of Faith", done for them by a Son of Man whose action was not just within time, but in the eternal world of His Godhead.

The Apostles had been told to "do this": and they obeyed. Whether they were immediately aware of being made priests need not concern us. The fact is that they had been given the office of making a covenant with God, through Jesus and His Blood: and this implied what the Jews called priesthood. They had become the new successors of Moses, since they possessed the rite of a new covenant sealed in Blood.

The Last Supper, the Passion and Crucifixion immediately following it and the Triumph of Jesus over death, these three acts contained the whole faith for the first Christians. They linked them up - as the words of the first Eucharistic prayer recall to us - with earlier sacrifices which foreshadowed that of the Saviour: that of the legendary "good shepherd" Abel, slain by his brother as Christ had been slain by His people; that of the mysterious Priest King Melchisedech; a type of the Royal Priesthood of Christ, offering the new, clean sacrifice for the whole of mankind: and that of Abraham, whose obedience in agony reflected that of their Lord, while the symbolic sacrifice and divine delivery of Isaac foreshadowed the Cross and the Resurrection.

This, then, was how the Eucharist of Christians began. In the talks that follow, I hope to tell you something of the development of this central act of worship and communion in the history of the Church.

## II. MASS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

In my last talk, I looked at Jesus Christ's institution of the Blessed Eucharist, linking it up with the Passover of Israel, and with the Old Testament sacrifices which foreshadowed the immolation of the Divine Victim on Calvary. We saw that the disciples, and the first Christian communities, undoubtedly took His words "This is My Body" and "This is My Blood" quite literally, while not attempting to probe further into the "Mystery of Faith". The early Churches wrangled over a lot of things - but not about the Eucharist. To begin with, the rite was blended with a religious meal, the Agape, following the pattern of the Last Supper: but even in St. Paul's time, this had led to abuses. The Gentile converts had no tradition of the Jewish type of religious meal, and their bad behaviour led to the separation of the Agape from the liturgical rite. This was now celebrated in the early morning of Sunday - the day of the Resurrection.

### The Roman Rite

The structure of this first "Mass" is preserved essentially in the Roman rite which has come down to us: it is described by an early philosophic Christian apologist, the martyr Saint Justin [died 165]. The first part, open to the unbaptized under instruction - the "Catechumens" - consisted of prayers and scripture readings with hymns and a discourse by the celebrating bishop. It was based on the Synagogue services, which the earliest Jewish Christians had still attended. The Catechumens were blessed and dismissed, however, before the beginning of the "Mass of the Faithful" with the offering of the bread and wine contributed for the Eucharist by the people.

This part of the Eucharist came to be under the "Discipline of the Secret": it was reserved for the initiates: and this, with the fact that all Christian rites were kept very private - for fear of the police or hostile intruders in times of persecution - led to fantastic terror tales about the sacrifice and cannibalistic eating of children.

The gifts of the faithful were gathered up and handed to the celebrant, some for his own maintenance, others to be distributed to those in need - including orphans, widows, prisoners and passing strangers. This "true Mass" included the washing of hands by the celebrant, the "Oration of the Fratres", ['Pray, Brethren, that our sacrifice, my sacrifice and yours,'] which associated the whole assembly of baptized Christians with the priestly sacrifice, and the angelic Hymn of Praise - the Sanctus, ['Holy, Holy, Holy,' see Revelation 4: 8] leading up to a climax in the Canon, which reproduced Our Lord's words and acts of Consecration. Then came the Communion; it was given in both species, though even in the second century, that of Bread alone was distributed by the deacons to absentees and to the sick. The rule among the baptized was to communicate whenever they took part in the "breaking of bread" - which St. Hippolytus [circa 235] wished to be a daily rite. Actually, it was performed on Sundays and later on Wednesdays and Fridays, which were observed as fasts. Every Sunday, in a sense, was "Easter", recalling the day of Christ's rising, but a special yearly solemnity came into existence very early at the time of the Jewish Passover - Pentecost was the next: and local Churches celebrated the "Birthday feasts" of the martyrs' entry into glory. Christmas, however, only appeared after Constantine's time, replacing the annual pagan feast of the Returning of the Sun. Epiphany - which recalled Our Lord's revelation to the Gentile world, was an earlier feast.

### Building of Churches

Churches only began to be built during the third century, which saw fairly long periods of toleration in which the Eastern Christian communities flourished. Before that, the Eucharistic celebrations were held in houses where there was space for them, or, especially in dangerous times - in

underground cemeteries, the "Catacombs". Burial clubs enjoyed a special immunity under Roman law, and their meetings were fairly safe from intrusion. The practice of celebrating the liturgy over the tombs of martyrs led to the placing of saints' relics in altar stones, which still continues.

Both in the liturgy of the early Church and its symbolic art - using the fish and loaves of the feeding of the five thousand - expressed the sense of its corporate nature as the Living Body of Christ. Churches were real communities, and the fact that they were under pressure from a hostile world intensified their sense of brotherhood "in Christ". But inevitably, as all sorts of people began flocking into the Church after the conversion of Constantine, this kind of intimacy declined - especially as Christianity was still largely urban. The stress was now on pastoral guidance by the bishop and his clergy: the masses had to be rallied and held together - hence the development of impressive liturgical singing and litany-like prayers. The long solemn prayers of the first era, now remain only on Good Friday: the "Proclamation of the Word" diminished. Metropolitan churches were large and splendid and Mass was grand and spectacular with the world's great people attending in state.

In my next talk, I hope to say something of the effect of religious controversy on Catholic thought concerning Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, and on the development of the Liturgy.

### III. CONTROVERSY AND LITURGICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The development of the pattern of doctrine and worship within the Eastern and Western Churches has been influenced a lot by the religious errors or "heresies" with which they have had to contend. Among the earlier ones was that of Arius, who denied the full Godhead of the "Logos", Christ the Word, under the influence of Greek Platonic thought. This was followed by that of Nestorius, who held Christ to be a man "possessed" by the Word of God in adult life; and then that of the Monophysites, who absorbed Christ's humanity in His Godhead, reducing it to a shadow. This, of course, involved the destruction of the whole idea of His priestly mediation as "Christ our Brother", setting Him at an infinite distance from mankind.

The Church refuted these errors in her Councils, but they had an effect which is visible especially in Eastern liturgical rites. To begin with the Gloria was changed. It had originally run "Glory be to the Father through the Son in the Holy Ghost" so as to stress Christ's mediation as man: but St. Basil [379] and St. Athanasius [373] reshaped it to express the equality of the three Divine Persons "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost". Other alterations with the same idea were made by St. John Chrysostom [407] in the Eastern liturgy.

#### Changes in Emphasis

One bad effect of this well-meant change was that the stress on Christ's Divinity, even among the Orthodox, tended to weaken the sense of His place as the priest of all mankind, offering their sacrifice to God the Father. He has passed over to the other side, so to speak. The sense grows of an immense distance between the immolated Eucharist and ourselves. Christian writers begin to stress the awful Majesty of the Body of the Lord. In the East, the Altar is withdrawn from the people and the Consecration takes place behind a screen. Increasingly, the laity began to go to Mass in order to pay homage to the Divine Christ, whom they dared not receive because of a sense of guilt. St. John Chrysostom already complains of those who "stand idle round the altar, while none partakes".

The Roman liturgy continued to reflect an earlier pattern of thought concerning the Eucharist: but in the West, too, the idea of the fellowship of Christians in Christ tends to fade, with the glad

consciousness of the Sacred Humanity as the pledge and realization of New Life for the human community "gathered together in His Name". Private devotion, meanwhile, becomes centred upon the Divine Christ, God the Father and God the Holy Ghost being recognized little except in the Sign of the Cross and the Creed. That the Eucharist was to be adored was always known - St. Cyprian [258] insists on it, as does St. Augustine [430]: but it is above all, the Bread of Life, the Food of Immortality which we share with the Son of Man.

Popular devotion to Our Lady and the Saints also suffered some distortion. The greatness of Mary, the glory of the saints consists in the fact they are triumphant members of the society of the redeemed to which we, too, belong. Mary, of course, is particularly "magnified" by the grace of her accepted vocation to replace Eve as the mother of all the living and by the fact that the Word became Flesh of her virgin body. So the Church turns to them to strengthen her prayers to the Father through Christ, the Eternal Priest. But where His Priesthood and mediation are forgotten, Mary and the Saints are called upon to bridge the gulf: they tend to take the place of Christ as intercessors of the praying community. Hence arises an extravagance which marked devotion to the Saints in the later Middle Ages. To be sure, the truth that "Head and Body are one Christ" in the Church was never denied: but it was in serious danger of being obscured in an atmosphere of legend in which Our Lady appears again and again as the merciful heroine rescuing souls from the severe justice of her Divine Son.

#### Monastic Masses

The fact that very many great Churches in the Middle Ages were in the hands of monastic groups or Canons Regular also had the effect of making their way of worship remote from the laity. The liturgy being celebrated in a part of the building cut off by a "rood screen". The common people saw a row of holy images: but the celebration inside could be followed only by the sound of bells: the priest had to descend a long way to administer the Communion, if any wished for it. The practice had grown of private Masses offered for the dead, in which no living person was present save the priest and the altar-boy: and the Protestant Reformers later declared roughly (and inaccurately), that they often reflected an ignorance of what sacrifice truly was, and that they were said for "lucre and gain". The pressing need for true Catholic faith and worship to be cleared of abuses was recognized not only by those who revolted but by men who were completely loyal and devoted to the Church they (those in revolt) disfigured. It remains true, however, that the Church did not invent Purgatory as a means for raising cash: while the simple faith of the people in "needs" for Mass-giving was an outgrowth of the traditional Christian belief that the Eucharistic offering of Christ to the Father is the most acceptable intercession for man's needs.

#### IV. FROM THE REFORMATION TO THE NEW LITURGY OF TODAY

The sixteenth century Reformers would have none of the traditional Catholic doctrine about the Real Presence in the Holy Eucharist, insisting that since Christ was in Heaven, His Body could not be in another space on earth: while they rejected transubstantiation as an Aristotelian concept of the scholastics. In his controversy with Cranmer, Bishop Gardiner, who defended the Catholic position, insisted that Christ's Sacramental Presence was not local or quantitative, but "in such a spiritual manner as we cannot define or determine"; and he was also careful to distinguish the doctrine of the fathers from the philosophic theories used to explain it. But the misunderstanding [or incomprehension] about transubstantiation has remained until our own times, though recent ecumenical dialogues with the Anglicans may have helped to clear it up.

The Council of Trent insisted on this doctrine as always held from the earliest times and on the divine powers conferred on the Apostolic priesthood as essential to the consecration of the Eucharist, which was a true sacrifice and not just a memorial "love feast". But the Protestant controversy had the effect that the social aspect of the Liturgy and the priesthood of the laity as co-offerers and members of Christ's mystical body was under-stressed. For the rest, the awe of Our Lord as the Divine judge of sinners continued to prevail over confidence in the love of Christ our Brother and helped to make lay communions few and far between. The puritanic damnatory terrorism of the Jansenists was fought valiantly by the Jesuits, who promoted the cult of the Sacred Heart; but infrequent lay communions remained the rule until our own 20th century saw a great change begun by the saintly Pius X.

#### After the Second Vatican Council

Since the Second Vatican Council, "aggiornamento" has set in with a vengeance, with a tendency among radicals to condemn the whole thought and practice of the Church since the age of Constantine, especially as regards the Mass. These people want to speak only of the Eucharistic Banquet and not of the Sacrifice: they are irritated by individual Eucharistic devotions of all kinds as they have developed in recent centuries: one often gets the impression from them that the presence of the Holy Ghost has completely failed to control the development of Catholic worship between the fifth and the twentieth centuries:

Yet in the (so-called) "dark days" before Vatican II millions learned to love the Mass of the Roman rite. God did work through it, even upon congregations which knew little of Latin and liturgical symbolism: and, after all, in the Gospel, the Eucharist is spoken of in terms which must look quite magical to these of the "new breed" - Eat this, Do this and you will live.

All the saints, too, seem to agree that the Divine Feast is what counts, not our intellectual and emotional states as seen by ourselves. You need not be an engineer to travel in a bus, and there is no suggestion that a high degree of individual or corporate understanding is needed by His people for Our Lord to carry them heavenward by way of the Eucharist.

Undeniably we have lost a great deal in the traditional Roman Liturgy with its treasures of ancient sanctity and beauty, and posterity may charge us with acting like vandals towards the glorious structures of the past. To be sure, the defects of the older liturgy are clear enough: fossilized phrases and usages, relics of a past age which had grown meaningless, proclamations in Latin murmured so that none heard them, commemorations of persons and things known only to a few scholars and zealots. But the "tidying up" needs to be done with piety and a certain reluctant determination, not with a revolutionary zest to "burn the junk"; and many may feel that there has been too little concern for beauty and the sense of mystery in the work of the latest liturgical revisers. [Note: this was written in 1973 before the reforming stability of Pope John Paul II was able to be put into effect.]

#### Gain and Loss

The desire to have forms of worship expressing "solidarity" and "togetherness" effectively, and drawing the laity into the Mass as offerers and not just passive hearers, is a very good thing. But it has always to be remembered that as Christ, while our Brother is different from all other men, so His Church is different from all other arrangements.

Recent changes in the Church have tended to play down hierarchical differences in order to express equality and brotherhood, and this is good, provided it does not lead to new distortions by belittling the unique role of the clergy, the authority of the Vicar of Christ, and the element of awe and mystery in the Divine Liturgy.

The history of the Eucharist has reflected the constancy of the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in holding to the essentials of Our Lord's teaching, but also the light and shade of human variations of emphasis and of adaptation to changing human structures - or alternatively the failure to do so, leading to rigidity and fossilization. This human element will, not doubt, continue to be apparent in the Church's pattern of life and worship: and when Vatican Three assembles, there will be new weeds in the garden to be cleared, and new corrections to be made in the balance.

Meanwhile, whether in the older or newer rites, it is the Mass that matters, in which Christ our Priest offers Himself for the living and the dead, while we, His members, partake of Him as the Bread of Heaven, the food of our souls, and the pledge of everlasting life.

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