

of the one Gift of the Victim. If this is true, then once the bread of life has been eaten the soul should remain peacefully open to these influences coming directly from him and not fuss with its own preconceived methods of prayer and converse with him. To light a fire a man prepares dry sticks, lays them carefully and then finally applies the match. A flame applied to a disorderly heap of damp wood will have little effect. At Communion the flame of love is applied by God's hand through the greatest of his sacraments; he leaves us to prepare the wood of the soul for kindling.

The Eucharistic devotion surrounding the presence of Christ on the altar will serve after this to keep the fire of love alight, to prolong the thanksgiving and so continue the sacramentally formed prayer. And the whole movement of the spiritual life, the outward prayer of the liturgy and the inner contemplation of the individual soul alike, is in this way inspired, directed and controlled sacramentally by the Eucharist which leads to the perfection for which every Christian prays. And because it works sacramentally it is not left to subjective activities of the soul *using* the presence of Christ's body as it might use holy water and a striking picture of Gethsemane; it works in such a way as to impel the soul to prayer—Christ takes possession of the soul and its activities through this sacrament. And so St Thomas says that it is the consummation of the spiritual life; for indeed the Eucharist is the sacrament of prayer because it is the sacrament of love and the sacrament of the body of Christ.

THE BREAD OF LIFE

BY

COLUMBA CARY ELWES, O.S.B.



ONE evening in summer on the rocky slopes overlooking the Sea of Galilee from the north, Jesus had fed five thousand people with a few pieces of bread. Next day these same people and Jesus were crowded into the synagogue in Capharnaum. Our Lord was speaking to them: 'I am the bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the desert and are dead. This is the bread that comes down from heaven that if any man eat of it, he may not die. . . . I am the living bread which came down from heaven. . . . If any man eat of this bread he shall live for ever. And the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world' (John 6, 48-52).

Unlike all other great spiritual teachers Christ claimed not only to lead and point to a better life, he made the astonishing claim that

he was that life. Further, he put it in the form that he was also the instrument by means of which we acquired this life, he said he was the 'Bread of Life'. This bread, or food, was in fact to be, as he promised, his flesh. 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you shall not have life in you' (*Ibid.* 54).

It is plain, then, that this new life is given by the holy Eucharist. We need not delay over the fact. But the significance of why Christ chose this method is not so clear.

The symbolism which Christ here uses, and as usual makes a reality, is one which was of almost universal acceptance in the ancient world. It is one of the uses of the book *The Golden Bough* that it has preserved for us innumerable examples of the sacrificial meal with the god. Christ was not come to destroy but to fulfil. And as these old rites were signs of the yearnings of the human heart for communion with God, for a lifting up of humanity out of itself, so clearly rotten, so was Christ's sacrificial banquet the fulfilment, the satisfying of this yearning, and in a manner worthy of God, when the methods employed before were not always so.

This linking up of Christ's teaching and way of life with the past of the whole ancient world remains to be done, but some points of contact some fulfilments are plain and this is one of them. We are reminded of St Augustine's magnificent intuition of this truth: 'For as the Egyptians not only had idols and heavy burdens which the people of Israel had to abhor and avoid, but also vessels and ornaments of gold and silver, and apparel which that people, at its departure from Egypt, secretly took for a better use, not on its own authority, but at the command of God, the Egyptians unawares providing the things, which they themselves used ill; so all the teaching of the Gentiles, not only has deceitful and superstitious practices and heavy burdens of a useless toil, which we in every case, as we go forth out of the fellowship of the Gentiles to join Christ, ought to hate and shun, yet also contains liberal arts, fitter for the service of truth and some most useful moral precepts. Besides, there are to be found among them some truths concerning the worship of the one God himself, as it were their gold and their silver, which they did not themselves make but drew from certain veins of divine Providence running throughout, and which they wrongfully and perversely abuse to the service of daemons.'¹

Every ancient sacrifice was of two parts, as also were the Jewish sacrifices; the offering to God and the return gift by God in the form of a meal. The thing once offered up, the grain, the animal, the wine, was considered to have been caught up in the life of God, impregnated with God's life. This meal then was more than sharing

¹ St Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, Bk 2, c. 40.

in the life of God in symbol, as a meal taken with someone is a sharing in his life. The food was really considered to be charged with the life of the god. For instance, among the Jews blood was considered to be the source of life. Consequently it was partly spilt on the altar, which represented God, and the remainder which was not so spilt, though handed over to God, was afterwards sprinkled over the people. The reason of this should now be clear; it was because this life-bearing blood was no longer the life-bearer of the victim's life, but the bearer of God's life into which the victim had been caught up.

The sacrificial meal of the Eucharist, the climax of the sacrifice after the humble offering of ourselves and the offering of Christ, is our being caught up into the life of God through receiving the victim. It is no longer make-believe, as the ancient sacrificial meals were, nor is it wishful thinking as theirs was; it is the reality because Christ is really God, though also the victim, and because the wish has been granted.

Having considered the manner of receiving we may now examine the fact, the nature of this life.

St John in the very first chapter of his Gospel gives us the beginning of an understanding. 'As many as receive him, he gave them power to be made the sons of God . . . who are born, not of the blood (namely of the Jewish race, simply because of being descendants of Abraham), nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God' (John 1). The change is so great that it is likened to a new birth, and the likeness to God is so great that it is likened to the relation of Father and Son. Sons have the same nature as their fathers. Christ emphasised the first of these astonishing truths when he half opened the door of mystery to Nicodemus that night in Jerusalem, 'Emphatically I say to you, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God' (John, 3). Nicodemus was incredulous, as we should be. 'How can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb?' Christ merely repeated his statement yet more emphatically. But the full answer to 'How can this be?' came, as we have seen, in Capharnaum for the nature of that life was only gradually made plain.

St Paul says that now we see in a glass darkly but that in the other life we shall see God face to face, by which he meant 'as he is' as St John says in one of his epistles: 'Dearly beloved, we are now sons of God. And it hath not yet appeared what we shall be. We know that, when he (i.e. God) shall appear, we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is' (I John 3, 2).

We can only understand this mystery by contemplating what we know of life in God. The life in God is that of the Trinity, the all-embracing knowledge of infinity, of boundless beauty, an unfathomable comprehension of the all, combined with a love which flows from the knowledge of this truth and beauty and perfection. We are to be caught up into this ecstasy of knowledge and of love, this absolute shining truth, this white flaming love: 'I am the Truth', *Deus caritas est*. It is not that we are going to have a piece of God's nature; that is metaphysically impossible. We are going to be 'made partakers of the divine nature' (II Peter 1, 4); that is, God is going to overflow into us, take up his abode in us, God the Trinity, and thus transmute our being. 'He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood abideth in me and I in him' (John 6, 55). God in us transforms us so that his life is shared by us; we love the Son and Spirit with the Father, and know the Father and Spirit with the Son and are wrapt in love of both with the Spirit. 'And *we* will come to him and will make our abode with him' (John 14, 23). We shall have a share in that life described by Christ and recorded by St Luke. 'All things are delivered to me by the Father and no one knows who the Son is but the Father, and who the Father is but the Son, and to whom the Son will reveal him' (Luke 10, 22).

We are, then, united to the humanity of Jesus through the assimilation of ourselves to his body and blood in holy Communion. This offers us a share, if we accept it, in the whole life of Christ, as the perfect being and also as God. We become, in a way, one with Christ, not only that we have something like, but in some way we have his life. 'Now not I live, but Christ lives in me.' Christ being God, God lives in us. God does not so much come down to us, as we are caught up in God, without ever losing our own being.

Agnosce, O Christiane, dignitatem tuam: et divinae consors factus naturae . . . (S. Leo, M.L. 54, 192).

NOTE—It would be erroneous to hold that grace or charity in us were God himself, these things are a likeness of God in us. Else we would cease to be cause in our own lives; it would be God working, and we looking on. But grace is the instrument, or link, by which we are caught up into the symphony of knowledge and of love that beats out its harmony in the life of the holy Trinity. It would be equally erroneous to hold that God were not in us in a new way through grace and charity. Grace and charity merge us into God, not in our person but in our most vital acts of knowing and loving.