

What is the Church?—IV: The Eucharistic Community

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In the last article¹ we spoke of the Church as the community of those who have been baptised. It is the new creation consisting of those who have left behind their old out-of-date lives in the waters of baptism and been born again to a new life, a share in the life that Christ brought back from the dead. In this article we shall look at the Church from another point of view. Last time we said that roughly speaking the Church consists of those who have been baptised and have not renounced their faith, this time we start from the rough generalisation that the Church consists of those who go to mass. Last time we found that the formula we started from had a lot more in it than immediately met the eye and we shall find the same in this case, but once more we shall begin with the obvious straightforward meaning and leave the qualifications until later.

It is quite easy to see what happens in a baptism; it obviously has to do with water and some kind of ritual cleansing. Even in the hurried ceremony done in a corner of the Church on Sunday afternoon while most of the parish is sleeping off its lunch, the onlooker can grasp what is being done. The difficulty for him may be to understand the meaning of what is being done. The imagination crippled by our educational methods may fail to respond to the symbolism with which it is presented. The problem with the mass is the opposite. Here the difficulty is to see what is going on. Once a man has grasped that the mass is the sacred meal that Christians eat in common, he has little difficulty in beginning to understand its meaning; the ceremony of eating together is one that persists in modern society. The difficulty even for the Catholic is that the mass does not really look like a common meal at all, and if you suggest to a stranger who has been to mass for the first time that he has been attending a meeting at which the local Christians come together to eat and drink, he will be deeply puzzled. To all appearances the mass is a secret rite conducted by a

¹LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, December, 1961.

priest set apart by his special clothing and his position facing away from the audience, speaking sacred words in a beautiful and ancient hieratic language unknown to the people. At one point in the ceremony some of the people are privileged to approach the holy place to receive from the priest a private share in his mysteries; they return to their places with bowed heads and half-closed eyes, oblivious of those around them.

I do not say that this is how the mass should appear to people, just that this is how it does appear, not only to non-Catholics but to Catholics as well and in particular to children. Children have a primitive and pagan love of the arcane and hieratic, they delight in secrets and magic and other things contrary to the life of the Christian community. It is the business of education to help the child to grow gradually out of his primitive responses to his parents and others into a mature responsible love, and it is the business of religious education to watch over the child as he transcends the magical relationship with Christ and enters into a more adult union. Of course a child of four may be a saint in his own primitive way, and of course religious education must be overwhelmingly concerned with the child's love of God here and now, but the child here and now is growing and it is our business not to hold him back but to walk beside him as he moves to more complex and more human responses to grace. It is difficult to resist the impression that the mass in its present setting is in some ways especially appropriate to the child's vision of God rather than the adult's. Children are of course bored in church to the point of tears, but the secrecy of the thing, its unintelligibility, its remoteness is something they do not begin to question. The fact that the mass seems in this respect designed for children may be one reason why they stop going when they grow up.

For the moment, however, I do not want to talk about how the mass may be made to look more like what it is, I merely want to stress that unless we see it first of all as the common meal of the Christian community we miss an essential element. The 'natural' symbolism of eating and drinking is well understood in our own day. When you invite a friend into your home you offer him a drink, if it is only a cup of tea, and more formally when you spend an evening with friends you have them in for coffee or for a meal or you go with them to the pub or you take them out to dinner. We take it for granted that food and drink cements a human relationship. Wherever two or three are gathered together in friendship there will normally be food or drink in the midst of them. The reasons that lie behind this are not difficult to see.

There is a difference in kind between a gift of food and any other gift. If I give you a cigarette or a new tie I am giving you something that will please you, but when I pass you the potatoes I am giving you life. We *use* clothes and furniture and books, but we do not just use food, we are made out of food. All animals are made of food; when a man gives you dinner he is responsible for the existence of part of you. All bread at some level is the bread of life.

It is abnormal to eat alone as it is abnormal to live alone. Sometimes we have to snatch a quick lunch at a cafeteria, we sit by ourselves at the counter and get through it, but we do not reckon this a proper meal. It is an exceptional thing; there would be something inhuman about a society in which it was the norm. The normal meal, the pattern of all meals is the family dinner or its equivalent. Here the family gather together round the same food; when friends are invited they are brought into the family circle. In such a meal the whole group is deriving its life from the same centre. The food on the table represents the common life of the family. As a general rule the head of the family from whom all have received their existence is the host from whom they receive their food. When a child is sent away from the table for misbehaving he is distressed not primarily because he is hungry but because he immediately sees this as an alienation, a being cut off from the community. Excommunication is like being sent to bed without supper. The food and drink, then, symbolizes the unity and common life of the family, and this symbolism extends from the family table to nearly all other occasions of eating and drinking. Most men in a pub are, as they say, 'in company', which means that you cannot buy one man a drink without being received into his group and engaging in the rather expensive ritual of giving and receiving rounds.

This natural symbolism of eating and drinking is thoroughly exploited in the scriptures. We have already seen, in the first of these articles,² that the Word of God by which the Hebrews were welded into one people was represented as bread: 'Not by bread alone does man live but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God'. The unity of Israel was established at the Exodus and every year they celebrate their unity, their existence as one people, by eating together the paschal meal in commemoration of the Exodus. The life they draw together from the unleavened bread and the paschal lamb symbolizes the life they first drew from Yahweh when they were reborn out of the darkness of Egypt.

²LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, March, 1961.

There is no need to labour the symbolic significance of bread in the scriptures but it may be worth while looking for a moment at the use of the image of wine or the vine. Like the waters which can be both life-giving or destructive, wine has a double significance in the Old Testament. As a manifestation of the sacred, the divine power, it can 'rejoice the heart of man' or it can work his destruction

These also reel with wine
and stagger with strong drink;
the priest and the prophet reel with strong drink,
they are confused with wine,
they stagger with strong drink;
they err in vision,
they stumble in giving judgement.
For all the tables are full of vomit,
no place is without filthiness. (Is. 28. 7 ff.).

Wine is a symbol of the sacred and as such it comes to be used as a symbol of the great manifestation of Yahweh's power in history, his chosen people. Already Hosea rebukes the idolatry of Israel:

Israel is a luxuriant vine
that yields its fruit.
The more his fruit increased
the more altars he built . . . (Hos. 10. 1).

But the best known prophetic use of this image is Isaiah's love song of the vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
He digged it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
and he looked for it to yield grapes
but it yielded wild grapes
For the vineyard of Yahweh of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
and he looked for justice,
and behold, bloodshed;
for righteousness,
but behold, a cry. (Is. 5. 1 ff.).

The comparison of Israel with the vineyard or the vine becomes a commonplace of later writing:

Thou didst bring forth a vine out of Egypt
 thou didst drive out the nations and plant it.
 Thou didst clear the ground for it;
 it took deep root and filled the land.
 The mountains were covered by its shade,
 the mighty cedars with its branches;
 it sent out its branches to the sea,
 and its shoots to the River. (Ps. 80).

The same image is used of the Israel to come in the 'Apocalypse of Isaiah':

A pleasant vineyard, sing of it
 I, Yahweh, am its keeper;
 every moment I water it.
 Lest anyone harm it,
 I guard it night and day . . .
 In days to come Jacob shall take root
 Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots,
 and fill the whole world with fruit.

When Jesus tells his parables of the vineyard in which it is an image of the Kingdom of God (Mt. 20 and 21, Mk. 12, Lk. 20) he can rely on his hearers having these Old Testament passages in their minds; to them it is perfectly clear that the Kingdom of which he speaks is the vineyard of the new messianic Israel. A more startling use of the image comes in St John's account of the last supper:

I am the vine
 you are the branches.
 He who remains in me and I in him
 bears much fruit . . . (Jn. 15. 5).

Here Jesus is claiming to be, himself, the new Israel. Just as he takes upon himself the titles (Christ, Son of God, etc.) which originally were applied to the whole people³, so he now describes himself by an image that belongs traditionally to the community. He is the unity of the new people of God, it is by being united with him that we form the new community.

So by the time the bread and wine come to be used in the eucharist they have already acquired a profound meaning. Not only do they mean ordinary human community but they mean just that unity which

³LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, June, 1961.

has been given to the people of God, they stand for the links which are to bind together the Israel which is to come.

We are now in a position to see how the scriptural symbolism which has built upon the natural significance of bread and wine is completed by the sacramental words. Taking the symbols of what is to constitute the unity of the new Israel Jesus says of them: 'This is my body . . . this is my blood'. It is his own body and blood that is to constitute the people of God, they are to form one people just in so far as their bodies are linked with his. We form one human race because ultimately our bodies are linked with those of our common ancestors, we belong to the new human race because our bodies are linked with the risen body of Christ.

There can be no doubt that in recent centuries the physical bodily aspect of our beliefs has been heavily played down. Partly because of some philosophical mistakes we have got into the habit of thinking of the real person as an invisible immaterial being. Bodily actions are thought to be at best merely manifestations of the real human acts which take place invisibly. Thus we have tried to make morality merely a matter of motives and intentions and other 'acts of the mind'; physical acts have been thought of as morally good or bad only in virtue of their relationship to these interior acts. In a parallel way some people have tried to make of heaven a 'state of mind'; the emphasis has been all on the immortality of the soul while the primary Christian teaching on the resurrection of the body has been pushed well into the background. It is only in comparatively recent years that Christian thinkers have returned to a more traditional way of thinking about man.

In the first place it seems clear that since Christ is a man it is only possible to be present to him in a human way by physical bodily presence. God does not need a body in order to be present to us for he is present in a divine way, but a man without a physical body can only be absent from us—this is what bereavement means. To be present to another man we have either to be in the same place, where we can see and hear and touch each other, or else be linked indirectly by some means involving our bodies, by a phone call or a letter. However much two lovers who are parted may think of each other, they remain in fact parted until there is some physical link between them, a link which in the natural order is most perfect when they are two in one flesh. If Christ were not a living body he would be humanly absent from us, if he were dead we could remember him but we could not be in his human presence. It is precisely because he is risen from the dead that he is with us: *Resurrexi, et adhuc tecum sum.*

It is our presence to the risen Christ that makes us one community; the eucharist and the sacraments that surround it constitute the Church. Of course we are not in the eucharist present to the body of Christ by being in the same place or by making the sort of direct physical contact that we can make with other people in the same room; the body of Christ, as the Council of Trent reminds us, is not present in the eucharist naturally but sacramentally; nevertheless there is a genuine human presence involving our bodies and his. All this would, of course, fall to the ground if we lost our hold on the real bodily presence of Christ, if we thought of the eucharist in psychological terms as merely making an appeal to our minds—reminding us of a person no longer with us.

The unity of the new Israel is the body of Christ, but it is his consecrated body, his sacrificed body, his glorified body. The unity of the Church, he says, 'is my body given for you . . . is the new alliance in my blood, shed for you'. It is through the shedding of his blood that his body becomes the foundation of the new creation. This is because the shedding of his blood is a sacrifice, literally a making sacred. It is his passing over from the old world to a new. It is St John above all who insists on this point; the mission of Jesus is only fulfilled by his being 'lifted up' by his return to the Father, by his being glorified.

He spoke of the Spirit which was to be received by those who believed in him; for there was as yet no Spirit since Jesus had not yet been glorified (Jn. 7. 39).

Behold the hour has come
when the Son of Man is to be glorified.

Amen, Amen, I say to you,
if the grain of wheat does not fall into the ground and die
it remains alone;
if it dies

it bears much fruit. (Jn. 12. 23-24).

Western tradition has concentrated so much on the Passion of Christ that we are in danger of forgetting that the essential point of it was not the heroic endurance of sufferings but the passing over from the world of corruptible flesh to the new world of his immortal risen body. It is in this consecration of his body that his sacrifice essentially consists.

Sacrifice means taking something out of its profane use and bringing it into the sphere of the sacred. The people take some animal or other object which represents themselves and by making it sacred they come themselves within the range of the divine. Frequently the identification with the sacred object is completed by a ritual meal. It should be

remembered, of course, that in primitive and Christian societies all meals are more or less sacrificial; the food and drink are first dedicated to God and become to some degree sacred.

Such is the state of the fallen world that the profane and the sacred are at odds with each other. There is no simple transition from one to other, the movement is a dialectic in which we can only transcend the profane by denying it. It is for this reason that sacrifice at its most characteristic involves death, the total renunciation of the profane world; the grain of wheat must die before it can bring forth new life. It is for this reason that the sacrifice of Christ involves his death and that is why in the eucharist in which we are present to the risen body of Christ, we 'show forth his death' (1 Cor. II. 26).

In its form the mass is first of all the sacrifice of the Church, though it only becomes perfectly the sacrifice of the Church as it becomes the sacrifice of Christ. We take bread and wine, symbols of the common life of the people and we offer them to God, that is to say we make them sacred, consecrate them to the divine sphere. The dedication of the bread and wine represents the dedication of our lives to God. But the bread and wine come to represent our common life most perfectly just when they come to represent sacramentally the body of Christ, because fundamentally our common life is life in the body of Christ. The mass is not two things: the sacrifice of the Church and the sacrifice of Christ. From one point of view it is the sacrifice of Christ because it is the sacrifice of the Church—for the Church's sacrificial meal, the 'breaking of bread', is the sacramental rite which shows forth and realizes the sacrifice of Christ. From another point of view it is the sacrifice of the Church only because it is the sacrifice of Christ, for it is only in Christ that the Church realizes herself; until the bread and wine represent Christ they do not at the deepest level represent us.

We have become accustomed over the past few centuries to thinking of the mass primarily as the re-presentation of Calvary. We think of it first of all as making Christ and his sacrifice present. We should think of it also, and perhaps first of all, as making the Church present and her sacrifice. For the Church is not present merely because her members are together in one room. It is not their bodily presence to each other that fundamentally links them, but their common bodily presence to the risen body of Christ. The eucharist and the sacraments in general make Christ present but they do this in the act of making the Church really present. This fact, that the Church is only fully present in the sacramental life, can be obscured by our tendency to

think of the Church as an organization visible and patent to all. It is true that she is visible even to the unbeliever, but she is a mystery and all that the unbeliever sees is the outer fringe of things. It is only the believer, who sees the sacraments for what they are, who sees the Church as she really is.

But, as we saw in the previous article, although the believer can see into the sacraments to the reality of the Church, it is not given to him to see all the members of the Church. There are those who are united to the Church by links which are not made sacramentally visible even to the eye of faith. Besides the comparatively small group of men who are actually gathered at the eucharistic meal they may be many more who are united with them invisibly, men and women whose lives are a sharing in the sacrifice of Christ but who through no fault of theirs are absent from its sacramental enactment. Here the all-important principle to remember is that those who with a will moved by divine grace sincerely desire to receive a sacrament, but are prevented from doing so, share fully in the ultimate effect of that sacrament, the growth of charity. We should particularly remember this when we think of the worship of other Christians. It is in their prayer and especially in their common prayer that they most fully express their invisible union with the sacramental Church, and for this reason the services of other Christian communities may be for them the occasions of that same eucharistic grace which we receive at mass. However clear we may be that their worship is not the mass, that Christ's body is not sacramentally present on their altars, it is if anything more important to be clear that his Spirit is present in those who sincerely believe that they are taking part in the act of Christian worship. The reason why we are compelled to say that some Christian worship is not in fact the mass is something we shall be talking about in the next article when we come to discuss the differing roles of laity and sacramental priesthood in the offering of the sacrifice.