

Chapter 14 - The Eucharist: Christianity's Source and Summit

"The bread we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

I remember my high school New Testament class, being absorbed by Mr. Burns' explanation of what Jesus did at the Last Supper. His perspective, that of a Jewish-Catholic, was insightful:

While celebrating the Passover, Jesus took bread and said to the Apostles, "This is My body." He took a cup of wine and said, "This is My blood. Do this *in remembrance* of Me." Now people, "in remembrance" had a very special meaning for Jews. The Jewish word for "remembrance" is *zikkaron*, and a remembrance is "a ceremony in which a past event is rendered present so that believers can participate in it and reap its benefits."

The Passover meal was already considered a remembrance, a *zikkaron*, of the Israelites freedom from slavery in Egypt. The exodus was a one time historical event – but through the Passover meal every Jew born after that time also passed through the Exodus. They too had been set free! The *zikkaron*, the remembrance, the Passover meal made it present for them.

People, this is what Jesus did at the Last Supper. He transformed the Passover meal, created a new *zikkaron* from it – the Eucharist! And every time we participate in this ceremony His Passover, His death and resurrection, are made present to us so that we can share in them and reap the benefit of eternal life! After the priest prays Jesus' words, "This is My body... This is My blood," you don't have bread and wine there anymore; it's Jesus! You don't fall on your knees in the kitchen when you walk by the *Wonder Bread*. People, we go down on our knees in church because that's not bread anymore, it's Jesus Himself!

It was this same conviction that led the bishops gathered at Vatican Council II (1964) to proclaim that the Eucharist is "the source and summit

of the Christian life.²⁴⁰ It has to be. It is *Jesus* – body, blood, soul and divinity, Jesus uniting *His Body the Church* in His Spirit-empowered gift of Self to the Father. The Eucharist, joined with the eternal moment of Cross-Resurrection-Ascension, is the sacrifice of the New Covenant.²⁴¹ The Eucharist, understood as such, brought the Church into being – just as it is the summit to which we strive to be configured.

I am reminded of the beautiful story the *Gospel of Luke* relates of Easter Day. Two disciples were traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus - broken-hearted at the death of Jesus and bewildered at the report that He had been raised. Jesus approached but "their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (24:16). He began to instruct them how all that had taken place had been according to the plan of God. "And then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted for them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself..." When the disciples reached a place of lodging they prevailed upon Jesus to join them. "When he was at table with them, he took bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. *And their eyes were opened and they recognized him*; and he vanished out of their sight" (24:30-31). The two bolted back to Jerusalem to tell the Apostles "what had happened on the road, and *how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread*" (24:35). The Eucharist's power to reveal lies in the fact that it is not just summit, but *summation*. It ties everything together: the images under the Old Covenant, Christ's sacrifice, and the future of His Church.

Always in View

Very early in this work we looked at the centrality of sacrifice in Israel's relationship to God. The God of Love is not blood-thirsty; that is not what the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament were about. Blood was used because it was the symbol of life (Leviticus 17:11). The life-blood of the ani-

²⁴⁰ Flannery, Austin, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1992), p 362.

²⁴¹ *Hebrews 9: 28* says that Christ was "offered once to bear the sins of many." And yet *Hebrews* goes on to tell us that it was "through the *eternal* spirit [that he] offered himself without blemish to God" (9:14, emphasis added). The effects of His sacrifice cut through time, stretching out to atone for sins in the past, present, and future. Scripture elsewhere calls Him "the Lamb slain from the creation of the world" (Revelation 13:8; NIV). In the Eucharist that eternal moment of redemption is made present in the here and now.

mal was poured out at the base of the altar of sacrifice. Part of the animal was then burned in offering to God, part of it held back to be eaten by the priests, and part taken home to the family making the offering (Leviticus 6-7). God and His People were being *united in the life of the sacrificial victim*.

Communion, a family bond, was being reestablished after a lapse into sin, or in cases of thanksgiving and petition, reaffirmed and strengthened.

We see such a covenant meal celebrated at the two highest moments of Israel's history. When God and Israel entered into covenant at Mount Sinai we are told that Moses made a burnt offering of oxen, read the book of the covenant to the people, and threw the sacrificial blood on them and the altar saying, "Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words." The culmination, however, was when Moses and the nation's seventy elders ascended Mount Sinai and "beheld God, and ate and drank" (Exodus 24:5-11).

The second covenant meal I want to discuss actually preceded the one eaten on Sinai by a period of months, the Passover:

The Lord said to Moses and [his brother] Aaron in Egypt, "Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of the month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household... The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect... they shall take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the door-frames of the houses where they eat the lambs. That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire... head, legs and inner parts... along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast... The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you... This shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as an ordinance forever" (Exodus 12:1-3,5-10,13-14).

Now we can see various other images of the Eucharist in the Old Testament – the Israelites being fed in the desert with "bread from heaven" (Ex.16:1-16,35) and their thirst quenched by water flowing from a rock (Ex.17:3-6) each time they stopped to camp (1 Corinthians 10:4); the use of bread and wine in Israel's sacrifices (Exodus 29:38-42; Leviticus 23:18); Twelve loaves of unleavened bread were kept before the Temple's Holy of

Holies (Exodus 25:30; Leviticus 24:5-9); the Messiah would be a priest “after the order of Melchizedek” (Psalm 110:1-4), a priest who offered a thanksgiving (“eucharist” in Greek) sacrifice of bread and wine (Genesis 14:18-20); Elijah being sustained in the desert for forty days by bread and water from an angel (1 Kings 19:5-8) – but the Passover is undoubtedly the New Testament’s favorite image.

The Time of Fulfillment

John’s Gospel couldn’t advance a chapter without John the Baptist thrusting his finger at Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” (John 1:36). We find it again at the Gospel’s culmination, when Jesus is crucified. John points out that like the Passover lamb, none of His bones were broken (John 19:33-34; Exodus 12:46). John surrounds this with other Passover imagery:²⁴² Jesus stood before Pilate at “about noon” (John 19:14), on the same day and at the same time the Passover lambs were sacrificed in the Temple; Jesus wore a seamless garment (John 19:23), just as the high priest; and He was given a drink via a sponge on a hyssop branch (John 19:29), the same type of branch used to spread the Passover lamb’s blood on the doorposts of the Israelite homes (Exodus 12:22).

What comes between these two points in the Gospel is key to our study. We are told in *John 6:4* that the Feast of Passover was near. John wants Passover at the front of the reader’s mind as he/she reads on. He recounts Jesus’ miraculous multiplication of the loaves and fishes, and walking on water. “The miracle of the loaves proved that Jesus could do anything he wanted with bread. His walking on water proved that he could defy the laws of nature with his body.”²⁴³ With those two points established John presents Jesus’ most controversial discourse.

The crowd, reminding Jesus of when Moses called down bread from heaven, asked for a sign. He answered, “it was not Moses who gave you bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to

²⁴² Hahn, Scott, *A Father Who Keeps His Promises: God’s Covenant Love in Scripture*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Publications, 1998), p. 228.

²⁴³ Shamon, Albert J.M., *Our Lady Says: Let Holy Mass Be Your Life*, (Milford, Ohio: The Riehle Foundation, 1989), p.2.

the world... *I am* the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst” (6:32-33,35).

The crowd stirred; what did He mean He came from heaven? Jesus continued:

“Do not murmur among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day... Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread come down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and *the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh*” (John 6: 43-44, 49-51, emphasis added).

Jesus had finally crossed the line. His Jewish listeners began to argue among themselves, saying, “How can he give us his flesh to eat?” The crowd thought He was speaking literally; and, like almost all cultures, the Jews considered cannibalism an abomination.

If they had misunderstood Him then Jesus would have, should have, paused right to explain His language as figurative; but He didn't. His statements became even more explicit: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you *eat* [“phogein” in Greek, the usual verb for “eat”] the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life within you; he who *eats* [“trogain” in Greek, meaning “to munch or gnaw”] my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:53-54; emphasis and information within brackets added). He pressed on, “For my flesh is *real food* and my blood is *real drink*. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him” (John 6:55-56, NIV). Talk about blunt - “gnaw on my flesh,” “real food,” “real drink.”

The Passover and Temple sacrifices united God and His people in the life of the sacrificial victim. God's people had to take that life into themselves through a covenant meal. Jesus is saying that this continues under the New Covenant.²⁴⁴ In 6:51 we hear Him say, “the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.” The bread is His flesh – we have to take Him into ourselves through a covenant meal. “If the flesh we eat for eternal life is meant in only a ‘figurative way,’ or ‘spiritually speaking,’ then

²⁴⁴ In fact, in Christian hindsight we recognize that the sacrifices under the Old Covenant were meant to point ahead to the reality of the Eucharist!