

## A Short Commentary on the Eucharist:

Many years ago, I wondered why Jesus, in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), did not present a more detailed explanation of the meaning of His death on the cross. He does say that He “came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). And on three occasions, He predicted that He would be handed over, be put to death and rise on the third day (See Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34). But these prophecies provide merely facts, they do not indicate why this would be the case, what its purpose would be or what it would accomplish. No wonder the apostles did not understand what it all meant (see Mark 9:32).

Saint Paul appears to have a more developed understanding of what Jesus’ death on the cross meant and what it accomplished. For example, he tells us that because of one man’s disobedience, sin and death entered the world and that through the obedience of one man many are made righteous and live (see Romans 5:12-21). He speaks of Jesus’ death as being an expiation for sin (see Romans 3:25). He also proclaims that on the cross Jesus put to death the old sinful nature inherited from Adam and rose from the dead with a new and glorious humanity. In so doing He became the new man, the new Adam, the father of a new human race (see Romans 6:1-11 and I Corinthians 15:45).

The entire Letter to the Hebrews offers a very developed understanding of Jesus’ death on the cross, and how it led to His glorification and our own entrance into the heavenly sanctuary. Why did Jesus not explain the theology of the cross in a fuller manner?

I pondered this for quite a number of years. I knew that Jesus must have a theology of the cross; it must be somewhere in the Synoptic Gospels; I just had to find it. It finally dawned on me: Jesus did have a very developed understanding, as one might expect, but He revealed it in a manner that one would *not* expect — at least in a manner that I would not have expected. He did not simply tell us, as did Paul, what the meaning and purpose of the cross is. He did not say: “I am going to die on the cross and this is what it means and this is what it will accomplish.” No, He did it in a much more imaginative and revealing manner. He acted out the meaning and purpose of the cross and in a manner in which we could not only understand, but also in a manner in which we ourselves could participate, and, in so doing, receive the benefits of His death and resurrection.

We might think that Jesus’ crucifixion and death teaches us about the meaning and purpose of the Eucharistic Liturgy; that we understand the Eucharist in the light of the cross, or that only in understanding the cross do we perceive the reality of the Eucharistic mystery. This is not true! Actually, it is the other way around. What I finally grasped is that we understand the cross *in the light of* the Eucharist. It is the Last Supper and its subsequent liturgical enactment that reveal the meaning and purpose of the cross and, in so doing, show us how His resurrection is the fruit of the cross.

The Last Supper, the Eucharistic Liturgy, is Jesus’ theology of the Paschal Mystery — His passion, death and resurrection. The Eucharist is Jesus’ *commentary* on the Paschal Mystery, a commentary that He Himself acts out, and in which He allows His apostles to participate. Jesus’ theological commentary is a *sacramental* commentary — a *liturgical* commentary composed of words and actions, and into which words and actions Christ unites us to Himself and so to the mystery of His saving death and life-giving resurrection. Let’s look more closely at Jesus’ liturgical commentary on His death and resurrection by examining the words of institution as they appear in the Roman Canon (Eucharistic Prayer I).

**This Is My Body:** The religious setting of the Last Supper is the traditional Jewish Passover. (Scholars debate whether the Last Supper took place on the actual evening of the Passover — the Synoptics and John place the Last Supper on different days.) In order to grasp that the Last Supper is Jesus' commentary on His death and resurrection, it is important to place Jesus' meal with His apostles within a Passover context. As the blood of the lamb, placed on the lintels of the Jewish homes, alerted the angel of death to pass over such homes, so Jesus' death on the cross will be His passing over from death to life. Jesus is the new Pass-over Lamb of sacrifice who will save the people from death and allow them to pass over into life. Moreover, He is the priest of the new Passover, for He will offer Himself, His own blood, His own life to free humankind from death and so empower them to enter the true Promised Land — the Kingdom of God.

With this in mind, the words of institution from our liturgy:

“On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread.....” BCP page 362

The “day before He was handed over to suffering and death” alerts us that what Jesus does on Holy Thursday bears upon what He will do on Good Friday. Jesus' hands are holy and venerable because these hands are the human hands of the Son of God. This is an *incarnational* statement — because the Son of God assumed our humanity, He possesses human hands and because these human hands are those of the Son of God, they are sacred. These are the same holy hands that healed and blessed. Now Jesus takes bread into these same holy hands, that is, He takes Himself into *His* hands, He takes into His hands His very own life.

“[A]nd with eyes raised to heaven to you, O God, His almighty Father, giving you thanks...” In raising to His almighty Father, Jesus is offering the bread which will become, momentarily, His very self. In this liturgical gesture and action, we perceive the truth of the cross. There Jesus will actually take His very life in His hands and will offer Himself, His life, to His almighty Father and He will do so with thanksgiving. As the Eucharistic liturgy illustrates, Jesus, on the cross, is raising His eyes to His almighty Father and thanking Him for the very act of salvation *that He Himself is now enacting* on behalf of the whole of mankind. He is praising and glorifying His Father, as the Author of our salvation, for His goodness and love. Jesus' “raising His eyes to heaven” is a look of love, adoration, praise and thanksgiving to His Father. Jesus' “raising His eyes” is a holy and loving offering of Himself to the Father. We see this clearly in the continuation of the liturgical action.

“He said the blessing, broke the bread, gave it to His disciples, and said: Take this, all of you, and eat of it: this is my body which will be given up for you.” The breaking of the bread is an action that gives meaning to the cross. On the cross, Jesus' body will be broken — or better Jesus, as priest, will break His own body in the offering of Himself to the Father as a loving sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. Moreover, not only does Jesus, in the breaking of the bread, offer His innocent and holy life to the Father in sacrifice, but He also gives the bread “to His disciples”.

There is a twofold giving here, each bestowing meaning and understanding upon one another. The breaking of the bread is a liturgical act that finds its reality on the cross where Jesus offers His life in sacrifice to the Father, and this action on the cross finds its sacramental reality in Jesus giving the broken bread to His disciples at the Last Supper. This liturgical action in the Eucharist is a participation in Jesus' sacrifice so as to share in and receive its benefits — the forgiveness of our sins and reconciliation with the Father. The Eucharistic action confers understanding on the action of the cross — a sacrifice to the Father; and, in turn, the action of the cross provides a commentary on the liturgical action — that those who participate in the liturgical action participate in Jesus' sacrifice of forgiveness and reconciliation.

We explicitly observe this interweaving of the liturgical action and the action of the cross in the words and actions of institution. “Take this, all of you, and eat of it: this is my body which will be given up for you.” Jesus hands His disciples the broken bread — that is the “this” that Jesus is giving to them. However, what they will actually eat is not broken bread, but His body that will be given up for them. The “this” of broken bread is the “this” of Jesus’ broken body offered in sacrifice.

This liturgical action accompanied by His words is Jesus’ commentary on the cross. On the cross, Jesus will give up His life to the Father for them. In turn, the life that He gave to the Father on their behalf is the same life that is now given to them in the Eucharist and so they are made one with the one sacrifice of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. This, however, is merely the first half of Jesus’ Eucharistic commentary on the Paschal Mystery.

### **This Is My Blood**

“When supper was ended, He took this precious chalice in His holy and venerable hands, and once more giving you thanks, He said the blessing and gave the chalice to His disciples, saying: Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my Blood, the Blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in memory of me.”

As Jesus took the bread in His holy hands, so He takes the chalice of wine into His holy hands; however, now it will be the chalice of His Blood. Once again, Jesus’ liturgical actions portray and His words declare that He is taking His life-blood into His own hands. On the cross, Jesus will in a real sense take the chalice into His own hands and offer His blood to the Father. Moreover, Jesus, as He did with the bread, gives thanks to the Father in anticipation of the cross, for the offering of His blood to His Father will be the supreme act of thanks to His eternal Father.

The liturgical words and actions are confirmed in the words of institution: “Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant.”

The apostles are to take the chalice of wine and drink from it, for it is no longer *wine*, but His *blood* — “the blood of the new and eternal covenant”. The chalice of Jesus’ blood, that the apostles are now to drink, is an anticipatory commentary concerning the shedding of this same blood on the cross.

Again, in these liturgical words and actions Jesus is informing us that on the cross He will be offering His blood as a *new covenant* that will last forever. As the *old covenant* between God and the Israelites was confirmed in blood and so established the living union between them, so now Jesus, as the new High Priest, will offer, in love, His own holy and innocent blood to the Father. Such a sacrifice, unlike the previous sacrifices of old, truly actualizes an unbreakable and eternal covenant of reconciliation and life between the Father and all of mankind. As Jesus declares: It “will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins”.

Jesus’ Eucharistic words and actions divinely reveal the truth contained within the Paschal Mystery of His passion, death and resurrection — He will be shedding His blood for the forgiveness of sins and so will establish a new covenant in His blood — an everlasting communion of life with His Father. As we perceived in the words of institution over the bread so we now recognize the same truth concerning the words over the wine — that is, while the Eucharistic words and actions manifest what *will take place* on the cross, so now, having grasped the truth of the cross, we recognize what is also *actually taking place* in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist makes present the Paschal Mystery, and so we actually participate in the salvific work of the cross, in the shedding of Jesus' blood, and thus we receive the benefits of the cross — reconciliation and everlasting life with the Father. Jesus makes this evident in His final sentence: "Do this in memory of me." The "do this" refers to the Last Supper, the Eucharistic Liturgy, and in doing "this" we not only recall Jesus' death on the cross, but we also, by doing "this", participate in Jesus' saving activity in embracing its effects.

### **A Complete Sacrifice — the Body and the Blood**

Why, at the Last Supper, did Jesus not take the bread and simply say: "This is me"? Why did He not take the cup and simply say: "This is me"? Why did He intentionally insist that the bread is His *body* and the wine is His *blood*?

The answer is that the symbols of bread and wine, along with the words "This is my body" and "This is my blood", reveal the true and complete nature of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross. The whole of the risen Jesus is present under the appearance of bread and under the appearance of wine, yet it is truly the risen Jesus who sacrificed His life on our behalf. The designation that the bread is His body and the wine is His blood assures us that it is precisely *this sacrifice* that is efficacious and merits Jesus' resurrection. Moreover, only by designating that the bread is His body and the wine is His blood did Jesus reveal to us that we, within the Eucharistic liturgy, are actually participating in the one and same efficacious sacrifice of the cross.

### **The Eucharist Interprets the Paschal Mystery and the Paschal Mystery Makes Efficacious the Eucharist**

Jesus' liturgical words and actions at the Last Supper were a prophetic interpretation of what He would accomplish on the cross. In turn, what took place on the cross makes the liturgical and sacramental words and actions efficacious — they give the Eucharistic liturgy its power. As the Eucharistic words and actions symbolically reveal the meaning of the cross, Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross makes it possible for the sacramental actions to effect what they symbolize and to symbolize what they effect.

At the Last Supper, Jesus simultaneously revealed through the Eucharist that His death on the cross is efficacious, and that the cross makes the Eucharist efficacious. In the Eucharist we, *in union with Christ*, participate in the salvific work of the cross and so we share in its redemptive power.

### **The Resurrection**

We have seen how the Eucharistic Liturgy of the Last Supper allows us to interpret the cross and vice-versa, but it is important to connect the whole of the Paschal Mystery — the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For what undergirds Jesus' liturgical commentary on the cross is *His resurrection*. There could not be a sacramental and liturgical commentary on the cross if Jesus did not rise gloriously from the dead. Without His resurrection, Jesus' death on the cross would be meaningless — there would be no commentary to enact liturgically.

Jesus' offering of His body and blood on the cross is salvific — can have the power to bring about salvation — only if the Father raises Him gloriously from the dead. Not only does the resurrection manifest the Father's acceptance of Jesus' sacrificial death, which thus reveals its efficacy, but it also makes possible our sharing in that efficacy within the Eucharist. Without the resurrection, the Eucharistic Liturgy would be devoid of benefit because the cross would be inefficacious — bearing no salvific effect. That is, Jesus' death *alone* could not accomplish salvation.

Only because the Father raised Jesus from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit can the Father, by the same Spirit, make the living and glorious crucified Jesus present within the Eucharistic. Only because the *risen* Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist are we able to unite ourselves to Him, and so, in the same Spirit, obtain the fruit of the cross — reconciliation and communion of life with the Father through the living Jesus.

The Last Supper then is not only Jesus' sacramental commentary on the cross, it also *presupposes and anticipates* His resurrection. Jesus' resurrection makes His liturgical commentary on the cross literally come to life, for He Himself — the crucified Savior and risen Lord — is present through the sacramental words and actions.

The body and blood that we receive in the Eucharist are truly the body that was given up for us and the blood that was shed for us on the cross; but in the Eucharist what we receive is the *risen* body and blood of the crucified Jesus. The bread and wine are changed into the risen Jesus, and it is this *risen Jesus* that we receive. Thus we are united to the living Christ who died for our sins, and thus we have, in the Spirit, a living communion with the Father.

### **Jesus' Commentary on the Commentary**

For the Maundy Thursday liturgy, the Church reads not one of the institution narratives from the Synoptic Gospels — Matthew, Mark or Luke — but the episode from John's Gospel where Jesus washes the feet of His disciples on the night before He was betrayed. I think we will see that as Jesus liturgically acted out His *commentary on the cross* within the Synoptics, so within the Gospel of John, Jesus acted out His *commentary on the Eucharistic Liturgy*. The washing of the disciples' feet is a commentary on a commentary. Therefore, the washing of the feet interprets the Eucharistic liturgy that, in turn, interprets the cross. Following the reciprocal pattern that we discerned above, this means that the cross not only gives reality to the liturgical words and actions, but it also provides the proper interpretation of the feet washing. Let us examine this in somewhat more detail.

John begins his narration in this manner. "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside His garments and girded Himself with a towel" (Jn 13:3-4). The institution narratives in the Synoptic Gospels are set within the context of the Passover, and the washing of the feet is set within the same context — "and that He had come from God and was going to God".

Jesus begins to wash His disciples' feet. When Peter protests, Jesus responds, "What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand" (Jn 13:7). After the foot washing, Jesus resumes His place at the table and interprets His actions for the disciples:

"Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (Jn 13:14-17).

We are to enact the Eucharist in our daily lives by giving our lives for one another — washing one another's feet. Jesus' washing of His disciples' feet is a parable about the Eucharist — as He gives Himself to us so we are to give ourselves to one another. Moreover, we find the source of the truth of this parable, as mediated through the liturgical

and sacramental words, in the cross itself. It is *on the cross* that Jesus truly washes our feet, for it is there that He gives up His body for us and it is there that He sheds His blood for us.

Every time we do what is good, in all of its various forms — acts of charity, kindness, forgiveness, courage, etc. — we are washing one another's feet in imitation of Jesus. In so doing, we are making concrete, in our daily lives, the meaning of the Eucharist that finds its source in the reality of the cross. Through our acts of sacrificial love, we are saying, "This is my body given up for you". Through our acts of mercy and compassion, we are saying, "This is my blood poured out for you".

Here we perceive that Jesus' washing of His disciples' feet is a commentary, a parable, about the meaning of the Eucharist within the lives of Christians, the basis of which is found in the cross.

As Jesus through the cross, the giving of Himself, His washing of feet, obtained the new life of His resurrection, so too does our cross, the giving of ourselves, our "washing of feet", obtain for us the reward of everlasting life, because this giving of ourselves in love is performed *in union with Christ through faith*.

In the Eucharist, Jesus nourishes us on the living body that He gave up for us, and on the living blood that He poured out for us. This will find its completion in the heavenly banquet where the life that we live is forever nourished on the risen life of Jesus. As Jesus nourished us on earth so He will fully nourish us in heaven. Moreover, as we nourish one another here on earth in the giving of *our* bodies and blood in acts of sacrificial charity, so we will completely nourish one another in heaven — for there, in union with Jesus, we will give ourselves fully and completely to one another.