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EUCCHARIST

A SHORT HISTORY

By Alfred McBride, O.Praem.

It is a very human trait to treasure the last words of a dying person. In the case of Pope John Paul II, his encyclical *The Church of the Eucharist*, published in his final year, aptly captures his desire to awaken in the Church a new appreciation of the Eucharist.

I have been able to celebrate Holy Mass in chapels built along mountain paths, on lake shores and sea coasts; I have celebrated it on altars built in stadiums and city squares. This varied scenario of celebrations of the Eucharist has given me a powerful experience of its universal and, so to speak, its cosmic character. Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation (*The Church of the Eucharist*, 8).

In this issue of *Catholic Update* we respond to Pope John Paul's eucharistic desire with this reflection on six stages in the history of the Eucharist in the Western Church.



CNS PHOTO BY ANDY CARRUTHERS, CATHOLIC STANDARD

1 FROM PASSOVER TO EUCHARIST

Whatever changes and variations occurred in history, the Church has always preserved the core ritual. Early Christians viewed the Last Supper from the viewpoint of the Passover meal. It was held in an “Upper Room,” a place often used for rabbinic Scripture discussions. The apostles would have seen a short-legged table surrounded by cushions where they would sit. On the table was a bowl of saltwater in memory of the tears shed during the slavery in Egypt. A dish of bitter salad recalled their crushing slave days.

A container of mashed apples, raisins and plums coated with cinnamon looked like the bricks they made. Platters of unleavened bread stood next to the large Cup of Blessing filled with wine. A roasted lamb (part of a lamb sacrificed at the Temple) symbolized the sacrificial quality of the meal and recalled the blood of a lamb on their doorposts that saved them from the avenging angel in Egyptian times.

Jesus opened the meal with a psalm that praised God for his mighty deeds of salvation in the Exodus. Then he took the bread, gave thanks for it and, breaking tradition, followed this with new words: “Take and eat. This is my body that will be given up for you.” This bread was now his body. It would be given up, that is offered on the cross. Pause for a moment to consider what the apostles might have felt and thought at participating in the first Eucharist in history.

At the end of the meal, Jesus took the Cup of Blessing filled with wine and instead of making the usual toast he again broke tradition and said, “Take and drink... This is my blood... It will be shed for you and for all for the forgiveness of sins.” Once more Christ referred to his forthcoming passion where he would shed his blood. As they drank of the one cup and ate of the one bread they experienced their unity in Christ. Finally, Christ gave them and their successors the power to celebrate Eucharist: “Do this in memory of me.” They all sang a psalm and Jesus went forth to his saving death and resurrection.

In this event Jesus gave us the sacraments of the Eucharist and the ordained priesthood.

2 FROM MEAL TO WORSHIP

Gradually the apostles and their successors developed the Eucharistic celebration into the structure that endures to this day. They first named it the “Breaking of the Bread” but soon they saw the need to separate the rite from a meal, both because of abuses at meals (1 Cor 11:17-22) and because they wanted a more prayerful setting for this act of worship.

This development was reported by a late first-century document, the *Didache* or “*Teaching of the Apostles*.” Eucharist was moved to Sunday in memory of Christ’s resurrection. In place of the meal the early Christians created a Liturgy of the Word somewhat modeled after synagogue prayer that included readings from Scripture, singing of psalms and an instruction.

Around the words of institution they added prayers of thanksgiving, praise and intercession. By the year 150, St. Justin Martyr tells us that the basic structure of the Mass was already in place. These Eucharists were held in people’s homes up until the year 313.

On Sunday there were two readings by a lector, a homily by the priest, then the Eucharistic Prayer and the distribu-

tion of Communion. And yes, there was a collection—for widows, orphans and others in need! The threefold roles of bishop, priest and deacon were already in place in the first century.

Our Second Eucharistic Prayer today is brief and simple, and owes its inspiration to a similar one composed by Hippolytus of Rome in 215. It is clear that the basic form of the Eucharist occurred very early and has remained remarkably durable for 2,000 years.

3 THE GROWING BODY OF CHRIST

The year 313 was a turning point for Christianity. Persecutions suddenly ended. Constantine gave freedom to Christians and spent great sums of money building basilicas for Eucharistic worship. Modest house churches gradually ceased to exist.

Stately ceremonies suitable in a huge church emerged. Processions, courtly movement in the sanctuary, metered chant (composed by St. Ambrose) and sung litanies that galvanized the voices of thousands, incense and bells, kissing sacred objects and the use of genuflections became a pattern to accompany the ancient structure of the Eucharist.

The celebrants wore clothes worthy of a Roman senator. Their robes eventually came to be called *vestments*, since they were retained long after fashions changed. The simple plates and cups of



ONS PHOTO BY GREG TARCYNSKI

house worship became elaborate chalices and patens. This was an inevitable evolution due to social acceptance, organizing an empire-size Church and, indeed, ecclesial prosperity.

This era witnessed the rise of extraordinary bishops, known now as Church Fathers, such as Augustine and Chrysostom, whose homilies were rich in theology and pastoral in application. Their genius was to work out theological development in the context of the light generated by the Eucharist and the prayerful hunger and faith of the people. Their theme was “The Body of Christ [Eucharist] builds the Body of Christ [Church].”

4 THE EUCHARIST BECOMES DISTANT FOR MOST

The widespread appearance of the stunning Gothic cathedrals in medieval Europe signaled a resurgence of faith. The colorful religious processions for feasts of saints, the enthusiasm for pilgrimages to holy shrines, the birth of new religious orders led some subsequent historians to call these centuries the “ages of faith.”

But alongside these events were troublesome declines in active participation in the Mass. The removal of the assembly from participating in the Eucharist was dramatized by screens of stone or iron that hid the choir and altar from public view. The monks and priests conducted their corporate liturgy away from the assembly. The Mass remained in Latin, even though people began using their local languages for most things in their lives. When the people complained of the Mass’s remoteness, they were given side altar Masses where the priest faced the wall and prayed in Latin.

The people compensated for their estrangement by asking the priest to hold up the host for their view and adoration: “Hold it higher, sir priest!” Meanwhile, Berengar of Tours taught that Jesus was not really present in the host, which was only a symbol of his presence. The Church repudiated his views at Lateran IV in 1215 by affirming Christ’s Real Presence and introducing the concept of

transubstantiation (the substance of bread becomes the substance or “being” of Christ) to support this doctrine.

Because many Catholics had ceased receiving Communion, the Council also mandated going to Communion at least once a year at Easter time. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament became popular along with other forms of popular piety.

5 REFORMATION AND THE TRIDENTINE MASS

It took the Church 28 years to gather to its energies and open the Council of Trent in 1545 to deal with the Reformation. The Council Fathers called for a renewal of the liturgy. In 1570

Pope Pius V responded to this call that would be a standard book for the celebration of Mass for the Western Church. Everything in his decree pertained to the priest celebrant and his action at the altar including the Liturgy of the Word. The participation of the people would be devotional rather than liturgical. The Mass text was in Latin. (This sturdy Tridentine Mass [named for Trent]) endured up to Vatican II.)

The Jesuits introduced Baroque architecture in which the choir stalls, screens and walls were removed. The distance between altar and assembly was shortened so that only an altar railing separated them. The altar was placed against the wall, which was lavishly decorated from floor to ceiling. The tabernacle rested on the altar and above it was a niche provided for exposition and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

A soaring pulpit was situated near the middle of the Church indicating the importance of a sermon but not a homily. This worship space glowed with self-confidence and triumph. It suited the mood of this Counter-Reformation. The church was a throne room and the assembly, the audience. They were treated with the music of Palestrina,



CNS PHOTO BY DON BLAKE, THE DIALOG

Haydn and Mozart. The Protestants had Bach, but also sang hundreds of new hymns triumphantly.

Sadly, most Eucharists were “Low Masses,” generally without music and which the assembly attended in silence. Catholics turned to new schools of spirituality to satisfy their spiritual longings: the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, the Carmelite schools and that of St. Francis de Sales.

Eventually, in the 19th century, it became clear that a return to the sources of the liturgy was needed.

6 MASS IN THE ERA OF VATICAN II

The first document approved by the Fathers of Vatican II (1962-65) was the *Constitution on the Liturgy*. But a century before this the stirrings of liturgical change had begun. Benedictines had begun to revive earlier liturgical practices, such as Gregorian chant (from the sixth century), and were studying the roots of Christian liturgy and the ways all Christians once had participated. Pope Pius X (1903-1914) encouraged the use of Gregorian chant, frequent Communion and lowering the age for First Communion to seven years.



“THE MOST HOLY Eucharist contains the Church’s entire spiritual wealth, Christ himself, our Passover and living bread.”

—Pope John Paul II,
Ecclesia de Eucharistia
PHOTO BY THE CROSIERS / GENE PLAISTED, O.S.C.

Pius XII’s *Mediator Dei* (1947) lent powerful impetus to the liturgical movement. In 1951 Joseph Jungmann, S.J., published *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, that revealed the complex history of the Mass. In the United States, St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, supported the cause for liturgical change through its magazine *Orate Fratres*, “*Let us pray, Brethren*” (now called *Worship*). Their roster of writers included all the movers and shakers who rallied the Church in America to the cause.

In other words, the groundwork was firmly laid by patient scholarship, hundreds of meetings and countless articles by the time Vatican II assembled. With relatively little debate and very small opposition, the *Constitution on the Liturgy* was approved by the Council Fathers 2,147 favorable to 4 opposed. The sonorous words of the *Constitution* reached a high point when it declared, “The liturgy is the summit to which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows” (10).

In the last part of the 20th century the application of the document began. A number of changes were introduced. The priest now faced the people. Vernacular languages replaced the Latin. People shook hands at the greeting of peace. The congregation was asked to participate actively in the Mass, to sing and pray at various times.

People were invited to receive Communion either in the hand or on the tongue and to stand at its reception. They were offered the chalice so they could communicate under both species, the eucharistic Bread and Wine.

Laity and religious could serve Communion as extraordinary ministers. Married deacons appeared, to assist the priest at Mass and to preach homilies. Entrance processions were added. People brought up the gifts at the presentation of the offerings.

Priests abandoned what some called the “fiddle-back” chasubles for robe-like replacements. Mass readings provided a three-year series of Scripture in which large sections of the Bible would be heard. Homilies, which had become lectures or announcements on most anything, were expected to explain Scripture and apply it to everyday life.

Church architecture became functional and minimalist in decoration, a sign of the times. Instead of the long “shoe box,” a wider auditorium model appeared. Guitar Masses surfaced and new hymns were composed, leading to many arguments about taste and suitability.

None of this happened without some anger and discomfort. Some experimentation went over the top. But in fact the amazing thing is how little disturbance actually happened. The dreams of the liturgical movement were fulfilled and expanded upon. People are realizing that they can enrich their spirituality mainly from the celebration of the Eucharist.

What’s striking is that the significant impact of all this is yet to be experienced. In Church years, we’re very near the beginning of the Council’s reforms.

UPDATE

Question Box

- 1) What drove the changes in the Eucharist at Vatican II?
- 2) In what sense is the Eucharist the same throughout history?

EUCHARIST: ALIVE AND DYNAMIC

One conclusion we can draw from this sketch of the history of the Mass is that changes in the liturgy, whether large or small, have been occurring since the Last Supper. The basics have never changed, but the details, decisions by Church authority and the attitudes of the participants have undergone modifications and development.

In this sense the celebration of the Eucharist is a dynamic and living reality. While a constant diet of experimentation is not healthy or desirable, a loving attention to the quality of the divine celebration is a necessity. We certainly need to avoid frivolity, but we also need to avoid stagnation.

The noble core of the Eucharist from the Upper Room to an urban cathedral or a village church has withstood the tumults of history—and always will. For this we praise and thank God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. ■

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