

THE BOND OF PERFECTION

by RICHARD BLUNDELL

THE last supper stands at the watershed of human history. In it the old and the new orders meet, for it is at the same time the central rite both of judaism and christianity. It is not surprising that the Lord should have chosen this occasion to utter words which were to transform the future history of men: 'I have a new commandment to give you, that you are to love one another; that your love for one another is to be like the love I have borne you'.¹ Under the Old Law, men were bidden love their neighbours as themselves. Now more was asked of them. They must love as the Lord loved. What this meant was told them a little later: 'This is the greatest love a man can show, that he should lay down his life for his friends'.²

This love which christians must bear towards each other, *agape*, charity, differs in kind as well as degree from any other form of love. By baptism the spirit of God enters into the christian, giving him power to cry 'Abba, Father'. The love of a child for its parent is qualitatively different from any other kind of love. By his baptism the christian is able to offer this love to God, because he has become God's son. St. Paul says that the christian is 'adopted' in order to show the difference that exists between Christ's relationship to the Father and ours. Yet we must not confuse divine with human adoption. In ordinary human life a person cannot become blood relation to another, bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, if he did not enjoy such relationship before. In the world of grace, however, that is precisely what happens. Because he is God's son, God's likeness is imprinted on the christian, even as the parents' likeness is imprinted upon their children.

If power is given to the christian to love God as children love their father, then power is given to him to love his fellow christians with the love of brothers and sisters for one another. The Lord has ordained that the love we bear for one another must be like the love he bears for us. That love is a real brotherly love, since he is the 'first-born of many brethren', Son of God by nature as we are by favour.

¹ Jn 13, 34.

² Jn 15, 13.

This declaration of the new commandment was made at the first celebration of the Eucharist. The first christians were told that they formed a new family, and, by a tradition which is as old as the human race, a family finds itself in the sharing of a meal. The idea that food and drink shared in common binds men together runs through the whole complex history of human relations. The signing of an international treaty is consummated by a state banquet, while two peasants who have successfully concluded a deal over a pig ratify their agreement by repairing to the nearest inn and clinking glasses. The love which binds the members of a family together is often most warmly felt in the meal which joins them together at the end of the day; when the tension and stress of their work is no more and all can relax. There are occasions, like first communions and weddings, when for a good Catholic family the fraternal meal is truly an *agape*, a continuation of what has been begun in the church. The Jews, living in an age more leisured and less complex than our own, were extremely conscious of the meaning behind the breaking of bread which preceded their meals, and the shared cup which terminated them. The actual words of institution of the Eucharist gave a new richness to the ancient rite of breaking the bread and blessing the cup; but so too do the phrases which announce the new commandment.

To speak of solidarity between peoples and brotherly love is very much the order of the day. A great catastrophe will evoke what is called a 'crusade of charity'. Marxist humanism can find volunteers ready to work themselves literally to death in order that future generations may find a problematical beatitude in a problematical new world. The new aristocracy of the cinema and the sporting arena will mingle with the old at charity balls and charity performances. All this will be confused with christianity or accepted as a worth-while substitute for it. 'To be a christian is to go about doing good' is often heard as the prelude to an attack on 'institutional' or 'denominational' religion. The statement cannot be denied, because it has evangelical foundations. Yet it needs careful qualification. It is true that devotion to a purely human and natural ideal will inspire great sacrifices. Sheer generosity, with which some characters are naturally endowed, will produce lives which verge on the heroic. Nevertheless it may be asked whether such activities are not inspired and given their direction by traces of religious sentiment obstinately surviving in a world where humanist and secular ethics officially prevail. From what we know of primitive societies their notions of

morality would seem to have been too rough and ready to have been able to give any worth-while direction to the generous impulses of the human race. Be that as it may, devoted service inspired by compassion for the suffering, by professional pride and integrity, or by sheer goodness of heart, is not charity. Still less worthy of the name charity is the perfunctory dashing off of a cheque, the slightly condescending attendance at a social function in support of a worthy cause, which often passes for charity in those lands where English is spoken.

In terms of hospitals and schools efficiently and devotedly run where human suffering and ignorance is eliminated the difference between philanthropy and real charity may seem negligible; though even here the direction given to such work by the christian ideal will preserve it from many harmful aberrations. But any set of values, in order to be really human, must be based upon something more fundamental than visible results. The human race has benefited most notably from the results of a natural spirit of pride and emulation which could well have taken a different and less beneficent turning. It is the motive which makes the difference. It is far more excellent to toil for others than for oneself. It is more excellent to toil for a *person*, with all the complex richness which that word contains, than for an abstraction. To have charity is to love Christ, to love men because Christ loves men, and to serve them on that account. It involves the effort 'to put on the mind of Christ Jesus', and, if necessary, 'to lower one's dignity, accepting an obedience which brings one to death, even death on a cross'.¹ This is impossible for unaided, human nature; but man has received God's power, and charity is one of three basic or theological virtues which accompany that gift. A virtue is a power, and power is given us to practise charity, which means that all our acts are transformed and have a new value in God's sight. They are transformed because they become henceforth the acts of a member of a family, of a family that is so closely knit that it may be compared to the members of a living body; so closely knit that the splendour of its head gives added lustre to all that its members do.

True charity gives point and meaning to situations which the humanist ethic ignores or condemns. The man of the world would with difficulty be persuaded that the aged and the invalid, who apparently can no longer serve their fellow men, are practising

¹ Phil 2, 5-8.

charity. Yet the words and gestures of the last supper, which illuminate and transform the tragic events of Calvary, give equal meaning to the toil and hardship of which the lives of christians are made up. When physical strength fails and it is no longer possible to go about doing good, it is still possible to offer up life, to accept whatever kind of death God has ordained. This, by virtue of the mysterious solidarity between Christ and the christian, described at the last supper in terms of the vine and the branches, will be 'in ransom for many, unto remission of sins'.

Before the celebration of the first Eucharist began, Christ washed the feet of his disciples. This gesture is as much a commentary on the words 'This is My Body which is given for you, this My Blood which is shed for you', as Calvary itself. To practise charity we must all accept death, but first we must be ready to serve, for Christ's sake, without making conditions or reserves; for 'charity is patient and kind; charity feels no envy; charity is never perverse or proud, never insolent, does not claim its rights, cannot be provoked, does not brood over an injury'.¹ All this the Lord expressed when he washed the disciples feet: 'I have been setting you an example which will teach you in your turn to do what I have done for you. If I, who am the Master and the Lord, have washed your feet, you in your turn ought to wash each other's feet'.² Paradoxically, it is often easier to accept heavy blows, and death at the end, than the normal failures and annoyances which make up the daily life of a man. But to show that the practice of charity has to do with the normal, the Lord laid his garments aside and girded himself as a servant, he who came from God and would return thither.

The sharing of a meal in common by a group of friends is the expression of their love for each other; but it is more than that. It serves to increase the intensity of that love. This is universally recognised by the way in which families gather themselves together from the ends of the earth. What is true in the natural order is true in the divine. The mere fact of assembling together to eat the supper of the Lord should have a powerful effect upon the solidarity and cohesion of any group, be it parish, religious community or human family. The Eucharist is destined by its very nature to bind men together. 'As this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and then, when gathered, became one mass, so may Thy Church be gathered from the ends of the earth into Thy Kingdom'.³ The symbolism of the

¹ 1 Cor 13, 4-5.

² Jn 13, 13-14.

³ The Didache. *Ancient Christian Writers*, no 6 (1948), p. 20.

separate grains of wheat and the grapes which crushed together come to form bread and wine tells us exactly what the Eucharist is intended to achieve. The Lord chose them for that very reason.

At the last supper and in those forms of the eucharistic celebration, now confined to the East, where the bread is actually broken so that 'the one bread makes us one body, though we are many in number, the same bread is shared by all',¹ this symbolism is easily perceived. But although, for reasons of a practical order, things are done differently in the Latin West, it is still the one body of the Lord of which all partake; and it is important that this should be recognised. It is true that the sacrament of the Eucharist will achieve its effect, through the power which Christ enshrines in it, *ex opere operato* as the theologian says. But its efficacy is none the less enhanced if the rites which surround its administration and the symbolism which belong to its very nature are properly understood. The Church has consistently taught that the Eucharist is a meal shared. She loses no opportunity to remind us of this and in her prayers and instructions explains its significance. There is a meaning, for instance, even in the ciborium, the cup the contents of which all share. We are to see it as the equivalent of the whole loaf which was broken up and passed round at the earlier eucharistic celebrations.

It is not beyond the ingenuity of any modern organisation for the practice of philanthropy to compose a kind of secular meal-rite to express brotherly solidarity. In fact many of them do, Masons, Rotarians etc. But their notion of brotherhood lacks foundation, because they recognise no common father. The christian reunion takes place in the presence of such a Father. The 'president of the assembly' is the Son, Christ Jesus, through whom every christian can claim God as Father; for Christ is the elder brother, the first born of many brethren. The love generated by every celebration of the Eucharist differs from that which could be the outcome of any reunion of people sympathetically inclined one to another, because of the presence of Christ.

The love which christians bear for one another must be like the love which Christ bears for them; and this love will be communicated to them at the Eucharist. There is a human analogy to this. The presence of some powerful and sympathetic character can have the effect of making men of strong wills and conflicting interests live and

¹ 1 Cor 10, 17.

work together in harmony. The grace of Christ can, of course, work more powerfully than the most radiant human personality and without its support; but Christ's presence is sacramentally veiled.

It is a paradox that human defects and weaknesses, such as ignorance, selfishness and sloth, can hamper and even block completely the workings of grace. Every effort must be made, by prayer and recollection, to pierce the veil, so that Christ's presence may be the more compelling. The christian must constantly remind himself that by assisting at the Eucharist he is not merely fulfilling another regulation but responding to a personal invitation by Jesus Christ to enjoy his company.

Post-Reformation piety, it is often said, made the reception of communion the meeting of Christ and the individual christian to the exclusion of its social implications. However true this may be, there is a danger that piety might go to the other extreme. Assistance at Mass and the reception of holy communion could become a matter of routine with all emphasis on personal preparation and thanksgiving omitted. We are brought closer to our brethren in the measure that we are brought closer to Christ. Presence at the eucharistic celebration should have the same effect as a meeting with some much loved friend, a contact which leaves the friendship deeper, stronger and more vivid. There is place, however, for an examination of the way in which reception of the Eucharist and assistance at the sacred mysteries has its effect upon relations between individual christians. In the early days the way in which christians loved one another was the admiration of the pagans. We are told in the Gospels that we must first be reconciled to our brother before we lay our gift upon the altar. In some of the eastern liturgies it is represented that if the priest remember that he is at enmity with anyone, he must first be reconciled before he go to celebrate the sacred mysteries. A state of bitterness existing between two people who frequently approach the holy table together as the Lord's guests to share the supper he offers is one of the greatest scandals in the Church. There are moments when memories of the eucharistic meal shared should act as an effective brake upon harsh words and deeds and as a powerful solvent of bitter thoughts.

The eucharistic gathering is the mark by which the community of charity may be recognised. We describe Catholics as practising or non-practising, depending upon whether or not they are faithful in their attendance at Mass. This is as it should be. By responding to the Lord's invitation and seeking him out in the Eucharist we

express clearly our belonging to his community. Every Mass presents to the world a cross section of the Church, gathered in from every clime and race and colour. The outsider, standing by the roadside watching the crowds pouring out of Mass, is seeing the Catholic Church in all its richness and variety. Conversely the enemies of christianity have always, with unerring instinct, sought to prevent Mass from being celebrated, because without the eucharistic assembly the Church cannot find herself. Nor, without great difficulty, can she find her Master.

Christ is present in the Eucharist through transubstantiation. He is present in other ways too. His voice is heard in the Gospel. It is heard, too, in whatever instruction may be given, whether from the sacred books or through the intermediary of the priesthood. He is present in the words and gestures of the priest-celebrant. It is customary to call a priest *alter Christus*, another Christ. The word 'apostle' signifies one who is sent having behind him the authority of the sender. 'As the Father sends Me so send I you'. The acts of the envoy are no longer his own, but those of the principal. Thus when the priest-celebrant 'takes bread in his hands, blesses it, raises his eyes to heaven and says, this is my Body', it is the Lord who thus speaks and acts, using the voice and the hands of his minister. The Apostles, assisting at the first celebrations of the Eucharist by one of their number, and seeing him perform acts which they had so often beheld Christ perform when he blessed the bread before the meals they shared in common, would easily have seen in the figure of his minister, that of the Master himself. The christian, desirous of assisting devoutly at the Eucharist, would do well to strive to put himself in the place of one of the earliest christians and see, behind the well-known figure of one of his clergy, Christ our Lord.

The Eucharist is a common meal. But it is something else besides. It is a sacrifice. Christ the Son offers his peerless life to his Father, for the remission of sins. Our Lord offers his life for his friends, and there is no greater love than this. He made the offering at the last supper and it was rendered authentic on Calvary. Thus the Eucharist enshrines for ever the example of obedience to the new commandment which our Lord gives us. The Mass is the sacrifice of the Church, because in it each individual christian should make the offering of his own life, associating it with the oblation of Christ. This sacrificial union is symbolised by the mingling of a drop of water in the wine and its absorption at the offertory. The christian who assists at the eucharistic sacrifice must authenticate the offering

he has made when he goes back into the world again. This authentication, the acceptance, that is, of whatever sacrifice the Lord may desire, is the gage of the christian's sincerity when he makes his offering. Saints have been literally overjoyed at the hardships which came their way, blessing the Lord and giving thanks at each fresh blow. To be able to do this is to have received an extraordinary grace; but it is a grace which every christian must pray for. The passion and crucifixion have sense only by reference to the last supper; and the tribulations of a christian man, borne in a christlike manner, can be understood only in relation to the Eucharist. In the eyes of the world the activities of the christian's daily life may be valueless. He may be an aged person pottering around painfully and aimlessly. Or he may spend himself in serving the sick and housing the homeless, in which case the world will say that he practises charity. But the criterion by which charity is to be distinguished from philanthropy is always the Eucharist.

'We who have feasted on Thy saving sacramental gift humbly beseech Thee, Lord, that we may be gladdened by tasting it and also made new by its working', runs a prayer in Advent time.¹ To analyse our motives, to try and decide whether we serve our neighbours because we love the God who made them or because they please us, or even because doing good gives us a feeling of satisfaction, is wearisome and will probably end by driving us mad. Much better pray for the gift of charity, so that the love of God in us may become so strong that all other affections are burned away. The careful reception of the Eucharist, day after day, means that the love of God will develop from within and guide our ways of thinking and acting. We shall slowly be transformed, in such a way that the Christ whom we receive in the Eucharist may be perceived through our words and actions by those among whom we live.

They will recognise him in us, in so far as we recognise him in them, however difficult and unpromising they may be. We shall never achieve this unless we begin by learning to be aware of Christ in his children when we meet them at the eucharistic assembly. Under the influence of his presence we will develop an attitude of love, respect and mutual forbearance towards those who share his company with us. By dint of seeing them in his presence we shall recognise him in them, and our conduct towards them and the way we regard them will become more and more Christ's way of doing these things.

¹ Postcommunion prayer; Wednesday in Ember Week.