

THE MYSTERY OF CHARITY

By JOHN H. MILLER

ALL that was visible in Christ our Redeemer', Pope St. Leo tells us, 'has passed into the sacraments of the Church'. The mystery of divine love in Christ continues to dwell in our midst in the sacramental worship of the Church. His bodily ascension did not bring his presence among us to an end; it is only the eyes of our body that are bereft of an immediate object of vision. The incarnation of divine Love, in the words of the christmas preface, 'has flooded the eyes of our mind with the light of his glory, so that as we recognize him as God made visible, we may through him be drawn to a love of things invisible'.

The liturgical life of the Church prolongs the redemptive incarnation, whereby God's Son embodies in human, tangible form all the Father's love and life; and, at the same time, surrenders us to the embrace of divine Love. By means of visible signs taken from the world of man, the Christ-sacrament extends into our lives his redemptive act, the paschal mystery, as he hands us over to the transforming power of his Spirit. The Church in her liturgical action is Christ redeeming the world. Called forth from the pierced side of the Son of Man as he hung upon the cross, she is the bride without blemish, who, in her sacraments, shows herself to be the effective image of the charity of God poured forth upon men.

God's love has but one aim in our regard: to admit us, in and through Jesus Christ, into his intimate life. Mankind was for centuries a prodigal, spending his precious inheritance in the rejection of his Creator. But now mankind hears the unmistakable voice of a goodness which goes beyond the mere pardoning of an inferior, to offer a genuine personal relationship, the love of the Father for his sons. This is the *inaestimabilis dilectio caritatis*, of which the Church sings in her *Exultet* on Easter eve: 'How marvellous is your fatherly regard for us, how incalculable the affection of your love, surrendering your Son to redeem the slave'! God sent his Son 'that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because we are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying *Abba*, Father'.¹ We are

¹ Gal 4, 5-6.

not restricted to the generic name, God, when we wish to address him; nor are we permitted only the use of his proper name, Yahweh. No, we go right to his heart in utmost familiarity, with 'Papa'; for that is what the Aramaic *abba* means.

To express all the warm tenderness of children sharing their father's life, what better image could God have chosen than the family meal? Certainly by his absolute power, he could have chosen some symbol other than food to convey and renew the redemptive sacrifice of his Son. But no other symbol could have expressed in such clear and intelligible terms all the richness of the human relationship of love that our Father wished to communicate to his beloved children.

The eucharist, as we know, is not something completely new; it has its roots deep in Israel's worship. Nor was its ritual form, as instituted by our Lord, the only ceremonial pattern familiar to the Israelites. There were the holocaust, the blood of slain animals, the tithes and cereal offerings; all of these were expressions, on the part of the worshipper, that God had supreme dominion over all things created, and that submission to him was man's fundamental obligation.

And yet from among all these ritual forms, Christ chose one, a communion sacrifice, the paschal meal, which was to embody and bring to men of all time his own surrender to the Father's love. This choice was made, we may suspect, not only because the passover was the principal feast of the Israelites, which epitomised the whole of salvation history and made actual and present the entire expanse of messianic hope; but also because central to its celebration was the sacrifice of communion, the earliest form of worship among the semites. Indeed the sacrificial meal appears again and again in the religious history of mankind, so much is it a basic part of the fund of human religious expression.

A meal, after all, is symbolic of friendship and love on a truly personal level. The two or more persons feasting together are not sharing something of little relevance to their lives. They share in common what nourishes and sustains life, something that becomes part of the very fibre of their being, food. At the same time, their convivial conversation effectively expresses in human sign-language an intimate spiritual communion. Similarly, the semites observed a meal ritual as the chief means of entering into intimacy with God. After first offering a victim to God, thus acknowledging it to belong to him, they sat down at table with him to eat the victim returned to

them, but now transformed with God's own life and power. Their intent was, by feeding upon such divine food, to be carried up into the world of divine life and holiness and to live in union with God.

Among the Hebrews, the paschal meal was essentially a memorial-meal which, while it commemorated the original passover, effectively made those who were at table relive, sacramentally, the events of the deliverance and exodus from Egypt. But even more important, this sacred meal renewed and confirmed the covenant of old, in which God had pledged his lasting faithful love to his people; provided they showed that they returned this love in their desire to be faithful to him. The paschal meal was, in fact, the chosen people's self-commitment to this engagement of love, and for achieving unity with its spirit.

Little wonder, then, that the passover meal was a family feast, that it had to be eaten within the family circle. What better way to bring out the profound reality shown and produced by this sacred meal – a filial relationship to Yahweh who had adopted this people in love? This family aspect was so vital that if it was impossible for a Jew to partake of the meal with his family, he would assemble with a group of friends, one of whom would take the place of the father of the family.

According to custom, the father began the ceremony with a reply to the youngest child's asking the meaning of the celebration. The father's answer took the form of the *Haggadah*, a solemn narrative recounting God's great deeds on behalf of his people at the time of the first passover. He then led his family in the re-enactment of the meal, blessing each morsel of food before it was eaten. Finally, at the end of the meal, he pronounced the more solemn blessing, or eucharist, which was but a recital in prayerful thanksgiving form of the same saving divine interventions in the history of his people. Each member of the family showed his involvement in the family's salvation by responding to the prayers and joining in the chanting of the psalms.

At the last supper Christ and his apostles observed all the regulations of the mosaic law, our Lord taking the place of the father of the family and the apostles the place of the children. As they celebrated the sacred meal, Christ narrated the *Haggadah*, the account of the original passover; spoke the *Berakah*, the table blessing; led his disciples in eating the paschal lamb; and intoned the solemn hymn of the final thanksgiving over the chalice of benedictions. But other things he did that holy night clearly indicated that he was fulfilling

the prophetic character of the ancient events recounted in the *Haggadah*. As he blessed the bread on the table, he changed it into his sacrificial body and gave it to his apostles to eat. As he offered them to drink from the chalice of benedictions over which he had prayed the concluding thanksgiving, he told them that he and they were beginning a new and eternal covenant with his Father written in his blood.

Here is the Mass in its most obvious components: the foremass, successor to the *Haggadah*, a narrative of God's saving words and deeds; the Mass of the faithful, the christian's thanksgiving (eucharist), which sacramentally re-enacts the paschal mystery, subdivided into the consecratory Preface-Canon (supplanting the *Berakah*, grace at the meal) and communion, the eating of the divine food.

The rich significance of this sacramental sign-language for the Saviour's act of redeeming love will be seen better if we consider that human prototype upon which this sacred symbolism is based, the family meal. Here, better than anywhere else, is the father of a family provided with the marvellous opportunity of forming his children to his own image and likeness, of shaping within them a personality and goodness reflecting his ideal, of winning them to his heart in willing and generous love. He makes his chief manifestation of love for them at the family meal by feeding them. When placed in its right perspective, the food he offers them on the table is his own flesh and blood. We call him the breadwinner, do we not? With his work and sweat – yes, his life – he sustains the life of his family; he places himself on the table, out of love, to be the food of life for his children. Then by means of his table conversation he impregnates their minds and souls with the spirit of his own personality.

On the other hand, his children, in willingly accepting food from his hand, demonstrate their loving and trustful dependence on him, on his strength, his love, his life. By eagerly listening to his conversation, they show their readiness to live the life of his spirit and, in their conversation, open their minds to him, to the formative influence of his fatherhood. It is here that the family is created and made one living, co-operating replica of the father.

This is precisely what the eucharist is: the family meal of God the Father with his children. In Jesus Christ, the sacrament of the Father's real presence among men, the Father places himself on the altar table, inviting men back into the embrace of his paternal love. The eucharist produces and strengthens in us a genuine relationship of sons to our Father. It was for this reason that St. Augustine called

it 'the sacrament of filial piety, a sign of unity and a bond of love'.

In the eucharistic sacrificial meal we take possession of the risen body of the Saviour, and receive divine life from the victim of Calvary transformed by God in the resurrection. The passage from death to life that took place in Christ, the sacrament of the Father's love, becomes ours, as we become the resurrected body of Christ and thereby receive of the divinity dwelling in him; we become another son of the Father, in the only Son.

The eucharist creates the Church, forms her in charity, makes her into the living earthly extension of the Christ eternally re-united with his Father – therefore the sacramental continuation of Christ's body, the sacrament of mankind surrendered to and transfigured by divine love, and hence the visible point of encounter with God's saving love. She becomes Christ at the moment of his redeeming worship, his dying to sin and rising to the everlastingly divinizing embrace of the Father's self-giving.

As befits a family meal, there is also table conversation at Mass. God the Father speaks his word of transforming love in the readings of the foremass. We, his children, reply with hymns and psalms. We set the table at the so-called offertory with a song in our heart. We listen as the Father blesses the food with his all powerful word, transforming it into himself, and we acknowledge our dependence on him with enthusiasm as we speak out the great *Amen*. After we have asked the Father for bread, in the Our Father, we continue our table-talk as we eat, for during the reception of communion we sing from our soul, opening our innermost person to the Father's coming to mould us into replicas of himself.

Just as of old their reaping of the full blessings of divine love expressed by the passover meal depended on the jews' fidelity to their covenant with Yahweh, so now our passover into the resurrected body of Christ, our definitive acceptance on the part of the Father, can take place only if we make sincerely the sacrifice of which the eucharistic banquet is the sacramental sign. A mutual self-giving between the Father and us is expressed by this sacred meal. But he can give himself to us only in proportion as we surrender ourselves to his love. After all, we want to sacrifice ourselves for the one we love to the degree in which we love. As the Father gave all, in Christ, to us, so we must give ourselves up to his love as completely as possible. While being the sacrament of the Father's love for us, Christ is also the sign and bearer of our yielding to that love. If we want that same transformation that took place in Christ's humanity

to be true of us, we must bring about in ourselves that same total gift of self which Christ made to his Father on the cross.

'Wherefore being mindful of Christ's blessed passion, resurrection and ascension, we offer . . .', are the strong words we speak to the Father immediately after the consecration. We are raising Christ to his Father as if to say, 'This is what we are; this is what we want to be'. Yes, it costs something for a son to allow himself to be educated into an image of his father. This is precisely the sacrifice we offer at Mass, the same sacrifice which Christ offered on the cross, the passion entailed in leaving the world of sin and entering into the life of the Spirit. In the beautiful ideal of love proposed by the Saviour, 'No greater love has a man than to lay down his life for his friend',¹ the death envisaged is not necessarily the biological one, but the death to self involved in living for the friend. It was in the same vein that Paul warned the Corinthians that, 'As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes'.² This means that in the eucharistic sacrificial meal the christian, having nailed himself to the cross with Christ, becomes the resurrected body of the Saviour and is filled with his divine life. He proclaims the death of the Lord in that he proves he has died to sin by living as Christ.

Though a more pointed and realistic symbolic image of the paschal mystery, the Mass nonetheless continues and deepens that immersion into Christ's mystery of dying and rising that we experienced in our baptism, our entry on the way of love. St. Paul asks: 'How shall we who are dead to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all we who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death? For we were buried with him by means of Baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ has arisen from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also may walk in newness of life. For as we have been united with him in the likeness of his death, we shall be so in the likeness of his resurrection also. For we know our old self has been crucified with him, in order that the body of sin may be destroyed, that we may no longer be slaves to sin, for he who is dead is acquitted of sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live together with him . . . Thus do you consider yourselves as dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus'.³

The Master himself, taking as an example a very commonplace occurrence, reminds us: 'Unless the seed falling into the ground dies,

¹ Jn 15, 13.

² I Cor 11, 26.

³ Rom 6, 2-11.

it remains alone. But if it dies, it brings forth much fruit'.¹ Unless fallen man is willing to lay down his old life, to cast out the old man, he can never begin to live the life of the new man, he will never be able to begin that transformation into Christ which brings ultimate glorification.

This is precisely the lesson of Holy Week and Easter, indeed of the whole liturgical year. The Church is not content to celebrate her passover-eucharist in itself, all powerful though it is. By means of her cycle of feasts, and particularly this holiest of weeks, she helps us to climb that arduous path which the earthly Christ had to tread in order to return our sin-laden humanity to the hands of his Father. Transformation into Christ does not come about in a day. If it did, Christ need never have commanded his apostles to celebrate his memorial repeatedly. Growth into Christ's divine life must follow the same difficult route Christ's humanity took to reshape our twisted human nature, strengthen our weak will, and overcome every obstacle to love.

Love demands union. It impels the lover towards an ever progressive growth into the beloved. This means a continuous dying to self, a constant immersion in the sacramental mystery of Christ, a consuming, life-long effort to live of him, in him, with him for the Father by the power of the Spirit.

¹ Jn 12, 24-25.