

# THE TABLE OF THE WORD

By QUENTIN QUESNELL

**A** THEOLOGICAL PARALLEL between bread and word, between being nourished by receiving holy communion and by listening to the word of God, has been frequently traced and can today be considered established. It has a long history, through both old and new testaments; and St Jerome's fourth-century use of it to interpret the gospel story of the feeding with loaves merely continued a tradition which could be followed back through Origen and Clement of Alexandria to at least St John the Evangelist.

Still, in spite of its excellent and ancient theological credentials, the use of this parallel came to be looked on with a certain suspicion in near-modern times. For Catholic theologians it was too closely linked with memories of the anti-sacramentalist attacks of the reformers, who, it was felt, used it to build up the importance of 'the word' at the expense of the reality of the sacrament. It is not surprising, then, that the enthusiastic endorsement of this very parallel in several documents of the Second Vatican Council has attracted widespread attention:

The church has always venerated the divine scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord; since from the table of both the word of God and of the body of Christ, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life, especially in the sacred liturgy.<sup>1</sup>

Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith . . . should be instructed by God's word and be refreshed at the table of the Lord's body . . . Let the storerooms of the bible be opened still more wide in order that a more richly laden table of the word of God may be set for the faithful . . .<sup>2</sup> Fed thus at the table of the divine law and of the sacred altar . . .<sup>3</sup>

. . . the church which, as the body of the Word incarnate, is nourished and lives by the word of God and by the eucharistic bread . . .<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 48, 51.

<sup>3</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ad Gentes*, 6.

The very same image of feeding, nourishment, table of the Lord, is here being used, without clear distinction, in regard to two realities, one of which is usually thought of as sacramental and real, the other as merely metaphorical. It is therefore proper to inquire into the Council's intentions in employing the image in this way. Is it merely a matter of staying as close as possible to scriptural and patristic language, without dogmatic reflection; or of using poetic expressions in the pastoral context it has set itself; or of emphasizing terminology which it trusts will be well received in the ecumenical climate it is trying to encourage?

Possibly all of these motives entered into the Council's use of the image. But the most likely explanation is that the choice of this traditional expression followed naturally from the decision to restore the eucharistic action, the mass, to its rightful place as the centre of eucharistic cult, and indeed of all christian devotion; and to restore communion to its proper place within that action.

For the eucharistic action, called the mass, is christian liturgy. This means that it must never be regarded as something automatic, merely external, or approaching the magical. It has nothing to do with the mechanical or the ritualistic. The repetition of the 'right' words and actions can never be enough to produce its effect. As christian liturgy, the eucharistic action is the active association of men with Christ in his great work; making men holy and giving glory to God.<sup>1</sup> And 'the glory of God consists in this: that men knowingly, freely, and gratefully accept what God has achieved perfectly through Christ, and manifest it in their whole lives'.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of the liturgy is to associate men with Christ in the action by which he most perfectly achieved the glory of God and the sanctification of men: 'the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, his resurrection from the dead and glorious ascension, where by dying he destroyed our death and by rising again restored our life'.<sup>3</sup> Christ sent the apostles and commissioned the Church to 'proclaim this work, and . . . by means of sacrifice and sacraments, practise the work which they proclaimed'. That is why 'from that time onward the Church has never failed to come together to celebrate the paschal mystery: reading in all the scriptures the things referring to himself',<sup>4</sup> celebrating the eucharist in which the victory and

<sup>1</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 5-7.

<sup>3</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2; cf *Ad Gentes*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Lk 24, 27.

triumph of his death are again made present, and at the same time giving 'thanks to God for his inexpressible gift'.<sup>1</sup>

Christian liturgy begins from the act of faith in that paschal mystery which makes christianity. It begins from the conviction that one man's action once gave God the worship God most wants from men: the action of the one man who gave himself perfectly to God and his fellow men, in allowing himself to be offered in accordance with God's will for the good of those whom he loved, his fellow men. Christian worship begins with the conviction that this insurpassable action is the key to the meaning of the world and of life. The christian's conviction and faith is that the one perfect way of worshipping God is to take part in that action; the desire to share in it is the desire which pleases God most, a desire to which God responds.

The point, then, of conducting christian worship, of having masses, 'repetitions' of what Christ did, is to open Christ's action to the possibility of further and wider sharing. His intentions must become the intentions of the christian community. They must want what he wanted, offer what he offered. They must join at least in desire the feebleness of their own intentions and the inadequacy of their own self-offerings with that perfect gift of self which was his cross, as freely anticipated and expressed at the supper the night before he died.

Thus the eucharistic action is a deliberate and conscious action of the assembled community, by which the christian community freely associates itself with Christ's great offering, and asks that God confirm and realize that association. We want to be and to do what he was and did; and so we offer mass.

It follows that any imperfection, any variation in the excellence of this act, is due to the imperfection of the individuals or communities offering; it cannot come from Christ's one complete and utter self-giving. His act remains one and the same, one and eternally perfect; his dispositions of love and obedience cannot vary. But the dispositions of the worshipping community of christians can and do. And according to the variety of these dispositions, an individual offering of the mass can be of greater or less effectiveness in achieving 'God's glory and the sanctification of men' in bringing men to 'accept knowingly, freely, and gratefully what God has achieved perfectly through Christ, and manifest it in their whole lives'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 2 Cor 9, 15. Cf *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2; *Ad Gentes*, 7.

We begin to see, then, that what was previously considered as peripheral is really at the centre of the true Catholic point of view. The dispositions of the offerers, individual and community, are recognized as vital in the fulfilment of the action. The whole point of offering the mass, of the performance of the eucharistic action, is that a given community (even if by exception that community consist of one sole person, the offering priest) may enter into the dispositions of Christ, the perfect interior spirit with which he made his sacrifice. The constant aim of the offering community must be to put on the mind of Christ; otherwise there is no real offering, no point in even 'going through the motions'. God is pleased with Christ's infinitely valuable sacrifice, of course, no matter how little Christ's co-offerers, his body, have to contribute. But God always was pleased with it, infinitely pleased. And he will always continue to be pleased, no matter how little other men make it their own. Thus the new or additional value which comes into the world by the repetition of Christ's act is measured by the church's growth into the perfect likeness of Christ.

A truly eucharistic action then is one which tends with Christ and in Christ to the fullness of the dispositions of Christ: the perfection of his virtues of obedience towards the Father and of love towards men. But merely to attempt such an action implies already to some extent sharing in those dispositions, at least in desire. Theologically, those who attempt the action must share in the dispositions; for since Christ is the offerer of every mass,<sup>1</sup> the community which is to share in the offering must to some extent already be Christ. The offerer of the liturgy is the one mystical body of Christ, made up of head and members.<sup>2</sup> It is another way of saying that those who offer the liturgy must come to it as christians.

Where are these christian dispositions to come from? In some way, at least, every christian possesses them or is inclined towards them. What makes a christian is possessing the mind of Christ: or desiring to possess it. Essential faith and love are poured into the soul as God's free gift at baptism. Yet such a minimal, we might say unconscious, possession of the Spirit of Christ can scarcely be said to suffice for christian liturgy. Faith and love are present in substance in baptized infants, but their presence at a community liturgy is not ordinarily regarded as contributing directly to the community's offering. The people who gather for mass must do so with an active

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf the definition of Trent, *Denzinger Schonmetzer*, 940.    <sup>2</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7.

and conscious possession of Christ's faith and love in their hearts, and with a desire for an increase of these dispositions. They are not merely a group of people who have been baptized, who belong to the Church as to some club; nor are they merely a collection of individuals intent on fulfilling a certain law. They are a group of people who are trying to be, who want to be, 'imitators of God'. This is the community which can be one body with Christ and offer with him an ever more perfect sharing in his one ever-perfect sacrifice.

And yet, this effective presence of Christ's faith and love in the heart is scarcely to be taken for granted. These dispositions, theology has long taught, are beyond the natural capacity of man. They come from God. They are infused as grace and of grace. They come from sacraments and from God's word received. A transformation, 'a renewal in the spirit of your mind',<sup>1</sup> has to take place in the community which offers mass. The ultimate transformation will be accomplished by God in and through the offering itself.

In order that the sacred liturgy may produce its full effect, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their thoughts match their words, and that they co-operate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain.<sup>2</sup>

Here is the special function of the Word. The Word is to create dispositions where they are not already present, and to bring them to actual life where they are present but dormant or ineffective. Dispositions which, at the beginning of the gathering, are minimal, can be brought to approximate to the ideal for the carrying out of the sacrifice in bread, and in life.

The Word is to lift the people to the high level of effectively desiring to live worthy of their christian calling. The Word aims at giving life to the faith which has been present in substance from baptism on.

... the preaching of the word is needed for the very administration of the sacraments. For these are sacraments of faith and faith is born of the word and nourished by it. This is especially true of the liturgy of the word during the celebration of the mass.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Epb 4, 23-4.

<sup>2</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 52.

<sup>3</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4.

The Word is to bring the christian to those high and noble dispositions needed to enter with Christ into his sacrifice. To have these dispositions and to be ready and willing to live by them is to be a good christian. But this is what the eucharistic action itself aims at. This is what is meant by saying that the sacramental action achieves the sanctification of men and the glory of God: 'that men knowingly, freely, and gratefully accept what God has achieved through Christ, and manifest it in their whole lives'.

It is not surprising that the Council should insist so emphatically that the reading of the word of God and the performing of the eucharistic action aim at, and achieve, one and the same thing:

the faith of the participants is being fed, their minds are being stirred up toward God to offer him spiritual service, and they are receiving his grace very abundantly, *both when what has been written for our instruction is being read and when the assembly is praying, singing, or acting.*<sup>1</sup>

The two parts of which the mass may be said to be made up, the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy, are so tightly bound to one another that they make one act of worship.<sup>2</sup>

In the celebration of the mass, three elements are inseparably united: the proclamation of the death and resurrection of the Lord; the response of the listening congregation; the very offering whereby Christ confirmed the New Testament in his blood – the offering in which the faithful share by their dispositions [*vota*] and by receiving the sacrament.<sup>3</sup>

To nourish the soul is to give the soul what it needs for growth and fulness of life: that is, the faith and love which make the christian. Listening to the Word does this, it makes the christian grow, come alive to what he really is. Receiving communion as part of the eucharistic action does this too: for it is the conscious acceptance of Christ and his sacrifice, the expression of our ritual attempt to share fully in what he was and did. Both listening to the word with faith and performing the eucharistic action, which reaches its climax in communion, truly nourishes the soul.

Thus both word and eucharist give nourishment; and they are also related in that the first prepares the way for the second: 'they

<sup>1</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 33. Italics mine.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>3</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4.

who eat me will hunger for more, they who drink of me will thirst for more'.<sup>1</sup> The same is said of the eucharist in Peter's first epistle, where those who have tasted of Christ are urged to hunger for a further tasting: 'Hunger after the guileless milk of the Word, that in him you may grown into salvation, *if you have tasted* that the Lord is sweet'.<sup>2</sup>

The soul is brought to a new hunger by tasting the word, in order that it may be truly nourished by the sacrament. The nourishment one receives from the sacrament will be proportionate to the dispositions of faith and love (Christ's own) which one brings to the reception of the sacrament. Without faith and love there is no profit whatsoever in eating the bread of the eucharist become the body of Christ.<sup>3</sup> Rather one would thereby eat destruction to himself, as the church has believed since the time of St Paul.<sup>4</sup>

We must now note carefully that, though the constitution on divine revelation says that the soul is fed with 'the bread of life', it does not identify the bread of life either with the word of God or with the body of Christ. 'From the table of both the word of God and of the body of Christ, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life . . .'.<sup>5</sup> The eucharistic body of Christ and the word of God are the table from which the faithful are nourished with the bread of life. What then is the bread of life? It is Christ: 'I am the bread of life'.<sup>6</sup> The eucharistic discourse in the sixth chapter of John's gospel makes the distinction clear. One series of sayings refers to the food which Christ gives:

27 Seek the food which abides to life everlasting, which the Son of Man will give you.

34 Lord, give us always this bread.

51 the bread which I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.

52 How can this man give us his flesh to eat?  
 . . . Unless you eat the flesh of the son of man, you have no life in you.

55 my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.

<sup>1</sup> Prov 24, 21.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Pet 2, 2-3, where the greek for 'sweet' is *chrestos*, word-play for Christ, as in Lk 5, 39.

<sup>3</sup> Cf the definition of Trent, *Denzinger Schonmetzer* 880.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor 11, 28 f.

<sup>5</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Jn 6; 35, 48.

Another series refers to the bread which he is:

- 32 My father gives you the true bread from heaven.
- 33 the bread of God is the one who comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world.
- 35 I am the bread of life.
- 41 the Jews murmured because he said, I am the bread coming down from heaven.
- 48 I am the bread of life.
- 57 He who eats me will live through me.

Two earlier discourses here seem to be woven together, one of them concentrating on what Christ *gives* (and characterized by words like *sarx*, flesh), and the other one by what he *is* (characterized by *artos*, bread, *ego eimi*, 'I am', *eme* as object, the problem of coming – 'he who comes to me will never hunger'). When the two themes are united as in the eucharistic discourse, we have a complete picture, in which the taking of the food he gives (that is, sharing in the eucharistic action by sacramentally eating his flesh and drinking his blood, as an expression of willingness to share in his self-offering) is a means to come to him<sup>1</sup> and to eat him.<sup>2</sup> This coming to him, receiving him, eating him, are all defined as believing in him: 'He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst'.<sup>3</sup>

'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent'.<sup>4</sup>

And this is the consummation; it does not lead to anything beyond itself. This is the full possession of Christ for the christian, the real possession of Christ by faith – the prayer of Paul for the ephesians 'That Christ dwell in your hearts by faith'.<sup>5</sup> This faith works through love.<sup>6</sup> 'This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'.<sup>7</sup> This possession of Christ is not achieved merely by opening one's mouth, letting a consecrated host be placed on one's tongue, and then swallowing. The external action alone could never nourish the soul. But it can be, as the Council distinguishes, a means to nourishing

<sup>1</sup> Jn 6, 35, 37, 44, 45, 65.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 6, 35, 51b, 57b.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 6, 35.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 6, 29; cf. 6, 40, 47, 64 ff, 69.

<sup>5</sup> Eph 3, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Eph 3, 18; Gal 5, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Jn 17, 3.



the soul; a table from which the soul can receive 'the bread of life'.

In other words, the problem is not really that one same image of feeding and nourishment should have been used of two realities, one of which is real and the other merely metaphorical. We have to remind ourselves that to speak of nourishing the soul by the sacrament is equally a figure of speech. Souls hunger and eat only figuratively.

We tend to think that in this one case there is real, literal spiritual nourishment because we know that here the very body of Christ is eaten. But it is not because this is the 'very body of Christ' that it gives spiritual nourishment. 'The very body of Christ', even understood in the most realistic manner, would not, simply because it is the Lord's body, do anything to the soul at all. The body of Christ in which he walked through Palestine two thousand years ago was his real body; but its physical proximity did not always sanctify.

The traditional theology of the eucharist tells us the same. No one holds that unbelievers receive grace if they eat unknowing what is in fact the eucharistic body of Christ. No one claims that a believer, if he were quite unconscious of the fact that this is Christ's body, would still receive grace from eating it or touching it. A child's rehearsal of first holy communion would not constitute truly a 'reception of the sacrament' even if it were by mistake carried out with a consecrated host. Finally, unworthy communions do not give grace. Nor does anyone maintain that unworthy communions can leave a sacramental grace to be revived after some future repentance and confession, as is normally taught in regard to confirmation, ordination, or the taking of marriage vows.

In other words, the nourishment does not come from the fact that one is eating the very body of Christ. The bread is indeed his very body, as he said. But it does not nourish us for that reason. Human bodies are not for nourishing.

Nor does the eucharist nourish spiritually because it is bread. As bread, or as the appearances of bread, it does what bread does: it nourishes the body. But this is not the nourishment of the soul promised in the sacrament. This is, in classical terminology, the effect of the appearances of bread and wine operating after their own manner. It is exactly equivalent to what unconsecrated elements would produce.

There is indeed the sacramental theory: sacraments do what they symbolize. Why not say, in this sacrament there is physical nourishment as a sign, and spiritual nourishment as an effect? This is in fact

often said. But it leaves out an essential step. The physical nourishment which is a sign in this sacrament would be just as much a sign if it were provided by ordinary bread. Baptismal water does not have to be truly Christ himself or the holy Spirit in order to cleanse the soul: ordinary water serves perfectly well. So would ordinary bread serve here, if the analogy were simply physical nourishment – spiritual nourishment.

The step omitted – which one must not omit – is the fact that the distinctive element here is precisely eating the body of Christ. If this sacrament is to do what it symbolizes, then ‘eating the body of Christ’ is the action which must symbolize something beyond itself in the spiritual order. And so it does. Eating the body of Christ and drinking his blood symbolize believing in him and desiring to share his passion, death and resurrection.

And this is why it is important that communion be seen in its proper place, as a part of the one eucharistic action. Then communicating becomes the fullest possible expression of oneself as a committed christian. It represents the fullness of christian maturity of which one is (today) capable. The maturity is a function of growth and so of assimilated nourishment, a nourishment provided ‘from the table both of the body of Christ and of the word of God’.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 33.