

# THE EUCHARIST AS SYMBOL

By MONIKA K. HELLWIG

THE EUCHARIST IS THE CENTRAL action and experience of Christian life, constituting the Church by bringing individual believers into relationship with one another in the Body of the Risen Christ. But the Eucharist is also the central ikon of the Church and of Christ. More particularly, it is the symbol of our relationship to the transcendent God in and through Jesus Christ and with one another, and as such it has great depths of meaning, each successive layer building upon those that went before. While it is not helpful to explain the symbolism in words within the celebration itself, where gesture, imagery and story should speak for themselves, it is nevertheless very important that those who plan, preside, choose the music and decoration of the church, read, preach or instruct should be sensitively attuned to the symbolism so that it may indeed speak for itself.

The document, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, of the Second Vatican Council has given some guidelines for this. The Eucharist is there presented as the visible sign of the Church (*S.C.* 2), as the event that shows the transforming presence of Christ in the world (*S.C.* 6), as a way of sharing the heavenly fulfilment of all the promises (*S.C.* 8), and as the encounter which is the summit or high point to which Christian activity is directed and from which the power of the community flows (*S.C.* 10). Moreover, the symbolic sense of the Eucharist is concerned with gathering, with inter-dependence, with community and communion with one another and with the whole human race as the intended people of God (*S.C.* 26). For these reasons, the Constitution directs our attention back to the deeper meaning of the Last Supper (*S.C.* 47), to the essential and dynamic interaction of word and sacrament (*S.C.* 51. 52), and to the significance of full, active participation (*S.C.* 48).

## *Last Supper: the Hebrew heritage*

The gospels present the Last Supper as a liturgical action which interprets the meaning of the death of Jesus that is soon to follow

by expressing it in the categories of the Passover Seder (Mt 26; Mk 14; Lk 22). It is true that biblical scholars have argued whether that meal on that day could really have been a Passover Seder, but that is not important for the understanding of the Eucharist. What is important is that the apostolic community makes it quite clear in the New Testament and in the rite that was handed down, that the key to the understanding both of the Last Supper and of the post-Resurrection Eucharist is the Passover meal. But Passover itself is only to be understood in the context of its history and the levels of symbolism that go into its construction.

Buried deep within the symbolism is a primitive layer of awareness of the significance of food. Our existence is contingent upon nourishment day after day by air and water, by light and warmth, and most obviously by food and affection. We are not created all at once, but continuously, so to speak, by the regular provision of nourishment. Hence, most primitive and traditional societies have had a keen awareness of food as a divine gift and of meals as religiously significant moments—moments of being created, of touching the source, of encounter with the divine. The blessing of food and sacrificial ceremonies acknowledging radical dependence are quite common. So is a certain recognition of the bonds of interdependence expressed by table fellowship and by links of dependence on those who have prepared and offered the food.

Israel, with its traditional table grace, is no stranger to this awareness. The customary blessing of God who brings forth food from the earth is accompanied by the action of breaking and sharing bread. It is a small gesture but very rich in symbolism. The sharing of the food with others is the horizontal dimension of the gratitude expressed to God as provider. Moreover, the prescribed norm is that it is bread that is broken, not a fruit or vegetable taken straight from nature, but an artifact of human labour, constituting dependence not only on God but also on fellow human beings as providers. The words spoken are, 'Blessed art thou, my Lord, our God, king of the world, who bringest forth bread from the earth'. It is not simply God as creator who brings forth bread from the earth, but God as Lord, as *our* God, reigning in the world so that human affairs are in harmony and there is peace on earth. In other words, the hospitality of God is dispensed directly through nature but also indirectly through human beings serving and sustaining one another, extending the hospitality of God in their own hospitality.

What Israel expressed in its everyday table grace over the breaking of bread is enhanced by the Friday evening grace which ushers in the sabbath. At this time a blessing is also said over a glass of wine. That blessing has a subtle paradoxical symbolism, because wine is an expression of joy and celebration, but wine is made by the crushing of grapes and the Hebrew language lends itself to a pun by which *anawim* by a slight difference in the Hebrew spelling might mean either grapes or the modest, unassuming people who put their trust entirely in God. The Friday evening meal ushers in the day of rest, joy and contemplation which is both gift and commandment of God, but which is only possible because the work and suffering of those who have laboured for our sustenance have made it possible. As the wine of joy and celebration is produced by crushing out the life-blood of grapes, so leisure, celebration and contemplation are made possible by the burdens and life-blood of the labouring poor. This realization of Israel applies equally to ourselves and is aptly expressed in the eucharistic formula, 'Of your goodness we have this wine to offer which earth has given and human hands have made'. It is a formula which should, of course, conjure up in our minds a keen awareness of the dependence of our own standard of living on people of other lands and other conditions, most of whom throughout the world work so much harder and enjoy so much less of the fruits of the earth and the product of human activity.

Beyond the Friday evening grace said over the wine, Israel again enhances the table grace by the special ceremonies and remembrances of the festival days, which move the awareness from reflection on the relationship with God and other people in the order of creation to a reflection on specific aspects of a liberating and saving history. Critical among these festivals, and chief among them, is the Passover which commemorates the calling and deliverance out of the slavery of Egypt into the freedom of being God's people. The basic theme of the Seder meal which celebrates Passover is thanksgiving for the past liberation on which present life and experience rest, hope for the future fulfilment of all that is promised and foreshadowed by that past event, and discernment of what that means for the present in which we live, leading to a rededication and deeper commitment. It is from the festival worship of the traditions of Israel that we Christians learned the idea and the practice of sacramental worship. The principle of it is expressed in a simple and charming story about Moses (Exod 33, 18-23).

Moses, in prayer, demands a more direct access to God, wants to see the face of God, but is told that he may shelter in a crevice of the rock until God has passed, and see God only from behind. He will know when to look, because the passing of God resonates with the implications of the holy name: undeserved mercy, undreamed-of compassion. Where this resonance is discernible, Moses may look back. The story, of course, is not about front and back of God in terms of space, but about before and after in terms of time. The way to see God is to look back on those moments in our experience, both as individuals and as a people, in which the mercy and compassion of God resonated in a particularly compelling way. In remembering, reflecting upon, celebrating that experience, we learn to see what God is doing in our present situation, and to reach forward in hope towards the yet unfulfilled promises implicit in the past event.

Celebrating the Passover in this spirit, Israel had established a ritual pattern long before the time of Jesus. The elaborate ritual meal included many elements in the dishes served, the songs and stories with which the meal was interrupted, the disposition of the family with neighbours and friends around the table, the gestures and explanations of ritual elements, and so forth. The gospel accounts of the Last Supper of Jesus direct our attention specifically to two elements, the unleavened bread used at the Seder and the final cup among the four cups of wine that were blessed and served. To understand the words of Jesus in some depth, it is helpful to look at the significance which the unleavened bread had already assimilated in the course of centuries of meditation. The story of Exodus relates that the Israelites left in haste, that they were poor and oppressed people in general, and that they came out of particularly bitter affliction at that time. Hebrew reflection gathered up these remembrances by referring to the unleavened bread as the bread of the very poor, the bread of affliction, the bread of radical newness. It is the bread of the very poor because it is the bread of desert nomads who mix flour, salt and water, and slap it in flat pieces onto hot stones in the sun to bake. It is the bread of affliction because it was the misery of their last days in Egypt and the haste of their departure which forced the Israelites to bake bread for the journey in this way. And it was the bread of radical newness, of fresh beginnings, because the prevailing method of leavening was by sour dough from old batches kneaded into the new flour and water mixture, linking each loaf with many that had

gone before, just as each human action and event is permeated with the consequences of actions and events long past. Even in our own day the significance of leaven has retained such symbolic value that observant Jewish households clean all traces of yeast out of their houses before Passover, and make a game of it with their children to detect whether any yeast might still be around the house in unsuspected forms. When, therefore, the father of the family or head of the household answers the question traditionally put by the youngest member about the reason for eating unleavened bread on this day, the answer invites an imaginative reliving of the captivity and liberation experience with emphasis on trying to understand in what ways the liberation is still incomplete and the moment of liberation therefore not past but present.

Concerning the last cup of the ritual four, a similar reflection takes place. It is generally understood that red wine was to be used and that it represented not only joy and celebration but the shedding of blood and great suffering endured in the course of the struggle for liberation. New life has arisen from suffering and death. Over the fourth cup the great *Hallel* was recited or sung, consisting of psalms of praise and hope, triumphant in their confident anticipation of divine redemption from suffering, exile and oppression. It was a cry of unflagging hope in the face of every kind of suffering and frustration and repression by occupation forces.

*Eucharist: the Christian transposition*

For the earliest Christian communities, the re-enactment of the farewell supper of Jesus adopted the framework of the Seder but infused it with meaning sharply focussed on the person of Jesus and the meaning of his death as redemptive. What they remembered was that before those shattering events that questioned all their hopes and the very foundation of their faith, Jesus himself had given them the frame of reference that would enable them to see his death not as terminal tragedy but as definitive breakthrough into the radically new beginning of the reign of God and the vindication of the poor and oppressed. The words they treasured and saved for us were a kind of short-hand summary of this, and their full meaning only emerges when seen in their original context at the farewell supper.

In answering the questions about the meaning in each element of the Seder celebration, Jesus as head of the table fellowship was

called upon not only to explain the meaning of the unleavened bread with references to the past, but was expected to give an explanation that would show in what way this past event was as yet unfinished and therefore present. He was expected to explain the particular meaning of the unleavened bread for that little gathering in that particular year. His actual answer would have carried a certain dynamic quality explaining the action of taking unleavened bread, breaking it and sharing it around the table. One might conjecture thus, 'What is the meaning now for us of the breaking and sharing of the unleavened bread of Passover? It is the breaking of my life and body in death. Share it with me!' It is readily apparent that something more is being said than is ordinarily conveyed by the static formulation, 'This is my body. Eat it!', and that the message has to do with a transition through suffering and death to new life, in all of which the members of the table fellowship are invited to participate actively as companions and partners and not only as passive recipients of the benefits that may result. In a similar way the dialogue over the cup would have been much fuller than the short formula that was preserved. There would have been the prescribed question about the four cups and about that final cup of defiant hope, and in answer to that the short exposition by Jesus would have linked past and present by reflection on the present participation in the unfinished event. 'This cup of blessing which represents the terrible suffering and anguish out of which new life is born, what is it for us now? It is the pouring out of my life and blood in death for the redemption of multitudes. Share that death, that passage into the new with me!' And again there is a dynamic of transformation and of participation in this which is not so clearly seen in the translation, 'This is the cup of my blood, of the new and everlasting covenant'.

How dynamically and inclusively the allusive phrases were understood in the apostolic generation is clear from the passages in the Letters of Paul in which the latter expresses his alarm at discovering that the meaning has not been properly understood (1 Cor 11, 17-26). For Paul, any exclusion or contempt for other members of the eucharistic table fellowship is failure to recognize the body of the Lord, the community which embodies the risen Jesus as his outreach into the world. The specific scandal that he mentions is the exclusion of the poor from the luxuries of the *agape* meal prepared by the rich for themselves and their friends. The contemporary implications of that in a world in which extreme

inequities in the distribution of resources are well known and capable of remedy are shattering in the simplicity of their scale of values and the implied judgement. Paul dwells on the vocation of Christians to share in the death and Resurrection of Jesus, not necessarily by martyrdom but by that death to self-interest in favour of the common good which is a necessary condition of the realization of the reign of God among us which is anticipated by those who live in the risen Christ.

This preoccupation with the Eucharist as the great mystery and sign of unity continued in the early Church, as is evident from patristic writings such as the *Letters* of Ignatius of Antioch and the *Didache*. In the latter we read,

As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and was gathered together and became one, so let thy church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into thy kingdom (*Didache* 9).

The great fourth-century Church Fathers while maintaining this concern with the unity among Christians as guaranteed by the Eucharist, place great emphasis on the aspect of nourishment and the significance of the fact that the central Christian mystery of encounter and communion with God in Christ takes place under the sign of food, which is a sign and symbol readily understood by all as expressing their true relationship of dependence on God, and also their relationship with one another as fellow guests (e.g. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical catecheses* 4 & 5). In the Western Church the idea had also been introduced by this time that the Eucharist was to be presented as a sacrifice, as making holy and dedicated to God both the gifts on the altar and the congregation (found as early as Cyprian, *Letter* 63).

*Eucharist today: recovering the symbolism*

The Catholic Church has been much preoccupied since the Second Vatican Council with the task of recovering the symbolism of the Eucharist so that the signs may truly signify and may signify appropriately the central mystery of the faith and not peripheral accretions. It is clear that we must do this from three sources: the scriptures, the tradition and the present pastoral context. Something has been sketchily suggested here concerning the first two of these categories, and it remains to indicate an approach to the third.

It was a non-Christian, the Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi, who said that in a world with so many really hungry people it is no wonder that the divine should appear to them in the form of bread. Forty years later, the cogency of that remark is even stronger. The most obvious symbolism of the Eucharist is that of bread as God's welcome to human creatures. But it may be necessary for us in the Western industrialized world to grow beyond certain post-Enlightenment, individualized, market exchange ways of viewing nourishment. It may be necessary to grow beyond a certain type of eucharistic spirituality that focusses on the usefulness of 'receiving' Communion as a way of banking increments of grace for an individual heavenly retirement fund. The symbolism of Eucharist is not only that of individual access to essential nourishment, but an impressive representation of table fellowship that may not be exclusive and which depends upon the guests to extend the divine hospitality to one another. The thrust of Paul's comments about the situation in Corinth seems to be that the enactment of the rite of Eucharist which belies the actual relationships among the fellow guests is a mockery that can only be sacrilegious and bring down judgement on the participants.

This much might indeed be true and appropriate concerning any sacred meal representing communion and table fellowship with the one God and Creator of all that is, inasmuch as the worship of the one God cannot exclude from respect and practical sharing of resources any of the intended people of God. But the focus of Eucharist as the invitation and presence to us of Christ crucified and risen adds a new dimension to the symbolism. Jesus presents himself as a host at a banquet, but the content of his hospitality is his own person. This highlights a truth about human relationships that is pervasive in family life, in work, in friendship and in public service. What we have to give to others is in the first place ourselves. Moreover, in nourishing the bodies and minds and hopes and spirits of others we are in some sense consumed. We are called by our interdependence in the plan of creation to become nourishment for others in a great many ways, and this is sacrificial not only in the sense of demanding renunciations of self-interest, but also in the basic sense of constituting a dedication, a making holy or sacred to God according to the purpose of God.

This focus on being nourishment for others might have been expressed eucharistically by a commemoration and re-enactment of Jesus in his public ministry of teaching, preaching, healing and



exorcizing. But in fact Jesus presents himself as nourishment for others, and gathers his disciples around him precisely in his death and Resurrection, directing our attention to that moment and that experience as the critical turning point in human affairs, and the critical revelation of the truth of human existence in the history of our world as it has actually been happening. Eucharist is the sign of Jesus as the self-utterance of God into our history not as primordial divine hospitality, but as redemptive divine hospitality to a world gone astray after false gods. And under those conditions the self-gift is in a context of contradiction and hostility. The Eucharist of Jesus is necessarily identified with the Cross. To be invited to table fellowship in the Eucharist is to be invited to share redemptive self-giving in a hostile world for the nourishment of others who are struggling in that world.

But Eucharist is also to be seen as the gathering of the people of God from the corners of the earth, to be one people, reconciling ancient feuds and overcoming all barriers to discover their common humanity and interdependence and to rediscover themselves as fellow guests of the divine hospitality in the world in all its secular functions. The celebration of God's gifts is also the celebration of common claims and mutual obligations; all who are created are invited to the feast of God's created bounty. As the early community in the Acts of the Apostles discerned so clearly, there is an underlying imperative to acknowledgement of community of goods and resources in the symbolism of the Eucharist (Acts 2, 42-47; 4, 32-37).

In part because the ideal sketched is such a demanding one, and unlikely in most cases to be attained perfectly at any time, the eucharistic gathering is also presented as a listening community, a people brought together to hear the word of God proclaimed, to receive the word and to reflect on it and gradually to be transformed in understanding, expectation and response. The symbolism of the Eucharist is intended to reshape the imagination of the Christian people, so that they will put the elements of their experience together in a brand new way that will allow of hopes and expectations hitherto quite excluded from consideration—expectations of peace and social justice and non-exclusive community, in other words real expectations of the reign of God coming among human persons and societies.