

HOLY THURSDAY, Of The Lord's Supper
April 5, 2012

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-15

What we just heard in our reading from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is the New Testament's earliest account of the institution of the Eucharist. Its main importance for us, however, lies not in the fact that it is earliest but in the practical import it should have on the way we live, and this cannot be properly understood without some reference to the verses that immediately precede and immediately follow the four verses of our second reading. These surrounding verses are very interesting in their own right, for they tell us a lot about the way the Eucharist was celebrated back in the first century and how that celebration differs from what we do today.

You very likely recall from other liturgies that in the preceding verses Paul severely chastises many of the Corinthians because when they would gather in one place (and that was almost certainly a private home and not what we would call a church), it was, in his words,

When you meet in one place, then, it is not to eat the Lord's supper, for in eating each one goes ahead with his own supper, and one goes hungry, while another gets drunk.¹

What Paul is there describing is what elsewhere in the New Testament is called an *agapē* or "love feast," that is, an actual meal taken together in the evening, during which there was supposed to be sharing of food and drink so that poorer persons would not be left hungry but could partake of the more abundant food and drink brought by those of better means. In that sense, it resembled what we would call a potluck supper. Only at the conclusion of this meal would what we call "Eucharist" take place, with all those present partaking of a piece of consecrated bread and what Paul, in the verse immediately following today's reading, calls "the cup of the Lord." He was so disturbed at what he had learned about the Corinthians' selfish behavior at the preceding *agapē* that he says that in the Eucharist itself they had eaten and drunk God's judgment on themselves for having participated unworthily. That judgment, he writes, is already being visited upon them in an unusual number of illnesses and deaths, but these are actually God's merciful chastisements and warnings to reform lest the Corinthians suffer the far worse judgment of utter, eternal condemnation.

When, then, in the verses we heard, Paul says that "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes," the real meaning of "proclaim the death of the Lord" includes a proclamation of the *life* that is ours in and through that death, as Paul explains in his second letter to the same community, where he writes of "carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifest in our body. For we who live are constantly being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may

be manifested in our mortal flesh”². But there is no way, existentially speaking, that one can make such proclamation if his or her behavior is contrary to that of Jesus himself.

This is why it is so totally appropriate that this second reading, with its account of the words of institution—“This is my body; . . . this cup is the new covenant in my blood”³ — should be accompanied by a passage from John’s Gospel in which the account of the Last Supper does not include any words of institution but rather shows their import by the action of Jesus in washing his disciples’ feet. In other words, the whole meaning of the Eucharist is that sharing in the one bread and one cup is directed to sharing and communion in loving service to one another—the exact opposite of what Paul had found the Corinthians doing at their misnamed “love feasts.” Otherwise, the partaking of the sacred elements brings one not to salvation but to condemnation.

This intimate, inextricable connection between ritual action and social behavior is just as eloquently taught by some of the saints of the following generation. Let me mention one in particular, St. Ignatius of Antioch. He is no doubt best known for his letter to the Romans, in which he asked the Christians of that city to do nothing to try to get his death sentence commuted by the pagan government, for he saw martyrdom as the best and quickest way to attain full communion with his Lord and Savior. However, Ignatius wrote six other letters as he was being transported across Asia Minor from Antioch to Rome, and they, too, are very much worth reading in order to gain a vivid sense of the faith and devotion of so many in the early Church. His letter to the Christians in the city of Smyrna is especially fine in the way it shows this close relationship between liturgical celebration and everyday behavior. Of certain heretics Ignatius has this to say:

Pay close attention to those who have wrong notions about the grace of Jesus Christ that has come to us, and note how at variance they are with God’s mind. These [persons] care nothing about love: they have no concern for widows or orphans, for the oppressed, for those imprisoned or released, for the hungry or the thirsty. They hold aloof from the Eucharist and from services of prayer, because they refuse to admit that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, [who] suffered for our sins and [whom], in his goodness, the Father raised [from the dead]⁴.

Let us ourselves take to heart the warnings of both Paul and Ignatius. It is not enough to come to the table of the Lord’s Supper, even perhaps with feelings of devotion, if the rest of our life does not truly contribute to the building up of the whole body of Christ, the Church, and even extend beyond the Church to serve any persons who are in need of help. May our sharing in the body and blood of Christ on this Holy Thursday deepen our commitment to such service.

Abbot James Wiseman

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:20-21

² 2 Corinthians 4:4-10

³ 1 Corinthians 11:24-25

⁴ St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, 6-7