

to know a good idea when you see one regardless of whether it is your own or someone else's; it means being prepared to make an effort when the occasion demands it and facing the sometimes unpalatable implications of thought. It also demands skill and efficiency and a reasonable degree of freedom from fear, anxiety and want. It needs leisure, or at least time for ideas to mature and be developed. And last but not least some sort of community in which ideas are valued, where they can be discussed and amended and improved, a meeting ground for like minds. It is this that the Church can provide us with: it is up to us to see that it does.

## The Feast of the Eucharist

GILES HIBBERT, O.P.

*O sacrum convivium in quo Christus sumitur  
recolitur memoria passionis ejus  
mens impletur gratia  
et futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur*

In this antiphon is to be found what is probably one of the most perfect expressions—being both precise and comprehensive—of the nature and function of the mass or eucharist. It comes from the liturgical office of the feast of Corpus Christi and is also used on other occasions connected with the eucharist. It is of the mass as a whole however that it is descriptive, as its opening words show: *O sacrum convivium*—the sacred feast in which Christ is preached, made present and then eaten.

To translate it into English is not easy for each original word contains overtones, depth of meaning and openness to further interpretation, the exact equivalent of which cannot all be captured in translation. Thus as well as translating and considering each phrase in turn it will be well to comment almost word by word, bringing out the meaning of each within its overall context.

*O sacrum convivium in quo Christus sumitur* 'O sacred feast in which Christ is received.' The most obvious thing about a feast or banquet is

that it is an occasion for eating; and this aspect of it is of vast importance—as it were its foundation, because eating is life-giving, the assimilation of life. To have a meal together is to share life, and here in the feast of the eucharist the food we share is Christ's body itself—the source of all life<sup>1</sup>. The material eating is symbolic (though at the same time much more than symbolic) of participation in the life of Christ, which is communion with God. This is already indicated by the fact that a feast is itself much more than a matter merely of eating or having a meal. It is concerned with a fuller sharing of life—human life—than this. It is a get-together, and more than a get-together, a matter of living-together—a *con-vivium*—in which in fellowship and friendship, in openness and spontaneity one to another, in truly human intercourse life is shared and deepened.

Because man is spiritual at the same time as being material the very nature of his being, and therefore of his living which is its expression, is that it is a *together-being*, a being together with others significantly and creatively; a life which in its deepest sense is social. When this nature is being fully, that is creatively, realised, when man is thus living to his fullness, realising the strength and power of life, this life of his becomes a matter of commitment and communion—to and with the world in which he has his being. It enters into and helps integrate the whole society of man—that brotherhood and unity which has its perfection in the Church, the companionship of Christ. Now the ideal representation of this *together-being* is, or should be, the feast or banquet in which men, living together, eat together and talk together, sharing their being and giving to life meaning and direction. This is what a feast should be, but unfortunately in modern times the idea of it has been emptied of much of its meaning, and has become for many something artificial and not altogether desirable. This is a pity for much has been lost. If however a feast can be seen as a microcosmic representation of the living unity and love of man, it will be of enormous help in showing how the eucharist as a feast is the representation—and thus symbol, though more than symbol: sacrament—of the unity of the Church. It will also help to show how it is essentially a 'love feast'; for in seeking after union and communion, it strives to fulfil and effect the central demand of love—the removal of separation. It shows itself also as a 'family' affair—the family of all Christians, adopted sons of God.

The feast which we are considering is however no ordinary feast.

<sup>1</sup>Cfr. the 'communion meal' of Exodus 24. 9-11. This concept of a meal is typically a Semitic one.

St Paul had to warn the Corinthians about this particularly (I Cor. 11. 20). It is a sacred feast. Now the idea of sacredness has two interrelated aspects: holiness and consecration. Consecration is a putting aside from ordinary profane use and making over to God for his service and his manifestation. It is consecration which gives to the holy the characteristic of being sacred, and it is holiness which gives to what is set aside the actuality of its relation to God.

All holiness comes from God and is due to his presence. When we set something aside for God, consecrate it to him, we are as it were asking that he should accept it and thus make it holy by showing forth his presence. Now the eucharist is that *par excellence* which is given to us precisely for 'setting aside' and offering to God in this way. It is the celebration of the sacrifice of Christ, given to God by God himself for us that we, participating in his priesthood, might offer it with him. It is both offered for us and by us. It is only through the supreme gift of God to man—Christ's body, sacrificed on the cross—that we are able ourselves to make this offering. But although primarily his, subordinately it is ours, and thus what we offer is truly of ourselves—the life which we have together with one another in him. In this way, by our participation in his sacred sacrifice, our living-together with one another in and with Christ—our life and participation in the mass—itself becomes sacred. If it is not precisely this, it is in danger of becoming a false offering. If it is not a matter of living with and for others, but only for ourselves, what we are doing will be sacrilege not sacred.

In saying that the mass is sacred precisely because of the nature of its consecration to God as worship (given by Christ and shared by us) we have been presupposing God's presence to make it holy. This presence is what gives actuality to the sacredness or consecration. The nature of the offering is what gives the mass its own particular and supreme quality of sacredness; the presence of God—achieved in the consecration of the bread and wine—is what makes this sacredness real, actual, accepted by God, truly holy and no vain offering on man's part alone.

The presence of God (be it that of the consecrated host or not) is a holy presence. It is, according to the nature of the holy, awe-inspiring. It is an awe-full presence. In the eucharist we participate in this presence, living together with God, for it is a feast, *convivium*. From this presence shines forth God's glory illuminating the hearts of men.<sup>2</sup> Through faith we see it—though as yet darkly (I Cor. 13. 12)—manifesting both that

<sup>2</sup>See J. Bourke, *Encounter with God* in LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, March, 1961.

presence and its holiness, which is one of grace and truth (Jn 1. 16). But we must also not forget that this same glory of God manifested itself at Sinai in fire and thunder. The eucharist is sacred, it is holy; one might almost say that it is dangerous.

As well as being present, Christ is eaten. *Sumitur*—taken, received, consumed, eaten. The really important idea here, though in complete dependence upon that of being eaten, is that of being received. There is more here than just being eaten, for Christ is received in faith—a necessary part of what is happening, and not merely an adjunct of being eaten. The very nature of faith is receiving—or rather receiving together with the overtones implied by accepting<sup>3</sup>—and this is necessarily based upon a physical, material receiving. This material aspect is given its significance and fulfilment by the spiritual movement which completes it as an act of faith. But this material aspect—the material ‘gift’—is faith’s foundation; without it there can be no faith. The material ‘gift’ is Christ’s body, and through it he reveals God himself; who sees Christ sees the Father (Jn 14. 9) and it is through the human nature of Christ, welcomed, accepted by us (in faith), that we have this communion with him who sent him. He is that which was from the beginning whom we have heard, whom we have seen, whom we have touched with our hands—the Word of Life (1 Jn 1. 1), giving to us his life—the revelation of the Father—giving it even unto death, giving us his body and blood, themselves the sign of that death.

Christ is made present in the Church through word and action—through the scriptures and tradition of the Church. The centre of this ‘presentation’ is formed by the sacraments, and the supreme centre is the eucharist itself. It is here in the eucharist that we meet Christ sacramentally face to face,<sup>4</sup> and it is thus here that the content of our faith can be most fully realised. We eat with our mouths, we listen and inwardly digest; we look with our eyes and receive him as he is made present and manifest in the action and words of the Church. What is received is the humanity of our Lord, and thus his Godhead. What we do in receiving is to take it to ourselves, consuming it, making it a most real part of our most inward self, both in the body and in the spirit too. All this is ‘accepting’ in its deepest sense—faith. For this is what faith is: it is the accepting and ‘taking’ of his revelation, his giving himself, in

<sup>3</sup>Cfr. Jn 1. 11, 12. ‘Accepting’ in this context can be said to add to ‘receiving’ the idea of adhering to Truth itself.

<sup>4</sup>Cfr. St Ambrose *Apologia prophetæ David* xii 58: *Facie ad faciem te mihi, Christe, demonstrasti, in tuis te invenio sacramentis.*

love to oneself as part of oneself. It is thus knowledge, the knowledge of God—even though only a part knowledge (1 Cor. 13. 12)—nevertheless not simply knowing about, but knowing, knowing the person of God in Christ. In faith we receive that light which God 'has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the Glory of God in the face of Christ'. (2 Cor. 4. 6). This knowledge is our life, for as Christ himself says 'this is eternal life that you should know the only true God and him whom he has sent, Jesus Christ.' (Jn 17. 3.)

The eucharist is thus that sacred meal in which Christ is received fully and perfectly, really and in faith, through ears and eyes as well as mouth, and in our hearts and minds borne to the centre-most sanctuary of our being. In it we receive that food which gives the growth of our supernatural life, the knowledge of God. But it is precisely all this because it is a sacrifice: that same sacrifice as Christ's on Calvary which was the culmination, but not termination, of his Incarnation. This is what we must now see.

*Recolitur memoria passionis ejus* 'In which is recalled the memory of his passion'. There is no difficulty about translating 'passion', but what it implies is of the utmost importance and must be considered at some length; for it means the suffering which went to form his sacrifice, and therefore by implication it means that sacrifice too. Christ's sacrifice is the perfect sacrifice in which offerer and victim are one, and it is God himself who both offers and receives it. There are thus two elements to it, perfectly united: the human and the divine—and this is what enables the sacrifice itself to be perfect.<sup>5</sup> With this in mind I shall start my consideration with that aspect of it in which the human element predominates, namely the nature of what is actually offered in the sacrifice: Christ's actual life.

In his Incarnation God took to himself (in the person of the Word) a human nature, thus becoming flesh. God, in other words, became incarnate in human body and soul. Now as these are precisely the principles of man's being, his being-in-the-world, making life to be the sort of life it is, a 'together-being', taking a human nature means contracting a whole human history, the organic personal unity of meaningful event in social intercourse. Thus the Incarnation—the revelation of God to man—is continuous with, co-terminous with, Christ's human life, in which he dwelt and talked with, taught and loved, his disciples and preeminently his apostles—his chosen and immediate society—

<sup>5</sup>See V. White, *The All-Sufficient Sacrifice* in LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, June 1957; reprinted in *Soul and Psyche* (London, 1960), pp. 248-257.

showing forth to them the Father and his love. He loved them in life even unto death—the death on the cross, his passion. This is the culmination of his living a truly human life with them, his human history, ever more being accepted by them, ever more being rejected by Jewry—even unto his death. On the one hand his passion and death was the ‘fulfilment’ of his emptying himself and taking on the form of a servant (Phil. 2. 7), and on the other the fulfilment of his human life, taking it fully into his hands and offering it to God his father in a perfect prayer upon the cross. This sacrifice was prefigured and also presumed—its perfection being anticipated—the night before, when in that original sacred feast, the Last Supper, he showed and gave to them his body and blood. Free and spontaneous sacrifice, a total offering.

The actual passion and death of Jesus was of course caused (through his allowing it) by the Jews and Romans; but it was he himself, not they, who offered it. He offered up to his Father his incarnate self, the fullness of his human life. What he was offering in fact was his total being-in-the-world, in other words, as we have just seen, the Incarnation itself, the revelation of God to man. As well as his physical body his human companionship and love; as well as this the whole history of revelation, of the giving of God’s word to man, fulfilled in his person at Bethlehem and perfected on Calvary—all this was drawn into and formed the matter of that offering; all this is the manifestation of God to man, and this offering of his in which he as Son of Man is lifted up (Jn 3. 14) is its perfection: the showing forth of his glory (Jn 12. 23). All this is his human life, and this he offered.

But the human life of Christ did not come to an end, it is not dead. On the third day he rose again, bodily from the grave, giving life as he did so to all those who through faith in him shared his life and love. When we die our immediate and this-worldly history ends, but through his resurrection Christ’s history is continuous here on earth. When at his ascension he left earth physically he left on earth his mystical body the Church, with the sacraments at the centre of her life, showing forth to men the continued presence of the Godhead through Christ himself. In his Church the divine person of Jesus, the Word of God, continues to make himself humanly present for men to meet and live with; and this is done *par excellence* in the sacrament of the eucharist, for it is here of all places that we unite ourselves to the privileged moment, the culmination and fulfilment of his human life: the sacrifice on Calvary. The eucharist is this sacrifice itself, because it is the ‘recollection of the memory of his passion’.

A total immolation, a divine oblation—this is what is being recalled. More strictly speaking, and more importantly, it is the *memory* of his passion which is recalled. Now it might well be reading somewhat into the text, but not in such a way as to fundamentally misrepresent it, if we see in ‘memory’ something much wider than that for which we normally use the word. Furthermore it will help to make manifest a causal link which is otherwise not clear—namely why the eucharist is indeed Christ’s sacrifice, why we can genuinely talk about the sacrifice of the mass.<sup>6</sup> St Augustine when showing forth in his *Confessions* (Bk X, ch. 8 ss.) his life-long search for God goes at length into the meaning of memory. For him ultimately it means ‘presence’, and this is what enables him later, in the *De Trinitate*, to call that perfect presence of the self to self, which is also the presence of God to the soul, *memoria sui* and *memoria Dei*.<sup>7</sup> ‘Recalling a memory’ can then be seen as the renovating of a presence, or its re-presentation from the past. Now normally re-presentation is no more than representation, and *memoria* no more than memory; in the eucharist however they are much more. Because of the nature of the eucharist, representation is re-presentation without being in any way repetition, and doing it in the memory of Christ truly means that he is present.

Now the sacraments go back to, and take their efficacy and nature from, focal points of meaning in Christ’s life on earth. They are rooted in that social personal historical complex, which we have already described, the Incarnation. Their individual origin, however obscure, is in some act or activity—not necessarily an isolated incident—of Christ himself in communion with those he drew to and around him, the embryonic Church. In each such act—act of the God-man—there is a divine and a human element. The latter makes that act historical with a ‘where’ and a ‘when’, once performed, individual, and in no strict sense repeatable. The former, the divine element, gives to that act eternal significance, and, in the presence of God, eternal actuality. These are not two separate things but two aspects of the one real act.

In the case of the eucharist there is no obscurity about its origin. The *centre-point* is Calvary, the act is Christ’s sacrifice—the Last Supper prefigures and assumes this. The human element here is the bloody immolation upon the cross, once and for all, never to be repeated. The

<sup>6</sup>Cfr. the Council of Trent in Session 22, ch. 2.

<sup>7</sup>Such an interpretation of *memoria* would not be strange to any thirteenth century Augustinian, nor all that strange to St Thomas either, as recourse to the *De Veritate* (q. 10, art. 7, 8.) will show.

other aspect is the eternal offering made by the Son to the Father. Now it is in the representation of the former in a symbolic mode (the sacraments are essentially symbols, achieving what they symbolise) that the latter, eternally real, is given as it were the 'opportunity' for its re-incarnation, re-manifestation on earth, or in other words the re-presentation of the sacrifice.

Thus in the recalling and showing forth of the passion of our Lord, it is the sacrifice of Calvary itself which is being made present. In this sense and in this sense only—a very imperfect sense—history is made to stand still; for the sacrifice of the mass is not a repetition of the passion; it is not a bringing of the time of Calvary into the present, nor putting ourselves into a timelessness of Calvary. Calvary was an historical event with a definite where and when. It is, rather, the extension throughout history of the supreme act of Christ's life, his offering of himself to the Father. This act soars and hovers over history, although, through the Church, perpetually linked with it. For God, entering into the historical order, incarnate as Jesus Christ, has given to the world a further dimension than it had before, linking earth with heaven, whereby, through the sacramental representation of the focal points of meaning of Christ's physical life on earth, that life is continually present in 'the time of the Church', showing forth Christ himself to her members. Thus it is that in the divine sacrifice, re-enacted in the mass, that same Christ is contained and bloodlessly sacrificed, who once in history offered himself on the cross in bloody manner.<sup>8</sup>

Christ's sacrifice, his death and resurrection, is the source of our redemption, our life in him; and therefore the mass is preeminently a source of grace and future life<sup>9</sup>—this is what Christ came to give us. The next step should therefore come as no surprise.

*Mens impletur gratia et futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur* 'The spirit is filled with grace and the pledge of future glory given to us'. *Mens* is often taken as meaning 'mind'; but 'mind' in English is normally given a very much narrower and more material sense than *mens* actually has. The word 'spirit' also has its disadvantages, being open to vague and emotionally pseudo-mystic interpretation. Nevertheless, being dynamic, it is ultimately the more satisfactory, so we will use it here and understand it as 'mind', yet much more than 'mind'. It becomes also practically synonymous with 'soul', when that is taken in a general rather than technical sense. It is in fact our capacity for understanding,

<sup>8</sup>Council of Trent. *loc. cit.*

<sup>9</sup>All grace is eucharistic, says St Thomas (S.T. 3a. 73. 3).



and that for loving too. Its movement combines these two, balanced and united at the centre of our being.<sup>10</sup> The spirit is that aspect of man whereby he is able to see meaning in life; it is that by which he can ask the question: Why?—not only: Why this? or Why that? but the absolute Why, the Why of all. It is therefore that by which we can to some extent make our lives the answer to that question; it is thus necessarily that in which lies the power of love, the possibility of self-giving. It is that by which we can encounter face to face the spirit of another; by which we know—not know about, but simply know, in heart and understanding. It is therefore that by which man's capacity for 'together-being' is fully realised. His spirit is ultimately man's capacity for the infinite, his possibility of knowing God; and it is precisely the knowledge of God and only this that can fill it—the knowledge of God the Father through loving encounter with Christ.

Thus saying that the spirit is filled, objectively is saying no more than that it is filled with grace; for if the spirit is filled it can only be filled with grace—that is the enigma of man. Man's *personal* answer, the answer to his absolute Why?—the meaning of his being—is something given to him, something which he cannot supply nor even demand, it so surpasses him—although he is made for it. It is freely given by God and thus called grace. Grace is the presence of God to the soul, that communion and intercourse about which we have already said much; its presence in the centre of the soul raises and perfects human nature, giving to it that quality which makes it actively capable of that which of itself alone it is not—this same sweet intercourse with God. The spirit is filled, perfected; the full nature of man, the image of the Trinity, is realised: in love, in understanding and in centre-presence of the soul to God.

There is however at the same time a sense in which our spirits are not filled with grace. In other words grace does not fully perfect the spirit—it is not so much filled as penetrated through and through with grace. For grace is not our perfection, which is not to be achieved here on earth; and in heaven it will give way to 'glory'. This however can still in a broad sense be called grace because it is freely given through Christ, just as on earth, but in a different way. But unlike the grace of this life glory brings to the soul, the spirit, its final and everlasting perfection, its eternal fullness. There in heaven through the light of glory we will be perfected in the vision of the Father face to face, embraced by Christ; whilst here on earth by faith we see only in a

<sup>10</sup>See my brief notes on *Silence*, in *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, February, 1961.

mirror darkly (1 Cor. 13. 12) not with that perfection which alone can give us steadfastness in God. Here we are always at the mercy of our fallen natures, able in selfishness to turn away; there we will be confirmed in Christ, perfected.

The pledge or promise of this future glory is given to us in the eucharist; the body of Christ being itself that pledge. For if we eat of it we shall enter into the kingdom of heaven (Jn 6. 51)—that is if we eat of it seeing and believing, and in love remaining faithful (Jn 6. 40). It was for this reason that his body was given for us on Calvary; that it might be for us the bread of life.

Here in the mass, past present and future are as it were gathered into one. The eternal salvific act of Christ is re-enacted, re-presented, giving us the grace of encounter-life with him; and at the same time the future, which is our eternal life with him, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is pledged—almost as it were brought into the here and now, for the pledge, being given, at least manifests its reality. The eucharist does not put the clock back to A.D. 30, nor does it put it forward to the final coming of our Lord, but being that continual point at which the salvific act of Christ penetrates this present life, filling the eschatological pause with his presence, filling the time of our waiting for the end, it is the centre of his continued life on earth. This life, though mystical, is physically manifested in the Church, and is thus that whereby we encounter him and know in him the Father (Jn 14. 9) and thus have the seed of everlasting life.

This is the shadow of that eternal banquet celebrated ceaselessly in heaven's perpetual sabbath. It is that which unites man to God, and that which unites earth to heaven. In it we encounter Christ; we find the Way, the Truth and the Life.