SHORT WRITINGS FROM TAIZÉ
7

Brother Émile, Taizé

The Eucharist and the Early Christians

I Introduction

An expert on the early Christian writings once pointed out that the first book on the Eucharist was not produced before the 9th century.[1] Although references to the Eucharist are frequent in the writings of the early Christians, and of paramount importance, we find no book dedicated exclusively to the subject before this time. Asking why this is so can lead us to an interesting insight. The first generations

[1] A. G. Hamman, *La Messe et sa catéchèse chez les Pères de l'Eglise*, Etudes patristiques, Beauchesne, p. 123.

of Christians never thought of the Eucharist in isolation. It was always linked to the full mystery of the faith of which it provided a synthesis. The Eucharist made the entire mystery of the faith present. When responding to a challenge to an essential article of the faith it was not unusual for the early Christians to turn to the Eucharist for guidance or to test the soundness of a position. Thus, in the 2nd century, we find Irenaeus of Lyons writing: *"Our opinion is in accordance with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn establishes our opinion."* As we explore the ways in which the first Christians understood the Eucharist, we are led to see how, for them, the eucharistic mystery was woven into the fabric of life and faith. Three examples will make this clearer.

The Eucharist speaks to us of the goodness of creation

As he grappled with spiritual movements which looked down on the visible world with scorn and saw it as a mistake, the great Bishop of Lyons saw in the Eucharist a confirmation of the goodness of creation. How, indeed, could its goodness be doubted since, as Irenaeus wrote: *"He took that created thing, bread, and gave thanks, and said, 'This is My body.' And the cup likewise, which is part of that creation to which we belong… he also declared to be His blood."*[2] Nothing in the Eucharist justifies any kind of contempt for creation. The Eucharist, on the contrary, affirms the nobility of the created order.

[2] Quotations from Irenaeus are taken from *Against Heresies, The Ante-Nicene Fathers,* vol. 1 and H. Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers,* OUP. Some of them have been modified.

The Eucharist says that my body has a future

Irenaeus appeals to the Eucharist to underpin belief in the resurrection of the body. In the ancient world, Christians were mocked for this belief and those who despised them thought of themselves as more "spiritual". What is at stake in this conflict of views is central to a true understanding of faith in Christ and of the Christian vision of God. And not only of God, but of our human identity and of what it means for human beings to share the life of God.

To be able to grasp what is really at issue here, we must understand that the resurrection body is not about molecules. Saint Paul, who strongly affirms the resurrection of the body, knows that everything will be changed: *"You do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed"* (1 Cor 15:37). He is advocating a new body, a glorious body and therefore a break with the past; and yet, there is no denying that the plant grows from the seed.

In God there is room for our personal stories

What is meant by *body* really has to do with each person's individual story.[3] Faith in the Risen Christ, in the Christ of the Ascension who entered into God's eternity with His glorified body, made it impossible for the first Christians to see his life on earth as a mere episode. His life as a human being was seen as having a permanent value. And so, guided by their faith in the resurrection of the body, the early Christians came to believe that, in God, each person's story is welcomed,

[3] " My body is neither a thing nor a tool. It is me in the world, me present for others." O. Clément, *Corps de mort, corps de gloire*, p. 10.

and that the most personal, the most unique aspects of each human life (insofar as they are compatible with love) have their place in Him. Such a faith holds that eternal life with God does not do away with what is human. The most intimate and lasting union with God, which we call eternal life, does not negate our otherness and uniqueness. This faith also tells us that, in the life of eternity, God will call each of us by name and that we, in turn, will be able to do the same with our brothers and sisters. Nourished by the faith of the first Christians, Dostoevsky knew that we will be reunited with those whom we have loved and he could therefore write at the end of "The Brothers Karamazov": *"We shall rise again, we shall see one another and shall tell one another joyfully all that has been."* So love has a meaning. To deny the resurrection of the body would be to disfigure the God of the Gospel and his plan for humanity, for not only is he tolerant of our otherness: he desires it and promotes it, giving it a future.

Of all of this, Irenaeus is convinced. *"How can they say that flesh passes to corruption and does not share life, seeing that flesh is nourished by the body of the Lord?"* Through the Eucharist, the life of the Risen One touches more than just our minds and our spirits. It does not simply enter our ears as an idea but nourishes our very bodies. Irenaeus stresses : *"We offer to Him what is His own, suitably proclaiming the communion and unity of flesh and spirit. For as the bread, which comes from the earth, receives the invocation of God, and then it is no longer common bread, but Eucharist, and*

consists of two things, an earthly and a heavenly; so our bodies, after partaking of the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having the hope of the eternal resurrection."

Perceiving the purpose of creation

Participation in the Eucharist therefore becomes a way of proclaiming that the world has meaning. In the light of the Eucharist, the believer sees that the whole of creation is called not to die but to be transformed, for the Eucharist celebrates the victory of life. Of course, we have to pass through death, it is the locus of our transformation; but a seed has been sown in the Christian which a forerunner of Irenaeus, Ignatius of Antioch, referring to the Eucharist, called the *"medicine of immortality and the antidote that wards off death."* When, at Communion, we receive the Body of Christ, His life as the Risen Lord, we allow ourselves to be welcomed into that place where death no longer exists.

The Eucharist and Social Responsibility

There is a third example which shows us how the Eucharist is linked to the whole of life. For the first Christians, to approach the communion table was to become aware of their social responsibility. If we become the Body of Christ by taking part in the Eucharist and if we are really members of each other, then we can no longer behave as if we did not care about those who are in need. So the tradition was born amongst the early Christians of bringing to the Eucharist a gift for the poor (which has now become the collection or

the offering). We see here the truth that, in Christianity, all authentic mysticism leads to concrete action.

Thus we hear Cyprian, in the 3rd century A.D., berating *"a noble lady who did not bring her offering to the Eucharist: 'Your eyes do not see the needy or the poor for they are veiled and shrouded in deep darkness. You are wealthy, and you imagine that you can celebrate the Lord's Supper without contributing to the offering. You come to the Eucharist with nothing to offer and, by participating in the sacrifice, you steal what belongs to the poor."*

Fr Haman, who has published a selection of texts on this question, has stressed how *"from the earliest days of Christianity, with the support of the deacons, the Eucharist prompted many social initiatives in the community: free meals for the poorer members and the distribution of material aid, all of which gave a concrete expression to the Sacrament of Love."* [4]

John Chrysostom saw in every encounter with the poor and in every attempt to help them the same reality as that which he saw in the Eucharist, *"The altar is everywhere, on every street corner, in every town square."* It is no accident that Matthew 25 is referred to in contexts which make mention of the Eucharist, *"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kindgom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink."* In any encounter with the hungry, the stranger, the sick or the prisoner there is *"the almost sacramental presence of Jesus"*. [5]

[4] Hamman, *La Messe*, p.132. For the quotation from Cyprian, see p.132-133. The document referred to is entitled *Vie liturgique et vie sociale*.

[5] Olivier Clément, *Corps de mort et de gloire*, p.62.

A "eucharistic conscience " can be found in Irenaeus as well. *"At the Lord's Table,"* writes one of his commentators, *"we become aware that He who needs nothing and who shares His gifts with us so that we may have something to give Him expects everything of us when we meet Him in our brothers."* [6]

These three examples, which show the extent to which the Eucharist is linked to the whole of faith and the whole of life, will help us to take our next step. In the early Church the Eucharist is at times presented using a selection of quotations from the Bible, all of which have in common a ferocious onslaught levelled at sacrifice. And yet the word sacrifice is not absent...

II What Pleases God

The early church, when celebrating the Eucharist, was fond of quoting a passage from the prophet Malachi: *"In every place, incense and a pure offering (sacrifice) will be brought to my name. For my name will be great among the nations"* (Malachi 1:11). [7]

At the end of our first chapter, we suggested that the Eucharist drew on an anthology of writings which attacked the practice of sacrifice; and yet now we are face to face with a text which seems to approve of it. Is there not a contradiction here? Not at all, as we shall see.

[6] M. Jourjon, *Les sacrements de la liberté*, p.79-80.

[7] I am indebted here to the analysis of this text written by Maurice Jourjon, *Les sacrements de la liberté*, p. 15-17

The word *pure* in a sacrificial context is usually meant to refer to the condition of the victim to be sacrificed, an animal without blemish, for example. It could also refer to the purity of those making the sacrifice. But when this text is quoted, in the *Didachè* for instance (which was probably written between 80 and 140 A.D. and which is sometimes called *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*), here is what we find. *"On the Lord's day, when you have gathered, break bread and give thanks; but first confess your sins, so that your sacrifice may be pure. However, no one quarrelling with his brother may join your meeting until they are reconciled; your sacrifice must not be defiled."*[8] The words *sacrifice* and *pure* are used here in the context of real life, of human relationships and, specifically, of reconciliation. What pleases God, therefore, is not the sacrifice of animals: Irenaeus and Cyprian will use the same fierce irony in their writing on this subject. What pleases God is to see men and women gathered together and forgiving each other. *"Everything seems to point to the fact that the confession of faults and the forgiveness of one's brother or sister, the meeting together on the Lord's Day to give thanks to God through the breaking of bread, constitutes a sacrifice"* (M. Jourjon). It is the gathering itself, as a place of love and forgiveness, which constitutes the sacrifice and which rejoices the heart of God.

It would be easy to extend this understanding of the perfect sacrifice to all those aspects of life which

[8] *Ancient Christian Writers* vol 6*: Didache, The Epistles of Barnabas, The Epistles and the Martyrdom of St. Polycarp.*. Mahwah, NJ: The Newman Press, 1948, p.23. Translation modified.

we considered earlier. When a community of men and women finds itself filled with trust and hope, able to rejoice in life and to identify the source of their joy, able to love each other, forgive each other and to share with the brother or sister in need, such a community embodies what pleases God.

III Enigmas in the Empire

The link between faith and life, which we are trying to highlight in this discussion of the Eucharist, is probably what made it so difficult for the inhabitants of the Roman Empire to understand the early Christians.

There is no doubt that other reasons, some of which are not unrelated to the practice of the Eucharist, contributed to the suspicion with which Christians were regarded. Firstly, there were the rumours, circulated by the opponents of the Christian faith, and probably not without ulterior motives. When those Christians get together, they eat someone's body! The intention behind the spreading of this kind of slander, designed to stir up fear, was probably to warn off the increasing numbers of people whom the Christian faith was beginning to attract. Not only were they accused of cannibalism, but of immorality, an accusation which Christians found particularly hurtful. What was the basis of such an accusation? Probably a failure to understand the nature of the meetings which used to begin on Saturday nights. On the Sunday morning, before sun-

rise, men and women, rich and poor, masters and slaves can all be found in the same room. And they all embrace! *"Yes,"* protested the 2nd century Christian Athenagoras, *"but there is only one kiss"!*[9]

We have to dig deeper than these slanders to find the real motive for the suspicion and even the hatred which the Romans encouraged towards Christians. In particular, it is the connection which Christians made between religion and life, between what is religious and what is true, that is new. This connection leads to forms of behaviour which can appear contemptuous of others. We know that the first Christians were criticised for their refusal to participate in pagan ceremonies. For the Romans, participation in all of these ceremonies was necessary for the wellbeing of the city. A shoddy performance of the rituals could call down all sorts of evils on the empire such as disease or war. Thus we see a growing tendency to hold Christians responsible for various misfortunes, a tendency that would not disappear overnight.

Christians appeared intolerant at a time when the prevailing ethos within the Roman establishment in the first and second centuries A.D. was keen on accommodating all beliefs.[10] Two distinct ideas of religion emerged. For some, what counted was ceremony, customs, ritual. They were not concerned with belief in the truth of this or that religious practice nor with questions about how it might affect their behaviour. In contrast, we find the Christian conviction, summa-

[9] See *Histoire du Christianisme*, vol. 1, edited by J.-M. Mayeur, Ch et L. Pietri et al. p. 246 for the main references.

[10] See article by Jozef Van Beeck, SJ, *The Worship of Christians in Pliny's Letter*, Studia Liturgica, volume 18, 1988.

rised by these words of Tertullian, *"Our Lord Christ has surnamed Himself Truth, not Custom."*. For Christians, the fundamental link between religion and life and between religion and truth, barred any compromise. For the Romans this was interpreted as arrogance and they reacted vigorously.

We have an example of this suspicion towards Christians in the form of a letter written by a Roman administrator which is usually dated to about the year 112 A.D. Pliny the Younger was the governor of a Roman province (Pontus and Bithynia in the north-west of Asia Minor). He knew that there were Christians in the province which he administered. What should he think of them? Were they a danger? Pliny had no idea and wondered how to react to them. He wrote to the Emperor Trajan in the hope of receiving instructions about the steps he was to take. In his letter, we read what he was able to find out about the Christians, *"On an appointed day, they had been accustomed to meet before daybreak, and to recite a hymn antiphonally to Christ as to a god… After the conclusion of this ceremony it was their custom to depart and meet again to take food but it was ordinary and harmless food."*[11] We can see in this text evidence of the rumours which were circulating about the food which the Christians ate. Pliny's spies saw no cannibalism! Furthermore, we learn that the Christians were in the habit of meeting on a particular day. Let us pause and consider this for a moment.

[11] Henry Bettenson, *ed., Documents of the Christian Church,* 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 3-4.

The eighth day

This special day, which the Romans called the Day of the Sun (the name which it still carries in English "Sunday"), will be called the "eighth day" by Christians of the second century. This is the day on which the Eucharist was celebrated.

The Jewish week ended on the Sabbath, the seventh day. Christ rose from the dead on the following day. But this day, which began with His resurrection was, the early Christians knew, unlike any other. Its sun was Christ Himself, victor over death. It could therefore have no sunset, it could not come to an end, for Christ could not die again. The number eight represented eternity. It also explains the architecture of baptisteries in the early church: they had to be octagonal, because what began in the waters of baptism was eternal life.

Justin, a Christian who lived in the 2nd century, called this day both the first and the eighth. Not the first day of the week, but simply the first, because it ushers in a new age. It is the first day of an entirely new and distinctive era.

One cannot speak of a first day without alluding to the creation of the world. Justin does this as well, but moves straight on to the resurrection: *"We all gather on the day of the Sun because it is the first day on which God, forming matter out of darkness, created the world and because, on this same day, Jesus Christ our Saviour rose from the dead."*[12]

[12] Justin Martyr, *I Apology*, 67, 7.

What we have here is not simply a juxtaposition of creation and resurrection, but the conviction that the resurrection gives meaning to all that has been created. *"Sunday symbolises the moment of creation which is taken up again into the recreative moment of Easter, when eternity gives birth to time and steers it towards eternity."*[13]

Opening oneself to the eighth day means allowing oneself to be penetrated by God's creative and recreative call and to discover that the world is not made for death. It is no accident that the Eucharist is celebrated on the eighth day. The Eucharist, summing up all meaning, tells us where we come from: we are the result not of blind chance but of a plan born of love. Intimately linked to the mystery of the resurrection, the Eucharist gives meaning to the human adventure. It is here that *"humanity ceases to be an adventure without beginning or end, as if it were a loop of cloth rotating endlessly on itself. No, the human adventure is fastened to a creative act and finds fulfilment in the Resurrection of Christ"* (M. Jourjon).

IV Uniting: A Eucharistic Art

We have already come across the figure of Justin. Born in Palestine, he lived in Rome. Justin offers us the

[13] Olivier Clément, *Le dimanche et le Jour éternel*, in Verbum Caro, no. 79, 1966, p. 99-124.

longest description we have of the Eucharist as it was celebrated in Rome around the year 150 A.D.[14]

Reading Justin, it is easy to recognise the structure of the Eucharist with which we are familiar. First of all, there are the readings. Where we would talk about readings from the Old and New Testaments, Justin writes that they read from *"the memoirs of the Apostles and the writings of the prophets."*

We Greet Each Other With a Kiss

Let us look more closely at what happens after these readings, before the bread and the wine are presented. It is at this very moment, Justin writes, that *"we greet each other with a kiss."* What is the connection between this kiss and the Eucharist? Why does it take place just before the presentation of the bread and wine? We are meant, of course, to think of the words of Jesus: *"When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go ; first be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift"* (Mt 5:23-24). Here again, we see the importance of forgiveness. The first Christians were aware that, in the Eucharist, they became a single body. To affirm this without putting forgiveness into practice would be to turn the Eucharist into a mere formality, to divorce it from life. The Eucharist enables the life of love to flow through the veins of the body: when forgiveness is given and received, this is what

[14] Saint Justin, *I Apology* 65-67, The Library of Christian Classics, The Westminster Press, 1953. Translations have been modified.

happens. To forgive and to receive forgiveness is to allow unity (always so fragile in a community) to be rebuilt. Here again, we see the extent to which the Eucharist resonated in daily life and, particularly, in human relationships. After the kiss, *"bread and a cup of water mixed with wine are brought to the President of the assembly: he takes them, gives praise and glory to the Father of the universe in the name of His Son and of the Holy Spirit, prays at length a prayer of thanksgiving for these gifts which He has graciously granted us…"*

The President

Why use the term *President*? Fr Stanislas Lyonnet S.J., who has thought long and hard about the link between the Eucharist and daily life in the Scriptures, offers this explanation, *"…it is easy to show that the New Testament, when referring to what one might call the 'ministers' of this service, systematically avoids any term which refers to the equivalent role amongst the Jews or the pagans. Instead, it opts for a series of words all of which mean the head of a community:* episcopos *or overseer,* presbyteros *or elder,* higoumenos *or guide,* poimèn *or pastor,* proïstamenos *or president. In other words, the minister leading the worship of the Christian community is the head of that community (…). In contrast, the titles* hiereus *or* hierateuma *(in Latin:* sacerdos *or* sacerdotium *; in English:* priest*) are reserved for Christ and for those who are baptised."*[15] This is probably the way Justin saw things too. In the Early Church, as was once again emphasised at the Second Vatican

[15] Stanislas Lyonnet, *Eucharisitie et Vie chrétienne,* p. 100.

Council, the celebration of the Eucharist is an action of the whole Church.

Although the vocabulary of priesthood was later used by the Church in order to speak of its ministers, it was not to revert to a ritualistic view of the sacred, in which the minister is seen as an intermediary. Christ remains the only Priest; but some people receive from God the responsibility of manifesting His presence and, specifically, of showing that everything flows from Christ. The end result is the same: the priesthood is shared by all the people. *"The ordained ministries are at the service of the common priesthood, and not the reverse."* The role of this priesthood *"does not consist of performing ceremonies but of transforming real life by opening it to the action of the Holy Spirit and to the impulses of divine love."* [16] Various authors have pointed out the Christian faith's *"subversive attitude to religious rituals."* The sacred is no longer something set apart. But if that is the case, we might say, why have Christians also ended up with places of worship, altars and rituals? Claude Geffré has provided a helpful answer to this question, which reflects the practice of the first Christians: *"…although it is true that Christian faith under the New Covenant has a subversive attitude to religious rituals, it needs some concrete way of giving religious expression to what is sacred. This is precisely where Christianity is original in its understanding*

[16] Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest According to the New Testament,* St. Bede's Publications, 1986, p.315. Vanhoye recognises however that the danger of regression (i.e. of making a Christian priest into a new kind of ancient priest) has not always been avoided and he notes, on the last page of his book, how difficult it is to maintain an authentically Christian perspective.

of what "sacred" means: things can continue to be thought of as sacred as long as they symbolise the sanctification of what is secular, and this symbolism finds its fullest expression in sacramental rituals." [17]

Embracing the whole Universe

It is thus the universe in its entirety that is represented in the bread and the wine which are brought to the President (and in the water too because, at the time, wine was not drunk undiluted). *"Christ invites his followers to eat His Body at the point when, in the Jewish tradition, the person presiding over the Passover meal would give thanks to the Lord, 'the King of the Universe, who has brought forth bread from the earth.' In a similar way, he prepared the cup of His Blood at the point when the President, blessing the cup, would give thanks to the Lord "who has created the fruit of the vine'. It was very early in its history, therefore, that the Church saw the whole of creation in the bread and wine of the Eucharist; for Christ, as Saint Paul says, is at one and the same time the Firstborn of many brothers and the Firstborn of all creation"* (Olivier Clément).

Irenaeus mentions this idea explicitly: *"Again, giving directions to His disciples to offer to God the first-fruits of His own created things—not as if He stood in need of them, but that they might be themselves neither unfruitful nor ungrateful—He took that created thing, bread and gave thanks, and said, 'This is My body.' And the cup likewise, which is part of that creation to which we*

[17] Claude Geffré, in « La Maison Dieu », no 142, 1980, p.53.

belong, He confessed to be His blood, and taught the new oblation (offering) of the new covenant; which the Church receiving from the apostles, offers to God throughout all the world, to Him who gives us as the means of subsistence the first-fruits of His own gifts in the New Testament.. " It is as if Irenaeus were saying to us, "See how Jesus identifies Himself with bread and wine. They have become His body and His blood. In Him, the whole universe finds its fulfilment." Yes, in a sense, the whole universe is already present in this piece of bread and in this cup of wine (the firstfruits), a universe destined not for death and corruption but absorbed and transformed by Him and destined for a life over which death has no dominion. If even the inanimate world has such a future, how much greater the hope that human beings can enjoy! The Eucharist is, for them, a call to read the future of humanity in the Risen Christ, the first-born of creation, the first-born from among the dead (I Cor 15:20), the firstfruits of the new creation.

What stands out from these texts is the magnificent faithfulness of God towards His creation. For Irenaeus, there is no incompatibility between the created world and the life of eternity in God. The fear of confusing life in this world and eternal life has done considerable harm to the Christian faith. M. Blondel lamented this, *"We are preoccupied by the fear of failing to distinguish [between the human and the divine], when we should, in fact, fear our failure to unite them sufficiently … it is the failure to understand what uniting truly means that leads to the fear of confusion. Maybe the life of humanity has too often deserted Christianity because we have too often uprooted Christianity from the deepest and most intimate levels of human experience."* [18]

When Irenaeus, in the 2nd century A.D. in Lyons, raised the cup *"that holds all things together"* he knew that he was practising that art of uniting which is called the Eucharist.

V From Fear to Trust

The Eucharist is all about gratitude. *Eucharistia* translates into English as *thanks*. When Justin describes the prayers of the one who presides, he speaks of "*giving thanks at length*". It is true that the believer brings an offering but, as Irenaeus says, it is not that God needs our gifts but rather that we need to give. What we offer is first and foremost our gratitude, as the memorial of God's generosity in the giving of His Son. Joyfully offered, our gratitude opens us to the freedom of the children of God. This is what it means to be a child of God: to know that we are what we are through the free gift of God. Irenaeus is particularly aware that the New Covenant is characterised by a journey from the fear of the slave to the trust of children. This is why this author, who is so preoccupied with affirming the Newness of Christ, dares to write, "*for there were offerings there* [among the Jews] *and there are*

[18] Quoted by Henri de Lubac, *Teilhard Posthume*, Fayard, p.54.

offering here [among the Christians]. *There were sacrifices among the people; there are sacrifices in the Church too. It is only the form that has changed: the offering is now no longer made by slaves, but by free men.*" For Irenaeus, there is a way of offering which "*bears the distinctive hallmark of freedom*". This is why he draws a distinction between the tithe of the Old Covenant and the tithe given by "*those who have received liberty: they set aside all their possessions for the Lord's purposes, bestowing joyfully and freely not the less valuable portion of their property, since they have the hope of better things*".

If I am understanding Irenaeus properly, he is suggesting that freedom is attained as we enter into the freedom to give everything. The idea of the *tithe* is too closely linked to that of a measured, calculated gift. It remains too closely connected to the mindset of a slave. He or she who welcomes the freedom imparted by God is enabled to give completely and without counting the cost. Whoever takes part in the Eucharist is called to join Christ, the Son, in his momentum of self-giving to the Father. It means letting oneself be caught up in the dance of giving. We find here the same insight that we see in John's Gospel. We know that, in John, where we would expect to find the account of the Last Supper, we read the story of the washing of the disciples' feet, followed by these words of Jesus: *"Love one another as I have loved you."* John is not silent on the subject of the Eucharist, but he has chosen to show where it comes from and what it produces, that is, the freedom which the Son enjoys to make Himself a slave

and to give everything, driven by the folly of love. This joyful momentum of self-giving which we see in the Son can become ours. The words, *"as I have loved you"* must be understood not only as if Jesus were inviting us to follow his example, but as pointing to a source from which we can draw, a spring which wells up in anyone who welcomes Christ in the Eucharist.

In this way, as we celebrate the Eucharist *"we cease to be sterile and ungrateful; from being 'a-charistoi,'* [ungrateful] *we become 'eu-charistoi'* [grateful]. What we celebrate is not just the good creation of God as represented by bread and wine. This good creation is also a wounded creation. What we celebrate in the Eucharist is also the fact that God has not abandoned His creation, that He has healed it, that He has not turned His back on it, even when it has turned its most unbecoming face towards Him. It is a creation wounded by evil, by death and by our mistakes, but healed and rescued not by the wave of a magic wand but by the gift which Christ has made of Himself, by the total commitment of God, particularly in His Son. *"Someone has paid the price,"* writes Saint Paul (I Cor 6:20), as he explains the extent to which God Himself has become involved in winning our freedom. The celebration of the Eucharist is a memorial of this in the strong biblical sense of making it real for us in the present. As Justin writes *"This bread of thanksgiving is a memorial (anamnèsis) of the suffering which He endured for men, whose souls have been purified of all disobedience. Jesus Christ our Lord commanded us to do it so that we should thank God both for having created the world*

for man, with all that it contains and for delivering us from evil … through Him who suffered by the will of God.…"[19]

We have chosen to use the word *healed* where we might have written *saved*. Indeed, in a number of languages, the words for *health* and *salvation* are interchangeable. *Healed* does have the advantage, though. It enables us to grasp the consequences in the present of what Christ has done, even if all that He has accomplished is not yet visible in the present.

An old eucharistic practice which we find in Rome, Carthage and Alexandria shows us how aware the first Christians were that they had already entered into salvation through baptism and the Eucharist. On the day of his first communion, which was also the day of his baptism, the new Christian received not only consecrated bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, but a cup filled with milk and honey. It's as if they wanted to show in this way that the baptised believer, by receiving the body of the Risen Christ in communion, was already entering the promised land, the land which flowed with milk and honey.

[19] Justin, *Dialogue of Justin, Philosopher and Martyr with Trypho a Jew*, Kessinger Publishing, 2004, p.43.

VI Communion : A Well-Chosen Name

We have arrived at the moment of communion in the Eucharist. Justin emphasises in no uncertain terms that this is no ordinary food: *" For we do not receive these things as common bread or common drink; but as Jesus Christ our Saviour being incarnate by God's word took flesh and blood for our salvation, so also we have been taught that the food consecrated by the word of prayer which comes from him, from which our flesh and blood are nourished by transformation, is the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus."*[20] For Justin, as for the whole of the early Church, flesh and blood signify the person of the Risen Christ, His real and mysterious presence.

Such is the faith of the Early Church. He who makes Himself present in the Eucharist truly is the Risen Christ. They took him at his word. But what interests the Christians of the early Church, unlike those of certain centuries in the Middle Ages, is not so much knowing what is going on in the bread and the wine, not so much the attempt to explain *how* they have become the body and blood of Christ, as what is happening in *us* when we receive His Body,[21] when, fed by the same bread, all of us together

[20] Justin Martyr, *I Apology*, 66, 1, *The Library of Christian Classics*, The Westminster Press, 1953, p. 286.

[21] "Let us learn the wonders of this sacrament, the purpose of its institution, the effects that it produces. We become one body, says the Scripture, members of his flesh, bones of his bones. That is what the food that he gives us effects : he joins himself to us that may become one whole, like a body joined to its head." John Chrysostom quoted by H. de Lubac, *Catholicism*, p. 39.

become a single reality, the Body of Christ. With a realism that many Christians in later centuries found difficult to grasp, the first Christians stressed this point. The Eucharist feeds each person; but, more than this, it feeds this Body and gives it its unity. Now we can see why this sacrament deserves the name *communion* and why the name is so well-chosen. We become what we receive. The Church, as Henri de Lubac wrote, is the great miracle of the Eucharist.

Let us listen to St Augustine as he tries to explain to new Christians that they (yes, they!) are the Body of Christ. *"It is* your *mystery which is placed on the Lord's table; it is* your *mystery that you receive. You respond "Amen" to a statement of what* you *are."* [22]

This point cannot be made strongly enough. If we wish to live with the faith of the early Christians, we have to leave our individualism behind and rediscover a sense of community. One of the best commentators on this aspect of St Augustine will provide us with our conclusion. *"The Eucharist is never more truly the Eucharist than when it takes flesh in the Church as the Body of Christ, and the Church is never more truly the Church than when it becomes a living Eucharist."* [23]

My thanks to David Ash and to Jason Santos for their help with this English version.

[22] Sermon 272, quoted by Hamman, op. cit., p. 132.

[23] L.-M. Chauvet, *L'Église fait l'Eucharistie ; L'Eucharistie fait l'Église*, in *Catéchèse*, dossier L'Eucharistie, no. 71, avril 1978, p. 178.

DL 1065 — juin 2008 — ISBN 9782850402579
Achevé d'imprimer en juillet 2008 imprimerie — AB. Doc, 71100 Chalon sur Saône