

BASIC CHRISTIANITY

Lecture Number 11

THE HOLY EUCHARIST

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INTRODUCTION

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From the days of the Apostles until the Reformation in the 16th century, there was no question about it! Not even a heretic would have thought of not observing Sunday with the Eucharist. Certainly, no one would have substituted some other service for the Eucharist on Sunday.

BACKGROUND

After Jesus had fed the 5000 on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, he returned to Capernaum on the western side. He went into the synagogue and spoke to the crowds that had followed him: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves....

“Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from Heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from Heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from Heaven, and gives life to the world...

“I AM the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from Heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die.

“I AM the living bread which came down from Heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh...

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.

“He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.” [John 6:26-56, passim]

Jesus and His disciples were Jews. And so they had an intimate, lifelong acquaintance with the book of Genesis.

And Genesis begins with the creation at which God said, “Let there be light.. let there be dry land, etc.” God creates by speaking, by uttering. The created order is to God as the song is to the singer or the lecture to the lecturer. And Jesus is God. And Jesus said, “This is my body...This is my blood.”

The earliest name for the Eucharist is “the breaking of bread”. The book of Acts says that following Pentecost, the Christians “continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, and in *the breaking of bread* and the prayers.” [Acts 2:42]

Acts goes on to say, “And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people”. [Acts 2:46,47]

That means they had a daily Eucharist. At first, it was done in the context of a complete meal, which later on led to difficulties, and which St. Paul mentions in his first Epistle to the Church in Corinth [I Corinthians 11].

The Book of Acts tells us about one Eucharist when St. Paul was at the city of Troas in Asia Minor. On his first Sunday there, which for Jews began at sundown the previous night, the Christians were gathered in an upstairs room to celebrate the Eucharist — “to break bread”.

Paul was preaching and he kept on preaching until midnight. A young man named Eutychus was sitting in one of the windows. At last, he went to sleep and fell out of the window. When people rushed down stairs to check on him, it looked like he was dead.

So Paul at last stopped preaching. He went downstairs and bent over the young man. Then he embraced him and told the people not to worry because he was alive. Then they all went back upstairs and finished celebrating the Eucharist. And then they visited until dawn. [Acts 20]

VARIOUS NAMES FOR THE EUCHARIST

The Eucharist has a number of names each of which expresses some aspect of its meaning. For example:

The *Eucharist* (Greek for “thanksgiving”)

Jesus based the Eucharist upon the Jewish family meal. The meal centered around giving thanks to God over bread and wine for the covenant.

The *Divine Liturgy* or The *Liturgy* (Greek for “work of the people”)

In secular Greek life, a liturgy was a big public event staged by a benefactor on behalf of the general population, like a rock concert, perhaps. The Eucharist, likewise, is work performed by the Church on behalf of all mankind.

The *Lord’s Supper*

The Eucharist is the heavenly banquet to which Jesus referred in various parables. This name also has a number of overtones of the nuptial banquet or wedding supper between Christ and his Bride, the Church.

For instance, in the ancient Easter Eve Liturgy, the paschal candle is lowered into the font and three drops of oil are placed in the font. This is to symbolize that the font has become a fertile womb out of which new Christians are to be born.

In the Lord’s Supper, the Church goes to the altar and receives the Body of Christ into her body and the two become one flesh.

The *Anaphora* (Greek for “the lifting up”)

This recalls the words of Jesus, “I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men to myself,” as well as

the *rising*, that is, the Resurrection. It also suggests the idea of the offering up of a sacrifice.

The *Holy Communion*

This calls to mind the union of the Church with Christ which is accomplished by the Eucharist, as expressed by the words: "...that he may dwell in us and we in him." (1928 BCP, p. 81; 1979 BCP, Rite I, p. 336)

The *Mass*

The word *mass* seems to have come from an ancient Indo-European word which turns up in many languages. In Anglo-Saxon — Old English — it is *maesse*, which meant first a meal, then a festival meal or feast. And, finally, it came to mean simply a festival.

Thus, we still speak of a "mess" of greens, meaning enough greens for a meal. And soldiers eat in a building called a "mess" hall.

Also, the word turns up in "Michaelmas", "Candlemas", and "Christmas", which mean the "festival of Michael", the "festival of candles", and the "festival of Christ".

In Latin it is *mensa* and means table. In Greek it is *meso* and means "midst" or "middle" — that place where the table usually is.

Perhaps it was the first Christians in Britain, in the first century, which applied the name *maesse* to the Eucharist - the Maesse. Then the usage spread throughout the Roman Empire, perhaps by Christian Roman soldiers.

THE FIRST NEW CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

When St. Paul and other missionaries arrived in a city which had no Christian community, the first thing they did was to go to the local synagogue.

Practically every Jewish synagogue had a number of "fellow traveler" Greek gentiles. They believed in God, they studied the Holy scriptures, and they followed the Jewish moral code. But they had not been circumcised, and thus they were not yet Jews. The Jews called them "God-fearers." Those who decided to "go all the way" and become Jews were called "proselytes."

The custom was that when a learned Jew visited a synagogue he would be asked to make the commentary on the lessons which were read on that occasion. Paul was a graduate of the Pharisaic school of Gamaliel and thus a very learned Jew. So the natural thing was to invite him to speak.

He would proceed to tell them about how the Hope for the Messiah had been fulfilled in Jesus and about how he had risen from the dead, etc. Some would believe, especially God-fearers; and some would not. And thus Paul would become a disruptive element - as in a classic tragedy - and the synagogue would be divided.

After a few weeks of that, he would be asked to leave. And as he left, Paul would mention that he was staying at the Ephesus Holiday Inn No. 2, and that if anybody wanted to hear more about

Jesus, he could find him there.

Then he would proceed to organize a rival synagogue, a synagogue of the new Covenant. Thus, also as in a tragedy, a new and higher good was born out of the ruins of the old. No wonder the Jews persecuted him all over Asia Minor, as well as Greece and Macedonia!

The members of the New Covenant synagogue continued the synagogue worship just as they had been accustomed to do:

That service consisted of the reading of passages of the Old Testament followed each time by the recitation of psalms in the context of prayers. Then the *overseer* of the congregation would comment on the passages which had been read and relate them to the Gospel of Jesus.

In Greek “overseer” is *episcopos*, and “congregation” is *synagogue*. Our word “bishop” comes from *episcopos*.

Then they proceeded to the *Anaphora*, the breaking of bread with prayer, which was the specifically Christian thing. Before long, the Anaphora was separated from the meal which was eaten for nourishment, called the *Agape*, or “love feast”.

And this is the pattern which has continued to the present day in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican churches.

In the Orthodox churches it requires two or three times as long to do it as it does in other Catholic churches because of the addition of litanies, hymns, prayers, and ceremonies. The separate synagogue part, or *Pro-anaphora*, is what we call the “Liturgy of the Word”, and it ends with the exchange of the Peace just before the Offertory.

The Anaphora, or the supper part of the service, begins with the Offertory and goes through the Communion of the People. The 1979 Prayer Book calls this “The Great Thanksgiving”.

In the feeding of the 5000, Jesus did four things: He *took*; He *gave thanks*; He *broke*; and He *gave*. At the Last Supper, He did the same four things to the bread and the wine. By the time the natural meal had been separated from the Anaphora, the practice of taking the bread and wine together was established, and it has continued ever since.

THE WORDS OF JESUS

Jesus said, “Do this.” What is the “this” that he was talking about? It is returning thanks at supper over the bread and wine and then eating and drinking it.

How often did He expect them to do it? As often as they got together for supper, which normally was every day. And so a *daily* Eucharist was the norm until, because of persecution, they could no longer assemble daily to do it. Under those conditions, they took some of the consecrated bread home. That way they could make their communions every day.

Whenever I say in the Lord’s Prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread,” I am reminded of that ancient custom. And a daily Eucharist remained the ideal to be done whenever circumstances

would permit. The Greek word *epi-ousios* normally means “daily,” but it can mean “really real”!

Jesus said, “Do this in *anamnesis* - in remembrance - of me.” *Mnesis* means to know. *Amnesia* means to forget or not to know. *Ana* means “again.” or “from above.” So *Ana-mnesis* means to know all over again, not just to remember. It is more like “experience it all over again.”

Let’s do another exercise in imagination: As you stare at the floor, imagine that you see a snow-white lamb lying there. Then suddenly you realize that something terrible has happened. Its legs and its tail and its head have all been chopped off with a cleaver. And the body has been hacked into pieces.

It has been *dis*-membered!

To put it back together and make it alive again is to *re*-member it. The words of Jesus mean, “Do this for the *re-membering* of me.”

Jesus said, “Whenever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in their midst.” “In my name” means on official business. When we are celebrating the Eucharist, we are doing the official business of the Church. And when we do it, Jesus is in our midst.

When two or three or more *members* assemble in the Name of Jesus to offer the Eucharist to the Father, Jesus is *re-membered*, he is put back together again!”

THE MEANING OF THE EUCHARIST

Shortly before the time of Jesus, a well-known rabbi had said, “In the days of King Messiah all of the sacrifices will be done away with except for the Thank-Offering.”

At one time the head of the family might offer all sorts of sacrifices. But all of those sacrifices had become restricted to the Temple priesthood, except for one. The thanksgiving at the family meal was the only sacrificial act left which the father of a family was allowed to perform. The first-generation Christians understood the Eucharist to be the fulfillment of all sacrifices.

John the Baptist said of Jesus, “Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.” The death of Jesus on the cross displaced the passover lamb, which was being slain at that very hour.

The essential meaning of sacrifice is to make a thing holy, to make it belong to God.

For example, if I give you an apple, you have one more than you had before, and I have one less. But the point is for you to have an apple, not for me to have one less. And the point in sacrifice is for God to receive something.

Thus the sacrifice of Christ is not completed on earth until he returns to the Father at the Ascension. So the Latin Mass ends with the words, “Go. It has been sent” - *Ite. Missa est*. That is to say, “The oblation has been sent up to the altar in Heaven.”

In eternity, the Father pours out His being to the Son; and the Son in turn empties out Himself to

the Father. And on earth, throughout His entire life, Jesus was doing exactly that. In Heaven at this very moment Jesus is doing exactly that.

Jesus said, “He that would save his life will surely lose it; he that loses it for my sake will find it.” What does this mean?

Well, when I *know* something, it means I receive into myself its essence, something of its being.

And when I *love* something that I know, I go out of myself to enter into the beloved, into its objective otherness. That is, I give myself to my beloved.

The crucifixion is the measure of love. This is what God wants us to share in — love. And love requires us completely to give ourselves up.

The next time I celebrate the Eucharist, I will be joined by many, or few, men or women or both, and we will constitute the *mystical* Body of Christ in that place. I will take bread which will become the *sacramental* Body of Christ, and we will offer it to the Father.

In every Eucharist in the world, every day, Christ offers Himself to the Father, visibly, in history, in time and space. We offer Him; He offers us.

It is not *like* what He does or did; rather it *is* the same thing continuing to occur throughout time and space.

THE ANCIENT SACRIFICES

Recall what we said in Class number nine:

Sacrifice is necessary, *not* because God demands it, but because *we* do.

Let me illustrate: If you lend me a book, and I leave it out in the rain, you know what it will look like. It will be ruined. I won't return that copy to you; I will buy you a new one. But what if you lent me a rare, irreplaceable first edition, and so I can't replace it? I will hate to face you. I will avoid you.

Well, each sinner is just such a ruined and irreplaceable first edition. I am. You are. And I want something to give to God to make up for my spoiled soul, so that I will be able to face him. Jesus is the only thing we have to offer to God. But he is enough. He is an adequate sacrifice, an adequate offering.

Remember — the essence of sacrifice is in the gift. It's not in the deprivation suffered by the giver. So the sacrifice of Jesus was his whole life which he offered to the Father. And it was completed at the Ascension when he was received into Heaven.

Behind the sacrifice of the Eucharist lie all of the ancient sacrifices. For example there was:

The Sacrifice of the *First-fruits*.

This involved giving part of this year's crop back as a sacrifice. Actually it was seed for planting, as you may recall from Lecture #5 on the Old Covenant.

Among the Jews the idea was extended to animals and even to human beings. The first male to open the womb was holy to the Lord and had to be sacrificed. And after that, every tenth one.

In the case of humans, the first male was redeemed by the sacrifice of a male lamb, or, for poor people, two turtle doves or two young pigeons. This, incidentally, is how we know that the family of Jesus was poor [Luke 2:22-24].

The *Sin Offerings*.

These were made in an attempt to compensate God for sins. They were usually burned up. And as the smoke ascended into the sky it became “spiritual,” that is “of the air.” In Hebrew, the word for *spirit* and *breath* and *wind* or *air* is the same - *ruach*.

The *Covenant Sacrifice*.

This involved the slaying of oxen and sprinkling of the blood on the tables of stone and on the people at Mt. Sinai when the Hebrews accepted the Covenant. Covenant sacrifices were also offered by both parties when two people were making important deals.

The *Totem* Sacrifice.

This type of sacrifice is common to many primitive peoples, both ancient and more recent. It involves the idea that a particular animal embodies the spirit of the god of the tribe. To eat the flesh of the totem animal was considered to give one the virtue of the tribal god.

The Temple Sacrifice on the *Day of Atonement*

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement only, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies in the temple. He had a rope tied around him so that he could be pulled back out in case of heart attack or other emergency.

He carried in with him the blood of the sacrifice. And when he had pronounced the divine name, he poured the blood out on the dirt floor of the Holy of Holies. This came to be the only time God’s proper name, JHVH, — I AM — could be pronounced. And the High Priest was the only one allowed to do it.

The Jews developed the practice of substituting the word Adonai, which means *Lord*, whenever they encountered the Divine Name. In some English translations this is still done. You can spot it when “Lord” is spelled all in caps with the letters “ORD” smaller than the L.

The Sacrifice of the *Old King*

In the Caucasus Mountains, — where Armenia is today — about the year 2000 B. C., there was a terrible custom. When the king became too old to rule, the throne passed to his successor. And the first duty of the new king was to slay the old king as a sacrifice for the welfare of the kingdom.

In time those people were overrun and conquered by the Aryans. The Aryans were shocked to learn that the conquered people expected them to follow the custom. So they devised the plan of making somebody else “king for a day” and then killing him. The real king could

then be allowed to die peacefully in his bed.

Over the centuries, this practice degenerated into a popular sport. Each year in the spring time, the village idiot, or a condemned criminal, or a slave, would be dressed up like a king, teased and ridiculed, and then put to death.

Roman soldiers recruited from that part of the empire, wherever they happened to be stationed, continued that custom well into the 4th century A. D.

We know it today as the “April Fool”.

In Jerusalem, in the year 30 A. D., the April Fool was our Lord Jesus Christ.

The New Testament describes it. [Matthew 27:27-31; Mark 15:16-20; John 19:2-5] The history of the practice is presented by Sir James Frazier in his famous work, *The Golden Bough*.

The *Aztec Sacrifice*

When the Spanish conquistadors arrived in Mexico, they were shocked at what they found. And they sent reports back to Spain saying that the Devil had taught the Aztecs a parody of the Mass.

Each year in the spring, a man would be chosen for a terrible honor. For an entire year, he would be treated like a king. He would be surrounded with beautiful maidens and enjoy great luxury. But when the next spring came, they would take him up on top of one of their pyramids and cut out his heart while it was still beating.

The priests would then eat his flesh and drink his blood. And at each street intersection, they would set up altars and serve the people bread and wine. They told the people it was their share of the body and blood of their slain god.

Life

One day in 1970, in the Mexican state of Morelos, there was a bullfight. The young matador was not very skillful. He was gored and carried out of the arena. Soon he came back into the ring and was gored a second time and carried out. Finally, the third time he came back in and killed the bull.

He was weak and did not do it very well. But he showed great courage, and the crowd was enthusiastic.

That evening in the town, an American couple who had been at the bullfight was dining at a restaurant. The woman was outraged at what had been done to the bull. She was lamenting such inhumane cruelty.

And all the time, she was eating a large beef steak. It was cooked rare, and it was swimming in blood. And she was completely oblivious as to how it got there on her plate.

If I am going to go on living, something is going to have to die. Chicken does not come in

cellophane, but in feathers.

The chicken I had for supper the other night was dead, but after I ate it, its protoplasm was turned into me. Thus that chicken lives on in me.

THE FULFILLMENT OF ALL SACRIFICES

In the Holy Eucharist *every* sacrifice is represented and, in fact, fulfilled. For instance, it is:

The Sacrifice of the *First-fruits*: St. Paul calls Jesus “the first-fruits of them that slept”. [I Cor. 15:20]

The *Sin-offering* and the *Substitute Lamb*: In the Eucharist we sing, “O Lamb of God that takest away the sins of the world . . .” [1979 BCP, p. 336].

The *Covenant sacrifice*: “Drink ye all of this; for this is my blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for you and for many, for the remission of sins” [BCP, p. 342].

The *Totem sacrifice*: We feed on the body and blood of the slain God and receive His virtue, His spiritual life. [John 6:51-56]

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The Book of Revelation is St. John’s account of the vision of Heaven which he received while he was “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day” on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea.

That vision is expressed in terms of the Holy Eucharist as it was celebrated at Easter, complete with those who have just been baptized:

God the Father, seated on the throne, is the celebrant – the bishop.

God the Son is the Deacon, – “the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world,” – and He alone is worthy to open the book and read the Gospel.

Four and twenty elders (the presbyters) sit on either side of the Celebrant.

The sea of glass is the pool of water in the middle of the atrium.

Those dressed in white by the sea of glass are the newly baptized - the martyrs.

The vision breaks at the invitation to Communion: “The Spirit and the Bride say ‘come’; let him that is athirst come, drink freely of the water of life.” And Heaven and earth are mingled.

If we have done our part in the Eucharist on earth, we should be right at home in Heaven.

THE REAL PRESENCE

In what sense does the Bread and Wine become the Body and Blood of Christ?

No orthodox theologian ever taught that there was a *physical* or *chemical* change in the bread and wine. Nor does the Church say that Jesus comes down and squeezes himself into the wafer.

Nor does the Church teach that because Jesus is present on one altar, his being there prevents him from being anywhere else at the same time.

It is not so much that God comes down and gets into the Bread and Wine, as it is that the Bread and Wine are taken up into Heaven. He is not located on the altar as much as what is on the altar is united to Him.

Remember a person is (in a real sense) where his mind is, because he is a spiritual as well as a physical being. So we say things like, “Sorry, teacher, I was a thousand miles away.”

A *purely* spiritual being — an angel — is *precisely* where he thinks. An angel is a self-conscious thought in the mind of God. And therefore he does not take up space. Thus, an infinite number of angels can “dance on the point of a needle.”

God is present in the sacrament in this way. He uses the Bread and Wine as the instrument through which He makes Himself present historically — in time and space

TRANSUBSTANTIATION

The doctrine of *transubstantiation* is one way of understanding what the dogma of the Real Presence means. It assumes Aristotle’s way of looking at things. It goes something like this:

How many legs does *a* table have? What color is it? What is it made of?

It can have any number of legs; it can be any color; it can be made of any material. These physical and chemical properties are incidental to “tableness.” Theologians call these incidental qualities *accidents*.

On the other hand, the “tableness” of a particular table is its *substance* — “that which stands under”. The idea of substance is related to “understanding”.

Substance (in this technical sense) gets changed when the use to which we put something is changed.

For example, if we take a door down from its hinges and lay it across a ditch and use it to walk across the ditch, it has become a bridge. Its substance has changed and so has our understanding of it.

The Doctrine of Transubstantiation says that it is the substance of the Bread and Wine which is changed, not the accidents.

God uses ordinary bread and wine to nourish us naturally. He uses the consecrated Bread and

Wine for the additional purpose of giving Himself to us and being with us – nourishing us spiritually.

It is the action of Jesus, the I AM, which changes the use to which the elements are put. On our own we could not make that change. Only he could do it. So it is the change in *His* understanding that accomplishes the change in their substance.

And he has told us how he understands the bread and wine of the Eucharist when He said, “This is my body...This is my Blood...”

CONCLUSION

The Eucharist is efficacious. It is not merely a symbol. It is a sign which accomplishes that which it signifies - just as a dollar bill is not merely a symbol. A dollar bill is efficacious; it will spend!

I am now going to read to you what has become accepted as one of the great, classic presentations of what the Eucharist means. It comes from a book by a Benedictine Monk of the Church of England, Dom Gregory Dix. The book is called *The Shape of the Liturgy*. It was published in London by Dacre Press, Adam and Charles Black. This is from the 1964 printing. I will read pages 744-5.

“THROUGHOUT ALL AGES, WORLD WITHOUT END”

Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacle of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the Parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia; for a village headman much tempted to return to fetich because the yams had failed; because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna; for the repentance of Margaret; for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman; for Captain so-and-so wounded and prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously, for the canonisation of S. Joan of Arc—one could fill many pages with the reasons why men have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unflinchingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to *make the plebs sancta Dei*—the holy common people of God.

To those who know a little of Christian history probably the most moving of all the reflections it brings is not the thought of the great events and the well-remembered saints, but of those innumerable millions of entirely obscure faithful men and women, every one with his or

her own individual hopes and fears and joys and sorrows and loves—and sins and temptations and prayers—once every whit as vivid and alive as mine are now. They have left no slightest trace in this world, not even a name, but have passed to God utterly forgotten by men. Yet each of them once believed and prayed as I believe and pray, and found it hard and grew slack and sinned and repented and fell again. Each of them worshipped at the Eucharist, and found their thoughts wandering and tried again, and felt heavy and unresponsive and yet knew—just as really and pathetically as I do these things. There is a little ill-spelled ill-carved rustic epitaph of the fourth century from Asia Minor:—‘Here sleeps the blessed Chione, who has found Jerusalem for she prayed much.’ Not another word is known of Chione, some peasant woman who lived in that vanished world of Christian Anatolia. But how lovely if all that should survive after sixteen centuries were that one had prayed much, so that the neighbours who saw all one’s life were sure one must have found Jerusalem! What did the Sunday Eucharist in her village church every week for a life-time mean to the blessed Chione—and to the millions like her then, and every year since? The sheer stupendous *quantity* of the love of God which this ever repeated action has drawn from the obscure Christian multitudes through the centuries is in itself an overwhelming thought. (All that going with one to the altar every morning!)

It is because it became embedded deep down in the life of the Christian peoples, colouring all the *via vitae* of the ordinary man and woman, marking its personal turning-points, marriage, sickness, death and the rest, running through it year by year with the feasts and fasts and the rhythm of the Sundays, that the eucharistic action became inextricably woven into the public history of the Western world. The thought of it is inseparable from its great turning-points also. Pope Leo doing this in the morning before he went out to daunt Attila, on the day that saw the continuity of Europe saved; and another Leo doing this three and a half centuries later when he crowned Charlemagne Roman Emperor, on the day that saw that continuity fulfilled. Or again Alfred wandering defeated by the Danes staying his soul on this, while mediaeval England struggled to be born; and Charles I also, on that morning of his execution when mediaeval England came to its final end. Such things strike the mind with their suggestions of a certain timelessness about the eucharistic action and an independence of its setting, in keeping with the stability in an ever-changing world of the forms of the liturgy themselves. At Constantinople

they ‘do this’ yet with the identical words and gestures that they used while the silver trumpets of the Basileus still called across the Bosphorus, in what seems to us now the strange fairy-tale land of the Byzantine empire. In this twentieth century Charles de Foucauld in his hermitage in the Sahara ‘did this’ with the same rite as Cuthbert twelve centuries before in his hermitage on Lindisfarne in the Northern seas. This very morning I did this with a set of texts which has not changed by more than a few syllables since Augustine used those very words at Canterbury on the third Sunday of Easter in the summer after he landed. Yet ‘this’ can still take hold of a man’s life and work with it.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Are you intimate with Jesus?

If not, do you want to be intimate with Jesus?

Can you think of anything more intimate than the mingling of his living flesh and blood with yours?

Can you think of any more powerful way of his assuring you that his Spirit is within you to change you?

Could you imagine trying to live without the Holy Eucharist?

Note:

The April Fool in the Gospel according to St. Matthew [27:27–31]

“Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the praetorium, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe upon him, and plaiting a crown of thorns they put it on his head, and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him they mocked him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” And they spat upon him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe, and put his own clothes on him, and led him away to crucify him.”