REFLECTION ON THE EUCHARIST

The manner in which we are to understand the Eucharist and its institution by Jesus has been a source of contention in the Church, especially since the time of the Reformation. Opinions regarding the degree of Christ's presence in the symbols have varied from the extremely sensual 'objective' views of Roman Catholic piety to the very 'subjective' views of certain Protestant groups which place so much emphasis upon the condition of the individual 'heart' as to practically empty the symbols of all meaning.

Much of the difficulty arises from misunderstanding of the word 'remember' (Heb. zakar) as it is used in Scripture. The modern notion of 'remembering' as an individual mental exercise is such a small part of the broader Hebrew conception that one may conclude, for all practical purposes, that the two are actually alien. 'Remembering' in Hebrew language and practice transcends the objective/subjective distinction, and is best described as 'communal' in the sense that it delineates a phenomenon which is complete only if considered in both its objective and subjective aspects. It is closely related to the biblical idea of the name.[1] In Hebrew usage a 'name' is used in a 'remembrance' or 'memorial' sense, an objective reality containing the substance or personality of the event or person named. It is for this reason that Yahweh (Ex. 3: 13, 14) refuses to give Moses his name but instead refers to himself as 'I am', the unpronounced name of Yahweh being a play on the Hebrew verb 'to be' (hayah).[3] But if God refuses to give a personal memorial by way of a name in order to guard his elusive transcendence, he displays an opposite inclination but the same potency of this pattern by ordering the remembrance of his action in delivering his people from Egypt. Israel is commanded at the institution of the Passover to 'keep this day as a day of remembrance', to 'make it a pilgrim-feast, a festival of the Lord', and to 'keep it generation after generation as a rule for all time' (Ex. 12: 14). The memorial of the Passover consists of the objective, dramatic acts by which the salvific action of the deliverance from Egypt and the creation of the Israelite nation is made present to those who celebrate it.

It is in this context that Jesus speaks the words 'do this as a memorial of me' (I Cor. 11: 24). As A. G. Hebert observes: 'He was assuredly not planning merely to keep before his disciples' minds that which they could anyhow never forget; it was to be a

"concrete remembering", a bringing back out of the past into the present. . . . The sacrifice offered once for all and unrepeatable, would be continually renewed and become newly present, '[3]

In biblical usage the relative authority of the person remembering determines the weight carried by the memorial.[4] Basic to this teaching is the fact that only what God remembers is ultimately memorable. When the Psalmist prays:

> Remember, Lord, thy tender care and thy
> love unfailing, shown from ages past.
> Do not remember the sins and offences
> of my youth,
> but remember in thy unfailing love (Ps. 25: 6, 7),

he is asking God to actually hold him in his divine perception, knowing that whatever God remembers will remain forever in existence. It is in this sense that the criminal on the cross beside Jesus recognises his authority: 'Jesus, remember me when you come to your throne' (Luke 23: 42, 43). This is no request for a sentimental conditioning of Jesus' heart, but a plea to be concretely included in the objective reality of the kingdom in which Jesus is the king. And Jesus states the gracious promise that he endorses with his life: "I tell you this: today you shall be with me in paradise.'

The Eucharistic Memorial is not an accident of salvation, but is an essential part of the nature and activity of God. We must not be misled by a faulty dualism which would suggest that physical signs are simply concessions to our carnal nature[5] considered physically. When we think of Jesus Christ as either the Word become flesh or in the credal sense of a hypostatic union of the two natures, we must perceive the physical as uninterruptedly and eternally expressive of the spiritual.[6] A duality or disharmony does exist between God and his creation on the ethical level, but this has nothing to do with our creaturely, physical existence per se. There is nothing inherently evil in creatureliness, as Genesis 1 affirms. On the contrary, John 1 points to the fact that the order of creation in the Word and its fulfilment Jesus Christ exists eternally, reflecting the creative self-sufficiency of God.

Both the Son (Word) and Spirit, although proceeding from the Father and divine in nature, are also of the 'stuff' of creation, in the sense that they reflect the Father but at the same time both bring the creation into being and include it in their activity. As St John writes: 'So the Word became flesh; he came to dwell among us, and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth' (1: 14). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews describes the Son as the one 'through whom he created all

orders of existence' and the 'effulgence of God's splendour and power' (1: 2, 3), the point being that the Spirit and the Son, though God, are (unlike the Father) inseparable from the creation they create and use. They are not authors of sin, but any attempt to separate them from creation itself is as futile as trying to figure out where God ends and man begins in Jesus Christ. One must be suspicious, if the teaching of Christ and the Apostles is any guide, that the question is irrelevant. Of much greater concern is the line dividing love from sin, or the divine creativity from the universality of death.

The picture of God we have thus received is that of a completely self-fulfilled, uncontingent being, who because of his very expansive, life-giving nature expresses his 'self-satisfaction', as it were, in communion with his Spirit and Son. We could speak of this nature as the 'eros' of God, described in Scripture as 'agape' to distinguish it from human self-love which, apart from God, is parasitic and destructive. The agape or unique 'eros' of God is a self-emptying love because of God's innate completeness. This self-love finds expression in a Spirit and a Son who are both one with the Father but distinct in the sense that unity with one such as God supports identity. The power of God's agape does not swallow up but rather sustains individuality.

This inner communion of the Divine Family, the paradoxical motion of loving embrace and liberating expansion, quite appropriately issues in the Incarnation, the 'new creation', the Jesus Christ 'event'. The descent into hell described in the Apostles' Creed is the ultimate outward pulsation of the divine love into the farthest reaches of chaos. The activity from Resurrection through Glorification is the drawing-together-again into wholeness of this new exploration into lostness. The pattern established is that of completeness reaching out to gather in to itself. Through the impact of the Son made present and recognised by the power of the Holy Spirit the creation is being transformed and drawn into the inner life of the Trinity.

Thus when Jesus commands his disciples to do 'this' at the institution of the Eucharist, he is enjoining participation in a divine pattern already in motion. 'This' refers to the whole Eucharistic action: taking bread, blessing it, offering thanks, breaking it, giving it[7] (Matt. 26: 26-29). As in the first creation God reached into this world to create an image of himself, and in the second used Mary to restore it, so Jesus *takes* bread and wine to reflect himself, this new creation. These elements are *transformed* and *offered* to the Father as part of the constant harmonious action of thanksgiving offered by the image eternally rejoicing in his source. But this offering of love means sacrifice as long as sin

remains. The *broken* body and shed blood of Christ will be the result of this love offered to the Father for it is offered (and thus shared) in the midst of a fallen creation. At the moment of breaking comes *giving,* divine self-offering to the cruelly confused appetite of a hungry world. But the devouring brings life. The world is drawn into the pattern at the giving and giving becomes taking again. Darkness becomes light. The light shines on. That which is taken is offered to the Father and is in turn reintroduced into the world. In this way the expansion of the divine image or memorial is transforming chaos and evil is being overcome with good.

The genius of God in both Christ and the Eucharist is that they are events, which create and save without violating the integrity of man's humanity. God wins, he does not compel. Though his winning is sometimes spectacular (e.g. the conversion of St Paul) and his activity intense beyond our imagining, his power never departs from his own harmonious inner life. There is no coercion. Oneness is never affirmed at the expense of individuality. God is simply there, generating health of eternal dimension to those who participate in the mystery of his Memorial, the God-Man, Jesus Christ.

For the content of the Eucharist, in view of the biblical understanding of memorial, we must take the words of Jesus literally. The Eucharist is Christ himself — moving through time, gathering to himself all prior divine activity and incorporating into the Family of God (divinising) all whom he draws to himself. The Eucharist therefore contains the entirety of salvation, the fullness of God and (eschatologically) the fulfilled universe. In this sense everything from the offering of Christ to his Father, through the Incarnation, to the simplest act of kindness, as far as the ultimate sanctification of the cosmos, is united in the harmony of God's Eucharistic Memorial.

This unity of divine revelation is expressed biblically in the use of the term 'Word' (Heb. dabar; Gk. logos) of God. 'Word', while indicating verbal communication, can also mean 'matter, affair, event, thing'.[8] A word in Hebrew is not an abstraction but is considered to carry an inherent power of its own. Thus in Christ, when the 'Word became flesh', all occasions of this 'Word' or all acts which God had performed became fulfilled in him and were shown to be properly his.

When Christ, through his Eucharist, shares himself with us, he is taking us and all Godly things into the life that is his in the communion of the Holy Trinity. His liturgy in the Holy Spirit with the Father becomes our liturgy. With him and through him we adore the glory of God in his mighty acts fulfilled in the

Son. We confess to our Father, with Christ, the burden of evil and death that weighs heavily upon us and hold it up with him in his death for the healing power of God's forgiveness. In the Eucharist we see the personification of God's forgiveness, irrefutable in the Risen Christ. In him we make the constant prayer for the abundance of grace that is of God's nature to give. In him we rejoice in the life of the Old Covenant and respond united with the people of Israel in their Psalms. We are directed to Christ by the Holy Apostles and hear and see him in his Gospel ministry. The contemporary Apostolic Ministry sacramentally presents Christ as he is transforming the world today and particularises the significance of the modern presence verbally. In the Eucharist we take hold of Christ, are known and know him bodily, as he offers and is offered to the Father for ever-closer communion in the Holy Trinity. We offer with Christ all the good things from God in which we rejoice. We hold up the world in its need in a way which Max Thurian compares to 'an exposure to the sun's rays';[9] and we offer our dead, acknowledging our total dependence on the Father's mercy, and confessing the eternal unity of the saints assured by the resurrection of his Son. In short, in the Eucharist we are led into the beauty and depth of everything which God has remembered, everything that is alive with the life of his eternal Memorial, Jesus Christ.

But the Eucharistic Memorial does not end with the formal liturgy of the Church. It is carried in our flesh and blood to the everyday encounters of the world. As God's love is by nature overflowing, so we, fed by that love, live it in the midst of a discordant creation, exulting in salvation and dying with Christ daily. Wherever God, by the Holy Spirit, is present, there also is his Eucharistic Memorial, his name, Jesus Christ.

Thus the Lord's Supper is not only a memorial of past events but in fact draws us forward as the memorial of the ascended Christ whose resurrection and glorification has placed him as our 'living hope' (I Pet. 1: 3), the 'living hypothesis' of all things human. The Incarnation has eliminated death as man's ultimate future and in death's place is Jesus Christ, risen for all time. Sin, the image of death, has been replaced by the Eucharist, the sacrament of eternal life, through which Christ is perfecting the creation. The ultimate joy of God in his creation will be fulfilled through his Son when the whole of creation is drawn into the life of the Holy Trinity. Thus the creation will become the perfect image of the Father, one in Christ, yet with all the beauty of diversity made possible by the divine agape.

This consideration of the Eucharist clearly endorses the principle of Christ's real presence in the bread and wine and the

bread and wine's real presence in him. To deny this possibility is to deny the Incarnation. Unfortunately certain Protestant groups, by down-playing the real presence, are inadvertently aligning themselves with Judaism and even with Islam by considering the union of God with his creation as scandalous. As Thurian comments, this view makes the memorial 'no more than a symbolic performance, which may be moving but would have no ontological reality'.[10] John Calvin, though he unequivocally affirms the real presence,[11] tends to place undue emphasis upon the division between creator and creation: 'We must confess, then, that if the representation which God gives us in the Supper is true, the internal substance of the sacrament is *conjoined with* the visible signs'.[12] (Italics mine.) This placing of the substance 'side by side' with the bread and wine would force Calvin to replace the words in John 1, 'the word became flesh', with 'the Word became conjoined with flesh', but this problem is not original to Calvin. Pope Leo the Great (440-61), in a letter to Flavius, Patriarch of Constantinople, later adopted by the Council of Chalcedon (451), writes concerning the two natures of Christ: 'For, as God, he suffers no change because of his condescension, nor as man, is he absorbed by the divine dignity; for each nature performs the functions proper to itself, yet *in conjunction* with the other nature.'[13] The Protestant result of this kind of divine-human distinction has been a belief that nothing in the creation has really changed. God has not crossed the line. Thus biblical expressions such as 'transform', or 'new creation' or 'born again' are rendered illusory since they indicate nothing in the real world as we know it.

On the Roman Catholic side it would appear that the doctrine of transubstantiation has gone too far in the other direction. Where the Reformation attempts to affirm the transcendence of God and ends up leaving the bread and wine virtually untouched by Christ in any ontological way, the Roman Church has emphasised the immanence and ontological presence of Christ to the point of annihilating the symbols of bread and wine. This distorts the effect of human contact with the divine. God, by his presence, does not annihilate his creation, he redeems it.

The Eucharist, like its substance Jesus Christ, is a mysterious, paradoxical, ethical, transference of the divine being.

It is mysterious in the sense that it cannot be grasped by sinful man, nor will it be known until the final fulfilment of the creation. It will always be God's memorial, his name, knowing rather than being known. Here an understanding of the Hebrew concept of knowing is essential.[14] For the Hebrews knowledge did not consist of abstract principles nor was it conceived as apart

from events. Knowledge involved the whole person in the apprehension of existential reality. To know God, or be known by him, is to encounter him in action. The sexual sense of 'knowing' (e.g. Gen. 1: 4) conveys the blatantly physical nature of this knowledge. In biblical usage there is no knowledge without involvement, and thus we cannot know Christ (or his Eucharist) fully until we have been fully known by him.

This imperfect knowledge on our part leaves us with a paradox. How can the Eucharist be bread and wine and the body and blood of Christ simultaneously? One possible solution can be found in the fact that Jesus often speaks eschatologically. When he says 'this is my body' and 'this is my blood' he is pointing to the day of final fulfilment when all things will be one with him. The paradox only exists now because a future transcendent reality has been transported into the present. In the perfected cosmos to which we are being drawn there will be no paradox. The oneness of bread and body, creature and creator, though experienced by us now, will only be known by us fully at some future date when we are more fully known. Another approach to the apparent paradox lies in the perception of God as one being in three persons, unity in diversity. We tend to see things as either one or diverse, unity at the expense of diversity, or individuality at the expense of oneness (no doubt because the correct relationship with God has been fractured). The plight of man seems either to be smothered or to be lonely! The nature of the Eucharist, however, is based on the fact that in God unity and plurality are requisites of each other, and reflections of the divine agape. A paradox exists in the Eucharist only if necessitated by philosophical presuppositions which fail to take the mystery of the Holy Trinity into account.

The Eucharist is also ethical in the sense that it is structured and bears a certain relationship to other structures. We cannot make it into whatever we wish it to be. It is Christ's and, as the Reformers were wont to insist, it must exist in a certain structural and historical relation to him. The sacramental presence only exist in those things structurally or ethically consistent with divine revelation. It is the Holy Spirit working through — Scripture and Tradition in the Church who affirms and testifies to this structural unity.

Nevertheless, God is ontologically present in the creation. We must not minimise the scandal of the Incarnation. When the Pharisees accused Jesus of blasphemy they were well aware that in Jesus there was something radically new. God *has* become man and the world is being conformed to this image. The Eucharist is the keystone of this contemporary presence.

Most conflicts in the Western Church revolve around the issue

of the Eucharist, the manner in which God is present to the creation, and can be traced to the initial mystery of the God-Man Jesus Christ. The issues of Papal infallibility and primacy, Apostolic succession, orders, the relation of Church and state, the nature of the Church, the intercession of the saints, the significance of statues and icons, the importance of the proclaimed 'Word' — questions of how and where God is present to his creation, all return to the mystery of the Incarnation via the Eucharist. Ironically, it will be Jesus Christ in his Eucharist who will bring resolution.

NOTES

1. A. G. Herbert, 'Memory', *A Theological Word Book of the Bible,* ed. Alan Richardson (London: S.C.M. Press, 1957), p. 142.
2. G. H. Parke-Taylor, *Yahweh: The Divine Name in the Bible* (Waterloo, Ontario: W.L.P. Press, 1975), pp. 46-62.
3. Hebert, op. cit., p. 143.
4. Ibid.
5. 'Because we are carnal, they [the sacraments] are exhibited under carnal objects'. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), II, p. 495 (IV.14.5).
6. H. J. Wotherspoon, *Religious Values in the Sacraments* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), p. 20, states of the sacraments: 'they are the harmonious incidents of an economic system within a concatenated universe, in which the material is uninterruptedly expressive of the spiritual, and is the peculiar instrument of God for spiritual ends'.
7. Max Thurian, *The Eucharistic Memorial,* trans. J. G. Davies (London: Lutterworth Press, 1961), II, p. 34.
8. J. Y. Campbell, 'Word', *Wordbook,* op. cit., p. 284.
9. Thurian, op. cit., I, p. 59.
10. Ibid., II, p. 108.
11. John Calvin, *Tracts,* trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), II, p. 170.
12. Ibid., p. 172.
13. *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation,* trans. J. F. Clarkson and others (London: B. Herder, 1955), p. 171.
14. E. C. Blackman, 'Know' *Wordbook,* op. cit., p. 121.

DAVID J. C. COOPER, Toronto