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The Eucharist in the Writings of the Fathers of the Church

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Abstract

Christianity, a religious minority group in the Roman Empire, had to often bear the brunt of false accusations and harsh persecutions. Rumours were spread that when Christians came together for worship they practised cannibalism and were involved in immoral activities. This is the context of the apologetic writings of the patristic fathers in defence of the Eucharist. The patristic writings, in general, tended to be more pastoral than dogmatic. And in the writings on the Eucharist, the Fathers gave more importance to what happened and should happen to a Christian who received Jesus Christ in the Eucharist than to the Eucharistic bread and wine. This is their strength.

Keywords

John Chrysostom, Pliny the Younger, Didache, Fathers of the Church, Cyril of Jerusalem, Ignatius of Antioch, Gregory of Nyssa

During the patristic age the Eucharist continued to play a vital role in the life of the Christian community. Sometimes people of other faiths looked at the gathering of Christians for Eucharistic celebrations with suspicion. For some of them Christian gatherings for worship brought back memories of the religious gathering of the Bacchanals, who were suppressed in 186 BC because of alleged immoralities. Rumours were spread that when Christians

came together for worship they practised cannibalism and were involved in immoral activities.¹

An Outsider's View

Christianity, a religious minority group in the Roman Empire, had to often bear the brunt of false accusations and harsh persecutions. Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia, was forced by circumstances² to take stringent action against the Christian community under his control. He questioned their belief system and sought reasons to punish them, but could not find any. In his Letter to Emperor Trajan he writes the information he picked up during the interrogation of two deaconesses. This document about the Christian way of worship, from a non-sympathetic if not a hostile person, portrays to us in vivid terms how the Eucharistic celebration was held during the early patristic period. From his findings Pliny wrote that the Christians “used to come together on a certain day before daylight to sing a song with responses to Christ as God, to bind themselves mutually by a solemn oath not to commit any crime, to avoid theft, robbery, adultery, not to break a trust or deny a deposit when they are called for it. After these practices it was their custom to separate and then come together again to take food but an ordinary and harmless kind.”³ This letter, written about 112 AD by a Roman governor, gives us some idea of how the Eucharist was celebrated by the Christians during the beginnings of the patristic age and how the celebration was interconnected with the way they lived. Of course the account filters the reality through the perceptions of the two anonymous deaconesses and Pliny's own understanding of their testimony and what he wanted to report to the Emperor.

Mentioned in Passing

A. The Eucharist had a bearing on the life of Christians. And the Fathers of the Church wrote on the Eucharist highlighting its effects on the Christians and the challenges it brought to the way they lived their lives. But it is to be noted that they wrote on the Eucharist in passing, in course of their discussion on other issues and themes. A reading of the patristic writings on the

Eucharist available to us makes it clear that “the direct concerns [of the writings] were other than a presentation of a Eucharistic theology,” as James O’Connor observed.⁴ As Sheerin has rightly commented, “The Fathers themselves rarely approached the Eucharist in a wholly comprehensive, synthetic way.”⁵

B. Despite these shortcomings the patristic writings do indeed touch upon all the important elements that go to make Eucharistic theology today. In this paper we shall highlight only a few concerns of the Fathers while they speak about the Eucharist.⁶

As a Suckling Child

Taking part in the Eucharist was considered to be of great importance. What was received there was seen as greater than what any human could achieve because it was God’s own doing. Aware of such a great gift the Fathers invited Christians to take part in the Eucharist with great eagerness and devotion. For example, John Chrysostom urged his fellow Christians to receive the Eucharist with great eagerness of a child sucking at her mother’s breast:

He nourishes by Himself, and putteth not out to another; by this also persuading thee again, that He had taken thy flesh. Let us not then be remiss, having been counted worthy of so much both of love and honour. See ye not the infants with how much eagerness they lay hold of the breast? With what earnest desire they fix their lips upon the nipple? With the like let us also approach this Table, and the nipple of the spiritual cup. Or rather, with much more eagerness let us, as infants at the breast, draw out the grace of the Spirit, let it be our one sorrow, not to partake of this Food. The works set before us are not of [hu] man’s power. He that then did these things at that Supper, this same now also works them.⁷

Partaking of Divine Nature

The Fathers wrote often about what the Christians stood to gain when they received the Lord in the Eucharist. The transformation the human persons underwent was of great concern to them. One finds an example of this concern in the five catechetical sermons belonging to the late fourth and early fifth centuries and attributed by many scholars to Cyril of Jerusalem. In these sermons which seem to have been given to the recently baptized Christians, the preacher said that through receiving the body and blood of Jesus Christ a Christian took part in the divine nature and became another Christ: “With all confidence we receive this as the Body and Blood of Christ. For in the type [Gk. *typos*] of Bread the Body is given to you, and in the type of wine the Blood is given to you, so that, partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, you may become one Body and one Blood with Christ. And so we become Christ-bearers, when his Body and his Blood have been diffused in our members. Thus, according to the Blessed Peter, we become ‘partakers of the Divine Nature’ (2 Pet 1: 4).”⁸

Medicine of immortality

Ignatius of Antioch considered the Eucharist the medicine of immortality. And so he invited his fellow Christians to break “one Bread which is the medicine of immortality and the antidote against death enabling us to live forever in Jesus Christ.”⁹

Gregory of Nyssa makes this theme of medicine and antidote still more explicit in his writings. He insisted on the necessity of receiving the Eucharist by mentioning that it worked as an antidote in human persons to remove the poisonous evil elements that had entered into their being and equipped them with immortality. He pointed out that the body of Jesus Christ, who through his resurrection had conquered death, was capable of giving immortality to the ones who received it and allowed it to have its effect in their body:

But since the human being is twofold creature, composed of soul and body, it is necessary that the saved should lay hold of the Author of the new life through both their component parts. Accordingly, the soul being fused into Him through faith derives from that the means and occasion of salvation; for the act of union with the life implies a fellowship with the life. But the body comes into fellowship and blending with the Author of our salvation in another way. For as they who owing to some act of treachery have taken poison, allay its deadly influence by means of some other drug ... in like manner we, who have tasted the solvent of our nature, necessarily need something that may combine what has been so dissolved, so that such an antidote entering within us may by its own counter-influence, undo the mischief introduced into the body by poison. What, then, is this remedy to be? Nothing else than that very Body which has been shown to be superior to death, and has been the First-fruits of our life. ... In the manner that ... a little leaven assimilates to itself the whole lump, so in like manner that Body to which immortality has been given it by God, when it is in ours, translates and transmutes the whole into itself.¹⁰

The same theme of the body of human persons becoming immortal because of the intake of the body of the Lord in the Eucharist was also discussed by Irenaeus of Lyons in his controversy with the Gnostics. He held the view that the body is created in the image of God. He insisted on the salvation of the body. According to him the human person is not saved *from* the body as the Gnostics taught, but *in* the body:

Vain in every respect are they who despise the entire dispensation of God, and disallow the salvation of the flesh, and treat with contempt its regeneration, maintaining that it is not capable of incorruption. But if this indeed do not attain salvation, then neither did the Lord redeem us with His Blood, nor is the cup of the Eucharist the communion of his Blood, nor the bread which we break the communion of his Body. For Blood can only come from veins and

flesh, and whatsoever else makes the substance of [hu]man, such as the Word of God was actually made. By his own Blood he redeemed us, as also his Apostle declares: "In whom we have redemption through His blood, even the remission of sins" (Col 1:14) ... and the bread ... he has established as His own Body, from which He gives increase to our bodies.¹¹

In another place Irenaeus expressed a similar thought:

Again, how can they [the Gnostics] say that the flesh, which is nourished with the body of the Lord and with His blood, goes to corruption and does not partake of life? ... But our opinion is in accordance with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn establishes our opinion.... For as the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly; so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible,¹² having the hope of the resurrection to eternity.

Union among Christians

A theme prevalent among many Fathers with regard to the Eucharist is the union among the Christians – the union already present and yet to be achieved. The very preparation that went to make the bread for the Eucharist is cited as an example of many becoming one, thus inviting the Christians to remain united:

That Bread which you see on the altar, consecrated by the word of God, is the Body of Christ. That chalice, or rather, what the chalice holds, consecrated by the word of God, is the Blood of Christ. Through those accidents the Lord wished to entrust to us His Body and Blood which he poured out for the remission of sins. If you have received worthily, you are what you received for the Apostle says: 'The bread is one; we though many, are one body.' So, by bread you are instructed as to how you ought to cherish unity. Was that bread made of one grain of wheat? Were there not, rather, many grains? However, before they be-

came bread, these grains were separate; they were joined together in water after a certain amount of crushing. For, unless the grain is ground and moistened with water,¹³ it cannot arrive at that form which is called bread.

Lack of unity among the participants was condemned as defiling the Eucharistic sacrifice. In one of the earliest writings of the Apostolic Fathers the author of Didache gave expression to that view in his instruction to the Christians. He wrote: "And on the Lord's day, after you have come together, break bread and offer the Eucharist, having first confessed your offences, so that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one who has a quarrel with his neighbour join you until he is reconciled, lest your sacrifice be defiled."¹⁴

In his desire to keep his people together, another writer belonging to the group of Apostolic Fathers, Ignatius of Antioch, beleaguered with the problem of a persecuted Church and internal dissensions, invited the Christian community to celebrate the Eucharist as a sign of unity: "Be zealous, then, in the observance of one Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and one chalice that brings union is His blood. There is one altar, as there is one bishop with the priests and deacons and my fellow workers."¹⁵

Eucharist and Equality

In his homilies on the Gospel of John, St John Chrysostom explained the greed and avarice of the rich as the origin of social inequalities and citing the participation in the one chalice during the Eucharist he challenged his Christians to individual and social transformation:

God hath given to us but one habitation, this earth, hath distributed all things equally. hath lighted one sun for us all, hath spread above us one roof, the sky, made one table, the earth, bear food for us. And another table [the Eucharist] hath He given far better than this, yet that too is one, (those who share our

mysteries understand my words,) one manner of Birth He hath bestowed on all, the spiritual, we all have one country, that in the heavens, of the same cup drink we all. He hath not bestowed on the rich man a gift more abundant and more honourable, and on the poor one more mean and small, but He hath called all alike. He hath given carnal things with equal regard to all, and spiritual in like manner. Whence then proceeds the great inequality of conditions in life? From the avarice and pride of the wealthy. But let not, brethren, let not this any longer be; and when matters of universal interest and more pressing necessity bring us together, let us not be divided by things earthly and insignificant: I mean, by wealth and poverty, by bodily relationship, by enmity and friendship; for all these things are a shadow, nay less substantial than a shadow,¹⁶ to those who possess the bond of charity from above.

Eucharist and Justice

In his reflections on the Eucharist, John Chrysostom the champion of justice and the voice of the poor and the marginalised, brought up once again the issue of equality. He was rightly convinced that liturgy and justice should go together. He compared those who approached the table after being unjust to the orphans and widows to Judas and Simon who suffered condemnation because of their covetousness:

Let no Judas ... then approach this Table, no Simon; nay, for both these perished through covetousness. Let us flee then from this gulf; neither let us account it enough for our salvation, if after we have stripped widows and orphans, we offer for this Table a gold and jewelled cup. Nay, if thou desire to honour the Sacrifice, offer thy soul, for which also It was slain; cause them to become golden; but if that remain worse than lead or potter's clay, while the vessel is of gold, what is the profit?¹⁷

The churches in Constantinople, the capital city of the Roman Empire, would have abounded in gold and silver vessels. They

belonged to a rich church peopled by many elite members of the aristocracy. Rich people would have donated them to the rich. But their archbishop Chrysostom did not set a high score on this show of wealth. He was ruthless in his condemnation of the distortion of things. He said:

The Church is not a gold foundry nor a workshop for silver, but an assembly of Angels. Wherefore it is souls which we require, since in fact God accepts these for the soul's sake. That Table at that time was not of silver, nor that Cup of gold, out of which Christ gave His disciples His own blood; but precious was everything there, and awful, for that they were full of the Spirit.¹⁸

He continued:

God hath no need at all of golden vessels, but of golden souls. And these things I say, not forbidding such offerings to be provided; but requiring you, together with them, and before them, to give alms. For He accepts indeed the former, but much more the latter. For in the one the offerer alone is profited, but in the other the receiver also. Here the act seems to be a ground even of ostentation; but there all is mercifulness, and love to man.¹⁹

Constantinople abounded in wealthy people who had the least concern for the poor. Chrysostom insisted that the Eucharistic celebration should have its consequences on the way a person led his or her life. Christians should have concern for the poor and work for their benefit. Otherwise what they donated to the church is of no value. We listen again to Archbishop Chrysostom:

Wouldst thou do honour to Christ's Body? Neglect Him not when naked; do not, while here thou honourest Him with silken garments, neglect Him perishing without of cold and nakedness. For He that said, *This is My Body*, and by His word confirmed the fact, This Same said, *Ye saw Me an hungered, and fed Me not*; and, *Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to Me...*

For what is the profit, when His table indeed is full

of golden cups, but He perishes with hunger? First fill Him, being a hungered, and then abundantly deck out His table also. Dost thou make Him a cup of gold, while thou givest Him not a cup of cold water? And what is the profit? Dost thou furnish His Table with cloths bespangled with gold, while to Himself thou affordest not even the necessary covering? And what good comes of it? For tell me, should you see one at a loss for necessary food, and omit appeasing his hunger, while you first overlaid his table with silver; would he indeed thank thee, and not rather be indignant? What, again, if seeing one wrapped in rags, and stiff with cold, thou shouldst neglect giving him a garment, and build golden columns, saying, "thou wert doing it to his honour," would he not say that thou wert mocking, and account it an insult, and that the most extreme?

Let it then be thy thought with regard to Christ also, when He is going about as a wanderer, and a stranger, needing a roof to cover Him; and thou, neglecting to receive Him, deckest out a pavement, and walls, and capitals of columns, and hangest up silver chains by means of lamps, but Himself bound in prison thou wilt not even look upon.

And these things I say, not forbidding munificence in these matters, but admonishing you to do those other works together with these, or rather even before these. Because for not having done these no one would ever be blamed, but for those, hell is threatened, and unquenchable fire, and the punishment with evil spirits. Do not therefore while adorning His house overlook thy brother in distress, for he is more properly a temple than the other.²⁰

Thus spoke the Fathers! They did not mince words. Down the centuries many reflections have been made on the Eucharist. Still, the writings of the Fathers on the Eucharist challenge us deeply even today. What would they tell us today if they saw not only the poor neglected but also the dalits discriminated against and sometimes even forced into separate places lest they 'corrupt' the dominating caste people? What would they think of the

English-speaking congregations claiming the best timings for their services and leaving the more inconvenient times to the majority congregation who communicate in the local language?

The patristic writings, in general, tended to be more pastoral than dogmatic. And in the writings on the Eucharist the Fathers gave more importance to what happened and should happen to a Christian who received Jesus Christ in the Eucharist than to the Eucharistic bread and wine. This is their strength.

Notes

1. About 200 AD Minicius Felix a Roman lawyer wrote a dialogue in which he mentioned a discussion between a Christian, Octavius and a person of another Faith. To the accusations levelled against the Christians by the non-Christian based on the rumours Octavius explained that the rumours were unfounded. See Minicius Felix, Octavius 9, 6.
2. For details see Leonard Fernando, *Christian Faith Meets Other Faiths: Origen's Contra Celsum and its Relevance for India Today*, Delhi: VIEWS/ISPCK, 1998, pp. 13-22.
3. Pliny the Younger, Letters 10. 96, as cited in Fernando, *Christian Faith Meets Other Faiths*, pp. 15-16.
4. James T. O'Connor, *The Hidden Manna: A Theology Of The Eucharist*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988, p. 4. The author points out that the first full treatise on the Eucharist was written only in the ninth century.
5. Daniel J. Sheerin, *The Eucharist Message of the Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 7, Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1986. p.16.
6. Eucharist as memorial, sacrifice, presence of Christ in the sacrament, etc. found in the writings of the Fathers are not taken up for discussion in this paper.
7. John Chrysostom, Homily on Mathew 82, *Library of Fathers*, Vol. 34, p. 1092.
8. As cited in O'Connor, *The Hidden Manna*, p. 28.
9. Ephesians, 20, *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol 1, New York: Cima Publishing Co., 1947, p. 95.10 Gregory of Nyssa, *Great Catechism*, 37, *A Select Library of The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol 5, Grand Rapids: WM Eerdmans, 1972, pp. 504-505.
11. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, 2 , 2, *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, Vol. 9, Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1869, p. 59.

12. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV, 18 , 5, *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, Vol 5, p. 435
13. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 227, *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 38, p. 196. On St Augustine's short formula on the Eucharist see the Note by G. Gispert-Sauch, "The Eucharist as seen by St. Augustine," *VJTR* 69(2005), pp. 387f.
14. Didache, 14, *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol 1, p. 182.
15. Philadelphia 4, *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol 1, p. 114.
16. John Chrysostom, The Homily on the Gospel of John 15, *Library of Fathers*, Vol. 28, p. 126-27.
17. John Chrysostom, The Homily on the Gospel of Mathew, 50 *Library of Fathers*, Vol 15, p. 684.
18. Ibid., p. 685.
19. Ibid., p. 685.
20. Ibid., p. 685-86.