

The Eucharist

by Thomas Bokenkotter

Recently I spent four weeks in Israel digging with some archaeologists who were uncovering the town of Bethsaida. While there I was able to offer Eucharist on a number of occasions for the Catholics present.

One of the most memorable was at Tabgha, a lovely site on the Sea of Galilee where, according to an old Jewish Christian tradition, Jesus multiplied the loaves and the fishes (Mark 6:35-44).

A mosaic in the pavement of a fifth-century church there depicts the loaves and the fishes. Nearby, close to the altar, is a large piece of rock on which Jesus is supposed to have placed the five loaves and two fishes.

I also visited the Upper Room in Jerusalem that is believed to be the traditional site of the Last Supper. A constant stream of pilgrims moves through the room in silence, many of them prayerfully meditating on what they believe happened there the night before Jesus died.

Our eucharistic tradition has its roots in these two events. Jesus' actions at the Last Supper became the basis for our celebration of the Eucharist. Those actions in turn reflect the earlier miracle of the multiplication of the loaves to feed the crowds.

In this issue of *Scripture From Scratch* we will take a closer look at the biblical accounts of these events, as well as other essential passages about the Eucharist from the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's writings. In doing so, we will come to a deeper understanding of our own celebration of Eucharist.



Bread Blessed, Broken and Given to All

All four of the Gospels include the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. The similarity between this event and the Last Supper is striking. It indicates the early Christians' belief that the multiplication of the loaves was an anticipation of the Eucharist, which in turn anticipates the messianic banquet.

In the Synoptic Gospel accounts of the multiplication we read that Jesus looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to his disciples to give to the crowds (Mark 6:41; Matthew 14:19; Luke 9:16).

These actions—blessing the bread, breaking it and giving it to the disciples—will be repeated by Jesus at the Last Supper, when he will explain the significance of the bread and wine as his body and blood.

In John's Gospel, Jesus doesn't wait until the Last Supper to explain that the bread he gives is himself. In fact, John's most explicit treatment of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist doesn't take place at the Last Supper at all. Instead, John uses his account of the miracle of the loaves to give Jesus' extended sermon on the Bread of Life.

In the sixth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus tells the crowd that he is the living bread come down from heaven. He explains that just as God gave their ancestors manna in the wilderness through Moses, so now he gives them the bread of life.

He goes on to say that the bread he gives for the life of the world "is my flesh." And when some of his listeners object to such an unheard-of idea Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son

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of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you" (6:53). The offense taken by his hearers, many of whom deserted him at this point, stemmed from the plain meaning of his words that excluded any figurative understanding. All attempts to interpret Jesus' words symbolically fail to take in the whole context of the chapter and the practice of the early community.

John's account of this story told in all four Gospels makes clear to us the significance of this event in the development of our eucharistic theology.

'On the Night Before He Died'

Our Eucharist commemorates the Last Supper Jesus celebrated with his disciples. What Jesus said and did that night with the bread and wine forms the basis for the Church's sacrament of the Eucharist. What we know about this gathering comes from two separate traditions.

First we have what is known as the Marcan tradition. This includes primarily Mark's Gospel (hence the name), but it also includes Matthew's Gospel, which follows Mark's interpretation quite closely, with only some slight changes in the wording.

The Lucan tradition includes Luke's Gospel, and his sequel to the Gospel, The Acts of the Apostles. It also includes Paul's account of the Last Supper in his First Letter to the Corinthians.

In spite of some variations, the important thing is that our two independent sources agree that what Jesus did included four things.

He gave thanks over bread and wine. He identified the bread and wine with his body and blood. He gave them the bread to eat and the wine to drink. Finally, he told them that his coming death was for the

forgiveness of sins, and he prefigured that death by breaking the bread and pouring out the wine.

According to Mark 14:12-16, Jesus and his disciples gathered for supper in a room that had been prepared for them. His enemies were encircling their gathering, and the passion is clearly at hand. Whether this

meal was a Passover meal or not is uncertain from the details in Mark's text.

Mark interprets Jesus' actions in the light of the Old Testament sacrifice traditions. Jesus says of the cup, "This is my blood

of the new covenant," a clear allusion to Exodus 24:8.

In that verse Moses takes the blood of the sacrificed oxen and dashes it on the people, saying, "See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words."

Mark's Jesus goes on to say "which is poured out for many," a clear allusion to Isaiah's suffering servant: "Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great and he shall divide the spoil with the strong because he poured out himself in death and was numbered with the transgressors, yet he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12).

Luke, like Mark, sets the Eucharist in the framework of a meal. More clearly than Mark, however, his account follows the basic sequence of the Passover meal, which began with drinking a cup of wine. Then a second cup was prepared and the paterfamilias told the story of the Exodus, after which a second cup was drunk.

The meal proper began with the breaking of the bread and after the meal a third cup would be consumed. In Luke, Jesus takes the cup and says, "This cup is the new



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covenant in my blood." Thus in Luke's reinterpretation of the Passover, Jesus' death becomes the new Exodus—a liberation from sin and the inauguration of a new covenant that constitutes a new people of God.

'I Pass on to You What Was Handed on to Me'

On the basis of these actions, the theology of the Eucharist was developed after Jesus' resurrection. It began with Paul, who taught that the Eucharist was the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20), the meal where the new people of God are nourished by spiritual food for their journey. The meal identifies them as the people of the new covenant (1 Corinthians 11:25).

Paul tells them, "For I received from the Lord what I handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Note here the actions of taking, blessing, breaking and giving the bread. These words have been handed down from that day to this and at each and every Eucharist the priest and people call them to mind once again in the institution narrative of the Eucharistic Prayer.

Paul taught that Jesus is truly and really present in the Eucharist. He made this clear when he took the Corinthians to task for their inappropriate behavior at the Eucharist. Some were starting to eat before all were gathered and some went hungry and some even got drunk. Paul told them

that by consuming the bread unworthily they were guilty of a serious sin insofar as they were "answerable for the body and blood of the Lord" and were "eating and drinking judgment against themselves" (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). The obvious explanation of these words is that Paul identified the bread and wine with Jesus himself.

According to *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, "One cannot argue away the realism of the identity of Christ with the eucharistic food in Paul's teaching, even if he does not explain how this identity is achieved." Later theologians would develop the explanations and understandings that Paul left unsaid.

Paul also taught that the Eucharist makes present the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. He told the Corinthians, "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

In other words, he told them, you make Jesus present in the act of offering himself for us; you are showing forth God's saving love as embodied in his Son's sacrifice.

The Eucharist, then, must be celebrated in the same spirit of love that Jesus showed if it is to be truly a showing forth of God's love. How can it show God's love if you are mean and nasty to your neighbor—getting drunk, gulping down the meal before all are present and so on. In doing so you are "eating the bread and drinking the cup of the Lord unworthily" by not discerning the body of the Lord—not relating lovingly to Christ's body—that is, the members of his body. You are therefore answerable for the body and blood of the Lord.

Finally, Paul brought out the eschatological aspect of the Eucharist, for he held that the proclamation of the Lord's death must continue "until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

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From the very beginning of the Church, the Eucharist formed the center of its life of worship. This is clearly indicated by the Acts of the Apostles. In the second chapter we hear that the 3,000 people baptized by the apostles on Pentecost devoted themselves to "the breaking of the bread," a Lucan term for the Eucharist. To this day, each time we gather for Eucharist, we remember and make present the Lord as Christians have done since Jesus first said, "Do this in remembrance of me."

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