

III  
*he*  
*nd*  
II  
*of*  
*ed*  
*on*

CHAPTER VII

The Eucharist in the  
Apostolic Church



STEPHEN PIMENTEL

In liturgical worship, the Church re-presents the works of God. The greatest of these works revolves around His formation of the covenants by which He restores mankind to communion with Himself. These covenants form the structure of biblical history; and liturgical worship receives its form from God's eternal plan as enacted in that history. Thus, the Church "re-reads and re-lives the great events of salvation history in the 'today' of her liturgy" (*Catechism*, no. 1095). The person and work of the Messiah stand at the very heart of the liturgy as the summation of covenantal history (cf. Eph. 1:9-10), with the Great Amen of the Church ascending to the Father through Him (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20).

The apostles knew that liturgical celebration was central to their mission of extending the kingdom of God. When their preaching of the Gospel was met by intense persecution, they boldly responded, not with force of arms, but with the more powerful force of joyful thanksgiving and worship (cf. Acts 4:23-31). They had been given "power from on high" (Lk. 24:49) to restore the kingdom among mankind, and sacramental celebration was

the chief means of exercising this power. Only through such celebration could the apostles fulfill their mandate to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19).

The Eucharist, in particular, was the wellspring of their proclamation of the kingdom. At the Last Supper, Jesus had promised the apostles that they would “eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Lk. 22:30). This promise is fulfilled sacramentally in the Eucharist, by which the Paschal sacrifice of the Messiah, who now reigns from heaven, is made present on earth. Leading the people of God into the presence of the King, the Eucharist is the Passover of the New Covenant.

### The New Passover

In the Acts of the Apostles, the Eucharist is referred to as the “breaking of the bread.” Jesus had broken bread during the Last Supper, declaring it to be “my body which is given for you” (Lk. 22:19). Likewise, He had declared the cup to be “the new covenant in my blood.” In other words, His Blood is “poured out” (Lk. 22:20) to seal the New Covenant, within which the Father adopts the baptized as His sons and daughters. The Son, the Paschal Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7) whose Blood effects redemption (1 Pet. 1:18–19), is thus the covenantal mediator between the Father and men (1 Tim. 2:5; cf. Heb. 9:14–15, 12:24).

Jesus deliberately chose the Passover as the time for the Last Supper (Lk. 22:15). The Passover commemorated the Exodus, through which God brought Israel back into covenant with Himself. Later, when the covenant was violated by idolatry, the prophets foretold a new exodus by which the Messiah would bring restoration in a new covenant (cf. Is. 52:2–6, 11–13; Jer. 31:31–32). Jesus’ words at the Last Supper defined the Eucharist as the New Passover, celebrated to commemorate the New Exodus that inaugurated the New Covenant.

Jesus, “on the first day of the week” (Lk. 24:1), celebrated the Eucharist (the first Eucharist after the Last Supper) with two

disciples in the village of Emmaus (Lk. 24:13, 28, 30). Hereafter, in commemoration of the Resurrection, the “first day of the week” would be a privileged time for the celebration of the Eucharist. When referring to this day (cf. Acts 20:7), Luke employs an unusual Semitism when he writes “*te de mia ton sabbaton*” (literally “on [day] one of the week”), using the cardinal *mia* (one) rather than the ordinal *prote* (first). In so doing, he follows the Septuagint’s literal rendering of Genesis 1:5. This manner of expression calls to mind the creation account of Genesis 1 and points to the Eucharist as a new creation.<sup>1</sup>

Before celebrating the Eucharist with the two disciples at Emmaus, Jesus explained to them how His Paschal sacrifice has fulfilled “all the Scriptures” (Lk. 24:26–27). The Scriptures form a dramatic narrative of which the mission of Christ is the climax. The disciples, however, are only able to grasp this fulfillment “in the breaking of the bread” (Lk. 24:35). The Scriptures and Communion—Liturgy of the Word and Liturgy of the Eucharist—must go together to be understood, and both are to be spread “to all nations” (Lk. 24:47).

### The Breaking of the Bread

In his depiction of the apostolic Church in Jerusalem, Luke describes the disciples as “devot[ing] themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Fellowship, or communion (*koinonia*), can be defined as “participation in the Mystical Body of Christ through the sacramental Body of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Hence, fellowship and “the breaking of bread” are inseparably linked (cf. 1 Cor. 10:16–17). Communion is brought about within the Church through Christ’s Eucharistic presence. The Church rejoices in His presence through “the prayers,” which consist of a liturgical service centered on the

<sup>1</sup> Eugene LaVerdiere, *The Breaking of the Bread: The Development of the Eucharist According to Acts* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998), 94–95.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Pimentel, *Witnesses of the Messiah: On the Acts of the Apostles 1–15* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2002), 50.

communal reading of Scripture and recitation of psalms, in the manner of the Liturgy of Hours.

As time went on, the disciples continued to obey Jesus' command at the Last Supper (Lk. 22:19) by "breaking bread" as He had taught them (Acts 2:46). They faithfully attended to the Eucharist "day by day," just as the Israelites, who ate "bread from heaven" in the wilderness, gathered "a day's portion every day" (Ex. 16:4). Luke reports that the disciples broke bread "*kat' oikon*," which is best translated "as a household." This phrase recalls the instructions for the Passover feast, according to which the Israelites were to take "a lamb according to their fathers' houses [*kat' oikous*], a lamb for a household [*kat' oikian*]" (Ex. 12:3, LXX).<sup>3</sup> The notion of a "household," in the context of the Passover feast, was not strictly limited to a single family. When the size of the families was small, Scripture made provision for multiple families to share a lamb (Ex. 12:4). First-century Judaism interpreted this provision broadly in terms of a *habburah*, or "company united for the celebration of the Passover."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, breaking bread "*kat' oikon*" refers not so much to the location of the Eucharistic celebration, as to its celebration in a company that was formed into a spiritual family through communion.<sup>5</sup>

During his third missionary journey, while returning to Jerusalem, Paul spent a week in Troas (Acts 20:6-12). In his description of this sojourn, Luke gives us the only narrative account in Acts of a particular celebration of the Eucharist. The disciples in Troas gather "on the first day of the week . . . to break bread" (Acts 20:7). Luke again refers literally to day "one" of the week, echoing his earlier account of Jesus' Eucharistic celebration at Emmaus. The gathering was planned for the purpose of a

<sup>3</sup> Eugenio Zolli, *The Nazarene*, trans. Cyril Vollert (New Hope, KY: Urbi et Orbi/Remnant of Israel, 1999), 202.

<sup>4</sup> David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1956), 332. As an example, Daube notes (in footnote 3) that, where Exodus 12:46 states that the Passover feast should be eaten "in one house," several of the Targums read "in one *habburah*."

<sup>5</sup> Zolli, 203.

Eucharistic celebration, suggesting that such liturgies had already become customary on Sundays. During the first part of the liturgy, Paul, knowing that he would never again visit Troas, gave an unusually long sermon (Acts 20:7). When the time for the consecration came, it was Paul himself who "broke the bread" (Acts 20:11), highlighting the role of the individual ministerial priesthood. After the Eucharistic celebration, Paul "conversed" [*homilesas*] with the congregation. A *homilia* is a company gathered for fellowship,<sup>6</sup> reminiscent of the Passover *habhura*. Luke's language frames the Eucharistic congregation as a company united in communion through the New Passover celebration.

### The Wilderness Generation

In his own writings, Paul, even more than Luke, develops an understanding of the Eucharist as the Messianic fulfillment of the Passover (1 Cor. 5:7). In fact, he presents a subtle typology in which both Baptism and the Eucharist are seen as the disciple's participation in the New Exodus, bringing the disciple, not into the land of Canaan, but into the Body of Christ. This typology centers on the generation of Israelites who were led out of Egypt in the Exodus and, thereafter, wandered for forty years in the wilderness. Paul explains that the experiences of these Israelites can be seen as "types" (*typikos*) for the instruction of the disciple living at the end of the Deuteronomic covenant (1 Cor. 10:6, 11).<sup>7</sup> Such typology is not merely a literary device or metaphor, but rather, reflects a pattern that God has imprinted on history as part of His salvific economy. Paul refers to the Israelites of the wilderness generation as the "fathers" of his Gentile converts (1 Cor. 10:1), not because of their ancestry, but because, through Baptism, the latter have been incorporated into the restored Israel. According to Paul's typology, the cloud of glory (cf. Ex. 13:21) corresponds to the Holy Spirit, and the passage through the Red Sea to the water

<sup>6</sup> LaVerdiere, 212.

<sup>7</sup> Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 91.

of Baptism (1 Cor. 10:2). Likewise, the manna in the wilderness corresponds to the Eucharistic Body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:3), and the water from the rock to His Eucharistic Blood (1 Cor. 10:4).

Water from the rock was miraculously given to the Israelites on two occasions. On the first occasion, Moses struck the rock with his rod (Ex. 17:3-6). The second occurred toward the end of the forty years of wandering, as the Israelites were preparing to enter Canaan (Num. 20:2-13). On this occasion, God told Moses and Aaron only to speak to the rock in order to elicit the miraculous water. Moses, however, did not obey. Apparently he could not believe that the water would come forth simply through the mere speaking of words. Instead, he desired something that could be seen, and so, in disobedience, he struck the rock. By his act of unbelief, Moses, in the presence of the people of Israel, failed to treat God as holy (Num. 20:12). The holiness of God is honored through faithful obedience, trusting in His word even when one does not yet see its fulfillment. God's plan had been for the rock to be struck only once, and thereafter it was to bring forth the miraculous drink when spoken to.<sup>8</sup> Paul identifies the rock with Christ (1 Cor. 10:4), who brings forth the miraculous drink, His Eucharistic Blood, when spoken to by God's appointed priest.

In developing his Eucharistic typology, Paul does not limit his exposition to the allegorical sense of Israelite history, but also explores its moral sense (cf. Catechism, no. 117), delving into the ethical implications of that history for the baptized. Paul quotes from the account of the golden calf (Ex. 32:6; 1 Cor. 10:7), employing his Eucharistic typology to invoke the memory of the Israelites' idolatry and immorality as a warning to New Covenant disciples against analogous sins. The beginning of the quotation, "the people sat down to eat and drink," follows Paul's exposition of the Israelites' spiritual eating and drinking. The end of the quotation, "and rose up to dance," precedes his description of the sins into which the Israelites nevertheless fell (1 Cor. 10:8-10). Thus,

<sup>8</sup> Rev. Michael Duggan, *The Consuming Fire: A Christian Introduction to the Old Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 129-30.

the Israelites' spiritual eating and drinking, though types of the Eucharist, did not prevent them from falling into idolatry and immorality.<sup>9</sup> Paul, therefore, warns the disciples against such sins, which destroy the unity with the Body of Christ that is established in the Eucharist.

Paul describes the Eucharistic cup as the "cup of blessing," employing the phrase that is used for the third cup of the Passover supper (1 Cor. 10:16). As a participation in the Body and Blood of Christ, the New Passover is a true sacrifice, one in which an uncreated Person offers Himself as a sacrifice which surpasses all other sacrifices. The Eucharistic cult must, therefore, overthrow the cult of every other deity, not only in exterior worship, but also in one's interior disposition. Worship given to any created reality, however great, is idolatry and ultimately demonic in inspiration (cf. 1 Cor. 10:21).

Those who participate in the New Passover are the members of the restored Israel, the "one Body" of Christ (1 Cor. 10:17).<sup>10</sup> The establishment of such union within the Body of Christ is the true significance of the *koinonia* practiced in the breaking of the bread. Thus, the one people of God is brought into being by the Eucharist, for "*the Eucharist makes the Church*" (Catechism, no. 1396, italics in original). The disciple is united to Christ the Head and, through Him, to the other disciples, "a transformation from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18, cf. EE 23).<sup>11</sup>

The doctrine of the Eucharist rests on the words of Christ at the Last Supper, which Paul "received" and "delivered [*paredoka*]" as Sacred Tradition [*paradosis*] (1 Cor. 11:23). According to this Tradition, Christ pronounced the Eucharistic cup to be "the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:25), referring to Jeremiah's prophecy of covenantal restoration for Israel (Jer. 31:31-33). In

<sup>9</sup> Hays, 92.

<sup>10</sup> N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 87.

<sup>11</sup> See also Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. Cyril Vollert, S.J. (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1946), 502, 533.

uttering these words over the cup, Jesus declared that His ministry was reaching its culmination in the ratification of the New Covenant. Thereafter, those who share in the Eucharist would be the people of God restored in that covenant.

Christ further instructed His disciples to celebrate the Eucharist "in remembrance [*anamnesis*] of me" (1 Cor. 11:24) so as to renew the covenant He had established. The Eucharist is not merely a subjective remembering of Christ's death and Resurrection but a sacred *anamnesis* of those events (1 Cor. 11:26), a covenantal renewal that makes really present His Body and Blood. Therefore, to partake of Communion unworthily is to make oneself guilty of sacrilege (cf. 1 Cor. 11:27-29; *EE* 12, 36).

### The Heavenly Tabernacle

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the importance of the covenantal dimension of the Eucharist for the apostolic Church is brought out even more forcefully. Jesus is described as the High Priest (Heb. 6:20) who guarantees "a better covenant" (Heb. 7:22) than the Deuteronomic covenant which was passing away (Heb. 7:18-19). Now that God has ratified the New Covenant "with an oath" (Heb. 7:21), the disciples are always able to "draw near" in the liturgy to Christ's Paschal sacrifice (Heb. 7:19). From the time of His Exaltation onward, Christ's sacrifice remains perpetually before the Father (Heb. 7:24-27). Christ serves as our minister (*leitourgos*) in the heavenly tabernacle (Heb. 8:2), offering His physical Body—no longer bloody, but glorified—for His Mystical Body, the Church (Heb. 8:3). The Church, in turn, participates in this unbloody sacrifice in the Eucharist. Thus, the Eucharistic liturgy (*leitourgia*) is "public worship" performed by Christ the Head in heaven and by His Body on earth (*Catechism*, no. 1070). Because of its heavenly nature, the liturgy of the New Covenant is "much more excellent" than that of the Mosaic covenant (Heb. 8:6). Indeed, in light of the New Covenant, the Mosaic covenant is seen to be "obsolete" (Heb. 8:13), for its sacrifices were bound to the earthly Temple and could not be offered in the heavenly one (Heb. 9:8-10).

Christ's sacrifice culminates in His new Exodus, by which He has entered into the "greater and more perfect" tabernacle "not made with hands" (Heb. 9:11) to offer His own Blood for "an eternal redemption" (Heb. 9:12). His sacrifice is grounded in earthly history, but not bound within its confines. Rather, it ascends into the heavenly realm, making possible the sacramental identity of Eucharist and Crucifixion. The Eucharistic celebration is thus the nexus between heaven and earth, wherein Christ is present under the appearance of bread and wine, just as in heaven He is present in His glorified humanity. By His sacrifice, "the heavens have been opened," allowing the Eucharistic liturgy to be celebrated on earth.<sup>12</sup> As Christ offered Himself to the Father through the Spirit, so He now offers "the blood of the eternal covenant" to sanctify the disciple (Heb. 9:14; 13:20).<sup>13</sup> We are not bereft of Christ's heavenly gift, for "we have an altar" (Heb. 13:10) from which we receive "everything good" (Heb. 13:21).

Christ invites us to follow Him into the heavenly tabernacle through His own Body and Blood. In the Eucharist, the Kingdom of God is extended from heaven into our bodies and souls, allowing us in turn to enter the presence of the Father. The sacrifice of Christ on Calvary was an historical event that objectively effected the Redemption. The Ascension did not remove it from history. Rather, the Ascension brings the sacrifice before the Father and makes possible Christ's Exaltation, in which the Spirit extends the sacrifice throughout history. The Eucharist thus participates in the interchange of Trinitarian gifts: the Word uttered by the Father offers Himself back to the Father through the Spirit. This interchange takes place first in eternity, then on Calvary, then in the heavenly Temple, and finally in the Eucharist throughout time.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *A New Song for the Lord: Faith in Christ and Liturgy Today*, trans. Martha M. Matesich (New York: A Crossroad Herder Book, Crossroad, 1997), 133.

<sup>13</sup> Scheeben, 519.

*Stephen Pimentel is the author of Witnesses of the Messiah: On Acts of the Apostles 1-15 (Emmaus Road) and a contributor to Lay Witness magazine. He holds an M.A. in theology from Christendom College.*