

**O COME, LET US WORSHIP XV;
“VOUCHSAFE TO BLESS AND SANCTIFY”**

Quite a number of years ago Ronald Knox wrote a book entitled *The Mass in Slow Motion*. That is an apt description of what we are doing at present, only our slow-motion is slower than his, and that is just as well, for just as we need from time to time to consider the Lord's Prayer petition by petition or the 10 Commandments one at a time or the Creed article by article, so will we find it useful—both intellectually informative and spiritually enriching—to think through the Divine Liturgy step by step. We must always guard against doing things we do regularly by rote so that, being on autopilot, as it were, we fail to fully appreciate their significance.

Last week we reflected on the Words of Institution, words that ever since our Lord first spoke them on the night he was betrayed have lead into the very heart of this celebration of the mystery of our faith. “This is my body,” he said and promised; “This is my blood,” and thus did he institute this memorial that his Church will celebrate “until his coming again.” The two brief sections that follow are called in the Missal “The Oblation” and “The Invocation.” More technically they are known as “The Anamnesis” and “The Epiclesis”, and I will explain those words in a moment.

The Words of Institution, those concerning the body and the blood, are followed in each instance by the words, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Sometimes theologians or liturgical scholars want to rush pass these words to get to the heart of the matter, the affirmation of the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine. That is the heart of the matter, but the fact that our Lord followed each of the words of institution with the admonition, “Do this in remembrance of me,” ought to lead us to consider that this remembrance is an important part of the matter. Now the theologians and liturgical scholars I just mentioned want to guard against the idea that prevails in some circles that the Lord's Supper is simply a memorial, an occasion for us to remember, to reflect back on a event long passed, as we might do on a visit to the Lincoln Memorial. Many a communion table in Protestant churches—they would never be called altars—are engraved with the words, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Now that is a good and valid

thing as far as it goes, for how can a sacred act that causes us to reflect on the death of our Lord be a matter to be derided. How well do I remember kneeling at the communion rail in the Methodist church in which I was raised and hearing the minister quote appropriate words about the death of our Lord and the depth of his love for me as he served the grape juice and tiny pillows of bread. Read the great hymns of John and Charles Wesley and you will find a depth of piety and clarity of insight into the Gospel of our Lord that is of great spiritual value. The understanding of the meaning of the sacraments may fall short of their full catholic richness but that does not mean that it is without genuine and valuable spiritual worth.

But even if we focus only on the words, “Do this in remembrance of me,” there is much more involved here than a simple recollection of what our Lord did on the cross. You recall that Jesus instituted this holy sacrament while celebrating the Passover with his disciples. Now the festival of the Passover is all about remembering. It is that holy meal in which the Jewish people recall and reflect on the primary saving event of their history, when God delivered the nation of Israel from Egyptian bondage, brought them over the Red Sea, defeated Pharaoh’s armies and started them on their way to the promised land. Everything about the Passover Seder, from the bitter herbs to the unleavened bread to the Passover lamb is meant to evoke the memory of that ancient event. But there is a peculiar twist, a distinctive character in this Passover remembrance. The celebration begins when the youngest child asks his father, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” The father replies, “Because on this night God delivered us from Pharaoh’s army,” and so forth. Note that he does not say, “Because a long time ago God delivered *our forebears*.” In other words, he does not look back on the event as merely an historical happening, however great the significance, as we might look back on the American Revolution. No, it is treated as a *present* event involving those who now celebrate the festival: “Because on this night God delivered *us*.” This is a kind of remembering whereby we are not only taken back to the event, but the event in all its saving significance is brought forward as it were, to be seen and experienced as a present reality. It involves not simply those who were contemporaneous with the ancient event. The event becomes contemporaneous with those who celebrate it. In the context of the Passover meal Jesus was celebrating with his disciples, we can see that this

sacrament is meant to be not just a memorial in the usual sense, but an on-going event, an ever-present reality.

The paragraph that follows the words of institution with the twice repeated admonition to do this in remembrance of Christ is called the memorial, or the Anamnesis, a Greek word that literally means ‘the loss of forgetting’—“Lest we forget.” “Wherefore” the sentence begins, hearkening back to Jesus admonition, “Wherefore, O Lord and heavenly Father, according to the institution of thy dearly beloved Son our Saviour . . . , we now offer unto thee, the Memorial thy Son hath commanded us to make. . . .” Two things are emphasized again and again. First, that our Lord did institute this sacrament. It is not a human invention, but a divine institution. Second, that we are offering these gifts, God’s gifts—the bread and the wine, the body and blood—as the Memorial God’s Son commanded. There is nothing of human will or self-glory here, no effort to raise ourselves up in the sight of God—only an act of obedience to a gracious and glorious commandment of our Lord.

As the priest continues, he says what we remember: “Having in remembrance his blessed passion and precious death, his mighty resurrection and glorious ascension.” Note the adjectives that are used here: his *blessed* passion, his *precious* death, his *mighty* resurrection, his *glorious* ascension. There is here no mention of the sorrow, the agony, the suffering of the cross. The words of this section of the Mass are among the most ancient, and the cross for the earliest Christians was not a symbol of suffering but of victory. There was never a corpus attached to the cross. And so the liturgy speaks not of his agonizing passion and sorrowful death, but of his blessed (*beata*) passion and precious death. Nor is the focus on his death alone. The resurrection and ascension are added, and all are conceived as one saving event. All of the words that are used, including mighty resurrection and glorious ascension, carry though the notion that it is Christ’s victory that we remember, and in that it is like the Jewish recollection of their ancient deliverance. The reality that is made present to us in this holy sacrament, this blessed memorial which our Lord instituted, is his triumph over sin and death and all the powers of evil through his blessed passion, precious death, mighty resurrection and glorious ascension—or, as the Orthodox sing at Easter, by “Trampling down death by death.” Therefore do we render unto God “most hearty thanks for the innumerable

benefits procured unto us by the same.” This is not just a thinking back upon the death of our Lord but a making present to us of his unspeakable victory over sin and evil and death, and his procuring for us “innumerable benefits,” benefits too many for us to imagine, much less to name. What a joyful celebration this is!

The second paragraph we referred to is called the Invocation, or the Epiclesis, the Greek word for ‘calling down’, for calling down the Holy Spirit. Incidentally, the fact that these two sections of the Mass bear Greek names is an indication of their antiquity, for Greek was the original language of the Church after it spread beyond Jerusalem. This is the prayer in which the priest says, “And we most humbly beseech thee, O merciful Father, to hear us, and of thy almighty goodness, vouchsafe to bless and sanctify with thy Word and Holy Spirit, these thy gift and creatures of bread and wine, that we receiving them according to thy Son’s our Saviour Jesus Christ’s holy institution, in remembrance of his death and passion, may be partakers of his most precious body and blood.” It is in short a prayer that the Holy Spirit may transform the Eucharistic elements that they may become for us the body and blood of Christ. This is even clearer in the ancient Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom:

We offer to Thee this reasonable and unbloody sacrifice;
and we beg Thee, we ask Thee, we pray Thee that Thou,
sending forth Thy Holy Spirit on us and on these present gifts
make this bread the Precious Body of Thy Christ
and that which is in this chalice, the Precious Blood of Thy Christ
changing by Thy Holy Spirit.

For the Orthodox, as is obvious, this is the point at which the bread and wine are transmuted into the body and blood of Christ. For the Roman Catholics the transsubstantiation occurs at the Words of Institution. Therefore in the Roman liturgy this Epiclesis precedes the Words of Institution and is seen as a kind of upbeat of the conductor’s baton, as Jungmann puts it, before the downbeat of the actual words of our Lord. This is another occasion where controversy occurs because we try to pin down too precisely the working of God’s Holy Spirit, and there is beginning to be a recognition that it is in the whole of the prayer of consecration and not at any precise moment that the holy miracle occurs. Anglicans are generally satisfied to simply recognize the mystery, which we can by no means comprehend, and adore the wondrous working of God. The bottom line is that God who made heaven and earth by his Word and Holy Spirit is at

work in this Holy Sacrament instituted by our Lord on the night of his arrest that he might wonderfully feed his people on his very body and blood, on the life-sustaining and life-changing food and drink of life eternal. And so with a combination of faith and wonderment, let us come to the blessed table of our Lord and there remember, as he bade us, his mighty victory over sin and death, and there receive “the medicine of immortality” (Ignatius of Antioch).

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire on the Third Sunday of Lent, March 15, 2009, at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL. Copyright © 2009.