

**O COME LET US WORSHIP XVI:
“HERE WE OFFER AND PRESENT”**

On the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord did institute this blessed Memorial, the holy sacrament of his body and blood, and we, in celebrating this mystery according to his institution, first call to memory the “blessed passion, precious death, mighty resurrection and glorious ascension” whereby he won the victory over sin and death. Thereafter we invoke the presence of God’s Word and Holy Spirit upon the gifts of bread and wine that we who receive them according to Christ’s holy institution “may be partakers of his most blessed Body and Blood.

I mentioned last week that this last action, called the Invocation or Epiclesis, is regarded by the Eastern Orthodox as the moment of the holy mystery, the time when the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, whereas the Roman Church, which places the Epiclesis before the Words of Institution, believes that it is only an anticipation, the preparatory upbeat a conductor makes before the decisive downbeat, and that the holy mystery occurs not at the invoking of the Holy Spirit but at our Lord’s Words of Institution, at the moment when we hear him say, “This is my body; this is my blood.” We Anglicans do not presume to be so capable of determining exactly how and precisely when the promised mystery occurs. We are part of the Western Church and so usually side with Rome. If we do so here, we would tend to agree that the mystery takes place at the Words of Institution, or, as many think better, that the miracle takes place through the whole of the Prayer of Consecration.

This complicated matter becomes even more complicated in the long and involved history of the *Book of Common Prayer*. We are happy to have in the American Prayer Book a rather clear Epiclesis or invoking of the Holy Spirit, which we inherited by historical coincidence from the Scottish Prayer Book of 1637. This clear wording is not present in the English Prayer Book which, of course, has been used since 1662 not only in England, but in Anglican churches throughout much of the English speaking world. I

have touched on this complex issue because I think it important to say that while I believe our American liturgy of the Prayer Book and Missal is a better liturgy for having this Epiclesis, and that brings us closer to the theology of the Orthodox Church with whom we have so much in common, it does not provide a basis for our refusing communion with Anglican churches that use the traditional English Prayer Book. To do so would have the effect of denying implicit communion with the leaders of the Anglican revival at Oxford in the 19th century, John Keble, E.B. Pusey, John Henry Newman, when an Anglican, and a whole host of notable divines through the centuries. The general Western position is, as I say, that the mystery takes place through the words of our Lord, and they lie at the center of all Anglican liturgies. A less rigid understanding is that the mystery takes place through the whole of the prayer of consecration, which is centered, of course, on the Words of Institution. Our Prayer Book may be an improvement on the English Book of 1662, but both are imperfect, as are all liturgies written by the hand of man, and all human understanding of the divine mystery is imperfect.

The basis of our communion is Jesus Christ and not any humanly devised liturgy however theologically perceptive. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians pointing first to the children of Israel, saying that those who were baptized with Moses by passing through the Red Sea “did *all* eat the same spiritual meat and drink the same spiritual drink, for they drank of that spiritual Rock which followed them, *and that Rock was Christ*” (I Cor, 10:1-4). All were baptized unto Moses and all did eat and drink of Christ by anticipation. The apostle then pointed to the contemporary reality of the church in Corinth, the very imperfect church in Corinth, and said, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body, for we are all partakers of that one bread” (10:16-17). The only basis for communion is Jesus Christ. That requires yet more explanation, but we must move on.

Having focused on the sacrifice of Christ throughout the Words of Institution, the Memorial of his blessed passion and death, and the invoking of the Word and Spirit upon the Eucharistic bread and wine, the liturgy shifts its focus and concentrates next on us and the sacrifice we bring, on that offering up of ourselves without which we cannot really

celebrate the sacrifice of Christ. And so the prayer continues, “And we earnestly desire thy fatherly goodness, mercifully to accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving,” here citing words from Hebrews 13:15. True praise and thanksgiving is a sacrifice because in them we offer ourselves to God all that we have received at his hand. In praise and thanksgiving we trace all that we are and have back to the goodness of God, acknowledging that it is in him that we live and move and have our being, and that his love for us in Jesus Christ is our only hope and salvation. The psalmist speaks of his prayer and praise at the beginning and end of each day as his *morning and evening sacrifice*.

With the sacrifice of praise we beseech God that not of our deserving but through Christ’s merits and death he would grant that we and all his whole Church may obtain remission of our sins and all other benefits of his passion. It is through the cross that we obtain not only the cancellation of all sinful debts but the acquisition of all spiritual blessings and virtue, the innumerable benefits of his passion.

We continue, “And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee.” It is not just the sacrifice of praise that we offer, but of ourselves, of all that we are and have. The liturgy here echoes that strong exhortation of the Apostle Paul as he approaches the concluding section of his great Epistle to the Romans, “I beseech you therefore brethren by the mercies of God that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto the Lord, which is your reasonable service” (Rom. 12:1). Note the emphasis both in the liturgy and in St. Paul on the offering up of *our bodies*. We observe first that the offering is not a purely or merely spiritual one but a total one. If it is a commitment of our bodies it is a commitment of our whole being.

But note secondly that there is here a clear echo of the Words of Institution. Jesus said, “This is *my body* which *is given* for you,” and we say. “*We offer and present* unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and *our bodies*.” He gave up his body in death upon the cross; we give our bodies to him as a *living sacrifice*. Herein is the divine love complete, in his total giving of himself to us and for us and in our returning his love by offering up ourselves, body and soul. Our Lord spoke elsewhere of this response as our

taking up our cross to follow him, as that dying to self without which we cannot follow him, as that dying to ourselves in which we truly find ourselves, as that dying by which and through which we truly live.

This our proper response must be an individual thing. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed out in the chapter we considered yesterday in our Lenten Study: “Alone you stood before God when God called you. Alone you had to obey God’s voice. Alone you had to take up your cross, struggle, and pray, and alone you will die and give an account to God” (*Life Together*, p. 82). Our response must be an individual matter. No one can do it for us. But, as Bonhoeffer would also contend, it is not *just* an individual matter. He wrote, “You are called into the community of faith; the call is not meant for you alone. You carry your cross, you struggle, and you pray in the community of faith, the communion of those who are called. You are not alone even when you die, and on the day of judgment you will be only one member of the great community of faith of Jesus Christ” (pp. 88-89).

Even so, the liturgy, while requiring our individual response and commitment, never loses sight of the community of faith. Earlier in this particular prayer there was reference to “*we and thy whole Church.*” Now the prayer continues, “humbly beseeching thee, that *we and all others who shall be partakers of this Holy Communion* may receive the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son Jesus Christ, be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction, and *made one body with him*, that he may dwell in us and we with him.” Holy Communion is not a private affair nor the possession of any one part of the Church, nor something of which we may partake apart from the whole Body, the point I was trying to make earlier.

The liturgy plays quite intentionally on the twofold meaning of the Body of Christ. In one and the same sentence we pray that we “may worthily receive the most precious Body and Blood” of Christ and that we may be “made one body with him.” We receive the body of Christ and we become the body of Christ, or as it is sometimes said today, the Eucharist makes the Church. St. Paul in the passage we quoted earlier spoke of “the communion of the Body of Christ” with this same dual meaning. This is why among the many names for this sacrament one of the most prominent and familiar is ‘Holy Communion.’

The prayer concludes, “And although we are unworthy, through our manifold sins, to offer unto thee any sacrifice; yet we beseech thee to accept this our bounden duty and service; not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offences, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Here then, we offer and present ourselves unto God, unworthy though we may be, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Our unworthy and imperfect sacrifice of ourselves is united in this sacrament with the most worthy and perfect sacrifice of Christ, and God receives it, not because of us but because of him, because of him “by whom, and with whom, in the unity of the Holy Ghost, all honour and glory” is due unto God, the Father Almighty, world without end. Amen.

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 22, 2009, at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL. Copyright © 2009.