

The Earliest Christian Eucharist

by Father Francis Firth, C.S.B.

THE EARLIEST written mention of the Eucharist is in the First Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians. There he is warning this Christian community to avoid sacrifices to pagan gods, drawing his argument from the holiness of Christian worship:

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

10.16-17

Later he explains:

I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of the demons.

10.20-21

Paul here indicates that the Christian Eucharist is some form of sacrifice offered to God which at the same time is a means for unity among Christians themselves. Then in the next chapter he admonishes the Corinthian Church about some abuses in connection with this sacred rite: "Each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk" (11.21). To impress on them the importance of the ceremony he continues:

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying: "This is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

11.23-26

There are similar accounts of the Last Supper in the first three Gospels. Some of the accounts say that Jesus took bread and blessed it,

others that he took bread and gave thanks. Actually the meaning is the same. Food was blessed among the Jews, and still is, by a prayer of praise and thanks to God called *berakah* recited over it by the leader of the group. The Gospel according to John does not mention this at the Last Supper; instead there is in chapter six a long discourse by Jesus on the bread of life. In the Acts of the Apostles we read of the earliest Christian community: “And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts” (2.46). The expression “breaking bread,” the same as used in First Corinthians 10.16 and 11.24, probably refers to the Eucharist which, during the first two centuries of the Church, was celebrated in private houses.

“On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the morrow; and he prolonged his speech until midnight” (Acts 20.7). Then a boy fell out of the window “and was taken up dead,” but he was restored to life by Paul. The narrative continues: “And when Paul had gone [back] up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them . . . until daybreak” (20.11). Already the time of celebration is on Sunday which, counted in the Jewish manner, runs from sunset to sunset. So these events took place on Saturday evening and continued into Sunday morning. Connected with the Eucharist was an instructive discourse and probably also a meal. Partaking of food, as at the Last Supper, expresses community, dependence on God, and joyful celebration.

In the *Didache*, an early Church document put together from very early sources, we read:

Now about the Eucharist (i.e., “thanksgiving”), give thanks thus. First concerning the cup: “We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of David, your servant, which you have made known to us through Jesus, your Servant. To you be glory forever.”

9.1-2

Jesus was quite often called the “Servant” of the Lord in the primitive Church. The Greek word used is *pais*; it means primarily “boy” or “child,” but was quite often used for “servant” or “slave.” That was no denial of Jesus’s Sonship of the Father which was expressed by the word “Son.” Thus, Clement of Rome, whose letter to the Corinthians was written a little after the *Didache*, often refers to Jesus as the “Servant (*pais*) of the Lord,” but also refers to him as “Son of God,” calls God his Father, and says he “addresses us through his Holy Spirit” in Psalm 33(34) from the Old

Testament (see 1 Clement 36.4, 7.4, and 22.1-7).

This early Christian use of the word *pais* would have come from the Greek translation of Isaiah, especially 52.13-53.12 where the prophet speaks of the *Servant* of the Lord as suffering for the sins of many. The word *pais* is also found in the New Testament—Acts 3.13 for instance—where it has often been translated “Son.” The more accurate translation of *pais*, however, expresses the mission of Jesus as *Servant* of God sent to do his Father’s will, especially by dying to expiate the sins of mankind.

Discussion of the Eucharist in the earliest Church, especially as it is described in the *Diadache*, will be continued next week. ❧