

The Didache

The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles

By Father Francis Firth, C.S.B.

D *IDACHE* is the Greek word for “teaching.” The full title—*The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*—emphasizes the fact that the contents of this ancient Christian handbook are in harmony with what the Apostles taught. Scholars date the document to the first century, which would make it contemporary with the writings of the New Testament. It is noteworthy that it shows no acquaintance with the texts of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, but rather draws upon the earlier tradition of Christ’s teaching which lies behind the Gospels. The following paragraph speaks about the Eucharist.

Now about the Eucharist: give thanks thus. First concerning the cup: “We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of David, your servant, which you have made us known through Jesus, your Servant. To you is glory forever.” Then in connection with the broken bread: “We thank you, our Father, for the life and knowledge which you have revealed through Jesus, your Servant. To you is glory forever. As this broken bread was scattered over the hills and was gathered together and became one, so let your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom, because yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever.” No one is to eat or drink of your Eucharist except those baptized in the name of the Lord. For concerning this Lord said: “Give not what is holy to dogs.”

9.1-5

It is surprising that this thanksgiving formula makes no mention of the Last Supper or of the body and blood of Christ. For this reason some scholars considered that it refers not to the Eucharist but to a sacred meal called *agape*, which was celebrated among the early Christians and which also involved formulae of thanksgiving. Others have suggested that this wording may be incomplete, leaving it understood that Christ’s words at the Last Supper were also to be included. It has also been suggested that this prayer would have been used by those receiving the Eucharist privately at home. This last theory would account for the fact that the bread is described as already “broken,” as opposed the “the *breaking* of bread,” which was the usual way to describe the celebration of the Eucharist in the early Church.

None of these speculations are certain; it seems clear, however, that early Christians were more concerned with having a faith-filled commemoration of their Saviour than with a specific formula. But it would be antiquarianism of the worst sort for anyone to invoke the authority of the *Didache* to celebrate today without using Christ's words from the Last Supper. It is well known that the Eucharistic celebration did include them very early in the Church's history and that they have been in general use ever since. While we do trust that the Holy Spirit is with the general belief and practice of the Church, we cannot be equally sure that the Spirit guarantees the universal validity of every ancient manuscript.

The text of the *Didache* continues:

After you have been satisfied with food, give thanks thus. "We thank you, Holy Father, for your holy name which you have made to dwell in our hearts and for the knowledge and immortality which you have made known to us through Jesus, your Servant. To you is glory forever. Almighty Father, you have created everything for the sake of your name, and you have given food and drink to men for enjoyment that they may thank you. But to us you have given spiritual food and drink and life eternal through Jesus, your Servant. Above all, we thank you because you are mighty. To you be glory forever."

10.1-4

Here we have a remarkably clear distinction between God's gifts to the human race in nature and his supernatural gifts to his Church through Jesus, his Son. The text continues with some final prayers and blessings:

Remember, Lord, your Church, to save it from all evil and perfect it in your love.

Make it holy and gather it together from the four winds into your kingdom, which you have prepared for it. For yours are the power and the glory forever.

Let Grace come, and let this world pass away.

Hosanna to the God of David. If anyone is holy, let him come. If not, let him repent. Our Lord, come! Amen.

10.5-6

These words express the longing of early Christians for Jesus to come in glory (cf. Rev 22.20). "Grace" would here seem to be a title for Christ.

Farther on in the *Didache* come the following directions for the

Eucharist, evidently taken from some other source:

On the Lord's Day of the Lord come together and break bread and give thanks, having first confessed your transgressions that your sacrifice may be pure. Anyone having a quarrel with his neighbour must not join until they are reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be defiled. For this is the word of the Lord: "In every place and time offer me a sacrifice, because I am a great King," says the Lord, "and my name is wonderful among the gentiles."

14.1-3; cf. Malachi 1.11,14

Here the Eucharist is expressly called a sacrifice, an act of worship. It is celebrated every Sunday and preceded by some kind of confession, practices which continue to the present day.

Texts about the Eucharist in the early Church leave many questions unanswered. But these prayers and thanksgivings do express in a wonderful way the blessings which the Church should hope and pray for, and be grateful for in this celebration. For this reason sections of the *Didache* have been fashioned into a modern hymn:

Father, we thank Thee who hast planted
Thy holy name within our hearts.
Knowledge and faith and life immortal
Jesus, Thy Son, to us imparts.
Thou, Lord, didst make all for Thy pleasure,
didst give man food for all his days,
giving in Christ the Bread eternal;
Thine is the pow'r, be Thine the praise.

Watch o'er Thy Church, O Lord, in mercy,
save it from evil, guard it still.
Perfect it in Thy love, unite it,
cleansed and conformed unto Thy will.
As grain, once scattered on the hillsides,
was in this broken bread made one,
so from all lands Thy Church be gather'd
into Thy kingdom by Thy Son. 