

INTRODUCTION

IN 1520, MARTIN LUTHER published *Ein Sermon von dem Neuem Testament, d.i. von der Heiligen Messe*.¹ Thus he established conformity between the Lord's Supper and the New Testament, which is the final word on relations between God and men. This conformity goes back to the most ancient attestation of the institution of the Lord's Supper: "This cup is the new testament in my blood", said Jesus (1 Cor. 11: 25; cf. Luke 22: 20).

When we consider the Eucharist, we are at the very heart of the Gospel and of the life which it creates in the Church. I would go even further and say we are, secretly, at the place and time which have a decisive effect on the life of the world since, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Supper exemplifies, renews and renders effective the place and the time where the fate and salvation of mankind are enacted. That is why the Supper is a kind of crucible in which all the elements which constitute the Gospel are combined. That is why the Supper—certainly not through the varied theological interpretations given to it but through the reality of its occurrence—remains a mystery to the present world; and it is as the Supper is given its central place in the life of the Church that the Church in her turn is protected against all that would compromise her eschatological nature.

We should, therefore, not be surprised that the Supper, so intimately associated with the Good News incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, has always been the target of the Adversary. Yet, distorted, amputated, neglected or paralysed, attacked on one side by magic and superstition and by rationalism on the other, the Supper has persisted, not always without difficulty, in enriching the believers and in summoning the Church to celebrate it more reverently and to interpret it more faithfully, more comprehensively and more profoundly. It is not surprising that the Supper should be the final test of peace and unity in the Church or, to express it negatively, that it is over the celebration and interpretation of the Supper that dogmatic and canonical divisions are most evident.

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"It is the glory of God to conceal a thing", says one of the Proverbs (25: 2). God visited the world incognito in the person of a Jew; He chose the weak and foolish things of the world to confound the strong and wise. But into this weakness and folly He put all His strength and wisdom. The Supper shares to a large degree this choice of weakness and folly. Not only because no liturgy can ever adequately express the eucharistic event, nor yet because a piece of bread can have no visible connection with the flesh given by Jesus for the life of the world, but much more because of the very considerable difficulty there is in following the clues which lead from the Supper celebrated by the Church to the moment when, on the night in which He was betrayed,² Jesus instituted the meal which was to bear His name. Indeed it must be admitted, in view of recent researches, that our sources do not enable us to affirm the exact nature of the institution of the Supper or the apostolic way of celebrating (if we can speak of any one way) without running the risk of being contradicted. This impression affects, for example, the following points.

When did Jesus institute the Supper? Was it during the celebration of the Jewish Passover meal? Scholars have multiplied arguments for and against, as if the theological interpretation of the Supper depended entirely on the conclusion reached. Today it seems, however, that at least until new documentary evidence is forthcoming which might allow the debate to be re-opened, a compromise has been reached in which the idea of the paschal setting—whether precisely stated or implied from the context—is inseparable from the institution of the Supper, that undeniably the paschal setting is of major importance for the understanding and assessment of the Supper, but that it is impossible to be more specific.³

What were the words spoken by Jesus at the time of the Institution? The four accounts that we have do not absolutely coincide. How did Jesus Himself interpret the bread and the cup (or cups)? Did He or did He not give the order for the repetition of what He did on that occasion, as Luke and Paul alone report? Did He specify what He meant by this new covenant-meal by means of teaching which might have been similar to the teaching on the Bread of Life reported in John 6? Did He sum up its true meaning in a prayer, e.g. the high-priestly prayer reported in John 17?⁴ Did He, at that time, speak in Aramaic or solemnly in Hebrew? There are so many questions on which historians hesitate to pronounce.

What part was played, in the structure of the eucharistic celebration

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of the primitive Church, by the apostles' memory of having eaten regularly, not just with an outstanding rabbi, but—after Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi—with one whom the Living God had revealed to them as His Son, the Christ? What part also was played by their memory of having eaten and drunk with Him after His resurrection from the dead (Acts 10: 41)? How did it come about that the accounts of such meals take on after Pentecost an almost eucharistic coefficient, so that we are led to suppose that every meal Christians ate together was suggestive of the Lord's Supper? In short, have other elements besides the institution by Jesus on the eve of His crucifixion played a part in the progressive formation of eucharistic liturgies? If the answer is Yes, is it possible to determine them with any degree of precision?

These questions preoccupied scholars thirty or forty years ago. The publication in 1926 of H. Lietzmann's *Messe und Herrenmahl, Eine Studie zur Geschichte der Liturgie* (3rd edition, Berlin, 1955) created a great stir, and led to considerable research. Lietzmann, starting from the different liturgical traditions in the post-apostolic age, postulates two different primitive forms of the Supper: the first without direct connection with the last meal of Jesus, but governed by the memory of meals eaten with Him (this would be the Jerusalemite form which re-appeared, *via* the Didache, in the Egyptian tradition); the second governed by the memory of the death of Jesus and linked with His last meal with His followers (this would be the Pauline and Synoptic form which re-appeared in the Hippolytan tradition and gained final acceptance throughout the Church). The first was probably characterized by an unbounded exuberance springing from the thought of the resurrection; the second by an increasingly firm insistence on the death of Christ and consequently on the sacrificial aspect of the commemoration.

Lietzmann's hypothesis may now be regarded as impossible: it rests on far too flimsy a foundation;⁵ it makes Paul, who held so firmly to the Jerusalem tradition, contradict himself; nor does it explain how the so-called Egyptian tradition could be so rapidly charged with sacrificial meaning.⁶ But it must be admitted that Lietzmann's thesis has led to a deepening of the conviction that "the nucleus of the tradition of the accounts of the institution has preserved in a trustworthy manner what Jesus said on the occasion of the Last Supper" (Jeremias), and that it has shown up clearly the part played in the liturgical development by the memory of meals eaten with Jesus, particularly after the

resurrection. It may be possible that in the primitive Church the Supper, according to stresses which could vary from place to place, included at the same time repetition of the Last Supper (this supplied the liturgical schema), memory of meals eaten with the Risen Lord (this supplied the overtones of the celebration), and the presence of this schema and of these overtones at the end of a meal where the appetite could be satisfied.

There is a fourth historical point which raises a problem: the place occupied by the Eucharist in the life of the apostolic Church. We have the four accounts of the Institution (the Fourth Gospel does not record it), what St. Paul says in 1 Cor. 10, a fragment at least (6: 51–58) of the Johannine discourse on the Bread of Life, and a number of probable allusions. That is all. Was this seemingly marginal place of the Supper in primitive Christianity due to the fact that the eucharistic life was indeed marginal, or was it due to a very great reticence when the subject was spoken of, because it was the very heart of the life of the Church and this centrality had to be guarded?

One interpretation would support the thesis of those who claim that the Supper grew in importance in proportion to the growing conviction that the Parousia was not imminent, the Supper becoming a kind of substitute Parousia offered to the Church or invented by her to encourage her to be patient. Here one encounters again the old affirmation of Loisy: Jesus preached the advent of the Kingdom and it was the Church which came. In other words, the Church had to come into being because the Kingdom did not come. Whence little by little emerged the rule of faith, the institutional and traditional ministry, the sacraments, the discipline—in short, “pre-catholicism”.

The issue is clearly vital: was the Church, or was she not, a fortuitous expedient which Christians had to make the best of so that the message of Jesus should not be lost? And as this procedure has an almost inherent tendency to smother the message, does not fidelity to the message demand an implied infidelity to the Church, or, at the very least, a constant challenging of the Church to prevent her becoming an end in herself? At first sight it must be admitted that one might put this interpretation on the scarcity of New Testament references to the eucharistic life, but in that case one must also suspect that the institution of the Supper by Christ was unhistorical, for when you reduce it to the bare essentials, it is possible to assert that it was when He instituted the Supper that Jesus instituted the Church.

The other alternative, namely that of a maximum silence dictated

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by discretion, was defended with a great deal of conviction by J. Jeremias. (*Die Abendmahlsworte Jesu*,^{6a} 3 ed., Göttingen, 1960, pp. 118–30). He postulates from the beginnings of the Church a secret discipline or the preludes at least to such a discipline. If some scholars disregard his arguments, others have been convinced with good or ill grace. Ph. H. Menoud observes that if the New Testament witness suggests rather than describes the acts of eucharistic worship, it is “as if the intention was to give hints which the initiated would understand and yet which would veil the heart of the Christian worship from those who were outside.”⁷

In my opinion, as soon as one begins to study the matter seriously, abundant indications are forthcoming in support of the latter interpretation. St. Paul would never have written about the Eucharist if the Corinthians had not questioned him on this point. For the same reason his reply, which he admits is incomplete (1 Cor. 11: 34), betrays a developed eucharistic theology which, however, he does not expound.⁸ The fact is emphasized that when Jesus instituted the Supper only His disciples were present, and that, out of prudence or fear, Christians met behind closed doors (John 20: 19, 26; Acts 12: 12–14; and Rev. 21: 25, where the announcement is made that in the Kingdom the Church will meet with all the doors open) as in the Parable of the Bridegroom (Matt. 25: 10 cf. Luke 13: 25; and perhaps also Matt. 6: 6). No precise information is given about who presided over the eucharistic meetings. Would not the idea of a secret discipline explain why, some time later, Pliny was able to give so little information about Christian worship?

Although the debate opened by Jeremias is not over, I am driven to think we are so accustomed to a Christianity which is openly acknowledged that we find it difficult to understand the very clear, very precise distinctions which the primitive Church had to draw, for her own safety, between open radiance and the secret source of that radiance. It seems possible to me, then, to argue that if we know so little about the eucharistic life of the apostolic Church, it was not because this was negligible, it was because Christians did not talk about it to those outside, and that they wrote about it as little as possible. Perhaps also this was the reason why the written liturgical sources of the primitive Church are so rare: this rarity could indeed bear witness as much to a liturgical secrecy as to a liberty of liturgical improvisation.

The uncertain nature of our historical information about the origin of the Eucharist should not so disturb the Church as to lead her to dis-

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courage historians from pursuing their inquiries. They are indeed dedicating themselves to a task which is indispensable to a religion which affirms that God's salvation, in order to reach men and the world, is involved in history and its ambiguities. The Church has nothing to fear since historical hypotheses put forward by this or that scholar are forthwith submitted to searching critical tests. With the help of those hypotheses which have emerged successfully from these tests, the Church may either reach certainty, or (sometimes simultaneously) be led to the place where it is no longer a question of historical assessment, but of an act of faith.

Moreover, just as the hesitations of historians in face of the witness borne to the birth, life, death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus are not intended to throw doubt on the confession of His messiahship, but much rather to make it clear that this confession cannot be other than a confession of faith, so the hesitations of the historians in face of the fragmentary and inexplicit information concerning the original doctrine and celebration of the Supper are not intended to make us despair of ever being able to offer to God the worship He desires. On the contrary, they bear witness to the truth that Christian worship is not an action which man controls for himself but is celebrated in an attitude in which man is stripped of his self-sufficiency and his self-righteousness. The ambiguity of our historical knowledge is not strong enough to check or even to interrupt the growth of a spiritual understanding of the Christian cult and of that which constitutes the central element thereof.

Having called attention to four subjects for inquiry relating to the origin of the Supper, we must turn now to the history of the Eucharist. I intend to deal only with three aspects: the liturgical diversity, the eucharistic vocabulary, and the significance of the Reformation in this history.

It is known that the ancient Church possessed different ritual traditions. Historians group them into certain families, and are at variance among themselves over the number and the "genealogy" of these families. The histories of the Christian cult supply most valuable information. Three things seem to be especially interesting for our purpose. First, this ritual diversity, at least in the early stages, did not compromise the unity of the Church, did not hinder a local Church from acknowledging in another local Church the grace which was the source of her own life, even if this other Church possessed a different

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liturgical tradition. On the contrary, it enabled each local Christian community through and in its worship (which was, as it claimed to be, "catholic") to confess its true nature before God and before the other Churches. Secondly, this liturgical diversity did not spring from any desire to deliver Christian worship from a certain liturgical monotony; different liturgies were not found in each local Church; there were different liturgies because there were different centres of Christian life, local but not yet "confessional". Thirdly, this ancient ritual diversity was gradually reduced to the two liturgies which can be called major: that referred to as the Liturgy of Saint Chrysostom or the Liturgy of Byzantium, and that of Rome.⁹ This progressive reduction to two liturgies is due not only to their theological and ritual quality, but also to the political and cultural pre-eminence of Byzantium and Rome and also—for Rome in any case—to certain theological pre-suppositions regarding the structure of the Church's unity.

For this reason the liturgical tradition which was shaped, stylized and supplied with rubrics at Rome is found just as it is, including the liturgical language, throughout the whole of the West, whereas, by and large,¹⁰ the Byzantine liturgy was celebrated in the everyday language of the people. This reduction of liturgical variation within the "Catholic" Church led, not only to a strong sense of unity and solidarity, but also to a heightening of the tension and to the eventual separation between Rome and Byzantium, as well as to a liturgical revolt against Roman uniformity, even though the great Christian liturgical tradition was more highly valued by the Churches which came under the impact of the Reformation than has sometimes been thought, and not only by Lutherans and Anglicans but even by Calvinists.

The second aspect of the history of the Supper to which I wish to refer concerns eucharistic vocabulary. The striking thing is the astonishing terminological variety in the ancient Church and her apparent refusal to apply doctrinal tests to this vocabulary. It was as though the Christians realized that they could only use faltering words to describe the eucharistic happening. It was as though, when they realized that they had, nevertheless, to make the mystery of the Supper intelligible, they hesitated to make a choice of doctrinal terminology which might lead to the belief that the theologians had solved the mystery. Whence the parallelism between realism, symbolism and spirituality, and the blend of all these which is so surprising in patristic literature, and which enabled those who, in the sixteenth century and later,

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quoted the Fathers in support of contending views to do so with full justification. But it was realized at that time how rich in meaning the Supper is, so abounding in grace that its very nature was threatened when it was interpreted in a single and exclusive way. In the Corinthian Church it was at the time of the Eucharist that outbreaks of glossolalia occurred. It is quite possible that the terminological profusion which surrounds the Eucharist, which may seem so contradictory, is really a form of glossolalia: a speaking in tongues, interpreted but not edited, for the edification of the Church.

What must also be borne in mind is that during the first millennium the Church experienced no violent controversies or notable heresies concerning the Eucharist. Because of the profoundly grateful emotions which the eucharistic event aroused, the truth concerning the Supper was not, at that time, felt to be cramping and restricting. There was, therefore, no need for anyone to quarrel with the formulation which the Church made in her practice and doctrine of the Eucharist, as there was to be with the dangerous or adulterated formulations of the doctrines of God and of Christ. All this clearly emerges from a rapid and superficial view. If one were to look more closely one would be aware of nuances, inflections, of the direct impact of the great christological or trinitarian conflicts on the doctrine and the celebration of the Eucharist. But actually these are discernible even from far off, as the bitterness of the eucharistic controversies of the sixteenth century may be seen in the background. Whereas in the first millennium close and detailed study has to be made if the internal polemic between the widely different elements which exist side by side in the Supper is to be discerned.

It is indeed astonishing, when you observe the altercations on this theme which resulted from the schisms of the eleventh and sixteenth centuries, that the Church of the first millennium did not seem to take into account the specific and divisive significance of the formal inclusion or omission of an epiklesis, for example, or the all-important bearing of a sacrificial interpretation of the Eucharist, or of a celebration of the Lord's real presence in ill-considered words. It was *a posteriori*, after the division of the Church, that these aspects became subjects for dissension. Why? Perhaps because the Supper fits ill into a divided Church, since division calls into question one of its special purposes: unity. Perhaps, too, because Christian disunity threatens to isolate one particular element of the eucharistic life and make it distorted or heretical, not intrinsically, but because this particular element can no longer be completed or balanced by other elements in this life.