

"THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SUPPER"

INTRODUCTION One day last April I found myself in mid-town Manhattan between appointments. In quest of some quiet space for my soul, I slipped into St. Patrick's Cathedral. The scene inside was anything but quiet. Scaffolding was present everywhere. Workers wearing yellow hard hats were banging away with their hammers, connecting and disconnecting wires, steam-cleaning walls and pillars, painting woodwork and jabbering away with each other on the job.

But above the din, one could hear a voice over the loud-speaker system and the sound of an organ. I traced the voice to its source and found that a Mass was being celebrated in spite of all the distractions. A priest with a kindly Irish face was ministering to a company of the devout from a small altar at right angles to the north wall of the cathedral.

At the appropriate moment the worshippers left their seats and knelt down to receive the sacrament. They were all there: taxi drivers, business executives, sales clerks, secretaries, housewives, college students, tourists and a host of others. The surrounding confusion did not deter them. Let those who are ready to bury religion ponder the hold of the Eucharist on Christians everywhere!

DEVELOPMENT If we understand a sacrament to be "a holy ordinance instituted by Christ", then we must acknowledge that two sacraments belong to the Christian faith: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism we experience but once. It stands at the entrance to the Christian life. The Lord's Supper we experience times without number; it is our nourishment along the way.

The significance of the Lord's Supper cannot be captured by any single mind, much less can it be expounded in any single meditation. Yet, there are two statements at the very least that can be made about this sacrament. One is that the Lord's Supper is a commemoration of the death of Jesus. The other is that it is an interpretation of the death of Jesus. ~~Commemoration and interpretation.~~ Let's consider both of them this morning before we share together in the sacrament.

COMMEMORATION First, the Lord's Supper is a commemoration of the death of Jesus. We call to mind His words,

"This is my body which is for you. This do in remembrance of me. This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as oft as ye shall drink it in remembrance of me".

Apparently, Jesus felt that even His own could forget Him, and this is not a flattering implication for us to ponder. It was not the world at large that He feared might forget - but rather His own people!

History shows that mankind has a strange way of forgetting its benefactors. For example, think of the way in which we go through our national holidays from year to year in this country. National holidays in America mean nothing more to many of us than a chance to buy something at a reduced price or an opportunity to slip away on a brief excursion into the country.

On George Washington's birthday two weeks ago a news team from one of the local TV channels went out to interview some people who were lined up waiting for a large department store to open. The question - "What does George Washington mean to you?" - brought forth smiles of ignorance and some frivolous answers. Not

one of those interviewed remembered anything significant about Washington. All that was recalled - when anything was recalled - had to do with the mythology of the cherry tree or the silver dollar that was scaled across the Potomac.

One of the most oft repeated verbs in the Old Testament is the verb, "zachar" which means to "remember". Over and over again the people of the Old Testament were exhorted to remember lest in their prosperity they should forget that they were nothing until God called them into being. People have a way - a tendency - to forget their benefactors. [We prefer to live for the moment and by the moment. We are fast becoming a historyless people, despite the fact that man has always lived by memory and by hope!]

Jesus wants us to remember Him. Especially, He wants us to remember Him for the death that He died. And it is the Sacrament of Holy Communion that focuses on that event. Perhaps Jesus anticipated that we might prefer to focus somewhere else. He might have taken a lump of clay and said, "Remember how I made the blind to see". Or, He might have taken a piece of net and said, "Remember how I called you to be fishers of men". Or, He might have taken some salt, some leaven and a lamp and said, "Remember your role in life". He might have taken a couple of leather thongs and said, "Remember how I cleansed the Temple". Or, He might have taken a precious coin and said, "Remember how I warned you against the deceitfulness of riches!"

But instead He took the bread and the cup that we might remember Him in His death. For He desired to be remembered - not primarily as a teacher or a worker of great wonders - but as the Saviour of the world who came to effect our liberation from the things that tie us up and hold us back. Thus, this Sacrament - given that we might remember. It is so easy to forget, to spend our time analyzing doctrine, or running all over the countryside applying Christian principles, or becoming immersed in programming the outreach of the Church. All of which, in my thinking, tends to become truncated activity - if we fail to re-Jesus. ~~The Lord's Supper, first, is a commemoration of His death.~~

INTERPRETATION The Lord's Supper is also an interpretation of His death. "This do in remembrance of me".

The pronoun "this" in that sentence includes the actions that belong to the sacrament and the statements concerning those actions. In the Sacrament speech is reduced, but not eliminated entirely. The enactment does not proceed wordlessly.

"As often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, you do show forth (or preach, proclaim, or publish) the Lord's death until He comes again".

In a very real sense, in this gathering for Holy Communion the congregation is preaching the fact and the meaning of His death.

Jesus died on the open plain of history. This is a fact. Therefore as many as will may interpret His death. Some would have it that He died to exemplify courage in the face of pain. Others insist that He died because He clung tenaciously to ideas whose time had not yet come. Still others tell us that He died as a martyr for a cause to which He was deeply committed.

His death belongs to history, but the meaning of His death belongs to the realm of faith. The Scriptures make it clear why He died. The Bible is quite

emphatic that His death was voluntary, that His dying was not a catastrophe, but an achievement. He did not lose His life! He gave it up! It was not taken from Him! He offered it up! He was in full control even to the end, before the presence of such powerful men as Herod and Pilate. ↑ From first to last it was a deliberate offering up of Himself. | A remarkable poise governed His earthly life.

And even more important - according to the Scriptures which is the source of our understanding of the meaning of His death - He died for us! "This is my body which is for you". In Paul's Letter to the Corinthians where he accounts for that which had been faithfully delivered unto him, he declares that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures". According to other minds, He may have died for something other or something less, but according to Holy Scripture, Christ died for us and for our sins.

I confess that we cannot understand the "mechanics of expiation" that make for our forgiveness. Truth is veiled in darkest mystery and we have our private questions and concerns regarding it. Even the finest of our theologians have conceded the deep mystery represented in that Cross, in that dying for others. But, in a way we don't have to understand it, do we? - at least not to the full? We are asked only to receive it. "Behold the Lamb of God which beareth away the sins of the world". ~~His death was a voluntary death.~~ His death was for us.

It seems innocent enough to say on a Sunday morning in March that God's love is manifested in this ancient supper. But when we find ourselves hammered by the blows and the tragedies of life, we look and search in desperation for a place, an event, where this love can be authenticated. And it is here in this simple sacrament - in the taking of the bread and the cup.

And look for a moment at what is weighed against the statement that God is love: man's inhumanity to man, the holocausts of nature, still born babies, senseless murders, barbarous wars, lechery, greed, malignancies, deceitfulness in high places. Against all of this - and much more that we might deduce from our own hearts and varied experiences, against all of this, the bread and the cup are set. Here the defense rests its case for the love of God.

Walter Cronkite recently shared these straight forward thoughts about faith in a magazine interview:

"I would think the greatest test of a man's faith is when a loved one is affected by disease or suddenly stricken down....even if you're an agnostic, you may still ask yourself what kind of celestial crap game is going on"

And maybe this is why those devout Catholics in St. Patrick's put up with the falling plaster, the drop-cloths, the noisy workers in quest of the wafer which would assure them of God's immeasurable love. The Lord's Supper is also an interpretation of His death.

CLOSING Those who know such things have said that Peter DeVries novel, The Blood of the Lamb, is one of the finest works he has done. Basically, it is the story of a man named Wanderhope and his bout with faith....of his resistance to God and his need for God. Toward the end of that story, his daughter, Carol, is dying of an incurable disease. She is taken to a reputable city hospital where the finest medical attention is made available to her. She is still there on her 8th birthday, so the family housekeeper bakes a beautiful cake for Wanderhope to take to the hospital for this occasion.

The father had made it a practice every now and then in visiting his daughter to slip into St. Catherine's Church nearby and offer a prayer. On this particular morning, he entered the church, put the cake down beside him in the pew. He said some prayers and then in his haste and anxiety to be with his daughter, he walked out leaving the cake in the pew of the church.

He discovered when he arrived at the hospital that Carol had just died. His whole life passed before him in an instant. His strength vanished. As he left the hospital, a desolate and bereaved soul, he remembered the cake in the church. He went back over to St. Catherine's - found the cake - walked out with it. Outside the church, under the main entrance, he looked up into the figure of the crucified Christ carved in stone. And in a burst of passion he removed the cake from the box and hurled it up against the face of Christ. The icing fell against the crown of thorns and dripped down over the visage of the Master. (face) At length the frosting fell away and a face appeared that could easily have said, "Let the children come unto me....for of such is the kingdom of heaven"

The chapter climaxes with these words:

"Then the scene dissolved itself in a mist in which my legs could no longer support their weight and I sank down to the steps. I sat on its worn stones to rest a moment before going on. Thus Wanderhope was found at that place...which.. was said to be the only alternative to the muzzle of a pistol: the foot of the Cross".

CONCLUSION This supper commemorates and interprets the death of Jesus. And every time we partake of these sacred emblems of our faith, our souls are confirmed once again in the knowledge and the faith that God is love!

PRAYER

"Lead us, O Lord, ever more deeply into the great mysteries of life and death as we see them revealed in the bread and wine. May we see there plainly, clearly, simply stated, the meaning of our existence, thy purpose for us, and the ultimate nature of life at the heart of reality.

Bind us more closely to each other in these moments and especially to Him, and lift up our hearts to Thee that we may go out renewed in body and soul - fed, nourished, made new. Amen"

ANNOUNCEMENTS: March 3, 1974

COMMUNION Friends, as most of you know, it is the custom of this church to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion on the first Sunday of each month. For the benefit of visitors in the congregation, we do like to announce that the Table of our Lord in this church is open to all. One does not have to be a member of this parish or of this denomination to receive the Sacrament.

We would invite and encourage all of you to receive the Sacrament this hour - on this the First Sunday of Lent. It will be served to you in the pews, and after all have received the elements we shall commune together - as one body, one family of faith.

CONCERNS Tomorrow evening the choir will present a special program of music. I was fortunate to hear the rehearsal on Saturday afternoon. I enjoyed what I heard, and I'm certain you will, too. Plan to come tomorrow evening at 7:30 for this special Lent program of sacred music by the choir and instrumentalists, and which I understand will be graced by women ushers.

Note, too, the word regarding the Restoration Fund which is now under way. The initial response thus far has been deeply gratifying. I think you would want to know that over fifteen hundred has already been received from fewer than fifteen people.

We're off to a fine start; however, we still have some way to go before we match the \$10,000 grant given us for sanctuary restoration. Timing is essential in terms of this Appeal - for we must know by a week from Thursday what our resources are.

GREETING We direct a warm word of greeting to visitors who have joined us today for the first time. You worship in a church that has been ministering to the needs of people in this city since 1837. It is a House of Worship for all people - and all who would worship with us in love and in peace are most welcome in this House of God.

We hope we shall have opportunity to greet you in a more personal way - either at the door of the church or at the coffee hour downstairs to which all of you are invited.

OFFERING Jesus said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive".
"You give but little when you give of your possession. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give."

Let us worship God with our morning offering.