

# Eucharist, the Act of Love

(The Liturgy – Much More than a form of Words)

The Christian liturgy is not a form of words. It is an action of the community. What kind of an action? Which community?

## *Action de Grace*

The French expression *action de grace* is translated into English as thanksgiving. This latter word, if you are an Indian, means a boring speech at the end of a meeting thanking all and sundry, or if you are an American, a sumptuous Tinkery dinner in November commemorating a historic event constitutive of the nation. It is true that the Eucharistic liturgy has both these elements, a speech offering thanks to God and a commemorative meal.

Perhaps the least helpful way of understanding the Eucharist or Holy Communion is to regard it as a sacrament, a means of grace. If we focus on what we get out of the Eucharist, we have already missed more than half the point.

The Eucharist is fundamentally a response of love and gratitude, not a means of getting something free called grace from God. It is the response of the Creation to its Creator. It is an expression of gratitude on the part of the Creation both for having brought it into being from non-being, and for redeeming it in Christ when it had moved away from being to non-being again by its own wilful choice.

But the liturgy is more than an expression of thanks in words. We can offer thanks to God for creation and redemption in an ordinary prayer. The Eucharist is not a mere prayer. It is an act of self-offering in love, wherein words can serve a function; but it should be clear that mere words cannot constitute an act of love.

There has to be total, loving, adoring, self-surrender in the act of self-offering. The Eucharist is *Agape* (love), and the two are inseparable. It is a response of love to God who is love, who made us out of nothing, and who gave his only-begotten Son that we may not perish. The forms of words, unless it expresses this loving response, becomes a mere noisy gong and a clanging cymbal.

## Action of the Community

The community that makes this act of love has three dimensions. First, it is not just a few local people gathered together in a building who offer the Eucharist. It is offered, in every instance, by the whole body of Christ, and not just by the fragment of the Church which is the local group of Christians of one or more denominations. The local Church is the whole Church in its local manifestation. And so in each local Church, it is the whole Church in heaven and earth, i.e. in all time and space, that offers the Eucharist. The commemoration of the departed and of the saints of the Church is not an optional matter in the Eucharist. It is they with us and we with them that lift up the offering, and we have to be aware of each other in the body of Christ.

Second, the Eucharist is offered on behalf of all mankind, and not just Christians. Even those who are not united to Christ by faith and baptism are linked to him by the fact of the Incarnation. It is human nature that Christ assumed, not Christian nature. The whole of humanity is now linked to the Incarnate Christ, whether they recognize it or not. True, there are fundamental distinctions to be made between the relationship to Christ in spite of themselves. But both relationships exist, and we as Christians and human beings share in both. Our fundamental solidarity with all mankind has to find expression in the liturgy, particularly in the prayers of intercession and in the offertory prayer.

Third, the whole Church, the whole Mankind, and the whole creation -- the three realms in which we as created Christian human beings participate-- have to be lifted up to God in the Eucharist, along with Christ's self-offering on the Cross. This aspect has become doubly important in our time when the environment crisis has begun to explode. It is the fruit of the earth, wheat and wine, that we offer up to God. With the elements the whole of material and organic creation is lifted up to God. Man, Christian humanity in Christ, thus becomes the spokesman, the utterance-giver, the highpriest of Creation as a whole. **The Eucharist is the response of the Creation as God's other, to her Lord.** Mankind and the Church are units within the creation where the Creation has developed greater consciousness and deeper awareness.

Christians do not offer the Eucharist in order to get something out of it. The Church in Christ offers the Eucharist as the mouth-piece and High Priest of Creation. This offering is a response to the act of love which created the universe and redeemed it. Like all acts of true love, it is not instrumental to something else, but a manifestation of the highest reality called love, which when made a means for something else, becomes degraded. When we offer ourselves, the whole mankind, and the whole creation, God again gives Himself to us in that continuing act of love called the Communion. His Body and Blood, God's own body, becomes united with ours, and through us with the whole mankind and the whole of Creation.

A true Eucharistic liturgy is the highest art of God and Man, not for some other purpose, but as an expression of the true being of the Creator and the Creation. The offering is made to the Holy

Trinity. But one of the Holy Trinity, Christ is both the offerer and the offering, for he has by Incarnation identified himself with the Creation, and offered it once for all in his own body on the Cross. The Holy Spirit is the one who unites us to Christ and makes our sacrifice his. The Holy Spirit also opens the way into the Presence. The Holy Spirit cleanses, sanctifies, removes barriers, and makes the love-offering possible. **The Eucharist is thus an act of and in the Holy Trinity, into which we are caught up by grace.**