

THE SACRAMENT OF THE EUCHARIST AND ITS RELATION TO CONFESSION

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This Sacrament is called the sacrament of Thanksgiving (Eucharist is Greek for thanksgiving). It is so called because our Lord, on the evening He instituted this Sacrament, took bread...and gave thanks.

It is also called the Sacrament of Sacraments, for it offers us a unique experience, to eat the very flesh and to drink the very blood of the glorified Lord, and through this, be united to Him. It is from this union between the Lord and our selves that the word "Communion" is derived.. "he that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood dwelleth in me and I in him (John 8:56).

The Lord has offered his own flesh as food, for a very important reason, it was through food that our ancestors were condemned to die by eating the forbidden fruit. Now through the act of love that the Lord has manifested on the cross, We are given the food that "endureth unto everlasting life" (John 6:27),... 'the bread which cometh down from heaven that a man may eat thereof, and not die' (John 6:50).

FIGURES OF THE SACRAMENT:

The word "figure" is an act or a thing that is recorded in the Bible as a symbol for something that is more significant to be revealed at a later time. For example, We say that the crossing of the Red Sea was a figure of Baptism.

The miracle of the feeding of the multitudes was a figure of the Eucharist. This important miracle, the only miracle that is mentioned by all four Evangelists, is sometimes called the Sacramental miracle because of the important relationship that it has to the Sacrament of Eucharist.

From reading the accounts in Mat 14:19, Mark 6:11, we gather that the Lord:

- took the loaves (M,M,L,J)
- looked up to heaven (M,M,L)
- gave thanks (J)
- blessed (M,M,L)
- brake (M,M,L)
- gave to the disciples, and the disciples to the multitude.

Here we can identify all the elements of the Eucharist.

The fact that the Lord gave to the disciples and the disciples to the people is further evidence of the Sacramental connotations of this miracle.

The strongest evidence for the foregoing comes from reading John 6. The chapter narrates the miracle as do the other three Gospels, but stresses the fact that the Lord "had given thanks"(Greek: eucharistesas), a liturgical expression that gave this Sacrament its name; EUCHARIST.

Saint John later tells us that the multitudes that witnessed the miracle sought after the Lord the next day, even traveling by boat across the lake to meet Him. It is here that the Lord uses the opportunity to explain to the multitudes the Sacrament of Thanksgiving.

"Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves and were filled" (John 6:26).

The Lord then draws their attention to the fact that what they had eaten is only a figure of the "true bread from heaven" (John 6:32).

THE MANNA AND THE EUCHARIST:

The Jews, ever proud of their tradition, remind the Lord of the miracle of the Manna. To their fathers, Moses had "presented his credentials" when he fed them the Manna, the food that came down from heaven. The Lord takes the opportunity to teach them that the Manna was only a figure of "the true bread of God is He which cometh down from heaven and giveth life unto the world (John 6:33). It is significant that the Lord uses "He" and not "it" to qualify this bread of God. For now the mystery is being declared to the world.

"I am that bread of life" declares Jesus.. "your fathers did eat Manna in the wilderness and are dead..I am the living bread that came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever..and the bread which I will give is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world (John 6:48-51).

Jesus is trying to explain to them the great mystery, that his own flesh which He will give unto death, of His own will, for the life of the world, He will also give unto us that we may eat thereof and live.

The earthly minded Jews, unable to grasp the spiritual and mystical dimensions of the discourse, are turned off by this "cannibalistic proposal". "how can this man give us his flesh to eat?" The Lord then declares unto them in the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, ye have no life in you.. whoso eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath eternal life... For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.

THE EUCHARISTIC MYSTERY:

To us, children of the new covenant, what the Lord was talking about the Sacrament of the Eucharist, which HE was going to institute later on, on the night He was betrayed, when He took bread, gave thanks, broke and gave unto his disciples saying: "Take eat, this is my body". And doing the same with the cup, gave to his disciples saying: "Take, drink, this is my blood." And then in a direct order to them to administer, after the day of the Pentecost, He adds "this do in remembrance of me"

In this second discourse about the Eucharist, the Lord reveals to His disciples more about the mystery, the mystery referred to in the book of Acts as "the breaking of the bread". That whenever the church is gathered, one of them, will take bread reciting to the church the same words that he has heard from the Lord on that most blessed evening, "this is my body..this is my blood" And that through the prayer of the whole church (the Liturgy), and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the elements (the bread and the wine), these will mystically, but most assuredly, become the very body and the very blood of the glorified Lord.

TRUE BODY AND TRUE BLOOD:

The church has always accepted without murmuring the assertion of the Lord "my flesh is meat indeed and my blood is drink indeed" How the bread becomes the body of our Lord, or how the wine becomes His blood is not revealed to us. It is a mystery (the word Sacrament means a mystery). Neither are we to inquire about how the water became wine at Kana of Galilee, or how the five loaves fed the multitudes, with twelve baskets to spare. One thing is certain, the church since its birth had clung to this tradition that the bread and the wine in the Eucharist are truly indeed the body and blood of Christ.

Saint Paul declares so clearly in his first letter to the Corinthians: "the cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?The bread which we break, is it not the

communion of the body of Christ? (1Co 10:16). The observation that Saint Paul uses the interrogative, points to the fact that Saint Paul was not declaring something new but rather asserting a tradition that was firmly established in the church at that time.

THE LITURGICAL TRADITION AND THE BIBLE:

Our Liturgy keeps alive the tradition that our fathers the Apostles delivered to us. This tradition that existed in the church even before the Gospels were written.

Saint Paul tells the Corinthians: "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And said, take eat: this is my body which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying this cup is the new testament in my blood.." (1 Co 11:24 -25)

It is well known that this letter was written earlier than any of the Gospels. This means that the Eucharistic tradition of the Last Supper (Mat26, Mark 14, Luke 22, 1Co:11) means that each of them wrote from a certain point of view, one emphasizing one aspect, the other attaching more importance to another attaching more importance to another.

The Liturgical tradition of our Coptic Liturgy, is certainly one of the oldest, since it even retains some details not mentioned in the four Biblical accounts mentioned, details which were already established in the traditional "depository" of the early church from which the three Evangelists and Saint Paul have drawn.

For example, the fact that Christ "looked up to heaven ", is not mentioned in any of the four Biblical narratives, but we find this mentioned in narrating the miracle of the feeding of the multitudes (Mat 14, Mark 6, Luke9). As we said earlier, the miracles a figure of the Sacrament, and even though the narrative of the last Supper does not mention it, our Liturgical tradition, much older than the written Bible, conserves for us the narrative and the words of institution spoken by the Lord, in their most intricate details.

The words "He gave thanks" and "He blessed " are found however in the Lord's intercessory prayer found in John 17: "And for their sakes I sanctify my self, that they also might be sanctified through the truth" (John 17:19).

Many exegetes explain the word "sanctify" not in terms of "to make holy" for our Lord is the source of holiness, but in the sense of "CONsecrate" To consecrate something is to make a vow that this thing is offered exclusively to God. For example when we consecrate a chalice or a paten, we are making a vow of offering them exclusively for the use on Lord, when He was about to offer Himself as a pleasing sacrifice unto His Good Father, on our behalf, sanctified Himself for this purpose, in order that through His sacrifice on the cross we may be sanctified in Him. Our beautiful Liturgical tradition has preserved for us this act of the Lord "sanctifying Himself" in the context of the institution narrative. For indeed the sacrifice of the cross and the sacrifice of the cross and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one and the same.

Another fact preserved for us in our Liturgical tradition is the mingling of water and wine. Although not mentioned in the Biblical narratives, yet no one will argue with this, since it was the custom at that time to drink mingled with water. The book of Proverbs, written a thousand years before the Gospels, prophesies about this: "Come eat of my bread , and drink of the wine which I have mingled (Pro9:5).

THE ETHICS OF HAVING COMMUNION:

1-Purity of body and soul: Unlike the Old testament, the new testament has no rites of purification

or ablutions, however, one is expected to be clean of body and wearing clean clothes. This is symbolic however, for being clean physically reminds one of the more essential requirement of purity of the soul.

2-Menstrual period:

Women normally refrain from having communion during their period. This is not because they are impure, because according to saint Athanasius, only sin makes one impure. The reason behind this is explained by Bishop Sawires Ibn Almocaffaa, a tenth century Coptic Bishop who tells us that in the Eucharist, Christ offers us His body as a sacrifice, we in turn offer Him our bodies as a sacrifice of love. Sacrifices to God are supposed to be perfect. Woman during her period does not consider herself perfect in the physical or psychological sense. That is why she refrains from taking communion.

3-Marital Relations

Marital sexual relations are not practiced on the eve of having communion. This is not because they are sinful or make one impure, on the contrary, these relations are blessed and sanctified through the sacrament of Marriage. However, as we said earlier, one who partakes of communion is offering this abstinence as a sacrifice of love. The married couple are refraining from the union that is sanctified by the Sacrament of marriage. In order to prepare themselves for the union (or communion) with the Lord through the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

4-Having peace with others: "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother and then come and offer thy gift. (Mat 5:23)

CONFESSION AND COMMUNION

We already said that one has to be clean in body and spirit before approaching the awesome mystery of the Lord's body and blood. To be clean in body, one has to wash his body clean in spirit, one has to wash away his sins through the Sacrament of repentance, and put on the clean garments of righteousness.

When the prodigal son returned to his father's house, he had to confess and put on clean clothes before being admitted to the feast. (Luke 15:21-23).

This washing away of sins by confession is symbolically illustrated in the Lord's washing of the disciples' feet (John 13:1-17). The Lord started washing the disciples' feet and when Peter's turn comes he objects out of reverence to the Lord. The Lord tells Peter "what I do thou knowest not now but thou shalt know hereafter" Here the Lord explains to Peter that the action has some mystical aspect that he will understand later (when he receives the Holy Spirit on Pentecost day). Peter nevertheless insists: "Thou shalt never wash my feet". The Lord answers him: "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me"

Peter realizing that this mystical washing of the feet is essential to his eternal life, now asks the Lord to wash not only his feet, but also his hands and head. But the Lord answers: "He that is feet"

The Lord's action of washing the feet of his disciples is symbolic of the washing of the feet is essential to his eternal life, now asks the Lord to wash not only his feet, but also his hands and head. But the Lord answers: "He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet".

The Lord's action of washing the feet of his disciples is symbolic of the washing away of sins

through the Sacrament of Confession. The Lord emphasizes to us that it is not optional, since if we don't get shall have no part with Christ.

The Lord explains the relation of the Sacrament of Baptism to the Sacrament of Confession by saying that he that is washed (baptized) needs not sins, for baptized is done only once , but rather "wash his feet" that is to say wash away his feet" that is to say wash away his every day sins through the Sacrament of Confession.

THE PERILS OF COMMUNION WITHOUT CONFESSION:

The Bible has a lot to say about approaching the Sacrament of Communion without washing away our sins.

Saint Paul tells us: "Wherefor whosoever shall eat this bread and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily , shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord . But let a man examine himself...for he that eateth and drinketh damnation to himself not discerning the Lord,s body". (1Co 11:27-29).

The Gospel According to saint John tells us of such a man that approached the Mystical Supper with unrepented evil in his heart . Judas Iscariot, was there sitting with the Lord and the rest of the disciples with his heart set on betraying his Lord. The Lord gives him a chance to repent when he says: "verily verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray him the Lord answers "he it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it. Judas totally unrepented, accepts the dipped sop..." and having received the sop he went immediately and it was night" (John 13:26-30)

The words "it was night" are symbolic of the outer darkness that is prepared for him who is "not discerning the Lord's body"

The King (God the Father) has a wedding feast for his Son (our Lord Jesus). The feast here symbolizes the Eucharistic feast, the table of the Lord. "And when the King came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment: And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou hither not having a wading garment? and he was speechless. Then said the King to the servants, bind him hand and feet, and take him away, and cast him into the outer darkness : there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Mat 22:11-13).

Before coming to the partake of the holy Sacrament, We have to put on the wedding garment, the state of heavenly purity that we obtain, when we confess and obtain the absolution.

Saint Paul in warning the Corinthians of the perils of approaching the mysteries unworthily, adds: "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we judge ourselves we should not be judged.

THE INSTITUTION OF THE SACRAMENT:

The Lord instituted this Sacrament when, after His resurrection, while speaking to His holy disciples "He breathed on them and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain they are retained. (John 20:22,23).

The disciples received the Holy Spirit from the Lord before His ascension and later on, on the day of Pentecost, received the Holy Spirit while in the upper chamber, so what is the difference between these two incidence?

H.H Pope Shenouda explains this by saying that the coming down of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost is the equivalent of the coming of the Holy Spirit on every one of Chrismation (anointing with the Holy Myron). The disciples, however, received the Holy Spirit from the Lord when He

established the Sacrament of Repentance (confession) This "infusion of Repentance (confession) This "infusion" of the Holy Spirit was to give them a special grace, and a commission, to accept confession from the faithful. This was only granted to the disciples and thy passed on the same to their own disciples through the Apostolic succession.

This has been handed down from the disciples to the Bishops and the priests.

A priest, after being ordained, and before receiving communion at the alter is asked by the bishop (or the Pope) to open his mouth, and the bishop, or the pope, breathes into his mouth, thus imparting to accept confession and give to people the absolution of their sins according to the Lord's saying: whose soever sins ye forgive they are forgiven.

CONFESSION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT:

In the old testament, people had to confess their sins and bring a sin offering to the priests: "And it shall be, when he shall be guilty in one of these things, that he shall confess that he hath sinned in that thing. And he shall bring his trespass offering unto the Lord for his sin which he hath sinned..and the priest shall make an atonement for him concerning his sin (Lev 5:5,6).

The priest would then take his sacrificial animal (a lamb or a goat).. "And he shall lay his hand upon the head of the sin offering ,and slay it for a sin offering (Lev4:33).

This sacrifice of sin was a figure of "the Lamb of God who carrieth the sin of the world" (John 1:29), Who made Himself a sacrifice of sin on our behalf (Isa43:1o).

This ritual has a parallel in our Eucharistic rite. In the Offertory, when the priest has chosen the "Lamb" (the bread which will become the body of Christ), he then lays his hand on the chosen lamb and says inaudibly: "grant o Lord, that this our sacrifice, be acceptable unto Thee, for my sins and the ignorances of The people"

In the new testament, the Sacrament has replaced its old testament figure. The sinner would come to the priest confessing his sin that he has done, and the priest shall make an atonement for him concerning his sin (prays that God forgives him, the absolution). Then, at the Eucharist, the priest lays his hands on the lamb (the lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world), and offers Him as our Eucharistic of the new testament, for which the animal sacrifices of the old testament were a mere figure.

CONFESSION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT:

Saint john tells us "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1John 1:9).

Saint James also exhorts us "confess your sins, one to another, he means one human being to another human being (the priest), and not directly to God, a temptation that the devil often suggests to us, to our peril.