

The Word of God and the Eucharist¹

GILLES LANGEVIN, S.J.

IT WOULD BE HARD to find a subject that brings us closer to the heart of Christian reality than the question of the reciprocal relations of Revelation and the Eucharist. One can see immediately that we are dealing, in both cases, with the gift of himself which God makes to men—in other words, with the communion with himself into which he admits us by grace. In addressing his Word to us, God has communicated to us that which he alone knew, the mystery of his transcendent being; even though it does not unveil it for us, faith hands over to us the very secret of God. In offering himself to us in the Eucharist, the subsistent Word of God, the Logos, who is not a created idea, but the effulgence of the Father's glory and the very image of his substance (cf. Heb. 1:3), gives himself to us as bread of life, as perfection of our being.

The gift of God which we are about to consider presents itself to us, not only in the unity and the richness which it attained at the culmination of the history of salvation, but also in the diverse phases of the development through which an infinitely wise God has made it pass. "God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things" (Heb. 1:1-2). Thus the Word of God began by resounding in our ears; then it became flesh, to show us the countenance of the Father; then it became bread of life. "He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:54). Thus we move, without any breach of continuity, from verbal communication to Christ and to the Eucharist, from the uttered word to the incarnate Word and to the Word made bread of life.

In this study we shall first see how, for the Christian, faith in the Word of God and the reception of the Eucharist have a real and essential bearing on each other. Then we shall consider, looking at the Word of God and the Eucharist in themselves, how they borrow one another's special characteristics.

I

Our adherence to the Word of God is effected in faith and in sacramental communion, working indivisibly; the acceptance of Revelation implies the reception of the Eucharist, and *vice versa*. The fact is that faith has not attained its true dimensions if it has not accepted the gift of himself which God makes to us in the Eucharist, and that, on the other hand, the reception

1. This is the second of the papers given at the "Ecumenical Dialogue" held in Montreal on 4 January 1962 to appear in this *Journal*.

of the eucharistic bread is an empty ceremony if it does not come as the authentication and the crown of a faith in words which are spirit and which are life (cf. John 6:63). This intimate union of the Word of God and the Eucharist is presented to us most definitely and most profoundly in the Holy Scriptures, in the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. For a long time now it has been recognized that the "bread of life" stands at once for the teaching of Christ, received in faith, and for the subsistent Word who offers himself in the Sacrament as the food of immortality.

After the manifestly symbolic miracles of the multiplication of the loaves and the crossing of the sea—miracles wrought as the Passover was approaching, so as to suggest in advance that the bread given by Jesus will constitute the new Passover (John 6:4)—a long discourse expresses and develops the significance of these events. Jesus sets himself to arouse *faith* in an altogether new *bread of life* among those who are scarcely prepared to look beyond bodily satisfaction (6:26f.). The two themes of faith in the Word of God and the reception of the bread of life are interdependent and intertwined throughout this wonderful chapter. Thus, over against the "works" of which the Jews speak Jesus sets "the work of God," which is "that ye believe on him whom he hath sent" (6:29); while to the request for a miraculous bread, similar to that which Moses obtained from God in the desert, Jesus replies: "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall not hunger, and he that believeth on me shall never thirst" (6:35). And he goes on: "But I said unto you, that ye have seen me, and yet believe not" (6:36). "This is the will of my Father, that every one that beholdeth the Son, and believeth on him, should have eternal life; and that I should raise him up at the last day" (6:40). "He that believeth hath eternal life" (6:47).

Then, beginning with verse 51 of this chapter, the discourse becomes permeated with a realism which bewilders the disciples:

[Jesus said:] "I am the living bread which came down out of heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: yea and the bread which I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world." The Jews therefore strove one with another, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus therefore said unto them, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, ye have not life in yourselves. He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed" (6:51-55).

The acceptance of this unheard of reality appears as the major test of the faith of the disciples:

Many therefore of his disciples, when they heard this, said, "This is a hard saying; who can hear it?" But Jesus knowing in himself that his disciples murmured at this, said unto them, "Doth this cause you to stumble? What then if ye should behold the Son of man ascending where he was before? It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I have spoken unto you are spirit and life. But there are some of you that believe not." . . . Upon this many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him (6:60-66).

If one wanted to draw out systematically the teaching of this chapter, where not only do the two themes of faith in the Word of God and the reception of the bread of life meet, but one is drawn progressively from the one to the other, one would note in the first place that the Word of God comes to arouse and enkindle our faith, and that it is our faith in this Word which ensures salvation. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth hath eternal life" (6:47).

But one would promptly add that faith, to be perfect and effectual, must reach the point where it accepts the gift of himself which Christ makes to us in the Sacrament. At the moment when it most sharply tests our faith, the moment when the Word made flesh presents himself as food to eat—precisely at that moment the Word of God assumes the highest form which it can take for us: namely, the subsistent Word giving himself to us as promise and, more than that, as earnest of that gift of himself which God will bestow upon us in eternity. At the summit and culmination of Revelation, the Word of God does not offer us concepts and propositions which tell us about God; it brings God himself to us, it is God. The Word first arouses our faith, but in response to that faith we receive the Word of God in person.

At the same time, one could not imagine a fruitful reception of the bread of life which was not preceded and accompanied by a living faith. If faith must lead us to accept and receive the bread of life, in their turn those two acts have need of faith, and to conceive of the reception of the Eucharist as acting apart from the spirit's adherence to the mystery of the God who became flesh and who makes himself food for his own would be to reduce it to the level of magical rites. "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I have spoken unto you are spirit, and are life" (6:63).

II

If his adherence to the Word of God and his reception of the Eucharist are so closely connected for the believer, the reason is that in their own reality the Word and the Eucharist already share each other's characteristic qualities. The Word of God has a sacramental quality, while on the other hand the Sacrament plays the role of a word.

It has often been observed that in the language of the Bible the same word, *dabar*, designates both speech and action. It is in God himself that this identification is realized in the most definite fashion:

As the rain cometh down and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, and giveth seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it (Isa. 55:10f.).

The power of the Word of God participates in the power of God himself, and it is the Word that makes history as it is the Word that has made beings arise out of nothing.

Consequently, we should not be surprised if God has willed that, in the new dispensation, realities of grace should arise at the summons of his Word. By God's command, words are pronounced which actually produce what they signify. But all the might and the goodness of God must have shone forth in the power which he gave to his Church to make the Word present in person at the summons of the words which, he, God, left to her: "This is my body; this is my blood." The word uttered in God's name gives us God himself, the subsistent Word. Thus it is in taking up the words of the incarnate Logos—words to which she adheres in faith and which she pronounces in the name of Christ and at his command—that the Church makes the Word of God present in her midst.

But the word which effects what it signifies, borrowing its efficacy from the very power of God—that word also signifies what it effects. To put it another way, if the Word becomes sacrament in the Church, the Sacrament in its turn is a word. To begin with we must note that every sacrament, in so far as it is a sensible sign, provides some instruction for the mind and thus participates in the nature of the word. Baptism, for example, speaks in its own way of the remission of sins and the renewal of the soul. As for the Eucharist, it speaks to us both as sacrament and as sacrifice. I have sufficiently stressed its nature as spiritual food, so that it will not be necessary to underline the teaching which the Eucharist gives us on this subject. As spiritual bread, it teaches us how the true food of our souls is God, who alone can satisfy their hunger and fulfil their desires. In its sacramental aspect, moreover, it speaks to us of the unity that prevails among those who share the same loaf and unite themselves with the same Lord.

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion of the body of Christ? Seeing that there is one bread, we, who are many, are one body: for we all partake of the one bread (1 Cor. 10:16f.).

With the writers of the New Testament—with St. Luke and St. Paul—we shall call attention above all to the "prophetic" character of the Eucharist considered as sacrifice. The Eucharist proclaims the death and resurrection of Christ, both as a memorial presented to our recollection and as a re-presentation in the sacramental order of that redemptive death and resurrection. St. Paul writes:

I received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, how that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed took bread; and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you: this do in remembrance of me." In like manner also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood: this do, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as ye eat this bread and drink the cup, ye proclaim the Lord's death till he come (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

Undoubtedly, then, the eucharistic sacrifice first speaks to us about the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus in the manner of an object-lesson, an acted parable. But the proclamation which is made here is not just the sort of proclamation that a symbol can make of the reality to which it points; it is the proclamation which the reality makes of itself to those who receive it in faith. In the sacramental mystery, the death of Christ is re-presented anew. There is not another death—that would deprive the sacrifice of all its value, since there is only one redemptive death, that of Christ on Calvary—but neither is there just an image or a likeness of that unique death which has brought us salvation. We have to do with the same death, made present to all times and to every point of space. The eucharistic sacrifice proclaims the death of Christ until the Lord's return in glory. As a German theologian, H. Schlier, puts it: "It is not the 'memorial' of the Lord that makes the Lord present, but on the contrary it is his presence that makes possible the apprehension of that presence and consequently the manifestation of his mysterious presence."² The present Christ speaks of his death to anyone who will really open his soul to the message of salvation. The same theologian writes:

We see, then, that in the divine service of the community there is a basic "announcement." It has its origin in the Lord himself and proceeds from him according to the rite established by the apostolic tradition. As memorial of the Lord, it *announces*, officially and solemnly, the salvation of the congregation, and *re-presents* in its proclamation the Lord himself in the act of his saving death.³

III

In this way, we may say, the cycle of the Word of God and the eucharistic action is completed. After the Word has become person and has been uttered in the very act whereby it ensures the salvation of mankind, the Eucharist itself becomes word or proclamation of the Lord's death until he comes. United in the life of the Christian, who finds his nourishment in the Word of God and in the Eucharist, and united in that unceasing interchange wherein the Word becomes the very Logos of God and the Sacrament becomes proclamation, Revelation and the Eucharist produce similar effects in souls. They both unite us to Christ and they both unite believers among themselves. They both procure for us the presence of Christ in our midst—"that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that ye may be rooted and grounded in love" (Eph. 3:17). But if faith inspires our hope—as the Epistle to the Romans says: "Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4)—the Eucharist already gives us the earnest of eternal life. In faith and in the Sacrament we receive that very God whom we shall meet in the face-to-face vision of eternity.

Translated by EUGENE R. FAIRWEATHER

2. H. Schlier, *Die Zeit der Kirche* (Freiburg: Herder, 1956), p. 248.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 250f.