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HOLY COMMUNION (VI)

One of the ancient witnesses we have to the worship of the early Church is a short treatise on church order called the Didache which was written at about the same time as the books of the New Testament. It is our first important witness to that which the New Testament does not discuss, the form and order for the administration of Holy Communion, and for that reason has attracted much attention since the one remaining complete Greek manuscript was rediscovered in 1875 in Jerusalem.

Chapter 14 gives this direction about the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, in terms that echo down the centuries to our own time: "On the Lord's day come together, break bread, and give thanks, having confessed your transgressions, that your offering may be pure; but let none who has a quarrel with his fellow join in your meeting until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice be not defiled. For this is that which was spoken by the Lord [Malachi 1:11, 14], 'In every place and time offer me a pure sacrifice, for I am a great king, saith the Lord, and my name is wonderful among the Gentiles.'"

In this passage the word "give thanks" is the verbal form of the noun eucharistia, one of the ancient names for the sacrament we also call Holy Communion. As this name indicates, the Church seeks for the benefits of communion in Christ in the context of thanksgiving to God for his work of salvation in Christ. In the Eucharist we give thanks for what God has done for us in the past, as the basis of our communion with him in the present, and our hope for the consummation of his purposes in the future.

It is in accord with this tradition that in the Prayer Book order the actual act of communion (the delivery of the consecrated elements of bread and wine) is framed on either side by eucharistic acts of praise and thanksgiving. The Sursum Corda, Preface, Sanctus and Prayer of Consecration precede communion, and the Prayer of Thanksgiving and Gloria in Excelsis follow it.

But the Didache's instruction to "come together, break bread, and give thanks" comes with the direction, "having confessed your transgressions, that your offering may be pure". The eucharistic celebration requires a penitential preparation. This penitential preparation has taken various forms through the history of the

church's worship, but since about the year 1000, a general confession (the prayer Confiteor) and absolution of sin became part of the prayers of the priest and those assisting him as they came to the altar, and the tendency was to extend its use to those who were coming to communion. In 1548, while the Latin mass was still in use in England, Cranmer provided a set of prayers in English for those coming to communion: the invitation, general confession, absolution and comfortable words, which in 1552 he transferred to their present position, between the Prayer for the Church and the Sursum corda. For Anglicans the rule of private and particular (auricular) confession of sins is "all may, none must, some should" (cf second Exhortation, third paragraph, pp 87-88). But public and general confession of sin before the eucharistic prayers is required for all; and this requirement, although not absolutely new, reflects a new clarity and emphasis about the meaning of communion.

The General Confession composed by Cranmer is a small masterpiece of liturgical art. It begins with confession proper (repentance in mind): an acknowledgement that we have sinned, and that we have sinned "most grievously", against "divine Majesty", and thereby have provoked "most justly" God's "wrath and indignation against us." However trivial the sin may seem to be – perhaps just a "thought" or a "word", sin is always the rejection of God, denial that his word his true and his will is good.

The Confession then moves on to the expression of contrition (repentance in will): the expression of sorrow for sin, the aversion of the will from what is wrong. "We do earnestly repent, and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; ... the burden of them is intolerable". As C. S. Lewis once pointed out, we find sin all too easy to tolerate; but Cranmer's language is about its objective reality, not our subjective attitude. The word "intolerable" is used in its root sense, "too heavy for me to bear" – a phrase from Psalm 38. The burden is indeed too heavy for us: only the Lamb of God can take it away.

Confession and contrition, repentance in mind and will, are completed in a third act, satisfaction, repentance in deed. Significantly, Cranmer uses that word in the Prayer of Consecration, in reference to the atoning death of Christ: but he does make clear that true repentance entails a changed life. The second exhortation (p. 87) is explicit that such amendment of life involves satisfaction in the external sense, reparation and restitution for the wrongs we have done.

The exercise of repentance in Confession naturally leads to the exercise of faith in God's mercy, in the Absolution and Comfortable Words, pronounced by Christ's representative. It is in virtue of this authoritative word, with hearts lightened of their burden, that we then respond as we are bidden to "lift up our hearts" (sursum corda, in the Latin) to the Lord in the thankful praise (praefatio, or preface, in Latin) and join together with the angels in their song of adoration for he who is holy (sanctus). And thus our acts of repentance and faith are completed again in an act of grateful love, eucharistia.

Penitence and praise, sorrow for sin and joy of salvation: these are not opposed, but dynamically related: it is as we turn from our sins in the sorrow of contrition, and lay hold of the forgiveness promised in the gospel, that with lightened hearts we rise to adore the mystery of divine love, singing with grateful hearts, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God

Almighty, heaven and earth are full of thy glory”.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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