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## HOLY COMMUNION (VII)

With the Prayer of Consecration (pp 80-81 in the Prayer Book) we come to the longest and perhaps most demanding prayer in the Holy Communion. To consecrate something is to set it apart from common uses for sacred or holy purposes. (Notice how the root word "sacred" appears in the middle syllable of "consecrate"). Thus bishops, church buildings, and altars are said to be "consecrated" for the service of God. In consecration – which is related to the ideas of "dedication", "sanctification", and "blessing", the Lord takes direct possession of the person or thing that is offered and dedicated, and makes it the instrument of his holy will.

In the Holy Communion, the elements ("gifts and creatures") of bread and wine are consecrated with the result that, (as Prayer Books since 1552 have put it) "we, receiving them according to ... Christ's holy institution, ... may be partakers of his most blessed Body and Blood". In the consecration of the elements, they become the sacramental means of our real participation in Christ, and in all the benefits of his sacrifice. And thus the "consecration" extends also the communicant believer: we too are made holy, we are consecrated to his service: "that he may dwell in us, and we in him". That is to say, as we possess him in all the gracious benefits of his sacrificial death, so he possesses us in all the obligations of a sacrificial life.

How does this consecration take place? It is often said that in the western church the elements are consecrated by the recital of the Institution Narrative (Christ's words over the bread and cup at the Last Supper), whereas in the east the focus of consecration has been the Epiclesis (or Invocation) of the Spirit in the communion. Cranmer himself seems to have seen no opposition in these emphases, and the American Prayer Book (following 18th-century precedents in the Non-Juror and Scottish liturgies, which themselves look back to Eastern Orthodox rites) requires both. For the Word of God and the Spirit of God never act separately. What Christ commands and promises in his word, the Spirit fulfills. Yet both within the Trinity, and in the economy of salvation, the Word has a certain priority over the Spirit - for the Spirit "shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear" – i.e. the Word of God – "that shall he speak" (John 16:13). Therefore, because the one implies the other, even the recitation of the Institution narrative without an Epiclesis (as in much historic western practice) is sufficient for consecration. And therefore it is fitting that

the words of Christ be distinguished by the traditional ceremonies of elevation and genuflection which follow them. In the words of Queen Elizabeth I – indifferent poetry, but excellent theology:

'Twas God the Word that spake it;

He took the bread and brake it;

And what he there did make it;

I do believe and take it.

Now, some comment on the structure of the Prayer of Consecration. Following upon the *Sursum corda* ("Lift up your hearts"), the Preface ("it is very meet, right, and our bounden duty"), and Sanctus ("Holy, holy, holy"), the Prayer of Consecration begins on the note of thankful adoration and commemoration, for God's "tender mercy", for his gift of his Son "to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption"; for his all-sufficient self-offering of himself against our sins, and of his institution of the sacrament as a "perpetual memory" of his saving death. The central theme, therefore, of this first paragraph (on page 80) is the sacrifice of Christ.

In the second paragraph, entitled in the American Prayer Book "The Oblation", the theme of thankful commemoration for Christ's sacrifice is summed up, and turns to prayerful supplication for God to accept our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, which is the theme of the final paragraph. What we see on the altar are the outward signs of Christ's Body, offered once for all upon the cross to reconcile us to God and to one another in one Body, which is the Church. In those outward signs of his sacrifice for us, we learn to offer ourselves through him: "ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice". "Be what you see" says St. Augustine, "and receive what you are"; for Christ "willed that we should belong to him, and consecrated the mystery of our peace and of our unity on his table".

This development in ideas is reflected in the exact symmetry of its literary structure. The memorial of the Cross in the first paragraph matches the self-offering of the Church in the last; the Institution narrative finds its counterpart in the Invocation (the prayer for our participation in Christ's body and blood), and at the center of the chiasmus (the enveloping framework) is "the Oblation", in which obedient commemoration gives rise to thankful self-offering.

There are thus two sides to our communion in the sacrament consecrated in this prayer: we claim the benefits of Christ's sacrifice for us, and we acknowledge ourselves bound by gratitude to serve him. "Ye are not your own" says the Apostle, "ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20).

**The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar**

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