The Eucharist today

'Formerly we seemed to focus on Calvary as if there were no Easter morning' writes Eugene Duffy, a priest of the diocese of Achonry and Director of the Western Bishops' Pastoral Theology Initiative. Here he shows how contemporary eucharistic theology takes into account the whole paschal mystery and focuses on the 'Mass as a whole, stressing equally that it is a sacred banquet, a memorial and sacrifice'.

Eugene Duffy

Contemporary eucharistic theology focuses on the liturgical action of the Mass as a whole, stressing equally that it is a sacred banquet, a memorial and a sacrifice. It is an action of the gathered assembly, not just of the presiding priest. Here some of these key ideas will be explored in the hope that they will enable all those who celebrate Eucharist to have a deeper appreciation of the profound action in which they engage.

The Trinity and the Eucharist

The Christian belief in a triune God has to condition all of our theological endeavours. A useful way to introduce ourselves to the central mystery of the triune God is to look at the Rublev Hospitality Icon. Through figures, colours and symbols the artist conveys more eloquently than any words an appreciation of the life of the Trinity and the unfolding plan of God, the great mystery about which St Paul speaks in the letter to the Ephesians (1:3-14).

The three persons are seated around the table, bonded together in a fellowship of love. They are turned outward towards the world with an attentive gaze, ready to welcome their guests around their table. This is a liturgy of hospitality, joy and blessedness, a

liturgy which will only be fully realised when all our guests share in their banquet.

Banquet of life for all

The Son goes out from that table and in the person of Jesus of Nazareth makes known to the human family what is on offer for them. He issues the invitation to join that table-fellowship in the most personal way possible. The invitation is not presented as something in a distant future but as something which can begin to be experienced in the present. Jesus in his own life and ministry gives a concrete expression of what that table-fellowship really means.

Jesus embodied the compassion of God in a great variety of ways, both in word and in action. His preaching of the reign of God heralded a new Exodus, the ending of a long exile and the ultimate triumph over the powers of evil. The vision of the new future was spelled out in parables which spoke of profound reconciliation, prodigal love and unbounded joy. This new future was embodied concretely in the healing ministry of Jesus but above all in the meals which he shared with those whom he encountered.

Jesus cut through the prejudices which religious people had erected in a way which is difficult for us to imagine. He accepted around his table everybody, no matter what their background or social standing. He accepted people as they were, as fellow human beings so that they felt forgiven, reconciled and part of the wider community (see Luke 14:15-24). He enabled people to feel genuinely human again, with their dignity restored. He gave them fresh insight into their unique worth and value before God and one another.

The sheer prodigality of God's love is also evident in the context of other meals which Jesus enriched by providing food and drink for the participants. When the drink ran out at Cana he provided a generous draft of good fresh wine. He did not want to see the enjoyment of the occasion in any way diminished. Similarly, we find him, again in John's Gospel, providing an abundance of food for those who are tired and hungry at the end of a long day on the hillside.

As well as responding to the immediate needs of the people, Jesus was giving them a foretaste of the messianic banquet. The abundance of Jesus' provisions was merely an anticipation of that great banquet when:

> Yahweh Sabaoth will prepare for all peoples
> a banquet of rich food,
> a banquet of fine wines,
> of food rich and juicy,
> of fine strained wines (Isa 25:6).

None of the implications of the table-fellowship of Jesus, neither its generosity nor its inclusiveness nor its eschatological significance, were lost on those who witnessed it. All of these fuelled the desire of his opponents to be rid of him, Nevertheless, Jesus was not deterred by this opposition. Rather was he determined to remain resolutely committed to the plan of God, the advancement of God's reign on earth.

A consideration of the meals of Jesus provides an important context both for the Last Supper itself and for Eucharist which is, from a liturgical perspective, a ritual meal. His table-fellowship is still a challenge to us as we gather to celebrate Eucharist, raising questions about our attention to human dignity, prejudice and unconditional love.

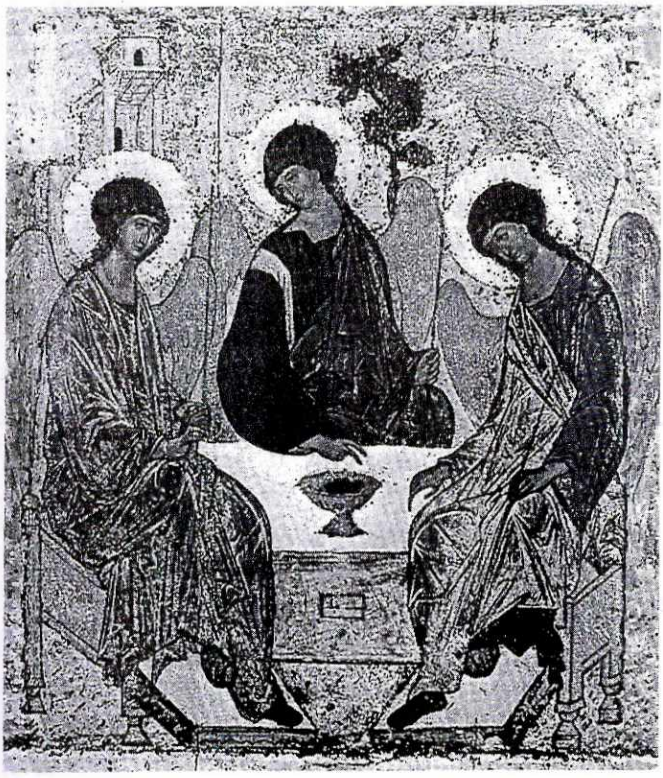
The Last Supper

When he finally went up to Jerusalem for the Passover of that year Jesus must have been acutely aware of the mounting opposition to him and his message. He must also have been aware that the Passover celebration was a time of tension in the city and that anyone who was regarded as a threat to the peace and stability of the nation was likely to be executed.

These two factors provide the critical background against which we begin to understand the Last Supper. These realities provide an important horizon of understanding for the disciples and for us of a later generation. They lead us into an exploration of a key idea of eucharistic understanding, namely, that of memorial.

The Eucharist as memorial

We cannot be sure that the Last Supper itself was in fact a Passover meal but what we can say is that it was celebrated in the context of the Passover. Central to the Passover celebration was the concept of memorial. The memorial was more than a remembering of the past events of the Exodus. Through ritual action and a familiar accompanying



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narrative, the people were enabled to share in the original experience of their ancestors who journeyed from the slavery of Egypt to the freedom of the promised land. The food, the dress, the posture and people present were all meant to conspire in evoking something of that original experience which effected their liberation and their constitution as the people of God.

The Jewish memorial was meant to act as a ritual through which the people thanked God for what God had done in the past and on the basis of this goodness, this steadfast love, they pleaded with God to continue showing that kind of love into the future. Memorial also reminded God of the divine favour shown them and made a claim on the basis of past experience that God would bring to fulfilment the work already begun.

Perhaps one of the clearest instances of memorial in the Old Testament is that which occurs in the book of Nehemiah (Ch 9). The context is that the people have returned from their exile in Babylon. They are in Jerusalem, a city which has been destroyed. Their leaders have no idea how they are going to rebuild what has been destroyed nor how their future will look. Instead of wallowing in self-pity and despair they gather the people and in the presence of the assembly begin to recapitulate the long catalogue of favourable deeds which their God has worked on their behalf. Despite the vicissitudes of history and the infidelities of the people, God always remained constant in goodness and mercy. Reflection on the past gives them every confidence to believe and hope that this same God will continue to show favour into the future and will provide for the good of all the people.

This background is important, too, for an understanding of what Jesus was doing in the words and actions of the Last Supper. His own situation of desolation was significant. He had given his life entirely to preaching the immediacy of God's reign and giving people concrete experiences of its impact on their lives. Now as he faced the prospect of violent death it may seem as if the forces of evil and those who could not accept him were about to be vindicated. It is against such a devastating vista that he summoned his disciples to gather with him around the table and to share this last meal of fellowship with him.

Given the Passover context it is entirely likely that Jesus recapitulated and proclaimed the steadfast love of God as this had been made manifest in the history of the people of Israel and also in his own life. He must have renewed his own sense of gratitude to God for what God had done in him and reaffirmed his own commitment to face death rather than retract anything he had previously said or done in God's name. Although the only horizon which lay ahead of him was death, he seemed determined to face it with a certain confidence that even in this hour of darkness and human uncertainty God would act and bring a new future out of an otherwise destructive event. Jesus can then be understood to have faced death with confidence in God's abiding love but without knowing the shape which God's future might take. His confidence was such that he could say to his disciples that even his own body would be taken up into the shaping of that future. Thus he could give over his body to them and to the Father in a confident surrender of loving service. So his own body was to be part of the future which God was

now shaping. It is only in the light of the resurrection that the full implications of what Jesus said and did at the Last Supper could be fully appreciated. Only resurrection light can elucidate the full significance of Jesus' command to 'do this as a memorial of me'.

Thanksgiving

The Eucharist itself is then understood as a memorial in the light of this Jewish faith and liturgical context in which it was first celebrated. The memorial is an act both of gratitude and of supplication. Thanksgiving was always stressed as an important dimension of the eucharistic action. In addition to the reasons for which the Jewish people might thank God, the disciples of Jesus had further reasons for expressing their gratitude. They now thanked God for what was done for them in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Furthermore, on the basis of this divine favour they pleaded God with renewed confidence, asking that what was begun in the Christ event would be brought to completion for all of them. Thus it is that all the eucharistic prayers are directed to the Father.

The memorial of the Eucharist is much more than a subjective remembrance. In the Eucharist the past event of the death and resurrection of Christ is sacramentally present through the liturgical action. Not only is the saving event of the past sacramentally present but the very person of the victim is present as a resurrected and transfigured body. Here we cross over into the realm of faith perception. The faith conviction of the Church is that in the eucharistic action the risen Christ is present to the community in a uniquely personal way, albeit under the appearances of bread and wine.

The Eucharist as sacrifice

Our notion of sacrifice needs a little retrieval. Sacrifice is a way in which the offerer expresses the desire to be in union with God and it involves making a significant gesture which demonstrates that deep self-commitment. In the Old Testament a person took an animal or food or something else which was precious and offered it to God as a sign of his or her desire to be in real communion with God and to enjoy God's favour.

The offering was, however, only one side of the sacrifice. It had to be accepted by God in order for the transaction to be complete. The acceptance was signified by the sacrifice being consumed by fire (2 Chr 7:1-3); by the smoke of the burnt offering rising up to God (Lev 9:22-24; Exod 19:18); more commonly by the word spoken by the presiding priest (2 Sam 24:23; Ezek 43:27). The acceptance or the sacrifice is essential to its very nature because without acceptance there is no sacrifice.

Three of the main sacrifices of the Old Testament were:

i) the original Passover sacrifice where the blood of the lamb was sprinkled on the door-posts of the Hebrew tents to ensure the protection of the people when the angel of destruction passed by during the night (Exod 12);

ii) the Covenant sacrifice offered during the Exodus when Moses sprinkled the blood of the bull on the altar and on the people sealing their desire to be forever in communion with God and with one another (Exod 24:8);

iii) the Day of Atonement when sacrifices were offered as sin offerings, for the remission of the sins of the people (Lev 16).

In all of these sacrifices blood played an important role. Blood was sacred because it was the symbol of life and life belonged exclusively to God. Therefore in the pouring out of blood the person offering was pouring out his or her own self before God, signifying the desire for communion of life with God. These ideas underlie our understanding of the Eucharist as a sacrifice.

The New Testament clearly understands the death of Jesus as a sacrificial offering. The offering of Jesus is very different from any of the offerings of the Old Testament. In all previous sacrifices the offerer used an animal or something else precious to signify the desire to be in communion of life with God. In the case of Jesus he offers himself totally, shedding his own blood as an expression of his desire to please God and to carry out the mission to which he had been called. His death was freely chosen as a way of demonstrating his total commitment and obedience to the Father's plan for reconciliation and communion.

The death of Jesus is consistent with the whole pattern of his life, a desire and a willingness to

reveal the extent of God's love for all people and for them to be brought into the deepest communion of life with one another and with God. Nothing, even the prospect of violent death, would deter him from his fidelity to that mission which was given him by the Father. But the Father himself is intimately involved in this sacrificial action. He 'did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all' (Rom 8:32; cf. 10:17f).

One cannot limit the role of the Father in the work of salvation to being the inspiration for Jesus to offer his life. Paul stresses the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead by the Father. When this is translated into the language of sacrifice it becomes nothing other than the acceptance of Jesus by the Father. Jesus died saying, 'into your hands I commend my spirit' (Luke 23:46). Resurrection is the acceptance of Jesus by the Father. It is an act of love between the Father and the Son, the mystery of self-surrender and acceptance.

The importance of the resurrection

When one reads the accounts of the resurrection appearances of Jesus they contain many discrepancies. In Luke the appearances seem to be confined to Jerusalem and its environs, in the other Gospels they are in Galilee. There are discrepancies about who went to the tomb and about what happened when they arrived there. We know that it is not the purpose of the evangelists to give us newspaper-style coverage of the events. Rather are they interested in conveying the meaning and significance of what was happening.

The situations and contexts which the evangelists describe seem to be a more fruitful way of approaching the appearances and these in turn provide important connections for us with our understanding of the Eucharist. Jesus usually appears or is seen by a number of people — there is a community dimension to the event. Even if only one is present he or she is asked to tell the others. Secondly, the message of forgiveness and reconciliation is strong in the appearance narratives. Jesus extends peace to those whom he meets and it is in the context of the post-resurrection appearances in John that he says: 'whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven' (20:23). Thirdly, the risen Jesus appears when the disciples are reflecting on their experiences of these last days, even as they doubted what was happening, or in the context of their attempting to understand what has happened in the light of their Jewish scriptures (see Luke 24:32). Fourthly, Jesus appears to them in the context of meals and table-fellowship: 'They recognised him at the breaking of the bread' (Luke 24:35, cf Matt 21:13-14). Fifthly, there is a recurring theme of mission in the post-resurrection appearances. Those who have had an encounter are told to go and tell the others and the parting words of Jesus at his final appearance are 'Go out to the whole world; proclaim the good news to all creation' (Mark 16:16). All of these experiences resonate with key experiences which the disciples had during the public ministry of Jesus.

The Eucharist and the Church

The similarities of contexts and contents of the encounters which the disciples had before and after the resurrection event enabled them to proclaim that Jesus was alive and present among them. The community itself was for them a privileged place of encounter with the risen Jesus. So deep was their conviction about what had happened that they could no longer contain themselves but felt impelled to go out to proclaim this from the rooftops. St Luke can say that the prophetic Spirit is now poured out on the community enabling it to be the new people of God and St Paul can speak about this same Spirit in terms of a new creation. Both of them, speaking from the experience of the early Christian community, are utterly convinced of the novelty of what has happened in the death and resurrection of Jesus. They are convinced that God's Spirit has been unleashed in a totally new and creative way enabling the community of disciples to be the sign and anticipation of the final gathering of all God's people.

It is this community which is now the Body of Christ empowered to continue his mission in word and deed. This community is most visibly the Body of Christ when it gathers in table-fellowship to re-enact and to remember Jesus' celebration of his Last Supper with them. It is in this gathering that they understand themselves at the deepest level to be the visible sign of Christ's continuing work among his people and they are enabled to be an effective sign because of the creative-prophetic Spirit who is guiding and sustaining them.

Blood poured out for us

New understanding

Gradually they were able to see the significance of what Jesus did in the Last Supper. They were able to recognise that the trust which he placed in God, as he offered his memorial, was answered, that God intervened in a new and decisive way bringing life from death and thus opening up a whole new relationship between God and the people and among the people themselves. They interpreted all of this as a new Exodus, a passage from the slavery of sin and death to freedom and new life. They saw it in sacrificial terms as the offering of himself by Jesus and his total acceptance by the Father. What Jesus offered was a new Passover, a new memorial sacrificial meal. It superseded all other sacrifices which had been offered and was complete in itself. No other sacrifices were now necessary.

They began to understand their re-enactment of that last meal in terms of memorial and sacrifice. They remembered what God had done for them in the whole event of Christ's life, death and resurrection. They brought this before the people to lead them in giving thanks and praise to God for what God had done for them. They brought this before God and pleaded with God to bring this work to completion among them and among all people. Through the memorial action they were brought into contact with the original event, that foundational sacrifice, which effected a new relationship between God and people. Such was the relationship between what they were doing in the re-enactment of the Supper and the original sacrifice of Christ that the only way in which they could describe what they were doing was as offering a sacrifice. However, it is not a re-offering of the original sacrifice; it is a sacramental participation in it. What makes it unique is that the same Christ who was present in the original sacrificial offering is now present in this ecclesial action as the glorified victim. He is present in the eucharistic action as a glorified body who makes himself present to the community to give it the strength it needs to be his body in every other word spoken and in every deed done by the community and its members.

This brings us to an understanding of the Eucharist which takes into account the whole paschal mystery, death and resurrection. Formerly we seemed to focus on Calvary as if there were no Easter morning. The paschal mystery is one, embracing the whole offering of his life by Christ and its acceptance by the Father. It is a genuinely ecclesial action celebrated by the Church which is the Body of Christ. St Augustine said that 'the Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church'. The truth of this insight should be clear from what has already been said. It is an action of the Church before it is an action of the priest. The priest who offers Eucharist is first and foremost a member of the community and from earliest times it was because of one's leadership of the community that one was entitled to celebrate Eucharist. Hence there was the ban on absolute ordinations by the Council of Chalcedon. Because the Eucharist is a community action the one who leads it must be intimately connected with the community

The Eucharist presupposes that the Church which celebrates it is living the life of dedicated service to which it has been called by Christ, that it is a genuine community of disciples of Jesus. The Eucharist is the gathering together of all the loving, reconciling action of the community and the presenting of this together with Christ's own great act of loving service to the Father. Thankful for what has already been achieved, the assembly continues to intercede that this great work will soon be brought to completion.