

word on worship

Walk in the Light! The Liturgy of the Advent-Christmas Season

Tertullian, learned layman and North African in the second century, focuses on the heart of the Christian liturgical cycle: "Is it not enough that we have fifty days of rejoicing every year and every week our Sunday?"¹ Indeed, the weekly celebration of the passion, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus at Sunday eucharist and our yearly celebration of the passion and resurrection in the paschal season form the hinges of the entire liturgical cycle. Yet, despite Tertullian, the church has long celebrated a wider cycle: "By means of the yearly cycle the church celebrates the whole mystery of Christ, from his incarnation until the day of Pentecost and the expectation of his coming again."²

Yet, far from unfolding the great mystery of Christ, most of us experience Advent-Christmas as a blur of red and green. Our liturgical calendar declares that in the Advent-Christmas season we remember and celebrate the birth and manifestations of Christ, and at the same time watch joyfully for his coming at the end of time.³ In this confusing time of year, when crass commercialism and vicious materialism often reign even in our hearts, we are prodded as a church at prayer to ponder deeply the mystery of our being caught up in Christ who is coming again.

While the earliest times are still shrouded in mystery and surrounded by much scholarly debate, December 25 came to be considered the date of the nativity in the West,

possibly having its origins in North Africa.⁴ This reckoning is subsequent to the paschal celebration and perhaps dependent on it for its date. Eventually, the West also adopted aspects of the Eastern feast of January 6 which we have come to know as Epiphany.

Whatever its origins, the Christmas season is regarded by our current liturgical calendar, "from Evening Prayer I of Christmas to the Sunday after Epiphany [the Baptism of the Lord] . . . inclusive."⁵ Very often during this time we find ourselves caught up in celebrating the birthday of the baby Jesus and the visit of the Three Magi from the East. These evocative images do indeed capture our imaginations. But they are meant to move our contemplation and challenge our celebration, to stir our imaginations and shake our souls. The evocative images, stirring narratives and central symbols of our liturgy call us to celebrate the feast of Christmas as a feast which marks the beginning of our redemption, a feast in which we behold a new vision of God's glory, a feast by which we are caught up in oneness with God.

In the Mass at Midnight, we hear the letter to Titus tell of how God has appeared and offered us salvation, for it was Jesus "who sacrificed himself for us to redeem us." This feast marks the beginning of our redemption, for in his birth, Jesus enters the struggle of sin and death which grip our humankind in an icy stronghold. In the infancy narrative of Luke this beginning of redemption is

captured in the evocation of the tender infant born in the thralls of poverty, rejection and suffering. Here foreshadowed, it is the same Jesus who will contend with the ultimate rejection and suffering in his passion and death on a cross.

Such is the glory that we behold, as the communion antiphon sings. It is a glory that at once confounds our human wisdom and bathes us in the light of the profound love of God whose very Son will suffer death. We pray in the opening prayer that the darkness of the night may be shattered by the "splendor of Jesus Christ our light" whom we welcome as Lord, "the true light of the world." Basking in the beautiful light we are called to walk in that light which dawns upon a broken and bruised world still groping in the darkness of death, senseless violence and bitter hatred. We celebrate the joy and peace spoken of by Isaiah in the first reading, a joy and peace which comes from God to a people so inexorably entrenched in despair and desolation. We have seen God's glory—Jesus who empties himself and is born as a human being, the Word made flesh, and so we are caught up in the love of our God (Preface I of Christmas).

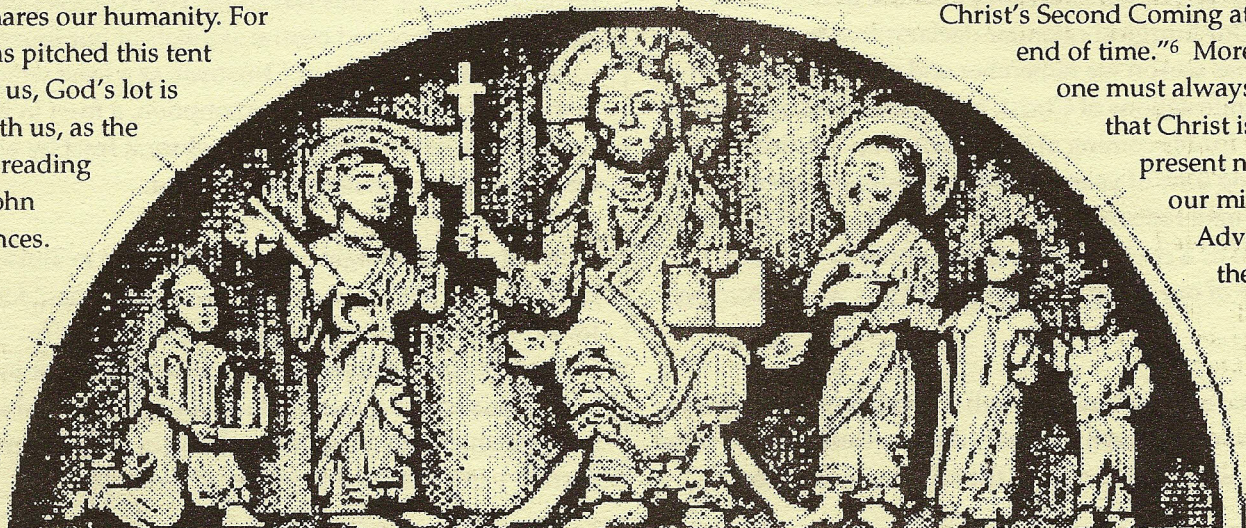
The Mass at Dawn continues to proclaim that the Savior has come, dawning upon earth as light. In Jesus, God has revealed the marvelous riches of God's mercy to us. As Paul explains, in our baptism we become heirs, one with God in Christ Jesus through the lavish gift of the Spirit (Titus 3:4-7). We have put on Christ and so have become daughters and sons of the light. The oneness of humanity and God in Jesus' incarnation is sustained in the Mass during the Day, in whose opening prayer we pray that we may partake in the divinity of the one who shares our humanity. For God has pitched this tent among us, God's lot is cast with us, as the gospel reading from John announces. Just as the Word was

made flesh in Jesus, so, too, must the Word take flesh in us that we "go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere" the good news of God's salvation. While Jesus had no place to lay his head, he tenderly embraces us and makes us one with him in our communion in the Spirit. He leads us from despair to the wondrous reign of God (John 1:11; Preface II of Christmas).

The celebration continues through Epiphany, when we proclaim the revelation of God's glory to the whole world. All nations on earth are drawn to God, who renews humanity in God's immortal image in Jesus (Preface of Epiphany). We are called to "recognize Christ" in the eucharist we celebrate (Prayer after Communion), and so welcome him. Throughout the season, the prayers express the tension between our welcoming Christ as our redeemer and our welcoming and meeting Christ as judge at the end of time. At the Baptism of the Lord, we celebrate the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the ministry of the obedient and suffering servant, who "went about doing good works and healing all in the grip of the devil" (Acts 10:34-38), "bringing the good news of salvation to the poor" (Preface of the Baptism of the Lord). Jesus is proclaimed as God's beloved Son, and we pray that we, too, may be awakened in faith to be daughters and sons of God.

The Christmas-Epiphany season is prepared for by the season we call Advent, which took hundreds of years to evolve to its present shape. Our calendar explains the character of Advent as twofold: "as a season to prepare for Christmas when Christ's first coming to us is

remembered; as a season when that remembrance directs the mind and heart to await Christ's Second Coming at the end of time."⁶ Moreover, one must always recall that Christ is present now in our midst. Advent, then,



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expresses in ritual and symbol a triple reality: Christ has come. Christ will come. Christ is here now. In our liturgical celebration, we keep all three bound together.

We remember that Christ has come: Advent is not a season of erasing or rereading the events of history as though the incarnation had not happened. Rather, we remember that a loved people, our forebears in faith, our Jewish sisters and brothers, have lived for centuries. They, much like the whole human family, have yearned for an encounter with God that would shatter sin and embrace all humankind in loving peace. We remember Jesus who came and entered this world and gave voice to our suffering and pain. We remember Jesus who came and died on a cross, being raised to life out of the jaws of death and destruction. In the Advent season we remember and proclaim that the world is not the same.

Christ will come—for this we hope. Yet, as the gospel tells us, we know not the day nor the hour. When the prayers and scriptures of the liturgy turn our hearts to Christ's final coming, they are not concerned with the when and the how. Rather, they stress that it is our readiness that is crucial whenever and however. For we know that "soon and very soon, we are going to see the king." Will we be ready? So we turn to the prophets who charge us with an amazing hope that there will be "no more crying there, no more dying there," when we behold our God. In a day when so many lives scream unto the Lord to rend the heavens and come down—those bent with hunger, those crouched in fear, those trapped in addiction, those wasting away with disease—we do long earnestly for that mighty morning when God brings forth a new heaven and a new earth. We live and wait, "hoping that the salvation promised us will be ours when Christ our Lord will come again in glory."

Christ is here and now—this reality we live. Christ is present here and now when we gather together Sunday after Sunday for eucharist. In the eucharistic banquet, we know him in our communion in his body and blood. At the table, God gives us a foretaste of the feast that is to come when God will be all in all as we pledge ourselves to be broken and poured out for the life of the world. The proclamation of the word of the Advent liturgy beckons us to en flesh the gospel in our lives in such a way that it can bear fruit in all that we do and be spread so that all the earth may know how excellent is the name of Jesus. We must, as Abbot Bernard reminded us centuries ago, keep the present coming of Christ "like a road on which we travel from the first coming to the last" (Office of Readings for Wednesday of the First Week of Advent).

The Advent-Christmas season is a time when we are called to walk ever more nearly to Jesus who lights our way. While the darkness of our day causes us to stumble and the pleasure of the moment leads us astray, our vigilance must keep our eyes fixed on the one who is to come.✙

¹ My paraphrase of Tertullian *De Idolatria*, 14.

² *The General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar* [GNLYC], 17.

³ GNLYC, 32, 39.

⁴ See Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991).

⁵ GNLYC, 33.

⁶ GNLYC, 39.

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Communicating the Assembly from the Reserved Eucharist

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Responding to the call of the second Vatican Council to examine and renew the ancient heritage of our rituals has been a major work in Church reform during the last thirty years. A careful look at these thirty years impels us to take a more critical view and cast a more reflective eye on the liturgical reform called for by the Council. Authentic celebrations, informed liturgical praxis and respect for the wisdom and vision of the council fathers can point us to a shared understanding of the church's rich heritage of worship.

This is fundamentally true and increasingly imperative in regard to our eucharistic faith life. The mixture of different ecclesiologies, theologies and ways of understanding which emerged as a result of the Council have prompted a variety of praxis which need to be examined again with thoughtfulness and care.

The way we worship has a profound effect upon our lives of faith. The expression of this life of faith shapes and molds us now and for the future. The allotment of appropriate time and resources to enhance a deeper understanding of the Eucharist, our central act of worship, needs to be the present agenda for all church leaders. Steps taken to be faithful to the vision and challenge of the second Vatican Council are to be applauded. However, the renewal is not completed, as some would have us believe. Continued catechesis and positive action are essential to ensure the faithful's identity as a eucharistic people.

This article is primarily concerned with one aspect of the agenda of eucharistic praxis, namely, that of communicating the assembly from the reserved Eucharist. Certain practices have been allowed to exist, many times for lack of examination, time or preparation, which greatly diminish our understanding of Eucharist as active engagement. Subtle though it may be, the very action of the Eucharist is being undermined Sunday after Sunday in churches all over the United States.

The Church has a long history of endorsing the receiving of communion by the faithful from the bread and wine consecrated at the same mass in which they participate.

To support this position, recent Council documents abound with statements concerning active engagement as inherent in the celebration of the Eucharist. In response to the concern of national offices of worship and liturgical commissions about this issue, we cite the article in the *Bishops Committee on the Liturgy (BCL) Newsletter*, Vol. XIV May 1989, which speaks clearly to this concern. The article states:

Questions [have arisen which] deal with various practices concerning the distribution of holy communion at Mass using hosts consecrated at a previous celebration. *The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life* reported that the faithful received holy communion from hosts consecrated at the same Mass at less than 20% of the Masses observed in the course of the study. The most frequent parochial practice observed was that both the hosts consecrated at a Mass and those taken from the tabernacle were distributed to participants. (Mark Searle and David C. Leege, *Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life, The Celebration of Liturgy in the Parishes*, Report No. 5, University of Notre Dame, August 1985.)

The normative liturgical practice should include the breaking of a large host during the fraction rite with distribution of the parts to at least some of those participating, the remainder receiving smaller hosts consecrated at the Mass.

The practice of consecrating a large number of hosts at one Mass for distribution at other Masses runs contrary to the nature of the faithful's participation in the eucharistic celebration. The full, conscious and active participation of the faithful includes their reception of the eucharist consecrated at the Mass in which they are participating. *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)* 56 states: It is most desirable that the faithful receive the Lord's body from hosts consecrated at the same Mass and that, in the instances when it is permitted, they share in the chalice. Then even through the signs, communion will stand clearly as a sharing in the sacrifice actually being celebrated.

This matter has been addressed in the encyclicals *Certiores effecti* (1591) of Pope Benedict XIV and *Mediator Dei* (1947) of Pope Pius XII, as well as in recent liturgical documents. *Mediator Dei* 118 quotes the forceful statement of Pope Benedict XIV which emphasized the significance of the communicants reception of hosts consecrated at the same mass in which they participate.

"Moreover, our predecessor of immortal memory, Benedict XIV, wishing to emphasize and throw fuller light upon the truth that the faithful by receiving the Holy Eucharist become partakers of the divine sacrifice itself, praises the devotion of those who when attending Mass, not only elicit a desire to receive holy communion but also

want to be nourished by hosts consecrated during the Mass...."

The reservation of the Eucharist is not maintained for the purpose of storing large quantities of consecrated hosts for use at subsequent Masses. Rather the eucharist is to be reserved in parish churches and oratories primarily for the administration of viaticum of the dying, and secondarily for giving communion especially to the sick outside Mass and for eucharistic adoration [cf. *Eucharisticum mysterium* 49 (1967) and *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass* 6]. There is no mention made in postconciliar liturgical norms of reservation of the eucharist for distribution at later Masses.

Clearly, the practice of distributing reserved hosts on a regular basis at Mass is a practice which compromises the fullest understanding of the eucharist as the source of the Church's unity and jeopardizes the recognition of the role of all the baptized in the eucharistic celebration.¹

DOCUMENTATION

Encyclical Letters:

Certiores effecti (1591) Pope Benedict XIV
Mediator Dei (1947) Pope Pius XII

Council Documents:

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

#55. The more perfect form of participation in the Mass whereby the faithful, after the priest's communion, receive the Lord's Body from the same sacrifice, is warmly recommended.

Instructions:

Eucharisticum mysterium (1967)

#31. The faithful share more fully in the celebration of the eucharist through sacramental communion. It is strongly recommended that they should receive it as a rule in the Mass itself and at that point in the celebration which is prescribed by the rite, that is, right after the communion of the priest celebrant.

In order that the communion may stand out more clearly even through signs as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated, steps should be taken that enable the faithful to receive hosts consecrated at that Mass.

#49. It is pertinent to recall that the primary and original purpose of reserving the sacred elements in church outside Mass is the administration of viaticum; secondary ends are the distribution of communion outside Mass and the adoration of our Lord Jesus Christ hidden beneath these same elements. [Quam plurimum, 1 Oct. 1949]

Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist Outside of Mass (1973)

#5. The primary and original reason for reservation of the eucharist outside Mass is the administration of viaticum. The secondary ends are the giving of communion and the adoration of our Lord Jesus Christ present in the sacrament. The reservation of the sacrament for the sick led to the praiseworthy practice of adoring this heavenly food that is reserved in churches....

#6. In the celebration of Mass the chief ways in which Christ is present in his Church emerge clearly one after the other. First, he is present in the very assembly of the faithful, gathered together in his name; next, he is present in his word, with the reading and explanation of Scripture in the church; also, in the person of the minister; finally, and above all, in the eucharistic elements. In a way that is completely unique, the whole and entire Christ, God and man, is substantially and permanently present in the sacrament. This presence of Christ under the appearance of bread and wine is called real, not to exclude the other kinds of presence as though they were not real, but because it is real par excellence. [*Mysterium fidei*, no. 39.]

Consequently, on the grounds of the sign value, it is more in keeping with the nature of the celebration that, through reservation of the sacrament in the tabernacle, Christ not be present eucharistically from the beginning on the altar when Mass is celebrated. That presence is the effect of the consecration and should appear as such.

#7. The consecrated hosts are to be frequently renewed and reserved in a ciborium or other vessel, in a number sufficient for the communion of the sick and of others outside Mass.✠

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