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One Body, One Bread

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THE Eucharist in the early Church was a corporate act done by all those present, each with his proper ministry. There was a great sense of fellowship in the body of Christ. They were doing something together, carrying out the sacrament of their redemption and so deepening the fellowship of which that redemption was the basis. The members of the congregation brought their gifts to the service, in particular bread and wine—things which were the results of corporate activity. They offered their daily food, and in and with it themselves. They gave thanks to God for these gifts of His creation and for their redemption, and then they received them back as means of grace. The spirit of the service is well summed up in a sentence taken from the Canon (or consecration prayer) of the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus going back to about 220 A.D. " Wherefore mindful of his death and resurrection, we offer unto thee this bread and this cup, giving thanks to thee that thou hast bidden us stand before thee and minister as priests (cf. Revelation of St. John, ' made us kings and priests '). And we beseech thee to send thy Holy Spirit upon this oblation of thy Holy Church ; that uniting them into one, thou wouldest grant to all thy saints who partake to be made one, that they may be fulfilled with the Holy Spirit that their faith may be confirmed in truth." Contrast this corporate note in which the celebrant never speaks in his own name with the medieval prayer that the priest is bidden to say in the Roman rite, " Receive, Holy Father, this immaculate victim which I thy unworthy servant offer . . . for all who stand around ". Here the corporate note gives way to the idea of the priest alone doing something for the laity.

In the early Church the Bishop was the celebrant with the presbyters on either side of him and the deacons slightly behind him. They all stood behind the table, facing the people who were in front of the table. In the most literal sense of the words they were " the Lord's people gathered round the Lord's table ". This spirit in the service and arrangement of the congregation and the ministers, continued for some centuries. But in the course of time a number of factors crept in which undermined this corporate spirit. Pagan ideas had infiltrated into the Church, Latin was no longer understood by most people, and above all, the communion of the laity became very rare. Therefore during the eighth and ninth century the service was increasingly felt to be something done for the laity by the clergy instead of the corporate act of all present. The eastward position was much more appropriate to this new idea and so made rapid strides, though the westward position was fairly general until roughly 1000 A.D., and in some places lingered on even later, e.g. at Canterbury the Cathedral at first had an altar at either end, one for celebrating back to the people, the other for celebrating face to the people. When the cathedral was rebuilt after being completely destroyed by fire in 1067, this arrangement was abolished

and the eastward position became uniform, though a trace of the older arrangement was left in the position of the Archbishop's throne, which remained behind the altar, facing the people, until early in the nineteenth century. The bishop's throne in Norwich Cathedral is still in this position. Seventeen miles away at East Dereham, there is a font on which is carved a representation of the Mass with the Bishop celebrating behind the altar, facing the people, with two assistants behind him.[1]

Certain remains of the older use have lingered on in the Roman Church, e.g. in St. Clement's Church in Rome there is a sheer drop in front of the altar making it physically impossible to celebrate in front of it. There are a number of other churches in Rome where the westward position has been retained as an occasional use.

But by the eleventh century the eastward position was general, and was only a symptom of a thoroughgoing clericalization of the Mass. The priest, who was separated from the people by a long chancel, murmured the service by himself in Latin, a tongue unknown to the people, who were not expected to join in or even to attend, except at certain points when a bell was rung to draw their attention. The service was no longer the Church's offering of its daily bread, figuring the Church's offering of itself but the offering of Christ to the Father by the priest for the people. Instead of one Eucharist in each church, each priest said his own Mass. And in the words of a Roman Catholic theologian, " Each mass as a propitiatory sacrifice has a definite value before God ; therefore two masses are worth twice as much as one ".[2] So priests were paid to say many private masses to achieve a multitude of objects, e.g. success in business, the deliverance of a soul from purgatory, for a safe journey, etc., etc.

The medieval attitude comes out in the reaction of Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, to the proposal of Cranmer that the services should be taken in English.

" For in times past," wrote Bishop Gardiner, " when men came to church more diligently than some do now, the people in the church took small heed what the priest and the clerks did in the chancel, but only to stand up at the Gospel and kneel at the Sacring, or else every man was occupied himself severally in several prayer. And as for the priest's prayer, they could not all have heard and understood, although they would, and had given ear thereunto. For such an enterprise to bring that to pass is impossible, without the priest should turn his face to the people when he prayeth, and occupy many prayers to them to make them hold their peace. And therefore it was never meant that the people should indeed hear the Mattins or hear the Mass, but be present there and pray themselves in silence with common credit to the priests and clerks, that although they hear not a distinct sound to

[1] The late Albert Mitchell, in *This Service*, has reproduced a photograph of the font at East Dereham on the fly-leaf. He has a useful appendix on the position of the minister at the Lord's Table, giving much evidence for the position facing the people. For another account, from an Anglo-Catholic viewpoint, see *The Celebration of the Eucharist Facing the People* by B. Minchin.

[2] Fortescue, *The Mass*, p. 187.

know what they say, yet to judge that they for their part were and be well occupied, and in prayer, and so should they be. And good simple folks were wont so to be, and other, more dissolute, used to commune in the time of Mattins and Mass of other matters. And I have known that, after their little devotions said, as they called them, some used to gather by the penny or two pence such money as they had lent in gross. But as for hearing of Mass in deed, some, well occupied, heard not, and some, evil occupied, heard not neither."[1]

It is only fair to add that in recent years what is known as the Liturgical Movement has been going on in the Roman Church whose aim is to restore the corporate character of the Church's services, specially the Mass. The watchword of this movement has been a saying of Pope Pius X from an encyclical of 1903. " You are not to pray at the Mass ; you are to pray the Mass." The results of this movement have been seen in vernacular translations, attacks on wafer bread, evening Masses, sometimes in private houses for a group of neighbours, and in the widespread restoration of the westward position. But of course the theology of the Roman Church is fundamentally against such a move, nor does their rite favour it. In the Church of England, however, we had our liturgical movement 400 years ago at the Reformation, when Cranmer made a determined attempt to make our services congregational. But while he made a start and provided the Church of England with a prayer book in the vernacular, he was martyred before he could set his mind to the practical problems presented to him by the traditional shape of our church buildings which were designed for a service in which the priest by himself did something for the people who were left by themselves. In fact, it was the problem of adapting for reformed worship, buildings designed for medieval worship.

In 1552 the table was to be brought down for the Holy Communion from the chancel into the body of the church. The table was turned round so that the long sides were at the north and south and the priest stood at the north side. For various reasons this position of the table was not satisfactory and other expedients were tried one after another during the next three centuries. A typical expedient was for priest and people to be in the nave for the ante-communion and for priest and people to come into the chancel at " Ye that do truly and earnestly repent " for the rest of the service. The various changes and the reasons for them will be found set out in *The Architectural setting of Anglican Worship* by Addleshaw and Etchells.[2] But in the 1850s, through a mistaken archæological reconstruction[3] our present arrangement became usual by which the table is against the east wall, next come choir stalls, and then in the nave of the church come the people. Once again for the Holy Communion the priest is at the end of a long sanctuary doing something *by himself* even when he stands at the north side of the table, and the people are separated from him and left very much on their own.

[1] Quoted in *Liturgy and Society* by A. G. Hebert, p. 172.

[2] Chs. 4-6.

[3] op. cit. ch. 7.

In 1890 the Archbishop of Canterbury, sitting as a judge, gave a decision known as the Lincoln Judgment. Amongst other points, it dealt with the position of the celebrant at the Holy Communion. The Archbishop ruled that while the prayer book rubrics could not historically be interpreted as requiring the eastward position, nevertheless a certain liberty as to details should be allowed, provided that the purpose of the rubrics was served and therefore that the eastward position was lawful, provided that the manual acts are visible. " The tenor," he said, " of the Book of Common Prayer is openness ". It was quite soon pointed out that the Archbishop's principle would seem to make the westward position lawful—in fact, more lawful than the eastward position as usually practised, as it is impossible for the celebrant to make the manual acts visible to the congregation when he stands with his back to them, unless he turns right round.

The way is therefore opened for the adoption of the westward position, and it is in my opinion the position most in keeping with the spirit and principles of the Book of Common Prayer. The table should be brought forward to the chancel steps, or perhaps a temporary table may be brought in for the service. The priest should be joined at the table by others (laymen), e.g. one to read the epistle and one to receive the alms, etc. This will break down the isolation of the priest and show the Church as one body giving thanks, each member with his own ministry. There should also be a sermon emphasizing the unity of word and sacrament. It is a help, too, to have an offertory procession in which bread and wine, as well as money, are brought up from the body of the church, emphasizing the offering of our daily bread and figuring the offering of ourselves and our daily work. In fact, it stresses the truth that our daily bread is brought to our Lord, linked to His Cross, and received back as a means of grace. By bringing members of the laity up to the sanctuary it helps to link together the officiants and people. It is a good thing for each family to take a Sunday in turn to provide the loaf and for the head of the family to bring it up in procession. It also helps to emphasize the corporate nature of what is being done if the congregation stands to offer its praise, e.g. from " Lift up your hearts " to the end of " Holy, Holy, Holy, etc.", and also for the closing " Glory be to God on high ". There is nothing in the prayer book to indicate that the congregation must kneel, except at the confession and to receive communion.

There is little movement, but what there is is clearly related to the central action of the service. Its meaning is neither " dark nor dumb " in the words of the third preface to the Book of Common Prayer. It is neither dark because it does not embody erroneous doctrine, nor is it dumb, because its meaning is clear to the ordinary communicant. Such simple changes as these can release an entirely new atmosphere at the Holy Communion, so that it becomes once again the Lord's people gathering round the Lord's table, hearing His word together, giving thanks for their redemption, and receiving its fruits, that is, feeding upon the body and blood of Christ.