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The United Church Communion Rite of 1932: An Appreciation and Apologia

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THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA is at present in the process of revising its Book of Common Order. This manual, which in essence is something less than a mandatory prayer-book, but at the same time much more than a directory of worship, first saw the light of day some thirty-three years ago. At that time its appearance was widely welcomed by the liturgically literate with words of warm approval. Thus as competent a judge in these matters as Dr. W. D. Maxwell wrote of it: "This book is really a monumental piece of work, and if there is astonishment, there is also thanksgiving that a young church, after only seven years of corporate existence, could produce so notable a liturgical contribution."¹

In these words, it is possible to discern an element of real surprise. No wonder, considering the place (Canada) and the time (1932) of the Book's appearing. The United Church of Canada was then in its infancy. Moreover, though the three denominations (Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian) that had combined to form the new United Church had already shared in various interests and enthusiasms prior to 1925, these had hardly included the task of liturgical renewal. On the contrary, an extraordinary ignorance of the manner in which their fathers had worshipped and an almost pathological distaste for the ways of liturgical devotion in any form had produced, in many United Church minds, a real road-block in the path of liturgical advance and reform. If ever there was a root springing out of the dry ground, it was the publication of the Book of Common Order of 1932.

At the heart and core of the Book is the service entitled "An Order for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion." This is a liturgy which repeatedly, during the past three decades, and from many quarters, has been accorded the highest praise. Now, along with the Book as a whole, it is being subjected to a close and critical scrutiny by the members of the Revision Committee, and what its ultimate fate will be I for one am not willing to prophesy. So it is that, at this present critical juncture in the rite's history, I want to speak a few words concerning it. And they are good words that I intend to speak, since the service includes many things which are eminently true and lovely and of good report. To this task of appreciation and apology I accordingly now turn.

1. *The Scottish Church Service Society Annual, 1932-33*, p. 69.

I

The first thing that I want to say concerning this, our present and accustomed communion service, is that it is a liturgy steeped in history and rich in tradition, whose rubrics and phraseology do again and again open the doors of memory to many a glowing page in the religious history of the English-speaking peoples of the world.

In the age of the Reformation men went to prison and into exile because of their devotion to the doctrinal principles and liturgical antecedents of this service, and for their sake also some were content to die. In the days of the Evangelical Revival, John Wesley, turning the pages of the liturgy, took up his pen and made abridgments and other changes here and there, prior to sending it, so altered, with his preachers across the wide Atlantic. From these original saddle-bag evangelists the service has come down to us, stage by stage and step by step. It is part of our heritage—yes, every bit as much a part of our family history as liberty of prophesying and extemporaneous prayer. When in celebrating Holy Communion I repeat the now familiar phrases of the service and am careful to do what it suggests and commands, the words of a well-known hymn always come into my mind, even if they are not actually formed by my lips: “Brothers, we are treading/ Where the saints have trod.”

“Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God hath led thee.” These words were spoken to those who dwelt in the dawn-light of the Old Covenant. If, however, they were authoritative to those who first heard them, they are assuredly even more binding on those of us who live amid the noon-tide splendours of a Covenant which is New and Eternal. “Thou shalt remember.” And one of the reasons why some of us so value our present United Church communion order is that it helps us so to consider and calls us so to remember. Needless to state it bids us lift up our hearts to the heavenly places. It does more than that, however. It calls us to retrace in reverent retrospect the successive stages of a pilgrimage, which takes its shining way backward through the centuries. Rich in history and tradition and bright with heroic and saintly memories—such is the communion liturgy of the United Church of Canada.

II

The second good word that I want to speak about our present service has to do with its language. There is great and noble English here; nor is this in any way surprising, since most of it has come to us straight from the time when there were literary and liturgical giants in the land, one of whom, Thomas Cranmer, was as much a genius in this area as were Shakespeare and Bacon in the fields they staked out for their own. Thus John Wesley could speak of this language “as not only pure, but strong and elegant in the highest degree.”²

2. Quoted by A. E. Peaston, *The Prayer Book Tradition in the Free Churches* (London: James Clarke, 1965), p. 39.

In making such an assertion Wesley did not stand alone—either in his own day or in our own. “The language,” declares J. G. Davies, in writing of the 1662 Prayer Book, “apart from a few obsolete words and phrases is not dated, but remains remarkably clear and fresh. The prayers are not florid or long-winded but are characterized by dignity and clarity.”³ And again: “Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century English,” writes Mr. Milner White, “is a great inheritance. It is a language unapproachable today, the national language alike of its birth and its fine flower.”⁴

Now I know quite well that the sentences I have just quoted will at once provoke a very tempest of contrary argument and earnest protest, and I think that I know in advance the form this will take. It may well be, I shall be told, that the language of our present liturgy is all that these and other writers say that it is; but, in the final analysis, what is the use of it, if, when we celebrate the sacrament, the average man does not know what we are talking about? It is a language—such is the current assertion—that is now so outdated and outmoded as to be well-nigh unintelligible at the present hour, and it is, therefore, a first-class obstacle to our contemporary endeavour to communicate the gospel of Christ. To repeat, what use is it?

Very little use, we shall be quick to allow, unless we are prepared to do three things, but surely, as the custodians of a noble literary and religious heritage, we can do no less. First, if there be some quite unintelligible words and phrases in the service—and I am willing to confess that there may be a few—we should speedily replace them by words and phrases the modern man will more readily understand. Secondly, we should be always ready to explain, in patient and persistent fashion, the meaning of what we say and do in sacramental worship. In other words, instruction should always accompany or, better still, it should precede celebration. Thirdly, we should not be afraid to point out that the Christian gospel, together with the Christian worship that is celebrated before the eyes and ears of men, may require a language all of its own, if it is to fulfil the purpose to which God has called it. Art today has its own techniques and science its own special symbols, and no one quarrels with these. Why then quarrel with the Church, if it continues to use inherited words and phrases, in which it has long since found real meaning and deep significance? And as for that formidable personage, the man in the street, if and when he and his kind aspire to become members of Zion’s City, surely they ought not to be averse to learning the speech of Zion.

Here I feel that I must state my growing conviction that, if the typical modern man is alienated from the Church and its witness, this has been caused not so much by the traditional language of the sanctuary as by the religious world-view, which the Church proclaims—and must continue to proclaim—a view, however, which our increasingly secularized world is

3. J. G. Davies in *Studia Liturgica*, 1 (1962), 167.

4. Quoted by W. K. Lowther Clarke, “The Prayer Book as Literature,” in W. K. Lowther Clarke and C. Harris (eds.), *Liturgy and Worship* (London: S.P.C.K., 1932), p. 812.

quick to dismiss as based on so much pious make-believe. As a recent writer has said: "If the ordinary man fails to understand the existing liturgy, it is because he is not interested in it. And he is not interested, because he fails to see the relevance of the Christian religion as a whole. We shall not interest him merely or mainly by giving him a liturgy, which makes no claim on what intelligence he has, or, worse still, insults it."⁵

To sum up the second section of this article, then, I say: We have in our communion rite a heritage of truly magnificent English. Let us improve it as we may; let us update it as best we can. To the suggestion, however, that for this reason or that we now rudely turn it out of doors, my answer must be: "Not now and possibly never."

III

The third good thing that I want to say on behalf of our present liturgy is to this effect: It is a true eucharist. Surely no one who takes the trouble to examine the 1932 rite dispassionately and objectively will feel free to dispute this fact.

Thus the introductory rubric of the service prescribes the singing of a psalm or hymn showing forth the power, the goodness, and the grace of God. The preliminary part of the liturgy—that which is called the Introduction—ends with a directive that here shall be said or sung *Gloria in Excelsis* or *Benedictus* or else a hymn of praise and humble gratitude to God. Provision is also made, a little later on, and as an alternative to the Creed, for the singing of the greatest of all the church's hymns, the *Te Deum*. Moreover, the celebration is to conclude with the minister giving thanks to God, and with a final hymn and the blessing.

It is, however, when we come to the core of the rite, to the great prayer of consecration and thanksgiving, that 1932's eucharistic quality becomes most luminously apparent. The note of high thanksgiving is struck in the *Sursum Corda*: "Lift up your hearts," and reiterated in the preface: "It is very meet and right and our bounden duty that we should at all times and in all places give thanks unto thee." It sounds again in the *Sanctus*: "Holy, Holy, Holy," and is carried forward in the theme of redemption in the opening words of the prayer: "All glory and thanksgiving be to thee, Almighty God our heavenly Father." Both this and all that then follows constitute "our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving," and this great and noble prayer concludes with still another outburst of thankful praise: "All honour and glory be unto thee, O Father Almighty, world without end. Amen."

In the light of facts as clear and as plain as these, it is difficult to see how anyone can possibly maintain that our service is not a true eucharist, or that it lacks a truly eucharistic character and quality. Such a complaint is sometimes made, and with considerable justification, against the Prayer

5. These words appeared in the correspondence columns of the *Church Times* several years ago.

Book rite of 1662. Here the prayer of consecration was pitched in a minor key, as if the Church were sadly commemorating the death of Jesus rather than rejoicing in and giving thanks for his resurrection victory. In that classic English rite, which until quite recently was also substantially that of Canadian Anglicanism, there was, of course, thanksgiving after communion. This, however, is hardly the point. To be a eucharist, a service requires thanksgiving at its very heart. When we turn to our present United Church liturgy, we discover that it does meet this requirement; from the *Sursum Corda* onwards the great prayer forms one continuous and uninterrupted whole, and in the entire service the dominant note from first to last is one of glad, lofty, and sustained thanksgiving. Whatever else the 1932 liturgy may be, it is emphatically and unmistakably a true eucharist.

IV

Fourthly, I must insist that our present service is laudable for its clear and coherent order. Particularly do I wish to draw attention to the logical sequence of the consecration prayer, and with this thought in mind, I shall ask the reader first to scan and then to try to keep in mind the following outline:

Sursum Corda.

Preface: Praise for the Creation of the world and man and recognition of Divine Providence.

Sanctus.

Thanksgiving for Redemption.

Words of Institution.

Anamnesis: Setting forth the Memorial.

Epiclesis: Invocation of the Holy Spirit.

Oblation of our worship.

Oblation of ourselves.

Conclusion and Doxology.

The Lord's Prayer.

First, as we see, there comes the *Sursum Corda* with its summons to lift up our hearts to the Lord. Then this same Lord, high and lifted up, we hymn in the *Sanctus*, because he created heaven and earth, made man in his own image, and ever spreads his tender mercy over all his works. The prayer then proceeds to the theme of redemption—to the solemn remembrance that Almighty God, our heavenly Father, did give his only son Jesus Christ “to take our nature upon him and to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption.” These words lead naturally to the narrative of the institution of the sacrament, and the apostolic quotation concludes with the words “This do ye . . . in remembrance of me.”

Now we should take note of the word that immediately follows. It is the word “Wherefore.” This is one of the key words in our prayer of consecration, just as it is in at least a dozen other liturgies one could name. In fact,

it may be thought of as being the keystone in the upsweeping literary archway of the prayer. As long as it remains in place, everything leading up to it moves along in clear and meaningful progression, while everything following it falls into a place equally reasonable and significant. For having been commanded to "*do this* in remembrance," we at once go on to say: "Wherefore, having in remembrance . . . , we, thy servants *do* set forth this memorial." In other words, having been told to do something, we now obediently proceed to do it, in this case setting forth our anamnesis, our memorial act, before the eyes of God.

Next in order comes the invocation of the Divine Presence, so that, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, the bread we break and the cup we bless may be to us the communion of the body and blood of Christ. And all this, from the *Sursum Corda* onward, constitutes, as we have already stated, "our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving." Lest, however, we be tempted to think of this as a merely magical or non-moral sacrifice, we next offer up to God "ourselves, our souls and bodies to be," in words clearly reminiscent of St. Paul, "a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice" to him. And so, having said what it set out to say, the prayer concludes with its stirring doxology, following which minister and people are directed to join together in the Lord's Prayer.

Now, having emphasized the simple and straightforward sequence of the prayer, I must be quite frank and admit that, in its last four paragraphs, its heretofore clear and consistent character seems somehow to lose both direction and momentum, as it becomes involved in not a little repetition and redundancy. What is happening to the prayer at this point? For a long time the writer could find no satisfactory answer to this question. Then some years ago, in the work of a distinguished American liturgist, he came across the following paragraph, which threw a beam of clear light into his thoughts on the matter.

What is fundamentally the trouble with this passage [the late Bishop Parsons of California wrote] is that historically it is composed of odds and ends of collects from the Latin order, from which their substantive, concrete, and interesting elements have been eliminated. On the other hand, [he added] the prayer contains some valuable and distinctive phrases of the Christian sacrifice, which ought not to be lost. It ought to be possible to reduce this paragraph to elements not expressed elsewhere, providing a dignified but brief conclusion.⁶

Such a reduction Bishop Parsons essayed as follows:

And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee to accept this our bounden duty and service; not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offenses, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.⁷

An alternative abridgment, prepared by the writer, would read as follows:

6. E. L. Parsons and B. H. Jones, *The American Prayer Book* (New York: Scribner's, 1937), p. 210.

7. *Ibid.*

And we entirely desire thy fatherly goodness mercifully to accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, as here we also offer and present, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable holy and living sacrifice unto thee; Through Jesus Christ our Lord, by whom and with whom in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honour and glory be unto thee, O Father Almighty, world without end. Amen.

v

We come at length to the fifth and final reason why the 1932 communion service has made for itself so large a place in the esteem and affection of some of us United Churchmen. (Moreover, this to us is a reason so clear and compelling that we cannot help but wonder that others fail to recognize it also.) Our present rite is one of those things that we of the United Church of Canada already hold in common with our friends and brethren of the Anglican Church. It already is, and it should increasingly be, a bond of union between us.

Cranmer's English communion liturgy of 1549—that which he entitled: "The Supper of the Lorde and the Holy Communion, Commonly Called the Masse"—was destined to be the parent, grandparent, and great-grandparent of a variety of eucharistic rites during the subsequent four centuries. One of its lineal descendents in these latter days has been "An Order for The Celebration of The Lord's Supper or Holy Communion" in the Book of Common Order of the United Church of Canada. The close kinship of this present-day liturgy with the corresponding rite in the 1959 Canadian Book of Common Prayer will be obvious to all who will place the two services side by side and compare the one with the other. Here are two members—two cousins, if you prefer, and not too far removed—belonging to the same family, and each has the family likeness stamped plainly on its forehead. Surely when the day of reunion comes, the fact that we already have this much in common will encourage us to persevere still further in the evolving of forms and orders that all members of the uniting communions will acclaim as their own.

Several years ago an English scholar pointed out that one of the achievements the Liturgical Movement had to its credit in our time was "not so much creating a new unity among Christians, as bringing to light that common ground which they already share."⁸ When we United Churchmen celebrate the sacrament with the Book of 1932 in our hands, we take our stand on that common ground—and some of us intend to go on standing there. Yes, to us it is not less than "meet, right and our bounden duty" that we should both use and cherish something, which, from the viewpoint of concern for Christian reunion, possesses an importance all its own.

A generation ago the late Dean Sperry, of Harvard Divinity School, wrote of a masterpiece of our religious heritage in these terms:

Here is a work of Christian art of supreme beauty. It serves as a bond of union and a medium for the interpretation of common Christian experience, as no

8. A. M. Allchin in *Studia Liturgica*, 1 (1962), 67f.

other vehicle in the possession of the church. There is no intellectual coin in common circulation in the English-speaking world that approximates to the gold par of the Authorized version. If for no other reason we should treasure it and abide by it, because it is one of the surest means we have of sharing the Christian life together.⁹

These words, originally written with reference to the King James Version of the Bible, are equally applicable to, and true of, the present communion liturgy of the United Church of Canada. Beyond all question it is "one of the surest means we have of sharing the Christian life" with our friends.

9. W. L. Sperry, *Reality in Worship* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), p. 244.