

CHAPTER SEVEN

Eucharist

*T*he Eucharist makes us who we are and tells us where we are going. The Eucharist both forms the church into a community, brings us together as a people, and reveals to us the destiny to which God calls us. If we were able to ask our earliest brothers and sisters in the faith what they thought they were doing when they celebrated the Eucharist, they would have responded that they were sealing the covenant. Covenant is the context in which the early church spoke about and tried to understand the mystery that they celebrated when they came together to eat the Lord's Supper. "Covenant" is a very ancient and rich term in the Jewish tradition. Several covenants are formed between God and his people throughout the Hebrew Bible. I will concentrate especially on three

great covenants that were central to Israel's understanding of its relationship to God.

The formation of the first of these three covenants concludes the story of Noah in the book of Genesis 8:20–9:17. After the waters of the great flood had subsided and the ark had come to rest on dry land, God proposes to form a covenant with Noah and his descendents. So God instructs Noah to build an altar and to choose animals for sacrifice from among those that were with him in the ark. Parts of the sacrificed animals were burned completely; that was God's share of the meal. The rest of the sacrificed meat was consumed by Noah and his family. Symbolically God and Noah and his family have eaten a meal together. The covenant between God and Noah's descendents is sealed in the blood of those sacrificed animals. The sign of this covenant with Noah is the rainbow in the sky, the visible reminder of the pact. Whenever the rainbow appears, God and all living creatures will be reminded of God's promise never again to destroy the earth with a great flood. Notice several things about this covenant story. First, God does all of the talking; God proposes the covenant and establishes its terms. Second, notice with whom the covenant is made: Noah and all his descendants, which means all of the human race since, according to the story, Noah and his family are the only survivors of the flood. Third, notice the importance of the communion meal symbolically shared by God and the human beings who are present. Fourth, notice the (implied) importance of blood in sealing the covenant. Finally, notice that the sign of the

covenant is the rainbow, an external reality, outside the human beings.

The second of the great covenants, that between God and Abraham, is found just a few chapters after the story of Noah. Abraham and Sarah (or Abram and Sarai, as they are called at this point in the story) had been promised by God that if they left their own land, entered the land of Canaan and remained faithful to God that God would raise up a great people from among their descendants who would inherit the land. But Abraham and Sarah have grown old and have no children as yet. They cannot understand how God will make their descendants a great nation when they have not a single descendant as yet. So God proposes to form a covenant to reaffirm the promise to Abraham and Sarah. In the fifteenth chapter of Genesis, God instructs Abraham to take a number of animals, cut them in half and arrange the halved carcasses in two rows. Then God appears as a flaming fire which marches up and down between the slaughtered animals—apparently a kind of dramatic ancient way of saying, “If I fail to keep my promise, may I end up like these animals.” The covenant is formed in the blood of those slaughtered animals. This time, however, the covenant is more explicit. No longer is the covenant made between God and all the peoples of the earth, as it had been with Noah. Now the covenant is between God and the descendants of this particular couple, Abraham and Sarah. The terms of the covenant, too, are more explicit: in brief, you will be my people, I will be your God, and therefore you will inherit this land. Finally, the sign of the covenant is much more personal:

circumcision. The sign of the covenant has changed from a natural phenomenon located outside those making the covenant, the rainbow, to a physical operation performed on the bodies of those (at least, the males) who participate in the covenant.

The third covenant story and the most famous is that of the covenant between God and Israel mediated by Moses at Sinai (Exodus 24:1–11). After the people of Israel have been led out of Egypt and have arrived at the mountain of God, Moses goes up the mountain to receive God's law, the terms of this covenant, now very elaborate and explicit indeed. Coming down the mountain, Moses reads these terms of the covenant to the assembled twelve tribes of Israel who are about to become one nation by sealing this covenant with God and with one another. Once the law has been read to them, the people express their willingness to abide by those terms. So Moses directs leaders of the Israelites to assemble stones to build an altar. Animals are sacrificed and the blood of these animals is collected in basins. Moses pours half of the blood over the altar, which is the sign of God's presence. He then sprinkles the remaining blood on the members of the tribes. This is a symbolic way of saying that God and His people have entered into a blood relationship with one another since blood is the seat of life. They share the same life in the sealing of this covenant through the blood of the sacrificed animals. In fact, just before Moses sprinkles the people with the blood, he presents the basin with the blood in it with the words, "See the blood of the covenant" (24:8). All then unite in a communion sacrifice. Notice that the sign of this

covenant has moved from the rainbow or a physical change in the bodies of the participants in the covenant to changed behavior, a new way of living. The sign of the Mosaic covenant will be that those who are its members will keep the law given them by God. The sign of this covenant will be how they live.

In the books of the later prophets, beginning with Jeremiah especially, the emphasis shifts from resealing the covenant with Moses to a new covenant which God will bring about through a mediator whom he will send, someone *anointed* to be a new Moses, a *messiah* in Hebrew or a *christ* in Greek. Thus, for century after century the expectation among the Jewish people was that, when the messiah came, he would give them a new covenant with God. It was a common expectation that this new covenant would be sealed at the celebration of the old covenant, that is, at the Passover. Therefore, when on one Passover evening in Jerusalem, in an upper room, a group of people gathered together under the leadership of a wandering rabbi from Galilee whom they had come to believe might be the messiah, and heard that rabbi say to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you" (Luke 22:15), they certainly must have thought, "At last! This is the moment. Now Jesus will give us the new covenant." And that is exactly what Jesus did at the Last Supper.

He celebrated the Passover ritual with his disciples but changed the words and so the meaning of the celebration. He took the bread, participation in which symbolized joining together in the former covenant, and said, "This is my body," so that now, in this new communion,

one actually eats the body of the Lord and so takes part in a true communion meal with God and with one another. Later in the meal he took a cup and said, echoing Moses' words at Sinai, "This is the blood of the new covenant." Now, however, the blood is not sprinkled on those who join in the sealing of the covenant but drunk by them; we actually consume that shared life and so take it within us. The blood relationship with the Lord, previously symbolized by the blood of sacrificed bulls and goats, is truly established through the Eucharist. And the sign of this new covenant established between God and his people is that they love one another. The covenant sign has moved from being the rainbow, to the physical change of circumcision, to a changed form of behavior, living the law, to a changed motive for living the law. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34–35). The sign of discipleship, the sign of membership in the new covenant, is that we love one another as Jesus has loved us. Just as the covenant brought by Moses not only established the bond between God and his people but turned twelve tribes into one nation, so in the Eucharist, we are not only joined with God but are formed together into one community. The Eucharist truly makes the church. In signing our covenant with God, in sealing it again and again each time we celebrate the Eucharist, we are joined to one another and to God. The Eucharist makes us into *a people* and so enables us to be the people *of God*. The Eucharist makes us who we

are. It is the sealing of the New Covenant, celebrated again and again and again.

Not only does the Eucharist make us who we are, it tells us where we are going. I suspect that if we could find someone who had never heard of Christianity and so knew nothing about the Eucharist, and invited that person to attend a celebration of the Eucharist and afterward asked what he or she thought of the ritual, such a person might well reply, "Well, you Christians certainly make a great deal of fuss about eating a little bit of bread and drinking some wine together." And the person would be correct, of course. The eucharistic celebration centers on bread that we believe becomes the body of Christ and on wine that we believe becomes the blood of Christ. Consider that bread for a moment. There is no intrinsic difference between the bread which becomes the Eucharist and the bread that we popped into the toaster at breakfast or that we will use for sandwiches at lunch. There is no intrinsic difference between the wine that will become the Eucharist and the wine that we drink with friends at dinner. If this bread can become the body of Christ, why not all that other bread? If this wine can become the blood of Christ, why not all wine? If bread grown from soil and nurtured by sunlight and watered by rain, if grapes tended by vine-dressers and grown with the help of sun and soil and rain, can become the presence of Christ, then why not the sun, the soil and the rain? Why not the vine, why not the wheat? In fact, if this tiny fragment of the material world can be transformed into the fullness of the presence of Christ, and therefore the fullness of the presence

of God in human terms, then why not the whole material universe? And that is, of course, precisely the point.

In the prayers for the feast of Corpus Christi, we find an antiphon that originated in the Middle Ages, *O sacrum convivium*, "O sacred banquet." In the antiphon we describe the Eucharist as a *pignus futurae gloriae*. In Latin a *pignus* is a "down payment," a "first installment." Thus, in the liturgy of the feast of Corpus Christi, we call the Eucharist the down payment, the first installment of future glory. Precisely right: the eucharistic bread and wine are, as it were, the tip of the iceberg, the point at which we see what the whole universe is destined to become. The whole universe is destined to be transformed into the presence of Christ, the fullness of God in the flesh. The whole universe is destined to be transformed into the presence of God in Christ.

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Saint Paul beautifully expresses the destiny of the universe when he writes,

Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "All things are put in subjection," it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are sub-

jected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:24–28)

That is where we are all going. That is the destiny that the Eucharist reveals to us now: the transformation of the universe into the presence of God, so that God may be everything in everything. The Eucharist makes us who we are and reveals to us where we are going. That is why we are a eucharistic people: because we are made into a people by the sealing of the covenant in the Eucharist, a people who know what the destiny of the world is. Consequently we are the people who respond by saying “Thank you.” (The Greek word for “to say thank you” is *eucharistein*.) We are the people who give thanks because we are constantly the recipients of gifts. The Eucharist makes us who we are. The Eucharist reveals our destiny.

For Reflection

- *What is a covenant? How is the Eucharist the new covenant?*
- *What does “Real Presence” mean? Do you feel that you and God have a covenant together?*
- *How does the Eucharist point to the holiness of everything? What does that mean in terms of our commitment to creation? To one another?*