

WORSHIP, FAITH, AND LIFE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The period from Constantine to Pope Leo the Great (d.461) was one of decisive importance in the history of the Catholic Church. Many of the basic features of Catholicism were fixed during these years in the form they were to retain, with relatively few modifications, for the next fifteen hundred years. Its chief act of worship, the Mass, was highly standardized and ritualized. Its chief dogma, belief in Jesus Christ, God and man, was affirmed and clarified in lasting terms. Many practices henceforth fundamental to its discipline and life originated and were incorporated into its canon law. Its clergy took on the character of a sacred caste and began to submit themselves to the law of celibacy. Monasticism took root in Egypt and spread across Christendom. Finally, the basic principles of its code of social and personal ethics achieved nearly permanent form.

The Mass, originally called the Lord's Supper, the breaking of bread, the Eucharist, was celebrated by the first Christians in the late afternoon and was joined with a regular meal of ritual character. Toward the middle of the

second century, however, the sacramental meal had become an independent rite and was now celebrated on Sunday morning and combined with a service of reading and preaching.

Our earliest description of the Mass is from the pen of Justin Martyr (d. 165) and reflects this development. It is a simple service consisting of prayers by the whole assembly followed by a kiss of peace. Bread and wine were then brought to the president of the assembly, who recited a long prayer of thanksgiving, all present finally consuming the bread and consecrated wine. On some occasions, the Eucharist was preceded by a reading of the prophets and memoirs of the apostles, as well as a homily by the president.

The oldest liturgical form of the Mass (except the Didache, a different type) is found in the Church Order of Hippolytus (d. 236).¹ It is evidently the basis of all eucharistic prayers that have since been composed. The bishop lays his hands upon the bread and wine and water offered upon the altar table and begins the following dialogue:

Bishop: The Lord be with you. Congregation: And with thy spirit. Bishop: Hearts up.

Congregation: We have them to the Lord.

Bishop: Let us give thanks to the Lord.

Congregation: It is meet and right.

Bishop: We thank thee, God, through Thy beloved Servant Jesus Christ, whom in the last times Thou hast sent us as Savior and Redeemer and Messenger of Thy counsel, the Logos who comes from Thee, through whom Thou has made all things, whom Thou wast pleased to send from heaven into the womb of the virgin, and in her body he became flesh and was shown forth as Thy Son, born of the Holy Spirit and the virgin. To fulfill Thy will and to prepare Thee a holy people, he stretched out his hands, when he suffered, that he might release from suffering those who have believed on Thee.

And when he delivered himself to a voluntary passion, to loose death and to break asunder the bands of the devil, and to trample hell and to enlighten the righteous and to set up the boundary stone and to manifest the resurrection, he took a loaf, gave thanks, and spake, "Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you." Likewise also the cup and said, "This is my blood which is poured out for you. As often as you do this, you make my commemoration."

Remembering therefore his death and resurrection, we offer to Thee the loaf and the cup and give thanks to Thee that Thou hast counted us worthy to stand before Thee and to do Thee priestly service.

And we beseech Thee, that Thou send down Thy holy Spirit upon this offering of the church. Unite it and grant to all the saints who partake of it to their fulfilling with holy Spirit, to their strengthening of faith in truth, that we may praise and glorify Thee through Thy Servant Jesus Christ, through whom to Thee he glory and honour in Thy holy Church now and ever. Amen.

In their attitude toward worship as in other respects, Christians stood apart from the pagan world. They had no special holy places or temples; or in the words of Minucius Felix, "We have no shrines or altars."> As St. Paul told them, "You are the temple of the living God."³ The place where they worshiped had no particular importance in itself-it was usually just a large room in one of the member's homes; the whole focus was on the worshiping and praying community itself. But as time passed and as their numbers grew, large, spacious buildings took the place of the simple rooms. The Eucharist was no longer consecrated on a simple table but on a massive and ornate altar made of precious marbles and studded with gems.

Church architecture came into being, Constantine being a prime mover in this regard. As Christianity flourished under his protection, simple, spacious buildings were no

longer sufficient; they had to be "splendid, public and imposing" as well. Here as in their other artistic endeavors at the time, the Christians were receptive rather than creative. As models they had at hand the various Roman basilicas or assembly halls of different shapes and sizes. The imperial audience hall, with its apse to accommodate the throne of the Emperor, proved to be most suitable for adaptation to liturgical purposes. Constantine himself set the pace, erecting many churches such as the great Roman basilica over the spot where St. Peter's bones were thought to rest; like many of his structures it combined the basilica-type church with a large forecourt or atrium.

The liturgy itself was considerably influenced by the Constantinian revolution. Millions of pagans suddenly entered the Church, and some of their customs inevitably crept into the liturgy: the use of the kiss- as a sign of reverence for holy objects, the practice of genuflection, devotion to relics, and the use of candles, incense, and other ceremonial features derived from the imperial court. Under this pagan influence Christians began to face the east while praying, which made it necessary for the priest to lead prayers with his back to the congregation.

Belief in the real presence of Jesus-both body and blood under the form of bread and wine continued to animate the

faithful at Mass (as it was called from the fifth century on). No orthodox spokesman of the early Church, in fact, ever subscribed to a mere symbolic interpretation of the rite. But there was as yet no official formulation to describe the nature of the change that took place in the bread and wine. (This only happened in the Middle Ages, with the definition of the theory of transubstantiation.)

For a long time the celebrant was left considerable freedom to improvise in conducting the liturgy. Even the wording of the canon was left to his discretion. But as Church organization became more centralized and as the danger of heresy increased (especially after the rise of Arianism), some amount of conformity was gradually imposed, the liturgies of a particular linguistic area being standardized to conform to the norms set by the great ecclesiastical sees of that region. In this way five main liturgies rose to dominance: three in the East (the West-Syrian of Antioch, the Coptic of Alexandria, and the Byzantine of Constantinople); and two in the West (the Romano-African, which stemmed from Rome and North Africa; and the Gallican, which covered most of Western Europe until the ninth century and still survives in a few places, such as Milan, Italy).

The formation of the liturgical calendar began with the special significance accorded to Sunday as the day of

Christ's resurrection and hence as the day Christians ordinarily gathered for their weekly liturgy. But it did not become a public day of rest until the fourth century, when Constantine forbade all official litigation on that day.

Easter was celebrated very early-by the beginning of the second century. But its date was calculated differently in the East and in the West. At Rome, it was observed on the Sunday after the Jewish Passover, but in Asia it immediately followed the fourteenth of the Jewish month of Nisan, the beginning of the Passover. Pope Victor (d. 198) tried to make the Asians conform to Western usage but failed. However, the Roman custom finally prevailed everywhere. Pentecost and Epiphany were the next feasts added to the calendar; the latter, on January 6, coincided with pagan festivals celebrating the birth of the new year. Christmas originated in the fourth century, when Constantine joined it with a pagan feast celebrating the birthday of the sun on December 25.

Although the Eucharist and baptism were accorded special importance, other rites of the Church were also considered sacraments instituted by Christ. By the Middle Ages seven sacraments were officially listed. Of these none underwent as much change as the sacrament of penance. Its earliest form is obscure. There even seems to have been a reluctance on the part of the first Christians to entertain the idea that a

person once converted to Christ could sin and be forgiven again. The Shepherd of Hennas (c. 150) speaks as though a second remission of sins was unthinkable. But the Church soon had to reckon with the sad fact that many did fall into sin even after baptism.

And so the Church gradually developed a system for handling the problem of the sinner in its midst. It was anticipated, it seems, in the practice of excommunication deemed necessary from the earliest days in dealing with notorious troublemakers. Another precedent was the procedure of arbitration used to settle disputes among members. With these practices as a starting point, a system was gradually evolved whereby one guilty of grave sin could be pardoned after undergoing penance.

Cyprian gives the fullest description of how the system worked by the middle of the third century's. A Christian guilty of a very grave sin, such as murder or apostasy, in some way made known his sin to the bishop, usually in private, or he was admonished as a public sinner to present himself in church. He was then publicly excommunicated by the bishop and relegated to a specially reserved section at the rear. He could no longer receive Communion and was obligated to lead a life of utmost austerity-wearing coarse garments, keeping his hair cropped, abstaining from sexual relations, and curtailing

other pleasures. In this state of abject humiliation he might have to remain for years. Details would vary from province to province, but certain features were universal: Penance was always public; it was never administered more than once to the same person; if a sinner relapsed he was left totally to the mercy of God.

Those penitents who had completed their penance were sacramentally reconciled with the Church-on Holy Thursday, as a rule. They prostrated themselves before the bishop, who raised them up while placing his hands on them signifying their restoration to full communion with the Church. This act of absolution or reconciliation with the Church was the essential sacramental act and still is. The system made extreme demands on human nature, for once enrolled in the ranks of the penitents, a person was condemned for life to an inferior status in the Church: He could never be admitted to the clerical state, run for public office, or even have marital relations. Even after absolution, he had to continue to live like a monk.

It is no wonder then that this system, the perfect reflection of the legalistic mind, broke down. The average Christian in the Constantinian Church was no longer in the heroic mold of the age of martyrs. Rather than subject himself to the rigors of penance, he simply deferred it until

he was on his deathbed or even postponed baptism until late in life.

During the early Middle Ages, the Celtic monks took the lead in devising a new system, which was private, which extended generally to all sins, and which allowed frequent confession. It is only in our own day that this Celtic system is itself in process of revision.

Like its worship, the faith of the Church underwent some development, and, in fact, its chief dogma, belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ, was not defined until the Council of Nicaea in 325. This council was called to settle a controversy over Christ's divinity, which erupted with violent intensity during the reign of Constantine when the presbyter Arius of Alexandria challenged his bishop, Alexander, on the question of God the Son's relation to God the Father.

To understand the unfolding of this controversy we must begin with the Church's basic understanding of Jesus Christ as it is found in the New Testament. Almost every page of the New Testament speaks in some way or other of Jesus Christ. Underlying all the variety of expressions and terms applied to Jesus there is the basic conviction that because of Jesus Christ, God was now an indestructible, vivid reality in the consciousness of men, his kingdom was

definitively established, and all men were invited to taste and enjoy the peace, forgiveness, love, and joy of his kingdom. Note that Jesus was regarded as the indispensable agent and instrument of this reign of God; his death by crucifixion and his resurrection were the means of salvation. So closely did they associate Jesus with the work of God that they regarded him no less than God the Father as the object of faith. Mercy, grace, and peace were gifts from Jesus as well as from God. This faith in Jesus they expressed especially in the various titles they attributed to him, such as Messiah or Christ, Son of God, savior, lord. This last term, Lord, is especially significant, for it denoted their devotion to him and recognition of his sovereignty—a sovereignty that they recognized when they worshiped him in their liturgy and invoked him as their Lord.

It was on this New Testament foundation of virtual belief in Christ's divinity that theologians began their speculations and developed a science about Christ that we call Christology. The most popular of the Christologies in the first several centuries of the Church proved to be the one known as the Logos Christology, from the Greek term *logos*, meaning "the Word." In this Christology, elaborated by such men as Tertullian, Origen, and Novatian, Jesus was asserted to be the divine Son, or Word or Wisdom who participated with the Father in the creation as well as in the

redemption of the world. The term *logos* was found already in John's "And the Word became flesh" and also in the Book of Proverbs (8:22-31), with its reference to a personified Wisdom distinct from the Father and begotten by him as his firstborn and instrument of creation. It was also a prominent concept in the prevailing Neo-Platonic philosophy of the time and so provided the theologians with a means of correlating the Christian revelation not only with the Old Testament but also with the insights of the classical philosophers.

This concept of the pre-existent Word when applied to Christ made it possible to distinguish in the eternal Godhead between God the Creator and the Word, his agent in creating. As Word he was the principle of rationality in God and also the principle of revelation; and as Word he had become incarnate in Christ. The concept of the Word also helped to clarify the meaning of the scriptural term "Son of God"; in this sense it meant not only the historical person of Christ but also his pre-existent being.

But some misgivings were registered as it was realized that Proverbs 8:22-31 could also be interpreted to subordinate the personified Word to God. This tendency was found even in some of Origen's writings, and it seems, in fact, that Proverbs 8:22-31 was the starting point of Arianism—interpreted, as it was, by the Arians in the light of

certain philosophical assumptions: "God," they said, "was absolutely one, the only unbegotten, the only eternal, the only one without beginning, the only true, the only one who had immortality, the only wise, the only good, the only potentate . . . the monad and the principle of creation of all things."⁶ Nor did he share these prerogatives with anyone, not even with the Word.

Arius, a presbyter in the church district of Baucalis in Alexandria, systematized and popularized this point of view. Through preaching and the hymns he composed, he taught that the Word was created to be the instrument of the Father's cosmic activity. Thus in explicating the passage from Proverbs 8:22 ff.: "The Lord begot me, the firstborn of his ways, the forerunner of his prodigies of long ago . . . ," Arius wrote: "Before he was begotten or created or ordained or established, he did not exist,"? So for Arius the Word had a beginning, and was even liable to change and sin. This was tantamount to denying all finality to the revelation of Christ and opening the way to a resurgence of pagan polytheism, with its myriads of intermediate gods and demons.

This denial of the divinity of Christ plunged Alexandria into controversy, and Arius' bishop, Alexander, suspended him. With the unity of the Church at stake, Constantine convoked the first ecumenical council,

which met at Nicaea in 325. Though the bishops for the most part were men of modest learning, it did not take them long to decide that Arianism was not what they had been teaching and preaching all their lives. The vote against it was virtually unanimous; the divinity of Christ was not to be an open question in the Church. The creed they issued is with some additions still recited at Sunday Mass. It unequivocally condemned Arianism, asserting that the Son was begotten, not created, and was "identical in substance" with the Father (Greek: homoousios). In other words, the Word shared the divine nature and was fully equal with the Father.

But peace was not to be had so easily. While the bishops agreed in rejecting Arianism, they were not all happy with the term used to formulate the orthodox position homoousios-which apparently had been imposed on them under the eagle eye of Constantine. So, after the council a controversy began over this term, which lasted until 381, when its use was once more sanctioned at the Council of Constantinople. On one side were the Nicenes, under their leader, Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, who defended the term, Opposed were a mixed group, mainly Greek. Speaking churchmen, some of whom were Arian, but the majority merely conservatives who simply preferred the traditional lack of definition and

objected to the Nicene homoousios as a novelty and a departure from pure biblical terminology. They were also for the most part followers of Origen in emphasizing the distinctions in the Godhead.

Complicating the situation was the accession to power of Constantine's son Constantius, who became sole ruler in 350; he favored the Arians and tried to crush the Nicenes. With his help the Arians were able to chase Athanasius from his diocese; call numerous synods, which repudiated the Nicene formula; and promulgate the Arian doctrine under the cover of various vague formulas. The peak of their success came at Constantinople in 360, when bishops from East and West subscribed to an anti-Nicene formula that concealed its Arianism under the vague words: "The Son was like the Father," (This phrase later became the official dogma of the Arians.)

For a time even Pope Liberius vacillated and signed one of these vague formularies. Through it all, however, Athanasius stood unyielding as rock while suffering exile five times. While the Arians were much indebted to the rationalist philosophy of the day, Athanasius argued his case from the Christian theology of redemption: Christ had to be divine in order to cause our divinization. Now, since the divine Son is eternally generated by the Father,

they must share the same nature, for the Godhead is a unique, indivisible monad; but at the same time, they must be truly distinct, since the Father is Father and not Son, and the Son is Son and not Father. And Athanasius found that only the term *homoousios*, meaning "identical in substance," was adequate to convey both distinction and identity.

His main difficulty was winning over the Eastern bishops, who preferred the formula "of a substance like the Father" (*homoiousios*). But the gap between them was considerably narrowed by their memorandum of 359, which insisted that though Father and Son are separate, yet the Son having been begotten from the Father is like him and hence "one and the same" as he. Eventually these two parties, the *Homoousions* and the *Homoiousions*, were brought even closer together at the council held in Alexandria under the aegis of Athanasius.

In the meantime, theological reflection on the nature of the Holy Spirit was stimulated by the whole controversy. Here also Athanasius' contribution was decisive: The Spirit, he asserted, was consubstantial with Father and Son. His work was completed by the Cappadocian Fathers Basil the Great (d. 379), Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 389), and Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395). The difficult problem of how he was dis• tinct from Father and

Son while sharing the same essence was solved by differentiating between their modes of origin; the Son is generated, but the Spirit proceeds.

Unity was then restored to the Church at the Council of Constantinople in 381, which reaffirmed the Nicene faith and endorsed the consubstantiality of the Spirit, thus giving the doctrine of the Trinity its definitive form.

Another great doctrinal struggle, however, almost immediately erupted as regards the relation of the divinity of Christ to his humanity, for once it was clearly defined that Jesus Christ fully shared the divinity of the Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, another question was bound to occur: How was his humanity related to his divinity or how were the events of his life and death related to his divine nature? But this controversy we will consider in a later chapter.

The ministry of the Church developed a high degree of organization. We know that Pope Fabian (d. 250) divided Rome into seven regions with, it seems, a deacon in charge of each region. This corresponds with the list of ministers of the Roman Church given us by the historian Eusebius (d. c.340): forty-six presbyters; seven deacons; seven subdeacons; forty-two acolytes; and fifty-two readers, exorcists, and door keepers. Next to the

bishop, the deacon for a long time played the most important role in the Church. Elected by the community, he was charged with administering Communion to the faithful, bringing alms to the poor, leading the prayer of the faithful at Mass, and in general acting as the bishop's right-hand man. His control of the funds assured him special influence, and many deacons passed directly to the episcopate without passing through the priesthood. But the deacon lost his prominence as the church spread into the countryside and it was necessary to multiply outlying churches-now called parishes. The presbyter now assumed functions that were previously often monopolized by the bishop: presiding at the Eucharist, preaching, and absolving penitents. The office of the deacon then became just a ritual step leading to the priesthood.

The clergy at first were not sharply differentiated from the laity in their lifestyle: The clergy married, raised families, and earned their livelihood at some trade or profession. But as the practice grew of paying them for their clerical work, they withdrew more and more from secular pursuits, until by the fourth century such withdrawal was deemed obligatory.

An important factor in this change was the increasing stress laid on the cultic and ritualistic aspects of

the ministry. At first the Christian presbyter or elder avoided any resemblance to the pagan or Jewish priests and, in fact, even deliberately refused to be called a priest. He saw his primary function as the ministry of the word. The ritualistic features of his sacramental ministry were kept in a low key. Even John Chrysostom as late as the fifth century still stressed preaching as the main task of the Christian minister. But the image of the Christian presbyter gradually took on a sacral character. This sacralization of the clergy was brought about by various developments-theological, liturgical, and legal. The Old Testament priesthood, for instance, was seen as the type and model for the New Testament priesthood. The more elaborate liturgy of the post-Constantinian era, with its features borrowed from paganism, enhanced the image of the minister as a sacred personage. The ministry of the word diminished in importance when infant baptism became the rule rather than the exception, for infants could not be preached to. Imperial legislation established the clergy as an independent corporation with its own rights and immunities.

In line with these developments, there was a big shift in the very idea of the sacred. Before Constantine the whole Church was considered the realm of the sacred as opposed to the profane world outside; after Constantine and the break• down of the separation between Church and world,

the polarity between sacred and profane was transformed into one between sacred clergy and profane laity.

A clear indication of this trend in the Western church is found in the requirement of celibacy for the clergy, which was adopted mainly on the grounds that sexual intercourse was incompatible with the sacred character of the clerical state. Legislation to this effect was first passed at the local synod of Elvira, Spain, and taken up by the Popes beginning with Siricius (d. 399), who enforced clerical celibacy in their decretals.

Even before it became a necessity for the Western clergy, virginity and celibacy were held in high esteem. There is very early evidence for the existence of Christian ascetics—men and women who practiced a special form of asceticism, renounced marriage, and lived lives of seclusion from the world. At first they did not form distinct communities under a fixed rule; they usually lived with their families and kept their own property. However, their vows to live a life of continence were recognized by Church authorities. Origen regarded the life of asceticism as a kind of spiritual marriage with Christ, an idea that became very popular; Methodius likened ascetics to martyrs.

From this practice it was only a short step to monasticism, wherein the ascetic secluded himself completely from society by going out into the wilderness or

desert. As far as we know, the first one to do this was St. Anthony of Egypt, who was deeply moved when he happened to hear the text: "There is one thing further you must do. Sell all you have and give to the poor. You will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me." He took up an abode in complete solitude on the east bank of the Nile. As others gathered around him, a large populace of monks formed in the deserts south of Alexandria. Some practiced lives of complete solitude except for a weekly assembly and liturgy, while others lived in communities. Pachomius (b. c. 290), another Egyptian, originated another form of monasticism characterized by a high degree of organization: work, study of Scripture, and prayer were integrated into a balanced daily schedule.

The monk completely renounced sex, while the general Christian attitude toward sex was suspicious and even hostile. But Christians were not alone in this regard. Dualism, a philosophy that saw the world as a place of exile and the flesh as a prison of the soul, was widespread in late antiquity. Neo-Platonism and the innumerable mystery religions were dualistic. And for many pagans as well as for many Christians, "the body became the chief locus of all the frustrating powers of the world." The Christians were simply more emphatic in the abuse they heaped on the flesh. Justin and Clement reflect the common teaching of

the Church in their view that sex and marriage were justified only by the intention to procreate. Most Church Fathers allowed marital intercourse only if procreation was directly intended. But the first Church legislation against contraception apparently was not passed until the Council of Braga in 572.e Augustine accentuated the Church's rigorous attitude toward sex by his fateful association of original sin and sexuality.

Roman law allowed abortion, imposed no criminal penalty for abandonment of a child, and even permitted infanticide.

It was only through Christian influence that these crimes were eventually outlawed.

Divorce was consistently condemned by the Church in keeping with its absolute prohibition by Jesus.

There was a strong body of opinion in the Church before the time of Constantine against Christians becoming soldiers. Manuals of Church discipline exist that rule out military service by Christians. But this view never won predominance. Many Christians, it seems, served in the Roman legions, and in 314 the Synod of Arles condemned Christians who deserted from the army. A half century later, Athanasius taught that of war. Augustine finally formulated the theory of the just war which, as

repeated by Aquinas in the Middle Ages, remained the standard Christian approach down to our times.

In their general view of social reform, the early Christians followed the lead of St. Paul, who pessimistically saw social evils-war, slavery, private property, poverty, oppression-as the result of sin and hence endemic to the human condition.