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Mass Without the Consecration?

By Robert F. Taft

But how can there be Mass without the consecration?" sputtered a perplexed Catholic prelate. He had just heard that the Holy See had recognized the validity of the eucharistic sacrifice celebrated according to the Anaphora [Eucharistic Prayer] of Addai and Mari, which does not include the words of institution, "This is my body, this is my blood." The answer, of course, is that there cannot be. But what is the consecration, if not the words with which Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper?

The Agreement of Oct. 26, 2001

One of the tasks of theologians is to explain the authentic decisions of the church's magisterium. And the *Guidelines for Admission to the Eucharist Between the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian Church of the East*, dated Oct. 26, 2001, is surely one such decision. It was approved by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and Pope John Paul II himself. The purpose of these guidelines is to make sure that members of two sister churches of the same ancient apostolic tradition will not be deprived of the Eucharist in the absence of a priest of their own church. They assure Catholics who fulfill the conditions to receive Communion consecrated at an Assyrian Eucharist using the Anaphora of Addai and Mari that they are receiving the one true body and blood of Christ.

The Problem

This, however, posed a dilemma. In the light of Catholic teaching on the centrality of the words of institution in the eucharistic consecration, how could the Catholic Church authorize its faithful to receive Communion consecrated using a prayer lacking these central words? Yet Rome has always respected tradition, and Addai and Mari is nothing if not traditional. Scholars are unanimous in agreeing that it is one of the most ancient anaphoras, in continuous use in the age-old East-Syrian Christendom of Mesopotamia since time immemorial.

With that in mind, the Vatican decree takes a forthright and courageous stand in favor of recognizing the validity of Addai and Mari, arguing from the apostolicity of the East-Syrian tradition and the antiquity of Addai and Mari, and placing its lack of an institution narrative in the context of the history of the eucharistic prayer, as well as in relation to the Assyrian eucharistic teaching concerning the institution narrative as reflected in the commentators and in the other two East Syrian anaphoras, which do have the words of institution.

The argumentation, fully au courant theologically and liturgically, can be summed up as follows. The Catholic magisterium teaches that the traditional practices of our Eastern sister churches are worthy of all veneration and respect. Scholars all agree that Addai and Mari is one of the most ancient anaphoras still in use. The consensus of the latest scholarship is that Addai and Mari in its original form never included the institution narrative. Contrary to earlier opinion, this is by no means unique: several other early eucharistic prayers have no words of institution. And though Addai and Mari may not cite the words of institution literally, it contains them virtually, in explicit references to the eucharistic institution, to the Last Supper, to the body and blood and sacrifice of Christ and to the oblation of the church, thereby clearly demonstrating the intention of repeating what Jesus did in obedience to his command, "Do this in memory of me."

Ecumenical Theology

This reasoning reflects the progress in Catholic liturgical scholarship that provided the historical and theological basis for such an agreement. Crucial to the agreement was the method I call ecumenical theology, a new way of studying Christian tradition in order to reconcile and unite, rather than to confute and dominate. Its deliberate intention is to emphasize the common tradition underlying differences, which, though real, may be the accidental product of history, culture and language rather than essential differences in the apostolic faith. So ecumenical theology strives to enter into the other's point of view, to understand it insofar as possible with sympathy and agreement. It is, in a sense, a contest in reverse, one in which the parties seek to understand and justify not their own point of view, but that of their interlocutor.

Such an effort and method is rooted in our faith that the Holy Spirit is with God's church, protecting the integrity of its witness, above all in the centuries of its undivided unity. Since some of the issues that divide us go back to those centuries, one must ineluctably conclude that these differences do not affect the substance of the apostolic faith. Furthermore, the Catholic Church recognizes the Eastern churches to be the historic apostolic Christianity of the East, and to be sister churches of the Catholic Church. Consequently, no view of Christian tradition can be considered anything but partial that does not take full account of the age-old, traditional teaching of these sister churches.

These principles make it obvious why the Catholic Church sought a positive solution to the problem of the validity of Addai and Mari. On what legitimate theological and ecclesiological basis could Rome argue that an apostolic church whose ancient principal anaphora had been in continuous use since time immemorial without ever being condemned by anyone—not by any father of the church, nor by any local or provincial synod, nor by ecumenical council nor catholicos nor patriarch nor pope—on what basis would one dare to infer that such an ancient apostolic church had never had a valid eucharistic sacrifice?

This positive solution received support from the consensus of the best representative contemporary Catholic scholars, who agree that the institution narrative is a later interpolation into the earliest eucharistic prayers. Not only Addai and Mari but 10 or more other early eucharistic prayers also lack these words, including the so-called *Apostolic Tradition*, whose institution narrative was probably added not earlier than the fourth century. So there is not a single extant pre-Nicene eucharistic prayer that one can prove contained the words of institution.

The Entire Prayer as Formula of Consecration

Catholic teaching of late has moved toward the broader view that the eucharistic consecration comprises the prayer over the gifts in its entirety. This renewal is reflected in official Catholic texts in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (Nov. 18, 1969) says of the eucharistic prayer: "Now begins the summit and center of the whole celebration, namely the Eucharistic Prayer itself, *that is, the prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification...*" (No. 54). "Sanctification," of course, means in this context eucharistic consecration. This broader vision is also reflected in how the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* refers to the anaphora: "with the eucharistic prayer, the prayer, namely, *of thanksgiving and consecration*, we come to the heart and culmination of the celebration" (No. 1352). This renewal found ecumenical agreement in the Munich Statement of the Orthodox-Catholic Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue (July 1982): "...the Eucharistic mystery is accomplished in the prayer which joins together the words by which the word made flesh instituted the sacrament and the epiclesis in which the church, moved by faith, entreats the Father, through the Son, to send the Spirit...."

The idea that the prayer of consecration is the entire core of the anaphora, not just some segment of it highlighted into an isolated "formula," is more faithful to the earlier common tradition of the undivided church. Several patristic texts—Justin, *Apology* I, 66 (ca. 150); Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* IV, 18.5 (ca.

185); Cyril/John II of Jerusalem, *Mystagogic Catechesis* 1, 7 (after 380)—lend themselves to this interpretation.

The Words of Institution are Always Consecratory

Does this mean the words of institution are not consecratory? Not at all. For the fathers of the church they are indeed consecratory, for they are eternally efficacious in the mouth of Jesus. The classic Latin doctrine on the words of institution as “words of consecration” can be traced back to St. Ambrose (339-97), who states the teaching unambiguously though not restrictively in his treatises *On the Sacraments* IV, 4.14-17, 5.21-23, and *On the Mysteries* IX, 52-54.

But Ambrose is not speaking of the words as a “formula.” In *On the Sacraments* IV, 4.14-17, for example, he attributes the efficacy of Jesus’ words to the indefectible effectiveness of the Word of God: “...it is the word of Christ which produces this sacrament. Which word of Christ? The one by which all things were made.... You see, then, how effective the word of Christ is. If then there is such power in the word of the Lord Jesus that things which were not began to be, how much more effective must they be in changing what already exists into something else!”

This is exactly what St. John Chrysostom, in his *Homily on the Betrayal of Judas* 1/2, 6, teaches: “‘This is my body’, he says. This word...once uttered, from that time to the present day...makes the sacrifice complete at every table in the churches.” The doctrine of St. John Damascene, “the last of the Greek Fathers” (d. 753/4), *On the Orthodox Faith* 86 (IV, 13), is no different: “God said ‘This is my body’ and ‘This is my blood,’ and ‘do this in memory of me.’ And by his all-powerful command it is done until he comes.” Since all these gentlemen are not heretics but saints and fathers venerated as such in the liturgical calendar of the Catholic Church, the old adage “let the rule of prayer determine the rule of faith” (*lex orandi legem statuat credendi*) must apply here.

In this patristic sense, then, the words of institution are always consecratory, even in the Anaphora of Addai and Mari, because Jesus’ pronouncing of them at the Last Supper remains efficaciously consecratory for every Eucharist until the end of time. So the gifts of bread and wine are sanctified using a prayer, the anaphora, that applies to the present gifts of bread and wine what Jesus handed on. How the individual anaphoras make this application has varied widely, depending on local tradition, particular history and the doctrinal concerns of time and place. In my view these differences cannot with any historical legitimacy be seen in dogmatic conflict with parallel but divergent expressions of the same basic realities in a different historico-ecclesial milieu.

That is the approach taken in this exciting and fully authentic new Vatican decree. Surprisingly, it has been a sleeper, attracting little notice despite its epoch-making boldness. I consider it the most important magisterial teaching since Vatican II.

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