

PRAYED THEOLOGY

THE LITURGY AS THE CONFESSION OF THE CHURCH

BY
MARTIN JORDAN

«Theology»

First we should determine at the very outset what is really meant by «prayed theology». We may try to summarize what today is understood by theology and what we generally expect and ask from theology. Christian theology, first of all, has to deal with the Biblical sources of God's Revelation. As a science, however, it also has to make use of all possible scientific means at hand and especially of the methods of historical research and philology. Theology has to face, as far as possible, the given problems of the present moment in order to give answers to them from Revelation. These challenges and expectations are quite justified. But we may also put to ourselves the following question: Are we not in doing so, overly tempted to apprehend in too narrow a way the conception of theology from within—in spite of the magnitude of its broadness as concerns its outward manifestation? We believe that the necessity for such a critical question, especially when studying the Fathers and liturgies of the Ancient Church, is quite justified, for in both the texts of the Fathers and in the liturgies as well we have to deal with a theology which is always straight-way directed towards its intrinsic aim, viz. the immediate statement of God. This statement of God is inseparably linked to personal «devotion» towards Him, and this devotion finally goes over into invocation and prayer.

It would be wrong to consider this spontaneity in statements of such a theology as being based upon a primitive, real conception of God. But according to the Fathers and liturgical formulas, God is «Θεὸς ἀκατάληπτος», the incomprehensible God Who is praised always by new apophatic expressions: «for Thou art God ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, from everlasting to everlasting, the same Thou...» (from the Liturgy of S. Chrysostom). He might even hide Himself before us in the word of His Revelation, so that we use

this word without knowing Him. It is exactly this very same incomprehensible God Who asks full devotion from His creature. This fact we are taught not only by the liturgies and the example of the Fathers, but above all by the New Testament Writings, for to recognize the invisible God, we have to be in «ἀγάρη» (cf. I Epist. of S. John) and to embrace Jesus as the Lord, and we have need of the Gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. I Cor. 12,3). Theology, as giving evidence of the One Who in His Essence again always escapes each statement of Himself, and the Liturgy as worship become, therefore, the highest all-embracing duty of our existence.

For the prototype of a living theology understood in such a way, we are referred to those superhuman beings of prophetic vision who stand before God's Glory and hail Him with veiled faces and cry unceasingly the Thrice-Holy. In particular, it is S. Cyrill of Jerusalem who speaks about this Thrice Holy in his *Ca'echeses* (catech. mystic. 5,6) as a «theologia», and, to give another example, two of the oldest formulas of the Liturgy of S. Basil explain these hailings as «never being silent theologies». But even in our human world, hymns and prayer may again possibly become an adequate theological statement appropriate for praising God.

The Eucharistic Prayer as a Theological Confession

In trying to analyze the data of the history of Liturgy, at first sight, it might seem to us a bit strange that the *Credo*, that is to say, the text which we today usually consider as the Creed, was introduced into the usual communion service at comparatively late date—and this, too, only by chance, i.e. at the transition from the end of the fifth to the beginning of the sixth century in the Christian East, that is to say, during the time of the monophysite controversies; and in Rome, as late as the eleventh century! And one might ask oneself what was the practice before in the ordinary service of Christianity concerning the Creed as the indispensable expression of the Faith of the Church. Such kind of doubts, however, easily find their solution, if we take into consideration the fact that our Creed is the special *Baptismal Creed*, which originally had its place only at the performance of a baptism.

On the other hand, the celebration of the Holy Eucharist had from the very beginning its own type of Creed in the very central prayer of thanksgiving in the ancient liturgies. It is a prayer of giving thanks for the creation of the world «...and when by our disobedience we were fallen,

Thou didst raise us again; that Thou mightest bring us to heaven, and give us an inheritance in the future kingdom», and a prayer of thanksgiving, as the Liturgy of S. Chrysostom formulates further on: «For these and all Thine other mercies, whether known to us or unknown, whether manifested or hidden». In the prayer of the Anaphora, of the «elevation», the Church is imitating Christ; just as He Himself had given thanks to His Father over the Bread and the Cup the night before His Death on the Cross, so does the Church.

In the last analysis behind the type of this prayer stand as literary pattern the Jewish prayers of thanksgiving and blessing spoken at the table - prayers which had been in use during Jesus' life-time, but whose outer shape is filled here with a new inner content. In ancient Christian literature we find — without regard to the prayer - formulas of the *Didaché*, the importance of which is so much disputed — the first more detailed statements about this prayer made by Justin the Martyr around 150 A.D., (see especially Dial. 41), and the most ancient formula of this prayer extant, belonging to the beginning of the third century, and found in Hippolyte's «The Apostolic Tradition». (It is notable that we already find in the beginning of this most ancient formula the «Sursum corda» as well as the «Let us give thanks to the Lord», that is to say, the antiphons which even today open the eucharistic prayers in all liturgies). According to Hans Lietzmann, this formula could have been in use even in Pauline communities like those of Ephesus and Corinth (see «Messe und Herrenmahl» 1955³, p. 181). In any case, this most ancient shape of the eucharistic prayer accessible to us, is, in all its basic features and in all clearness, recognizable in the prayer of the Anaphora of many of the ancient liturgies, and most especially, in the Byzantine Liturgies of S. Basil and of S. John Chrysostom.

The New Testament Fundamentals

«For as often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till He come» (I Cor. 11,26). Through the celebration of the Holy Eucharist as such, or, as one usually thinks, the kerygma takes place, i.e. the proclamation of the Death of Jesus as the deciding event of salvation in God's history with us as men; and this will happen until the Day of His Coming Again. And this proclamation, as far as it can be realized by words, is accomplished — we may conclude — before God's face in the eucharistic prayer of the Church.

Our prevailing conclusions must now be augmented with regard to several fundamental facts of liturgical theology.

It belongs to the nature of Christendom to promote its missionary expansion by preaching, i.e. by the proclamation of a message which — according to the testimony of the Apostle — is mighty, «casting down every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ» (II Cor. 10,5). But Christianity is not only a message. Jesus Christ is not only the Teacher from Galilee. Above all, He is the Redeemer and the High Priest of Whom the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks.

He proved Himself to be Redeemer and High Priest by the Mystery of His Death, of His «lifegiving Death», as it is called by the Liturgy (of the Presanctified), and by His Resurrection. It is not just accidental that the report of the Last Supper «in the night when he was betrayed», which we read in S. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, is the most ancient — and at the same time the most detailed — message about an event in the Life of Jesus delivered to us; and the sacramental words (of institution) of the Holy Eucharist, as they are here written down, are the most ancient written fixation of a self-statement of Jesus which exists (see J. Jeremias, «Abendmahlsworte» 1960³, p. 180).

From all that we know concerning the historical beginnings of the Christian Church, we are able to say that the celebration of the Holy Eucharist was already from the very beginning the central mystery of the Church. The eucharistic bread is the Body of Christ... «For (we being) many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread» (I Cor. 10,17). The Church is the Body of Christ and this especially, because she always gathers herself together for celebrating the Holy Eucharist, and, because precisely here in the sacrament she is participating in Christ's Body and Blood.

Facing Christ the Church always remains in so doing the one who receives. «Take, eat!» This is exactly what He is saying unto her. Participation, *communio*, «μετάληψις» or «κοινωνία» — this is her nature. In spite of her oneness with Christ, she remains at the same time facing Him as the Bride whom we meet in the Epistle to the Ephesians and in the Revelation of S. John. Christ speaks to her and she answers Him. The voice of answering confers upon her the «other Paraclete», the Holy Spirit Who since the Day of Pentecost is present for her — personally.

Therefore, standing besides the message and the mission as answer, ordered by Christ we have the confession of faith and the divine worship

of the Church which is gathered together in all places in power of the Holy Spirit so that she is enabled to celebrate the Holy Eucharist.

The end of the Epistle to the Hebrews shows us the humiliating Death of Jesus which took place outside of the city of Jerusalem, and we are asked to go forth unto Him and to bear His humiliation. «By Him therefore», continues the passage, «by Him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise...» (Hebr. 13,15). Through Jesus, disgracefully crucified outside the Holy City, we are able to offer to God a sacrifice of praise. Further below, this offering of praise is characterized as «a fruit of the lips» giving thanks (ὁμολογούντων — confessing) to His Name. Instead of the material blood-sacrifice of the Old Covenant a sacrifice which is accomplished «as the fruit of the lips» through the word, through the confessing praise, the ἀνάμιμακτος καὶ λογικῆ λατρείᾳ the bloodless and spiritual worship, of which the Liturgy repeatedly speaks, is henceforth performed.

According to the evidence, plainly visible in the ancient liturgies, the «sacrifice of praise», to which the Epistle to the Hebrews refers, is identical with the eucharistic prayer of the Church. This interpretation as regards the Holy Eucharist might even become clearer, if one were to take also into consideration the narrower as well as the wider context of this Epistle (comp. 12,22sq., 13,10 and 13,16.).

The Meaning of the «eucharistia» is the Proclamation of the Death of Jesus Christ

The Liturgy of the Church knows a double abyss which exists between God and us. On the one side it is the abyss of our sin. When we look upon ourselves, we are forced to confess with the words of the Liturgy of S. Basil: «We have done nothing good on earth». And behind this abyss there is still another one: the abyss between God's unlimited existence and our limited one as creatures. In particular, the text of the Liturgy of S. John Chrysostom teaches us—repeatedly and emphatically—the creation of the Universe «*ex nihilo*»—out of nothing, and thus underlines, in an especially clear manner, the absolute limit between Creator and Creature.

This double abyss existing between God and man is for us irreconcilable; but it is vanquished through Christ: the abyss of sin by the absolute sanctity of His Life and of His Dying, and the abyss existing between God's unlimited existence and our limited, creature-like existence, in the Mystery of His Person uniting in itself the two natures,

the divine and the human. And our ultimate human absurdity is accomplished with divine sense: death becomes the door of life. «...Ἐδωκεν ἑαυτὸν ἀντάλλαγμα... ἐν πᾶσι πρωτεύων...» In such a way the Liturgy of S. Basil summarizes in its prayer of the Anaphora the New Testament message of Christ's Death and His Resurrection.

The Eucharistic Prayer as Prayer of Consecration

The Church's great prayer of thanksgiving, finally, extends itself into the statement of the institution of the Holy Eucharist which took place at the Last Supper which Jesus held with His Disciples. The great prayer of praise and thanksgiving now becomes the prayer of consecration. The institutional words, now repeated through the mouth of the priest, for the orthodox and the other ancient liturgies, certainly, do not as yet signify the consecration of the Holy Gifts; but everything that now follows can only be understood in regard to these words.

In the most ancient shape delivered to us (in the writings of Hippolyte of Rome, belonging to the beginning of the 3rd century), the institutional words immediately following part of the eucharistic prayer are as follows:

«Remembering His Death and His Resurrection we offer unto Thee the bread and the cup in giving thanks unto Thee, because Thou madest us worthy to stay before Thee and to serve Thee, and we pray unto Thee, that Thou mightest send down over the offering of the holy Church Thy Holy Spirit».

The train of thought in our present-day liturgies is step by step precisely the same: first there is the liturgical anamnesis, again a short remembrance of Christ's salvatory work, then the indication to the Holy Gifts lying before us upon the Holy Table and, finally, the epiclesis, the calling down of the Holy Spirit, the praying for consecration.

In consequence to the testament of Our Lord: «this do in remembrance of me», the Church is answering by the avowal that she is now ready to fulfil in obedience this command:

«Remembering... His Cross, His Burial, His Resurrection the third day, His Ascension into heaven, His sitting down at Thy right hand, and His second coming in great glory» (Liturgy of S. Chrysostom).

And then she is indicating the Holy Gifts, the Bread and the Potion in the Cup:

«In all and for all, we offer unto Thee Thine own of Thine own», that is to say, in regard to all, that Thou through Christ hast done for us. The earthly gifts of bread and wine, which we have put upon the Holy Table, are God's gifts of creation. But at the same time they are also our gifts, with which we are allowed to approach Him in giving thanks to Him over them, according to the pattern of Christ. We are not able to offer God anything which did not belong to Him already before. The eucharistic canon of the Roman Catholic Mass holds a similar formulation by the *«de tuis donis ac datis»*.

The prayer of the Church now immediately goes on into the petition for consecration — into the epiclesis, into the petition for the sanctifier who is the Holy Spirit. The Church is now saying to God the Father, as it were: «Let there now happen on bread and wine in the power of the Holy Spirit, that which Thy Son, by His words at the Supper has promised to us. According to the precise formulation of the Liturgy of S. Chrysostom this petition is as follows:

«Send down Thy Holy Spirit upon us and these oblations presented before Thee: And make this bread the precious Body of Thy Christ and that which is in this cup, the precious Blood of Thy Christ, changing them by the Holy Spirit». And according to the contents, the Liturgy of S. Basil has exactly the same formulation, and so do other formulations which we find in other ancient liturgies.

The Meaning of the Epiclesis

One might say that there is no prayer imaginable more daring than this petition for the visible presence of the Lord in the shape of bread and wine, for His Presence performed by the Miracle of the Holy Spirit.

The same One Who sits in heaven at the right hand of the Father in Glory is becoming actually — although hidden — visible and tangible in the shape of bread and wine, here on earth, in the sacrament which is being performed in the Holy Liturgy. And He is indeed the exalted and glorified Lord, Who at the same time is He Who is enthroned on the right of the Father. But He now becomes visible among us as the «Lamb which is slaughtered»: the bread which is being broken; this is His Body, and the wine in the Cup is His Blood shed for us. In this outer and visible shape of His hidden Presence, the Lord of Glory again and always acknowledges His Suffering on the Cross for us — so long as this earth does exist.

In such a way the eucharistic proclamation of Christ's Death performed by the Church by means of the prayer of thanksgiving now becomes its very last actual fulfilment. Now it is no longer we who are speaking, but the precious Blood shed for us on the Cross — once and for ever speaking instead of us.

«Ye are come...» says the Epistle to the Hebrews, «to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the Blood, that speaketh better things than that of Abel» (Hebr. 12,24). The Blood of Jesus speaks «mightier and better» than the blood of Abel and of all those murdered on this earth, a blood which cries for revenge; but the Blood of Jesus is now crying in our midst to God for our atonement. Here on earth the Lord always acknowledges His personal aspect as servant — the same Lord Who continuously represents us before God the Father in heaven as our High Priest (Rom. 8,34; Hebr. 7,25). So the sacramental remembrance of Jesus before God's face becomes its very last and objective meaning. And all this happens only by the intervention of the «Life-giving Spirit».

The Church is able only to stand forth and to ask with empty elevated hands confident in the promise of Jesus for the advent of the Spirit Who makes her gifts into that which they stand for. «You ask», says S. John of Damascus, «how the bread becomes Christ's Body and the wine and water Christ's Blood... I say unto you: the Holy Spirit comes thereto and energizes that which surpasses comprehension and thinking» (fide de orth. IV, 13). And it is precisely this steadily growing lack of capacity for understanding the action of the Spirit as the intrinsic and sole consecrator of the Holy Eucharist that has led repeatedly — especially in the West, where it started with the Middle Ages — to misunderstandings in theology and liturgical practice.

Contrary to the opinion of scholastic theology, it is quite demonstrable that even the canon of the Roman Mass to a great extent is to be understood in regard to the epiclesis which follows the institutional words — hidden but in spite of this, obviously there is also a kind of epiclesis. The only difference is that instead of the daring petition of the Eastern Liturgies for the coming down of the Spirit, there is the perhaps more gentle petition that the gifts might be elevated upon the heavenly altar by an angel's hand: «Jube haec perferri per manus sancti Angeli tui in sublime altare tuum, in conspectu divinae majestatis tuae: ut, quotquot ex hac altaris participatione sacrosanctum Filii tui Corpus, et Sanguinem sumpserimus, omni benedictione coelesti et gratia repleamur...»

Both this prayer as well as the immediately foregoing petition for acceptance of the Holy Gifts which are therein compared with the sacrifices of Abel, of Abraham and of Melchisedek, represent a permanent impulse for an interpretation of the Roman Catholic canon of the Mass in a scholastic sense. Thomas Aquinas already tried to eliminate this scandal by means of an allegorical interpretation of the «Jube haec preferri...» (Summa Theologica III, 83,4,9). And even Martin Luther, faced with this passage of the Roman canon of the Mass, came to the conclusion, that it is «summa summarum... eitel, gräulich, lästerlich Ding im Canone» (in «Schreiben an das Kapitel zu Wittenberg, die gottlosen Zeremonien abzutun», 1524). Yet it is possible to solve all problems of this kind in the light of the original liturgical theology of the Ancient Church.

The Eucharistic Prayer as a Prayer of Intercession

The eucharistic prayer is not only a prayer of praise and thanks, but at the same time always a prayer of petition also. Already in the Jewish prayer of thanksgiving, which presumably represents the pattern for the prayer of thanks which Jesus spoke over the Cup, the thanksgiving goes over into the following petition:

«Have mercy, O Lord, Our God, upon Thy people and upon Jerusalem, Thy City, and upon Zion, the dwelling of Thy Glory, and upon Thine altar and upon Thy temple» (Jeremias, op. cit., p. 104).

Already with the epiclesis the Christian prayer of anaphora becomes a prayer of petition. We might call this petition a «communion petition».

According to the Liturgy of S. Basil this petition starts as follows:

«Unite us all together, we who are participating in the one bread and cup, into the communion of the Holy Spirit».

Particularly in the ancient Liturgies of Jerusalem and Antioch as well as in our Byzantine Liturgies this petition always extends itself into a great intercession, not only for the people gathered together but also for all members of the Church. Originally such intercessions might have been inserted just in cases of special need...

So the eucharistic prayer of the Church becomes the great intercessional prayer for the Church of God existing in this world — the intercession for all her living as well as for her members who have fallen asleep. Within this eucharistic intercession, the Church includes all her

members — all those who are saved through the Blood of Christ, and the saints already glorified in heaven. So the eucharistic worship is, according to the wording of the Liturgy of S. John Chrysostom, the eucharistic worship, not only offered in general for all the living as well as the departed faithful, but expressedly also — as strange as it might sound — for Mary the Mother of God and for all the saints in heaven. We all come together under the Cross and under the institutional words: «Given for you and shed...»

Here we pray no longer in our own name: the Bride of the Lamb is praying in the Holy Spirit, in the Name and in view of the Lamb given into death for the salvation of the world. In view of the Heavenly Father she refers to the sacrifice of her Bridegroom. It is His Sacrifice on the Cross which she «holds up» to the Heavenly Father. She does not have anything else that she can offer to Him: «Ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and into an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and the church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel... (Hebr. 12, 22-24). The proclamation of Christ's Death as the decisive salvatory event which finds its realization in the Holy Eucharist performed on earth by God's Church, and the crying of His Blood from the altars of this earth towards God the Father is, according to its eschatological orientation towards Christ's Coming Again («until he comes»), an event which cannot be meaningless — not even for the «spirits of just men made perfect».

In this way the eucharistic prayer becomes the self-representation of the Church. Since the Middle Ages this self-representation of the Church has found a very pictorial expression in the Byzantine Liturgy, that is to say, in the setting of the Offertory, that is in the preparation and disposition of the eucharistic bread and wine, before the celebration of the Liturgy starts. In view of the abundance of the so many gifts of bread coming from the community, gradually the custom developed to represent upon the Holy Paten around the eucharistic bread which is to become later on by consecration the Body of Christ, the different dead and living members of the Church and their participation in Christ by means of the particles of bread which are laid down upon the Holy Paten in their name and which later on are placed within the Holy Cup.

The Celebration of the Liturgy as the self-representation of the Church.

In this very last sense the whole orthodox Liturgy is such a self-representation of the Church as the Body of Christ. An interpretation of the Liturgy which attempts to start from the specialities of the optic and acoustic manifestation of orthodox worship, cannot do justice to the essence of this Liturgy, especially, since certain elements of these outer manifestations observed in various countries are not entirely homogeneous, and, partially because they are the results of later and comparatively accidental historical developments. For example: the iconostasis replaced the ancient open altar rail as late as after the Fall of Constantinople.

In the beginning of the celebration of the Holy Eucharist the community closes together in hymns and common prayers. Then follows the procession with the Gospel-Book: In the Book of His Word Christ is symbolically entering into our midst. When the bishop himself celebrates the Liturgy, he now for the first time — in the suite of the Gospel-Book — enters the altar: Through Christ, through the «veil, that is to say, through His flesh» (Hebr. 10,20) do we now have entrance into the Holy of the Holiest and we are allowed to stand before the Face of the Father.

It is in the face of the altar where now for the first time the celebrant begins to sing the Thrice-Holy. But the heavenly exclamations of the Holy of the angels now join the petitions for mercy towards sinful mankind: «Holy God, Holy and Strong, Holy and Immortal, have mercy upon us».

Then follows the proclamation of the Word by the Scripture Lesson and the Sermon which basically, at least, has its place here.

And hereafter the community closes even more together for conducting common prayers. The Liturgy, as it is in use today, shows us that henceforth it is basically a gathering behind closed doors to which is allowed only he, who by faith and baptism already belongs to the Body of Christ. The eucharistic gifts, already available before the beginning of the celebration of the Liturgy, being laid aside on the one side of the chancel (altar—room), are solemnly transferred upon the Holy Table. And, finally, in love and faith follows the «holy kiss» of which the Apostolic Writings report and which is today interchanged in the common worship only between the priests. Lastly, follows the repetition of the Baptismal-Creed of the Church which in the Byzantine

Liturgy immediately proceeds the eucharistic prayer. The eucharistic prayer, however, in a certain sense now reaches a last subsequent acme, that is to say, its culmination in our Lord's Prayer: Through Christ and in the Holy Spirit we are encouraged to appear like children before the Heavenly Father...

Before the fraction of the One Bread and before the administering of the sacrament one listens to the great exclamation of invitation and, at the same time, a last warning: «Holy things for the holy!» Corresponding with this exclamation the community answers with the confession: «There is one holy, one Lord Jesus Christ, in the glory of God the Father». Nobody is holy but Christ alone. Nobody is worthy to approach Him. Yet, so far as He is concerned, we are allowed to approach His Mysteries. This confession of our own unworthiness, but also of our membership in Him, is at the same time the exclamation of adoration of that Name before which all knees must bend according to the word of the Apostle (Phil. 2,10). And this adoration has as its very last scope the Glory of God...