

A Long Sermon for Holy Week

Part 1

Holy Thursday : The Mystery of Unity

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I am here concerned with the paschal mystery; so, first of all, a few words about mystery.

Mystery is a depth of meaning. There are two things to notice here. Firstly, mystery belongs to what has *meaning*, to the signs and symbols and gestures through which we understand. (If we see event as *mystery* it is because we see it as *word*.) Secondly, mystery always refers to the not-so-obvious, deeper meaning that is perhaps hidden at first. So mystery concerns what shows itself but does not show itself easily. Mysteries are not for concealment but for revelation; it is because the revelation is so important and so profound that we have to work to understand it.

This is not meant to be a very difficult idea. Take, for example, a play like *Macbeth*. It is quite clear that you can appreciate the meaning of this play at many levels. In the first place it is a good thriller about murder and intrigue at court. At another, slightly deeper, level it is a piece of English political propaganda slandering the memory of a perfectly decent king who was, however, Scottish. At a deeper level still it is a tragedy about a man over-reaching himself; about the relationship of human life with nature and especially with time. It is about how we belong to the cosmos and to the time that is given to us and yet seek to transcend this and to belong to ourselves, and it is about the revenge that time and nature take upon us.

Now, you would not expect to see all these deep meanings in a play when you watched it for the first time; you have to learn to understand it, and you cannot take short cuts to the depth. I mean, unless you are prepared to enjoy it as a thriller you will never grasp it as a tragedy; you have to allow the play to take you into its mystery by its own route. It is, of course, the mark of a great work of art that it seems inexhaustible, and one reason for this is that as we understand a mystery it enlarges our capacity for understanding. At first we just check the meaning against what we already understand—as though we looked up a word in our personal dictionary—but then we come to meanings that we only partly understand (as with riddles and good crossword clues). To understand

them is to stretch and re-form the dictionary itself. There seems to be no final dictionary we can use to say: 'Now I have come to an end; now I understand it all'. To understand *Macbeth* is to reach into depths within ourselves which we did not suspect we had, just as it is to reach into depths that Shakespeare did not know he had. The ancient teaching that the artist is inspired by the muses is just the recognition that it is only in a rather trivial sense that the individual author is an expert on 'what he meant'. In making (just as in understanding) a mystery we are, as St Thomas Aquinas would say, 'instruments' of more profound forces at work.

In so far as signs and symbols reveal mysteries they are irreplaceable. You can read Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* if you are merely concerned with the 'plot', with the play as thriller, for example; this relatively superficial meaning can be detached without much loss from the play itself. But, when it comes to reaching down to the deeper meanings, there is no substitute for watching or taking part in the play itself. The mystery reveals itself in the actual enactment of the play. It is very hard to put the meaning of *Macbeth* into any other words and that is why literary critics are always harder to read than plays; it all seems so much more complicated. This is not because critics are trying to make things difficult nor is it that the deep meaning is itself something complicated. It is something simple; the difficulty lies in bringing it up from its depth. When you try to bring deep simplicities to the surface you have to be complicated about them. If you are not, then you will simply have substituted slogans (like those awful twee religious posters) for the truth. Some of the most subtle and complex pages in the *Summa Theologiae* deal with the simplicity of God.

The job of the literary critics is, in part, to prevent you *merely* seeing *Macbeth* as a thriller. It is, of course, a thriller but it is so much more. The critics are asking you not to stop there; they are asking you to let your capacity for understanding expand so that you have a richer enjoyment of the deeper truths to be explored in the mystery. Of course, they can only ask you to do this; they cannot do it for you. They can bring you to the theatre but nothing they say can be a substitute for, or equivalent of, watching or taking part in the play itself.

This 'long sermon', the first part of which is printed below and the other two parts of which will appear next month and the month following is meant to do something like a literary critic's job for the mysteries of Holy Week. I shall be trying to put into words, inevitably complicated and perhaps stumbling words, the deep meaning of the mysteries; and the purpose of this will not be to substitute a 'teaching' for the revelation of a mystery but merely to encourage myself and others when Holy Week comes round, not to stop at a superficial understanding of what we are doing. In the bad old days before the liturgical movement

had made its impact and before the reforms of Vatican II, the trouble was not just that liturgy was mechanically and uncomprehendingly enacted but that the theological critique was absent. The handbooks of theology had lost touch with liturgy; the 'Ceremonies of the Roman Rite' had lost touch with theology. It is from this 'dissociation of sensibility' that we are now trying to recover. It is very important that we do recover, otherwise our liturgy will be reduced to simplified 'popular' get-togethers of Christians with fixed smiles and our theology to a clutch of slogans.

I have called this section 'the mystery of Unity' because this is what the Eucharist (and hence Holy Thursday) is all about. You could say, of course, that this is what the entire gospel, the whole of divine revelation, is about. The Bible from beginning to end, the tradition of the scriptures, the life and sacraments of the people of God—all this is about human animals being with each other, culminating in the recognition that the only way we can really be with each other is in the Holy Spirit. But it is about a *mystery* of unity, about being together in a very profound way, and when we try to bring this unity to the surface in words it becomes a great multiplicity; it becomes all the elaboration of the history of Israel and the life and death of Jesus. To try to give an account of human beings coming together in any terms less complex than this is to fail to reach to its depths.

Holy Thursday is very blatantly about unity because it is about the Church—the sacrament (or mystery) of union with God and the unity of all mankind. In this phrase from Vatican II the union with God and the unity of mankind are not meant to be two separate things. The ultimate unity of people is only to be found in God, and the real God is only to be found in unity between people. It is just because we have not reached the point of unity, just because we are still alienated from each other, that our picture of God keeps slipping into falsehood and idolatry, so that God becomes for us the God of our class, our nation, our race or our time, the tutelary deity, perhaps, of the 'free world'. It is because we have not reached unity in God who is love that our unity is less than the unity of all mankind. Our unity is always 'ours' over against 'theirs'.

I do not mean to suggest that we should pretend that this is not so. I do not think we should foster the illusion that there *is* a unity of mankind. To do that is to pretend that there is no sin, that the kingdom is fully established, that there already is a brotherhood of the human race. In fact the only approach we have to a real unity is the solidarity of the poor and the exploited against their oppressors: we have to recognise both that this is so and that it is not enough. It is just the nearest we can get to unity. We have to recognise that the only God we know is the God

of the poor, the God who takes sides in the struggle, and that any God of consensus who is supposed to belong to both sides is an illusion and a dangerous one. Sorting out the sides is, of course, a delicate business because though God is not on both sides *we* are: God is a God of judgement because he is love. We do *not* have 'God on our side', and this is not because God is neutral but because we are compromised. We have to see that there is no other God to be known except the God of the oppressed, 'The Lord your God who brought you out of the land of slavery...you shall have no gods'; and yet this is not yet to know God. The Church must be the Church of the poor—this is the sign that she is on the way to the kingdom; it also shows she is not there. St Thomas says that we have sacraments (that is to say, the visible sacred life of the christian cult) because of sin; and, of course, we make an 'option for the poor' because of sin: when we have passed from the world of sin to the kingdom all this will wither away. For St. Thomas, as for Karl Marx, organised religion is the symptom of human alienation and will not outlast it. Bourgeois anti-clericalism and atheism such as flourished in the nineteenth century and still persists today is the expression of the belief that human alienation has already been radically overcome by the French Revolution, the Enlightenment and the dawn of liberal capitalism. Neither Christians nor Marxists see things that way. There is no real unity to the world, the only authentic unity is in the struggle, and it is because this is our real unity here and now that we can only express the Kingdom sacramentally. We can see humankind itself as one only in mystery, in the gesture towards the reality that is to come. We can only see God in mystery, as the reality that is to come. We cannot see love except in hints and guesses of what is to come.

So on Holy Thursday we celebrate the being-together of people but we celebrate it as what is to come. It is present alright, but present in our celebration, present in mystery, in hints, in sacrament. The reason why it is not yet, the reason why we recognise it only in mystery, is sin. Holy Thursday is about sin.

Sin is the disunity of people, their deep disunity. Sin, too, is a mystery; it is not to be identified with what we see on the surface. I do not mean by this that sin is some hidden 'spiritual' reality quite distinct from the physical facts of cruelty and greed; I mean it is the depth within our quarrels and disunity and dislikes. Sin is the seriousness within human injustice, where it becomes a matter of what God we serve.

As I have said, there are those who, in effect, believe that sin was abolished by the bourgeois revolution not merely because the Enlightenment could find no place for it intellectually but because liberal capitalism had provided at least the basis for human community. True, there are seen to be little difficulties here and there, but these are thought to be in large part due to the evil empire of Communism that threatens us

from outside. Otherwise they are awkwardnesses that will gradually be eliminated by judicious reforms and especially the spread of education—meaning schooling. Basically we are now on the path of progress. Basically we are where the kingdom of God has been established. If only we could realise it; if only we could change our hearts and minds and recognise what a nice good place our modern world is, how nice and good people are in themselves, then all would be well. People who think like this do not believe in sin. They dare not believe in sin, for they could not imagine how to cope with it. Instead they believe in our world, which is pretty well what St John meant by ‘the world’ and its values. The mysteries of Holy Week are a challenge to them.

Then there are those who do see that our world is heading towards destruction, that its alleged unity is born out of fear and that it is based on violence, the violence built into its structures; that it is not the unity of love but of concealed hatred, a hypocritical pretence of fellowship. But of these less-deceived people there are many for whom the answer lies at least for the most part in simply dismantling the economic structures of injustice by which this deeply divided world maintains itself as a fake unity. They have not reached down to the mystery of sin, which will always seek new forms as old ones are dismantled. For these people the mysteries of Holy Week should be not so much a challenge as an invitation: an invitation to go further, to enter into the deeper mystery of sin, to realize that the transformation we need if we are to escape destruction is even more radical than revolution; it is forgiveness.

So sin is the mysterious depth within the alienation and isolation of people from each other. Sin is not to be identified with the more obvious signs of human separation, any more than real unity in love can be identified with superficial friendliness and cheerfulness. The signs and symbols of Holy Thursday take us into the real depths of both sin and love—the love-feast of the cross, the torture-machine.

The liturgy of Holy Thursday begins with the Mass of the Chrism in the morning. This is the first and most obvious sign of unity because it is usually the one time in the year when the whole Church is gathered together as one; at this ceremony the local Church, or at least priests representing the various parishes and communities, come together with the bishop as a visible sign of the unity of the whole Church. I say ‘the whole Church’ because, as Vatican II insisted, the particular diocese is not just a local part of the Church in the way that, say, the counties are local parts of Britain. In the diocese centred on the bishop the mystery of the whole People of God is made present, just as in any celebration of the eucharist the whole Christ is present. The local Churches are not administrative districts of an international organisation; each is complete unto itself. It is true that each is necessarily and essentially in communion with others because of the kind of thing that a Church is; its unity and

completeness is not that of self-satisfied isolation. This is as true of individual Churches as it is of individual people. Communion with others is not basically because of what Churches lack and can get from others but because of what they have to give and need to give. There is nothing lacking as Church to the Church of, say, Birmingham or Rome that needs to be supplied by the Church of Leeds; but the life of a Church, which is the Holy Spirit, naturally goes out to others. This, of course, is especially true of the Church of Rome as See of Peter and focus of unity amongst the others.

So on this special day when the people are gathered around their bishop they represent and are the unity of the whole Church. From this united gathering the priests receive a re-affirmation of their commission to act for the bishop, to be, by preaching the gospel of unity in Christ, themselves agents of unity amongst their people. For that is what a priest is and that he is why he presides at the eucharist; he represents and realises there the solidarity of the whole Church throughout the world, living and dead.

On Holy Thursday, the communion of priests amongst themselves and with the bishop is expressed in concelebration, which is the normal way of celebrating the eucharist when a community of bishops or priests is gathered together. A concelebration is not a group of priests coming together so that each exercises his priesthood with the others. It is not as with a football team, where each player contributes his skill to the common work. There is no such thing as my individual priesthood that belongs to me; I belong to the one priesthood of the Church; when three priests are together there is not three times as much priesthood. In spite of all that has been learned at and since Vatican II there still sometimes lingers a certain clericalism in which the priesthood is regarded as a private possession, a *privilege* of serving others. When a dozen priests concelebrate they are not each exercising and displaying their privilege of belonging to a clerical caste, they are engaged in a single expression of the solidarity of the people of God.

Just as there used to be priests who spoke of 'my Mass', so there are nowadays some, worried by vestiges of the same clericalism, who fear to concelebrate lest it should separate them in some clerical way from the ordinary laity—they prefer to be 'just members of the congregation'. But, of course, if taking part in concelebration separated one from the ordinary laity no priest should ever celebrate Mass at all. The Mass would indeed be a blasphemy if it were not the sole function of the priest to celebrate the solidarity in Christ not only of all who are present but of the whole Church. What pre-conciliar theology of the priesthood is lurking in those who feel that solidarity with the people of God is better expressed by standing beside them in the congregation than by acting as the sacramental word in which all the people express their solidarity?

What pre-conciliar theology of the eucharist lurks in those who simply feel that the Mass would, after all, be just as 'valid' if there were only one celebrant? When, as on Holy Thursday, there is present a natural community of priests with their bishop the question is not why should they join in concelebration but rather what would they be saying by not doing so. (nor, of course, is the gathering of the pastoral clergy with their bishop the only natural community of the kind; plainly a monastery, priory or similar institution represents a similar common life and ministry most suitably expressed in concelebration.) Priests need reasons for *not* concelebrating, not for concelebrating.

There can, of course, be many excellent reasons. Concelebration is meant to dramatise the single, non-private, priesthood of an existing group of priests; to show that their priesthood is what they belong to as a community and not something individual to each. There certainly would be something a little odd about an *ad hoc* concelebration performed simply because there were more than one priest around. It is undoubtedly hard to understand the thinking of those priests who turn up in a strange sacristy and ask to concelebrate the Mass—though, of course, we may invite guests to an established concelebration as we might to any other meal. Concelebration should be the natural outcome of the life of priests who already share a common life and mission. This in itself suggests another good reason for not concelebrating: it is, especially in its modern form, quite difficult to do. Today it nearly always involves the choral speaking of long passages of the Eucharistic Prayer, which is an acquired skill. It would be mere archaeologism to criticise this modern form simply on the grounds that it is not ancient enough, but it certainly is a form that can only be enacted properly by people who have been doing it together regularly for some time. Singing the Eucharistic Prayer together might in some ways be easier, but only for those who can sing. So it has to be admitted that in practice a concelebration that occurs only once a year, even though it spring from the natural communion of priests of one local Church with their bishop, is not guaranteed to be particularly edifying.

Nevertheless, however awkwardly it may be performed, the point of the concelebration remains clear: these are not people each with an individual priesthood who happen to be together, but the priests of a diocese who have come to take part in, and to dramatise that they are taking part in, a single ministry. It is within this demonstration of community that the sacramental oils are consecrated as symbols of the power of the Spirit, and from this community that the Spirit-bearing oils go out to every part of the diocese.

We now turn to the parish Mass of the evening of Holy Thursday, the Mass which is about the Mass. The first thing to notice here is that there is, or should be, only one Mass on Holy Thursday in each church

(apart from the Mass of the Chrism in the Cathedral) and this very important rule is to emphasise that it is unity that is being celebrated. All the people of the district should be celebrating this one eucharist together and only this one. I know that, in spite of Vatican II, in some churches corruption has already set in, and another Mass is celebrated in the morning for the sake, it is said, of those who cannot come to the evening Mass. This is a sad distortion of the liturgy. Behind it is the idea, still lingering on, that instead of celebrating as a community the unity of the Church and the meaning of Christ's passion, we are providing each individual with his or her private allowance of grace.

If you cannot make it to the one Mass of Holy Thursday it is a pity; but in the end it makes no difference. You are represented there by the people who can get there; so far as your sharing in the grace of the Mass goes, you are in exactly the same position as those who have been lucky enough to be able to celebrate it as the liturgy envisages. Why lucky? Because participation in the mysteries matters in itself and not just for some 'fruit' it bears. Of course it is more satisfactory to be one of those who receive communion at the feast of the Lord's Supper, as it is more satisfactory to act in a play or in a game than simply to watch it. But the meaning of the play, and your sharing in that meaning, are just the same in both cases. So the mere fact that some individuals will not be able to be present is no possible excuse for destroying the liturgical meaning of the uniqueness of the celebration. Those who are actually enacting the liturgical sign of eating the Body of Christ and drinking his Blood are doing so not for their own private sakes, but for the whole community, just as actors are not acting just for their own private satisfaction but for the whole audience as well.

A meal is not just a way of acquiring carbohydrates and protein; it is a way of belonging to other people, of taking part in community, whether it be tea with the family or the office party or the wedding breakfast. Only in exceptional and marginal cases does the human animal eat alone. It is quite recently, with the ending of the ice age, ten thousand years ago, that our ancestors established agriculture, settled down within the boundaries of property, eventually built walled cities (it is a curious thought that, so far as we know, the very first of all walled cities was, of all places, Jericho) and began the privatisation of human life. Before that, for thousands upon tens of thousands of years, we lived as today's bushmen still do, hunting together as a whole community, bringing down the prey by concerted skills and eating together. All that immense stretch of human history must, I suppose, have drummed it into our psyche that eating means belonging to the group; it even means receiving your food from the leader of the group. It is surely this that has left quite deeply in our unconscious the link between food and community and between food and receiving a gift.

There are, of course, some cultures in which this intimate connection between food, friendship and gift is partly obscured. Just as in our culture the symbolism of anointing with oil as a sign of the Spirit is something that has to be *explained*, so that for us the meaning of sacramental anointing is not perspicuous, so there are African cultures in which the symbolism of the eucharist is not obvious. But for the most part the human animal eats with others and finds in this act a potent symbol of community; and, just as any meal is a sign that expresses and fosters unity, so the eucharistic meal is the mystery of our deepest unity, our sharing in the love which springs from the Spirit of God in us. The shared food that is the sign of this unity is Christ himself, in whom we find our unity in the Spirit.

It is because the eucharist is the sign of our unity that the Body of Christ is present there. Christ is present precisely as the sign of our unity and not in any other way. I think that some mistakes have been made about the eucharist by people who have approached it the other way round. They have sought to explain how Christ is present and then gone on to add that this is something in which we share. This has led sometimes to the idea that Christ's presence is somehow independent of the Mass, of the coming together of the faithful—as though the great thing were to get Christ into the tabernacle; then the Mass and communion could be seen as making our own selves into tabernacles of Christ. Of course nobody talks like that anymore but it is useful to remember where people can be, and have been, led by theological muddles.

The eucharist is first of all about our unity with each other, a profound and mysterious unity which is only achieved in the body of Christ. The point is well made by the present Pope in his first encyclical: 'It is an essential truth that the eucharist builds the Church as the authentic community of the people of God ... Accordingly in the eucharist we touch in a way the very mystery of the body and blood of the Lord!

Meals, then, are primitively not only signs of community but of hospitality. We receive our food at the hands of others, as gift from others. The first meals we have, are experienced as gift from our parents, from our families. They are basic signs of that kind of giving and receiving that is essential to the family community. Parents are essentially providers. This goes back, of course, beyond meals to the first nourishment we receive at our mother's breast, and all hospitality can be seen as a kind of extension of that first relationship.

To invite a guest to a meal is to invite her or him into the family circle, into a relationship defined by that first and most primitive act of hospitality; hence the deep relationship between food and gift. Our first experience of gift is the gift of food from our mother's body; it is the

closest thing to the gift of life itself. Now in a certain way we are giving life to our guests when we give them food. This is true partly because to give them food is not merely to give them something they can use, but to give them their own bodies, which the food becomes. It is also true because all such giving goes back to, and is a kind of imitation of, the primary giving. For all these reasons eating is very closely connected with saying 'Thank you'.

It seems altogether natural to say 'Thank you' to your host—let us consider what this means. The word 'thank' comes from the same root as the word 'think' and to say 'thank you' is to say something like 'I think of you' or 'this gift makes me think of you'. In other words, it is to say that the gift is seen not just in terms of its objective value but precisely as *gift*, as communication from you, an expression of friendship from you. It is to say 'I think of this not just as a thing I have come to possess but as an expression of your love, of your giving of yourself to me'.

Now, in a sacred encounter such as an act of hospitality (just as with understanding the depth of meaning in a play), there is more than the superficial immediate occasion of a friendly gesture between host and guest. The host, like the playwright, is seen as an 'instrument' of forces beyond him, and our thanking/thinking reaches into those depths so that primitively meals involve acknowledgement of the gods as well. It is not then surprising to find that Jews and Christians, although they have abolished the gods, find it natural to thank God on the occasion of a meal: we say grace at meals. In this we acknowledge that in and through and beyond our host, all our food and all our life comes from an ultimately mysterious source of life and this we call 'God' ('et hoc omnes dicunt Deum' as Aquinas used to say at the end of each of the Five Ways; a meal can be a reaching into mystery just as the Five Ways are.)

When we say grace we acknowledge our meal as an expression of God's love for us, as communication from God, as word from God. 'Grace' is, of course, just the Latin form of 'thank you', and this thanks recognises the food as word of love from God. The Greek form of 'thank you' is 'eucharist', and when we make eucharist we are recognising our food and drink as word from God, as the Word of God incarnate, God's ultimate communication of his love, his ultimate gift to us, the gift of himself and his own life.

'Let us give thanks to the Lord our God'—that is how we open the eucharistic prayer. What we call the 'words of institution' are simply the central part of a whole prayer, a prayer saying thank you for the communication of God's love in which we have faith. The prayer expresses our faith that in sharing together in this food and drink we are sharing together in Christ, in the communication of God's love, in the Word of God. That is the form that the eucharist takes—a saying 'Thank you' for our shared food and drink which is also a 'thank you' for the

whole history of God's love for us, which led up to the mystery of the Lord's Supper and will lead on from there to the Kingdom.

It is important to remember that the eucharist is a *symbolic* meal. The food and drink are not there to nourish us; it is a token meal, a sign that we belong to one family, and what we are giving thanks for is that we have been brought together and that our meal can be a sign of this. It is not quite like thanking your host for a satisfying meal: what we thank God for in the Eucharist is the symbolic value of our food and drink, their value as signs of our fellowship. We are thanking him precisely for our *shared* food and drink, for our communion in the body of Christ. We thank him that we are a community of love—the kind of love that can only be expressed in Christ and in the act of his love: the breaking of his body and the shedding of his blood. So the eucharist is thanksgiving that people are brought together, and the Eucharistic Prayers— or anyway those that are properly written—begin with some proclamation of the great deeds by which God has brought the human race gradually together, overcoming our perennial tendency to division, isolation and alienation. In thanking God we are seeing the symbols of our unity, the token meal of bread and wine, not just as symbol of our communication with each other but as symbol of the truth that this communication itself is gift of God.

In the eucharist we recognise our communication between ourselves, our gift of ourselves to each other, as itself the communication from God, the gift of God, God's gift of himself.

Let me say that as clearly as possible: in the Eucharist we are recognising what we already see as symbol in our human language of signs, in a piece of communication, a word between us, as now a symbol in God's eyes, as Word not just of man but of God.

Any anthropologist, or indeed anyone at all, can recognise the eucharist as a symbolic ritual. You do not need faith to see that these people are not engaged with bread and wine as such but with their signification; all you need is some understanding of the way human beings use symbols. What by faith we recognise in our Eucharistic Prayer, in our prayer of thanksgiving, is that what might have been simply social signs have become sacramental signs. We recognise that this whole exchange of gifts between us is itself a gift from God, that the language we now speak to each other is the language given from God, the language of God himself, the Word of God. That Word is made flesh and so in the Eucharistic Prayer we recognise the presence of the flesh of God. The Word we communicate to each other is the body and blood of Christ, the Word made flesh.

In other words, it is not because the eucharist is a sacrament that the bread and wine become symbols. They are symbols already, for this is a token meal; this is a piece of human communication conducted in

gestures and with signs as well as with words. The special thing about the eucharist that differentiates it from any other *agape* or feast of friendship, is that because it is sacramental the language has become God's language, the Word of God's love, and that is ineluctably incarnate. The real quarrel between Catholics and Zwinglians is over whether we have here simply the language and signs of a human religious rite or whether we have the language of God; is it language about Christ or is Christ himself our language? If, as Catholics say, it is the actual Word of God, then *of course* it is flesh and blood. This is the incarnate Word that expresses the love of God.

The Word of God made flesh does not express God's love simply by *being* in some static way: because he is made flesh his being, his life, is a life-story. The being of every animal is a life-time; the being of every human animal is a life-story. The life-story of God's Word culminates and finds its meaning in his death; in the cross. The love of God for us is expressed in terms of human love, and the life-story of Jesus shows us both that human love finds its meaning in suffering and that therefore God's love is expressed and enacted for us in the suffering of God.

That is what St Paul had to explain to the Corinthians. They understood the eucharist very well as it is so well understood in so much of modern catechetics, as a feast of friendship and fellowship. This is a sound understanding and it contrasts well with the 'tabernacle theology' of thirty years ago. But, while the Corinthians saw that the eucharist was an occasion to express their love for their friends in an *agape*, as it turned out it was just for their friends. Others, especially the ones they didn't mix with socially, were left out in the cold. The middle classes had a pleasant time seriously considering the meaning of friendship and love as they got mildly intoxicated together, while the poor were ignored and excluded. St Paul tells them that it is not this kind of friendship that the eucharist is about; it is about a friendship that can only be seen in a story of blood and torture and fear and death. The feast of friendship takes place in the shadow of the cross.

'On the night before he died', Paul emphasises, 'Jesus took bread ...etc.' The body he shares with them is the body which is not just given up to them but given up to pain and death. His blood is not just his life but the blood that is shed in death. The love of this love-feast is not just any superficial friendship, or even just any kindness, but the sacrificial love of Jesus, the love that expects death. But we shall see more of that in the next section of this 'long sermon', on Good Friday.

A final word, about the washing of the feet. For Matthew, Mark and Luke, the Last Supper was the Jewish paschal family celebration, the *Seder*. It seems very likely that this was historically the case. Certainly the behaviour of Jesus in taking and blessing bread during the meal and blessing a cup of wine after it fits in very well with the ritual of the *Seder*.

So the synoptics, and probably Jesus himself, wanted to stress the connection between the eucharistic banquet and the Jewish paschal meal celebrating the liberation of the people of God from slavery and looking forward to the final liberation from sin and the coming of the messianic Kingdom. So for Matthew, Mark and Luke (and for Jesus) the eucharistic meal foreshadows the eschatological banquet—the love-feast of heaven. (When you go to Mass you have a foretaste of heaven—but only sacramentally.) Luke has Jesus saying: ‘I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God. I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the Kingdom of God comes’.

Now John’s Gospel has no such account of the institution of the eucharist, and this fact has puzzled scholars as well as ordinary readers—I think quite unnecessarily. In John’s interpretation of Jesus, the meaning of his story is centred on his ‘hour’, the hour of his ‘lifting up’. This ‘lifting up’, which refers to both cross and resurrection, is the glorification of Jesus and, as John says, until this hour the spirit is not given: ‘for there was no Spirit as yet because Jesus had not yet been glorified’ (7.39). As Jesus said at the first sign at Cana, ‘My hour has not yet come’ (2.4).

For John, then, there can be no outpouring of the Spirit, no sacraments, until Jesus breathes forth the Spirit on the cross in his moment of death and glorification. So it would have been inappropriate to insert an account of the eucharist before this. For John, the paschal sacrament of liberation is the cross itself.

So instead of the eucharist itself John has a ceremony that hints at the eucharist and looks forward to it just as does his story of the feeding of the five thousand. He has the washing of the feet.

It is customary to see this as an act of humility on the part of Jesus but this is not its primary significance. In itself having the guests’ feet washed was a normal act of hospitality, but the fact that it is Jesus who does it makes it a special act of hospitality. As Timothy Radcliffe has pointed out, (in an unpublished Holy Thursday sermon,) feet were normally washed by a servant but there was an exception: a wife would wash her husband’s feet. ‘A rabbi would not let his disciples wash his feet, but he could ask his wife; not because she was a servant but because they were one body. There is a charming little story called *Joseph and Asenath*, written about this time, in which Asenath, Joseph’s bride, will not let anyone else touch Joseph’s feet. “Your hands are my hands and your feet are my feet and I will wash them, and no one else will touch them”. Throughout the Middle and Far East you will find that the washing of feet is part of the betrothal and marriage ceremonies’.

So this ceremony, like the eucharistic meal, is first of all about unity, about being one body with Christ. As is indicated in Ephesians

(5.25ff.), the bridegroom and bride can say of each other 'This is my body': 'Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word ... that she might be holy and immaculate. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself'. The whole liturgy of Holy Thursday is thus focussed on the mystery of unity, of our oneness with each other in the body of Christ. But, as I have said, Holy Thursday is also about sin, about alienation and disunity, and this element too is to be found in the story of the washing of the feet, where Jesus relates it to cleansing from sin: 'If I do not wash you', he says to Peter, 'you have no part in me'. This connects the ceremony with the other traditional feature of Holy Thursday, the reconciliation of penitents who, in the early form of the sacrament of penance, had been doing penance since the beginning of lent, when the ashes were imposed on them. But this takes us into the mystery of sin itself and that we must leave until the next section, *The Mystery of the Cross*.

A Mistake about Error

Ian Hamnett

In a recent stock-taking essay on the current state of the sociology of religion, Richard Fenn writes:

The functionalist synthesis in the sociology of religion has disappeared ... Functionalism provided a privileged methodological stance from which the sociologist could interpret and transcend the accounts of groups and individuals. As a trained interpreter the sociologist could provide a coherent text of a community's beliefs, but as one skilled in delving below surface appearances the sociologist could also identify 'latent' functions and, in the process, call into question a community's account of its own life. These methodological approaches are still adopted, but the sociologist does not enjoy a privileged position from which to put them together. The result is parallel and competing