

ASPECTS OF THE CHALICE

BY

DOMINIC BALDWIN, O.P.

THOUGH a study of the liturgy is undertaken to find the meaning of, to get behind, so to speak, the elements (the words, actions, things) of the Church's ceremonies, it may seem a little strange that we should look for a symbolical meaning of so necessary a receptacle as a chalice or cup in any religious rite in which a liquid is used. But man's knowledge begins with the senses. Metaphors, sensible (corporeal) representations or similitudes are not only natural to man but naturally pleasing to him—for which reason St Thomas says, it is fitting that spiritual things are given to us by means of metaphors drawn from corporeal things, *sub metaphoris corporalium*.¹

Man has always tended to express his religious or spiritual ideas in terms of his physical environment and his reactions to it, in terms of things that are vital and familiar to him. Though this familiarity has perhaps clouded the modern sophisticated mind, the principle remains fundamentally true. But to ancient, and to primitive, man this familiarity served to bring him into closer contact with the spiritual world. He was much more aware of his being part of nature and expressed his religion in terms of nature cycles and his own physical growth. Spiritual life and growth—and particularly man's after-life with the gods—are seen in terms of birth, death and re-birth. The seasonal changes, the death (Winter) and rebirth and resurrection of nature (Spring) are closely linked with man's own fertility, and both are symbols of spiritual death and re-birth. 'The union with the mother is the shadow of spiritual rebirth and baptismal regeneration into life more abundant.'² Man's images and symbols are taken up by God in the Incarnation; and in the life, teaching and the passion and death of Christ they achieve a greater and deeper significance, being as it were, endorsed and impressed with a divine character. The primary association with the chalice or cup is 'drinking'.

1. *Summa Theol.* I, I, 9 c. and ad l.

2. Victor White, O.P.: *The Frontiers of Theology and Psychology*. (Guild of Pastoral Psychology. Guild Lecture No. 19, October 1942, p. 12.)

Light, air, food and drink are recognised as necessary to man's physical life and well-being, and are used to express spiritual realities. The cup as synonymous with drinking signifies life and good health—the *salus hominis*. Our salvation is through Christ. The chalice is consecrated not only out of reverence for the sacrament in which Christ is really present (the ciborium, though it contains the Body of Christ, is not consecrated, but blessed), but also because the Mass is the re-enactment and continuation of the sacrifice of Calvary, and the consecration of the chalice represents the effect of holiness (i.e. dedicated to God) which comes from the passion of Christ.³

Though St Matthew and St Mark in their Last Supper narratives have only 'This is my blood of the New Testament,' etc., St Luke and St Paul in his first epistle to the Corinthians have 'This is the chalice,' etc. In the Canon of the Mass the words of the consecration of the wine as they stand now are: *Hic est calix sanguinis mei, novi et aeterni testamenti mysterium fidei, qui pro vobis et pro multis effundetur in remissionem peccatorum*. Speaking of the fittingness of this formula St Thomas says that '*Hic est calix sanguinis mei* is a figurative mode of speech which can be understood in two ways: (a) *metaphorically*, so that by the word "chalice" is understood the Passion of Christ, as when our Lord said: "Father, if it is possible, let this chalice pass from me" (Matt. 26-29), so that the sense of the consecration formula is: This is the chalice of my passion. (b) *as a metonymy* by which the container is used for the contained, so that the sense is: This is my blood contained in the chalice; and this is said because the blood of Christ is consecrated in this sacrament in as much as it is the drink of the faithful, the *potus fidelium*, which idea is not conveyed by the word "blood" and is therefore signified by the vessel accommodated to this use.'⁴

The blood of Christ has not only redeemed us but it is also the drink of everlasting life. Just as food and drink are necessary for man's physical life, so the body and blood of Christ are the necessary 'food and drink' of the life of the soul. 'He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood has life everlasting.' (John 6: 55.) The chalice as synonymous with drinking the blood of Christ is the symbol of life.

3. *Summa Theol.* III, 83, 3.

4. *Summa Theol.* III, 78, 3 ad 1.

Closely connected with this, and seemingly in direct contrast, is another significance of the chalice as the symbol of the tomb. We may recall here that on Holy Thursday the consecrated Host is placed in a chalice (not a ciborium) and so reserved at the 'Altar of Repose'. And in the prayer for the consecration of a chalice to be found in the *Rituale Romanum* we read:

Almighty and everlasting God, we beseech you to pour forth through our hands the power of your blessing: that by our blessing this vessel and this Paten may be made holy and by the grace of the holy Spirit be fashioned into a new tomb for the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through the same Lord. . . .

The two symbols of the chalice, as signifying life, and as representing the tomb, are so closely connected and delicately inter-woven that it is difficult to separate the strands of one without marring, or at least detracting from, the significance of the other. It may, therefore, be of service here simply to present a few texts from the New Testament in which the word 'chalice' appears, with their Old Testament background, and to show some parallels from mythology and various religious practices. What follows is merely an attempt to put together a few pieces of a vast jigsaw of scriptural texts, mythology and archeological facts to form a picture of the chalice as the symbol of life and of the tomb.

Apart from the narratives of the Last Supper and the Agony in Gethsemani, the word 'chalice' generally occurs in the four gospels in connection with washings or with some sort of ritual cleanings. In Matthew 23, 25 we read: 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you make clean the outside of the cup. . . .' Without pushing the association too far, the reader may note that this quotation from St Matthew and a parallel passage in St Luke (11, 39) are followed almost immediately by Jesus's indictment of the Pharisees as whited sepulchres. The 'cleaning' element is interesting too, for though St Matthew and St Luke use *Katharizete*—make clean or purge—the Markian parallel passage has *Baptismous*—wash. Now, in St Mark (10, 38), our Lord answers the sons of Zebedee when approached by them for a place in the kingdom: 'Can you drink of the chalice that I drink of or be baptised with the baptism wherewith I am baptised?' Commenting on this passage, Professor Vincent Taylor remarks

that 'in popular Greek *baptizesthai* was used metaphorically in the sense of being "flooded" or overwhelmed with calamities'.⁵ The baptism, therefore, that Jesus speaks of is his suffering and death and may be called an 'oblique' reference to his chalice of suffering—the chalice given him by his Father to drink. This would seem to be verified by the words that follow: 'You shall indeed drink of the chalice that I drink of and be baptised with the baptism wherewith I am baptised'—St James and St John suffered the pains of martyrdom.

'The chalice which my Father has given me, shall I not drink it?' We have seen that the word 'chalice' can be taken metaphorically to mean the Passion of Christ. From this follows the significance of the chalice as the symbol of the 'tomb'. The tomb is synonymous with death. 'Christ died for us', says St Paul, 'that we being now justified by his blood, shall be saved from wrath through him.' (Rom. 5, 9.) Christ was laid in the tomb after his death—St Thomas gives three reasons why this was fitting:

- (a) to confirm the truth of his death, for no one is placed in a tomb unless he is truly dead. . . .
- (b) because Christ's resurrection from the tomb gives hope of rising through him to those who are buried, as is said in John (5): 'All who are in the tomb shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear shall live'.
- (c) as an example for those, who, through the death of Christ are spiritually dead to sin—who, that is to say, are hidden from the disturbances of men, as is said in Col. 3: 'You are dead and your life is hid with Christ in God'; and also as an example for those who are baptised, who through the death of Christ die to sin, are, as it were, buried with Christ through immersion.⁶

So also in the epistle to the Romans (ch. 6): 'We who are baptised in Christ are baptised in his death. For we are buried together with him by baptism into death that as Christ is risen from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also may walk in the newness of life'. This theme seems to take us back again to our Lord's question—'can you drink of the chalice,' etc. The chalice that Jesus speaks of is his suffering and death, the chalice his Father has given him to drink. This figure of the chalice or cup of suffering is one that occurs also in the Old Testament.

5. *Jesus and his Sacrifice*, p. 98.

6. *Summa Theol.* III, 51, 1.

Though the Israelites were chosen by God as a race apart, their history shows that they did not remain entirely immune from the influence of surrounding cultures and religions. But the religious practices and ideas taken over by the Jews, when used properly in the cult of the one, true God, are obviously given a much greater spiritual meaning than they could ever have had before, though it would be unfair to say that for the pagan these ideas did not signify a spiritual reality. Among these pagan cults it is generally agreed that the Babylonian had the most considerable influence throughout the Near East, so that in order to understand the Old Testament texts, it may be of some profit to trace the 'cup' theme in the Babylonian, as well as in some other, myths and religious practices.

The Babylonians conceived of the earth as a hollow mountain, the top of which as well as its hollow interior (the underworld) were the homes of the gods. It is to the interior underworld that man goes after death. The description given of it seems to be suggested by the grave or cave in which the dead were laid, so that the words for grave (*Kalru Gehenna*—dark place) are used, especially in poetry, as synonymous with the nether-world.⁷ Once the dead were placed below the earth, whether in a cave or some other kind of tomb, they were actually conveyed to the underworld. The tomb was the entrance to the underworld, the womb of the new life; for this reason, for example, the dead were often buried in the embryonic position. This is the 'return to Mother Earth'.

The new life in the underworld was conceived of either as one of darkness and terrors for the wicked, or as one of feasting with the gods—and especially the drinking of the 'clear waters of life'.⁸ The dead were buried with cups and bowls and other utensils, seemingly sometimes to provide them with the necessary means to drink the 'clear waters of life', sometimes food and drink being supplied to propitiate the dead; so that eventually the cup and the bowl become the symbol of the tomb. It is interesting to note that an ancient cup-divination ceremony consisted of gazing into a cup of wine or shining liquid, for through that one could see into the future, particularly into one's state in the after life.⁹

7. Jastrow: *Babylonian and Assyrian Religion*, p. 571-3.

8. Delitzsch: *Babel and Bible*, p. 58.

9. Hastings: *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. IV, p. 870b.

There are many cylinder-seals, sculptures and inscriptions which depict ritual or sacrificial meals, and many show a god and a man drinking from the same cup by means of tubes, perhaps to suggest communion between the god and man. Sometimes there is depicted an offering of the cup to the god by a priest.¹⁰ Many of these ancient monuments are Hittite and archeologists have compared the offerings depicted with the sacrifice of Melchisedech.¹¹

In an inscription on a colossal statue of the god Hadad (eighth or ninth century B.C.), Panammu, the king who erected the statue, after speaking of the bounty of the god to him and of his desire to eat and drink with the god, goes on to say that should his successor not be faithful, 'let Hadad pour out his wrath upon him . . . suffer him not to eat, in anger, and withhold sleep from him by night'.¹² Here we have the other aspect of the deities' dealings with man. Man's life on earth becomes one of endless terror and fear as the gods pour out their wrath (here we seem to have the counter-part to the cup of life); and these terrors are carried over as symbols of the terrible underworld, that She'ol from which there is no return, the land of darkness, shadows, of cobwebs and corruption.

The psalms are full of Canaanite stylistic and verbal reminiscences.¹³ Perhaps one of the most striking of these similarities lies in the fact that in most psalms in which the chalice or cup figure appears, the whole context seems set in, or refers to, something rather like the Babylonian underworld theme. Psalm 115 is particularly interesting in that it begins with a prayer of thanks for delivery from the terrors of the underworld and then goes on, 'I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living . . . now, what return shall I make to the Lord for all his benefits to me? I will take the cup of salvation and will call on the name of the Lord.' It is as if the psalmist, taking the cup of the 'clear waters of life', offers it back to God, so that he can go on to say: 'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful servants'. Psalm 15 has: 'The Lord is my allotted portion and my cup'

10. Cook: *Early Religion of Palestine in the Light of Archeology*.

11. Garstang: *The Hittite Empire*, p. 124, p. 149; also Burrows in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1925, p. 284.

12. Cooke: *North Semitic Inscriptions*, p. 162; see also Schofield: *Archeology and the After Life*.

13 Albright: *Archeology and the Religion of Palestine*, p. 128.

(which seems to refer to a custom for the father of a family or the giver of a feast to pour out for each one present at the table his portion of wine), and sings of confidence in God: 'For thou wilt not abandon me to the underworld nor permit thy faithful servant to see destruction'. In Psalm 22 God's bounty is symbolised in a feast: 'and even if I pass through the valley of deep gloom I have no fear. Thou preparest before me a banquet . . . and my overflowing cup, how rich it is'. Psalms 10 and 74 revert to the 'cup of wrath' theme: 'He shall rain snares upon the wicked; fire, brimstone and burning blasts shall be the portion of their cup'. (10, 7.) 'It is God who is judge, humbling this one and exalting that one, for there is a cup in the hand of the Lord, filled with pure wine, well spiced . . . surely the wicked shall drain and drink the dregs thereof.' (74, 8-9.)¹⁴

The 'cup of wrath' theme is taken up again by the prophets. Against the background of the Babylonian domination, Ezechial, Jeremias and Isaias use the figure almost as if they take the significance of the 'cup' and turn it against the enemies of Israel. 'For thus saith the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Take the cup of wine of this fury at my hand. And thou shalt make all the nations to drink thereof unto which I shall send thee.' (Jer. 25, 15.) And again in Isaias (51, 17), where the judgment is against Israel herself because of infidelity: 'Arise, arise, stand up, O Jerusalem, which has drunk at the hand of the Lord of the cup of his wrath: thou hast drunk even to the bottom of the cup of dead sleep, and thou hast drunk even to the dregs'. Here it is interesting to note that the Hebrew has 'the bowl of the cup', where the word for 'bowl'—*kubba'ath*—appears to be a Babylonian word which was unfamiliar to the later Jews; and the pleonasm 'bowl of the cup' has arisen through the addition of the common word for 'cup'—*Kos*—as an explanatory gloss.¹⁵

'The cup which my Father has given me, shall I not drink it?' The figure, when used by Christ, is given a wonderful significance and there is a synthesis of the 'cup of wrath' and 'the cup of life'. The cup of suffering as symbolising the tomb is the way to, and the source of, life. In order to attain life we have to participate in the sufferings and death of Christ—the acceptance by the Christian of suffering and death is essential to eternal life. 'If any man will

14. Psalms quoted from P. Callan, O.P.: *The Psalms*.

15. Skinner: *Commentary on Isaias* (Cambridge); also *Oxford Hebrew Lexicon*.

come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For he that will save his life shall lose it: and he that shall lose his life for my sake shall find it.' (Mt. 16, 25-26.) Our life with God, the kingdom of heaven, is 'like unto a treasure hidden in a field which a man having found, hid it and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath and buyeth that field'. Here we have a parallel figure of the 'cup' and 'tomb' symbols. The treasure of eternal life is buried in a field; in order to obtain it a man must sell all his goods and, as it were, suffer the loss of all he has.¹⁶

Here again we have the descent into the earth, the cave, the grave, the way to the underworld and new life. This symbol of the grave as the womb of the new life is one that occurs again and again in initiation ceremonies through which the initiate is incorporated into 'new life' in his society. Thus for example among tribes on the Darling River in Australia the novices are placed alongside a grave from which an old man rises during a dance and a dirge in honour of Daramulun the All-Father.¹⁷

We have here, however, only 'shadows' of the actual regeneration of life in Christian Baptism. And then our rebirth as sons of God into the life of the Church only begins with Baptism; the Christian has to grow up in the way indicated by Christ. The Mass, the Christian sacrifice in which Christ is continually offering himself to God for us, is not something confined to the space of an hour or so, but is meant to be relived over and over again throughout the whole of one's life. The importance of the chalice as the symbol of the tomb is, perhaps, that we should see in the chalice not only our 'drink' of eternal life, but also the call for our acceptance of, and participation in, the suffering and death of Christ.

16. We find something corresponding to this in various religious rites of Spring festivities in which an image of a god is hidden and found again—as symbolising new life—and in the old myths and 'fairy' tales in which a hero seeks a lost (buried) treasure. The treasure signifies wealth and prosperity—new life. To obtain the treasure the hero must undergo many hardships, he must fight a dragon or some monster that guards the treasure, or beguile the snake-guardian.

17 S. H. Hooke: *Myth and Ritual*, p. 151.