

Not by words alone

by Rob van der Hart, O.P.

Religious experience is thickly overlaid by theological speculation and the reality of God is further and further submerged beneath theories that fruitlessly attempt to forge a connection between the Invisible and 'ordinary' things, between 'the living ascended glorified personal Christ and lifeless impersonal objects, bread and wine', as it was put recently in this magazine.¹ Making sense of this sort of discussion is often difficult, because what is actually disputed is the very experience that the doctrine was formulated to express, the experience of God's presence in things, which, indeed, sinks beneath the weight of words spoken about it. We are increasingly left with the empty shell of a splendid worship from which God himself has retreated.

Of course, many aspects of our faith are well served by serious questioning, but that does not always entitle us to unrestrained reflection. Sometimes speculation obscures its object instead of clarifying it, and the mind creates for itself a vacuum where once there was the immediacy of response: for example, when we begin to believe that a demonstration is required to confirm a reality that can, in truth, only be encountered. Is it not a most peculiar ability of the mind, a strange inclination towards self-destruction, to wonder about the factuality of the world, to wonder about the reality of the forest, or the person we love, or the God we inescapably find in our path? Perhaps the mightier the experience the less we feel able to cope and the more we feel called to doubt. By putting such things in question they are indeed rendered questionable, and we are confronted with the frustrating task of proving that there is a reality that corresponds to the ideas in our mind. We are caught in the vicious circle of having to re-discover through the argument that which was originally lost through it.

Of all the aspects of our faith it is above all the Eucharist that has fallen victim to this strange epistemological phenomenon. We have been so anxious to preserve its meaning through centuries of discussion that we hardly noticed that we were losing the experience: we have in fact forgotten that the Christian Gospel was initially about events relating to God's presence in the bread, and now all our concern is directed to the question of how food can be said to be the reality of God.

In the New Testament we read that on the evening before his death our Lord Jesus Christ took bread and said of it, 'This is my body'. What is the 'this' to which Jesus is referring; can it be the lifeless and impersonal object which it is so often assumed to be?

¹E. L. Mascall, 'Egner on the Eucharistic Presence', *New Blackfriars*, December, 1972, p. 540.

Nothing of that sort is suggested in the Scriptures. On the contrary, the first three Gospels attach great value to the fact that the Last Supper was celebrated as the Passover meal, so that in their opinion the food that was eaten was most emphatically not ordinary or lifeless but the embodiment of the Exodus experience. Even if we prefer to follow the account in St John, which seems less concerned with this coincidence, it would still be highly presumptuous to maintain that Jesus was referring to ordinary bread. Such secular and prosaic notions are found only in a society like ours where the connection of food with heaven is lost and where God has become absent from things. It may look that way to us, but it does not follow that we can assume the same attitude in other cultures and traditions: for them our notions are probably inexplicable if not absurd. I recall the occasion of a catechetical instruction in an African village where the priest from Europe held up a communion wafer, asking, 'What is this?' Spontaneously the people replied, 'The body of Christ', which was of course the wrong answer for the consecration had not yet taken place. They should have said, 'Plain, ordinary bread', and in order to emphasize his point the missionary crumbled the bread in his hand, threw it on the floor and trod it in with his heel. The congregation were astonished: how dare a man destroy food and trample on something so fundamentally sacred. Far from being a commodity that can be obtained in the supermarket, bread is for most people the fruit of a reluctant soil, life beaten out of the unyielding earth by a relentless sun after torrential rains have flooded the fields. For them food is something holy because it is the direct manifestation of a generative power which is not under the dominion of man, it is the outcome of a divine fury and a divine benevolence, desolation created into life. Indeed, for us this sort of understanding has been lost. It is not that we find it so difficult to imagine how food can *become* something sacred, a sacrament, how it can *be made* into the presence of God—in most of us there is a vestige of a child-like soul that sees little problem in changing the profane world into the garden of God. What is at issue here is the point of departure, which for us is always a factual world of objects that can by poetic or religious alchemy be transformed and given resonance. For the Primitive, on the other hand, that resonance is only too terribly present, the overwhelming holiness of things meets him at every turn and in every activity. What for us is a higher, spiritual reality to which we may hope to ascend from a profane world, is for him a dimension bringing unavoidable and troubling evidence of the divine.

Here, perhaps, we may detect the crux of our problem with the Eucharist and with the sacraments in general. We seem to have turned things inside out: God is brought into the world through the sacraments, ordinary matter is turned into holiness by the word spoken in faith. For primitive man, however, food is already God;

it is of its very nature 'sacrament', holy because it is the direct evidence of his reality—'Man does not live by words alone'. It is truly possible to say that food *is* God, although not in the sense that there is an identity of God with food. Writing about the religion of an East African tribe, E. E. Evans-Pritchard observes: 'But though one can say of rain and pestilence that it is God one cannot say of God that he is rain and pestilence'.¹ Similarly, when people say that food is God, they do not imply that God is eaten, but that which is eaten is God, for here in the eating they encounter and unify themselves with the spirit of growth by which creation is sustained and prevented from returning to the chaos of destruction. Religious ceremonies do not arise in order to create holiness; they are designed as an entry into it in order that man may participate in a sphere that does not really belong to mortals. We might perhaps best understand sacraments as tools of 'de-numinization', making available the things of the earth that are imprisoned by holiness, freeing them from the Numinous for common use, protecting the taker from heaven and damnation. Ultimately, after all, it is very daring of man to eat of the food that grows by the grace of God, to sit at the table of the Mighty Ones; it is highly dangerous to take the things that belong to heaven, for we may be consumed by the divine wrath. The earth has more than one realm: it has a depth which is the greedy mouth of God, an abyss slow to give up its treasure, fertile but without produce, until the sun, clothed in the clouds, appears from the bridal chamber.

He commanded the skies above, and opened the doors of heaven; and he rained down upon them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven.

Man ate the bread of the Mighty Ones (*abbtrim*); he sent them food in abundance (Psalm 78, 23-25).

Thus man ought to make sure that food is recognized as the gift of God, as something that is not to be taken for granted: 'The Lord provides food for those who fear him'. He must be careful that he finds the right approach, taking his share while apologizing for the audacity, eating only after the heavenly powers have had their fill. The harvest is not to be touched before some of it has been allowed to return to heaven in the smoke of the burning sacrifice, the first loaves are to be baked without leaven because man has no natural right to mix the dough with a foreign element, and before bread is eaten it has to be broken, and before the cup is drunk some of it has to be poured out, for man has to acknowledge that he is not entitled to life in its totality: 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'. Bread is the eternal life that comes out of the mouth of God and can therefore never be taken in isolation from the creative Word.

¹*Nuer Religion*, Oxford, 1956, p. 125.

There is a war in heaven between grace and greed, an inscrutable ambiguity between life and death, a threatening order where the gift demands the recognition that it can be taken away; it is a structure in God of a loving Father and destroying powers, a structure in which love awaits to be redeemed from anger when the demand is fulfilled. The sacrifices of the Old Testament were rejected not because they failed to make God present in this world, but because apparently they were incapable of satisfying the greed of God and making the food available in abundance for man.

We are told that Jesus often invited his disciples to his table: timid men who could not hope because of the dominion of the powers. They were given the bread from heaven, the broken bread that returns from God, and they shared with him in the same holiness: food that is grace. In this way they grew in strength and overcame their individual fears. Eating meant the entering into God's presence, and in this act the community was transfigured and lifted beyond the limitations of its members. And when the Lord breaks the bread and hands it to his disciples, he invites them to follow him, not on account of his personal qualities, but on account of the divine life and inspiration which is represented in the food. It is therefore not at all strange that on that memorable occasion of the Last Supper Jesus—who knew himself to be the Messiah—identified himself with the bread and wine; what is remarkable is that he spoke of his body and blood.

Surely, in this perspective it makes no sense to maintain that Jesus *instituted* the Eucharist as a new means of continuing the presence of God's creative Word. Bread is already the direct evidence of the divine reality; a meal is in principle always a sacred banquet at which we share in the food of the angels. If that is indeed the context of the Last Supper, the context in which the words 'This is my body' were spoken, we must admit that our modern controversies about the 'real presence' are quite beside the point. The change, the transubstantiation to which the Christian confesses, does not take place in 'ordinary and plain bread', but in bread that is the presence of God, a kind of presence, however, that was still awaiting a revolution, a fulfilment that was to be realized in the death and resurrection of the Messiah. Jesus did not institute a sacrament, but he entered sacramentality; he went through the gates of righteousness making existing sacraments effective because his passage through suffering and death, his descent into Sheol, into the mouth of God, satisfied the demand once and for all.

Christians at first merely continued the meals that Jesus ate with his followers, but they soon began to understand the unique importance of the Last Supper.

Naturally the Paschal context would have made this occasion an eminently suitable one for a messianic message and an emphasis on the role of the Suffering Servant, who, like a lamb, would be

sacrificed for the life of others. But we would twist the evidence if we regarded this as the real reason why Jesus chose to eat the Passover meal with his disciples. His own intention is explicitly stated in the Bible, and it was not that he sought an opportunity for instituting the Eucharist; rather, we are told that he had a deep and irresistible desire to eat this meal with his disciples. The fulfilment of the Law of the Old Testament in the celebration of the Judaic festivities is not a stage setting against which we must place the sayings of Jesus; it is the very reality of God, his presence amongst the people, which the Redeemer revolutionizes by entering.

All four Evangelists, but in particular, St John, are very intrigued by the behaviour of Judas the traitor. To disregard the communion with one's friends, or even worse, to betray the table-fellowship with the brethren, is far more than an act of disloyalty: it is a sacrilege because it does not recognize the holiness of the bread. When the Psalmist says, 'Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted his heel against me' (41, 9), he is not just complaining about this particular misfortune; he is expressing a deep anxiety that the divine order has been violated, and that the universe is thus about to collapse before the Judgment. Judas was actually eating with Jesus when Satan went into him and he left the table to betray his friend. It was a deed of the greatest consequence, a radical incision in the given divine order, a disruption and violation through which a new order was announced or even could no longer be withheld. When we read the accounts it almost looks as if Jesus wanted to force the hand of God, to bring the crisis nearer, by challenging Judas: 'It is to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it'. Why did he seem to take the initiative in this betrayal, why did he want the supper to be disrupted? We know that he had sworn not to eat nor drink until the fulfilment of this meal in the kingdom of God; he felt compelled to abstain so long as the conditions were not radically changed. Something was to happen that would for ever make an end to all ambiguity, something that would make this meal into a true and everlasting gift of God which he would not take back again. Here is the crisis which he had feared but which he had also wanted to provoke, the 'hour' which he had wanted to postpone as well as to bring near. He knew that it was going to happen in Jerusalem, in the divine city which the Most High had made his sacred abode. In Jerusalem he was either to succeed in establishing the kingdom, or his enemies would seize him and bring him to death. The visits to the city were necessary, but they also endangered his whole mission. Towards the end he spent only the days within the city-walls, enjoying the protection of the crowd, while at night he withdrew to a remote place, often to the house of his friend at Bethany. But on that night he did not return to Lazarus's house: he stayed instead in the city, sharing the Passover meal in a room in the south-west quarter, and with the

intention of spending the rest of the night on the lower slope of the Mount of Olives, which, for that occasion, was declared part of Jerusalem on account of the many pilgrims. Each Jew who celebrated the Passover in the Holy City was obliged by law to remain within its boundaries for the total duration of the festivities.

Thus Jesus was truly caught in the nets of God's law, as a caged animal with no chance of escape from the slaughterer, caught as a prisoner already tried and condemned to death. A deep desire to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem and obedience to Moses forced the Messiah to remain within the gates of the city, that is within the jurisdiction of his enemies, and inevitably it delivered him over to the destroying anger of the custodians of the law. God's law had laid a demand upon him which could be fulfilled only by his death. And while the world moves on through strife and suppression, here in the seclusion of the cenacle there can no longer be any doubt about God's intention: eternal life will be withheld, the land and the city will be devoured together with Yahweh's anointed.

Where then is the Love of the Father? Is Yahweh not in Zion; is her King not therein? The harvest is past, the summer is ended, but we are not saved (Jer. 8, 19 ff).

And yet we *are* saved. Yahweh does not forsake the people to whom he made his promises. In his hands Jesus holds the bread; it has not perished together with the Messiah. He is about to hand it to his disciples, hand them the life returning from God. Yet this life cannot possibly any longer be the ambiguous presence of God: life that is given but that is also taken away. The gods are having their fill—Christ has begun his descent into Sheol, and what returns from there, from the mouth of God, now lasts for ever.

The bread of the Last Supper, the 'this' which Jesus holds in his hands, and which still exists despite his death, now exists *because* of his death, it now becomes eternal life: the presence of God is transubstantiated once and for all. And so it is with all the bread that is broken in commemoration of the fact that the demand of God has been fulfilled. This bread is truly the body of Christ, because this body, which has been taken up into God, is now the source from which it is released.