

## Patristic theology of the efficacy of the Eucharist

### Introduction

Christianity is by its nature incarnational and therefore sacramental, and Christian praxis has from the very beginning been centred around a sacramental celebration which was experienced as an encounter with Christ.<sup>1</sup> Frances Young summarises the early Christian experience in this way:

The central act of sacrifice performed by Christians is a fellowship-meal, through which believers share in the redemptive sacrifice of Christ by commemoration, a symbolic meal shared in his presence with fellow-believers, a meal in which the actions of breaking bread and drinking wine enable us to feed spiritually on his 'virtue' and vitality. ... The Eucharist is a sacrifice of worship, praise and thanksgiving ... [it] is a sacrifice for sin, [which] realizes in us God's act of atonement. ... the early Church even thought of it as an aversion-sacrifice, believing that sharing in the feast kept away the devil and his angels; ... it is a sacrifice with the power to deal with sin and guilt and reconcile us with God. But primarily, it is a communion-sacrifice which draws us into fellowship with him and with each other, a meal in which we partake of his power and receive the strength to continue the battle against evil within ourselves and in the world around us.<sup>2</sup>

Those modern theologians who feel squeamish about acknowledging this fact are reflecting more recent agendas. As late as the Reformation, a religious genius and innovator in so many areas such as Luther was still able to uphold the objective reality and efficacy of the Eucharist over against Zwingli, who in this instance represents modernity.<sup>3</sup> The reduction of the 'spiritual' to the disembodied is a modern phenomenon, which echoes the dualistic systems of antiquity. These had their starting point in the acceptance of the reality of the spirit, and struggled to give matter full reality. The modern incomprehension of sacramentalism may rest ultimately on an even more grave error: the background assumption that the spirit belongs to such an utterly different order of being that in effect only matter is real, and that seeking concrete manifestation of the spirit in the realm of matter is both doomed to failure and somehow blasphemous.

In this chapter we shall be surveying the many images used by the Church Fathers to describe the efficacy of the Eucharist and examining their theology of its effects. The Fathers' use of so many unsystematised images reflects an immediacy of experience. This throws up the question of the provenance of the liturgy. If this is seen as a *product* of theological reflection, it is hard to understand how it could give rise to unmediated experience amongst those – theologians – who are responsible for producing it. Adrian Kavanagh made the case that the Eucharist deserves to be seen as just as much part of the earliest tradition as the stories which came to be gathered together as the gospels. According to this theory, true liturgy as a locus of encounter is a *source* of theological reflection, and not a *result* of theological endeavour.

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<sup>1</sup> cp. Wainwright in Hastings et al, *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, Article on Eucharist, p. 215: "The eucharistic *presence of Christ* has been a constant confession of the Church, even though Christians have differed sharply in their accounts of the manner in which he is both 'host and food'.

<sup>2</sup> Frances Young: *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ*, London 1975, pp. 137-8

<sup>3</sup> cp. Owen Chadwick: *The Reformation*, London 1988, pp. 78-79

Christians do not worship because they believe. They believe because the One in whose gift faith lives is regularly met in the common act of worship.<sup>4</sup>

Irenaeus confirms this in his *Against Heresies*, when he says:

But our opinion is in accordance with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn establishes our opinion.

Irenaeus (b. 2nd century; d. c 200)  
Against Heresies Book IV, 18.5

It is certainly very noticeable that the Fathers do not call the origin and essential forms of the Eucharist into question; even John Chrysostom, who was the creator of a liturgy, speaks of it as a given.

The ongoing discussion on 'liturgical theology' has modified the initial positions adopted by theologians such as Kavanagh. This has led to a renewed appreciation that the liturgy is something real in itself, rather than an illustration of theological precepts. We shall examine below the idea of the Eucharist as participation in the life of Christ. Crichton describes liturgy in general as participation in the life of the Trinity:

the liturgy in celebration introduces the believing Christian into the very life of the triune God.<sup>5</sup>

The Trinity reveals God as being in relation. In his self-disclosure as Word and Spirit, God's fundamental tendency to communicate with his creation is revealed. In the Incarnation, God reveals his inclination towards the earth, towards embodiment and participation. In the ultimate indwelling of earthliness in the grave and its lifting up in Resurrection, the original and archetypal sacramental gesture is revealed. In this way it is quite right to speak of Jesus Christ as the 'Ursacrament'<sup>6</sup>

The doctrine of the homoousion or consubstantiality of the Son with the Father was the decisive breakthrough in understanding the Trinity at the Council of Nicaea. This led in turn to the realisation of the consubstantiality of divinity and humanity in Jesus. These two achievements opened the way for a mingling of the created and uncreated orders, and their ultimate union.

Salvation as henosis and theosis was not a change of state but a dynamic achieved through suffering and compassion. Jesus' eschatological message re-emphasised again and again that the victory achieved on Easter Sunday was only the inauguration of the in-breaking of the end-time. The Fathers saw the Eucharist as a realisation of what was inaugurated. The power of their argument came from their experience of salvation.

In the definitive work, *The Study of the Liturgy*, Halliburton makes clear the underlying soteriological thrust behind this understanding. He draws out the parallelism – much used by the Fathers, as we shall see below – between the transformation of the humanity of Jesus in the Incarnation and the nature of bread in the Eucharist:

The argument ... is that as human nature was transformed by its union with the Word (through the action of the Spirit), so the Eucharistic elements are transformed in order that we too may be transformed and saved from incorruption. ... The motif is in fact soteriological rather than magical ... For

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<sup>4</sup> Adrian Kavanagh, in Cheslyn Jones et al: *The Study of Liturgy* 2. London and New York, 1992, p. 6

<sup>5</sup> Crichton, in Jones *op cit*, p. 7

<sup>6</sup> Cp. 'The Ursacrament is Jesus Christ, in whose human form the whole fullness of God dwells bodily' (Col 2,9). \* Barbara Hallensleben: Heterodoxie—Wie wird der Streit um die religiöse Wahrheit geführt?—Eine Antwort aus katholischer Sicht. Web: <http://www.oki-regensburg.de/hetero.htm>

what is received is not a thing but a person, a dynamic and outgoing redeemer who demands a response from those who approach him.<sup>7</sup>

This points up the very aspect that is a challenge to many modern interpreters of the Eucharist: just where they would locate the most intimate, personal meeting with God, comes something which they see as mechanical or automatic. The Fathers were better able to bear the paradox. From a theoretical viewpoint, there is no way of bridging the gap between receiving a ‘thing’, as it might be medicine, and encountering a person. Experience of the Eucharist provided what intellect could not provide: a way of reconciling these two seeming opposites.

St John Chrysostom makes the paradox particularly vivid, playing on the tension between a person encountered in love and the thing consumed with typical rhetorical flair (what preacher today would dare to point out that just as we often bite our lover playfully, we bite Christ in consuming the host?)

All are nourished by the same Body....When you see [the Body of Christ] lying on the altar, say to yourself, “Because of this Body I am no longer earth and ash, no longer a prisoner, but free. Because of this Body I hope for heaven, and I hope to receive the good things that are in heaven, immortal life, the lot of the angels, familiar conversation with Christ. This Body, scourged and crucified, has not been fetched by death...This is that Body which was blood-stained, which was pierced by a lance, and from which gushed forth those saving fountains, one of blood and the other of water, for all the world”...This is the Body which He gave us, both to hold in reserve and to eat, which was appropriate to intense love; for those whom we kiss with abandon we often even bite with our teeth.

John Chrysostom (c.347– c.407) Homilies on Corinthians 8, 1[2]; 24, 2[3]; 24, 2[4]; 24, 4[7]

There was little if any systematic theological deliberation about the Eucharist in the patristic period.<sup>8</sup> Church history shows that such deliberation is often driven by controversy, and there were no crises of interpretation of the Eucharist in the patristic period to compare with the debates on the Trinity and Christology. There may be a deeper reason, too. The transition from unmediated experience with a kind of pre-conceptual understanding to conceptual debate seems to reflect a change in consciousness. Only that which is no longer understood experientially is the subject of debate.

If this principle is true, it would indicate that the experience and unreflected ‘understanding’ of the Eucharist survived longer than the experience of the Trinity, or of the reality of the Incarnation of Christ. It may seem counter-intuitive to talk of a loss of understanding of the Trinity in relation to the period in which the doctrine of the Trinity was first developed in the disputes of the fourth century. There is however an question which has received far too little attention from theologians focussed on the kind of explicit formulations of faith which one can learn for an examination: what stood behind the 300 years’ usage of the Trinitarian formula in the Baptism, or the

<sup>7</sup> John Halliburton: *The Patristic Theology of the Eucharist*, in Jones et al *Op. cit.*, p. 250

<sup>8</sup> In the patristic period there was remarkably little in the way of controversy on the subject [of the doctrine of the Eucharist], Article on ‘Eucharist’ in Frank Leslie Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone (eds): *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oxford, 1997, p. 567; and cp. Martin Wallraff: *Von der Eucharistie zum Mysterium. Abendmahlsfrömmigkeit in der Spätantike*. In: *Patristica et Oecumenica. Festschrift für Wolfgang Bienert zum 65. Geburtstag*. Hrsg. v. Peter Gemeinhardt u. Uwe Kühneweg, Marburg 2004, p. 90 and

epiclesis in the Eucharist, if the Trinity was only ‘invented’ in the fourth century? It is not likely that we will ever have a definitive answer to this, by virtue of the nature of unreflected experience. However, it is perhaps good to counteract the uncritical devaluation of such modes of understanding, which stems from the unconscious privileging of modes of thought congruent with those adopted by the student. This study may make a small contribution to this effort, as it needs must draw on sources which were never designed to add up to a coherent system.

In the Fathers’ expositions on the Eucharist, and their devotional and mystagogical instruction, we come close to a world of immediate experience. Because of the lack of high-level debate, we have to cast the net wide enough to include not only writings for a theologically trained audience, but catechetical and mystagogical instruction, and private letters. It is important always to bear in mind that experience formed the background for these thoughts; experience was assumed too by the Fathers on the part of their hearers and readers.<sup>9</sup> In stark contrast to the situation of many theologians today, the Fathers were convinced that they experienced Christ daily in the holy office, as Basil the Great describes in a letter to a Patrician Lady Caesaria:

To communicate each day and to partake of the holy Body and Blood of Christ is good and beneficial; for He says quite plainly: “He that eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood has eternal life.” Who can doubt that to share continually in life is the same thing as having life abundantly? We ourselves communicate four times each week...and on other days if there is a commemoration of any saint.

Basil the Great, (born ca. 329; died 379)

Ignatius makes quite clear his existential longing to communicate:

I have no taste for the food that perishes nor for the pleasures of this life. I want the Bread of God which is the Flesh of Christ, who was the seed of David; and for drink I desire His Blood which is love that cannot be destroyed.

Ignatius of Antioch (b. ca. 50; d. between 98 and 117)

Letter to the Romans § 7

The Fathers’ writings display an unquestioned assumption that the Eucharist effects salvation, giving healing and bestowing life. It is the continuation of the salvific deed of Christ. When we read the Christological and above all soteriological writings of the Fathers, we need to bear in mind that the experience of the Eucharist is in the background, informing their reflection. Athanasius uncovers this connection, which for other Fathers is implicit.

For this purpose, then, the incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God entered our world. ... taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father. ... This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly

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<sup>9</sup> Cp. Enrico Mazza: *The Celebration of the Eucharist*, trans. M J O’Connell, Minnesota 1999: “In these [mystagogical] homilies, the Eucharist is explained to the neophytes after they have already taken part in it, so that the experience of the rite is the basis for the theological understanding of it.”

as straw from fire.

Athanasius (b. ca 296; d. 373): *De Incarnatione* § 8

We shall examine in more detail how Athanasius' radically physical conception of the Incarnation leads to a Eucharistic theology of participation at the end of this chapter.

Two centuries before Athanasius, Justin had made a similar point:

For we do not receive these things as common bread or common drink; but as Jesus Christ our Saviour being incarnate by God's Word took flesh and blood for our salvation, so also we have been taught that the food consecrated by the Word of prayer which comes from him, from which our flesh and blood are nourished by transformation, is the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus.

Justin Martyr (b. ca 100; d. ca 165): *First Apology*, Ch. 66

And Leo the Great, in a sermon on Ascension Day, gives this thought a chronological framework:

What our Redeemer did visibly has passed over into the sacraments.

Leo the Great (b. unknown; d. 461)

Sermo 74, *De Ascens.*

J. D. Crichton interprets Leo's words:

[Leo] is considering how, after the forty days of Christ's resurrection-life, he was lifted up to remain at the right hand of his Father until he should come again. *Now* all that he did in his earthly life is to be found in the *sacraments*, the liturgy that [Leo] and his hearers were celebrating.<sup>10</sup>

The importance of this link cannot be over-emphasised. Our situation as modern theologians, with our specialisations in the various fields of Systematic Theology and Liturgical Theology, tends to make us see the doctrine of Christ in a different category to the study of the Eucharist. For the early theologians of the church, this separation did not exist.

Köster makes this clear on hand of Ignatius' understanding of the Incarnation: Ignatius points

to the suprahistorical Henosis of Spirit and Flesh, understood in a metaphysical way. Whoever takes part in the sacrament participates in this union, and so attains salvation.<sup>11</sup>

All of this would mean that it could be legitimate to include all soteriological statements of the Fathers in our study of their theology of the Eucharist, in a kind of *communicatio idiomatum*. For reasons of space, I do not intend to do this here. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind the original unity of what for us are two disparate areas in the thought of the Fathers. In places it allows us to fill out a fragment of thought from the one area with a fuller exposition from the other.

It is important not to strain to impose a systematic framework on the Fathers' utterances on the Eucharist. They do not show that there was one and only one theology of the Eucharist; far from it: they demonstrate that the experienced reality of the Eucharist as a continuation of Christ's salvific deed gave rise to a great variety of images and alternative conceptions.

<sup>10</sup> James Dunlop Crichton: A Theology of Worship, in Jones et al, *op. cit.*, p. 14

<sup>11</sup> Helmut Köster: Geschichte und Kultus im Johannesevangelium und bei Ignatius, ZTK 54 (1957), 56-69. Quoted in Lothar Wehr: *Arznei der Unsterblichkeit*, Münster 1987, p. 3

### ***The overall theme: objective change***

Beneath the sometimes bewildering array of images used by the Fathers to describe the efficacy of the Eucharist—there are at least fifteen distinct thematic groups, of which we will only be able to examine three in depth in this study—there is one underlying theme. They all attribute an objective efficacy to the Eucharist. Partaking of communion brings about a change, which may reach as far as the *physis*, the nature of the recipient. It does not only serve to remind him of Christ's saving deed, or to inspire him to follow the example of Christ's self-giving love. This is not to say that the Fathers neglect the importance of the frame of mind and spiritual state of the one receiving the communion, in line with Paul's warning in I Corinthians 11:27. However, it is important to see that Paul himself is making a point that is far from that of a receptionist—the wrong attitude in the recipient does not prevent the communion from having any effect, it merely changes the objective effect from a positive into a negative one. The Fathers follow this interpretation.

The objective understanding of the effects of the Eucharist eclipsed the aspect that had been equally important in the New Testament era, that of table fellowship<sup>12</sup>. It found expression in usages which seem to us today almost bizarre, such as the practice of taking some of the host home and taking it daily before meals, or rubbing it on the places where an illness manifested.<sup>13</sup>

This emphasis on the physical efficacy of communion should not however be seen through the lens of the Reformation, as something merely mechanical. In her classic study on the emergence of the Creeds, Frances Young makes the point that the physical understanding of salvation and its instrument, the Eucharist, was forged in the crucible of the conflict with Gnostic doctrines that denied the goodness of creation.

Necessarily this implies the resurrection of the body, the restoration of the whole person by the creative power of God ... The credal doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh affirms that the bodily existence of humanity is to be healed and restored along with its moral and spiritual being, and the eucharist, for Irenaeus a joyful sacrifice of thanksgiving offering back to God the good things of this creation, then becomes spiritual food, or as Ignatius put it, a kind of 'drug' or 'medicine' that imparts immortality to those who participate.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Overview***

Before studying three images of the efficacy of the Eucharist in greater depth, it may be useful to give an overview of the many images. We have already seen the quotation from John Chrysostom above:

All are nourished by the same Body....When you see [the Body of Christ] lying on the altar, say to yourself, "Because of this Body I am no longer earth and ash, no longer a prisoner, but free. Because of this Body I hope for heaven, and I hope to receive the good things that are in heaven, immortal life, the lot of the angels, familiar conversation with Christ.

Homilies on Corinthians 8

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<sup>12</sup> Cp. Paul Bradshaw: *Early Christian Worship*, London 1996, pp. 40-43

<sup>13</sup> Cp. Wallraff, *op. cit.*, p.96. See too Owen Chadwick Chadwick: *The Reformation*. London 1988, pp 23-24: 'Since the darkest ages peasants had consumed the dust from saints' tombs or used the Host as an amulet or collected pretended relics or believed incredible and unedifying miracles or substituted the Virgin or a patron saint for the Savior. In 1500 they were ardently doing these things.'

<sup>14</sup> Frances Young: *The Making of the Creeds*, London 2002, p. 85

This passage introduces a number of motifs that are present in many of the Fathers' writings. First is the image of **nourishment**, which we shall examine below. Then comes the **rescue from corruption** ('earth and ash'); then a motif of **liberation**. The ability to hope may seem more like the subjective answer to the experience of salvation, but Chrysostom's sense seems to be that the Eucharist itself bestows or restores the ability to hope which would otherwise be lost. The motif of **immortality** is developed more fully in many other passages, some of which we have seen above.

In a remarkable passage involving a typology of exodus and the Eucharist, Cyril of Alexandria develops the images of **purification** and **aversion**.

You must consider your senses as the door to a house. Through the senses all images of things enter into the heart, and, through the senses, the innumerable multitude of lusts pour into it. The Prophet Joel calls the senses windows, saying: "They shall enter in at our windows like a thief" (Jl. 2:9), because these windows have not been marked with the precious blood of Christ. Moreover, the Law commanded that, after the slaughter (of the lamb), the Israelites were to smear the doorposts and the lintels of their houses with its blood, showing by this that the precious blood of Christ protects our own earthly dwelling-place, which is to say, our body, and that the death brought about by the transgression is repelled through our enjoyment of the partaking of life (that is, of life-giving Communion). Further, through our sealing (with the blood of Christ) we distance from ourselves the destroyer.

Cyril (I) of Alexandria (b. 376, d. 444)

Glaphyra in Exodum 2.2, PG 69, 428B.

Clement distinguishes a twofold process, distinguishing between the blood of the body and the spiritual blood, which give rise to **rescue from corruption** and **anointing**:

And the blood of the Lord is twofold. For there is the blood of His flesh, by which we are redeemed from corruption; and the spiritual, that by which we are anointed. And to drink the blood of Jesus, is to become partaker of the Lord's immortality; the Spirit being the energetic principle of the Word, as blood is of flesh. Accordingly, as wine is blended with water, so is the Spirit with man. And the one, the mixture of wine and water, nourishes to faith; while the other, the Spirit, conducts to immortality. And the mixture of both—of the water and of the Word—is called Eucharist, renowned and glorious grace; and they who by faith partake of it are sanctified both in body and soul.

Clement of Alexandria (b. ca 150, d. 211-216)

The Instructor of the Children". [2,2,19,4]

Here, the Eucharist effects **immortality** and **sanctification**.

John Chrysostom brings an image of **renewal**, referring to the 'image of God' in which humanity was created (Gen. 1: 26)

Let us then return from that Table like lions breathing fire, having become fearsome to the devil, thinking about our Head (Christ) and the love He has shown for us.... This blood causes the image of our King to be fresh within us, it produces unspeakable beauty, and, watering and nourishing our soul frequently, it does not permit its nobility to waste away....

He too ascribes a power of **aversion** to the blood, which is at the same time **purifying**:

This blood, worthily received, drives away demons and keeps them far from us, while it calls to us the angels and the Master of angels. For wherever they see the Master's blood, devils flee and angels run to gather together....

This blood is the salvation of our souls. By it the soul is washed, is made beautiful, and is inflamed; and it causes our intellect to be brighter than fire and makes the soul gleam more than gold....

A further image is **enrobing**:

Those who partake of this blood stand with the angels and the powers that are above, clothed in the kingly robe itself, armed with spiritual weapons. But I have not yet said anything great by this: for they are clothed even with the King Himself.

All from *On John* 46.3–4 <sup>15</sup>

John Chrysostom relates a vision which was reported to him first-hand, which introduces the image of **post-mortem protection**:

Moreover another person told me—not having heard it from someone else, but having himself been deemed worthy to both see and hear it—with regard to those who are about to depart this life, that if they happen to partake of the Mysteries, with a pure conscience, when they are about to breathe their last, angels keep guard over them because of what they have just received, and bear them hence (to heaven)

*De Sacerdotio* 6.4, SC 272, 318; NPNF (V1-09), 76.

It is remarkable that the Fathers can ascribe to the Eucharist the power of **forgiveness of sins**, and **purification**, functions which modern praxis would distribute between penance and baptism. Clement of Rome exhorts his flock:

Now we have received the precious body and the precious blood of Christ, let us give thanks to Him who has thought us worthy to partake of these His holy mysteries; and let us beseech Him that it may not be to us for condemnation, but for salvation, to the advantage of soul and body, to the preservation of piety, to the remission of sins, and to the life of the world to come.

Clement of Rome (dates unknown; bishop of Rome ca 90-99)

Apostolic Constitutions, Book 8, ch. 14 <sup>16</sup>

Cyril brings the aspect of **purification**:

The precious blood of Christ not only frees us from every corruption, but it also cleanses us from every impurity lying hidden within us, and it does not allow us to grow cold on account of sloth, but rather makes us fervent in the Spirit.”

*De Adoratione et Cultu in Spiritu et Veritate* 17

Justin Martyr develops a full parallelism between the Incarnation, by which the divine nature of the Word united with a human nature in Jesus, and the transformation of the elements. These in turn lead to the **transformation** of our bodies:

For we do not receive these things as common bread or common drink; but as Jesus Christ our Savior being incarnate by God's Word took flesh and blood

<sup>15</sup> PG 59, 260–262; NPNF (V1-14), 164–165.

<sup>16</sup> SC 336, 210; ANF (07), 491

for our salvation, so also we have been taught that the food consecrated by the Word of prayer which comes from him, from which our flesh and blood are nourished by transformation, is the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus.  
First Apology, Ch. 66

Here we see a three-step process: God transforms the ‘flesh’ into Godself; the word of the incarnate Lord has the power to transform the elements; these in turn nourish and transform our human nature. The Eucharist is a part of the economy of salvation.

This brief survey of images, which could be added to, demonstrates the living fullness of the Fathers’ writings.

## **Holy Food**

The first image we shall look at in more detail is the image of Holy Food. The cultic meal is one of the original components of human religiousness. As Bradshaw says, ‘sacred meals, expressive of the human relationship to the divine, form a part of the ritual practice of many religions.’<sup>17</sup> Their significance varied and developed over time. It would go beyond the bounds of this chapter to trace this development in detail. For this context, it is important to note that in the New Testament period, sacramental meals were consumed in the mystery religions, as Angus points out:

The sacramental meal of the Mysteries had almost the vogue in popular religion which the Eucharist enjoys today in Christian circles, and it offered the same wide field of speculation as to its blessings and modes of operation.<sup>18</sup>

The immediate background to the ritual meal of the Christian Community was Jewish religious life. In the communion sacrifices of the Hebrew Bible,

part of what was offered was returned to those who had offered it to be eaten by them. In effect, they shared a sacred meal with God as a sign of their acceptance by him through the sacrificial act.<sup>19</sup>

The practice of holding a ritual meal had become an ever-more important part of Jewish religious life. The meal came to be seen as a token of the end-time, when all the elect would be invited to sit down with God at the great feast.<sup>20</sup> It was this tradition that Jesus developed and scandalously subverted in his own practice of sharing table-fellowship with outcasts, the ritually impure of the Jewish world,<sup>21</sup> and developed in his teaching:

Jesus in his parables pictured God’s reign as a feast (Matt. 8:11 = Luke 13: 29; Matt 22: 1-15; 25: 1-13; Luke 14: 16-24) where his own followers would join him at his table (Matt. 26: 29) ...

Elements of the Jewish meal-ritual are clearly contained in I Corinthians 11: 24 f. Bradshaw sees the meal Paul describes in the tradition of the eschatological meal:

<sup>17</sup> Early Christian Worship *Op. cit.*, p 38

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Angus: The Religious Quests of the Graeco-Roman World: A Study in the Historical Background of Early Christianity. New York, 1967, p. 167

<sup>19</sup> *ibid* p. 167

<sup>20</sup> cp. Isaiah 25: 6-9

<sup>21</sup> cp. Dennis Eric Nineham: Saint Mark (Penguin New Testament Commentaries), London 1992, pp. 94-5

The whole meal event was thus both a prophetic symbol of the future and also a means of entering into that future in the present.<sup>22</sup>

However, even if it had been dominant in New Testament times, the understanding of the meal as an eschatological event foreshadowing the fellowship with God in the end-time rapidly faded away along with the practice of eating a full meal in common (*Sättigungsmahl*). It is perhaps straining the point to make too clear a separation between Eucharist and community meal. As Rowland points out, this meal had been a celebration of the Christian community, but also a “cultic demonstration of communion with the Saviour”.<sup>23</sup>

The *Didache* (provenance probably early 2<sup>nd</sup> century) sees the Eucharist as “spiritual food and drink” which gives “eternal life” (10, 3). The duality of bodily and spiritual nourishment implicit in John 6 is the background here. Although the opposition of bodily food and spiritual nourishment seems at first to be crudely dualistic, closer examination shows that in fact an underlying monism is restored. Already in John 6, and all the more in some of the passages we shall examine, it is clear that the means of spiritual nourishment is the transformed bread. In John 6 Jesus repels most of his (Jewish) followers by drawing this thought to its conclusion: ‘Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”’ (John 6: 53). In other words, salvation, spiritual nourishment, come not from a denial of the physical realm, but from accepting the physical food that is bearer of spiritual power. As Geoffrey Wainwright says:

the ‘eating of the bread’ and the ‘drinking of the cup’ locate the divine work of salvation celebrated in the Eucharist firmly amid the *material creation* and *embodied humanity*.<sup>24</sup>

Thus we see not Gnostic dualism and denial of the flesh, but what Frances Young calls ‘practical dualism’.<sup>25</sup> We have to recognise that in its present state, the world is alienated from its origin and from that which could restore it. Nevertheless, the world contains what can be made the means of restoration.

Justin makes a distinction between “common bread and drink” and “food consecrated by the Word of prayer which comes from him from which our flesh and blood are nourished by transformation.”(see full quotation above). Here again we see the communication of qualities: the power that changes the elements, changes us too, in nourishing us.

Ignatius typically contrasts the perishable bread and the elements of the eucharist:

I have no taste for the food that perishes nor for the pleasures of this life. I want the Bread of God which is the Flesh of Christ, who was the seed of David; and for drink I desire His Blood which is love that cannot be destroyed.

Letter to the Romans, paragraph 7, circa 80-110 A.D.

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<sup>22</sup> Early Christian Worship, *Op. cit.*, p. 40

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Rowland.: Christian Origins—From Messianic Movement to Christian Religion, London, 1985, p. 242

<sup>24</sup> In Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason and Hugh Pyper (Editors): The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought, Oxford 2000, Article on Eucharist, p. 216

<sup>25</sup> Young, The Making of the Creeds *op. cit.*, p. 96

Again, the paradoxical mixing of realms is striking – a radical rejection of the world leads Ignatius not to ascetic fasting but to seek a different kind of nourishment. In fact in another letter he criticizes heretics who

abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which that Father, in his goodness, raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes  
Letter to the Smyrnaeans 6:2-7:1

It is not possible to establish exactly whom Ignatius has in mind here. For our argument it is not important; what is clear is that Ignatius sees an absolute identification between bodily communion and salvation.

Tertullian uses typically stark imagery to bring this thought:

The flesh feeds on THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST, so that the SOUL TOO may fatten on God.  
Tertullian (b. ca 160; d. ca 225)

Resurrection of the Dead 8:3

Clement of Alexandria too uses starkly realistic imagery in his description of the condescension of the Word:

The Word is everything to a child: both Father and Mother, both Instructor and Nurse. 'Eat My Flesh,' He says, 'and drink My Blood.' The Lord supplies us with these intimate nutrients. He delivers over His Flesh, and pours out His Blood; and nothing is lacking for the growth of His children. O incredible mystery!  
The Instructor of the Children [1,6,41,3]

The condescension of Christ makes possible his adaptation to the needs of those he saves. Typically for Clement's thought, this happens not for rescue from corruption but for a positive end, for 'growth'.

What runs through these various passages with their diverse imagery is a conception of a 'hunger' and a 'nourishment' which are objectively real, even if they are not physical. It is anachronistic to understand these terms as metaphors for purely inward, subjective processes. Tertullian's 'fattening' of the soul; Clement's 'intimate nutrients' effect an objective change. Just as eating brings about measurable, physical changes in a human being, so receiving the Eucharist satisfies a real need.

If we attempt to generalise, a picture of this need emerges. We have already established that any onesided, ascetic desire simply to escape the body is held in check – perhaps in part by the very praxis of bodily communion. Earthly existence is affirmed, whilst being acknowledged as being in a provisional state. The soul is not nourished by the kind of food that Adam had to work for 'by the sweat of your brow' (Gen. 3: 19). This reference sets the scene for the background of the image of feeding in the Old Testament, which is full of images of the food that was lost in paradise and will be regained in the time to come. The promise of the land 'running with milk and honey' (eg Exodus 3: 17) is not just an comment on soil-fertility in the Mediterranean littoral; it has an eschatological overtone, which becomes explicit in the expectation of the messianic meal in the end-time.

All of this means that the Fathers experienced the Eucharist as a foretaste of the recreation of humanity that they confidently expected in the end-time. Bread and wine

are the very earthly vehicles for the nourishment which does not deny the earth and the embodied state, but completes it.

In a lyrical passage contrasting the Christian Eucharist with the meals of the pagan temples, Firmicus Maternus attributes to this ‘food’ a series of qualities: [check out for an Eng. Translation] ‘It is another food, which bestows Salvation and life’ – images with which we are already familiar. When he continues: ‘[it is] another food, which commends man to the highest God, and reconciles him to Him,’ he ascribes central images from soteriology to the Eucharist, in terms which we would expect to be used of the Incarnation, or of the offering of the Mass as sacrifice. Here, however, the consumption of the food itself is seen as effecting atonement, and as putting human beings right with God. Taken one-sidedly, this could seem the extreme of justification by works.

He continues speaking of this food ‘which enlivens those grown weary, and calls back those who have lost their way’. This is an interesting moment. The “food” of the Eucharist now appears to have an effect on the moral makeup of those that consume it. In other words, speaking with Pelagius, it strengthens the resolve of those who would and may follow the right path. Firmicus continues: the food gives ‘those who are dying the signs of eternal immortality.’ Subjective and objective efficacy dissolve into one. As well as effecting salvation, the Eucharist is a comfort to those dying as a symbol of eternal immortality.

Later, the meal functions as a “call” to all: ‘Christ is calling you back to the light with his meal.’ Now the call, which of course depends on the response of those called, translates us from a realm of darkness to one of light, from the fallen world to a new paradise: ‘and animates the parts which have become gangrenous through the strong poison, and the limbs which have grown stiff.’<sup>26</sup>

We shall examine these images more fully when we turn to the image of Eucharist as medicine. Here they serve to demonstrate the experience of the practical dualism: the consequences of the Fall are not just internal, or ‘spiritual’ transactions between humanity and God; they manifest in the extremes of gangrenous and sclerotic limbs.

Cyril of Alexandria too knows the fortifying of the inner life through the food received in the Eucharist.

We have been instructed in these matters and filled with an unshakable faith, that that which seems to be bread, is not bread, though it tastes like it, but the Body of Christ, and that which seems to be wine, is not wine, though it too tastes as such, but the Blood of Christ . . . draw inner strength by receiving this bread as spiritual food and your soul will rejoice.

Catecheses, 22, 9; Myst. 4

Theodore of Mopsuestia makes the same point even more directly:

At first [the offering] is laid upon the altar as mere bread, and wine mixed with water; but by the coming of the Holy Spirit it is transformed into the Body and the Blood, and thus it is changed into the power of a spiritual and immortal nourishment.

(b. ca 350; d. ca 428)

Catechetical Homilies 16

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<sup>26</sup> All quotes from ‘Concerning the errors of heathen religion’, quoted in Kraft [REF???], 293\*

Ambrose brings another motif in his treatise *On the Mysteries*. In a classic instance of the Fathers' allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs, he identifies the church with the beloved of the song:

Christ, then, feeds His Church with these sacraments, by means of which the substance of the soul is strengthened, and seeing the continual progress of her grace, He rightly says to her: "How comely are thy breasts, my sister, my spouse, how comely they are made by wine, and the smell of thy garments is above all spices. A dropping honeycomb are thy lips, my spouse, honey and milk are under thy tongue, and the smell of thy garments is as the smell of Lebanon. A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed."

Ambrose of Milan (b. ca 338; d. 397)

Cant. iv. 10 ff. B

It is striking that Christ must first nourish the church—she, as a bodily organism needs nourishment. Strengthened by this, she can be generous:

Wherefore, too, the Church, beholding so great grace, exhorts her sons and her friends to come together to the sacraments, saying: "Eat, my friends, and drink and be inebriated, my brother."

Cant. v. 1.

What she offers to eat is nothing other than Christ himself:

What we eat and what we drink the Holy Spirit has elsewhere made plain by the prophet, saying, "Taste and see that the Lord is good, blessed is the man that hopeth in Him." Ps. xxxiv. [xxxiii.]. In that sacrament is Christ, because it is the Body of Christ, it is therefore not bodily food but spiritual. ... Lastly, that food strengthens our heart, and that drink "maketh glad the heart of man," Ps. civ. [ciii.] as the prophet has recorded.

The intensity of such passages, which could be amplified by many more, witnesses to the Fathers' experience of the Eucharist as an encounter with their Saviour. Bradshaw makes clear his regret at the passing of the Eucharist as a purely eschatological meal, a foretaste of the end-time.<sup>27</sup> Jürgen Moltmann is similarly critical. Starting in *Theology of Hope*, Moltmann develops a strong critique of the Church as liturgical community, which, he claims, substitutes for the 'apocalyptic of the promised, as yet unrealised lordship of Christ' the 'cultic presence of his eternal, heavenly lordship'<sup>28</sup> and leads to the theological neglect of the Cross. This 'present eschatology' deprives history of its eschatological direction.

A sacramental, salvation historical future hope replaces the earthly-historical hope: the church penetrates the world continually with heavenly truth, heavenly life-forces and heavenly salvation.<sup>29</sup>

He brings this into connection with Paul's criticism of the congregation in Corinth, which he summarises as the *eschatologia crucis*. The exaggerated enthusiasm of the Corinthians had to be restrained by the 'not yet' of the *parousia*. Their tendency to neglect the reality of earthly existence had to be counterbalanced by the reminder of the cross.

<sup>27</sup> Cp. Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship*, pp. 96 ff

<sup>28</sup> Jürgen Moltmann: *Theologie der Hoffnung: Untersuchungen zur Begründung und zu den Konsequenzen einer christlichen Eschatologie* (Gütersloh, Germany: Chr. Kaiser 1997), III §4 p. 143

<sup>29</sup> *ibid* III § 4 p. 144

Moltmann subsumes another central strand in Paul's thinking, which reminds his readers of the intense experience of Christ as present reality, as in Rom. 6:4 and numerous parallels into his eschatological model.

The baptised have died with Christ ... but they have not already risen with him and gone to heaven in a cultic perfect tense.<sup>30</sup>

However, Paul does not oppose sacramental union and eschatological hope, but rather sees the experience in worship as that which stimulates hope by creating awareness of the provisional character of our present existence, as in Col. 3: 1-4: the believers have indeed been 'raised with Christ' in baptism; this should make them 'set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.' Paul seems here to be more dialectical than Moltmann is prepared to be: the believers are *both* raised with Christ *and* their lives are hidden with God. Moltmann can accept 'buried with Christ' but not 'raised with him'. This weakness is displayed too in Moltmann's discussion of the liturgy in *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*. Here the doctrine of the real presence is dissolved into an eschatological anticipation of Christ's coming.<sup>31</sup>

Both these scholars imply that the Fathers are using figurative language to make a theological case – much as they would themselves. But the Fathers are speaking from experience: far from neglecting the future realisation, they concentrate on what has been inaugurated as present reality. They are convinced that through the Resurrection, Christ has attained incorruptibility. This incorruptibility is transmitted to those who communicate. The thesis is made most concrete! Or is it the other way round? Has their experience of the nourishment at least strengthened their conviction concerning the divinization of humanity that occurred through the Incarnation and Resurrection? That such a thought is not absurd is demonstrated by Athanasius' appeal to the experience of worship in the later phase of the Arian controversy.<sup>32</sup>

### ***Medicine of immortality***

The fact that we are well used to using physical nourishment as a metaphor for spiritual nourishment can blind us to the literal way in which the Fathers use those images. Medicine is less used as a metaphor, so this image confronts us with the physicality of the efficacy in a starker way.

The one explicit use of the phrase 'medicine of immortality', *φάρμακον ἀθανασίας* comes in Ignatius' letter to the Ephesians 20.2, where he speaks of the congregation coming together

in common through grace, individually, in one faith, and in Jesus Christ, who was of the seed of David according to the flesh, being both the Son of man and the Son of God, ... breaking one and the same bread, which is the medicine of immortality, and the antidote to prevent us from dying, but [which causes] that we should live for ever in Jesus Christ.

There is a precursor to this image in Ignatius' use of the image of Christ as a doctor in chapter 7 of the letter to the Ephesians:

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid* III § 4 p. 146

<sup>31</sup> Jürgen Moltmann: *The Church in the Power of the Holy Spirit – a contribution to messianic Ecclesiology*, tr. Margaret Kohl, London: SCM Press, 1992, pp. 253-254

<sup>32</sup> see Henry Chadwick: *The Early Church*, London, 1987, pp. 147-8

There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; God existing in flesh; true life in death; both of Mary and of God; first passible and then impassible.

Here again we see the continuity between Christology and the theology of the Eucharist. The Soteriological concept of Christ as Healer—implicit already in the Hebrew name Jeshua, Jesus, and a prominent feature of the synoptic Gospels—is developed to his being the physician (ιατρος). What could be more natural than to see the Eucharist as the continuing ‘treatment’. Unlike an ordinary doctor, Christ does not dispense medicine extraneous to himself: the means of his healing are the Eucharistic elements, that is to say, his own body and blood.<sup>33</sup>

Lothar Wehr makes it clear that Ignatius’ theology of the Eucharist is to be seen in the context of the rest of his theology, whose most important elements for Wehr are ‘the true understanding of the person of Jesus Christ, Ignatius’ longing for martyrdom, and the unity of the church.’<sup>34</sup> He brings these aspects partly to justify his programme of removing from Ignatius’ theology any taint of what he sees as magic. We shall see how once again the division introduced by a modern reader is anachronistic when applied to a writer in the ancient world.

Ambrose too develops the parallel between Christ the healer in his earthly ministry and the medicine available in the Eucharist:

To Him, therefore, let all come who would be made whole. Let them receive the medicine which He hath brought down from His Father and made in heaven, preparing it of the juices of those celestial fruits that wither not. This is of no earthly growth, for nature nowhere possesses this compound. Of wondrous purpose took He our flesh, to the end that He might show that the law of the flesh had been subjected to the law of the mind. He was incarnate, that He, the Teacher of men, might overcome as man.

This medicine Peter beheld, and left His nets, that is to say, the instruments and security of gain, renouncing the lust of the flesh as a leaky ship, that receives the bilge, as it were, of multitudinous passions. Truly a mighty remedy, that not only removed the scar of an old wound, but even cut the root and source of passion. O Faith, richer than all treasure-houses; O excellent remedy, healing our wounds and sins!

Exposition of the Christian Faith, Book 2, XI § 90 and 92

In his treatise Concerning Widows, Ambrose points to this healing power of Christ as the ultimate source of healing and comfort for those who take on a Christian ministry:

But let us return to the point, and not, while we are grieving over the wounds of our sins, leave the physician, and whilst ministering to the sores of others, let our own go on increasing. The Physician is then here asked for. ... And so now He comes, when called upon, to Peter’s mother-in-law. “And He stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she arose and ministered unto them.” S. Luke iv. 38. As He is worthy of being remembered, so, too, is He worthy of being longed for, worthy, too, of love, for His condescension to every single matter which affects men, and His marvellous acts. He disdains not to visit widows, and to enter the narrow rooms of a poor

<sup>33</sup> Cp. Owen F. Cummings: Eucharistic Doctors ??? is this really true?: A Theological History, London ??? 2005, p. 16

<sup>34</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 37\*

cottage. As God He commands, as man He visits.  
Concerning Widows, Ch. 10 § 60

The connection between the Crucifixion and healing is made potently in this passage, which explores the typology of the brazen serpent raised up by Moses as an antidote to the snake-bites that were killing the Israelites in the desert (Numbers 21). First Ambrose presents the brazen serpent as a means of combating the wiles of the devil:

And well did the Lord ordain that by the lifting up of the brazen serpent the wounds of those who were bitten should be healed; for the brazen serpent is a type of the Cross; for although in His flesh Christ was lifted up, yet in Him was the Apostle crucified to the world and the world to him; for he says: "The world hath been crucified unto me, and I unto the world." "So the world was crucified in its allurements, and therefore not a real but a brazen serpent was hanged; because the Lord took on Him the likeness of a sinner, in the truth, indeed, of His Body, but without the truth of sin, that imitating a serpent through the deceitful appearance of human weakness, having laid aside the slough of the flesh, He might destroy the cunning of the true serpent. And therefore in the Cross of the Lord, which came to man's help in avenging temptation, I, who accept the medicine of the Trinity, recognize in the wicked the offence against the Trinity.

On the Holy Spirit Book III Chapter 8

In another place, the connection between the cross and healing becomes even more explicit:

He cast down his rod and it became a serpent which devoured the serpents of Egypt; this signifying that the Word should become Flesh to destroy the poison of the dread serpent by the forgiveness and pardon of sins. For the rod stands for the Word that is true—royal—filled with power—and glorious in ruling. The rod became a serpent; so He Who was the Son of God begotten of the Father became the Son of man born of a woman, and lifted, like the serpent, on the cross, poured His healing medicine on the wounds of man. Wherefore the Lord Himself says: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up."

Three Books on the Duties of the Clergy, Book 2, XV, 94

We already referred to Firmicus Maternus, who sees the Eucharist as an antidote to poison, which

animates the parts which have become gangrenous through the strong poison, and the limbs which have grown stiff.

Along with the graphic imagery of the effects, which go right into the constitution, the image of poison is a development of the medical imagery as the idea of poison places the cause of our illness yet further outside of us. Even today, people are aware that the conduct of their life may have a bearing on their susceptibility to illness. However, if I have been poisoned, then I am indeed a victim and can only hope that someone has an antidote.

The language of poison and antidote is developed by Gregory of Nyssa to striking effect, using the parallelism we have noted above between the Incarnation and the changing of the elements in the Eucharist. The poison referred to seems to be the apple which Eve ate in paradise. I quote at length from the passage as it displays a mature development of the theme. Gregory is at pains to develop a theory of the

Eucharist out of the current scientific thinking on nourishment. He includes a long excursus (omitted below) on the capacity of the body to transform the extraneous elements taken in in nourishment into its own proper form.

For as they who owing to some act of treachery have taken poison, allay its deadly influence by means of some other drug (for it is necessary that the antidote should enter the human vitals in the same way as the deadly poison, in order to secure, through them, that the effect of the remedy may be distributed through the entire system), in like manner we, who have tasted the solvent of our nature necessarily need something that may combine what has been so dissolved, so that such an antidote entering within us may, by its own counter-influence, undo the mischief introduced into the body by the poison. What, then, is this remedy to be? Nothing else than that very Body which has been shown to be superior to death, and has been the First-fruits of our life. For, in the manner that, as the Apostle says (1 Cor. v. 6) a little leaven assimilates to itself the whole lump, so in like manner that body to which immortality has been given it by God, when it is in ours, translates and transmutes the whole into itself. For as by the admixture of a poisonous liquid with a wholesome one the whole drouth is deprived of its deadly effect, so too the immortal Body, by being within that which receives it, changes the whole to its own nature. Yet in no other way can anything enter within the body but by being transfused through the vitals by eating and drinking. It is, therefore, incumbent on the body to admit this life-producing power in the one way that its constitution makes possible. And since that Body only which was the receptacle of the Deity received this grace of immortality, and since it has been shown that in no other way was it possible for our body to become immortal, but by participating in incorruption through its fellowship with that immortal Body, it will be necessary to consider how it was possible that that one Body, being for ever portioned to so many myriads of the faithful throughout the whole world, enters through that portion, whole into each individual, and yet remains whole in itself ... If the subsistence of every body depends on nourishment, and this is eating and drinking, and in the case of our eating there is bread and in the case of our drinking water sweetened with wine, and if, as was explained at the beginning, the Word of God, Who is both God and the Word, coalesced with man's nature, and when He came in a body such as ours did not innovate on man's physical constitution so as to make it other than it was, but secured continuance for His own body by the customary and proper means, and controlled its subsistence by meat and drink, the former of which was bread,—just, then, as in the case of ourselves, as has been repeatedly said already, if a person sees bread he also, in a kind of way, looks on a human body, for by the bread being within it the bread becomes it, so also, in that other case, the body into which God entered, by partaking of the nourishment of bread, was, in a certain measure, the same with it; that nourishment, as we have said, changing itself into the nature of the body. For that which is peculiar to all flesh is acknowledged also in the case of that flesh, namely, that that Body too was maintained by bread; which Body also by the indwelling of God the Word was transmuted to the dignity of Godhead. Rightly, then, do we believe that now also the bread which is consecrated by the Word of God is changed into the Body of God the Word. For that Body was once, by implication, bread, but has been consecrated by the inhabitation of the Word that tabernacled in the

flesh. Therefore, from the same cause as that by which the bread that was transformed in that Body was changed to a Divine potency, a similar result takes place now. ... Seeing, too, that all flesh is nourished by what is moist (for without this combination our earthly part would not continue to live), just as we support by food which is firm and solid the solid part of our body, in like manner we supplement the moist part from the kindred element; and this, when within us, by its faculty of being transmitted, is changed to blood, and especially if through the wine it receives the faculty of being transmuted into heat. Since, then, that God-containing flesh partook for its substance and support of this particular nourishment also, and since the God who was manifested infused Himself into perishable humanity for this purpose, viz. that by this communion with Deity mankind might at the same time be deified, for this end it is that, by dispensation of His grace, He disseminates Himself in every believer through that flesh, whose substance comes from bread and wine, blending Himself with the bodies of believers, to secure that, by this union with the immortal, man, too, may be a sharer in incorruption. He gives these gifts by virtue of the benediction through which He transelements

Gregory of Nyssa (b. ca 335; d. after 390)

The Great Catechism, Chapter 37

In a passage from his commentary on John, Cyril makes the efficacy of the Eucharist graphic and in a way perhaps challenging for modern readers, dependent on the frequency of communion:

Receive Holy Communion believing that it liberates us not only from death, but also from every illness. And this is because, when Christ dwells within us through frequent Communion, He pacifies and calms the fierce war of the flesh, ignites piety toward God, and deadens the passions.

In Joannis Evangelium 4.2

Here, Cyril moves from imagery of medicine to what we might call a moral tonic: the Eucharist brings harmony into the embattled soul, toning down the negative aspects of the soul-life and encouraging the positive. This paradoxical mixture of objective and subjective elements points up the fact that for Cyril there is no question of the communion being a substitute for the 'piety' of the believer; nevertheless, it can incline the soul towards such piety.

Samuel Angus casts light on the background to the medical imagery with an examination of the concepts of healing in the ancient world:

Religion and Healing were closely associated in the Graeco-Roman world. *Soteria* connoted to both Pagans and Christians more than its special meaning to us; it connoted health of body and of soul, for neither Christians nor Pagans distinguished rigidly between physical ills of body and maladies of soul. The philosopher, the Christian teacher, and the medical practitioner were all *bealers*. The word *soteria* meant *safety, health* in the fullest human sense, and alleviation of pain... Medical language was used in moral teaching and preaching, religious language in the work of medicine. Vices were diseases in the eyes of Christian teachers and Stoic and Platonic moralists.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The Religious Quests, *op. cit.*, p. 414

He quotes Clement of Alexandria who makes the link between the moral component of medical healing and the medical aspect of spiritual healing:

Even as the physician secures health for those who co-operate with him to that end, so does God secure eternal salvation for those who co-operate with Him for knowledge and good behaviour.  
Strom. VII 7.48 cited in Angus p. 37

As Angus points out,

Pagans and Christians alike observed no strict boundary-lines between the physical and the hyper-physical, between the symbol and the resultant or concomitant experience. Neither their science nor their philosophy necessitated a strict delimitation.<sup>36</sup>

φάρμακον ἀθανασίας was an existing concept in the ancient world.

ἀθανασία bzw. φάρμακον ἀθανασίας is a terminus technicus for a particular medicine, which was used to treat various illnesses. Diodorus Siculus ... reports in his universal history, ... the Egyptian doctors ascribed it to Isis. She used it to awaken her dead son, Horus, from the dead, and to bestow immortality on him.<sup>37</sup>

Wehr shows that the concept was widespread in antiquity and even into the Middle Ages. Thus Ignatius was drawing on an existing concept. Wehr states that his innovation was to apply it to a cultic meal. However, he gives examples that show that it was not in fact such a great innovation. The mystery-religions knew meals that bestowed immortality. There is a conversion story of 'Joseph and Aseneth' which combines the concepts of 'bread of life' and 'cup of immortality'<sup>38</sup>. We have already examined the images around a meal that bestows immortal life.

An inevitable limitation of this presentation is that by separating the images in order to deal with them systematically, we give the appearance of alternatives where in fact they are parts of an organic whole. It is easy to see how the concept of food that bestows immortality might glide over into the concept of medicine; they are in fact two aspects of the same thing. The modern attention to diet and sometimes questionable supplements shows that even today, in regard to certain substances it is largely a question of one's inner attitude, whether they are to be seen as food or medicine.

However, every image reveals another aspect of the whole. The image of food is positive and general. The Eucharist nourishes and strengthens Christians and maintains an ongoing relationship with Christ. The image of medicine on the other hand brings associations of illness, that is to say of something negative and specific which needs to be healed. Food is a question of the conduct of life, a hygienic question in the true sense, whereas medicine is a therapeutic question.

In an important article on the Orthodox understanding of medicine, Philip LeMasters demonstrates that in this regard at least, the Orthodox churches have a greater claim to be the successors of the Fathers:

Jeffrey P. Carpenter notes that Eastern Orthodoxy does not view salvation as the equivalent of a disembodied or purely spiritual life; instead, it teaches that "the problem of sickness and death and Christ's victory over death is at the

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*, pp. 132-3

<sup>37</sup> Wehr *op. cit.*, p. 107\*

<sup>38</sup> Wehr *op. cit.*, p. 108

centre of what we say about salvation.”<sup>39</sup> In clear distinction from the western forensic theory of substitutionary atonement proposed, for example, by St Anselm, the Christian East prefers a medical analogy of salvation that understands human beings as sickly, weak creatures in need of genuine healing from the corrupting consequences of sin—not fundamentally as violators of a law who need someone to appease God’s wrath on their behalf. ‘In the East, the sin of Adam is primarily understood not as disobedience to the Law but as a willful disruption of the communion between God and man. As a result, a distortion of man’s whole being, body and soul, entered in, as man is only healthy when rightly related to God.’<sup>40</sup> St Ignatius of Antioch (c.35-c.107) referred to the Holy Eucharist as ‘the medicine of immortality, and the sovereign remedy by which we escape death and live in Jesus Christ for ever more.’ The church ministers to the healing of the whole person in the holy mysteries: baptism, chrismation, confession, holy matrimony, holy orders, and holy unction all seek the healing of our corrupt nature in body, soul, and spirit.<sup>41</sup>

In contrast to the concentration on sin as the result of personal disobedience, which ultimately condemns human beings to despair, as only obedience, only moral efforts could put things right, this conception gives hope: we all experience the limitations of our creaturely nature, and know that we need support in our efforts.

In a passage contrasting the specific remedies of ancient medicine with the thoroughgoing constitutional change effected by Christ, Athanasius exemplifies this attitude:

Asclepius was deified among them, because he practised medicine and found out herbs for bodies that were sick; not forming them himself out of the earth, but discovering them by science drawn from nature. But what is this to what was done by the Saviour, in that, instead of healing a wound, He modified a man’s original nature, and restored the body whole.

*De Incarnatione*, Chapter 49, 2

The medical terminology of Ignatius became common theological currency; thus in his *Confessions*, Augustine refers to the all the sacraments as medicines:

With what strong and bitter regret was I indignant at the Manicheans! Yet I also pitied them; for they were ignorant of those sacraments, those medicines and raved insanely against the cure that might have made them sane!

Book IX Ch. 4, 8

Although it is outside the remit of this chapter, it is perhaps interesting to note a more recent revival of aspects of this theology. In a fascinating article in *Encounter*, Jeremy Ayers shows that John Wesley, the father of the Methodist Church, saw religion as

θεραπεία ψυχής, God’s method of healing a soul which is *thus diseased*.

Hereby, the great Physician of souls applies medicine to heal *this sickness*; to restore human nature, totally corrupted in all its faculties.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Jeffrey P. Carpenter: *An Orthodox Perspective on Illness and Healing*, The Word 46 (2002): 4 (quoted in Philip LeMasters (see below), p. 7)

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*

<sup>41</sup> Philip LeMasters: *The Practice of Medicine as Theosis*. In *Theology Today*, July 2004, p. 1

<sup>42</sup> John Ayers: *John Wesley’s therapeutic Understanding of Salvation*. *Encounter*, Vol. 63, Number 3, Summer 2002, Indianapolis, p. 273

## ***Incorporation/participation***

A third grouping of images that we encounter in the writings of the Fathers concerns participation. We saw above (p. 2) that the liturgy as a whole can be seen as participation in the triune life of God.

We shall examine two theologians in more depth, both of whom see *incorporation* and *participation* effected by the Eucharist as the fulfilment of salvation.

In a fascinating article, Julie Canlis gives an account of Irenaeus' theology from the viewpoint of participation.<sup>43</sup> Irenaeus' thought was forged in the struggle with Gnosticism. His concern was more than speculative: he saw the controversy as a struggle for the life of human beings.

Irenaeus was combating not simply false knowledge with true knowledge, but rather knowledge with worship, speculation with eucharist ... In Irenaeus' eyes, [the] blasphemy [of the Gnostics] amounted to homicide, for it *eliminated the possibility of union with God...*<sup>44</sup>

The fundamental tenet of Irenaeus' anthropology was, according Canlis, the contrast between God the Creator and the human being, the creature. The creation was not a static transformation from non-being into being, however much Irenaeus upheld the *creation ex nihilo*.

Creation marks the beginning of an existence lived with God that is not static but dynamic, propelled onward towards greater and greater communion with him.<sup>45</sup>

This leads to his impressive anthropology: although distinct from God as his creatures:

our creaturehood is not creaturehood in truth without full participation in God's life.<sup>46</sup>

The loss of this participation threatens us with non-existence:

We are those whose humanness depends on communion: 'lest man, falling away from God altogether, should cease to exist.'<sup>47</sup>

The solution to the condition of illusory independent being of the creatures lies in the Incarnation, which is the beginning of the process of mutual penetration of Creator and creature:

the First-begotten Word, should descend to the creature (*facturam*), that is, to what had been moulded ... that it should be contained by Him; and, on the other hand, the creature should contain the Word, and ascend to Him, passing beyond the angels, and be made after the image and likeness of God.<sup>48</sup>

Canlis rightly points out that this mutual *containing* holds the key to Irenaeus' theology of participation:

In quite remarkable language, Irenaeus speaks of this as a mutual containing – on that takes place in the person of the Word. Participation in God thus

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<sup>43</sup> Julie Canlis: Being made human: the significance of creation for Irenaeus' doctrine of participation. . In Scottish Journal of Theology, Vol. 58 No. 4, Edinburgh, 2005

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, p. 435

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*, p. 447

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, p. 447

<sup>47</sup> *Against Heresies*, IV 20.7 quoted *ibid* p. 448

<sup>48</sup> *Against Heresies*, V 36.3 quoted *ibid* p. 452

functions neither as a threat to our creatureliness, nor to the Creator's divinity, but rather is the very means by which the creation *becomes* itself. ... God's goal for humanity is full participation in his communion, a progressive '*koinonia* of the Spirit' (2 Cor 13:14)<sup>49</sup>

Canlis mentions that the experience that underlay this remarkable theology and anthropology was 'the reality in which [Irenaeus] lived, most obvious to him in the Eucharist.'<sup>50</sup> However, the thrust of her article is the theology of participation, not the Eucharist itself. She gives an excellent framework in which to place Irenaeus' statements on the Eucharist.

The creaturely status of the natural human being is counterpointed against the natural genesis of the elements in the Eucharist in terms that echo the mystery of the containing and being contained referred to above.

So then, if the mixed cup and the manufactured bread receive the Word of God and become the Eucharist, that is to say, the Blood and Body of Christ, which fortify and build up the substance of our flesh, how can these people claim that the flesh is incapable of receiving God's gift of eternal life, when it is nourished by Christ's Blood and Body and is His member? As the blessed apostle says in his letter to the Ephesians, 'For we are members of His Body, of His flesh and of His bones' (Eph. 5:30). He is not talking about some kind of 'spiritual' and 'invisible' man, 'for a spirit does not have flesh and bones' (Lk. 24:39). No, he is talking of the organism possessed by a real human being, composed of flesh and nerves and bones. It is this which is nourished by the cup which is His Blood, and is fortified by the bread which is His Body. The stem of the vine takes root in the earth and eventually bears fruit, and 'the grain of wheat falls into the earth' (Jn. 12:24), dissolves, rises again, multiplied by the all-containing Spirit of God, and finally after skilled processing, is put to human use. These two then receive the Word of God and become the Eucharist, which is the Body and Blood of Christ.

Five Books on the Unmasking and Refutation of the Falsely Named Gnosis,  
Book 5:2, 2-3

The conclusion of this argument is reached when Irenaeus shows that the elements transmit incorruptibility. The change is provisional, or more accurately proleptic—it is the hope of the resurrection that gives rise to the incorruptibility.

For just as the bread which comes from the earth, having received the invocation of God, is no longer ordinary bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly, so our bodies, having received the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, because they have the hope of the resurrection.

Five Books on the Unmasking and Refutation of the Falsely named Gnosis.  
Book 4:18 4-5

The Eucharist is the instrument for continuing the restoration or "promotion" of human beings to their intended state. Although Canlis' thesis is that Irenaeus wishes to uphold an ultimate creator/creature divide against what she posits as an underlying monism in his Gnostic opponents, it seems to me that the train of thought which she

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<sup>49</sup> *ibid*, pp. 452-3

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*, p. 454

so ably develops out of his writing suggests much more that he wishes to uphold what we have referred to as a ‘provisional dualism’ which is on its way to being dissolved.

As was mentioned above, it is Athanasius, the great interpreter of the Incarnation, who makes explicit the link between receiving communion and salvation. In her article *The intimate connection between Christ and Christians in Athanasius*, Carolyn Schneider describes how Athanasius adapts the Middle Platonic conception of ‘participation’ or μετοχη to explain the relationship between Christ and Christians. Instead of following the Neoplatonic teaching from which he took the term, which understood participation to mean the timeless contemplation of the Platonic Forms, Athanasius uses ‘the language of bodily creation and kinship ...to express the relationship’.<sup>51</sup> Through the Incarnation,

the Word embodied a new humanity in Christ. The Holy Spirit enables Christians to participate in Christ, becoming thereby part of a new humanity and children of God.<sup>52</sup>

The Fall effected a loss of the ability to contemplate God in his full reality. In as far as human beings are λογιζεθαι—endowed with λογος—they realise the spark of divinity that was implanted in them. Its evident obscuration is a function of sin.

Real humanity, for Athanasius, has something of the divine in it. It is when people lose their realness and their humanity that they lose what is divine. But this divine gift is always, and emphatically, seen as a *gift*.<sup>53</sup>

It is impossible for human beings to redeem themselves, because of the thorough-going grip that evil has upon them. It is ingrained in their constitution.

Even a virtuous life will not ensure it because evil exercises its destruction also over the body, so that even the virtuous die.<sup>54</sup>

Now Schneider takes us to the soteriological kernel of Athanasius’ thought, with its direct bearing on the theology of the Eucharist. This is his theology of the Incarnation, which is conventionally thought to represent Christ’s participation in humanity. Schneider points out:

For Athanasius, there is no ‘humanity’ in which Jesus participates; rather, he *is* humanity, in which we participate. ... [Christ] defines humanity in a new way so that it now participates in the Word internally, though we are still of a created and graced nature...<sup>55</sup>

This participation is something new:

Our connection to Christ, as Athanasius sees it, is unique, without parallel or analogy, and thus difficult to understand.<sup>56</sup>

She concludes that

Athanasius does not explain how physical bodies can participate in another body; he just asserts it.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Carolyn Schneider: *The intimate connection between Christ and Christians in Athanasius*. Scottish Journal of Theology, Vol. 58 Number 4. Edinburgh, 2005, p. 1

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*, p. 1

<sup>53</sup> *ibid*, p. 7

<sup>54</sup> *ibid*, p. 8

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*, pp. 10-11

<sup>56</sup> *ibid*, pp. 11-12

Here, we can carry her cogently argued case on a step, using a passage we examined above:

For this purpose, then, the incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God entered our world. ... taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father. ... This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.

*De Incarnatione* § 8

For Athanasius, it is the participation in Christ's body in the Eucharist which allows human beings to participate in the full reality of Christ's heavenly body, which in turn the restored and future humanity.

The Form of the old humanity, which ceased to reflect the Form of the source of all Form, has been made over and recovered from death. Those who do not participate in the new humanity, therefore, are still dying. Christians die too, but for them death is the opportunity for the new humanity, of which they are already a part, to achieve its victory over death in resurrection.<sup>58</sup>

The theory of participation adds a metaphysical dimension to the understanding of the Eucharist, which becomes the locus of the meeting, mediation and fusing of the creaturely and divine worlds, which we encounter as divided. Beyond the personal nourishment and healing encountered in the images of food and medicine, the theory of participation leads to an appreciation that receiving the Eucharist is not just of benefit for the individual communicant but blazes a trail for the recreation of humanity.

## Conclusion

We have seen in this chapter that the church Fathers shared a conception of an objective efficacy of the Eucharist. This was anchored in their theories of salvation, and underpinned by their experience of Eucharist. We have shown that there was nothing mechanical about their understanding, governed as it was by the experience of encounter, and that it did not exemplify the kind of works-righteousness rightly rejected in the Reformation. We have traced briefly some of the background of thought and praxis in the religious surroundings; and we have seen the innovations in praxis and understanding that the Christian church made. We have seen that these developments were in line with the experience and understanding of salvation by Jesus Christ, which reintroduces human beings to communion with the divine communion of the Trinity. We have seen in a number of places how the world of the Fathers' thought and experience challenges the thinking of contemporary theologians.

This chapter was not written with a religious agenda. However, the material makes abundantly clear that the Fathers' conception of the Eucharist is of more than merely intellectual interest. Their appreciation of its efficacy was of a piece with an understanding of the Triune God in his relation to the world, which tends towards incarnation. If it is indeed so that this is a more adequate explanation of God and the

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<sup>57</sup> *ibid*, p. 12

<sup>58</sup> *ibid*, p. 12

world, the recovery of a truly realistic conception of the Eucharist, and the cultivation of a praxis that fosters such a conception, is an urgent necessity. Only by doing this can we participate in the divine life in the way that God has put before us. As Schmemman says:

The only real fall of man is his noneucharistic life in a noneucharistic world.<sup>59</sup>... Man was to be the priest of a eucharist, offering the world to God, and in this offering he was to receive the gift of life. ... When we see the world as an end in itself, everything becomes itself a value and consequently loses all value, because only in God is found the meaning (value) of everything, and the world is meaningful only when it is the 'sacrament' of God's presence.<sup>60</sup>

The Twentieth Century witnessed in many churches, and in the foundation of a new church in The Christian Community, something rather unexpected: a renewal of interest and attention for the liturgy. We may see this as a sign of hope. Another sign of hope of our time is that many areas of life which hitherto have seen themselves as quite separate are beginning to join. Ecological activists from the 1970s on often saw those who chose to worship instead of joining the demonstration or cleaning up the river as indulgent and ineffective. Now an ecologist such as Alistair McIntosh can write:

In my experience it is not possible to engage fully with the world without a growing understanding of spirituality. ... We are, as Jesus said, all branches on the vine of life; as St Paul says, 'members of one another' in the Body of Christ.<sup>61</sup>

As members of the body we are called to celebrate the Eucharist, in which is infolded all hope of renewal of the earth and redemption of humanity.

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<sup>59</sup> Schmemmann, Alexander: *For the Life of the World*, Crestwood, NY, 1987, p 18

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.* p 17

<sup>61</sup> Alastair McIntosh: *Soil and Soul – People versus corporate Power*, London, 2004, p. 118

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