

Robert F. Taft

What is a Christian Feast? A Reflection¹

Just what are we doing when we celebrate a Christian feast? Most would answer that we are commemorating an event in salvation history like the Nativity of Jesus in Bethlehem on Christmas, the visit of the Magi to the newborn babe on Western Epiphany, January 6, or Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan on Eastern Theophany on the same date.

HISTORICAL EVENTS OR SAVING MYSTERIES?

A closer look at feast-days in the earliest centuries, however, when the Church Year was in formation, shows that originally feasts did not commemorate a saving event of salvation history, but a cluster of distinct events all at once. In the East, for example, the original feast of the Nativity cycle, Theophany on January 6, celebrated not just the events of Bethlehem but also those of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. So what was being feted was not so much one saving event as the saving mystery revealed in several events: in this case, the mystery of the epiphany — which means "appearance" or "manifestation" — of the Father's salvific will for us in Jesus' incarnation at his birth in Bethlehem, and Jesus' revelation as Divine Son at his baptism in the Jordan by the divine voice as reported in the Synoptic Gospels: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:37, Mark 1:12, Luke 3:21).

The same was true of the original Pascha, which celebrated not just the resurrection, as we are tempted to think of Easter today, but the entire Paschal Mystery of Christ from his passion and death on the cross to the descent into hell and resurrection on the

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third day. And Sunday, the original weekly celebration of this Paschal Mystery, was the same, as we read in the account of the Spanish nun Egeria on pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 384. In her famous *Travel Diary*, Egeria describes how at the Resurrection Vigil, held Saturday night in preparation for Sunday, “. . . the bishop, standing inside the (chancel) screen, takes the Gospel book and goes to the door (of the chancel), where he himself reads the account of the Lord’s resurrection. At the beginning of the reading the whole assembly groans and laments at all the Lord underwent for us, and the way they weep would move even the hardest heart to tears.”²

It is obvious that what Egeria calls the Gospel “account of the Lord’s resurrection” included also the account of the Passion — i.e., the Paschal Mystery in its entirety. The people are weeping in sorrow not at Christ’s resurrection to glory, but at the sufferings of his passion and crucifixion!

Again, the original Pentecostal celebration feasted not only the Descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles in the upper room, but also the Ascension. In all these instances what was being celebrated was not a *past* saving event but an *eternally present* saving mystery — in the case of Easter, Jesus’ Paschal Mystery; in the case of Pentecost, the mystery of salvation’s completion in the final glorification of Jesus’ Ascension and enthronement at the right hand of the Father, and the Father’s sending of the Paraclete, the Counselor, in Jesus’ name, to be with us until the end of days, as Jesus had promised his disciples in John 14:25.

AN ETERNALLY PRESENT REALITY

The actuality, the *presentness* of it all, is because we are celebrating not something from the past, but a permanent present reality, an ongoing call and response, a new life, which we call salvation, that was called into being by saving events that are past only in their historicity. The salvific events of Jesus’ earthly life are more than just an epiphany or sign, more than just a manifestation of salvation. They are the actual means of that salvation, its very instrumental cause, for the saving events of the past are past only in the

² Chapter 24.8, trans. J. Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels, Newly Translated with Supporting Documents* (London: S.P.C.K. 1971) 125.

historical mode of their manifestation, that is, as they are perceived within human history by us. Our tradition teaches with the prologue of John that Jesus Christ is not only man but also the eternal Word of God. Insofar as the Incarnate Christ is forever both Eternal Word of God and Only-begotten Son of the Father in the Holy Spirit, he is for all eternity that which he has done. Not only is his saving, self-offering eternal; he is his eternal self-offering, and it is in his presence among us that his sacrifice is eternally present to us. It is these eternally present mysteries, not past events, that our feast-days celebrate.

LITURGY IS BOTH CHRIST'S AND OURS

So our liturgy does not celebrate a past event, but a present person, who contains forever all he is and was, and all he has done for us. That is why the Latin Church can sing in the ancient hymn: "*Iam pascha nostrum Christus est, paschalis idem victima* — For our very Pasch is Christ, and he its very paschal victim." In other words Jesus Christ, our incarnate Lord and God risen and ascended to glory in the Holy Trinity, is a constitutive component of the liturgy. This is seminal: Jesus is not extrinsic to our worship; he is its foundational constituent. He, Paul tells us, is the head of the body, and just as in any living body, it is only the signals from the head and their reception and execution by the members, that makes the celebration a celebration. If one is missing, Jesus' giving or our receiving, there is no celebration.

But we too are one of liturgy's integral component parts. If according to the New Testament, the new worship, the only cult henceforth worthy of the Father, is the self-giving kenosis of his Son, do not think that leaves us out in the cold. For our worship is that same sacrificial life, eternally personalized in the Risen Lord, communicated and expressed and lived in us through the Holy Spirit in the worship of the church.

Christian liturgy, then, is based on the reality of the Risen Christ, called "*liturgie de source*" in the felicitous phrase of the Melkite Catholic theologian Jean Corbon.³ Because the Risen Jesus is humanity glorified, he is permanently present through his Spirit to

³ Translated as *The Wellspring of Worship* (New York: Paulist Press 1988).

every place and age not only as savior, but as saving; not only as Lord, but as priest and sacrifice and victim. Nothing in his being or action is ever past except the historical mode of its manifestation. As the Byzantine Liturgy prays to and of Christ, "You are the offerer and the offered, the recipient and the gift."

Thomas J. Talley once put it this way: "By virtue of the resurrection, Christ is now trans-historical and is available to every moment. We may never speak of the Risen Christ in the historical past. The event of his passion is historical, but the Christ who is risen does not exist back there, but here, and as we live on this moving division line between memory and hope, between the memory of his passion and the hope of his coming again, we stand always in the presence of Christ, who is always present to everyone. *This is where the real substance of our anamnesis lies.*"⁴

So if the Bible is the Word of God in the words of men, the liturgy is the saving deeds of God in the actions of those men and women who would live in him. Its purpose is to turn you and me into the same reality. The purpose of Christian Initiation is to make us cleansing waters and healing and strengthening oil; the purpose of Eucharist is not to change bread and wine, but to change you and me. Through baptism and Eucharist it is we who are to become Christ for one another, and a sign to the world that is yet to hear his name.

LITURGY IS LIFE IN CHRIST

Our true Christian liturgy, therefore, is just the life of Christ in us that we both live and celebrate. That life is none other than the one we call the Holy Spirit, the Comforter who dwells in us according to the promise of the Risen Lord. This is salvation, our final goal. The only difference between this and what we hope to enjoy at the final fulfillment is that the mirror spoken of in 1 Cor 13:12 will no longer be needed: as Adrien Nocent put it, the veil shall be removed. As §7 of the Vatican II Liturgy Constitution affirms: "To accomplish so great a work [of salvation through the ministry of the Church] Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the Sacrifice of the Mass not only in

⁴ From his unpublished class notes on the Liturgical Year, which the late Fr Talley kindly placed at my disposition several years ago (emphasis added).

the person of his minister . . . but especially in the Eucharistic species. By his power he is present in the sacraments so that when anybody baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes. He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. Lastly, he is present when the Church prays and sings. . . .”

So liturgy is a present encounter. Salvation is now. The death and resurrection of Jesus are past events only in their historicity, that is, with respect to us. But they are eternally present in the Triune God, who has entered our history but is not entrapped in it, and they have brought the presence of Jesus among us to fulfillment in the Holy Spirit, the permanently present saving reality we encounter at every moment of our lives. The saving past we memorialize in liturgy is in fact the efficacious saving event of salvation now, made present once again in symbol. In the Risen Lord, creation is at last seen as what it was meant to be, and Christ is Adam, that is, all humankind.

But this fulfillment of the past is directed at the future. For just as Christ has become everything and fulfilled all, for us to be fulfilled we must become him by the grace of the Holy Spirit. And we can do this only by letting him conform us to himself, to his pattern, the model of the new creation. This is the true “identity formation” of Christians. The old cult and priesthood have been replaced by the self-offering of the Son of God, and our worship is to repeat this same pattern in our own lives, the pattern of what he was and of what we must be in him.

To express this identification with Christ, St Paul uses several compound verbs that begin with the preposition *syn* (with): I suffer with Christ, am crucified with Christ, die with Christ, am buried with Christ, am raised and live with Christ, am carried off to heaven and sit at the right hand of the Father with Christ.⁵ This is one of St Paul’s ways of underscoring the necessity of personal participation in redemption. We must “put on Christ” (Gal 13:27), and assimilate him, experience in mystery the principal events by which Christ has saved us and repeat them in the pattern of our own lives, so that we can affirm with Paul in Gal 2:20: “I have been

⁵ Rom 6:3-11; Gal 2:20; 2 Cor 1:5, 4:7ff; Col 2:20; Eph 2:5-6.

crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”⁶

WHY FEASTS?

At this point one might well ask: “Then why commemorate on feast-days saving events of the past if it is not a question of past events but of present mysteries? Why not have just the original, all-inclusive feasts of Paschal Mystery on the Easter Pascha and Sunday?” The answer is seen in the Bible itself, which uses a multitude of celebrative commemorations in its divine pedagogy to help us encounter God’s salvation ever anew. From its Old Testament beginnings right through to the end of the New Testament, we see that the Bible presents the sequence of historical saving events as a medium for presenting the story of an encounter with God,⁷ and employs the later cultic memorial celebrations of this encounter as a means of overcoming the separation in time and space from the actual saving event.⁸

God’s salvation of his Chosen People, manifested in the past saving events of Sacred History, lived on as an active force in their lives because they encountered it ever anew and responded to it in faith. But they could not have done so unless they remembered it in their cultic memorials. In the Old Testament, such cultic memorials were one of the ways in which Israel remembered, making present the past saving events as a means for every new generation to encounter the saving work of God. And the New Testament revelation does the same thing with Christ.

That *present* encounter is the point of it all. In liturgical memorial we do not take a mythic trip into the past, nor do we drag the past into the present by repeating the primordial event in mythic drama.⁹ For the events we are dealing with are not myths but history. As such they are *ephapax*, once and for all. There was one resurrection of Christ, one Pentecost, and we can neither repeat them nor

⁶ Cf. David M. Stanley, *A Modern Scriptural Approach to the Spiritual Exercises* (Chicago: Institute of Jesuit Sources 1967) 210–11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁸ B. S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (Studies in Biblical Theology 37, Naperville, IL no date).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 81ff.

return to them as historical occurrences. But that is not to say these realities are dead, static, over and done with. *For the Holy Spirit came to stay.* So these saving events created and manifested and remain the bearers of a new and permanent quality of existence called salvation, initiating a permanent dialectic of call and response between God and us, for God's promises were made, in the words of Gen 13:15, "to you and to your descendants, forever." Liturgical memorial presents this challenge to each new generation, so that it too may respond in faith and love to God's eternal call.

So in memorializing past salvific events we do not somehow return to them nor recreate them in the present. The past event is the efficacious sign of God's eternal saving activity, and as past it is contingent. The reality it initiates and signifies, however, is neither past nor contingent but ever present in God, and through faith to us, at every moment of our lives. And if the past event is both permanent cause and contingent historical sign of salvation, its liturgical memorial is the present efficacious sign of the same eternal reality. The ritual moment, then, is a synthesis of past, present, and future, as is always true in "God's time."

THE AGE TO COME IS NOW

What the New Testament adds to this biblical vision of Salvation History is the startling message that "God's time" has been fulfilled in Christ. So New Testament time is not some theory of time, but the fullness of time. What distinguishes it is its completeness, its *pleroma*: what is inaugurated is not some new theory of time, but a new quality of life. The *eschaton* is not so much a new age as a new existence. "New age" is but one of its metaphors, and it is important not to mistake the sign for the signified. Since our *pleroma* is in God, what we are confronted with is not the *past* made present, or even the *future* present, but the *end* present, not in the sense of the *finish* but of the *completion*: God himself present to us as saving.

This presence is fulfilled in Jesus, and that is what we mean by the "eschatological" nature of the New Age. As Abbot Patrick Regan O.S.B., has said: "The death and resurrection of Jesus are eschatological in that they bring the history of faith and the history of the divine presence to a close by bringing them to fulfillment. In the death of Jesus faith finds full expression; in his resurrection

the divine presence is fully given. . . . But they come to a close as history only because they have reached that condition of fullness (*pleroma*) toward which their respective histories were ordered. The goal toward which all faith tended, and from which it derived its saving power, was the death of Christ. And the goal toward which all of God's gifts tended was the gift of himself to Christ in the Spirit. Thus the entire history of man's faith and God's self-gift are destined to find their eschatological perfection in the glorification of the crucified One. Consequently, neither faith nor the divine presence cease to exist. Rather do they remain everlastingly actual precisely because they have attained definitive and final form in the Spirit-filled Christ. Hence the eschaton is really not a thing (*eschaton*), but a person (*eschatos*). It is the Lord Jesus himself — the last man, the spiritual man — the one in whom God and man have fully and finally met in the Spirit. The death and resurrection of Jesus bring to fulfillment not only history but creation as well. . . . In him, man and the world have, for the first time, come to be what they were meant to be. Hence the eschatological "last days" join the protohistorical "first days." The kingdom is the garden. Christ is Adam. The eschaton is the Sabbath; the day on which God rests from his work and delights in its perfection.¹⁰

LITURGY PERSONALIZED IN CHRIST

In the message of the New Testament, everything in sacred history — every event, object, sacred place, theophany, cult — has been assumed into the person of this *eschatos*, the Incarnate Christ. He is God's eternal Word,¹¹ his new creation¹² and the new Adam,¹³ the new Pasch and its lamb,¹⁴ the new covenant,¹⁵ the new circumcision¹⁶ and the heavenly manna;¹⁷ God's temple,¹⁸ the new sacrifice

¹⁰ Patrick Regan, "Pneumatological and Eschatological Aspects of Liturgical Celebration," *Worship* 51 (1977) 346-47.

¹¹ John 1:1, 14.

¹² 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; Rom 8:19ff; Rev 21-22.

¹³ 1 Cor 15:45; Rom 5:14.

¹⁴ 1 Cor 5:7; John 1:29, 36; 19:36; 1 Pet 1:19; Rev 5ff.

¹⁵ Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; Heb 8-13.

¹⁶ Col 2:11-12.

¹⁷ John 6:30-58; Rev 2:17.

¹⁸ John 2:19-27.

and its priest;¹⁹ the fulfillment of the Sabbath rest²⁰ and the Messianic Age that has come.²¹ All that went before is fulfilled in him: "For the law was but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities," Heb 10:1 affirms, and that includes all worship.

So according to the New Testament, true worship pleasing to the Father is none other than the saving life, death, and resurrection of Christ. But since through baptism we too are Christ, *our worship is his same sacrificial existence in us*. "To live is Christ," Paul tells us in Phil 1:21, and to be saved is to be conformed to Christ by dying to self and rising to new life in him,²² who, as the "last Adam" (1 Cor 15:45), is the definitive form of redeemed human nature.²³ For we know "the power of his resurrection" only if we "share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Phil 3:10).

This liturgy of life, our true Christian liturgy, is the Church's common celebration of our salvation in Christ. As such, it is the most perfect expression and realization of the spirituality of the Church. The spiritual life is life in Christ, and this life is created, fed and renewed through the grace of the Holy Spirit that is showered upon us in the liturgy, first of all at our baptism. Baptized into the mystery of his death and resurrection,²⁴ we rise in him, having "put on Christ" (Gal 3:27), so that, as St Paul says in Gal 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."²⁵ Henceforth he dwells in us, prays in us, proclaims to us the Word of his New Covenant, seals it with his sacrifice, feeds us with his Sacred Body and Blood, draws us to penance and conversion, glorifies the Father in us through the Holy Spirit. In proclamation and preaching he communicates to us his life; in rite and song he celebrates it with us; in sacramental grace he gives us the strength to live it.

¹⁹ Eph 5:2; Heb 2:17-3:2, 4:14-10:14.

²⁰ Col 2:16-17; Matt 11:28-12:8; Heb 3:7-4:11.

²¹ Luke 4:16-21; Acts 2:14-36.

²² 2 Cor 4:10ff, 13:4; Rom 6:3ff; Col 2:12-13, 20, 3:1-3; Gal 2:20; Eph 2:1ff; Phil 2:5ff, 3:10-11, 18, 21.

²³ 1 Cor 15:21-22; Rom 5:12-21; Col 3:9-11; Eph 4:22-24.

²⁴ Rom 6:3-11; Col 2:12-13, 20, 3:1-4.

²⁵ Gal 2:20; cf. Col 2:6.

LITURGY AND CHRISTIAN LIFE

The mystery that is Christ is the center of Christian life, and it is this mystery and nothing else that the church renews in the liturgy so that we might be drawn into it. When we leave the liturgical assembly to return to our other tasks, we have only to assimilate what we have experienced and realize the mystery in our lives: in a word, to become other Christs. For the purpose of the liturgy is to generate in our lives what the church realizes for us in its public worship. The spiritual life is just another word for a personal relationship with God, and the liturgy is nothing less than the common expression of the church's relationship with God.

This is what justifies the Catholic Church's extraordinary claims about the nature of Christian worship, as in the striking assertion of the Vatican II Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy — *Sacrosanctum Concilium* §2, which says "that . . . it is the liturgy through which the work of our redemption is accomplished. And it is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church."²⁶

Pope Pius XII affirmed the same doctrine in his 1947 encyclical *Mediator Dei*, the "Magna Carta" of the modern Catholic Liturgical Movement, when he wrote: "It is an unquestionable fact that the work of our redemption is continued and that its fruits are imparted to us during the celebration of the liturgy . . ." (§29).²⁷ Hence, Pius XII continues, "liturgical prayer, being the public supplication of the illustrious Spouse of Christ, is superior to private prayers" (§37), and "The worship rendered to God in union with her divine Head is the most efficacious means of achieving sanctity" (§26). The implications of that last statement for our spiritual lives should be obvious. Liturgy is at the very center of the redemptive work Christ exercises through the Holy Spirit in the ministry of the church.

²⁶ Vatican II documents are referred to by paragraph number and cited from Vatican Council II, *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 1975).

²⁷ Texts cited by paragraph number from *Encyclical Letter of His Holiness Pius XII on the Sacred Liturgy*. Vatican Library Translation (Washington, DC, no date).

This teaching is not just that of the Catholic Church. It goes back to the mystery-theology of the Fathers of the Church and of the classical Byzantine Orthodox liturgical theologians, all of whom assert that liturgy is nothing less than the ongoing saving work of God's Only-begotten Son, still present and operative among us now through the Holy Spirit, in the sacramental ministry of his Church. That is why one of the great Latin Fathers, Pope St Leo the Great (440–461), could dare to say: "Thus what was visible in our Redeemer has passed over into sacraments — *Quod itaque Redemptoris nostri conspicuum fuit, in sacramenta transiit*"²⁸: — in other words, what Jesus did historically during his earthly life, he continues to do sacramentally through the liturgical mysteries he celebrates in and with his Church.

This is also the teaching of the classic Orthodox liturgical commentators and theologians, among whom the greatest in my opinion is St Nicholas Cabasilas, who writes ca. AD 1350 in Book I §6 of his marvelous treatise on the sacraments, entitled *The Life in Christ*: "In the Sacred Mysteries . . . we depict His burial and proclaim His death. By them we are begotten and formed and wondrously united to our Saviour, for they are the means by which . . . 'We live, and move, and have our being' (Acts 17:28). Baptism confers being and in short, existence according to Christ. It receives us when we are dead and corrupted, and leads us to new life. The anointing with chrism perfects him who has received [new] birth by infusing into him the energy that befits such a life. The Holy Eucharist preserves and continues this life and health, since the Bread of life enables us to preserve that which has been acquired and to continue in life. . . . In this way we live in God."²⁹

In chapter 131 of his treatise *On the Holy Temple*, St Symeon of Thessalonika (d. 1429), last of the classic Orthodox liturgical commentators of the Byzantine Era, expresses the same theology in these words: ". . . there is only one Church, above and below, since

²⁸ *Sermo 74 (De ascens. 2)*, 2, PL 54:398. Of course the Latin term "*sacramenta* — sacraments" in the language of the Fathers refers to the whole visible, liturgical ministry of the church, and not just "the sacraments" in the current technical sense of the term.

²⁹ Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*. Translated from the Greek by Carmino J. de Catanzaro (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Press 1974) 49–50.

God came down and lived among us, doing that for which he was sent on our behalf. And it is a work which is one, as is Our Lord's sacrifice, communion, and contemplation. And it is carried out both above and here below, but with this difference: above it is done without any veils or symbols, but here it is accomplished through symbols, because we humans are burdened with the flesh that is subject to corruption."³⁰

So to borrow a term from the biblical scholars, the liturgy is the ongoing "life situation (*Sitz im Leben*)" of Christ's saving pattern in every age, and what we do in the liturgy is exactly what the New Testament itself did with Christ: it applied him and what he was and is to the present. Do not both the New Testament and the liturgy recount for us this holy history again and again as a perpetual remembrance? This is what we read in 2 Pet 1:12-16: "Therefore I intend always to *remind you* of these things, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. I think it is right to arouse you by way of *reminder*. And I will see to it that after my departure you may be able at any time to *recall* these things. For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty."

LITURGY IS ANAMNESIS

Note that this is not *kerygma*, as it is almost always mistakenly called, but memorial, *anamnesis*. *Kerygma* is preaching the Good News to awaken the response of faith in the new message not yet heard. But the *kerygma* written down and proclaimed repeatedly in the liturgical assembly to recall us to our commitment to the Good News already heard and accepted in faith, even though "we know them and are established in the truth" (2 Pet 1:12), is memorial, *anamnesis*, and that is what all liturgy is about.

Christ's saving mysteries, then, are not a story but "the power of God unto salvation for everyone who has faith, first for the Jew, then for the Greek," as St Paul says in Rom 1:16 (remember that St Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans before the Gospel had become the Gospels). So the Good News contained in the Gospels is that God's Spirit is in us now, in the age of the church, calling us to

³⁰ PG 155:340AB.

himself. And so Matthew is not just writing “history” when he recounts the call of the twelve, nor is St Ignatius of Loyola when he proposes in his *Spiritual Exercises* that we meditate on the saving actions of Jesus in the Gospels, nor is the church when it presents the same saving mysteries to us in word and rite and feast. For the focus is not on the story, not on the past, but on Paul’s “power of God unto salvation, first for the Jew, then for the Greek” (Rom 1:16), and right now for you and me.

This is what we do in all liturgy, including our liturgical feasts. We make anamnesis, memorial, of this dynamic saving power in our lives, to make it penetrate ever more into the depths of our being, for the building up of the Body of Christ. As we read in 1 John 1:1-4: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — the life was made manifest and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us — that which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you, so that you may have communion with us; and our communion is with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete.”

EMMANUEL — GOD WITH US

So the New Testament sees salvation as present now. The main point of New Testament eschatology is that the end-time is not in the future but *now*. And it is operative now, though not exclusively, through the anamnesis in word and sacrament of the dynamic present reality of Emmanuel, “God-with-us,” through the power of his Spirit in every age. As Heb 6:4-5 teaches, we have already “been enlightened . . . have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come . . .” And Eph 2:4 says that “. . . God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. . . .”

In the Gospels the transition to this new age of Salvation History is portrayed in the accounts of the post-resurrection appearances

of Jesus.³¹ They introduce us to a new mode of his presence, a presence that is real and experienced, yet quite different from the former presence before his Pascha. When the Risen Jesus appears to his disciples, who knew him intimately, they do not immediately recognize him (Luke 24:16, 37, John 21:4, 7, 12). There is a strange aura about him; his disciples are uncertain, afraid; Jesus must reassure them (Luke 24:36ff). At Emmaus they recognize him only in the breaking of the bread — and then he vanishes (Luke 24:16, 30-31, 35). Like his presence among us now, it is accessible only through faith.

What these post-resurrection accounts are telling us is that Jesus is with us, but not as he was before.³² He is with us and not with us, real presence and real absence. He is the one whom Acts 3:21 says: “heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old.” But he sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in his church, thereby making our grace-filled celebrations possible. For Jesus also said at the end of the Gospels, just before ascending into heaven: “I am with you always, until the close of the age” (Matt 28:20). It is simply this reality that the Holy Spirit makes alive in the liturgy, believing from Matthew 18:20 that “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them,”³³ yet celebrating the Lord’s Supper to “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26) in the spirit of the early Christians, with their liturgical cry of hope: “Marana-tha! Amen. Come Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20).

So the Apostolic Church did not just keep a record of Jesus’ historical saving events. The chief interest of the New Testament Church was the contemporary, active, Risen Christ present in the church through his Spirit, as can be seen in the earliest writings, the epistles of St Paul, which say next to nothing about the historical details of Jesus’ earthly life.

³¹ See Stanley, 278ff.

³² *Ibid.*, 280ff.

³³ I am aware of the challenge to the liturgical interpretation of this pericope by J. Duncan M. Derrett, “‘Where two or three are convened in my name’: a sad misunderstanding,” *Expository Times* 91 no. 3 (December 1979) 83–86. But no matter; the liturgical application has become traditional regardless of the original *Sitz im Leben* of the text, and it is this traditional belief that interests us here.

LIFE IN CHRIST

It is this consciousness of Jesus as the Lord not of the past but of contemporary history that is the aim of all Christian preaching and spirituality and liturgical feasts. Christian vision is rooted in the gradually acquired realization of the Apostolic Church that the Second Coming was not imminent, and that the eschatological, definitive victory won by Christ must be repeated in each one of us, until the end of time. And since Christ is both model and source of this struggle, the New Testament presents both his victory and his cult of the Father as ours: just as we have died and risen with him (Rom 6:3-11, 2 Cor 4:10ff, Gal 2:20, Col 2:12-13, 20; 3:1-3, Eph 2:5-6), so too it is we who have become a new creation (2 Cor 5:17, Eph 4:22-24), a new circumcision (Phil 3:3), a new temple (1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:19, 2 Cor 6:16, Eph 2:19-22), a new sacrifice (Eph 5:2), and a new priesthood (1 Pet 2:5-9, Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). This is why we meditate on the pattern of his life, proclaim it, preach it, celebrate its memorial and feasts in the liturgical year: to make it ever more deeply our own. This is why the Apostolic Church left us a book and a rite, word and sacrament, so that what Christ did and was, we too may do and be, in him. For this reason, Sacred History is never finished. It continues in us, which is why in liturgy we feast the saints, and ourselves too, as well as Christ: for God's true glorification is Christ's very life that he has implanted in us. So the "communion of saints" is also a sign of Sacred History, proof of the constant saving action of Christ in every age.

For Christian life, according to the several New Testament metaphors, for it, is a process of conversion into Christ.³⁴ He is the "Great Sacrament" we have seen the New Testament present as the personalization of all that went before, and the recapitulation and completion and model and foretaste of all that will ever be. As such, he is not just the mystery of the Father's love for us, "the image of the unseen God" (Col 1:15); he is also the revelation of what we are to be (1 Cor 15:49, 2 Cor 3:18, Rom 8:29). Christ's life is the story of entering sinful humanity and returning it to the Father through the cross, a return that was accepted and crowned in Christ's deliverance and exaltation (Phil 2:5ff). And this same story,

³⁴ See Mark Searle, "The Journey of Conversion," *Worship* 54 (1980) 48-49, and id., "Liturgy as Metaphor," *Worship* 55 (1981) esp. 112ff.

as we have seen, is also presented as the story of everyone, the archetype of our experience of returning to God through a life of death to self lived, through the Spirit, after the pattern Christ showed us: "He died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor 5:15). For as 1 John 3:14 teaches: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love remains in death."

CONCLUSION

Liturgical feasts, therefore, have the same purpose as the Gospel: to present this new reality in "*anamnesis*," memorial, as a continual sign to us not of a past history, but of the present reality of our lives in him. As St Paul says in 2 Cor 6:2: "Behold *now* is the acceptable time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation." It is this vision of the mysteries of Christ's life *now* that we see in the festal homilies of the golden age of the Fathers, such as those of Pope St Leo the Great (440–461), which always stress the present salvific reality of the liturgical commemoration.³⁵ For Salvation History does continue, but not in the sense that at Christmas Christ is somehow born again. Such events are historical, and they are past, and liturgy is not about the past but about the present. What is present is our being born anew in Christ, *our* entrance into new life through this coming of God to us now.³⁶

One pastoral conclusion from all this should be obvious: there is no ideal model of Christian feast or calendar we must "discover," and to which we must "return." Rather, it is up to each generation to do what the Apostolic Church did in the very composition of the New Testament: apply the mystery and meaning of Christ to the life-situation of the church today. A liturgy is successful not

³⁵ For example, *Sermo 63 (De passione 12)* 6, PL 54, 356: "Omnia igitur quae Dei filius ad reconciliationem mundi et fecit, et docuit, non in historia tantum praeteritarum actionum novimus, sed etiam in praesentium operum virtute sentimus — We know everything that the Son of God did and taught for the reconciliation of the world not just as a history of past actions, but we also experience the force of their works in the present." On Leo's liturgical theology see M. B. de Soos, *Le mystère liturgique d'après s. Léon le grand* (Liturgiewissenschaftliche Quellen und Forschungen 34, Münster 1958).

³⁶ *Sermo 36 (In epiph. 6)* 7, PL 54, 254.

because of its fidelity to the past, but because it builds up now the Body of Christ into a spiritual temple and priesthood by furthering the aim of Christian life: the love and service of God and neighbor; death to self in order to live for others as did Christ.

And so Christmas is not just about the coming of Christ to Bethlehem, but about the coming of Christ to *us*, and about our going out to others. And Easter is not about the empty tomb in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, but about the reawakening here and now of our faith in Christ's eternally life-giving resurrection via our baptismal death and resurrection in Christ. We shall see this, I think, if we meditate on the texts of the Word of God, and of the Fathers, and of the liturgy of the church. There we shall find that our cycle of liturgical feasts is but one more facet of the life of the church, one way of expressing and living the mystery of Christ that is radically one in all aspects of its Christian expression. As Cardinal Jean Daniélou S.J., said, "The Christian faith has only one object, the mystery of Christ dead and risen. But this unique mystery subsists under different modes: it is prefigured in the Old Testament, it is accomplished historically in the earthly life of Christ, it is contained in mystery in the sacraments, it is lived mystically in souls, it is accomplished socially in the Church, it is consummated eschatologically in the heavenly kingdom. Thus the Christian has at hand several registers, a multi-dimensional symbolism, to express this unique reality. The whole of Christian culture consists in grasping the links that exist between Bible and liturgy, Gospel and eschatology, mysticism and liturgy. The application of this method to scripture is called exegesis; applied to liturgy it is called mystagogy. This consists in reading in the rites the mystery of Christ, and in contemplating beneath the symbols the invisible reality."³⁷

That is what the feasts of the Church Year, and indeed all liturgy, is about: *seeing in the rites and feasts the mystery of Christ with us now.*

³⁷ "Le symbolisme des rites baptismaux," *Dieu vivant* 1 (1945) 17 (my translation).



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