

Theology of the Church Fathers: Sacrament and Liturgy

In the previous part we focused on prayer as central to the Christian life of the early Church. Evagrius says “A theologian is one who prays, and one who prays is a theologian.” Yet, prayer in the early church is far more than the repetition of the Our Father or the constant prayers of offering or thanksgiving offered by Christians individually. The communal prayers which surround the liturgies and Sacraments of the early Church were the true center of Christian life and the focus of every Christian. These prayers became the foundation of the local community, the source of spiritual renewal, the source of Christian doctrine through expounding on Scripture, and the focus of the communal life of the early Church. We cannot dismiss nor ignore the power and importance of the liturgy and especially the Mass for the people of the early church.

The Sacraments of Initiation

Entry into the Christian life and the Church required a set of Sacraments, namely baptism and Eucharist. These two Sacraments were highly esteemed in the Christian life and greatly guarded. For the first three centuries of the church, preparation for baptism could take between 3 to 5 years requiring many stages as well as preparations. The person would have a sponsor who was required to attest that the person is ready for baptism and would not defect from the faith or turn them into the Roman government. During this preparatory stage, called the Catechumenal stage, the person was not allowed to enter a church nor to participate in any way with the Mass. They could watch from the inner doors, listen to the Scriptures being proclaimed and maybe the homily, but were not allowed to enter the Church or participate in any way with the Eucharist.

The preparatory stage for baptism is almost the complete opposite of our modern experience. Whereas today we strive to help people feel comfortable and ready for each stage, during the early church, they would not tell the person anything about what they are about to experience. You can only imagine the shock when you show up for your baptism, are required to strip, and then are dunked three times in the water followed by being anointed with oil. It was quite an experience. Why the silence on the procedures of the Sacraments? The church felt that the Sacraments were sacred encounters with God during which the person needed the “shock” of the Sacraments to feel their full effect. The concern of the early church was that too much preparation devalued the Sacraments and caused an anticipation for what is to come. Instead, the shock value allowed the person to experience the strangeness and uniqueness of the Sacraments as they were receiving them.

Although highly encouraged today, following the person’s entry into the church through the Sacraments, they would enter into a new stage of their formation. Today, most people stop coming to the classes following their reception of the Sacraments. This stage, called the mystagogy, was a critical part of their formation. During the mystagogical stage, the Sacraments and life in the Church would be explained to the neophytes. St. Cyril of Jerusalem, who we will read in connection with this part of the series, wrote an entire series of lectures to help those who just entered the church to understand and appreciate the events that they just experienced. The mystagogical stage was a critical part of their formation as they came to know the power of the

Sacraments and their character during this time. Today, we are strongly encouraged to continue the formation of the neophytes and maintain the mystagogical stage but few people return following the reception of the Sacraments.

Baptism

The first Sacrament for entry into the church was baptism. Baptism was the central Sacrament of the early church and the one that created a Christian. The church spent incredible energy plumbing through the Scriptures to uncover the truth and value of the Sacraments. Drawing upon Old Testament imagery, they saw Baptism as the salvation from the great flood of Noah, the parting of the Red Sea of Exodus drawing the neophyte into the Promised Land, the hope of Israel as the person enters into life with Jesus, and the grafting of a person into life with Jesus. Baptism was a beautiful Sacrament whose value brought life to the soul, redemption to the sinner, the promise of eternal life, and entry into the Church. A person could only be baptized once. After being baptized, if the person sinned egregiously, then the hope of salvation was lost with no possible return.

The majority of baptisms in the early church were adult baptisms. The bishop would take the person who is about to receive baptism, take the person to the baptismal font, usually in the church, have the person strip, and then dunk the person three times in the water. All of these symbols are important. Each of the churches of the early church had a baptistry as part of the church building. For the first three centuries, these baptistries were a separate room located off to the side of the main gathered area of the church. This gave the Sacrament both an air of secrecy but also privacy. When a woman was baptized, special ministers sometimes called deaconesses, would assist them at baptism since it is improper for a male to touch a female. Stripping off all their clothes was a sign of leaving the old world behind to become something new. Being immersed three times in water was a sign of dying and rising. The waters represented death and the coming out of the waters represented life. The anointing with oil represented a share in the power of Jesus as priest, prophet and king. Finally, the person is clothed in white garments as a sign of their new dignity and identity.

What about Confirmation? Many people who study the early church ask the same questions. It seems that the two major Sacraments of initiation were Baptism and Eucharist. Yet, this is not true. Much like today, the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation are deeply connected to each other. Once a person had been baptized and come out of the waters, they were immediately anointed with oil. The anointing with oil is Confirmation. The early church spoke highly in regards to the value of this anointing as the sign of the Holy Spirit coming down upon the person. Baptism wasn't enough. The person needed the gift of the Holy Spirit to be a complete Christian. Since most baptisms were adult baptisms, the two Sacraments happened at the same time. As the church grew, developed, and became dominant, baptism of children became the most common form. The church, however, didn't give permission for the priests to call down the Holy Spirit upon the newly baptized but kept that power with the bishops. Hence, the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation got separated often by years.

The Eucharist

Often people turn to the words of Jesus to either treat the Eucharist as a symbol or as the Body and Blood of Jesus. The church fathers were not divided on this issue. For the early church, the Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Jesus and there is simply no other way to understand it. Justin martyr, who lived around 150 AD and was a disciple of St. John the Apostle, wrote this:

“And this food is called among us *eucharistia*, of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes the things that we teach are true...For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but we have been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.” (The Apology of Justin Martyr)

The early church was unequivocal about their understanding of the Eucharist: it is the Body and Blood, flesh and blood, of Jesus. They eat his flesh. Sometimes the Romans would challenge the Christians as cannibals for their beliefs as evidence of this truth. Around the 4th century, we have records of Christians gathering around the extra consecrated bread that is reserved for the sick to pray. They had such a strong belief in the true presence of Jesus’ Body and Blood in the Eucharist that they found value in spending time praying in its presence.

The Mass and Liturgy

The Mass was the center of Christian prayer, the community, and their sense of God. The earliest Christians understood that the Mass is the celebration of the living Lord. During the Mass, the people gathered would listen to the Scriptures being proclaimed, hear the bishops (presider and eventually priest) expound upon the truths of Scripture, and celebrate the physical presence of Our Lord by consuming the Eucharist. In this one celebration were all the essential elements of the Christian life. Justin Martyr wrote a detailed description of this celebration:

“On the day called Sunday all who live in the cities or in the country gather in one place and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the one who is presiding instructs us in a brief discourse and exhorts us to imitate those noble things. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers...When we have finished the prayer, the bread is brought forth, and wine and water, and the presiding minister offers up prayers and thanksgiving to the best of his ability, and the people assent, saying the Amen; after this the consecrated elements are distributed and received by each one.”

Mass in the early church was quite unified from what we may think. Although the prayers differed across regions and church, the structure remained the same. They always gathered to read the accounts of Jesus’ life, the writings of the apostles, or the Old Testament, then they would offer prayers, pray the offering prayer, and consume the Body and Blood of Jesus in the Eucharist. Over time the celebration became more varied with additional prayers added in some regions but the standard form remained the same even into the present day.

Mass grew over the course of the first centuries. Under the apostles, they celebrated the Lord’s Supper, the Mass, on Saturday evening marking the coming of the Lord on Sunday. Around 10

years later, this practice moved to Sunday morning. Over the course of the 1st century, the number of Masses increased from once a week on Sunday to various times throughout the week to commemorate the death of the martyrs. By the end of the 4th century it was common for Masses to be celebrated several times a week with bishops preaching anywhere between 3 to 5 times a week with a congregation present. This increase in both Masses celebrated and amount of preaching shows the value and centrality of the Mass in the lives of the early Christians.

The Mass was not simply an event. As Augustine said in one of his sermons: the liturgy “makes present what took place in time past, and in this way it moves us as if we were actually watching our Lord hanging on the Cross.” The Mass was not simply an event, a gathering, or a set of rituals. It was the presentation of the one event of Jesus’ Passion, death, and Resurrection made present to the worshipping community. It was the central act of worship through which the people encountered the one true God and came to know him. Through the Mass, the people understood the events of Jesus’ life, the mystery of their salvation, and came to understand God.

The big question that many wrestled with is, how does this event compare to the sacrifices of the Old Testament? The church fathers spent time comparing and understanding the connection of Jesus’ new act of worship to the one of the Old Testament. The Old Testament sacrifices were bloody events requiring the death of animals whereas the Mass of the New Testament didn’t require blood or animals at all. Were they really the same? Yes and no. The fulfillment of the sacrifices of the Old Testament in the death of Jesus was the one sacrifice through which no more were required. They understood that the unbloodied sacrifice of the New Testament era was the completion of the Old Testament and the final sign through which God brought his work to completion. St. John Chrysostom writes:

“Do we not offer the sacrifice daily? Indeed we do offer it daily, re-presenting his death. How then is it one sacrifice and not many? ... We offer the same person, not one sheep one day and tomorrow a different one, but always the same offering... There is one sacrifice and one high priest who offered the sacrifice that cleanses us. Today we offer that which was once offered, a sacrifice that is inexhaustible. This is done as a remembrance of that which was done then, for he said ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’ We do not offer another sacrifice as the priest offered of old, but we always offer the same sacrifice. Or rather we re-present the sacrifice.”

Jesus is never exhausted by the one sacrifice neither is it a once and done event. The Mass is a remembrance, a memorial, a remembering, of the one central event of our salvation continually celebrated as the one event but also celebrated many times without changing. Here in the Mass, the Christians found their God and met him face-to-face.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem

St. Cyril was born around 315 in where we generally agree is Jerusalem. Like most of the church fathers, we know little about Cyril’s early life and childhood. He was born around the same time as the peak of the Arian controversy and the Council of Nicaea. Both of these events had major impacts on his life. For the majority of his life, his ministry, teachings, and life would be surrounded by heretics and heretical movements vying for power and trying to exile him.

Cyril wrote a decent amount about himself that allows us a glimpse into his world. He writes about the importance of honoring your parents to his catechumens indicating his great reverence and care for his parents. Additionally, he gave descriptions of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Church of the Nativity before their renovation giving us a sense of their structure and style. His family was very devout. One of his cousins became a bishop.

The details we know about his life come after he was ordained a deacon and then a priest under St. Maximus. Respected for his intellect and care, he was put in charge of the catechumens. When St. Maximus died, they named Cyril as the bishop of Jerusalem. Since he was friends with the bishop of Caesarea, the Arian supporters believed that they finally had another supporter as a bishop. They were wrong. Cyril became a staunch supporter of orthodoxy against the Arians leading to many struggles.

Everything began to unravel following a famine that hit Jerusalem. During the famine, Cyril sold church property to care for those who have become impoverished by the famine. Later, Acacius, the bishop of Caesarea, got into a territorial dispute with Cyril. The questions at hand was whether Acacius had authority over all of Palestine or just Caesarea. Cyril held that Jerusalem was an apostolic seat and therefore not under his jurisdiction. Acacius accused Cyril of selling off church property to actors and other people who desecrated it.

Cyril moved to Tarsus while awaiting an appeal on this issue from the emperor. Emperor Constantius called a council to resolve this dispute. When Acacius arrived at the council and saw that Cyril was also there, he refused to come claiming that anyone in dispute should not be present. Desiring for an official council, they allowed Acacius' request and removed Cyril. When Acacius refused to testify, the dispute was thrown out. Yet, Cyril was still not able to return from exile.

Under Justinian II, he required the return of all exiled bishops. Acacius was at his game again to try to get Cyril removed. The next emperor removed Cyril from his see for 11 years. He finally returned to Jerusalem after his years of exile. The Council of Constantinople in 381 finally resolved his case, exonerated him, and allowed him to return to his diocese. He remained as bishop of Jerusalem for 8 more years before his death in 386 at about 70 years old. Cyril is best known for his catechetical work on the Sacraments and the basics of Christianity.

The Catechetical Lecture Series

St. Cyril delivered this lecture series probably around 349 AD as part of a Lenten series for a group of high-class of catechumens. This series is not a simple series on the basics of Christianity. Instead, Cyril takes time to go through each major point of doctrine including all the members of the Trinity and their part in salvation history. Cyril used minimal notes when giving these lectures. Those who listened to them, brought a scribe who copies down Cyril's words to retain them.

The lectures are arranged in systemic order. The first four focus on the preparation and explanations of baptism. Essentially, Cyril is building up the Christian life from the foundation through the mystery of the Creed. It was common in the early church for those who were brought

into the Church to receive the Creed before they were baptized. They were given the Creed to reflect on its truths and come to adopt it into their lives. Cyril is following a similar format. He starts with the entryway into the life of the Church and then builds the Creed from there. Lecture 4 is kind of an outlier to his system. This chapter focuses on virtue and vice and the importance of living a Christian life. From 5 until the end, he focuses on the principal parts of the Creed namely the nature of the Trinity and the way we are saved.