

## THE GREATEST EUCHARISTIC SERMON<sup>1</sup>

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It was not in a grand cathedral nor to an assembly of the learned that the most sublime exposition of the Eucharist was unfolded. The immediate results were not even successful. For, as the great Cardinal tells us, "the discourse opened amidst the wonder, the admiration, the reverence of multitudes; it closed with the scoffs and persecution of the Jews, the desertion of His disciples, and the vacillating perplexity of His chosen twelve."<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, it was a matchless piece of oratory. It taught a doctrine of unfathomable wisdom; it offered a supreme happiness to men; it revealed consummate skill in its development; it was divinely eloquent because divinely spoken. With the sermon on "the Beatitudes," preached from the mountain pulpit, with the pastoral upon the "Good Shepherd," and with the farewell discourse on "Christian Charity," this "Promise of the Eucharist" must be classified.

Divine Providence had fittingly prepared the occasion<sup>3</sup> of its delivery. The miraculous feeding of the multitude which had followed Christ had awakened among them an enthusiasm to proclaim Him king. This purpose had been thwarted by His flight. Then a rough night at sea disillusioned the Apostles, and His mysterious transit to Capharnaum diverted the intention of the people; but the ardor that had been aroused was still unquenched. Thus, when Christ arose in the synagogue the next day He possessed an ascendancy which peculiarly favored the promulgation of the new doctrine. He held the interest of the masses, and from the miracle of yesterday, which was but a figure of the New Bread, could easily introduce and explain the Eucharistic dogma. "Amen, amen, I say to you," He solemnly began, "you seek Me, not because you have seen miracles, but because you did eat of the loaves and were filled. Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that which endureth unto life everlasting, which the Son of man will give you. For Him hath God, the Father, sealed."<sup>4</sup> The exordium was complete. He had a New Bread to give them which would nourish unto life eternal. To obtain it a

<sup>1</sup> John, ch. vi.

<sup>2</sup> Wiseman, Lectures on the Real Presence, Philadelphia, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> John, ch. vi, v. 1-25.

<sup>4</sup> *ibidem*, v. 26-27.

certain labor was required, and He indicated what that labor was—belief in Him. For no one can admit the possibility of the Eucharist until he has first accepted the divinity of Christ. Grant that Christ is divine, and there should be no difficulty in accepting His Eucharistic presence. Omnipotence can do all things. But the fault of the Jews was precisely that of the non-Catholics of today—they would neither assent to the motives of credibility nor pray for enlightenment. Consequently, they rejected the Eucharist.

This incredulity of the Jews showed itself from the very start. As soon as they understood what was required of them, they asked Christ for a proof of His divinity, intimating to Him that since the multiplication of the barley loaves was not as great a miracle as the falling of the manna from heaven, He had not yet proved Himself mightier than Moses, who was not divine. Now, the manna had not really fallen from heaven, but had only been distilled from the clouds.<sup>5</sup> So Christ took occasion of this fact to put forth a first argument<sup>6</sup> for His divinity taken from His very nature. Clothing Himself under the figure of bread, He showed that, inasmuch as He had truly come down from heaven, from the very bosom of God, He must be of divine origin. Moreover, He could give life to the world, and God alone is the principle of life. He could even satisfy completely the hunger of the human heart and the thirst of the human intellect—things possible to the infinite alone. In speaking thus He seemed already to be preparing the way for the new doctrine, for such satiation of soul is obtained, in the measure possible to the present life, by union with Christ through Holy Communion, and it is under this aspect that Saint Thomas holds the Eucharist to be necessary for salvation.<sup>7</sup> If, then, the Jews wished to become partakers of His delights they had only to go to Him in the spirit of faith, and pray the Father for the grace to believe. Had they come thus, He would not have cast them out.

There was an easy transition from this to a second argument,<sup>8</sup> drawn from His divine Will. In the very decree of Redemption, in fulfilment of which He had come, He showed that His Will was identical with the Father's, and therefore one with

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<sup>5</sup> MacEvilly, *Exposition of the Gospel of St. John*, Dublin, 1889, p. 120.

<sup>6</sup> John, ch. vi, v. 32-37.

<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theologica* III, q. 73, a. 3.

<sup>8</sup> John, ch. vi, v. 38-40.

it. This unity was confirmed by the absolute perfection with which Christ was executing the divine command; of all that was given Him He lost nothing. But that no doubt as to His omnipotence might remain, He declared that by His own power He would raise up the dead in the final resurrection.

The Jews could not longer doubt His meaning: He had declared Himself to be divine. They, however, only scoffed at the idea. "Is not this Jesus," they said, "the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" After such an assertion it must have been evident to Christ that any attempt to follow up the proof by a revelation of His miraculous birth would be more than useless, for Jewish pride had placed itself above divine wisdom. Nevertheless, the designs of God were not thereby frustrated but rather furthered, since this obduracy gave Christ the opportunity to propose a final proof<sup>9</sup> from His divine omniscience. He expounded it by means of the text: "And they shall be taught of God." For, whosoever seeks from the Father the knowledge of divine things is led to the Son for the full obtaining of it, because He is the eternal Word, begotten by divine comprehension, and endowed with the fullness of infinite wisdom. And, since no one among men possessed perfect knowledge of God, this only-begotten Son deigned to become the teacher of mankind, so that those who desired life immortal might easily attain to it by believing in Him. "Amen, amen, I say unto you: He that believeth in Me, hath everlasting life." This perfected the proof of the divinity of Christ. He who is divine by nature, omnipotent in will and omniscient in intellect, must undoubtedly be God.

The second part of the discourse was but the sequence to this; being God, Christ could give Himself as a eucharist to men. the transition<sup>10</sup> to it is very beautifully made by a "poetic parallelism" which leads from the manna of the desert, through the divinity of Christ, to the promise of the New Bread. As the climax of this progression stands the clear declaration that the new Food is to be the very flesh which the Son of God is about to deliver up on the Cross for the life of the world. Of course the Jews, who would not be convinced of Christ's divinity, declared the new dogma absolutely unbelievable. "How can this man," they said contemptuously, "give us His flesh to eat." But the Master, according to His usual custom of reiterating a doctrine

<sup>9</sup> *ibidem.* v. 45-47.

<sup>10</sup> *ibidem.* v. 48-52.

understood but not believed, repeated the truth six different times,<sup>11</sup> in such unmistakable language that He put beyond doubt His intention of giving His own flesh and blood as man's food.

These repetitions indicate also the effects of this greatest Sacrament. The Eucharist was to give grace, which is the life of the soul; it was to be a pledge of everlasting life and of glorious resurrection. It was to be meat and drink to the soul, and was to do for the spirit all that material food accomplishes in the body. But there would be an effect greater than even these: "He that eateth My flesh, and drinketh My blood abideth in Me, and I in him." The union was to be the closest possible. "As the living Father hath sent Me, and I live by the Father; so he that eateth Me, the same also shall live by Me." Nothing more could be added. To live thus transformed in Christ is the consummation of the spiritual life, the last degree of perfection before the actual adoption into eternal glory.

"This is the bread that came down from heaven," Christ repeated for the last time. His peroration<sup>12</sup> had begun. He was recalling to their minds His divinity and the necessity of accepting it as the only possible means of obtaining the blessings of the Eucharist. "Not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead," He continued, for the New Bread was not to be carnal food, but spiritual, giving spiritual life—"He that eateth this bread, shall live forever," summing up the effects of this most perfect Sacrament in the pledge of future glory. He, their God, had eternal Food to offer them; let them eat and live.

He would have said no more, but the synagogue was in open dissension. The Jews, as stubborn as ever in their incredulity and self-sufficiency, had endeavored to penetrate the very depths of His doctrine by mere reason. They had, consequently, formed a very repulsive conception of His words—slaughtered human flesh and draughts of human blood. But the infinitely patient Jesus made a final effort<sup>13</sup> to clear up their misconception, although they did not deserve such condescension. Was it not sufficient that He had revealed the gift to them? Could they not trust Him for the congruity of the manner in which He would give it? Any gross meaning, however, that they might attach to it would be removed by the fact of His Ascension. And if He

<sup>11</sup> *ibidem.* v. 54-59.

<sup>12</sup> *ibidem.* ch. iv, v. 59.

<sup>13</sup> *ibidem.* v. 62-66.

could miraculously ascend on high, could He not in an equally miraculous and becoming way descend into the souls of men to be their heaven? He had promised to give them His living Self, for of what avail to the soul would be dead flesh, which could at most nourish only the body. The contradictory ideas they had conceived were not due to the obscurity of His words but to their lack of faith in Him, which defect could have been removed by the supernatural grace they would not ask the Father to bestow. Instead of listening to this last appeal, they turned their backs upon the proffered grace and left the synagogue.

He let them go. Rather let heaven and earth pass away than that an iota of His doctrine perish. Let even Judas find in this dogma the beginnings of an unbelief which would lead to downfall, but let the dogma itself stand intact. For not only the Jews and Judas would stumble upon it, but in ages to come others would likewise cast aside belief in that Real Presence and, as a natural consequence, would end by rejecting the very divinity of Christ. Is not this the reason why so many Protestants to-day are doubting the divinity of Jesus Christ?

—Hyacinth Chandler, O. P.