

JUNE 7, 2020: HOLY TRINITY

Exodus 34:4b-6, 8-9 II Corinthians 13:11-13 John 3:16-18

All the theses we were expected to defend during our seminary dogmatic theology courses began with a “definition of terms.” We had to give the meaning or “essential nature” of every word or concept in the thesis. A good way to begin if one is an “either/or” Greek thinker. But if one thinks like our Semitic “both/and” sacred authors, defining terms can be a problem – especially if one of those terms is “God.”

It’s no accident that our Trinitarian definition of God as “three persons in one” wasn’t formulated as such until the Council of Nicea in 325 CE, long after Greek thought had hijacked Christianity. If the question of defining God had come up in the first Christian century I’m certain our biblical authors would have challenged the questioner’s faith. The essential nature of God isn’t something a person of scriptural faith can provide with a simple either/or response. And certainly not something today’s three sacred authors would even think of doing. They’re much more concerned with talking about what they’ve experienced God doing in their lives than in defining who God is.

In today’s Exodus pericope, for instance, we must appreciate that our biblical writers presume a person’s name actually stands for the person. So when God proclaims the name “Yahweh” in front of Moses he/she is giving the great lawgiver an intimate glimpse into God’s nature, a nature which can only be grasped by someone to whom Yahweh’s been “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity.” In the mind of the sacred author, Yahweh is what Yahweh does.

By the way, I trust more and more Christians will gradually begin to use Yahweh’s name and not God or the Lord in their prayers. It’s a long story why that name isn’t employed in most English translations of the Bible. (The Jerusalem Bible is a notable exception.) But, as we hear in this Exodus passage, Yahweh certainly wishes to be called by that name. Why do we constantly refuse to honor his/her wishes?

Though Paul refers to God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in our I Corinthians passage, he doesn’t mention anything about three persons in one God. He simply seems to be reminding his community about the different ways in which the God we follow is a “God of love and peace.” No matter how God comes into our lives – for Christians through Jesus and the Holy Spirit – these two attributes are always present. According to the Apostle, they’re parts of the divine nature we can and should be imitating.

John especially zeroes in on the love dimension. In one of the best-known lines of the Christian Scriptures, he reminds his readers, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.” For John, being God’s Son doesn’t help Jesus lay claim to being the Second Person of the Trinity, but as proof positive that God loves us. He presumes that without some sort of sacrifice there can be no legitimate love. Especially in this passage the evangelist points us to the depth of God’s sacrifice.

It might be providential that Greek thought eventually permeated Christian faith. We probably couldn’t have catechisms without it. (Had we “stuck” with Semitic thought our books of Christian formation would be at least as thick as the Bible!) But on the other hand, such a way of either/or thinking also made it more convenient for us to define God rather than reflect on God’s actions in our lives. Certainly left us off the hook. I don’t know how someone would go about imitating a definition.

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JUNE 14, 2020: BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14b-16a I Corinthians 10:16-17 John 6:51-58

The early biblical Christian community would have looked at today's feast through different eyes than those looking at it today. We've been trained to see the "feeding" element of Christ's Body and Blood; they saw the "presence" element.

We see the former in today's choice of a first reading. The comparison of Christ's Body and Blood to the manna in the wilderness is classic. Moses reminds the Chosen People, "He (Yahweh) let you be afflicted with hunger, and then fed you with manna . . ." No matter the dangers the Israelites faced during their desert wanderings, Yahweh's timely manna provided the strength to see them through their journeys unscathed. The similarity with Christ's Body and Blood needs no explanation.

John's late first century CE reflection on both Eucharistic elements certainly reinforces that theology. Immediately after the bread miracle, his Jesus states, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them on the last day." The evangelist is convinced Christ's Body and Blood are the only "true food and true drink" Christians need to attain eternal life.

Yet a generation or two before John wrote his gospel, Paul looked at the Eucharist through a different filter. Today's I Corinthians passage is very significant; it contains the earliest known biblical reference to the Lord's Supper. But once pulled out its chapter 10 context, it's almost impossible to appreciate Paul's unique Eucharistic theology.

At this point of his letter, Paul's challenging the overconfidence of some in the Corinthian community who believe they can continue taking part in their old pagan sacrifices yet remain followers of Jesus in good standing. He argues that just as receiving from the Eucharistic cup makes them one with the risen Jesus, so the pagan temple rituals in which they engage make them one with those other gods; an obvious contradiction for a disciple of Jesus. Then, bringing up a point John never makes about the Lord's Supper in his oft-quoted chapter 6, the Apostle mentions his belief that receiving the cup and bread also make the participants one with one another. Symbolized by the one loaf, it transforms them into the one Body of Christ. (I wonder what our use of individual "hosts" signifies.)

Paul doesn't have to ask the next question. It's obvious. How could the Body of Christ take part in such an abomination?

One of the reasons Catholic celebrations of the Lord's Supper eventually transformed themselves into just a series of "robotic actions" springs from our church's zeroing in only on John 6 and ignoring other early Eucharistic theologies, especially that of Paul in I Corinthians. The "Mass" simply became the way this special food and drink was produced. No longer was it a communal meal in which the participants became one with both the risen Christ and one another. One special person did all the "work;" everyone else just "applauded" when it was over. (Until the liturgical reforms of the mid-20th century practically no one – except the priest - even dared to actually eat any of this unique food!)

Ad nauseam I repeat the late Bishop Frank Murphy's 1964 instruction to us about-to-be-ordained priests. "Your main task during the Eucharist isn't just to say the right words or make the right gestures; it's to help form the participants into the Body of Christ."

Unfortunately, it didn't take us long to figure out it was far easier to "cook" the meal than it was to create the unique environment in which that one of a kind meal was to be eaten.

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