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# O Sacrum Convivium – St Thomas on the Eucharist

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**Abstract**

St Thomas Aquinas' antiphon from the Office of Corpus Christi, *O sacrum convivium*, enjoys popularity and remains part of the Liturgy of the Hours, as do other parts of the Office and Mass he composed for the feast. It offers a survey of Eucharistic theology, evoking past ('the memory of the Passion') present ('the soul filled with grace') and future ('pledge of future glory'). It points, too to the Eucharistic flavour of authentic Christian spirituality, always remembering the self-giving of the Saviour 'for us', becoming what it has received in the Eucharist, and straining forward towards a goal whose foretaste is ever on our lips. On other occasions Aquinas points to these three dimensions of any sacrament, finding its source in the passion of Christ, its content in the effect achieved in the soul and its aim in the glory of communion with God. a goal whose foretaste is ever on our lips. On other occasions Aquinas points to these three dimensions of any sacrament, finding its source in the passion of Christ, its content in the effect achieved in the soul and its aim in the glory of communion with God.

**Keywords**

Aquinas, Eucharist, Sacrament, Corpus Christi, '*O sacrum convivium*'

The Office and Mass for the feast of Corpus Christi is one of St Thomas Aquinas' lesser but best-known works. He composed it at the petition of Pope Urban IV, who had proclaimed Corpus Christi a universal feast in his Bull *Transiturus* of 11 August 1264. St Thomas actually composed two offices for the feast: a provisional one entitled *Sapientia* (from its initial word) and a final text entitled *Sacerdos in aeternum*. Texts from this office are well known to generations of Catholics for they have found their way into the Benediction service (*O salutaris hostia*, *Tantum ergo sacramentum*, and the prayer: '*Deus qui nobis sub sacramento mirabili* . . .'). Many of the Mass texts also remain in the Missal of Paul VI: the collect prayer as given above,

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the prayer over the offerings, the prayer after communion and the Sequence (*Lauda, Sion, Salvatorem*).

One of the most popular phrases from the Office is the antiphon at the *Magnificat* (now used at Evening Prayer II of the *Liturgy of the Hours*). It is entitled 'O Sacrum convivium' and offers a summary of eucharistic doctrine:

> O sacred banquet
> In which Christ is received,
> The memory of the Passion recalled,
> The mind filled with grace,
> and a pledge of future glory given us, alleluia.

The original Latin has been set to music by many composers as a motet:

> *O sacrum convivium.*
> *In quo Christus sumitur,*
> *Recolitur memoria passionis eius,*
> *Mens impletur gratia,*
> *Et futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur, alleluia.*

The other antiphons in the Office are taken (or adapted) from the Bible; this one has been composed for the occasion, and reflects St Thomas' thinking on the Eucharist. Its popularity seems to derive from its intensity and sweep, containing as it does a reference to the *past* (recalling the Passion), the *present* (displaying the soul filled with grace) and the *future* (anticipating the glory of heaven).[1]

St Thomas' brief resumé of the doctrine of the Eucharist in this antiphon can also help us in our personal appropriation of the mystery. In this meditation, I will follow the three stages of the antiphon I have just referred to.

## 1. 'The memory of the passion recalled'

'Do this in memory of me' (1 Cor 11:24). As Gregory Dix, the Anglican liturgical scholar, put it:

> Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge of the fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. Men have found no better thing than this to do

[1] St Thomas himself referred elewhere to the threefold temporal structure of Eucharistic delight: '*Delectatio causatur ex tribus, ex memoria preteritorum, ex spe futurorum et ex sensu presentium*' (from the sermon '*Homo quidam fecit cenam*', 2).

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> for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the Parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America... One could fill many pages with the reasons why men have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them.... At the heart of it all is the Eucharistic action, a thing of an absolute simplicity as done by a young Jew with his friends on the night before he died.... He had told them to do this henceforward with the new meaning 'for the anamnesis' of him, and they have done it always since.[2]

The Passover supper was itself a 'memory', to be recalled and retold every time it was celebrated: 'And when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the Lord's passover, who passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he slew the Egyptians but spared our houses' (Ex 12:26-27). In this ceremony, the people entered into their identity as the chosen people of God, and experienced the power which raised them up and saved them from slavery.

In the same way, the Eucharist, by recalling the Lord's death and renewing the work of our redemption, works on our memory too, that store-house of our identity before God and 'reminds' us of who *we* are. As Catherine Pickstock remarks in her distinguished analysis of the Roman liturgy, 'the identity of the [worshipping] I is... not established ahead of the journey but contemporaneously with its pilgrimage'[3]. Our Christian 'I' is finally formed and given its full identity by exposure to the liturgy, in which we come to 'understand the waters in which [we] were cleansed, the Spirit by which [we] were reborn, the blood by which [we] were redeemed' (Prayer for 2nd Sunday of Easter, from the *Liturgy of the Hours*).

## 2. 'The mind filled with grace'

All the sacraments of the Church bring salvation and life to the Church, but they do so in and through the signs which embody them to us: signs of the human world, signs of the covenant, signs which have been taken up by Christ. As the Catechism puts it, 'the sacraments of the Church do not abolish but purify and integrate all the richness of the signs and symbols of the cosmos and of social life'. The Eucharist does just this; it reaches in to one of the most

[2] Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre, 1945, p. 744), quoted in *Antiphon* 6:2 (2001), p. 47.

[3] Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing. On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, p. 184).

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powerful signs we have: that of sharing a meal with one another, and offers us a reading of that profoundly human moment, the moment of the breaking of bread. St Augustine's famous remark, which he placed on the lips of the Lord:

> I am the food of strong men; grow and you shall feed on me; nor shall you change me, like the food of your flesh into yourself, but you shall be changed into my likeness. (*Confessions*, Bk 7 ch 10)

can give us some clue of the intimacy offered by Jesus in Holy Communion, the risk which he takes, and asks us to take, because the food for our souls is not assimilated by us; the Church is, rather, assimilated to Christ: 'he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him'.

If it still seems excessive to suggest that the mind may be 'filled' with grace, we can turn to the related image which Pope Benedict introduced at his World Youth Day homily in Cologne:

> To use an image well known to us today, this is like inducing nuclear fission in the very heart of being – the victory of love over hatred, the victory of love over death. Only this intimate explosion of good conquering evil can then trigger off the series of transformations that little by little will change the world. All other changes remain superficial and cannot save. For this reason we speak of redemption: What had to happen at the most intimate level has indeed happened, and we can enter into its dynamic.

In the Eucharist, Love is 'out of control', at least as seen from our side of the relationship, and can indeed 'control' us (2 Cor 5:1), transforming, first ourselves, then the world.

The Church asks for this every day at Mass, knowing that she is *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, the Church drawing her life from the Eucharist. In a particular way she asks for this on the feast of St Augustine, who was so imbued with the way that the Eucharist makes Christ present to the Church and to every Christian:

> Lord,
> make us holy by our sharing at the table of Christ.
> As members of his body,
> help us to become what we have received.
> (Prayer after Communion)

## 3. 'The pledge of future glory'

'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day' (Jn 6:54). We are used to proclaiming that when we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim the death of the Lord Jesus until he comes in glory. Anticipation is

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the order of our days, while we approach the sacrament of Christ's presence among us today and every day, for we know that our Christian life is both not yet completed and already given to us in its fullness.

This pledge contains two moments: first, the *already*: Those who feed on Christ in the Eucharist need not wait until the hereafter to receive eternal life: *they already possess it on earth*, as the first-fruits of a future fullness which will embrace man in his totality . . . . With the Eucharist we digest, as it were, the "secret" of the resurrection. (John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 18); second, the *not yet*: The Eucharist nourishes a 'straining towards the goal' which is part and parcel of the Christian life in this world. This is the experience which St Paul relates in Philippians 3: making Christ his own was the be-all and end-all of his life since Christ had made him *his* own (a very Eucharistic state, reflected by St Augustine above) but he had to admit that he had not yet achieved this, so he 'forgot what lay behind and stretched forward towards the the upward call of God in Christ Jesus' (Phil 3:13-14). Our faith never permits us to sit back, having achieved our aim. *Deus semper maior*.

This has been reflected in the lives of the saints: how many of them have 'strained forward' and discerned the future of the Church in ways that more ordinary mortals find puzzling: we might think of the Curé of Ars' determination that his unlikely parish was to be a beacon of holiness and reconciliation; St Paul's insight that even the created world around him was groaning in one great act of giving birth, awaiting the revelation of the children of God (cf. Rom 8:22-24); Blessed John XXIII's insight that the Church needed to speak eternal truths to the world in a fresh way.

## Conclusion

St Thomas offers an explanation of the theology of *O sacrum convivium* in his description of what sacraments signify:

> a sacrament properly speaking is that which is ordained to signify our sanctification. In which three things may be considered: the very *cause* of our sanctification, which is Christ's passion; the *form* of our sanctification, which is grace and the virtues; and the ultimate *end* of our sanctification, which is eternal life. (ST III, q. 60, a. 3)

Firstly, each sacrament conjures up the passion of Christ and the paschal mystery as a whole for it is the cause at work in the holiness of a Christian, for 'by his death he gave life to the world'; it also makes us aware of the 'form', the identity of Christian holiness, which is not merely a set of virtues or achievements, it is Christ in person, whose life we come to live; finally it reminds us of our goal,

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that this dwelling with God points to a fulfilment which cannot yet be achieved, but grows ever closer:

> Consequently a sacrament is a sign that is both a reminder of the past, i.e. the passion of Christ; and an indication of that which is [now] effected in us by Christ's passion, i.e. grace; and a prognostic, that is, a foretelling of future glory.' (*ibid*.)

Our Christian life is taught by this threefold dimension of the Eucharist: endlessly re-discovering its source and power, not in one's own efforts, but in Christ's self-giving to the Father on our behalf; finding its truest identity in the intimacy of Christ's presence to us and in us; and endlessly straining forward for a prize which is already given, not yet complete, and whose dawning glory sheds light on everything we do, turning it into a foretaste of that kingdom where the Father's will brings peace to our hearts.

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