

## CHAPTER VI

### THE PRE-NICENE BACKGROUND OF THE LITURGY

WE have said that despite its extreme structural simplicity there was no ideal of squalor or poverty about the pre-Nicene celebration of the eucharist. The list of church plate at Circa and many other such indications are a sufficient guarantee of that. The baptistery attached to the house-church at Dura-Europos (*c.* A.D. 230) was painted from floor to ceiling with pictures of scenes from the Old and New Testaments, and a similar decoration of the assembly-room of the church had just been begun when the building was destroyed. There could be a considerable degree of splendour about the setting of the *ecclesia* in a great Roman patrician house, and even where this was lacking attempts were evidently made to supply some dignity. There was no puritan cult of bareness for its own sake.

There was, too, an element of ceremony in the celebration and a good deal of moving about. The rite was viewed essentially as an action, and a number of people cannot combine to take different parts in a corporate action without some such element of ceremony, in the sense of organised and concerted movement. It was a large part of the deacon's 'liturgy' by his 'proclamations' to direct and give the signal for these movements. There was, too, an element of solemnity; the bishop's prayer was probably chanted as the Jewish prayers had been chanted. The use of the informal speaking voice for any part of the eucharist appears to be an innovation of the Latin churches in the early middle ages; for the eucharistic prayer itself it was not known before the Reformation. One cannot make much of the use by pre-Nicene writers of *dicere* (to say) in connection with the prayers. The ancients habitually used this word of a *recitative*, *e.g.* *dicere carmen* (*lit.* = 'to say a song'). Probably the immemorial preface-chant of the West<sup>1</sup> represents approximately the way in which the whole eucharistic prayer was originally recited there. Very similar intonations are traditional for the public prayers of the liturgy all over the East.

When all is said and done, the impression left by the early evidence about the celebration of the eucharist is one not so much of simplicity as of great *directness*, as became a deliberately 'domestic' act. There was no elaborate or choral music at the eucharist as at the synaxis; no special vestments or liturgical ornaments or symbolism, nothing whatever to arouse the emotions or stir the senses or impress the mind—just a complete and intense concentration upon the corporate performance of the eucharistic action in its naked self, without devotional elaborations of any kind whatever.

<sup>1</sup> In its 'ferial' not 'festal' form. The latter is known to be a later elaboration.

It is very easy for us to romanticise the life and worship of the primitive christians. What was conventional in the social setting of their day has for us the picturesqueness of the strange and remote; what was straightforward directness in their worship has for us the majesty of antiquity. It is a useful thing occasionally to transpose it all into the conventions of our own day and look at the result.

Suppose you were a grocer in Brondesbury, a tradesman in a small way of business, as so many of the early Roman christians were. Week by week at half-past four or five o'clock on Sunday morning (an ordinary working-day in pagan Rome) before most people were stirring, you would set out through the silent streets, with something in your pocket looking very like what we should call a bun or a scone. At the end of your walk you would slip in through the mews at the back of one of the big houses near Hyde Park, owned by a wealthy christian woman. There in her big drawing-room, looking just as it did every day, you would find the 'church' assembling—socially a very mixed gathering indeed. A man would look at you keenly as you went in, the deacon 'observing those who come in',<sup>1</sup> but he knows you and smiles and says something. Inside you mostly know one another well, you exchange greetings and nod and smile; (people who are jointly risking at the least penal servitude for life by what they are doing generally make certain that they know their associates). At the other end of the drawing-room sitting in the best arm-chair is an elderly man, a gentleman by his clothes but nothing out of the ordinary—the bishop of London. On either side of him is standing another man, perhaps talking quietly to him. On chairs in a semicircle facing down the room, looking very obviously like what they are—a committee—sit the presbyters. In front of them is a small drawing-room table.

The eucharist is about to begin. The bishop stands and greets the church. At once there is silence and order, and the church replies. Then each man turns and grasps his neighbour strongly and warmly by both hands. (I am trying to represent the ancient by a modern convention. The kiss was anciently a much commoner salutation than it is with us in England, but it implied more affection than does merely 'shaking hands' with us.) The two men by the bishop spread a white table-cloth on the table, and then stand in front of it, one holding a silver salver and the other a two-handed silver loving-cup. One by one you all file up and put your little scones on the salver and pour a little wine into the loving-cup. Then some of the scones are piled together before the bishop on the cloth, and he adds another for himself, while water is poured into the wine in the cup and it is set before him. In silence he and the presbyters stand with their hands outstretched over the offerings, and then follow the dialogue and the chanted prayer lasting perhaps five minutes or rather less. You all answer 'Amen' and there follows a pause as the bishop breaks one of the scones

<sup>1</sup> *Didascalia*, ii. 57.

and eats a piece. He stands a moment in prayer and then takes three sips from the cup, while the two men beside him break the other scones into pieces. To each of those around him he gives a small piece and three sips from the cup. Then with the broken bread piled on the salver he comes forward and stands before the table with one of the deacons in a lounge suit standing beside him with the cup. One by one you file up again to receive in your hands 'The Bread of Heaven in Christ Jesus', and pass on to take three sips from the cup held by the deacon, 'In God the Father Almighty and in the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit in the holy church', to which you answer 'Amen'; then you all file back again to where you were standing before. There is a moment's pause when all have finished, and then most of you go up to the bishop again with a little silver box like a snuff-box into which he places some fragments of the Bread. You stow it in an inside pocket, reflecting perhaps that Tarcisius was lynched six months ago for being caught with one of those little boxes upon him. There is another pause while the vessels are cleansed, and then someone says loudly 'That's all. Good morning, everybody.' And in twos and threes you slip out again through the back door or the area door and go home—twenty minutes after you came in. That is all there is to it, externally. It would be absolutely meaningless to an outsider, and quite unimpressive.

But perhaps it did not all end quite so easily. You might very well never walk back up Maida Vale again. Perhaps the bishop stopped to speak to someone on the front-door steps as he went out, and was recognised by a casual passer-by who set up a great shout of 'Christian! Christian!' And before anyone quite realised what was happening a small jostling crowd had collected from nowhere and someone had thrown a brick through one of the windows; doors and windows were opening all down the street and there was a hubbub of jeers and yells, till a policeman arrived majestically, demanding 'Wot's all this 'ere?' 'It's those — christians again!' shouts someone, and the policeman gets out his notebook and looks severely at the bishop standing with the two deacons just behind him at the foot of the steps. 'Wot's all this about?' And then in response to the accusing shouts of the elbowing crowd there comes the deadly challenge from the policeman, 'Is that right that you're a christian?' And the bishop admits he is a christian. 'There's another of them', says someone, pointing at one of the deacons. 'There's a whole gang of them in there.' The deacons briefly admit their faith, and the policeman looks doubtfully at the house. It's said that they always come quietly, but one never knows. He blows his whistle, more police arrive, the house is entered, and soon afterwards twenty-two people, including the bishop and his deacons and the little grocer from Brondesbury, are marched off to the station.

The proceedings are by summary jurisdiction, as in the case of a raid on a night-club with us. They are all charged together 'with being christians',

*i.e.* members of an unlawful association. Each is asked in turn whether he pleads guilty or not guilty. If he answers 'guilty', his case is virtually decided. The magistrate is perfectly well aware of the christian rule of never denying their religion. Someone's courage fails at the critical moment and he falters 'Not guilty.' Then there is a simple further test to be applied. At the side of the court-room is hung a picture of the king. 'Just go and kneel in front of that picture and say "Lord have mercy upon me", will you?' says the magistrate. (The offering of the conventional pinch of incense or few drops of wine before the statue of the deified emperor, which was the routine test for christianity, involved no more religious conviction than such a ceremony as I have invented here.) Some of the accused go through the prescribed test with white faces and faltering lips. One goes to the picture to do so and his conscience suddenly gets the better of his fear; he knocks the picture off the wall in a revulsion of nervous anger. He is hustled back to the dock and the picture is hung up again. The magistrate, a reasonable man, again asks each of those who have pleaded guilty whether they will even now go through the little ceremony. They all refuse. There is no more to be done, no possible doubt as to the law on the matter: *non licet esse christianos*; 'christians may not exist.' The legal penalty is death, and there is no ground of appeal. As a rule there is no delay. Unless they were reserved for the arena, sentences on christians were usually carried out on the same day. So in our modern analogy fifteen christians were hanged that afternoon at Wandsworth. On other occasions the policy of the administration might have caused private instructions to be issued to the magistrates that the law against christianity is not to be too strictly enforced for the present; a sentence of the 'cat', penal servitude for life and transportation would have been substituted for the death-penalty. Whether this was really much more merciful may be doubted. The imperial lead-mines in Sardinia, for instance, which were the usual convict-station for Roman christians in such a case, must have been even more like Devil's Island than Botany Bay. Most of the prisoners died within two or three years.

We shall not begin to understand what the eucharist meant to christians until we have estimated this background of real danger and intense hatred in a setting of absolutely normal daily life. It is true that organised and official persecution by the state was by no means continuous, that there were long periods when the central government was otherwise occupied, and wide regions where the local authorities were inclined to turn a blind eye to the existence of christians, provided these did not thrust themselves upon their notice. But there were other periods and equally wide regions where official persecution raged with violence for years together. For two hundred years, from Nero to Valerian (roughly A.D. 65-260), christian worship was in itself a capital crime. For another fifty after that, the law against christian assembly relaxed; but to be a christian was, by an illogi-

cality, still brought under the capital charge of *laesa maiestas*. There is the opinion of Ulpian the jurist and the actual contemporary court-record of martyrdoms to prove that even in this period of peace in the latter half of the third century martyrdom was still only a matter of whether you happened to be accused. No one ever knew even in a period when the government was quiescent when persecution might not break out in the form of mob-violence, or what trivial cause might bring upon a man the inescapable official challenge 'Art thou a christian?' Callistus trying to recover a commercial debt from jewish debtors finds them making this charge against him in the prefect's court to avoid payment; and within an hour or two he has been scourged and sentenced for life to the deadly Sardinian mines.<sup>1</sup> Marinus, the soldier accused of christianity by a comrade envious of his promotion to centurion, is dead three hours after the accusation has been lodged.<sup>2</sup> Both these typical stories are reported by contemporaries from periods which rank more or less as times of toleration. We can and should distinguish between the intermittent hostility of the government and the unorganised and unpredictable malignity of the mob or of private informers. But when all has been said that is true in mitigation of the severity of ancient persecutions, for two hundred and fifty years from Nero to Constantine to be a christian was in itself a capital crime, always liable to the severest penalty, even when the law was not enforced. It remains a demonstrable historical fact from contemporary records that during this period thousands of men and women were killed, tens of thousands more suffered grievously in their fortunes and persons, and hundreds of thousands had to put up with the opposition of their families and the suspicion and ostracism of their neighbours for half-a-lifetime and more. And the storm centre throughout the whole period was undoubtedly the eucharist.

When we regard what actually took place in the early eucharistic rite, the fear and hatred it inspired over so long a time seem ridiculous. Yet it is an uncanny fact that there is still scarcely any subject on which the imagination of those outside the faith is more apt to surrender to the unrestrained nonsense of panic than that of what happens at the catholic eucharist. As a trivial instance, I remember that my own grandmother, a devout Wesleyan, believed to her dying day that at the Roman Catholic mass the priest let a crab loose upon the altar, which it was his mysterious duty to prevent from crawling sideways into the view of the congregation. (Hence the gestures of the celebrant.) How she became possessed of this notion, or what she supposed eventually happened to the crustacean I never discovered. But she affirmed with the utmost sincerity that she had once with her own eyes actually watched this horrible rite in progress; and there could be no doubt of the deplorable effect that solitary visit to a Roman Catholic church had

<sup>1</sup> Hippolytus, *Philosophumena*, ix. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Eusebius, *Ecl. Hist.*, VII. xv. 1.

had on her estimate of Roman Catholics in general, though she was the soul of charity in all things else. To all suggestions that the mass might be intended as some sort of holy communion service she replied only with the wise and gentle pity of the fully-informed for the ignorant.

I mention this peculiar opinion of a good and sensible woman because it illustrates well enough a frame of mind among the ancient pagans which was at once a cause and a result of christian secrecy about the eucharist. The gruesome stories of ritual murder and cannibal feasts which have been told since the stone age—when, no doubt, they had their justification—about all unpopular associations, received a fresh impulse from misunderstandings of indiscreet christian talk of receiving 'the Body and the Blood'. The dark suspicions of orgies of promiscuous vice or even organised incest, which the nasty side of men's imaginations is always willing to credit about mysterious private gatherings, were stimulated by talk of 'the kiss' and of 'brothers' and 'sisters'. The point is that these charges against the christians were taken with the utmost seriousness by multitudes not only of the cruel and foolish and ignorant but of normally humane and sensible men. When the heathen slaves of a christian master broke down under the torture always employed in the Roman courts to ensure the truthfulness of a slave's evidence—such was the extraordinary reason seriously maintained for the practice—and proceeded to 'confess' their knowledge of such goings on among the christians, it may have added to the disgust with which the decent pagan regarded all mention of the eucharist, but hardly at all to the strength of the general conviction that the holding of the *ecclesia* ought to be stopped by the authorities at all costs. One has only to read, for instance, the account by an eye-witness at Lyons in A.D. 177 of the pathetic occasion in the persecution there when after just such a 'confession' by heathen slaves the *apostate* christians were mobbed by the crowd as self-confessed 'polluted wretches' (*miarous*), to realise just what associations the very word 'eucharist' would have in the mind of any decent Lyonnais for the next thirty years, or what sort of hysteria a rumour of the holding of christian worship would be likely to work up in the city.

The imperial government was a great deal better informed than the populace. It regarded the church as a potential political danger for precisely the same reasons as any other totalitarian government is bound to do so. At times it took vigorous measures to protect itself against this danger, and it is an instance of Roman governmental capacity that whenever it did so it showed a clear understanding of the problem which confronted it. Active measures were always directed not so much against the holding of christian beliefs as against the expression of that belief in the *worship* of the *ecclesia*. Those officials, for instance, who actually carried out the persecution under the emperor Decius (A.D. 250-251) must have been perfectly well aware from their behaviour that of the thousands of christian apostates who offered sacrifice under threat of instant martyrdom, the vast majority

had on her estimate of Roman Catholics in general, though she was the soul of charity in all things else. To all suggestions that the mass might be intended as some sort of holy communion service she replied only with the wise and gentle pity of the fully-informed for the ignorant.

I mention this peculiar opinion of a good and sensible woman because it illustrates well enough a frame of mind among the ancient pagans which was at once a cause and a result of christian secrecy about the eucharist. The gruesome stories of ritual murder and cannibal feasts which have been told since the stone age—when, no doubt, they had their justification—about all unpopular associations, received a fresh impulse from misunderstandings of indiscreet christian talk of receiving ‘the Body and the Blood’. The dark suspicions of orgies of promiscuous vice or even organised incest, which the nasty side of men’s imaginations is always willing to credit about mysterious private gatherings, were stimulated by talk of ‘the kiss’ and of ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’. The point is that these charges against the christians were taken with the utmost seriousness by multitudes not only of the cruel and foolish and ignorant but of normally humane and sensible men. When the heathen slaves of a christian master broke down under the torture always employed in the Roman courts to ensure the truthfulness of a slave’s evidence—such was the extraordinary reason seriously maintained for the practice—and proceeded to ‘confess’ their knowledge of such goings on among the christians, it may have added to the disgust with which the decent pagan regarded all mention of the eucharist, but hardly at all to the strength of the general conviction that the holding of the *ecclesia* ought to be stopped by the authorities at all costs. One has only to read, for instance, the account by an eye-witness at Lyons in A.D. 177 of the pathetic occasion in the persecution there when after just such a ‘confession’ by heathen slaves the *apostate* christians were mobbed by the crowd as self-confessed ‘polluted wretches’ (*miarous*), to realise just what associations the very word ‘eucharist’ would have in the mind of any decent Lyonnais for the next thirty years, or what sort of hysteria a rumour of the holding of christian worship would be likely to work up in the city.

The imperial government was a great deal better informed than the populace. It regarded the church as a potential political danger for precisely the same reasons as any other totalitarian government is bound to do so. At times it took vigorous measures to protect itself against this danger, and it is an instance of Roman governmental capacity that whenever it did so it showed a clear understanding of the problem which confronted it. Active measures were always directed not so much against the holding of christian beliefs as against the expression of that belief in the *worship* of the *ecclesia*. Those officials, for instance, who actually carried out the persecution under the emperor Decius (A.D. 250–251) must have been perfectly well aware from their behaviour that of the thousands of christian apostates who offered sacrifice under threat of instant martyrdom, the vast majority

remained sincerely convinced christians in belief, even though by the failure of their courage at the moment of trial they now faced life-long exclusion from christian communion. The persecutors were not concerned to produce sincere believers in the deity either of the emperor or of the Olympian gods, but to put an end to the illegal meetings of the christian *ecclesia*. They could be content with the merest pretence of conformity because they could rely on the discipline of the church itself to exclude from the *ecclesia* all who had in any way compromised. The government's attack was pressed all the time upon worship, by striking especially at the clergy with martyrdom or penal servitude, by the confiscation of all property upon which christian worship was proved to have taken place, and by a variety of other measures, all designed to make impossible the holding of the *ecclesia*. But there was no parallel attempt by a counter-propaganda to discredit christian beliefs or to defend pagan ones.

The church being what it was, the act of taking part in the common worship could be accepted by church and state alike as the effective test of christianity. From the point of view of the state it was deliberate treason (*laesa maiestas*). From the point of view of the church the corporate action of the eucharist in the *ecclesia* was the supreme positive affirmation before God of the christian life. There was no place on either view for that modern 'christianity' which owns no allegiance to the church and her worship. To the state an academic belief which did not express itself in worship carried no danger of christian allegiance. To the church belief which did not express itself in worship would have seemed both pointless and fruitless. Christian belief was the condition of admission to that worship, explicitly required before baptism and confirmation, which alone admitted a man to pray with the church, let alone communicate. On the other hand, for a confirmed christian to allow himself to take any part whatever in non-christian worship was 'apostasy', a public declaration that he renounced that faith in Christ as his redeemer which was his passport to worship. Down to A.D. 252 apostasy involved perpetual exclusion from the *ecclesia* in this world and damnation in the next, unless perhaps the lapsed christian might hope to move the mercy of God after death by a life-long penance outside the corporate life of the church. The state was content to accept the logic of the christian principle that religious belief can only be finally and adequately expressed by worship. When the well-organised Decian persecution encouraged apostasy by making compliance easy, and reaped an immense harvest of lapses, it must have seemed that the church was about to be strangled in her own inviolable discipline.

The church met the crisis by a revolutionary change in that discipline, which the government does not seem to have anticipated. In the teeth of bitter opposition from the zealots everywhere, the bishops restored to membership of the *ecclesia* all apostates who showed the sincerity of their repentance by undergoing a period of penance. The lapsed flocked back in



thousands, and the correspondence of S. Cyprian contains abundant evidence with what eagerness they sought to resume their christian life, not as believers—they had never ceased to be that—but as *worshippers*. For the christian as for the persecutor the liturgy formed the very life not only of the church corporately but of the individual soul. It was a statesmanlike move, probably the only one which could have enabled the church to survive the second wave of persecution which the baffled government at once launched against the christian revival under Valerian (A.D. 254–9). The state was eventually distracted by foreign war, and had to own itself unable to stamp out the *ecclesia*. An edict of Gallienus conceded permission to the christians freely ‘to use their *ecclesiae*’, the property in which was restored to them (A.D. 260).<sup>1</sup>

This was a virtual concession of freedom of worship, but it left the legal position ambiguous. Christian worship was no longer in itself a crime, and the church became a tolerated if not a legally recognised association. But christianity was not a legal religion, and the individual christian could still be charged with high treason.

For the next forty years the state simply turned its back upon the fact that the church existed, though everyone was aware that ‘the christian question’ would have to be faced one day. But the forty years of uneasy toleration which ended the third century brought a considerable increase in christian numbers, which together with the liberty of assembly now permitted, began to force upon the church a more regular organisation of her worship. We find special church buildings for this purpose beginning to be erected in many towns and even in some quarters of Rome itself during this period. In Asia Minor especially the church came to number quite a large proportion of the population and could come more into the open. At Nicomedia, the Eastern capital, where high officers of the court and even members of the royal family were attracted to the church, the christian bishop’s cathedral is said to have been the most imposing public building in the city before the end of the third century.

Elsewhere, christians were usually an unpopular minority, and worship had to be conducted with more discretion. But everywhere (as we have seen at Circa) it was now an open secret where christian worship was held and who the christian clergy were. When the last tempest of persecution arose under Diocletian A.D. 303–13—the longest as well as the fiercest the church ever had to face—it was again upon christian worship that it pressed most fiercely. That worship was itself now much more open to attack by reason of its new semi-public organisation. This time, too, there was a real attempt to refute christian teaching by intellectual propaganda, and a systematic destruction of christian literature. The virtual prevention of corporate worship except in the most furtive fashion for nearly ten years

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the text of the edict, *ap. Eusebius, Eccl. Hist., VII. xiii. 1*, which clearly means houses, not ‘churches’ in our sense.

and the gradual extinction of the clergy by martyrdom or apostasy did on this occasion reduce the church to the direst extremities, in a way no previous persecution had ever done. The edicts of toleration put out in 313 by the emperors Maximin and Maximian, and comprehensively ratified and enforced by the new christian emperor Constantine in the following year, came only just in time to save her from complete disorganisation. The West was now finally free from organised persecution by the state, but the Eastern provinces still had to endure it intermittently for another five years.

It will be seen that popular and official persecution of the church had very different motives. The state feared the church; the populace disliked the christians. The state wished to make apostates; the mob as a rule preferred martyrs. It is a constant feature of the genuine *Acta* of the martyrs to find the magistrate arguing and pleading with the prisoner to deny his faith and fulfil the formal test of sacrifice, even delaying and straining the law sometimes to secure something which will pass for a denial, while the mob howl for the prisoner's death.

The Roman judicial standard was on the whole a high one. There is evidence that many of the magistrates did not enjoy the duty of enforcing the law against christians, and recognised its futility and injustice. But though the administration might often be disposed to avoid charging men with christianity, the law placed a fatal weapon in the hands of both the hostility of the mob and private enmity. Once the accusation of christianity had been brought to his notice the magistrate was bound to take cognisance of it. And once a man was put that fatal question 'Art thou a christian?' there was no other way but apostasy or sentence. The magistrate and the martyr were alike helpless. It was always open to a magistrate more energetic or fanatical than his fellows to set the law in motion himself within his jurisdiction. But except when instructions were received from the central administration to 'tighten things up', this appears to have been comparatively rare; and the general practice of changing the local magistrates annually usually ensured a brief duration to such local official action.

It is plain from second and third century christian literature that the great permanent danger to the christians came from the mob. As Tertullian puts it, 'They think the christians are at the bottom of every disaster to the state and every misfortune of the people. If the Tiber floods the city or the Nile fails to flood the fields, if there are portents in heaven or earthquakes on earth, if famine comes or plague, they clamour instantly "Throw the christians to the lion." So many, to one lion?'<sup>1</sup>

Thus the church could not meet the charges of cannibalism and incest, which the man in the street honestly believed about the eucharist, in the only way which might have been effective—though it did not convince my grandmother—by holding the rite with absolute publicity. This was partly at least because the state made the holding of christian worship in itself a

<sup>1</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, xl.

capital crime. In any case she would probably have been reluctant to do this in a pagan world, because the eucharist expressed in its very essence and idea the 'separateness' of the holy church from 'the world that lieth in wickedness.'<sup>1</sup>

There was thus left only the alternative of denying the charges as often as possible in the course of propaganda, and enduring their consequences when this failed—as it invariably did—to convince the public. Justin in the famous 'Open Letter to the Government' which is known as his *First Apology* tried the expedient of describing just what was done at the eucharist with a disarming frankness, which to a modern reader must seem a convincing (and rather skilful) demonstration of its entire harmlessness. Yet it had no effect whatever on contemporary opinion. In his second manifesto of the same kind issued a year or two later, Justin himself obviously despairs of achieving much by this method of reasonableness, and adopts a much more indignant and defiant tone.

Tertullian used instead the method of a biting irony. But it is obvious throughout the book that though he addresses the administration he is really trying to counter the popular rumours about orgies at the eucharist, which are having a very serious effect. He twits the officials with the fact that they have never been able to discover the scantiest factual evidence for these charges—'how many babies any particular person has eaten, how many times he has committed incest, who the cooks were. . . . What a boast for any governor, if he had actually caught a man who had eaten a hundred babies!'<sup>2</sup> But his argument on these things is really addressed not to the officials, who did not take these charges seriously, but to the public which did. 'Suppose these things are true for the moment. I only ask you who believe that such things are done to imagine yourself eager for the eternal life they are supposed to secure. Now! Plunge your knife into an innocent baby that never did anyone any harm, a foundling. Perhaps that is some other christian's office. Well, any way, stand looking down on this human being gasping in death almost before it has lived; wait while its new little soul escapes; catch its gurgling blood and soak your bread in that. Then gulp it down with pleasure! Then lie down and point out where your mother is to lie and where your sister. Take careful note, that when the dogs (chained to the lampstand) plunge all in darkness you may make no mistake. You will have done a sacrilege if you fail to commit incest. By these mysteries and this confirmation you shall live for all eternity. Tell me, now, is eternity *worth* that? . . . Even if you thought so, I deny that you would want it on those terms. Even if you did want it, I deny that you *could* bring yourself to gain it thus. Why then can others, if you cannot? Why can you not, if others can? We are different from you in nature, I suppose—dog-headed men or sciapods? We have a different sort of teeth, or feel a different lust? You believe men can do these things? Then pre-

<sup>1</sup> 1 John v. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, *Ap.*, ii

sumably you can do them. You are a man yourself, just like a christian. If you know you could not bring yourself to do them, then do not believe that others can. . . . I suppose when someone wants to be initiated in this way he first goes to the high-priest of these mysteries, to find out what preparations he must make. And he tells him, "Oh, you will need a baby, a *teeny* baby, which does not understand death and will smile under your knife; and bread in which to catch its squirting blood . . . and above all, you must bring your mother and your sister." What if they will not come, or the convert has none? What about christians who have no near feminine relations? I presume he can be no rightful christian unless he be a brother or a son?"<sup>1</sup>

Of course this sort of firework did no more good than Justin's calculated *naïveté*. Indeed Tertullian's whole *Apology* is so much in the nature of a devastating counter-attack on paganism all along the line that it seems more calculated to infuriate any conventionally-minded pagan who happened to read it than to soothe his alarm at the alleged revolutionary opinions and morals of the christians. But the lurid background of suspicion and calumny about the eucharist and ill-will towards those who took part in it has to be borne in mind in considering the importance that christians attached to its celebration and the reasons why they clung to this ill-famed rite.

These men and women did not run continual risks to attend it merely because there they remembered with thankfulness in a specially moving way the death of Jesus which had redeemed them. They could do that anywhere and alone; some of them did it most of their waking hours. Nor was it simply that in the eucharist alone they could satisfy a personal longing for God by receiving holy communion. As a matter of fact if a devout third century christian on his deathbed could have reckoned up all the communions he had ever made, he would probably have found that the large majority had been made from the reserved sacrament at home, quite apart from the liturgy. These desires of christian personal devotion could be and were satisfied in private in comparative safety, without the dangers and scandal which centred round the eucharist. There was, indeed, a rather striking absence from the primitive eucharistic rite of any devotional practice which was calculated to arouse or feed a subjective piety—no confession of sins or devotions in preparation for communion, no corporate thanksgiving even, nothing but the bare requisites for the sacramental *act*. It was a burning faith in the vital importance of that eucharist *action* as such, its importance to God and to the church and to a man's own soul, for this world and for the next, which made the christians cling to the rite of the eucharist against all odds. Nothing else could have maintained the corporate celebration of the liturgy through the centuries when the *ecclesia* was outside the law.

For these christian men and women were very normal. They were

<sup>1</sup> Tertullian, *Ap.*, viii.

not impossibly heroic. Their answers in the dock often shew that they were very frightened. Even when they were most defiant their rudeness is often a mark of fear. Few men could look forward to the appalling tortures which the courts in the later second century sometimes took to applying—'to make them deny their crime' as Tertullian bitterly remarked, 'not like other criminals to confess it'—without considerable perturbation. Many of them apostatised when it came to the final test, often most of them. The world, the flesh and the devil were as active and deadly with them as they are with christians nowadays. And so was another enemy whose assaults on the church of the martyrs we often ignore though we know its deadening effects on ourselves—routine, the mere fact that one has been trying to be a christian for quite a long time and little seems to come of it. The parable of the Sower was just as true then as now. But these normal men and women were prepared with open eyes to accept the risks and inconveniences they undoubtedly did encounter, just to be present at the eucharist *together and regularly*. I submit that it casts a flood of light on their beliefs about the eucharist and the nature of the church and christian salvation generally, that they attributed this desperate importance not so much to 'making their communion' as to taking part in the corporate action of the eucharist.

It was to secure the fulness of this corporate action that a presbyter *and a deacon* had to be smuggled somehow into the imperial prisons, there to celebrate their last eucharist for the confessors awaiting execution; and S. Cyprian takes it as a matter of course that this must be arranged.<sup>1</sup> To secure this for his companions as best he could, the presbyter Lucian lying with his legs wrenched wide apart in the stocks of the prison at Antioch celebrated the mysteries for the last time with the elements resting on his own breast, and passed their last communion to the others lying equally helpless in the dark around him.<sup>2</sup> To secure this a whole congregation of obscure provincials at Abilitina in Africa took the risk of almost certain detection by assembling at the height of the Diocletian persecution in their own town, where the authorities were on the watch for them, because, as they said in court, the eucharist had been lacking a long while through the apostasy of their bishop Fundanus, and they could no longer bear the lack of it. And so they called on a presbyter to celebrate—and paid the penalty of their faith to a man.<sup>3</sup> To secure this was always the first thought of christians in time of threatened persecution. 'But how shall we meet, you ask, how shall we celebrate the Lord's solemnities? . . . If you cannot meet by day, there is always the night', says Tertullian, bracing the fearful to stay and meet the coming storm.<sup>4</sup> Even when a church had been scattered by long persecution, the duty was never forgotten. 'At first they drove us

<sup>1</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.*, v. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Boll. Acta SS.*, Jan. 7th, iv. 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Cf.* the contemporary *Acta Martyrum Abilitinensium*.

<sup>4</sup> Tertullian, *de Fuga in Persecutione*, 14.

out and . . . we kept our festival even then, pursued and put to death by all, and every single spot where we were afflicted became to us a place of assembly for the feast—field, desert, ship, inn, prison', writes S. Denys, bishop of Alexandria, of one terrible Easter day *c.* A.D. 250, when a raging civil war, famine and pestilence were added to the woes of his persecuted church.<sup>1</sup>

Literally scores of similar illustrations from contemporary documents of unimpeachable historical authority are available of the fact that it was not so much the personal reception of holy communion as the corporate eucharistic action as a whole (which included communion) which was then regarded as the very essence of the life of the church, and through that of the individual christian soul. In this corporate action alone each christian could fulfil for himself or herself the 'appointed liturgy' of his order, and so fulfil his redeemed being as a member of Christ. For my own part I have long found it difficult to understand exactly how the eucharist ever came to be supposed by serious scholars at all closely comparable with the rites of the pagan mysteries. The *approach* is so different. In the mysteries there is always the attempt to arouse and play upon religious emotion, by long preparation and fasts, and (often) by elaborate ceremonies, or by alternations of light and darkness, by mystical symbols and impressive surroundings, and pageantry; or sometimes by the weird and repulsive or horrible. But always there is the attempt to impress, to arouse emotion of some kind, and so to put the initiate into a receptive frame of mind. As Aristotle said, men came to these rites 'not to learn something but to experience something.' The christian eucharist in practice was the reverse of all this. All was homely and unemotional to a degree. The christian came to the eucharist, not indeed 'to learn something', for faith was presupposed, but certainly not to seek a psychological thrill. He came simply to do something, which he conceived he had an overwhelming personal duty to do, come what might. What brought him to the eucharist week by week, despite all dangers and inconveniences, was no thrill provoked by the service itself, which was bare and unimpressive to the point of dullness, and would soon lose any attraction of novelty. Nor yet was it a longing for personal communion with God, which he could and did fulfil otherwise in his daily communion from the reserved sacrament at home. What brought him was an intense belief that in the eucharistic action of the Body of Christ, as in no other way, he himself took a part in that act of sacrificial obedience to the will of God which was consummated on Calvary and which had redeemed the world, including himself. What brought him was the conviction that there rested on each of the redeemed an absolute necessity so to take his own part in the self-offering of Christ, a necessity more binding even than the instinct of self-preservation. Simply as members of Christ's Body, the church, all christians must do this, and they can

<sup>1</sup> Dionys. Al. *ap.* Eusebius, *Ecl. Hist.*, VII. xxii. 4.



do it in no other way than that which was the last command of Jesus to His own. That rule of the absolute obligation upon each of the faithful of presence at Sunday mass under pain of mortal sin, which seems so mechanical and formalist to the protestant, is something which was burned into the corporate mind of historic christendom in the centuries between Nero and Diocletian. But it rests upon something more evangelical and more profound than historical memories. It expresses as nothing else can the whole New Testament doctrine of redemption; of Jesus, God and Man, as the only Saviour of mankind, Who intends to draw all men unto Him by His sacrificial and atoning death; and of the church as the communion of redeemed sinners, the Body of Christ, corporately invested with His own mission of salvation to the world.

Despite all the formalism and carelessness and hypocrisy which a social tradition of the general attendance at the eucharist of all who have been baptised involves, and has always involved, in catholic countries, there is this to be said: that no personal subjective devotion on the part of select individual communicants can manifest Christ as the redeemer of *all* men and of *all* human life, either to themselves or to the world or before God. Nor can the corporate being of the church as His one Body with many members be fulfilled in an action from which the greater part of the baptised and confirmed members are regarded or regard themselves as tacitly excluded.

We do well to approach the mystery of Christ's Body and Blood with the profoundest reverence and searching of heart. Yet a eucharist where the table is 'fenced', even only by the consensus of christian opinion, a eucharist at which frequency has come to be regarded as a special preserve of the clergy and 'the devout', and at which the majority of practising christians are present only on comparatively rare occasions—this has just as much ceased to be the scriptural and primitive eucharist as has the most unprayerful and conventional non-communicating attendance at Sunday mass by the tradesmen of a Sicilian country town.

The unfamiliarity of a vast proportion of 'C. of E.' christians with the eucharist may have begun with a false notion of reverence. It has ended by destroying the true understanding of the eucharist even among many of those who still frequent it. The clergy will all have encountered those choice souls who actually prefer to 'make their communion' only in the peace of a week-day celebration, where three or four leisured people can scatter themselves widely all over the church, and avoid disturbance by the larger congregation at 'the 8 o'clock' on Sunday. It would probably surprise the clergy to find how widespread this self-centred devotion is among the laity, and how many regular communicants would prefer to fulfil their personal religious needs in this way if their situation gave them the week-day leisure. This is not much better than a parody of devotion to the eucharist, which our practice and teaching have somehow succeeded in

implanting as the ideal. Behind it lie centuries of the mediaeval distortion of the eucharist as the focus of a subjective individual piety. In reality it is the very action of Him who came 'to die not for that nation only, but that also He should *gather together in one* the children of God who were scattered abroad.'<sup>1</sup>

John xi. 52.