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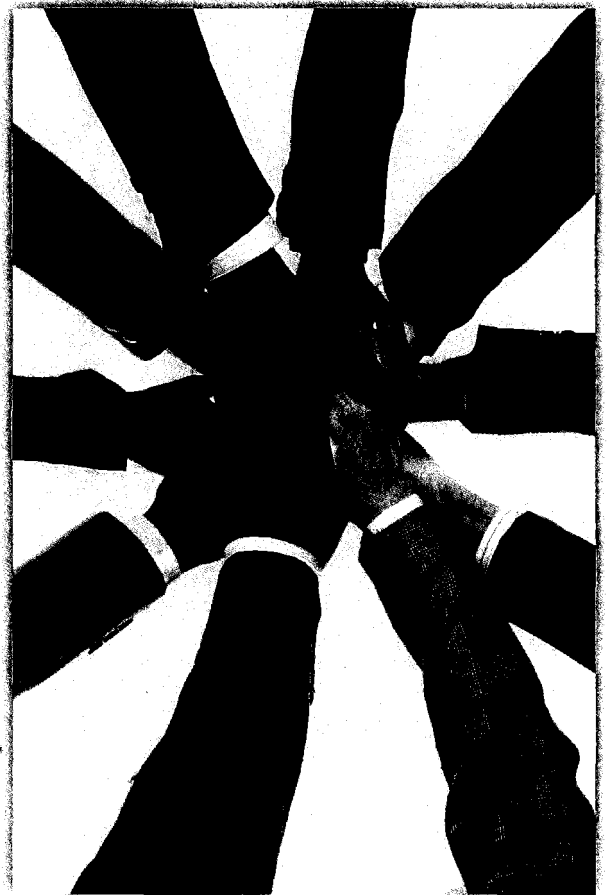
Racism

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NTR WORD AND WORSHIP

Rodica M. M. Stoicoiu

Do This In Memory of Me

"Take this, all of you, and drink from it:
this is the cup of my blood,
the blood of the new and everlasting covenant.
. . . Do this in memory of me."

I remember a time, not so long ago, when taking the cup was something I assumed everyone did. Not taking the cup, like not receiving Communion at all, was something that made you stand out in our small parish community. Now as I stand with my brothers and sisters as one body that prays together and receives together, it seems more and more people are passing the cup by. This is not an isolated event. There are still many communities in this country that have yet to experience the cup as a regular part of their eucharistic celebrations in the first place, and of equal concern are those communities who once shared this experience but do so no longer. Recent official shifts combined with a lack of understanding by many in the pew have led to accepting the cup as an optional addition rather than an integral action of Eucharist. It is time to remind ourselves why we "take this," "do this," in memory of the Christ.

Scripture

Scripture reminds us clearly of the radical nature of our eucharistic actions, actions

rooted in the lived experience of the earliest Christian communities. Their eating and drinking were the means by which they expressed their participation in the paschal mystery (La Verdere, 5). It was these experiences that would go on to influence the works of Paul and the gospel writers. That is to say, celebrating the Lord's Supper was the experience that both preceded scriptural accounts of the Last Supper and shaped the telling of those accounts. In eating the bread they expressed the radical new way of being human that was called forth by the resurrection of Christ. In taking the cup, they accepted the cost of this discipleship. Jesus' followers had been together with him for meals throughout his ministry, and now "the appearance of Jesus as the risen Lord brought them together as never before, inviting them to remember their days with Jesus of Nazareth and seeing Jesus life with them in an entirely new light" (6). Not surprisingly then, the tradition of celebrating the Eucharist would be influential when the various New Testament writers sought to communicate the meaning of Jesus to their respective communities. These writers

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used the liturgical tradition of celebrating the Eucharist to reveal the meaning of living as a Christian outside of worship.

Mark's gospel draws on his community's experience of eating and drinking the Body and Blood of Christ to communicate the truth of being a disciple of Christ. For Mark, the cup is event (59)! He impresses upon his community this reality: to drink of the cup of Christ is to accept the cost of their baptism, to follow Christ and share in the paschal mystery. "In drinking the Eucharistic cup of Christ, the Christian community offers its life for the redemption of many" (59). Whenever the cup appears in the Gospel of Mark it is a symbol of the cost paid by Christ for the salvation of the world and those who drink of it accept their participation in this cost. To drink the cup is to "join in Jesus' sacrifice." This is the cup Jesus asks his disciples to share, "Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized" (Mark 10:38)?

For these early Christians then, the cup they drank is an event, an active participation in the mystery of Christ, and part of a symbolic whole, fully understood only when in relation to the breaking of the bread. Together they are a unity of "word and service, of goods and meal" (Power, 30). To break the bread and to drink the cup is to become one community taking up the challenge of baptism. It is eating the Body to become the Body and drinking the Blood to bear the cost. They are part of one single eucharistic reality but do not have identical meaning. They are complimentary symbols that together communicate a new reality.

Yet something happens to this understanding of the Eucharist. The symbolic whole understood as an event of eating and drinking is replaced with a focus on the Eucharist as object rather than action.

Symbolic and Historical Shifts

To understand how we can go from such an active understanding of the cup, to one

that treats the Eucharist as object rather than event, we need to pay attention to our use of symbols. The expression: "it's not real, it's just a symbol," reflects an understanding present in our culture today. Historically, we moved from an understanding of symbol as something that invites us more deeply into the mystery, engages us, and draws us into relationship to treating symbols with suspicion, as objects more likely to conceal the truth than means of more fully encountering that truth.

Through the early medieval period the church worked hard to maintain the concept of symbol as revelation of reality. Symbols invited the participants more deeply into the reality symbolized (Mitchell, 1998, 98). The cup as the Blood of Christ had a depth of meanings, never exhausted. Over time there was a narrowing of the understanding of symbol and a subsequent loss of sacramental imagination. Symbols become understood in opposition to reality rather than an encounter with the deeper reality signified. The result of this is the treatment of the Eucharist as an object rather than an action. In turn, these objects became the territory of the ordained, the focus rested on the bread and the cup was no longer offered to the laity. This shift in symbolic understanding which treats the cup as object rather than event allowed the celebration of the Eucharist to be understood as a "rite performed by the clergy, as opposed to an action celebrated by the entire community" (Mitchell, 1982, 87-88). Symbol was reduced to sign.

Combine this loss of symbolic understanding with the rise of vernacular languages and the result was "the distancing of lay persons from altar and sanctuary" (Mitchell, 1982, 88). Latin became the language of the clergy, and those who spoke the language have access to the eucharistic species (Mitchell, 1982, 88). There also occurred a series of events that removed the cup from physical contact with the laity. Sipping through a

straw or intinction (dipping) of the bread, both practices used in the care of the sick, over time become normative for all. "It was a case of the extraordinary exceptions becoming the pastoral (though not the theological) norm" (Mitchell, 1982, 96). Under these circumstances the laity continued to receive but no longer handle the cup. When the understanding is introduced that one species alone has the real presence of the whole Christ, the cup seems even less necessary (Mitchell, 1982, 96). This situation persisted for the next nine centuries and took the reforms of Vatican II to return the cup to the fullness of eucharistic action. The Eucharist again is an event, where eating and drinking by all the baptized is the norm.

Final Thoughts

Change is in the air again today. Recent documents once more seem to consider the cup as non-essential for the laity. Limitations on use, whether it be size of congregation, or limited availability of clergy to purify the vessels, or choice of language that treats Eucharist as object, give the impression that the cup, though valued, is not indispensable for the laity (see *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, nos. 100–104). A return to emphasizing the hierarchic is evident in the situation surrounding the purification of vessels and the denial of recent indult requests would seem to bear out the direction of the shift (see *Purification of Sacred Vessels by Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion*).

The need for an energetic catechesis of the cup is obvious. It is our communion in suffering and hope, bitterness and joy with, in, and through the Christ and our parish

communities. Through this cup our suffering is transformed into a new hope and joy only experienced through the power of the paschal mystery. The cup is the cost we are willing to pay to follow the Christ. This is the cup of communion, the cup we share, and it is not an optional addition. We come together as a eucharistic community to take, and drink, in memory of Christ.

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