

FRUIT OF THE VINE

BY KIMBERLY HOPE BELCHER

In the eucharistic liturgy, when the wine and water are mingled during the preparation of the gifts, the prayer and action evoke the centrality of the Incarnation to human salvation: “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” The prayers of the liturgy often develop this theme, calling it the “holy” or “glorious exchange.” For example, on the Fifth Sunday of the Easter Season (as well as several weekdays within that season), the Prayer over the Offerings reads, “O God, who by the wonderful exchange effected in this sacrifice have made us partakers of the one supreme Godhead, grant, we

pray, that, as we have come to know your truth, we may make it ours by a worthy way of life.” This is the prayer recited by the presider while those assembled stand, having just authorized the presider to act on their behalf: “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands. . . .”

If we give in to the modern temptation to fixate on the one moment at which the gifts are consecrated, or at which we receive Communion, these prayers may seem like empty preliminaries. In fact, they are the revelation of the whole work of God redeeming the universe. The key to seeing this, and praying it, is to see a much larger vine behind the eucharistic liturgy.



Christ the True Vine, Westminster
Cathedral (Catholic)

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Photina Rech, in *Wine and Bread*, reflects on the many images of grapevines in Bible and liturgy: “The symbol of wine and the images it engenders—vineyard and vine, grape and winepress—has been called a ‘theme of love.’ It is no less than that divine love which planned and put into effect the work of creation and salvation.”¹ Rech is a beautiful example of the imaginative breadth that can result from long practice of the liturgical sub-creation; her work draws together the tree of life, the vine signifying the goodness of God’s earth, the vineyard of Israel, and the Blood of Christ.

After the consecration, Catholics believe that Christ is truly present in the Blood of Christ under the species of wine. Unfortunately, in our concern that the real presence be taken seriously, we often eliminate “wine” from our vocabulary, with the result that we also eliminate the cosmic connection between the Blood of Christ, the vine of the Lord, and the redemption of creation. In a word, we allow our vine (Christ) to become too small, limiting ourselves to his historical Body and the eucharistic species, when it implies a much larger story.

The theme of the divine love is the center of the story of creation, in which God creates a world in love and then seeks to communicate the divine love to that world. The theme of the vine, then, is the theme of God’s creative love erupting throughout creation. The tree in the garden, Rech reflects, was seen as a grapevine by some of the writers of the early Church, because of the association of wine with life. Because sin fractured the relationship between humanity and God, God called Israel, the holy vineyard, to be the visible manifestation of God’s thirst for union with creation. Jesus Christ was not only God become a human being, but was also the fruit of this holy vine. By his sacrifice, mysteriously made present in the Eucharist, human beings were able to participate in the divine love lost through sin: “The organic wholeness of those who are saved and gathered in Christ’s spiritual

body is a unity of such depth that, according to Christ’s own declaration, it corresponds to the mutual indwelling of Father and Son in the Trinity.”²

That vine was also represented in the Cross, the triumph over both sin and death, where Christ, as new vine, gives forth “the blood of the vine in which life and death reconcile themselves with each other.”³ Thus the Cross, the “tree of life,” becomes the spring of the blood and water that represents the sacraments, and especially the Eucharist (cf. Jn 19:34). God on the Cross thirsts for reconciled humanity, and gives grace for them to drink.

Christian liturgy frequently reads history backwards as well as forwards. In this case, seeing Christ as the new and true grape, the real vine, implies reading all vineyards throughout history as the fruit of God’s longing for creation. “In all the vineyards of the earth,” Rech muses, “God saw—and showed to those who can see—the image of our human longing, the sweet fruit of God’s own loving devotion to humanity, the bleeding grape that is the incarnate Son who sacrificed himself for the guilt of the world. . . . The Son was to make the earth again a flowing and fruit-bearing vineyard of God, a new paradise, in whose center stands the ‘true vine.’”⁴ This paradise “*is already here*,”⁵ and knowing this strengthens Christians baptized into the vine. “When people enter the service of God—in the liturgy or through a life guided by the liturgy—they must know that they have come to the winepress. They will be trod upon and pressed, not in order to perish but to flow over into the wine cellar of God.”⁶

The eucharistic liturgy is the place where mortal beings come nearest to seeing that heavenly and cosmic existence intertwined with human earthly existence. In the cup where the wine and water are mixed is the purity of original creation (water), the fruitfulness, sweetness, and exuberance of earthly fertility (the grape), the history of cultivation of the vine the Lord tended

and called his own (the vine of Israel), the Son's thirst for humanity that brought him out into all the joy and the suffering of human life (the Passover meal and the blood of the Cross), and the enduring desire of God for human people to share in the divine life (the mingling). By our sharing in the cup, by our sharing in the work of the Kingdom, Christians humble themselves to share in the humanity of Jesus, who wants to graft the whole world into the divine love. Every drop of water, every glass of wine, every fruit, and every vineyard speaks of that sacred moment when God mingled with creation at last.



NOTES

1 Photina Rech, *Wine and Bread* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998), 5.

2 Ibid., 16.

3 Ibid., 17.

4 Ibid., 26.

5 Ibid., 27.

6 Ibid., 25.



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