

Maundy Thursday
 1 Cor 11.23-32; Lk 22.14-30
 20 March 2008
 Fr. Patrick S. Allen

+ + +

Here in South Carolina – right here at the Church of the Holy Communion – we are big believers in "tradition." The other evening, Ashley and I made a tragic parking miscalculation and found ourselves driving down Market Street, and she with shock and dismay pointed out to me a tourist wearing white linen trousers and white shoes – more than a week before Easter, if you can believe it. Where do these people come from?

In the Church, when we speak of Tradition, or "Sacred Tradition" – Tradition with a capital "T" – we mean more than quaint, local customs or community habits. No, Tradition in the Church means something much more like a piece of clothing, a "hand-me-down" piece of clothing, that has already been worn by many older brothers and sisters, though it never fades, frays, or wears out.ⁱ A Tradition in this sense, then, is something which is given, received, and handed down – and received and handed down, and received and handed down, and so on. We see this just dynamic at work in our Epistle lesson, St. Paul's great teaching concerning the Lord's Supper. Paul reminds the Corinthians,

*That which I received from the Lord, I also delivered – handed down – to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread...and said, "This is my Body"; ...in the same way also the cup...saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my Blood."*ⁱⁱ

These last days of Holy Week, from this evening to Easter morning, we come right to the heart of the Church's great Tradition: *This is my Body. This is my Blood.* Our Lord gave a Gift to St. Paul and to the other Apostles, and they kept it sacred and inviolate, and they very carefully handed it on to the bishops whom they had appointed as their successors, who themselves handed it down, one generation to the next, in every place the Gospel these two thousand years has travelled, down through the centuries, right down to those of us gathered on the corner of Ashley & Cannon in Charleston, SC, A.D. 2008, tonight.

It might be easy for us, heirs as we are of a glorious and costly patrimony – to forget the Gift itself and to become distracted, preoccupied even, with the wrapping paper – beautiful, important, significant as it is. But the Gift is not silver and gold and silk damask and ethereal chant. The Gift is Christ himself, his Presence with us "even unto the end of the age,"ⁱⁱⁱ Christ giving himself to us and for us: *This is my body. This is my blood.* The Gift and Giver is Jesus, "both priest and victim in the Eucharistic feast."^{iv}

That's the Gift, the Tradition, that which the Lord gave and the Church treasures – his Body and Blood, Christ with us. It's a shocking thing to say, a shocking thing to believe. So it's tempting to try to attenuate the Tradition, to domesticate it to our own refined sense of good taste and propriety. To avoid embarrassment by saying, "What we have here, beautiful in its simplicity, evocative of and resonate as it is with our primal desires – what we have here is a symbol."

But were we to say that, then what we would "have here is a failure to communicate," and I intend the pun. Because that would not be the Gift handed down and entrusted to us. Wine and bread cannot atone for sin. Wine and bread have no life of their own to give, no more than – perhaps less than – did the flesh of bullocks and blood of he-goats. For, said the Lord, "mine are the cattle on a thousand hills; if I were hungry I would not tell you."^v Is it possible then that the Lord lacks for bread and wine? Mere symbols do not avail. No, as Flannery O'Connor said with typical frankness when the subject of the Eucharist came up at a literary dinner party, "If it's a symbol, to hell with it."^{vi}

Which brings us back to the shocking reality we claim: *This is my Body; this cup is my Blood*. Back in January, the alleged comedian and television talk show host Bill Maher gave his opinion of Christian belief:

You can't be a rational person six days of the week and put on a suit and make rational decisions and go to work and, on one day of the week, go to a building and think you're drinking the blood of a 2,000-year-old space god. That doesn't make you a person of faith...That makes you a schizophrenic.vii

Mr. Maher's purpose was to shock and belittle and even offend, and when I first read about them, I myself got a little hot under my button-at-the-back collar. But as I reflected on his comments, I realized my quibbles are fairly minor. "Space god" is certainly imprecise, and he doesn't really understand what schizophrenia is, and as for myself, I'm mostly a daily, not a weekly "space god" blood drinker. Maher intends to shock and offend, but I think he actually does us a service by calling attention – and not just the attention of the world outside, but re-calling the attention of those of us in the Church, those of us on the inside – to the astonishing, out-of-this-world nature of what the Church believes and proclaims and eats and drinks –

This is my Body. This is my blood. I am the bread of life. My flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.viii

Our friend Frederica Mathewes-Green recognizes the same truth as Bill Maher, but from the perspective of one on the inside. She writes in one of her books,

A little church on a Sunday morning is a negligible thing. It may be the meekest and least conspicuous thing in America. ...At dawn all is silent...there is nothing much to catch the eye. [But] in a few hours, heaven will strike earth like lightning on this spot. The worshippers in this little building will be swept into a divine worship that proceeds eternally, grand with seraphim and incense and God enthroned "high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple" (Is 6.1). The foundations of that temple shake with the voice of angels calling "Holy" to each other, and we will be there, lifting falli-ble voices in the refrain, an outpost of eternity.ix

That chapter in Frederica's book is called "Re-scandalized." Bill Maher may be a smarmy, hipper-than-thou bigot, but at least he recognizes the scandal of the Church's faith, the astonishing nature of what Christians claim. Do we? Does it astonish us still? As we will recall in vivid detail tomorrow, two thousand years ago on a hill outside Jerusalem, Jesus Christ, God the Son, once for all time offered himself - *A full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world; and did institute and in his holy Gospel command us to continue, a perpetual memory of that his precious death and sacrifice until his coming again . . . This is my Body. This is my Blood.*

On the Altar, he ever offers himself, his very flesh and vital blood, and we plead his merit, and then in the great reversal too wonderful for anticipation, he gives himself to us, the power of his Resurrection Life. His Body, broken so that we may be made whole. His Blood, poured out so that we may be filled.

That is the Gift given that first Maundy Thursday. The Thing Itself, The Person Himself: *The Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world.*

+ + +

i Peter Kreeft, *Catholic Christianity*.

ii 1 Cor 11.23-26

iii Mt 28.20

iv William Chatterton Dix, "Alleluia, sing to Jesus." Hymnal 1982, 460,461.

v Ps 50

vi Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*. Here's the larger context:

"I was once, five or six years ago, taken by some friends to have dinner with Mary McCarthy and her husband, Mr. Broadwater. (She just wrote that book, *A Charmed Life*.) She departed the Church at the age of 15 and is a Big Intellectual. We went at eight and at one, I hadn't opened my mouth once, there being nothing for me in such company to say.... Having me there was like having a dog present who had been trained to say a few words but overcome with inadequacy had forgotten them.

Well, toward morning the conversation turned on the Eucharist, which I, being the Catholic, was obviously supposed to defend. Mrs. Broadwater said when she was a child and received the host, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost, He being the most portable person of the Trinity; now she thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one. I then said, in a very shaky voice, Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it.

That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable."

vii NBC, *The Conan O'Brien Show*, 4 Jan 2008. My thoughts here influenced by Fr. Richard John Neuhaus in "The Public Square". *First Things*, April 2008.

viii Jn 6.35,55,56

ix Frederica Matthewes-Green, *At the Corner of East and Now*.