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CAPHARNAUM AND THE EUCHARIST

By Frank Duff

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CAPHARNAUM AND THE EUCHARIST

Catholicism insists that Our Lord meant precisely what He said at the Last Supper: "This is my Body, etc." Protestants are convinced that He only spoke those words figuratively. It is well nigh impossible to move them from that position if we confine our attention to the Last Supper itself. For frequently enough Our Lord did speak figuratively. But there was a prelude to the Last Supper. It was the disputation which took place at Capharnaum, told of in the 6th Chapter of the Gospel of St. John. That discussion has decisive bearing on the question.

In Our Lord's time Capharnaum was an important centre. It was situated on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, and it was the natal place of St. Peter and St. Andrew. Our Lord was much in Capharnaum and it was the scene of many of His miracles.

The Eucharist is the keystone of the Catholic system. It is vital. Destroy it and the whole edifice totters. The Eucharist is the heart from which the other Sacraments draw their efficacy. St. Thomas talks in an extraordinary way about the Eucharist. He declares that all the other Sacraments depend on it; that Baptism itself is only efficacious because it represents an undertaking to receive the Eucharist; and that if a person who has been baptised wilfully denies the Eucharist and refuses to partake of it, that attitude would prevent the flow of sanctifying grace. Those are breath-taking words, but they proceed from the foremost theologian of the Church.

If the Eucharist were to go, there would be no Mass and it is hard to contemplate the Catholic Church thus deprived. In fact, if the Eucharist went, it is very hard to see what would really remain.

Protestant Repudiation of Doctrine

It is one of the doctrines which Protestantism has repudiated. Having rejected it, has never been able to make up its mind as to what to put in its place. One might ask: Why put anything? The answer is that there has to be a substitution, because the Scriptural accounts of the Last Supper show that something was instituted there which all the sects agree in calling the Holy Communion. But at that point their agreement ends. Some of the sects have reduced the transaction to such petty significance that it is obvious they would like to be rid of it altogether. But the action and words of Our Lord are too solemn and too formal just to ignore. And so the sects have to stage something which they can allege to be the fulfilment of the Lord's action on that occasion.

The differences between them cover the entire gamut of possibility. On the one hand one sees the more or less recent Anglican discovery of the Eucharist which is an adopting of our own doctrine. From that, things go to the opposite extreme in a sort of foolish good-fellowship ceremony, involving the taking of a little bread and some wine in a pious frame of mind. The Seventh Day Adventists replace the wine by orange juice on anti-alcoholic principles. It is that circumstance of infinite variation that I would put before you as a first argument for the truth of the Catholic position. But you will understand, when we talk about arguments, that there is in reality for Catholics only one final argument, which is the declaration of the Church. Once it has declared, that settles the fact of the matter. But we have need of arguments for the sake of others. And of course it is desirable that we provide a logical support for the faith that is in us. Our faith should be strengthened by every means.

So I put before you as a first argument the fact that the rejection of the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist has led to chaos among those who rejected it. This argument by itself would not show the Catholic doctrine to be true, but definitely it would prove that the Protestant position is an impossible one because chaos cannot be truth.

A second argument brings us back to Moses. It is the

falling of manna in the desert. Moses was a type of Our Lord and unquestionably the manna was a type of the Eucharist. Ever since Moses it had remained as a constant tradition among the Jews that the Messiah, like Moses, would bring down manna from Heaven.

Type Must Exceed Reality

A point of importance here is that the type must always be exceeded by the reality for which it stands. Any type of Our Lord or any type of Our Lady was only a shadowy, inadequate representation of the mighty Personage whom it foreshadowed. So it was in the case of Moses. Commanding figure though he was, he was as nothing compared with Our Lord for whom he stood. Following out that reasoning, the manna would have to be succeeded by something of an utterly superior sort. It could not be fulfilled by the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves because ordinary bread was in question there, even though miraculously produced. Obviously the manna must be pointing to something as far beyond ordinary bread as Our Lord Himself is beyond Moses. That requirement could, we would imagine, be fulfilled in no lesser thing than the Eucharist itself.

Moreover, when the disciples at Capharnaum challenged Our Lord to imitate Moses by bringing down manna, it is evident that they were not thinking in terms of another multiplying of the loaves, a miracle which had taken place the previous day, but of something more. Our Lord's reply to that was His description of Himself as the true bread from Heaven. The Protestant retort is that Jesus was only referring to His doctrine and faith in Himself. Is there any justification for such a contention? We shall see.

Dramatic Event in Desert

The multiplication of the loaves and the fishes was a preparation of minds for the Eucharist. That event was one of the great dramatic happenings of all time. You will recall the story of the multitude that was pursuing Our Lord—hungry to hear more of His holy words, and eager to watch more of His miracles. He had just been

calling down a veritable hail of cures. When he moved away, the multitude followed Him and could not be deterred. He went into the desert. They followed Him there and after three days they were starving. There was a great number of them—the Gospel specifies that there were 5,000 men and does not mention women and children at all. But we can presume that they were there. This multitude had followed the Lord into the desert forgetful of the natural needs, and there they were, so to speak, stranded. Our Lord Himself was the first to notice this and He enquired what quantity of food could be mobilised. Investigation showed the dismaying fact that there were only five loaves and two fishes which one prudent youth had brought along for his own use.

So, Our Lord directed that these things be yielded up. We are given to understand from the wording that the owner did not make any fuss about it, though he probably thought it was a very silly performance. Then Our Lord took those articles into His hands and blessed them and multiplied them. Around Him were a lot of volunteers, of course headed by the Apostles, who received from His hands that inexhaustible commissariat. And no matter what they took, His hands were still full of the bounty.

Just figure out for yourself that stupendous scene—where the food for that mighty host is flowing, so to speak, out of the hands of Jesus Christ. There is the multitude seated in rows and the busy helpers running with the food. They ate and they ate and they ate of the unlimited feast! Hunger and a free feed are marvellous sauces.

Moreover, and this touches the quaintly sensational, Our Lord was multiplying what was actually in His hands. Presumably it was baked bread and cooked fish that the youth's mother had provided for him, ready for eating. So the multitude had a cooked meal!

When all had eaten until they could eat no more, the remnants that were left of the repast were gathered up and filled twelve baskets. Then as soon as the people had time to think, the Scripture tells us that they cried: "This is of a truth the Prophet that is to come into the

world." An incredible impression must have been created, and of course the thoughtful ones would have seen in the prodigy the fulfilment of the tradition that the successor to Moses would draw down manna.

Not only among those who had thus benefited, but further afield there must have been a sensation created by that miracle. You have to figure out those thousands of excited people going off and talking about it everywhere. It will be realised what an overwhelming impression it would create throughout Judea. It was in that atmosphere and with minds thus deliberately made ready by Our Lord, that the historic disputation of the next day took place at Capharnaum. But that preparation must necessarily be for something of surpassing magnitude. To suggest that it would end only in another of Our Lord's incessant pleadings for their belief would be to propose an anticlimax.

Further Prelude to Promise

After the miracle, the people wished to make Him king, so Our Lord fled into the mountains. During the night, while the Apostles were crossing the sea to Capharnaum, He came to them walking on the raging waters. Again this display of divine power as a further prelude to His promise of the Eucharist. As if to say: Believe my words because I can do all things.

The multitude followed in boats of every description and no doubt a crowd assembled from the other side as well. Appetites were whetted for miracles and everybody wanted to hear Our Lord talk.

He did not gratify their desire for miracles on this occasion but He certainly did give them words of extraordinary importance. The first part of His dissertation related to faith in Himself and His doctrine. Then at Verse 47, according to the Catholic commentators, the second part of His discourse opens up. It was introduced by words which fulfil the rôle in Scripture of introducing or asserting something of importance; those are the words "Amen, Amen, I say unto you."

But now it is better that I put aside my own weak words and set down for you St. John's rendering of the

vital words on which Catholics have based their lives and on which Protestantism has based its great denial: "I say unto you: He that believeth in Me hath everlasting life. I am the Bread of Life. Your fathers did eat manna in the desert and are dead. This is the Bread which cometh down from Heaven that if any man eat of it he may not die. I am the living Bread which came down from Heaven. If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is My flesh for the life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying: How can this man give us His flesh to eat? Then Jesus said to them: Amen, Amen, I say unto you: except you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you. He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood hath everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood abideth in Me and I in Him. As the living Father hath sent Me, and I live by the Father, so he that eateth Me, the same also shall live by Me. This is the Bread that came down from Heaven. Not as your fathers did eat manna and are dead. He that eateth this bread shall live forever. These things He said teaching in the synagogue in Capharnaum. Many of His disciples, hearing it, said: This saying is hard and who can hear it?"

Not Figurative Words

The Protestant comment on that passage is that Jesus was all the time talking about His doctrine and that His remarks regarding the eating of His flesh are only figurative. That eating would not be real! It would only be figurative!

But the certain fact is that Our Lord could not be using those words figuratively. Why? Because that phrase of eating a person's flesh possessed already an invariable well-understood figurative sense among the Jewish people. As a figurative expression it had only one meaning. It meant to calumniate that person, to speak of him in a vicious way. Examples of that significance occur frequently throughout the Scriptures.

Therefore, let us face the blunt alternatives: Either Our Lord meant His words actually and literally, or else He meant them figuratively. As just pointed out, He could not have meant them figuratively, because that would amount to ordering His hearers to betray Him, to calumniate Him, to attack Him in words, to destroy His character and name as best they could. That is the very behaviour for which very shortly afterwards He would rebuke Judas in the words: "One of you is a devil." Therefore that figurative interpretation is ruled out. It would be sheer nonsense in the circumstances.

And so it is inevitable, and without alternative, that He meant those words simply and literally in the sense given to them by the Catholic Church, in the sense that all of us receive them. And thus the audience understood it. They had no doubt in the matter. Not for a second did they suppose that He was speaking figuratively. They took Him literally and they were scandalised, as you can see from St. John's description which I have copied out for you. "How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?"—that is the way they took it up.

With regard to the reply which Our Lord then made, it is necessary to linger for a moment to explain His ordinary method when a statement of His was challenged in any way. Sometimes people took a wrong meaning out of His words, and His practice in those cases was always to correct it—usually prefacing His remarks with that solemn little interjection "Amen, Amen, I say unto you."

Sometimes, on the other hand, they understood Him correctly but questioned His statement as extraordinary. In such cases He affirmed what He had said before.

Some Familiar Examples

I will give you some examples of this which are familiar to you. There is the case of Nicodemus. You will remember that noble man among the Jews who used to come to Our Lord by night. Nicodemus believed but did not want it to be known. In one of their conversations Our Lord declared to him: "Unless a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." Nicodemus'

reply was: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into the womb of his mother and be born again?" He had taken the material view of things, which was not what was intended, and so Our Lord corrected him: "Amen, Amen, I say to thee, unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God." There we have a great pointing to the Sacrament of Baptism. Nicodemus had taken the wrong meaning out of it and he was set right. He had taken as literal what was only intended as a figure. Our Lord meant "born again" in a supernatural sense. When He was misunderstood, He made plain His meaning.

Another instance is that of Lazarus. He had been reported as gravely ill. Our Lord's comment was: "Lazarus, our friend sleepeth; but I go that I may awake him out of sleep." Whereupon those around said: "If he sleepeth, he shall do well." But as Lazarus was actually dead and Our Lord meant sleeping in that sense, He said plainly to them: "Lazarus is dead." One could multiply instances of the kind.

Now I will give you something of the opposite sort, that is, where they understood Our Lord correctly but raised a difficulty. There is the case, described in the Gospel of St. Matthew, where Our Lord said to a man afflicted with the palsy: "Thy sins are forgiven thee." Some of the scribes were filled with dissent. What right had He to be talking about forgiving sins? He blasphemed. And Jesus said: "Whether is it easier to say: Thy sins are forgiven thee; or to say: Arise and walk?" Of course the minds of the Jews would at once supply the answer that it would be easier to say: "Thy sins are forgiven thee." So in order to prove that He could do both the lesser and the greater, He said to the unfortunate creature lying there before Him: "Arise, take up thy bed and go into thy house." And the man rose up and walked.

Another case is where Our Lord said: "Abraham, your father, rejoiced that he might see My day; he saw it and was glad." The Jews objected, saying: "Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?"

But Our Lord had meant literally what He had stated, and He told them so in those amazing words: "Before Abraham was made I am," speaking as God.

Confirmed With Emphasis

That is the context or the atmosphere in which we must view Our Lord's present attitude. They have said: "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?" His reply was: "Amen, Amen, I say unto you, except you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you." They had correctly taken Him to be speaking literally and actually and not figuratively. So according to that rule of speech which we have been crediting to Him, He confirmed what He had said; then repeating it again and again for emphasis; finally adding on the Divine threat that they shall not achieve eternal life unless they conform to what He directed, that is eat His flesh and drink His blood.

Then the disciples retorted: "This saying is hard and who can hear it?" No room for misapprehension there. They have understood an actual eating and drinking to be in question, and Our Lord is insisting on the same. He adds His last word: "No man can come to Me except it be given him by My Father," conceding that His requirement was hard to mere flesh and blood, and that they must be enlightened by the Father before they can believe in it.

After that—we are told in Verse 67 of that Chapter—many of the disciples went away and walked no more with Him. Try to call up that painful scene before you as if it were a picture on a screen. There they are—His disciples whom He had drawn to Himself by so many heavenly words and startling deeds; who had forgotten hunger to listen to Him and who wanted to make Him king. Now they are thrown into confusion and are finished with Him, all because of a statement which would create no difficulty whatever if it were only a figurative one. But it is not figurative. So He lets them go! He does not make a gesture to stop them!

But if the Protestant interpretation were right: that He did not really mean those words in that hard sense,

all He has to say is: "Come back, you are mistaken—no need to go—I only meant all that figuratively. When I said My flesh, I meant My doctrine." Of course, He would have drawn them all back with that explanation. They were prepared to accept that. It was on that basis that they had been following Him up to that moment.

Oh, what a tragic situation! So much had been offered to them but their faith had not been big enough to take it. They were on the point of entering into history but they walk off into the void of silence.

In such circumstances one would continue to look at the receding figures: surely they will turn back? Hope exhausted, He turns to the Twelve who had remained and said to them: "Will you also go away?" Again see—no withdrawing—no watering down of His words—no effort to explain that He meant something different to what the others had taken out of His words!

But this almost puts us into an agony, even though we know the result! Why does Our Lord press the issue in that way? Does He not realise that the Twelve share all the difficulties felt by the others? Is it not enough that they stay with Him? Why challenge them in a way which may send them off too?

Radical Decision Forced

No. The Lord will not retain the unbeliever on those terms. He will not let them sit on such a fence. He forces a radical decision: "Will you also go away?" No half-way course! No escape! They must believe or leave! It is as evident as anything could be evident that if they do not accept the Lord's words in their literalness, they too *must* go away. In which case He will not have a soul beside Him. Is it in this that all His striving has ended?

I suppose there was a moment between the putting of that question to the Twelve and the coming of their reply. What an extraordinary moment was that one in which the fate of the Catholic Church trembled in the balance. But Scripture gives us the noble words that proceeded from Peter speaking on behalf of his companions: "Lord to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of

eternal Life, and we have believed and known that Thou are the Christ the Son of God."

Oh what a gallant and comprehensive confession of faith! For the "saying" was as hard to them as it was to the others, but they accepted it on the strength of His word.

And now to strengthen things even a little more, I return to those words: "This saying is hard and who can hear it?" Usually those words are held to mean: "This is a difficult statement and who is able to believe it." But that is apparently not the correct meaning. In his remarkable treatise on the Eucharist, Cardinal Wiseman points out that what the words actually signify is: "This saying is revolting, who can bear to listen to it?" This shows with what unreserved literalness Our Lord's hearers had taken His words. Among the Jews the eating of human flesh or the drinking of human blood was an extreme abomination punishable by death. It was a transgression of the Divine Law delivered by Moses. It was condemned repeatedly in the books of the Old Testament. And so it was that those disciples, accustomed to those awful prohibitions, protested: This is revolting and we cannot bear to listen.

So you will see that if there were any way of turning to a figurative explanation, those disciples would have done it instead of accepting what they regarded as an abominable meaning, and then as a consequence walking away and leaving Our Lord forever. There is nothing in what follows in Holy Writ to suggest that those disciples who had thus walked away ever came back.

So the figurative meaning is out of the question. Note too the insistence of Our Lord on that phrase which they found intolerable. He repeated those words about eating His flesh and drinking His blood no less than six times in quick succession, as if He was determined that there would be no doubt whatever about what He was saying; so that afterwards no one could allege: "We did not take up things correctly. We should have had a shorthand writer."

The Question Settled

Capharnaum is the foundation stone, so to speak, for the subsequent episode of the Last Supper. The words of Capharnaum merge into those of the Last Supper, where the promise turns into fulfilment and the ceremony is enacted around which the Catholic religion has ever since revolved. The Eucharist is instituted. Listen. It is the Eternal Son Himself who is speaking:

“And while they were at supper, Jesus took bread and blessed it and broke and gave to His disciples and said: ‘Take ye and eat; this is My Body.’ And taking the Chalice, He gave thanks and gave to them saying: ‘Drink ye all of this, for this is My Blood of the New Testament which shall be shed for many unto the remission of sins.’” These words are taken from the Gospel of St. Matthew; they are repeated in the Gospel of St. Luke and also in St. Paul.

It is vital to note that the phrase “My Blood of the New Testament” echoes and fulfils the kindred phrase which Moses used to dedicate the Old Testament with the blood of victims. St. Paul tells us (Hebr. IX 19-20): “When every commandment of the law had been read by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the Book itself and all the people, saying: ‘This is the blood of the testament which God hath enjoined unto you.’”

How could the Protestant sense be reconciled with all that? Our Lord is talking as Messiah about the fulfilment of the Old Law and the inauguration of the New, the completion of the prophecies, the offering of the Victim, the shedding of the blood of the Lamb of God and the partaking of His flesh. To suppose that all this amounts to no more than a sort of pious little equivalent of a modern tea-party would be a shocking anticlimax—and in fact a pantomime act introduced into the sacred drama of Redemption.

“Take ye and eat . . . My Body. Drink ye all of . . . My Blood.” Where are the murmurings, objections, protests, and the departures which the mere promise of the

Eucharist had produced at Capharnaum? They are not heard because they are not made; they represented a past chapter and a closed one.

What do we see at the Last Supper? Just what would be seen each day at any modern altar-rail—a group of people with hearts full of faith and faces transformed receiving the Bread of Life, the Lord Himself.

The question had been settled for the Apostles at Capharnaum. And to Capharnaum let everyone proceed—by reading and meditation—who doubts the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist.