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THE COSMOLOGY OF THE EUCHARIST

George Theokritoff

A grain of wheat falls to the earth and decomposes, and is then raised with manifold increase by the spirit of God, who contains all things; by wisdom it is then used by human beings, receives the Word of God and becomes the Eucharist, which is the Body and Blood of Christ. In the same way our bodies, being nourished by it, will be deposited in the earth and decompose there, and then rise at their appointed time, as the Word of God grants them resurrection to the glory of God.

—*St. Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V 2, 3 (trans. E. Theokritoff)*

Here, in a statement that focuses on the work of God in the Eucharist, St. Irenaeus summarizes the essence of the Cosmology of the Eucharist in a seemingly simple yet profound statement. What I propose to do here is to approach this Cosmology from a different perspective, drawing on what we know of the workings of the Cosmos. We could usefully start by asking the questions “What is bread?” and “What is wine?”

It needs hardly to be said that bread is made of flour, yeast (or leaven), and water, and wine by the fermentation of grape juice. What is produced by wheat (Irenaeus’s “grain of wheat”) and by the vine is transformed by human labor (“used by human beings”). But this is not the only intervention of human labor: the wheat is sown (“a grain of wheat falls to the earth”) and then germinates, grows, bears ears of wheat (“raised with manifold increase by the Spirit of God”), and finally reaped, threshed, and the grains ground to give flour. Similarly, vines have to be planted and grafted. They then grow and bear fruit (“raised with manifold increase by the Spirit of God”), and finally the grapes are gathered and pressed. In this, we see the synergy of the transformative power of God with human labor.

We too should wonder and give thanks,
that from the dry stalk of wheat there comes ample bread,
that from the vine stalk there flows wine,
that from each tree, all kinds of varied delights—
this too is a great wonder, as great as the miracle at Cana.¹

In the wheat and in the vine, and at Cana, there is the same key element in the transformation: water. The third question, then, is “What is water?” An essential constituent of all living things, water also has a vital role at every stage, every transformation, in the preparation of the elements of the Eucharist. Both the wheat in the fields and the vines on the hillsides utilize water and carbon dioxide as well as the energy of sunlight in photosynthesis. But it is important to be aware that plants also obtain nutrients from the soil.

And so we come to the fourth question: “What is soil?” Most soils consist of two components. The first is minerals derived from weathering of the bedrock, which is broken down into smaller pieces by the action of frost, tree roots, and burrowing animals. Once in smaller pieces, the increased surface area enhances the chemical alteration of the bedrock. Here, naturally occurring acids (carbonic, nitric, nitrous, and those produced by plant roots) and the activity of microorganisms play important roles in the release, from the minerals that make up the bedrock, of nutrients, in a water-soluble form that can be utilized by plants. The second component is an organic material called humus. This is of great importance because it retains soil moisture, thereby binding the soil and inhibiting loss by erosion. It is made up mostly of plant debris, such as the leaf litter that accumulates in the woods. But in itself leaf litter is of little use to plants because the nutrients in it are locked up in complex molecules, which must be broken down into simple molecules that plants can utilize. This is done by decomposers: nonphotosynthetic microorganisms such as bacteria and fungi. Thus, the decomposers obtain their own energy and nutrients. In the larger context, the working of the decomposers is of profound importance in the functioning of the biosphere because it completes the cycling of nutrients and energy.

Up to this point, we have noted the contributions of the sun, the atmosphere (carbon dioxide, water, oxides of nitrogen), the hydrosphere (water), the solid earth (mineral nutrients such as potassium and calcium), plants, decomposers, and human labor. All are made of matter derived from our planet, the Earth. And so we come to the fifth question: “What is matter?”

The two lightest elements, hydrogen and helium, which predominate in the stars, are by far the most abundant elements in the Cosmos. But the heavier elements (for example, carbon, phosphorous, nitrogen, sulfur) are the

product of the death of generations of stars. The temperatures and pressures that develop in some kinds of dying stars convert the lighter elements into the heavier, which are then flung out as dust into the surrounding space when the star explodes. Eventually, under the influence of gravity and the pressure of light, the dispersed heavier elements are either incorporated into new stars, going through the cycle again, or cluster into bodies called planets. The Earth and everything on it, including our bodies and blood, as well as the Eucharistic bread and wine, are cosmic in origin. In taking flesh and blood from his Holy Mother, the Eternal Word of God clothed himself in his own creation, the Cosmos. Thus Christ's words, "This is my body; this is my blood," have a profound literal sense in that the matter making up the Eucharistic bread and wine—and that making up the flesh and blood taken from his Holy Mother—share the same cosmic origin.²

The entire Cosmos thus participates by representation in the preparation of the matter used by the Church sacramentally and in other ways. And it is in this fashion that the entire cosmos offers its praise. With specific reference to the Eucharist, the wheat and the grapes are the offering of the community that is the Cosmos, the offering of the dust clouds in space, the stars, the Earth and other planets, of bacteria and fungi, of plants and animals. This offering is transformed into bread and wine by human labor and skill, and it *receives the Word of God and becomes the Eucharist*, an offering to God by man, the priest of the Cosmos. Man depends on the Cosmos for the matter that makes up his and her body and for the matter that is used sacramentally; reciprocally, the Cosmos depends on Man to complete its own offering. Thus the seventh-century saint Leontius of Cyprus wrote:

Through heaven and earth and sea, through wood and stone, through relics and church buildings, and the Cross, and angels and men—through all creation, visible and invisible, I offer veneration to the Creator and master and Maker of all things. For creation does not venerate the Maker directly and by itself, but it is through me that the heavens declare the glory of God; through me the moon worships God, through me the stars glorify him, through me the waters and showers of rain, the dew and all creation, venerate God and give him glory.³

In the Eucharist we offer, in this piece of bread and in this cup of wine, the entire Cosmos and every living creature including ourselves—everything from the tiniest particles of matter to the farthest reaches of space, as well as the fruits of human labor in all places and all times.⁴ We thus come to see that the Eucharist is central to the Cosmos. And it is the Eucharist that enables

us to recognize more clearly that the Cosmos is transparent to Christ, who shines through all matter.

The late Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann has reminded us that the Eucharist may best be understood as a journey or procession.⁵ If we are to consider the local Eucharist, one celebrated in a given place and at a given time, we might state that the procession starts in the gathering of the local community and at the table of preparation. In the light of what has been written above, we might opt at a deeper level for an arbitrary spot in the cycle leading up to the fruiting of the grains of wheat and grapes. This spot might be, for instance, the working of decomposers. But the arbitrary nature of the choice points beyond, to include the whole creation. If this is accepted, the beginning of the Procession of the Cosmic Eucharist, of which the local Eucharist is the full local manifestation,⁶ is in Creation—“*In the beginning.*” Christ is the lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

It is worth noting that we have now arrived at a corrective to contemporary neopagan attempts to grasp a holistic worldview of creation. In one way or another, they venerate the cycles of nature and see the “meaning” of creation in itself. In contrast, Christians find the meaning of creation in the uncreated Word of God, through Whom all things were made, and they recognize the cycles of nature as the ongoing work of God in the Cosmos. In this connection, it is worth noting that in the second half of St. Irenaeus’s statement (“In the same way . . . the glory of God”), he shows us a parallel in the life, death, and resurrection of man. Taken from the Earth, nourished by the Eucharist, man returns in death to the Earth, where, like the grain of wheat, he decomposes. The Word of God then grants him resurrection to the glory of God. It is through the Eucharist, in which we offer the fruits of corruption (the work of decomposers) and receive them back as the fruits of incorruption, that we escape the cycle of life and decay. Father John Jillions, in a somewhat different context, stated that Christ’s disciples “tasted of the banquet of immortality that transforms the corruption of the tomb [of Lazarus] into the blessing of Cana [the new wine of the Kingdom].”⁷

Questions are raised here that are beyond the scope of this paper: Just what do we mean by corruption? Is corruption just one thing? Can some form of what we call corruption be an essential step in the process of renewal?

Apart from a few details, nothing has been added to what is implied in St. Irenaeus’s understanding of the Cosmology of the Eucharist. But I am suggesting that the preceding discussion, albeit couched in terms that would be quite unfamiliar to St. Irenaeus and his contemporaries, nevertheless underlines the church’s understanding of the Cosmology of the Eucharist. It

points to Creation as a sacrament, a means of communion, a gift from God for us “to till and keep,” but certainly not a commodity to be abused. It also helps us to perceive more clearly Christ, the Wisdom and Word of God, who comes to us in bread and wine, present in every element of creation and at work in all its processes.