THE DRUG OF IMMORTALITY: THE EUCHARISTIC LITURGY AND ESCHATOLOGICAL HOPE

When I was studying theology for ordination in Frankfurt, Germany, more years ago than I like to admit, we had a fine course on the Eucharist from a professor named Otto Semmelroth. Strictly speaking, it wasn’t a liturgy course – and for that reason would probably have never passed muster in our department here at Notre Dame. Fr. Semmelroth was a dogmatic (or what people today might call a “systematic”) theologian, and really specialized in ecclesiology; so he approached the traditional Catholic understanding of the Eucharist, as the Church’s defining act and as the source of Christ’s sacramental presence at the Church’s heart, in the larger perspective of how this ancient practice shows us what the Church itself is. One detail from that course that has always stayed in my memory came from near the end of the semester, when Fr. Semmelroth was trying to tie all the themes together. He was arguing that no single category from the long tradition of theological reflection can, by itself, identify the heart of the Eucharistic Mystery: meal, celebration, sacrifice, sign, real presence, transubstantiation – all of them are part of what “happens” when we gather for Mass, but none is the whole explanation. In fact, he confided, he couldn’t really think of a better thumbnail summary of what the Church understands the Eucharist to be than the famous, admiringly contemplative Magnificat antiphon that St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, back in the 1260s, for vespers of his office of the feast we celebrate this week, Corpus Christi – the antiphon known in Latin as O sacrum convivium, and set to music by so many great composers since then: “O sacred banquet, where Christ is consumed, where the memory of his Passion is brought to mind, where the mind is filled with grace, and where a sign is given us of the glory that is to come!” As the defining, shaping revelation of what the Church is, the Eucharist needs all of these images, and more, to let us even begin to glimpse its meaning.
Yet I couldn’t help thinking, then and since, that of all these terse, pregnant phrases Aquinas so brilliantly marshals for us, it’s the final one, about the Eucharist as “a sign of future glory,” that I and most other modern Catholics tend to forget. The Second Vatican Council, it is true, speaks in Sacrosanctum Concilium of the liturgy as pointing us, by the very reality of what it is, beyond the day-to-day preoccupations and issues of life in the world to “the future city which we seek;”¹ a few paragraphs later, it reminds us, with echoes of the Roman liturgy itself and the Pauline epistles:

In the liturgy on earth, we are sharing by foretaste in the heavenly one, which is celebrated in the holy city, Jerusalem: the goal towards which we strive as pilgrims; the place where Christ is, seated at God’s right hand - the minister of the holy ones and of the true tabernacle. With the whole host of the heavenly army we sing a hymn to the Lord’s glory; venerating the memory of the saints, we hope to have some share in their company. We await as our savior our Lord Jesus Christ, until he who is our life appears, and we appear with him in glory.²

The liturgy we celebrate day to day, in other words, is not just the distribution point for our daily bread, not just a prayer meeting or a Bible study or a chance to promote parish committees set up to change the world. In its familiar phrases, liturgy by its very nature calls our attention to the direction of time, and to time’s goal beyond itself: it reorients us towards eternity, to the life without end to which this life introduces us, to God who simply is. And it reminds us that Christ, who stands at the heart of the Church and of each Eucharistic celebration, is not only invisibly present here in his Body, but is the one who will “come again in glory” and so himself bring time to its fulfillment. We pray his prayer to the Father, we prepare to eat his flesh and drink his blood in sacramental celebration, expectantes beatam spem, et adventum Salvatoris nostri Jesu Christi.³ By his very incarnation, and by inviting us to encounter him here in the Eucharist, he calls us to hope for a new mode of his presence, of parousia, that will never end.
This eschatological, even apocalyptic dimension of the Eucharistic liturgy is probably something most of have thought about, on and off – nodded to in recognition, as another “cool idea”. I wonder, though – and I speak here of myself, first of all – how central a role it plays in the way we actually approach the Eucharist, experience it when we participate in the liturgical celebration, present it to others when we try to explain all the things that Catholics believe the Eucharist is. Does it play a part in our liturgical “formation”? Much of our energy and thought over the last 50 years, since Sacrosanctum Concilium was in the planning stages, has been concerned with making our form of worship more intelligible, more inclusive and moving, in the world of today: with making liturgy relevant to our age. When I was in college in the late 50s, Catholics liked to draw a clear distinction between an “eschatological” spirituality - one focused on the life to come, on getting to heaven and even on fleeing the snares of this world – and an “incarnational” spirituality, which begins in our conviction that it is precisely in this world that God the Son has come to live with us, and that it is this world that needs to be redeemed. Vatican II, in many ways, shifted the spiritual focus of Catholics from the eschaton to the incarnation, from the next world to this one. That probably needed doing. But the problem, I suspect, is that many of us have lost our sense of eschatology altogether: of the limits and resistances, the transience, of the things that now concern us; of God’s promise of a different kind of life altogether in and through the risen Lord. And one main reason, I suspect, why so many college-age Catholics today don’t find the present liturgy very engaging or spiritually nourishing is that in most places it has lost that dimension of eschatological hope: of offering us something valuable beyond everyday blessings; of focusing our attention, together, on a gift of life and unity and joy that goes endlessly beyond the pressing issues, the tentative arrangements and signs we can construct in this present world, and that is the beginning of what we call the
Kingdom of God. If liturgy is meant to be formation (as our conference this week is stressing), perhaps we all need to be formed again in that hope.

I have no easy answer to the questions these thoughts raise, much less a way to reclaim some of this sense of the “blessed hope” that Aquinas and the Second Vatican Council thought so essential to a right understanding of what we are doing at Mass. Instead – since I call myself a “historical theologian,” or more popularly a “patristic dude” - I wanted simply to present you with a scattered, almost impressionistic collection of voices from the great early tradition of the Church’s theology, who seem to have had that sense, perhaps more strongly than we do today, that the Eucharist is really preparing us now for eternal life, teaching us now how to journey and labor with eternal life and a transformed world in mind. In other words, teaching us to hope.

1. The first hint that the Church’s gathering to break bread in Jesus’ memory bore with it the sense that it pointed to the future – to God’s plans for the future – as well as to the past, comes in Paul’s description of the Eucharist, during the early 50s of our era, as a central dimension of the Christian community’s regular assembly. In his first letter to the Corinthians, chapters 10 and 11, Paul is engaged in an impassioned, if sometimes rather circuitous exhortation to the Christians there to develop unity among themselves, by adhering conscientiously and steadily to what holds them together in faith. This unity of faith and practice is expressed and realized in the Eucharistic meals they share together, which bind the members of the community into a single body, centered on the crucified and risen Christ.

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. 4

This unity among the members of the Church is founded, Paul emphasizes, in their identification with Christ, whose death for our sakes they commemorate in this ritual meal. So in the
following chapter, he criticizes them for not celebrating the Lord’s supper together when they

gather for a common meal, but simply eating the food each one has brought for his or her own

family group.⁵ The Lord’s supper, as he calls it, is clearly something different from just a

Church picnic: it is a meal focused on him, on what he said and did “on the night when he was

betrayed.” So in verses 23-25 of chapter 11, Paul repeats for the Corinthians, in apparently

formulaic terms close to those related in Luke’s Gospel, the already familiar story of Jesus’
giving of his body and blood, at that Last Supper with his followers, in the bread and the cup

they share. He concludes:

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until

he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats this bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an

unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let

everyone examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who

eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself.⁶

Paul reveals here, as has often been observed by commentators, his powerful sense of

living, as a Christian disciple, in the end-time of history: the dramatic period in which God has

already begun to fulfill his age-old promises to Abraham to restore and unify all the nations in

the faith of Israel. That end-time, understood in apocalyptic literature in a wide range of

dramatic images and prophetic narratives, was for Paul and the first Christians a time of crisis:
of testing and final judgment for all people, of hope for the disciples of Jesus, who recognized

the beginning of that crisis in Jesus’ passion and death, and the beginning of restoration - the

fulfillment of creation and salvation - in his resurrection. To be unified as his disciples by

gathering together, eating bread and drinking wine, as he had done on the eve of his death, and

by explicitly narrating the story of Jesus’ last supper and his death that followed, was to enter

into that sacred, irreversible climax of history, to peer over the brink of a new age of life. To eat

and drink this food unworthily was to expose oneself to the harshest possibility of final
judgment: the desecration that begins in our forgetting what Jesus’ death has begun in the world. Even the instructions for upright, unobtrusive, doggedly faithful moral living Paul gives here and elsewhere (see, for instance, I Thes 4.1-5.11; II Thes 1.5-2.12) seem to have been intended as urgent exhortations for Christian disciples living in the end-time – an age that began with Jesus’ death and would soon end in the resurrection of all, and in Jesus’ coming as judge. So to eat and drink the Lord’s supper now, to see the heart of their own unity in what Jesus did the night before he died, was to make oneself conscious of this end-time: to “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

2. The little handbook of moral and spiritual instruction, organizational advice, and eschatological warning, that we know as the Didache (the full title is: “The Teaching [Didache] of the Lord through the twelve Apostles for the Gentiles”) contains not only the instruction to “gather together, break bread, and give thanks” every week on the Lord’s day (14.1), but a well-developed model for praying at these gatherings. The dating of this work has been estimated variously by scholars since its first publication in 1883; most, however, would agree it comes from the last few decades of the first century, perhaps forty years after Paul’s words to the Corinthians, and probably had its origin in Syria. It represents, then, that same sense of living at the edge of a new creation, anticipated in Jesus’ death and resurrection, that we have already seen in Paul’s letters. The final chapter of the work, in fact, calls on its readers to be prepared for the end, in terms borrowed from Jesus’ parable of the ten bridesmaids:

Watch over your life (the author writes): do not let your lamps go out, and do not be unprepared, but be ready, for you do not know the hour when our Lord is coming. Gather together frequently, seeking the things that benefit your souls, for all the time you have believed will be of no use to you if you are not found perfect in the last time.7

The author then offers a small-scale vision of the coming end, sketched out in now-traditional Christian apocalyptic terms. “In the last days, the false prophets and corrupters will abound;”8
hatred and conflict will dominate human society, and “the deceiver of the world” – the Antichrist – will pose as the Son of God and lead the broad population into deeper and deeper immorality. And as the human race is caught up in “the fiery test,” “the signs of the truth” will finally also appear: an opening in heaven, a trumpet, and then the resurrection of the faithful dead. “Then the world will see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven.”

In the context of this expectation of the imminent end of history and the appearance of the risen Jesus, the Didache’s beautiful and familiar Eucharistic prayer, laid out in detail in the work, takes on a distinctive, clearly eschatological character. The presider begins by giving thanks to God, as Father, for “the holy vine of David” - the Jewish heritage of promise represented in the cup - and for “life and knowledge” communicated through Jesus, represented in the broken bread: presumably since he had spoken of himself as the “bread of life.” He prays then that like the bread, made of “grain once scattered on the hillsides,” the Church may be “gathered together from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom”: a vision of the reunification of scattered Israel in Jerusalem that many of the post-exilic prophets saw as the beginning of the final restoration of God’s people. The texts gives no hint of a narrative recalling the institution of this characteristic Christian meal by Jesus – for reasons that remain debated by scholars – but, after alluding to the need for all to eat and drink these Eucharistic elements with reverence and care, the text resumes its solemn prayer of thanks, presumably with words that are meant to follow the sharing of the elements. The community’s spokesperson praises the Father once again: for allowing his holy name to dwell in their hearts; for “knowledge and faith and immortality” revealed through Jesus; for all the things of creation, including ordinary food and drink; but especially for the “spiritual food and drink” God has bestowed – presumably in the Eucharist – and for “eternal life through your servant.” This meal, formed of what began as
ordinary bread and wine, nourishes its participants even now, in a spiritual rather than simply a material way, for life with the risen and glorified Jesus. So the presider goes on to pray again for the Church, “which” – presumably because the congregation has just received the sacred gifts – we now hear “has been made holy”: he prays that God may “deliver it from all evil,” protect it, and gather it “from the four winds… into your Kingdom.” The Eucharistic prayer then concludes: “May grace come, and may this world pass away. Hosanna to the God of David… Come, Lord – Maranatha – Amen!” The community mirrored in this rich, yet simple text is a community of faithful believers in the risen Jesus, living as part of faithful Israel, yet convinced that in Jesus it has received the beginnings of everlasting life. So it prays in the Eucharistic liturgy that that life will come to fulfillment for all, when the risen Lord comes again.

3. The fullest complete description of the common prayer and initiation practices of the earliest Christian communities is, as is well known, the one given by Justin, “philosopher and martyr,” in his *Apologetic* - an exposition of Christian faith and practice written for a generally hostile Roman pagan audience, probably around 155. After discussing Christian initiation in the context of pagan rituals, and amid arguments that God always works in history through visible symbols, Justin speaks at some length of the meal that the Christian community celebrates as the conclusion of its rite of initiation, and in fact celebrates every Sunday:

> This food is called by us ‘Eucharist;’ no one is allowed to share in it except the one who believes that what is taught by us is true, and has been washed in the bath that is for forgiveness of sins and for rebirth, and who lives in the way that Christ handed down to us. For we do not take these things up as ordinary bread or ordinary drink, but rather in the way that Jesus Christ our savior, made flesh by God the Word, had flesh and blood for the sake of our salvation; so we have been taught that the food that has been made Eucharist, by the words of prayer that come from him - from which our flesh and blood are nourished in the process of physical change - are the flesh and blood of that very Jesus who was made flesh.
Justin makes no explicit connection here between the community, gathered to receive the Eucharist each week, and its hope for mercy in the coming judgment and eternal life, although a vivid expectation of the end is articulated elsewhere in the *Apology.*\(^{20}\) The emphasis here is that the food and drink shared in the community’s most central and important celebration is, in fact, nothing else than the flesh and blood that the eternal Word has made his own by becoming incarnate, and which he has shared with us as our nourishment by his words and actions at the Last Supper.\(^{21}\) But other important second-century Christian texts do draw this connection with eschatological life explicitly, even though it is not yet clearly indicated by Paul or the *Didache:* that it is the Eucharistic food itself - the bread and wine that are transformed by the words of Christ - that begins in each of us, who receive it into our bodies, the sequence of transformation that will only be fully realized in our own resurrection to life.

4. Perhaps the earliest witness to this way of thinking of what the Eucharist does for us, in the context of our eschatological expectations, is Ignatius of Antioch, whose authentic letters are usually dated about the year 110.\(^{22}\) Ignatius is not a systematic thinker, and the literary genre of his extant work – intense, allusive letters to Christian communities he has not yet met, urging them to maintain accepted traditions and follow legitimate authorities – often makes it difficult to identify fully his broader understanding of Christian faith. Still, a number of clearly Eucharistic allusions in the letters also suggest the conviction, even at this early date, that what is really being eaten and drunk in these celebrations is the human flesh and blood of the glorified Christ. In his famous letter to the community at Rome, for instance, expressing an astonishingly powerful desire to be unified personally with Christ by martyrdom, Ignatius states:

> I take no pleasure in corruptible food or in the pleasures of this life. I want the bread of God, which is the flesh of Christ who is of the seed of David; and for drink I want his blood, which is incorruptible love.\(^{23}\)
Taken by itself, this sentence might simply be using arresting terms to express a longing for spiritual union with the risen Lord. But Ignatius’s conviction that it is actually the Eucharistic species, sacramentally making present the risen human flesh and blood of Christ, that he desires for his personal fulfillment, becomes clear in another passage, in his letter to the Ephesians:

All of you [he writes], individually and collectively, gather together in the grace that is from the Name,24 in one faith and one Jesus Christ - who physically was a descendant of David, who is Son of Man and Son of God - in order that you may obey the bishop and the council of presbyters with an undisturbed mind, breaking one bread, which is the drug of immortality (pharmakon athanasias), the antidote we take in order not to die, but to live forever in Jesus Christ.25

Here, just before the end of his letter, Ignatius seems to be summing up his view of what the Christian community is. They are held together by faith in Christ, by the grace that calls them, by the common identity that leads both to opprobrium and hope; their unity is guaranteed by their obedience to the bishop and elders, and by the Eucharist they share, which makes Christ present and underlies the authority of their leaders. And the function of the Eucharist, in Ignatius’s memorable image, is to be a medicine for mortally sick souls, an antidote for the poison of the world – the “drug” that gives immortality. It is the Eucharistic food itself which allows the community to live on the far edge of time, in hope for unending life.

5. Writing from a different perspective and a different place – the Rhone valley in Gaul, about 185 - Irenaeus of Lyons also strongly emphasizes the tendency of Christians in the mainstream – unlike the “Gnostic” Christian sects - to place a high value on the body and the material world, and connects this with the generally accepted significance of the Eucharist as the center of Christian worship. In the fourth book of his sweeping overview of Christian theology – all the more astonishing in its depth, for being the first such summa we know of in the Christian tradition – Irenaeus is considering the value of the Hebrew Bible for Christians, as affirming the continuity of faith in a single God who is both creator and savior, and as pointing the way to the
fulfillment of its own meaning, as Scripture, in the person and work of Jesus. Chapters 17-18 of Book IV deal with sacrifice in both Testaments: sacrifice in ancient Israel, both commanded by God and criticized by the prophets, and the Christian sacrifice (already a standard term) of the Eucharist.

“The offering of the Church,” Irenaeus writes, “which the Lord taught should be offered in the whole world, is considered a pure sacrifice by God and is acceptable to him – not because he needs our sacrifice, but because the one who offers it (presumably Jesus on the cross) is himself glorified in what he offers, if his gift is accepted.” Sacrifices are still offered to God in the Church, as they were in Israel and as they continue to be in pagan sects; for Christians, however, both their form and their content has changed, taking on the character that Christ has personally given to this central act of worship. In Irenaeus’s view, this confirms the central conviction of Christians that the God to whom they offer sacrifice is indeed the God who spoke to Israel, the creator of the material world and the human body – two assumptions the anti-materialist Gnostics did not share. Gnostic Eucharists are self-contradictory, Irenaeus suggests:

How shall it be certain for them that the bread, in which thanks are offered, is the body of their Lord, and the chalice his blood, if they refuse to admit that he is the Son of the world’s Creator – that is, his Word, through whom wood bears fruit and fountains flow and the ‘earth gives first a shoot, then an ear, then grain filling the ear’? And the implication for the eschatological future of the body, and the material world where the body lives, are clear:

How can they say, beyond this, that the flesh, which is nourished by the body and blood of the Lord, will return to corruption and not share in life? Let them either change their opinion, or cease to offer what we have mentioned! Our understanding of the Eucharist is consistent [with our practice], and our Eucharist, on the other hand, confirms our understanding. For we offer to him the things that are his, preaching in a consistent way the interchange and unity of flesh and spirit. For even though the bread is from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God [on it] it is no longer ordinary bread, but Eucharist, formed from two realities – earthly and heavenly; and so, too, our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are not corruptible, but have the hope of resurrection.
The reality of the Eucharist, as Christians by the end of the second century have come to understand it – that it is truly a sharing in the flesh and blood of the risen Christ, truly God and truly human, made present through real bread and real wine on which God’s blessing has been invoked, - implies for Irenaeus both that this materiality, this flesh, is the place of salvation, and that salvation consists in our sharing in the divine life of the Word who became flesh.\(^\text{31}\)

This conviction reappears even more clearly at the start of Book 5 of \textit{Adversus Haereses}, where Irenaeus discusses at length Christian expectations for the final stages of human history: crisis and conflict, divine judgment, resurrection, reward and punishment, and transformation to a condition beyond our present imaginings. If, as the Gnostic theologians teach, human salvation will ultimately mean a complete liberation from the flesh, an annihilation of all materiality, then the centerpiece of Christian faith – the incarnation of God’s Word in our flesh – becomes illusory, and our sharing in the Eucharist as real communion with the risen Lord (which Irenaeus suggests is also the Gnostic understanding of liturgical practice) loses its point, as well.

They are completely vain who look down on the whole plan of God in history (\textit{oikonomia}), and deny the salvation of the flesh, and reject its regeneration, saying that it is not capable of receiving incorruptibility. If this flesh is not saved, then clearly neither did the Lord redeem us with his blood, nor is ‘the cup’ of the Eucharist ‘a sharing in his blood or the bread which we bread a sharing in his body’\(^\text{32}\). For blood only comes from veins and flesh, and from everything else that belongs to human substance; by being made this, the Word of God redeemed us with his blood.\(^\text{33}\)

Because we are “members of Christ” and yet also creatures nourished by earthly things, Christ has taken bread and wine from the earth to become his own flesh and blood, and yet to be our genuine bodily food. Irenaeus continues:

When the blended cup, then, and the baked bread receive the word of God, and become the Eucharist of the blood and body of Christ, something from which the substance of our flesh grows and comes to be what it is, how can they deny that the flesh is capable of God’s gift, which is eternal life, since that flesh is fed by the blood and body of Christ and is his member?.. And just as the wood of the vine, planted in the earth, bears its fruit
in time, and ‘the grain of wheat, falling in the ground’ and dissolved, rises as many grains through the help of the ‘Spirit of God, who holds together all things,’ and then, through his wisdom, comes to serve humanity, and when these receive the Word of God to become the Eucharist, which is the body and blood of Christ; so also our bodies, nourished by these things and then laid in the earth, and dissolved in it, will rise in their time, when the Word of God grants them resurrection ‘for the glory of God the Father,’ who will surround this mortal body with immortality and will gratuitously give to this corruptible body incorruptibility, because ‘the power of God is made perfect in weakness’…

In the Incarnation, as confessed by mainstream Christians, in the understanding of the Church as Christ’s body, and in the familiar, distinctively Christian practice of the Eucharistic meal, Irenaeus sees three interwoven manifestations of the same underlying paradox of faith: that God gives strength in and through weakness, life in and through death, spiritual reality in and through the material reality that is his creation, but which points beyond itself to him. If this body is not to be part of God’s plan of salvation, he asks, why do we have a Eucharist at all? And if the Eucharist does not point to the complete eschatological salvation of ourselves, can it really be what we say it is? Can it really be the flesh and blood of Christ our Savior?

6. The last quarter of the fourth century, and the first half of the fifth, witnessed differences in understanding of the person and work of Christ, and the associated differences in Biblical interpretation, that have classically been recognized as the beginnings of the great controversy between Antiochene exegetes and theologians, such as Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Alexandrian exegetes and theologians, such as Didymus the Blind and Cyril of Alexandria. These differences in theological and Scriptural emphasis also had implications for how the Eucharist was understood in the present life of the Church, and for its relationship to Christian hope for eternal life. Interpreting the Eucharist was part of a larger understanding of the Church, the Biblical narrative, and salvation.
It has been argued by a number of scholars in recent decades that the focus of the so-called “Antiochene school” of Biblical exegesis, as well as their vision of the person of Christ, really had its point of departure in a distinctive understanding of God, and of God’s relationship to creation. To put it simply, one of the main concerns of Antiochene theologians from the 370s on seems to have been to insist on the absolute transcendence of God to creation and its history. Growing, perhaps, from tangled attempts to find a way of affirming the true divinity of Christ, and even the formula of Nicaea, without becoming “modalists” who simply asserted that in God the Son is “the same thing” as the Father, scripturally sensitive theologians and pastors in West Syria and eastern Asia Minor in the late fourth century tended to insist that God – eventually that the divine Trinity – in God’s own being, is in no way part of creation or time. God is not circumscribed, is not subject to suffering or diminishment, is not in himself affected by the changes or uncertainties that every creature faces in virtue of being a creature. As a result, God is related to the world as creator or ultimate cause, and works in history, through the prophets and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, to purify creatures from sin and draw them to himself. God is history’s source and goal. But Antiochene theologians, from Diodore, writing mainly in the 360s and 370s, to his pupil Theodore (who died in 428), from Theodore’s pupil Nestorius of Constantinople (c.381–c.451) to the great Biblical commentator Theodoret of Cyrus (c.393-c.466), tended to stress more than other ancient Christian thinkers the autonomy of human history, as a chain of human choices and actions, and to conceive of union with God, and sharing in God’s own life, as a distant promise, reserved for the new age (katastasis) after the resurrection. Naturally, this affected the way they read Biblical narrative, and the way they understood the life and work of the human Jesus; it also affected their understanding of the Eucharist.
For the school of Antioch, the liturgy of their Church – which had an especially rich and well-documented history – was a world of symbols and types, providentially formed by the Holy Spirit to recall the events of Christ and to point the believer forward to deeper incorporation with him at the end of time. Antioch had long been a city where classical rhetoric was taught and prized; like Scripture itself, the liturgy of the Church seems to have been understood as a kind of divine rhetoric, drawing on a broad array of images and associations to move the faithful believer to reform his or her life and to trust in God’s providence for the future. In his sixteenth Catechetical Homily, for instance, which develops a sophisticated understanding of the Eucharist in the life of the Church, Theodore of Mopsuestia presents this sacrament as God’s way of leading the people to share in the “ineffable benefits” that Christ first won for us, by suffering for us and being raised from the dead.⁴⁰ After being born again in baptism, he writes,

we commemorate the death of our Lord through this awe-inspiring⁴¹ service, and receive the immortal and spiritual food of the body and blood of our Lord, for the sake of which, when our Lord was about to draw near to his passion, he instructed his disciples that all of us who believe in Christ had to receive them and perform them through these [elements], and in this way to commemorate by stages the death of Christ, our Lord, and obtain from them [= the Eucharistic elements] an ineffable nourishment. From these things we derive a hope that is strong enough to lead us to the participation in the future benefits.⁴²

Theodore’s understanding of the powerfully symbolic role of the Eucharistic elements, within the history of salvation, is based on a fairly literal reading of the New Testament: because of the instructions of Jesus at the Last Supper, the bread and wine used in the liturgy actually become the body and blood they represent, offered to the Father for us on the cross. And because, according to Rom 8.11, it was the Holy Spirit who was the Father’s instrument for raising Christ from the dead and who promises to raise us up as well, Theodore sees the epiclesis of the liturgy – now understood specifically as the invocation of the Spirit on the Eucharistic elements after the
narrative of institution – as transforming these elements into the immortal humanity that the risen Jesus now possesses:

When the priest, therefore, declares [the elements] to be the body and the blood of Christ, he clearly reveals that they have so become by the descent of the Holy Spirit, through whom they have also become immortal, inasmuch as the body of our Lord, after it was anointed and had received the Spirit, was clearly seen to become so. In this same way, after the Holy Spirit has come here also, we believe that the elements of bread and wine have received a kind of anointing from the grace that comes upon them, and we hold them to be henceforth immortal, incorruptible, impassible, and immutable by nature, as the body of our Lord was after the resurrection… And the priest prays that the grace of the Holy Spirit may come also on all those present, in order that as they have been perfected into one body in the likeness of the second birth, so also they may be knit here as if into one body by the communion of the flesh of our Lord, and in order also that they may embrace and follow one purpose with concord, peace, and diligence in good works...  

Through the activity of the Holy Spirit, in other words, in forming these sacramental signs and in bringing about their effect in the faithful, the Eucharist has a key part in God’s way of achieving final salvation for humanity, step by step through history: connecting us as we now are to the glorified Christ. He writes:

It is with these expectations that all of us draw near to Christ our Lord, who promised us a second birth in baptism... and secondly placed before us the elements of bread and cup which are his body and his blood, through which we eat the food of immortality, and through which the grace of the Holy Spirit flows to us, and feeds into an immortal and incorruptible existence, by hope; and through these leads us steadfastly and in a way that no one can describe, to the participation in future benefits, when we shall really feed ourselves from the grace of the Holy Spirit, without signs and symbols, and shall become completely immortal, incorruptible, and unchangeable by nature.  

In the narrative rhetoric - what Bryan Spinks has called the “theological drama” of Theodore’s Eucharistic theology - the reality of Christ’s sacrifice, present in the gifts on the altar, is itself the promise of a transformation yet to come, for those who share in them.  

7. As on a number of other theological subjects, the way Theodore and his followers interpret the meaning of the Eucharist stands in sharp contrast – in what is emphasized, at least - to the approach of Cyril of Alexandria, the bishop, exegete and theologian who is best known for
his intense opposition to the interpretation of the person of Christ put forward by Theodore’s pupil Nestorius. For the Antiochenes, the time-line of the achievement of salvation was crucial. It is on the way: already achieved in the resurrection of the human Jesus, eventually to be realized also in us. In contrast, Cyril emphasizes strongly the immediate presence of God in human history; God saves us, not simply by revealing to us the moral law or by exhorting us to reform our lives by following Christ, but actually touches us personally by becoming – in the person of the Son – a part of our human community. So while Cyril certainly affirms God’s transcendence in his own being, even the eternal transcendence of the Word who became flesh, he also constantly emphasizes that this Incarnation makes the life of God fully and finally available to us now, in the context of Christian discipleship. This is not just a promise, for Cyril, but a present reality.

In his celebrated Third Letter to Nestorius, written in the late summer of 430 as a kind of theological ultimatum to the new Patriarch of Constantinople, who – like his Antiochene teachers – wanted to keep the transcendent reality of God and the inner-worldly reality of Jesus (and ourselves) ultimately in separate boxes, Cyril includes a strong affirmation of Christ’s life-giving presence in the Eucharist as one of the central issues at stake:

We proclaim the death according to the flesh of the only-begotten Son of God, and confess the return to life from the dead of Jesus Christ, and his ascension into heaven, and thus we perform in the churches an unbloody worship, and in this way approach mystical blessings (eulogia) and are sanctified, becoming participants in the holy flesh and the precious blood of Christ the Savior of us all. We do not receive this as ordinary flesh – God forbid! – or as the flesh of a man sanctified and conjoined to the Word in a unity of dignity, or as the flesh of someone who enjoys a divine indwelling. No, we receive it as truly the life-giving and very flesh of the Word himself.

In some of his exegetical writings that preceded the period of controversy with Nestorius, Cyril had already emphasized this understanding of Christ’s Eucharistic presence. In his Commentary on John, for instance, which probably dates from the mid-420s, just before the
arrival of Nestorius in the capital, Cyril describes the union of believers with Christ and with each other in the Eucharist in the strongest terms:

Blessing those who believe in him with a single body – namely, his own – by sacramental participation, he made them one body (literally: *syssemoi, concorporeal*) with himself and with each other. Who could separate and alienate from natural union with each other, those who are bound together, through the one holy body, into union with Christ? For if all of us share in the one bread, we are all formed into one body. The body of Christ cannot be divided... For if we are all united to Christ through his holy body, since we receive him single and undivided into our own bodies, we identify our limbs more with him than even with ourselves.  

And since Christ has life in himself, and has come into the world to give life to his disciples, our physical contact with him in the Eucharist necessarily communicates that life to us. He writes somewhat earlier, also in the *Commentary on John*:

It is utterly impossible that he should not completely overcome corruption and conquer death, who is by nature life. For this reason, even if death, which has attacked us through the fall, holds the human body captive, so that it must necessarily be corrupted, we shall nevertheless be raised, since Christ has come to be in us through his own flesh. For it is not credible – rather, it is impossible – that life should not give life to those in whom it has come to dwell.

This theme of the direct communication of eternal life from God, by the real incarnation of God the Son, to a race heading on its own towards death in the flesh, and by the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, reappears throughout Cyril’s writings; clearly it is an important, even driving idea behind his conception of the person of Christ, and his quarrel with Nestorius and his Antiochene teachers. In his 142nd *Homily on Luke*, for instance - part of a series of homilies that seems to be contemporary with the Nestorian controversy - Cyril summarizes clearly his sense of the saving connection between Christ’s flesh and the Eucharist:

God the Father gives life to all things through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. How, then was the human person, mastered on earth by death, to make his escape to incorruptibility? Necessarily, the flesh that was dying had to become a sharer in the life-giving power that comes from God. And the life-giving power of God the Father is the only-begotten Word. He sent him, then, as our savior and redeemer, and he became flesh – not undergoing change or alteration into what he was not, nor departing from being the
Word, but rather coming to be from a woman, in a fleshly way, and making his own a body that came from her, that he might take root among us in an inseparable union, and reveal all of us to be the conquerors of death and decay… Joining to himself, then, the flesh that shared in death, the Word, being God and life, frightened corruption away from his flesh and revealed it to be also a giver of life…

So by eating the flesh of the Savior of us all, Christ, and by drinking his precious blood, we have life in ourselves and are formed to be one with him and remain in him, having him even within ourselves… He must come to be within us through the Holy Spirit, in the way appropriate to God: to be blended, as it were, with our own bodies, through his holy flesh and his precious blood, which we possess as a life-giving act of blessing (eulogion), as bread and wine. In order that we might not grow drowsy, as we gaze on the flesh and blood that lie before us on the holy altars of our Churches, God joins us in restoring our weakness, imparts to the gifts the power of life, and changes them to possess the power of his own flesh, so that we might have them as a means towards life-giving participation, and a kind of vital seed may be found within us: the body of life.\textsuperscript{51}

Cyril does not explicitly refer here to the future implications of this marvelous transformation of humanity through the Incarnation and its continuing effect in the Eucharist, but they seem to be clear: if we share in the life from God that Christ imparts to our flesh through his, we have already begun to live in the new creation. The “vital seed” will bear fruit as immortality.

* 

In these few examples of the continuing sense among early Christian Fathers that the Eucharist we celebrate, and the Eucharistic food we share, are directly connected not only to Christ’s redemptive act but to the future realization of our own redemption in resurrection and life with him, we see – as so often – both continuity and difference. In Paul’s letters and in the Didache, the emphasis seems to be on the present gathering around the table of the Lord, as an anticipation of the final gathering of God’s people when Christ comes again: mainly ecclesiological, one might say, rather than soteriological. The Church itself, as it celebrates the Eucharist in memory of Jesus’ last supper and death, is reminded effectively that it lives on the brink of a new, eschatological reality. In the more narrative or symbolic-dramatic approach of Theodore of Mopsuestia and the Antiochenes, this sense that the full soteriological meaning of
the body and blood of Christ, present here in our liturgy, will still only be fully realized in the
life to come, continues: here in this life, the Spirit is given, Christ’s death is really made present
in sign, in order to draw us into the process of moral conversion and growth that will become the
fullness of life only at the end of history. The Eucharist expresses the transitory character of the
Church’s present existence, even as it points to a new age for which the Spirit now prepares us.

In the works of Ignatius of Antioch, on the other hand, or of Irenaeus and (much later)
Cyril of Alexandria, the emphasis is rather on the Eucharist as the way our Savior, God the Son
made flesh, now touches our flesh with the transforming, immediately effective energy of
healing and endless life. Even though the believer continues to live bounded by weakness and
death, his assimilation of Christ’s risen flesh into his own body through the Eucharist is a clear
guarantee, for those who understand what they are doing, that victory is already theirs, that
resurrection is already working as a power within them. Like an effective antibiotic in a time of
infection, the Eucharistic species, in Ignatius’s phrase, is “the drug of immortality.” As Cyril
would argue, we already participate in the life of God that Jesus has enfleshed in our midst, the
life that never ends!

As so often seems to happen, it is Augustine – the professional rhetor, the energetic
pastor, the philosopher and mystic and Scriptural commentator – who seems to bring both these
streams of Eucharistic hope together seamlessly: the “eschatological” and the “incarnational,”
the reality and the promise. In Sermon 227, for instance, one of his numerous “mystagogical
catecheses,” – explanations given to the newly baptized, on Easter Sunday or during Easter
week, of the significance of the rites by which they have become part of the Church – he draws
on his favorite image for the Church, the real and organically unified Body of Christ, the *totus
Christus*, to remind them that what they now *are* as Christ’s Body is both what they *receive* in
the Eucharistic species, and what they will be, in a visible yet transfigured way, at the end of time.

That bread which you can see on the altar [he begins], sanctified by the word of God, is the body of Christ. That cup – or rather, what the cup contains – sanctified by the word of God, is the blood of Christ. It was by means of these things that the Lord Christ wished to present us with his body and blood, which he shed for our sake for the forgiveness of sins. If you receive them well, you are yourselves what you receive. For the Apostle says, “We, being many, are one loaf, one body” (I Cor 10.17).52

Augustine goes on to develop a picture of the sacraments of initiation, in all the material language of water and oil, bread and wine, as representations of the Church as it is: separate elements brought together, ground (by contrition) and moistened (in baptism), blended and baked (by the fire of the Spirit), to form a single loaf and cup, a single people who are together Christ, present in the world. But by a perceptive focus on the words – already traditional in the Latin liturgy – with which the Church’s prayer of thanksgiving begins, Augustine urges his hearers not just to focus on the present reality to which they have been joined – the sacramental Church - but to see it in its eternal implications: the bishop has invited them to “lift up their hearts,” and they reply, by God’s grace, “We have lifted them up to the Lord,” because they realize their hearts must not simply be preoccupied with things on earth. If they are the body of Christ, they must have their hearts where their head is. Christ, our head, is risen from the dead and is in glory with the Father; ergo in caelo caput nostrum, he says, and our hearts must be lifted up to heaven as well! In that awareness, the significance of our identification, as Christ’s body, with his own sacrifice for us and for the world, becomes clearer.

Then, after the consecration of God’s sacrifice, because he wanted us to be ourselves his sacrifice, which was indicated when it was first instituted as God’s sacrifice and our own – that is, as the sign, which we are, of a deeper reality – behold, when the consecration is finished we say the Lord’s Prayer…53

We join with Jesus himself in calling God our Father! Augustine draws his conclusion:
So they are great sacraments and signs, really serious and important sacraments… Don’t let yourselves think that what you can see is of no account. What you can see passes away, but the invisible reality signified does not pass away, but remains. Look: it’s received, it’s eaten, it’s consumed. Is the body of Christ consumed? Is the Church of Christ consumed? Are the members of Christ consumed? Perish the thought! Here they are being purified, there they will be crowned with the victor’s laurels. So what is signified will remain eternally, although the thing that signifies it seems to pass away.54

The Body of Christ, he seems to be saying, is both an earthly, human, sacramental and social reality, and a heavenly, eternal one. The liturgy presents both these realities to us: a material representation of Christ’s sacrifice for us, which forms us even now into the means for continuing that sacrifice, that purifying gift, in present history; and Christ himself in glory, nourishing us with the life that even now, surrounded by death, lets us share his eternal victory.

In the world of later Greek theology, the fourteenth-century Byzantine spiritual writer and theologian Nicholas Cabasilas (b. 1319-23, d. 1391) suggests, in Book 4 of his work Life in Christ, something of this same conviction we find in Augustine’s sermons: that the concrete sign offered us in the Church’s liturgical rhetoric accomplishes both present and eternal transformation, through union with Christ. Drawing on Jesus’ apocalyptic saying, “Where the body is, there the eagles will gather” (Matt 24.28), he applies the image of a rejuvenated eagle, an eagle growing new wings, to the faithful gathered here at the Eucharistic table, and later on at the heavenly feast around Christ’s Body:

They will move from table to table: from the one still veiled to the one that will then be clearly visible, from the bread to the body. For now Christ is bread for them, as they still live this human life; and he is Pascha, as they cross over from here to the City in the heavens. But when “they renew their strength, and grow wings like eagles” (Is 40.31), as the admirable Isaiah says, then they shall sit down around the Body itself, free from every veil… There is, after all, one meaning of the table, one host in both worlds. The bridal chamber is one thing, our preparation for the bridal chamber another, but the Bridegroom remains the same.55

For one who understands sacramental reality, the eternal banquet is already under way.
In the sixth chapter of John’s Gospel – the Lord’s profound and challenging discourse on “the bread of life” – Jesus identifies the “work” he has come to accomplish in the world, as Word made flesh, as providing his disciples with “bread from heaven,” which will nourish them unfailingly, just as the manna nourished Israel on its desert journey: bread that will lead, on “the last day,” to resurrection and to eternal life. The response of his hearers is eloquent in a way that only simplicity can be: “They said to him, ‘Lord, give us this bread always!’” Our own formation – our “capacitation,” as David Fagerberg would say - to understand and share in the liturgy that forms the heart of the Church’s life, comes, I think, in the end, from joining in that simple prayer.

Brian E. Daley, SJ
Sacrosanctum Concilium 2.

Ibid. 8

This phrase, from Titus 2.13, comes at the conclusion of the “embolism” prayer, spoken by the presider, that follows the congregation’s recitation of the Lord’s Prayer.

I Cor 10.16-17.

I Cor 11.20-21.

I Cor 11.26-29.


Ibid. 16.3 (Holmes 369).

Ibid. 16.5

The Didache here appears to accept the opinion of a number of Jewish apocalyptic authors, that the coming general resurrection will only include the just; those who have persisted in their sins will simply remain dead, or (in some texts) will be raised only to be finally annihilated.

Ibid. 16.7 (Holmes 369).

Ibid. 9.1-4 (Holmes 359).

Ibid. 10.3 (Holmes 359).

Ibid. 10.5 (Holmes 361).

Ibid. 10.6 (Holmes 361).

See now the fully annotated edition and translation of the Apology by Charles Munier, in the series Sources chrétiennes 507 (Paris: Cerf, 2006). Munier accepts the position now put forward by most scholars of Justin, that what has traditionally been taken to be two separate “apologies” really constitute a single, two-part work.

Literally: “the food Eucharistized by the word of prayer that comes from him”.

The Greek word for this change of food into flesh and blood is metabolē, from which our English word “metabolism” is derived.

Apology 1.66.1-2 (SChr 507.304-306).

See, for instance, Apology 1.18; 45; 52.
Justin goes on to give a summary narrative of the institution of the Eucharist in *Apology* 1.66.3.

After Lightfoot’s study of the work of the “Apostolic Fathers” in 1889, most scholars agree that Ignatius was put to death sometime in the reign of Trajan (98-117 a.d.). Recent attempts to argue for a later date, or to attack the authenticity of the “middle” recension generally accepted as his valid works, have not won much positive reception.

Rom 7.3 (trans. Holmes [see above, n. 7] 233).

Literally: “you all come together in grace from the name.” Ignatius seems to be referring to the *nomen Christianum*, the name of Christ that was applied to them both as a term of opprobrium and a recognition of vocation.

Eph 20.2 (tr. Holmes 199 [alt.]).


The original Greek word, presumably, is *epiclēsis*.


For this sense that in Irenaeus’s understanding, salvation for us is to share in the divine life of Christ, see the end of the Preface to Book 5 of *Adversus Haereses* (ed. Rousseau; SChr 153 [Paris: Cerf, 1969] 14, ll. 35-39).

1 Cor 10.16.


Wisdom 1.7.

Phil 2.11, hinting at the consummation of the world, which will begin with the universal acknowledgement that “Jesus Christ is Lord”.

See 1 Cor 15.53.

*Adv. Haer*. 5.2.3 (Rousseau 34-38); the final Biblical allusion is to II Cor 12.9.

Theodore of Mopsuestia, Catechetical Homily 16 (ed. and trans. A. Mingana; Woodbrooke Studies 6 [Cambridge: Heffer, 1933] 103). This important series of homilies is commonly called the Liber ad baptizandos; the first ten are an exposition of the Creed, the next two on the Lord’s prayer, followed by two on baptism, and finally two on the Eucharist. They seem to have been given in Antioch about 392, when Theodore was still a presbyter. They were only discovered, as a whole text, in the 20th century, in a Syriac translation, and were first published and translated in 1933, in England, by the Iraqi émigré and linguist Alphonse Mingana (1878-1937) from a manuscript in the collection of Syriac and Arabic Christian and Islamic manuscripts he had himself assembled (Mingana Syr. 561). This collection of almost 3000 manuscripts, which Mingana gathered on three trips to the Middle East between 1924 and 1929, is now housed in the library of the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham, England. Mingana probably found and bought MS 561, along with most of his Syriac early Christian manuscripts, on his trip to Kurdistan and Upper Mesopotamia in 1925. The most thorough and careful study of Mingana’s puzzling but colorful life and career is Samir Khalil Samir, Alphonse Mingana (1878-1937) and his Contribution to Early Christian-Muslim Studies (Selly Oak, 1990).

Literally (in Syriac), “powerful,” “miraculous”. Mingana prefers to render the word by “awe-spiring.”

Cat. Hom. 16 (trans. Mingana 103).

Ibid. (trans. Mingana 104).

Ibid. (trans. Mingana 112 [altered]).

See Bryan D. Spinks, Prayers from the East (Washington: Pastoral Press, 1993) 60. This same sense of the Eucharist as promise of future salvation is evident in the two sixth-century anaphoras of the Church of the East, which lives in the same tradition. See, for instance, the anaphora attributed to “Mar Nestorius,” in which the presider prays, after invoking the Holy Spirit on the elements, “And when we stand before the fearful judgment set of your majesty, let us not be ashamed or guilty. And as in this world you have counted us worthy of the ministry of your dread and holy and life-giving and divine mysteries, likewise in the world to come account us worthy to partake with uncovered face in those good things that neither pass away nor are dissolved. And when you make a completion of all these which we possess as a mirror and in a parable, may we there openly possess the Holy of Holies that is in heaven.” (Bryan D. Spinks [trans.], Mar Nestorius and Mar Theodore the Interpreter: the Forgotten Eucharistic Prayers of East Syria [Cambridge: Grove Books, 1999] 32-33)
See, for instance, his first letter to Succensus, 5, where among a number of like places - Cyril insists that “the Word of God, in an incomprehensible manner, beyond description, united to himself a body animated with a rational soul and came forth as man from a woman, not becoming what we are by any transformation of nature but rather by a gracious economy. For he wished to become human without casting off his natural being as God, and even when he descended into our limitations, and put on the form of the slave, even so he remained in the transcendent condition of the Godhead and in his natural state as Lord.” (trans. John A. McGuckin, _St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy_ [Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s, 2004] 354).

Greek, _eulogia_: i.e., the Eucharistic elements – what have been “blessed” by the invocation of the Spirit.

_Based their argument primarily on this letter, and on Cyril’s later explanations of it, a number of recent scholars have pointed out the centrality of both authors’ understanding of the Eucharist to the controversy between Nestorius and Cyril. See Henry Chadwick, “Eucharist and Christology in the Nestorian Controversy,” _Journal of Theological Studies_ 2 (1951) 145-164; for the _Commentary on John_, see Lawrence J. Welch, _Theology and Eucharist in the Early Thought of Cyril of Alexandria_ (San Francisco: Catholic Scholars’ Press, 1993).

_Correction on John_ 11.11 (PG 74.560 B).

_Ibid._ 4.2 (PG 73.581 B).

Although the Greek original of these homilies is largely lost, and the full text survives only in a Syriac translation, many large fragments of the Greek, including this one, can be found in the Biblical catenae. This Greek fragment of Homily 142 is in PG 72.908 C – 911 A. For a translation of the Syriac translation of the whole homily, as well as all the others, see Robert Payne Smith, _A Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke by Saint Cyril of Alexandria_ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1859, 666-669; repr. Stoudion Publishers, 1983, 569-571).


Hill 255 (altered); Poque 240. I have made some changes in Hill’s translation of this difficult passage, on the basis of the Latin original. The point seems clear enough: God wants the sacrifice of Christ to be both God’s offering and our offering of ourselves; that is the sacrifice he has instituted or “laid down” for the people of God. This unity between Christ and ourselves in the act of sacrifice is what enables us, with Christ our head, to pray to God as “Father.”

_Manebit ergo quod significatur, quamquam transire videatur quod significat._ (Hill 255; Poque 242).