

THE HOLY TABLE

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When Nicholas Ridley came from Rochester in 1550 to replace Bonner in the See of London and Westminster (Rochester being offered in October 1552 to John Knox), one of Ridley's first acts was to remove the stone altar from St Paul's and set up a table - an "honest table decently covered." In this he had probably the moral support of Reformers both north and south of the Tweed. In marshalling his reasons to the diocese why in every church the Lord's Board should take the form of one table, instead of "their multitude of altars," Ridley adduces "Christ's Institution" and the usage of the Primitive Church. It does not seem to have occurred to him or, indeed, to any of the men of that age, else he might have further buttressed his position by the fact that, as in Holy Writ, so throughout Eastern Christendom, the terms "altar" and "table" are interchangeable, while the ritual term for "altar" in the Greek Church is the Holy Table.

The Greek "altar" includes not only the altar proper, with seats for the clergy, but also the credence table, whence the prepared Bread and Wine is borne at the "Great Entrance". The Latin altar is generally set back against a reredos, but the Greek well forward, on the chord of the apse. The Western is of stone, but the Eastern of wood. The Greeks may lavish ornamentation upon the ikonostasis, or the screen with its Holy Doors concealing the sanctuary, but upon the Holy Table rests only the book of the Gospels, and the service book (Euchologion), whence are recited the unchangeable parts of the Divine Liturgy.

In matters Liturgical and Ecclesiological there has been within recent years a widespread revival of interest. From all quarters testimonies accumulate - architectural, literary, artistic, even chemical - in support of the Greek origin of British Christianity. Some trace in our northern ritual, however much now departed from, notable parallels. The black gowns of the clergy; the standing posture of the worshipper at prayer; the unaccompanied praise; the "lifting" of the Holy Elements; the mixed cup still used

in Galloway; the importance attached to the Blessing of the Bread and Cup - the Epiclesis; and markedly the solemn procession of ministers and elders bringing in the Holy Elements to the sanctuary, so suggestive of the Great Entrance, seems to evidence a tinge of Oriental ritual. The very pigments used in Byzantine and early Celtic MSS., notably a Tyrian purple found among the gorgeous decorations of the Lindisfarne Gospels; also the grotesque animal forms depicted on the margin of an ancient Celtic psalter by Byzantine monks, displaying the elephant and fish symbols so familiar to us on Pictish stones throughout Scotland, all tend to "open a window eastward."

The genesis of our Scottish Communion Service is difficult to trace. What led to the adoption of the Table Gesture is unknown. May it not possibly have been suggested by the manner in which the "Holy Bread" (the pain benit) of French usage, the antidoron or Eulogia of the Oriental ritual) was distributed and consumed? When the men of Devon rose against the Reformation in 1549, one of their grievances was, "We will have holy bread every Sunday." This ceremony still survives in the Spanish, Greek, Russian, Coptic, and Armenian Churches. Those who have witnessed it in Brittany tell us that, "as the Bread is passed from hand to hand and seat to seat among the congregation, ministrants following its course with a supply from which to renew it, there is a startling resemblance to our Scottish usage."

At the foundation of the Church Service Society, 31st January 1865, the possible derivation of certain elements in Scots-Catholic worship from Greek sources is not entirely ignored. When pleading for a manual of direction for celebration of Holy Communion, Dr Sprott urged that while "the basis of the book should be the old 'Reformed' liturgy; in the Greek and other liturgies are many golden sentences full of sweetness, piety, and sympathy which should also be incorporated." This view happily met with general acceptance. Dr Robert Lee, indeed, wrote: "Do not take up your time by talking of the Greek liturgies and such far-away subjects. None who have any tolerable acquaintance with those formularies will imagine they can furnish anything suitable for us"; but there were others who knew better. In the autumn of 1867, after much consultation, appeared the first edition of "Euchologion: A Book of Common Order."

Reviewing the past three decades from the Eucharistic standpoint, while there is ground for gratitude, we are confronted with various unsolved problems, the more recent the more difficult. Most pressing, perhaps, is the infrequency of Communion. After all, the Holy Table is there not for ornament but for use. Unused it is meaning-

less, or speaks only to our reproach. In the matter of frequency there has too often been a chasm between law and practice. The Fourth Lateran Council enjoined annual reception, and that at Easter, as a minimum. Other canons required the faithful to communicate thrice a year. "Everything tends to show that the prevailing custom of the laity at the time of the Reformation was to communicate once a year except in the case of the very devout, or at the approach of death." To this Popish practice the people of Scotland still adhere, at least in rural parishes, with remarkable steadfastness. The 'Second Book of Edward VI' endorses the mediaeval minimum of three, one to be Easter. The rubric in our book of 'Common Order,' (1560), suggests celebration monthly, while the 'Westminster Directory' enjoins that it be celebrated "frequently." Custom was not the same everywhere. In the Parish of Morebattle in Teviotdale there was no Communion for six years, 1610 - 1616. Willison of Dundee, however, in 1726, writes: "Are there not many serious exercised Christians who communicate almost every Sabbath during the summer season?" Great things were expected after the War when our troops intermingled daily with French, Belgian, and Italian allies and, further, themselves enjoyed frequent opportunities of Communion at rudely extemporised Holy Tables; but alas ! like metal molten in a furnace, we return to our native hardness so soon as the fire is withdrawn. There are still over seventy parishes, most of them north of the Grampians, where the Lord's Board is spread only once a year. On the other hand, the number of parishes having Easter Communion in the Church of Scotland has more than quadrupled within the last two decades. Infrequent celebration was a fault not confined to Scotland. In the six years Ken spent as a boy at Winchester, 1651 - 1657, Holy Communion was administered only thrice - at Christmas, Easter, and All Saints' Day.

Our forefathers' aversion to the observance of Easter may easily be overstated. The aim of the Reformers was apparently to break the people off the Popish practice of communicating only once a year, on Easter Day, annual communion being denounced by Calvin as a satanic invention. The Kirk Session of St Andrews ordained, eg that "Communion be ministered to the inhabitants of this citee upon Palm Sunday," 8th April 1581 which implies, if, as was usual, Communion was to be continued on a second Sunday, that it should include Easter. If their aversion to Easter observance was so keen as it was usual to represent, why trouble to print an elaborate calendar to ensure that they should observe Easter on the right day? All through these St Andrews registers the dates of the ecclesiastical year continually recur. Pasche, Yule, Lentron, Mid- Lentron, Palm-Sunday, Low-Sunday, Trinity-Sunday, Whit-Sunday, S. Stephen's Day, All Hallow Day, S Luke's Day, S James's Day, and

other days. A stronger case could probably be made out for the historical observance of the Christian year than is generally supposed. The answer to the question, "Whether the Communion may be administered upon Pasche Day or not?" given by a Committee of Assembly in 1570, which included Craig, Row, and almost certainly John Knox, still holds good: "Why not, where superstition is removed?"

The Practice of "extended Communion" for the sick, the infirm, and the dying is also on the increase. To Dr Alexander Hill of Glasgow is assigned the credit of first indicating a way of escape from the restraint imposed through a misapprehension which for generations forbade the extension of this blessed ordinance to those who needed it most. "Any minister," he was wont to say, "is free to celebrate the Communion anywhere in his parish where he can collect a congregation. And a congregation, we know on the highest of all authority, may consist of two or three."

One great change which has come over the face of the Church during the last half-century is that regarding the Table Gesture. Whatever posture be adopted, whether "ambling" (ambulans) Communion as at Zurich, standing as among French Reformed, sitting, or kneeling, an exact repetition of the gesture used at the original institution is impossible. All four Gospels unite in describing the attitude used as reclining. Our forefathers laid the greatest possible emphasis on the communicant's action in coming forward to receive at a table.

If the practice of receiving at a fixed altar rail be a Laudian invention, the custom of receiving in pews is still more recent - a nineteenth century device borrowed from English independency. "To come out of their pews to a table," says Baillie, "they deny the necessity of it; we affirm it necessary." "We, sent from the Church of Scotland," adds Alexander Henderson, "are all of one mind on this point." The debate lasted for days, and in the end the matter was left at Westminster an open question, but the General Assembly, in their Act adopting the "Directory" in 1645, inserted a special reservation on the subject. So lately as 1825, after long debate, the Assembly condemned the pew practice, finding that: "it is the law, and has been the immemorial practice of the Church of Scotland, to dispense the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper to the people seated at or around a Communion Table or Tables; and they enjoin the Presbyteries of this Church, when churches are to be built or to be new seated, to use their best endeavours to have a suitable Table or Tables provided for the solemn service of the Lord's Supper."

The American innovation of replacing the Cup of the Lord by a thousand little utensils is still more revolutionary, and to many offensive, as subversive of the Institution

and going against the nature of the of the Sacrament, as much or more than Ridley's "multitude of altars" seemed to him to do. More frequent celebration, reversion to the Apostolic usage of Sunday observance as the Dies Panis, would be the solution of many difficulties.

In certain parts of Scotland the Table Gesture still survives, as at Keir in Dumfriesshire, Edderton, Lochcarron and other northern parishes, while recent instances of its revival are not unknown - for example, at the Parish Church of Linton in Teviotdale and at Hoselaw Chapel, erected in 1906 as a memorial to Dr Thomas Leishman.

At the Church of St. John the Baptist in Perth, 31st July 1580, we find John Row, the Scots Reformer, celebrating his last Communion where the "High Altar" formerly stood. The choir was railed off, and the people, singing as they entered, gave up their tokens and alms to the deacons. The usage of singing at entrance and exit, which of old prevailed also in the Church of England, is certainly primitive and probably Apostolic. In the Ethiopic Liturgy, the rubric runs: "Then they receive the medicine of their souls." The sacred Board in all lands and all ages has been vested with "fine linen, clean and white," and we would put in a plea for the retention of our Scottish Communion Table linens, possibly a survival of the pre-Reformation houseling cloths.

We have it on the best authority that in the Holy Orthodox Church all the celebrants and the assistants before consecrating bow themselves before the Holy Table, but after the consecration they do kneel. But there exists no general regulation, because other people do only bow themselves. The same liberty exists also among the communicants. Some of them before taking Holy Communion make a metanoia - that is, they fall on their knees. But Greek people generally do not take Holy Communion kneeling. The metanoia above is only a sign of respect before the holy mystery.

While much may be said for the retention of the Table Gesture as a beautiful old-world custom, as near in all probability to the original institution of Christ as any corresponding Communion ceremony in existence in Christendom, it were futile to suggest its adoption by other national Churches. Looking to the future, in view of the great world-wide movements towards Christian reunion, it is clearly essential to claim for all a reasonable liberty for alternative uses in the details of sacramental observance.