NOVATE
VOBIS
NOVALE

The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Thomas O'Loughlin

We Drink from One Cup

February 2017

We Drink from One Cup
– towards a theology of the Eucharist

Thomas O'Loughlin

There is an old joke warning us not to assume that people share our assumptions: 'there are only two certainties in life: death and taxes!' But we can extend this a little: it is certain that if you are reading this, you have being drinking some liquid in the last few hours or will do so in the next hour or so. If this is not the case, then I suggest your time would be better spent finding liquid to drink than reading any further. The fact is, drinking – or more technically: hydration – is about as basic a human activity as we can imagine. We can go a little further with our assumptions: apart from times when people are ill, the occasional use of straws or water fountains, when we drink we do so using some sort of vessel: a cup, a glass, a bottle, or a ladle of some sort. Unusually, we might use our hand in lieu of a ladle or make some other improvisation, but the norm is – and has been for as long as we have records – that we use a cup, or its equivalent, while drinking. We see this assumption even in the gospels' saying: 'For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward' (Mk 9:41) – the assumption is not just that one gives water, but the means to drink it: a cup. Indeed, cups/mugs/beakers belong among the most basic material artefacts of every culture. It is a fair bet that there are one or more cups near where you are reading this right now.

It is not surprising, therefore, that since Christian rituals originate in the domestic space (in contrast to a sanctuary / temple setting) of eating and drinking that cups play a central role in our liturgy. What is surprising, however, is that for just over a millennium there has been almost no reflection of the significance of cups in our worship and the theological significance attached to them in our early sources. This invisibility can be easily explained. Since at least the seventh century there was an ever-growing tendency for people not to eat or drink at the Eucharist – to attend without

Thomas O'Loughlin is Professor of Historical Liturgy at the University of Nottingham, England NG7 2RD.

communicating – out of fear of sinfulness, the rigours of the fast, or the sense that while 'going to Mass' was the way for ordinary folk, 'receiving' belonged to the pious. Despite a century of corrective catechesis, this attitude that 'taking communion' is for the special few is still far more widespread than is often realised. The perception/appreciation of the cup – given equal weighting in the early catechesis of Christian practice as we see in 1 Cor 10:16 and 11:26-7 and the *Didache* 9:2-3 – is even more peripheral in the consciousness of most Catholics.

Gradually the cup became the private property of the priest – indeed it became a metaphor for the distinctiveness of the priest from ordination, when it was one of the 'instruments' handed to him, to being the ideal gift to a priest, and, finally, as part of the iconography on many priests' tombstones. The cup was/is of little direct concern to the rest of Christ's faithful. When the laity did receive, it was simply a wafer: the cup was beyond their use, their reach, and their ken. Today in most places in the Catholic world the cup is still only the priest's cup. Despite what presiders have said in the Institution Narrative: 'take this all of you and drink from it,' many priests feel uncomfortable about sharing the cup with the laity – and if needs must, do so in as minimal a manner as possible. But it is not even considered in most places and the whole idea of 'under both species' seems like a frill, another daft idea of liturgists (and a very complicated one at that) which the 'ordinary' people have no interest in!

The cup has also become harder to see. When the cup became that which was only going to be used by one person, the priest, the cup quickly reduced in size: from being a large vessel containing a goodly quantity of wine, it became the size of an individual's stem-glass, save that it was made in precious metals. It was also obscured by language: cups (*cuppae*), belonged to the world of drinking – and is the word used in the New Testament, while the ritual cup came to be called a *calix* (a word belonging to the élite) and this soon evolved into a technical term far from ordinary experience. By using the term *calix*, chalice, the link between the Eucharist and drinking was further obscured in our understanding, while the link to the many places where 'cup' (*potérion*) is mentioned in the New Testament became detached from thinking about the actual ritual of the Eucharist – so much so that the recent translators did not realise the by reverting to 'chalice' they were playing false to their Greek base texts.

The cup also disappeared as an object of reflection. From the time of Gregory of Nyssa (330-95) there has been a tendency to give ever greater emphasis to 'the elements' – and so to the nature of the contents of the eucharistic cup rather than the manner of drinking

it. Earlier texts had emphasised the way one drank at the Eucharist over what was drunk. Later in the West, even these contents (and so too the cup) came to have less distinct significance in theology: 'communion under both kinds' was simply a ritual extra – it added nothing of religious importance to what was received in the wafer, and to assert that a layperson's eucharistic participation was in any way incomplete without the cup has been formally defined as heresy (Trent XXI, canon 1 [DS 1731]). But despite being bypassed for centuries, old images, along with a handful of ancient cups, have survived to remind us that the cup was originally one of the keys to how Christians understood the Eucharist.

Probably the best place to appreciate this older theology is the National Museum in Dublin – few museums anywhere have pre-modern cups because as they became liturgically redundant they were usually recycled as scrap – where you can see two such cups almost side by side. The Derrynaflan Chalice and the Ardagh Chalice both date from a time when drinking at the Eucharist was still the partner of eating, and each can hold, without being filled to the brim, about the equivalent of two modern bottles of wine (approximately 1.5 litres). Both have handles which facilitated being handed over to a communicant and then taken back when in use; both have low centres of gravity giving added stability from being toppled; and the drinking edge of both cups is rolled which makes them more lip-friendly than a cut metal edge. Taken together these features point to actual use; and because the diameter of a vessel is related to the amount of liquid consumed in a normal mouthful, we can estimate that they were for use in a community of less than 100 people (which figure, incidentally, tallies with surviving instructions for breaking a loaf at the Eucharist). But this phenomenon of large cups was not something specifically Irish but across the Christian world. We have but to look at the mosaic of the Empress Theodora in San Vitale in Ravenna. She is depicted presenting an even bigger cup than those of Ardagh and Derrynaflan in a procession of gifts at the Eucharist (Justinian, the emperor and her husband, is on the opposite wall presenting a large paten). These images and objects are now admired as great works of art, but for contemporary Christians they should also be seen as pointers reminding us of parts of our heritage of eucharistic theology that we have all but forgotten.

IPSISSIMA GESTA CHRISTI

One of the curious cul-de-sacs in twentieth-century biblical scholarship was the pursuit of 'the very words of the Christ' (*ipsissima verba Christi*). Could we say, with certainty, that this or that saying – as we have it – goes all the way back to the historical

Jesus rather than being given its shape within the memory of the communities of believers often decades later when the evangelists were preaching? Those who took a maximalist position usually found themselves on the weaker end of the argument because the gospels are not recordings of the historical Jesus but the salient memories of his followers: and memory is always a creative, reflective, and adaptive process. Curiously, there was no parallel search for the very actions of Jesus: it was Jesus as teacher rather than as doer that attracted those searchers. But this begs the question: are there traces of things that Jesus *did* that were remembered as belonging to him or distinctive of him? For such a quest one could adopt one of the criteria often used in the search for the *ipsissima verba*: are there memories about Jesus' actions that are so unusual and discontinuous with his environment, and so with the culture of the early followers, that they can plausibly be recognised as actions that were peculiar to him? One such action concerns the cup and the way Jesus used the cup at table when blessing the Father.

THE GRAMMAR OF MEALS

While it is common to share a loaf, a loaf placed on a table presumes that those at the table will share it by breaking or cutting it – and, indeed, there have long been special loaves (i.e. cakes) where having a piece is tantamount to being 'one of the group.' We have but to think of birthday cakes or wedding cakes for a contemporary expression of this basic element of the grammar of meals. Moreover, the leader of a Jewish meal customarily 'blessed God' – i.e. thanked him – for his gifts using a loaf although there is no hint of any formal breaking of it and sharing of it linked to the moment of blessing God. But what about the liquids at a meal? In this case it was not a question of holding up a jug or flagon full of liquid, rather the leader blessed God holding his own cup. And thus, by extension, he thanked God for all that was drunk at the meal by each person. But the practical assumption was a simple one: *each person at the meal then drank at the blessing from his or her own cup*. This accords with the normal way we drink: we might have a common joint of meat, dish of vegetables, or a common loaf, but the liquids we drink – be it wine, water or lemonade – will be imbibed with each of us having our own vessel of glass, pottery or plastic. Which of us has not been at a formal dinner – with lots of glasses – and not checked with our neighbour at table: 'is that one my glass? – the assumption being that one of the glasses is the one that I, and only I, use. Indeed, the idea of sharing someone else's glass is repulsive to us! If, by accident, with many glasses on a cluttered table we take up someone else's glass, we apologise immediately, blame it on our clumsiness, and

a fresh glass is often procured. A glass that has had two drinkers is somehow soiled and in need of washing! We may share a bottle of wine, but we need separate glasses. We may say to a friend 'let's have a cup of coffee!'; but at no point do either you or your friend imagine that you will get just *one* cup of coffee. Rather, you will have coffee together with each of you having her/his own cup: so *a* cup of coffee involves *two* cups! There are, of course, exceptions – but these prove the rule. When we are far from the domestic space and its habitual comforts, we might have to share a cup – maybe at a well or in some sort of picnic situation where we are short of cups. But we will often use different sides of the shared cup. In some rough and tumble situations we may share a bottle and drink from it – one's cuff acting as a purificator. Those who have shared a common achievement may share a cup in celebration – hence football trophies – but it is part of the unique moment of *team* triumph; and intimate friends may share a glass – but it is a sharing that is private to them.

OUR EUCHARISTIC PRACTICE

Now take note of our eucharistic practice: *the cup is shared*, passed from one to another, and each drinks from it. Here is a community practice that is so at variance with the cultures of the time of Jesus – whether specifically Jewish or Greco-Roman – that it must have resulted from a definite decision to make a statement in gesture that was not only discontinuous with expectations, but deeply shocking. Since this use of the common cup is ubiquitous in early Christianity – in contrast to their practices regarding the content of that cup: while some places used wine, many others used water and continued to do so until the third century at least – this shocking gesture must surely go back to Jesus himself. 'Gestures sometimes,' as Jean Vanier has remarked, 'speak louder and more lastingly than words.'

That this gesture was seen as a direct legacy of Jesus, indeed more significant than his words, and an action that was to be remembered can be deduced from a curious silence in the so-called 'eucharistic words of Jesus.' These few sentences, harmonised from Paul and the Synoptics, have probably been the most studied verses of the New Testament, yet what is usually overlooked is that they are more concerned with Jesus' gestures than his own eucharistic words. We are told what Jesus did, what he said those at table were to do, but we are not told what prayers he said. Paul describes Jesus' actions after 'he had given thanks' and the words are not those of his blessing but words to the company interpreting the gesture (1 Cor 11:23-5). The same pattern in found in the gospels: we are not told what he said when he gave thanks to God, but are told what

he did, what he said to the disciples about what he was doing, and with the implication (explicit in Lk 22:19 as in Paul) that they were to imitate the gestures in his memory. For the first generations of his followers a knowledge of the words of thanksgiving, i.e. how to bless the Father could be taken for granted, but what had to be guarded as part of their tradition – a point made explicitly in 1 Cor 11:23 – *were the gestures specific to Jesus*. Only in the *Didache*, compiled in a context of initiating gentiles, do we find specimen thanksgivings over loaf and cup, but without any suggestion that these formulae should be attributed to Jesus, indeed they were not intended to limit how a prophet should give thanks (10:7). But if it is permissible to vary the words of blessing, there is no suggestion that one can depart from a common cup and a common loaf.

The gesture of many people drinking from a single cup – virtually unknown in antiquity and culturally problematic ever since as we see in various 'workarounds' ranging from straws, to dunking, to individual thimble-sized glasses, to abandoning it altogether – was clearly a defining feature not just of Christian table ritual, but of their on-going identity, and their sense of acting in continuity with Jesus. Whatever significance we attach to the gesture, the action itself is at the core of thanksgiving.

At this point, someone always jumps back with the objection that 'people do not like sharing a cup,' that there is currently a risk of flu, or that the old will not be able to handle a cup without spilling it – and the inevitable conclusion that it is best not to try. This reaction – and variations on it can be found for at least 1500 years – is itself theologically interesting: it shows just how counter-cultural the gesture of Jesus was and, indeed, still is. Drinking from a common cup is as demanding as discipleship and as counter-cultural as an action as the Beatitudes are to conventional economic and politics. When we look at the contrivances developed to avoid cup sharing, we see that it is, in a nutshell, an action that goes to the heart of the gospel. It is not insignificant that Jesus is presented in the gospels as asking potential disciples if they are willing to drink the cup that he drinks (Mk 10:38 and parallels). What look like ritual quibbles over drinking the cup may be calls for a deeper awareness of how the Christian way and everyday normality may not be in alignment.

ACTIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Actions, repeated within communities, have their own continuity, and are often more stable in their forms of repetition than the words and stories we use to interpret them. Thus we have the action of baptising, yet many explanations – several in Paul alone – of its meaning. We have the action of Jesus washing feet, yet traces

of two explanations of this action in John's story about it. And, likewise, we have the distinctive gesture of a common cup, and several explanations. In this range of given meanings we have both the richness of our inheritance – for no teacher either in the first Christian century or since can exhaust what an action may say to those who take part in it – and the source of so much ecclesial woe – because later theologians assuming both consistency in the texts and a single authorised dogma were destined to disagree and clash since their evidence was not amenable to their quest for doctrinal singularity and certainty. Viewing, however, the early documents as an album of meanings allows us to appreciate the core gesture of Jesus with a sense of the continuity of faith, while at the same time providing ourselves with resources for our own acts of blessing the Father, and remembering Jesus while we pass the cup from hand to hand and mouth to mouth.

SHARING IN THE CUP

For Paul, sharing the common cup is both an identifying act of discipleship and an ethical challenge to how deeply the participants are committed to making the way a reality in their lives. Sharing in the cup is sharing in the life of the risen Christ: 'The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?' (1 Cor 10:16). There is no suggestion of consuming blood here – the very notion is inconceivable to any Jew educated in 'the tradition of the fathers' and if this were even close to Paul's thinking it would have had to be vigorously justified by him. Paul seems to be thinking analogically: as the cup is shared, so is life; as we share a cup so we share in the Christ's life-blood. It is inappropriate to try to define Paul's rhetorically shaped argument as if he were a later theologian weighing each term and preposition, but what is clear is that his argument turns on the fact that his audience have experienced the actual sharing of the cup of blessing. It is this sharing that is the crucial basis of his whole appeal: common cup, common life-source, common destiny. If nothing else, this awareness should alert modern day readers who still press Paul into scholastically-framed, and ecumenically unhelpful, debates on the nature of the 'eucharistic change' that there is a serious price to be paid for ignoring the significance of the common cup.

Choosing to drink, or refusing, the cup was also an existential choice for Paul equivalent to decision for or against the Lord: 'You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons' (1 Cor 10:21). Given that the common meal was a source of dispute in the church in Corinth, and it seems clear that it was the participative dimension of the meals that was the source of the problem, then the

sharing of the cup must have been problematic. Put another way: if the sharing of the wealthy with the poor, benefactors and clients, slaves with owners, was causing dissention such that they were pulling apart into socially stratified factions, then the sharing of the cup – perhaps a master having to share it with his slave – would have been the flashpoint. Paul, consequently, takes the rhetorical high ground rather than seeking a compromise: if you cannot take the extreme, then you have missed the whole point of the message. This approach could only have been taken by Paul if he saw in the sharing of the cup a paradigm of his whole ecclesiology.

Paul draws out several other insights from sharing the cup, but rather that focus on them – most have become standard themes in our preaching – we should note the basic role of ritual *actions* in Paul's presentation. It is the actions that provoke the community's remembering. Memory is linked to doing rather than (as so often with us) being an intellectual activity in the form of word-pictures or the invitation 'to cast your mind back.' In just three verses (1 Cor 11:26-8) he refers to the actions of eating and drinking no less than three times:

> For as often as you
> *eat this loaf and drink the cup,*
> you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.
> Whoever, therefore,
> *eats the loaf or drinks the cup of the Lord*
> in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord.
> Examine yourselves, and only then
> *eat of the loaf and drink of the cup.*

Paul's concern is with the authentic actions – it is these that establish the link with Jesus and his actions whether with disciples at table or in establishing the new covenant.

We have linked memory to the repetition of words and then have often wondered if we even needed the actions – hence we do not share the cup in most eucharistic assemblies – but it is repeating the action that was originally the anamnesis. Hence Paul's use of words of Jesus 'do this in remembrance' for the loaf (11:24) and the cup (11:25) which for him were not a liturgical formula ('the institution narratives' only began to appear in Eucharistic Prayers in the later third-century) but an explanation of something far more basic: human actions, and doing what Jesus did. A loaf and cup, shared, are the actions that constitute the participation in the Christ. Later theology has tended to see the ritual action as expressions of revealed doctrine, but for Paul it is exactly the

reverse: it is the action that is legacy of Jesus and 'the doctrine' is secondary – a drawing out implications of what is remembered by Jesus-like doing.

ACTION AND WORDS

This priority of action over words/meanings seems strange, indeed alien, to us: have we not spent over 500 years fighting over these meanings with one another? That this priority was the case is not in doubt: hence the concern in Paul and gospels with getting the actions right – sharing one loaf and one cup; while neither Paul nor the evangelists bother to give us the actual words of [what we call] the Eucharist Prayer nor seek to put any such prayer into the mouth of Jesus. Prayers for blessing God were well known and could easily be adapted (as we see in the *Didache*) for use by those who held Jesus to be the Christ. What was difficult for the first preachers (as we know from what was happening in Corinth) was to get the actions of Jesus right. It was their common, and implicitly distinctive, actions at their meals that were their proclamation of their Lord's death in their period of waiting for his return. Doing is proclamation. Words, such as his own, belong to the order of reflection and presuppose that the actions are being done – in the light of later developments in western liturgies one cannot but be struck by the irony of arguments over Paul's words with barely a whimper over a complete disappearance of the actions (to varying extents in the different churches).

That, for Paul, the actions were the personal sealing of the covenant by those taking part in the meal and their proclamation of Jesus' death is confirmed by the fact that these actions have ethical consequences. These actions must be done in a worthy manner and with the awareness of what these actions imply for how they act within the community (11:30-4). If they are done without this ethical commitment – action complementing action – then the acts of common eating and drinking brings condemnation upon the actors. This linking of action and action, and of action and commitment was then continued by the evangelists. That the action of sharing the cup is the declaration of one's commitment to the way of Jesus and of acceptance of God's will is drawn out by Mark in his preaching. Drinking the cup of Jesus, being baptised, and being willing to accept the suffering that is part of discipleship are made equivalent. This is bought out in the story of the sons of Zebedee who want to be assured of their heavenly locations:

> But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' They replied, 'We are able.'

> Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized … (10:38-9).

Drinking 'the cup of the Lord' – to use a Pauline phrase – and decision for Jesus' gospel of the kingdom are identified; and Jesus is later presented as himself acting out this commitment in his acceptance of the Father's will imagined as the drinking of a cup: 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want' (14:36). Mark's kerugma in words – both as the statement to the two disciples and as the example in the garden – only has value within the context of his audiences' experience of their own kerugma in the action of sharing the cup at the community meals. Moreover, as in Paul, this action has a fixed place in the recollection of the churches: it is a memorial of the final supper, the action forming a link with the final supper when it was declared to be the action of accepting the covenant (14:24). And this action is for the community, as it was for Jesus, an action with eschatological significance: 'he will not drink the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God' (14:25). This verse, with its parallel in Mt 14:29, is, incidentally, the sole basis for the later insistence on the use of wine as a eucharistic element; in the earliest documents the whole emphasis is upon the action of common drinking rather than on the commodity drunk.

In Mark the drinking from the common cup is *the* sacramental action: it establishes the community in the present and is part of their proclamation; it links them back to the time of Jesus and acts as the memorial making those events present; it is the acceptance of the covenant and the future that awaits them as disciples, and it has a dimension of anticipating the end times. As such, the common cup is, in Mark, the core of all the themes that would later be drawn out in eucharistic explanations and seen as based in the 'sacramental elements.' Without the action, the words are but sounds.

That this 'theology of the cup' was not just a passing moment – at least in the later first century – or something peculiar to Paul and Mark is demonstrated by the way that the range of Marcan explanations of this most strange behaviour at the communities' meals is taken over into the gospels of Matthew (20:22-3; 26:27-9; and 26:39) and Luke (22:17-8 and 20; 22:42). In generating this consistency as an element within the tradition we have implicit evidence of the shared cup's importance as one of the linking and defining actions of the followers of Jesus. And if further evidence be needed we have but to look at Jn 18:11: 'Jesus said to Peter,

"Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?"' Only a community that imagined its own commitment as crystallised in the action of drinking from a cup could appreciate the significance that they should attach to this moment in John's narrative of the passion. Drinking the shared cup was everything those disciples had taken on board: faith in a new covenant, a radical social arrangement in a new fictive family, and the dangers of what being part of that association might entail.

PROBLEMATIC INHERITANCE

We are defensive of our table habits and are especially slow to adopt new ways of eating or drinking that seem to us as invading our space. While within the domestic setting we may be prepared 'to slum it'; in all other spaces – even when these are freely chosen moments of intimacy within a fictive family – we become cautious and hesitant. Drinking one after another from a common cup, even if the cup's lip is wiped and turned, was never an easy 'ask.' In a stratified society one does not share equally with one's client or slave; and if one takes the cup from one's master or patron does one simply assert one's equality by doing as he/she did? The egalitarianism of the Christians' meals was already problematic for Paul, and these difficulties only increased with the passing of time, and no moment brought out these problems more pointedly than the action with the cup. We today may scoff at such social distinctions (and conveniently forget that Christianity had little problem with slavery for most of its history), but we are swift to find other 'scientific' reasons such as germs, hygiene, or untouchable sacrality. Maybe we have to learn the same lessons as Paul and the evangelists preached to the first churches? To remember in words 'take this all of you and drink' and then skip the action is tantamount to holding that the Good News is just sounds.

So does the cup have a future? It is certainly the key to a rich theme in 'the scriptures' / the experience of the early churches – and Christianity is always searching this archive and re-presenting what is found there as an element in all ecclesial renewal. But here the cup presents us with a special challenge: if it is rediscovered as a body of ideas, manifested in an action which is then taught and enacted, we have failed to grasp its mystery and, quite soon, we will bore of it, find new work-arounds, and just treat it once again as simply a synaesthestic 'add-on' to a theology of the Eucharist that remains focused on a set of questions revolving around 'what have you got there?' The sharing of the cup is complete in itself as an action – it is Jesus' action at his meals with his people and so it is enough that we do it because this is the way we do it! The action – with all is awkwardness, hesitations, fears, costs – is

our proclamation. If we want to explain it – as we inevitably must – then we turn first to looking at the action itself in terms of the anthropology of meals: only in a fictive family of great intimacy could one do such a thing as this because this is no ordinary way of behaving. And this reflection on our behaviour will generate new explanations of the significance of sharing in the Lord's Supper. In this process, we are continuing in the process we see in Paul and the Synoptics, and not merely repeating them.

Weekly worship. For a start we need to look again at the spirit of Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. 'The liturgy', it states, 'sanctifies almost every event in (people's) lives (*SC* 61).' Weekly worship is the Incarnation made tangible for God's needy people, it states. Parishioners want to experience God in the middle of the mess and mystery of each day. Liturgy has, you might say, become too heavenly to be of any earthly use. When a more life-centred, incarnational and truly traditional theology of liturgy is unpacked for parishioners, a radical shift in how they understand the sacraments will follow.

– Daniel O'Leary, *Treasured and Transformed* (Dublin: Columba Press) p. 52.