

Early Christian Worship

Early Christian membership and participation in worship was characterized by three essential requirements:

1. Repentance of sin;
2. Faith in Christ; and
3. Baptism.

With membership came certain privileges:

1. The Christian became reconciled to God. His past life of sin no longer stood against him. He was justified; made right, in God's eyes.
2. He was sanctified; made holy, because he belonged to God through baptism.
3. He received the gift of the Holy Spirit as a supernatural power within him.
4. He was admitted to the common life and the sacraments of Christian brotherhood. On his part, in turn, he was bound, so far as he could, to live up to the high standards of that life; to be a new creature in Christ.

One of the great responsibilities of the Church is to teach us how to worship God. Jesus said, "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:24). Men must be led in their worship by a proper explanation of the Scriptures, by prayer and praise. We, as Christians, need to be reminded of the necessity to live according to our consciences, and our consciences need to be properly formed in accordance with the teachings of Christ. The place of the Catholic Church in this matter is clearly defined in the New Testament. The Church's mission is to reconcile mankind to God by preaching the "Good News".

Christianity is not a secret cult. Its principles and doctrines were promulgated not for a chosen few, but for all men, and for all ages. Jesus' parting instructions to His disciples were, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15; Mt 28:19-20; Ac 1:8).

From the first Pentecost, the disciples of Christ have endeavored to obey the Master's command. The Catholic Church, which began as insignificantly as a mustard seed, grew to a worldwide religion, which shelters all races and peoples of the world. It appealed to

The expression of the "breaking of bread" in Acts 2:42 has reference to something more than a common meal. It was a religious act, a sacrament (1 Co 10:16).

There seems to have been at first a daily Eucharistic celebration (Ac 2:46), but later it seems to have been observed on the first day of the week (Ac 20:7). At first also it was held in the evening at the close of a meal eaten in common, following the example of Christ and His disciples. The meal was called the Agape—or love feast—and was afterwards separated from the Eucharist. The Eucharistic celebration was held in the early morning while the common meal was eaten in the evening. Now the celebration of the Eucharist is by itself a result foreshadowed in Paul's advice to the Corinthian Christians when he saw the abuses, which grew out of the meal eaten in common. The significance of this sacrament was deepened and intensified in the minds and hearts of the Christians, as its great spiritual meaning was more and more clearly understood. This was, as it still is today, the central point of worship in the apostolic age.

If we look at the textual testimony, as it stands in the New Testament and also that of the early Christian writers, we find that God, the Father, was exalted and worshipped and Jesus Christ, His Son, and the Holy Spirit. The baptismal formulas were in the names of the three in one. Christ was the Lord and Savior Who had come from the Father, Who had appeared on the earth in bodily form and was, after His ascension, still with the disciples comforting, leading and blessing not only them but all who had faith in Him and called upon His name.

The centrality of the worship in Christ is very plainly stated by Paul, "That every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father" (Phil 2:11; 5-11; Col 1:13-21).

The exaltation of Christ exalted the lives of the worshippers; they died to the old lives of sin and strove to be renewed in the purity and holiness of the life of the Master whom they served and revered. The good results of the new worship were so plain and manifest that they were a marvel to many heathen writers. To those most zealous in the performance of their duties of worship came the largest results.

Pope John Paul II Society of Evangelists

P. O. Box 5584, Bakersfield, CA 93388

E-mail: info@pjpiisoe.org Phone: 661 393-3239

www.pjpiisoe.org

Pamphlet 169

3. Praise. The hymns and ascriptions of praise are very frequently found in the New Testament and the early Christian writers. They express great religious emotion and thankfulness. There was not only singing of hymns and Psalms, but outbursts of spoken praise of the goodness of God and for salvation through Jesus Christ. Paul writing to the Ephesians says, "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father. Speaking to yourselves in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to God. Giving thanks in all things always unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:19-20) and to the Philippians (4:4) "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say, Rejoice."

4. The offering. This consisted of the purely voluntary contributions of the congregation. It was so from the beginning; even in that wonderful outburst of religious enthusiasm when all the property was given up by certain converts there was no requirement to do so. Every person was to give according to his ability and the offering was taken up on the first day of the week. If a man chose to give all he had or a certain proportion, that was a matter settled between him and God, but all were urged to contribute to the full extent of their ability. The money was used for the poor of the church, for missionary purposes, the support of the ministry, the other expenses of maintaining the church organization and gifts for special purposes.

Baptism was the rite by which the convert was formally admitted to the Church (Ac 2: 41). Baptism was by the command of Christ and was performed in the name "of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28: 19); it was and is the outward sign of the inward cleansing and is to be administered to all Christians.

From the earliest days of the Church until Vatican II, the Mass was described as having two parts - the "Mass of the Catechumens" and the "Secret": Today's Mass is divided into the Liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. The Mass of the catechumens was open to the public, but the "Secret" (Liturgy of the Eucharist) was restricted to those who had committed their lives to Christ and had been baptized.

The Eucharistic celebration was not only a part of the secret, but the central point in it. The observance of this feast was also by the command of Christ, Who said, "This do in remembrance of Me". His body was broken for us; His blood was shed for the remission of our sins.

man as man. In this universal character it differed from all other religions. The benefits of a certain religion, the person was required to become a subject of the nation of which it was a part. The idea of an act of religious worship as something apart from the state was unheard of to the pagan mind. Christianity proclaims redemption for all, under certain conditions, which can be met by every person.

The first meeting place for worship, after the ascension of Christ, was in an upper room in Jerusalem where prayer and supplication were made by the disciples. The second place was the Temple where Peter preached his sermon and thousands of people were converted. The third place was the "house church". When Peter was liberated from prison he came to the house of Mary, "where many were gathered together and were praying" (Ac 12: 12). Paul makes special mention of the "house church" in Romans 16:5. The fourth place was the Jewish synagogue. There are many instances of Jesus preaching in synagogues. "And He went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people" (Mt 4:23). In Luke's gospel (4:4-21) we again read that He taught in the synagogues of Galilee, and in the one in Nazareth He read from the prophet Isaiah (61:1) and declared that this scripture was fulfilled in Him. Paul's custom was, in his missionary travels, to first seek the Jewish synagogue and to there proclaim his message, declaring that the Messiah and Savior had come in the person of Jesus Christ. In case the message was heeded the worshippers would soon turn the place, practically, into a Christian meeting place; in case it was not heeded the Christians would split off from the Jewish congregation and seek houses or other places in which to meet. The Jewish synagogues played a great part in helping to spread Christianity. They were very numerous throughout the Roman Empire. The fifth place was the distinctively Christian church. At what specific time the Christians began to erect buildings for the purpose of holding services of worship in them is not known, but as they were accustomed to hold frequent assemblies and the congregations rapidly increased it is obvious that private houses would soon cease to accommodate them. In 1 Corinthians 11:20-22 Paul implies that the Corinthian church was meeting in some place other than a house. That they did erect buildings, or rent them, and some of them of very good size is apparent in spite of the numerous persecutions to which they were subjected. Then later on, the churches grew to be large, numerous, and had lands attached to them is shown by the decree of the Emperor Diocletian in 302 A. D., ordering their destruction and the confiscation of their lands.

However, it should be remembered that as Christianity was a religion of the spirit it was preached anywhere and everywhere, in the market- place, by the roadside, by the river's edge, by the seashore and in the house, it did not depend upon a certain place or a ritual, but men in every place could worship God "in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4: 21-24).

The publicity or secrecy with which the meetings were held varied greatly and according to circumstances. In times of persecution the Christians were often compelled to abandon public services. Then there would be periods of many years in which they met together in the most open way and publicly invited unbelievers.

Public Worship was characterized by:

1. Orderliness. Paul exhorted the Corinthian church, "Let all things be done for edification" (1 Co 14:26-33). The effort was made in all the churches to carry out this injunction.
2. Openness. The public services, which all Christians were expected to attend, were also open to non-Christians as well; in this respect they had a missionary aspect and were of great usefulness in extending knowledge of the Catholic religion.
3. Simplicity. As the church was, in certain respects, an outgrowth of the Jewish synagogue it followed its simplicity. Besides the descriptions of the simple life of the early churches drawn for us in the Acts and Epistles there are two others, among many others, described below; one is by a Christian and the other by a pagan writer.

Justin Martyr, an early church father (105-165 A.D.) wrote:

"And on the day called Sunday all who live in the city or in the country gather together in one place and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings according to his ability and the people assent saying Amen. And there is a distribution to each and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do and willing, give what each thinks fit, and what is collected is deposited with the president who succors the orphans and widows and those in sickness or want, the prisoners and the strangers

among us."

Pliny, the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor (present day Turkey), in 112 A. D. wrote a letter to the Emperor Raajan in which he says after a careful official examination of many Christians in regard to their worship with a view of finding charges against them:

"They affirmed that they were wont to meet together on a stated day before it was light and sing among themselves a hymn to Christ as a God, and to bind themselves with an oath not to the commission of any wickedness, but that they would not be guilty of theft or robbery or adultery: would not falsify their word or refuse to return a pledge committed to them, when called upon to do so. When these things were performed, it was their custom to separate and then come together for a meal which they ate in common but without disorder."

In 1 Corinthians we find that Paul presents to us two kinds of Christian worship. Chapter fourteen describes a meeting whose chief aim is mutual edification; in chapter 11:17-34 one of a very different character and ceremonial, the purpose of which is to partake of the Eucharist. It is for a meeting of the first kind that there was a public order of service; the second was of a private character and limited to baptized Christians.

There were four prominent and essential elements in the public service of worship.

1. Teaching. Under this would be included the reading of the Scriptures. While the Epistles might not yet have been classed as Scripture, in the true sense of the word, yet they might have been regarded as such. There was the practice, followed from the custom of the Jewish synagogue and which we still follow, of the presentation of a sermon after the reading of the Scriptures.

The teaching was not confined to the reading of the Scriptures and the sermons in the public services; there was also a large work done in the instruction of new converts in the facts of the Old Testament, the facts about Christ, His life on earth, His death and resurrection, and the Catholic doctrines. This work was continual, painstaking and unremitting. There was a "gift of teaching" and a class of men like Aquila and Apollo, who gave themselves to this needed work, and who were called teachers.

2. Prayer. Prayer was made standing or kneeling. The prayer of one person was often accepted as the prayer of all, the congregation assenting to it. There were special prayers for the advancement of the Gospel, for the civil rulers, for erring members, and for the needs of the community. There were very few formulated prayers with the exception of the Lord's Prayer and certain benedictions