

PRECIOUS
Gifts

Biblical Reflections
on the Eucharist

JOHN F. CRAGHAN



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PREFACE

The title of this work was inspired by Matthew 13:44: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” This parable, which is unique to Matthew, involves four stages. The first stage is the traditional work of a farmer where circumstances dictate a whole future. The second stage is about how finding the treasure opens up a new world. The third stage is a total reversal of the past that compels the farmer to sell everything he owns. The fourth and final stage is a new life for the farmer, with new possibilities grounded in the person of Jesus.

As I wrote this book, I thought especially of those Catholics who completed their formal religious education at the end of high school. Many such people seek to reconnect with their Catholic heritage. Like the farmer in the parable, they possess a treasure hidden in a field that they want to rediscover. They are anxious to explore its contents so that, like the farmer, they may enter a world of new possibilities rooted in the person of Jesus. It is my hope that this book will help them discover a new world by focusing on different dimensions of the treasure of faith.

I also envision those in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) process. I hope that the unfolding of this treasure may help their journey of faith. I also hope that Bible study

groups may examine particular aspects of this inexhaustible treasure more closely. The Bible is not merely a rich heirloom, but a catalyst that urges believers to discover and rediscover ever old but new dimensions of their faith.

As both sacrament and sacrifice, the Eucharist possesses the unique ability to reflect the dynamism that can connect so many dimensions of Christian community life. It is a special symbol that expresses the challenges, rewards, and dangers of living out the Gospel. Ultimately, the Eucharist functions as a prism through which believers can evaluate their whole lives. To experience the Eucharist is to experience all the values of the Good News.

This work mines the riches of the biblical tradition and enables believers to view the Eucharist from a variety of vantage points. Hence, my use of ten biblical R's in the names of each chapter. The book attempts to enrich believers' understanding by considering various avenues to approach the Eucharist. Although I could have considered other biblical themes, I believe these ten themes serve as a beginning for reflection. In this way, Sunday Mass will emerge as a source of inspiration and encouragement for the week ahead, rather than another obligation. The treasure hidden in a field is ultimately a Eucharist that never ceases to arouse wonder and awe.

The format of each chapter is as follows. First, I suggest initial thoughts about the biblical theme stated in the chapter title. These may stem from human experience or other biblical passages. Second, I consider the biblical background as I examine scenes in both the Old and New Testaments. Third, I offer reflections on the theme and attempt to link them with the faith journey of the audience. Fourth, I deal with the Eucharist as it relates to the chapter theme and try to show

how it reveals a particular aspect of the Eucharist. Fifth, I recommend some review or discussion questions to explore the theme in greater depth.

I wish to thank my wife, Barbara Lynne Wenzel Craghan, for her advice and encouragement. She has provided insight from her own experience in both the classroom and parish ministry. Such insights have aided me in the selection and development of the Eucharist and ten biblical R's.

Finally, I dedicate this work to the Redemptorist community. As a young boy in the Redemptorist parish of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Brooklyn, New York, I was first introduced to the rich theology of their founder, Saint Alphonsus de Liguori (1696–1787). In the years thereafter, the Redemptorists continued to help me absorb his teaching and attempt to make it accessible to others. This book is a small token of my enormous gratitude to them. May they continue to realize their motto of plentiful redemption.

JOHN F. CRAGHAN

AUGUST 1, 2010

—FEAST OF SAINT ALPHONSUS DE LIGUORI



CHAPTER ONE

Repentance

INITIAL THOUGHTS

In modern language, the word “repentance” evokes a considerable range of meaning. For some, it suggests the resolve to amend one’s life and correct the errors of the past; therefore, it implies a certain dimension of regretting and deploring. For others, repentance may take on the added features of lament and bemoaning; here shame and reproach may play a vital role.

Repentance evokes the notion of change because of a new focus. Life is a journey, a quest for a particular object or goal through the reorientation of a person’s ways. This object or goal may include a person, for example, finding the ideal marriage partner. It may also involve honor and prestige, for instance, becoming the CEO of a significant company or

corporation. It may simply imply becoming the biggest and the best in a particular field or endeavor. Usually a journey involves expending untold amounts of time and energy. If the goal or objective of the journey is deemed worthwhile, the physical and mental demands in attaining it appear inconsequential. Spiritual repentance is captured in the language of faith, and Christians find in the Scriptures the need for their own conversion.



BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

In the Old Testament Prophets section, repentance is best expressed in the verb “to return.” It means a total reorientation, a complete shifting of values. One retraces one’s steps and, as in the parable of the prodigal son, goes home to one’s father (Luke 15:18). The prophet Hosea depicts Israel as stumbling in her sinfulness and urges, “Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God; you have stumbled because of your iniquity” (Hosea 14:2).

When Jeremiah describes the stubbornness of his people, he diagnoses it as turning away from God. “Why then do these people resist with persistent rebellion? Why do they cling to deception, refuse to turn back” (Jeremiah 8:5)? However, once the whole process of reorientation begins, the focus of that change can only be God. “If you return, Israel—oracle of the LORD—return to me” (4:1). Speaking to his compatriots from the northern kingdom, Jeremiah articulates both God’s mercy and the proper dispositions. “Return, rebellious children! I will heal your rebellions. ‘Here we are! We belong to you; for you are the LORD, our God’” (3:22).

Another term associated with repentance is “life” or “to live.” As a theological category, “life” implies fellowship with God, the ability to dialogue with God, the feeling of ease

in his presence, and closeness to God. Ezekiel, for example, demonstrates the centrality of the “life” dimension of repentance. He quotes his audience as saying, “Our crimes and our sins weigh us down; we are rotting away because of them. How can we survive” (33:10)? To this community deprived of homeland and hope and burdened with the consciousness of their sins, the prophet replies directly and energetically: “As I live—oracle of the LORD God—I swear I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! Why should you die, house of Israel” (33:11)?

Like a very practical pastoral theologian, Ezekiel preaches about the signs or indications of repentance. A series of works points to the change of heart in the guilty. “Returning pledges, restoring stolen goods, walking by the statutes that bring life, doing nothing wrong—they shall surely live; they shall not die” (33:15). This apparently wooden style of preaching had nostalgic overtones for his community. It recalled the entrance liturgy at the temple when the people were bidden by the priest to examine their consciences. Only after the demands of justice in particular had been met could they sojourn in the Lord’s tent and dwell on his holy mountain. Only then could the priest cry, “Lift up your heads, O gates; be lifted, you ancient portals, that the king of glory may enter” (Psalm 24:7).

Implied in this Old Testament notion of repentance is the central role of faith. Two Hebrew roots capture the salient aspects of faith: (1) to be strong, firm and (2) to trust in, rely on. In Genesis 15:6, Abram, lacking all evidence or proof of God’s promise of numerous descendants, believes the Lord. He is made strong by opening himself up to God. In Jeremiah 17:7, the prophet announces, “Blessed are those who trust

in the LORD; the LORD will be their trust.” From the biblical perspective, faith involves the acceptance of a person, in this case the person of the God of Israel. In other words, one grounds oneself in the person of God. Having accepted this person, one is thus prepared to accept what this person says or reveals. This priority of person over statement may be outlined in these three steps: (1) I believe you, (2) I believe in you, and (3) I am prepared to believe what you tell me.

As partners in the covenant relationship, God and Israel have sworn allegiance to each other and, therefore, expect reciprocal faithfulness. The people of Israel must then demonstrate their faithfulness through concrete actions. Obedience thereby becomes the measure or standard for assessing genuine repentance and true faith.

A key term for repentance in the New Testament is the Greek word *metanoia*. It implies a new way of thinking that impacts a new way of acting. One New Testament scholar has suggested translating the verb form “to repent” as “to screw one’s head on right.” The result of this new way of thinking is that the person becomes transformed. Such repentance is the hallmark of the preaching of John the Baptist. According to Mark 1:4 and Luke 3:3, he fearlessly proclaims “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” In Matthew 3:2, the Baptist urges such repentance since the kingdom of heaven has come near. At the same time, the Baptist links this radical call to positive proofs of this interior change. “Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance” (Matthew 3:8; see also Luke 3:7–14).

Jesus of Nazareth follows in the footsteps of the Baptist but connects the call to repentance with the necessity of faith: “Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Ultimately,

the Good News comprises not only the message but also the person of Jesus. This transformation of one's life is thus grounded in his message and person.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus sees his mission as nothing short of the universal proclamation of repentance. Following the call of Levi, he firmly announces, "I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners" (Luke 5:32). In speaking of certain tragic events in Galilee and Jerusalem that claimed many lives, Jesus goes on to insist that, unless his audience repents, they, too, will perish (13:3, 5). In the parables of the lost sheep (15:7) and the lost coin (15:10), heaven must break out in exuberant joy over the one sinner who repents.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke captures the twofold prophetic dimensions of conversion, namely turning from sin and a turning to God/Jesus. At Solomon's Portico, Peter understands the mission of Jesus as a blessing "by turning each of you from your evil ways" (3:26). Paul and Barnabas interpret the healing of a cripple at Lystra as the occasion "to turn from these idols to the living God" (14:15). Paul explains his own conversion and subsequent mission as a turning from darkness to light and a turning from the power of Satan to God (26:18). Conversion in Acts, therefore, as in the prophetic literature, involves the movement of turning from and turning to. While turning from may require only an instant, turning to requires an arduous journey that demands no small measure of perseverance.

Alone among the evangelists, Luke deliberately constructs his Gospel and his second volume (Acts of the Apostles) along the axis of a journey that will inexorably take Jesus from Galilee (Luke 9:51) to Jerusalem, the city of destiny (19:28), and the Christian message from Jerusalem to Rome, the end of the

earth (see Acts 1:8 and 28:16). In Luke, this journey brooks no obstacles. Jesus' determination is quite simply unrelenting. "Yet I must continue on my way today, tomorrow, and the following day, for it is impossible that a prophet should die outside of Jerusalem" (Luke 13:33). According to Luke, Jesus' journey also impacts the disciples, since they must follow him on his way (9:57–62). Significantly, one of the names for this community of disciples is "the Way" (Acts 9:2 and 19:23).

Luke demonstrates the connection between the call of Levi and his subsequent banquet (Luke 5:27–39), and while Luke does not employ overt eucharistic language, he still makes abundantly clear how breaking bread with Jesus impacts one's radical commitment to reorient one's life. The great banquet hosted by Levi (v. 29) provokes more than dismay for the Pharisees and their scribes since the guest list includes a large crowd of tax collectors and others (v. 30). When the Pharisees ask Jesus' disciples why he associates with such people, Jesus himself responds, "I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners" (v. 32).



REFLECTIONS

Repentance is a total turning away from everything that makes community with God and others impossible. In the Bible, it is often a turning away from idols and, therefore, allegiance to other gods. The image of idols still functions as a viable symbol today. Humans create their own idols, even though they may not label them as such. These idols masquerade as the energy-sapping and all-engaging forces of daily life. They include the unbridled quest for power and dominance, the insatiable drive for pleasures of various kinds, the pursuit