

Ritual and Rhetoric:
Two Form of Rhetorical Memory in the Early Eucharist
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Because of its historical relationship to homiletics, we often associate religious rhetoric with the spoken and written word. And, yet, the early church understood that actions, especially ritualized actions, could communicate meaning and purpose just as effectively as language. The symbolic washing away of sins in baptism to be reborn in Christ is but one obvious example of a ritualized action that communicates as much, if not more, than the words that accompany it.

Moreover, just as the spoken or written word can be analyzed through the lens of the rhetorical canon so can ritual. We might consider, for instance, the relationship between the rhetorical canon of memory and ritualized speech and action in the early Eucharist. By the eight century, the procession of clergy, deacons, and laity into the church took on several symbolic dimensions designed to remind the congregation of Moses ascent up Mt. Sinai and the New Testament counterpart of Jesus ascent of Golgotha. We hear something similar in Germanus, the eighth century patriarch of Constantinople, who describes the ascent of the Bishop to the throne, his blessing of the people, and his sitting in these terms:

The ascent of the bishop to the throne and his blessing the people signifies that the Son of God, having completed the economy of salvation, raised his hands and blessed his holy disciples, saying to them: ‘Peace I leave with you’ (Jn 14:27).

This shows that Christ gave the same peace and blessing to the world through His

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disciples. . . . The sitting represents the time when the Son of God raised His body [which He wore] and the sheep which He put upon His shoulder—that is the nature of Adam, which is represented by the omophorion—above any beginning, power, or authority of the higher powers, and brought it to His God and Father.

(77)

In many ways, the processional as envisioned by Germanus, encapsulates the very Passion of Christ, reminding the laity of the suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus even before a word of the Eucharist prayer is spoken.

Indeed, a slightly more in-depth study of rhetorical memory and ritual can broaden our understanding of religious rhetoric. In the case of the early Eucharist, we can begin to see two different types of rhetorical theories of memory emerge. These are what I call Aristotelian and Platonic memory, which I will discuss in reverse. Aristotle divided memory into two categories, ordinary memory and anamnesis. Aristotle's first category theorizes the manner in which the mind makes an imprint of objects to recall later. Anticipating the later work of Cicero, Quintilian, and the unknown author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Aristotle understood the nature of mnemonic devices, their ability to make lasting impressions on the mind, and their ability of recall. Later, when Cicero develops this line of thinking, Quintilian, and the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, elaborate mnemonic systems emerge as student aides for memorizing long speeches and complicated knowledge. A simple example might be the weekly saying of the Apostle's or Nicene Creed. At a time when very few of the laity could read or write, the weekly saying of the Creeds reminded the clergy and laity of the central tenets of the Trinity. Aristotle's second category, anamnesis, focuses on the force with which those objects are

imprinted or recalled. He understood that the greater the impression, the more likely the student would be able to recall the memory.

In this tradition—and, I will note here that this is the tradition that is the most developed in classical rhetoric—the emphasis is on using memory as a means for recalling the past into the present. We only need to return to Germanus, who was attempting to unfold the rich symbolism of the Eucharist to the newly baptized. In his discussion of the offering, he notes,

The bread of offering, that is to say, which is purified, signifies the superabundant riches of the goodness of our God, because the Son of God became man and gave Himself as an offering and oblation in ransom and atonement for the life and salvation of the world. He offered Himself as first-fruits and Himself as first-fruits and chosen whole burnt-offering to the God and Father on behalf of the human race, as is written: ‘I am the bread which came down from heaven,’ and ‘He who eats this bread will live for ever’ (651).

Although Germanus seems only to be revealing the meaning behind certain symbols, in actuality he is using those symbols as mnemonic devices to recall important principles of the faith. We can almost hear the question and answer of the catechesis: “What does the bread at the offering symbolize? It symbolizes ‘the superabundant riches of the goodness of our God,’ the incarnation of God in man through Christ, and the offering of Christ up to sacrifice.” Moreover, the symbol and its meaning become rhetorical *topoi* and commonplaces for recalling important passages from the Gospels, in this case, from John. Indeed, Germanus highlights the relationship between memory and the symbols of the liturgy, stating, “The bread and the chalice are really and truly the memorial of the

mystical supper [the last supper]” (71).

No doubt, those acquainted with classical rhetoric and philosophy will argue that Aristotle’s ideas were not original at all, that Aristotle merely built on the previous work of Plato. And, indeed, this is largely, though not altogether, true. In his *Timeaus*, Plato had argued that the mind is like a ball of wax. Some minds, he suggested, are so hard or so soft that they cannot retain anything; other minds are of such a consistency that they are able to retain their imprints for a long time. However, in many of his other works, most notably the *Phaedrus* and the *Meno*, Plato describes memory as a metaphysical tool that allows us to recall and even “unearth” truths that have already been present, but have otherwise been necessarily hidden. Through Socrates’ telling of the “Myth of the Charioteer,” which appears in the *Phaedrus*, Plato suggests that we are born with the ideals already imprinted upon our souls, though, at birth, these imprints remains submerged and hidden from our own self-awareness. It is not until our souls are awoken by love that we realize their presence, and, then, it is only through philosophic discipline that we become fully aware of their presence. Indeed, Socratic dialectics can be viewed as an exercise in memory to recall truths already present.

Although Aristotle and Plato tap into the same philosophic wellspring, they arrive at different conclusions. For Aristotle, memory allows us to make present the past through recollection. Within this schema, language and rhetoric help to facilitate this recollection through a variety of devices, such as the use of symbols to remind us of Christ’s passion. Conversely, for Plato, memory allows us to make visible already present, though invisible, truths. Within this schema, language and rhetoric are less facilitators of recollection as they are vehicles for the revelation of truth.

We distinctly see this in John Chrysostom's description of the Priest's invoking of the Holy Spirit (liturgical epiclesis) and the repeating of Christ's injunction to "Always do this in the Remembrance of Me" (liturgical anamnesis) in the Eucharistic prayer. For Chrysostom, this is not a "symbolic" act, but a literal one, in which the Holy Spirit descends upon the Host and the truth of Christ's resurrection, once invisible to the congregants, is made visible and present.

There stands the priest, not bringing down fire from Heaven, but the Holy Spirit: and he makes prolonged supplication, not that some flame sent down from on high may consume the offerings, but that grace descending on the sacrifice may thereby enlighten the souls of all, and render them more refulgent than silver purified by fire. Who can despise this most awful mystery, unless he is stark mad and senseless? Or do you not know that no human soul could have endured that fire in the sacrifice, but all would have been utterly consumed, had not the assistance of God's grace been great. (100)

Echoing Plato, Chrysostom believes that the "awful mystery" is always present, but by grace chooses to descent "on the sacrifice" in order to "enlighten the souls of all." For Chrysostom, language (whether it is through speech or action) is less about the trace of something that reminds of its absence and more about a lens that magnifies and clarifies an everlasting presence.

In conclusion, these passages by two early Church fathers suggest the fertile ground for further study of the Eucharist and other forms of Christian ritual as rhetorical devices. By taking one of the least studied of the rhetorical canons, memory, and using it to analyze parts of the Eucharistic prayer, we can begin to see how easily it taps into two

classical traditions of memory. And, yet, we only scratch the surface, having only begun to consider how, in this case, rhetorical and liturgical memory reveal different understanding of the role of language to recall the past into the present or to make visible and ever present, yet invisible, truth.

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