

Chapter xxxi:

Wine is mixed and offered to God

LAST WEEK WE SAW GOD GIVEN BREAD, and the audacity of that act (giving – *God* – bread) so amazed us that we took twelve pages to meditate on it. But now the Offertory is rushing to its close, and we are going to move this week and next with, by our standards, dizzy speed, through the oblation ([oblation](#) – what was that word? It means offering, with connotations of ritual sacrifice) of wine (with water in it – *why?*); though the offertory of incense and of money; and so, with a great halting crash, to the end of the Offertory. And then we shall stand on the brink of a whole new movement of the Mass (and proceed no further; our summer break begins).

As I say, things are fairly straightforward for these two weeks – with two exceptions. The bread having been offered, you'd expect, logically, the oblation of wine to follow: and so it does. But before that can happen, two surprising actions occur.

First, [water is added to the chalice](#). Adulterating wine with water is counter-intuitive, especially given all that praise of wine some chapters back; why is it done?

Next, [the paten is got rid of](#), which involves the subdeacon getting up to something extremely mysterious (almost furtive – he muffles something against his torso. This is, perhaps, the weirdest business in the traditional rites of High Mass: a moment when even people who have been coming to Mass for many years can still have no idea what's going on).

So we have two big *Why* questions to deal with: and then only a cheerful rush of scrutable action into our August vacation.

Mixed drinks.

DRINKING GIN NEAT is wicked – I mean, it’s a breach of decorum, an eccentricity which always needs some explanation or excuse. Gin is always ‘cut’ with something else, most often tonic water (although as more-and-more disgusting saccharine-laced tonic waters drive the real thing, which contains a little sugar, off the market, accepting gin-and-tonic from strangers is becoming unsafe. Can’t Schweppes see the lunacy, the vileness, of making ‘diet tonic water’? Alas for our dwindling civilisation. In any case, a better summery thing to do with gin is to mix it with equal parts Rose’s Lime Cordial – not lime juice; we are not making margaritas – and then you have a [gimlet](#), to be drunk before luncheon cold but not icy: very decadent 1940s California, very *film noir*. And of course the classic thing to do with gin at all times of the year and day is turn it into a [martini](#). – Now, martinis are one of the glories of Western man, and America’s only absolutely unambiguous contribution to human happiness {now I’ve been refused a greencard I feel entitled to say things like this}. But *the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour*,¹ and he has sunk his choppers, not into the martini itself – which is too perfect to be in danger from him – but from the *word* ‘martini’. Little ones, sever your ties, by divorce if necessary, with anyone who tries to get you to drink a so-called vodka martini, a thing which does not exist but would cry to heaven for vengeance if it did. The word ‘martini’ means one thing only: severely icy gin {it can’t be too cold; store it in your deep-freeze and take it out with your hands swaddled, humeral-veil-wise, in a towel} gently mixed with a smallish but not too small amount of vermouth, of course ‘dry’ and not sweet: Noilly Prat ideally, French if possible, Italian if necessary since this is a fallen world. Stir delicately in a glass jug with a good deal of ice, and void from your memory the heresy of that self-loathing pervert, *poseur* and assassin Bond *Shaken, not stirred*. This is as flatly and fatally wrong as the Monophysite *One nature after the Union*. Orthodoxy declares *Two inseparable natures after the Union* and *Stirred, not shaken*. Shaking makes no difference to the taste, but if you shake it, it will emulsify, which is to say turn cloudy, and part of the visual joy of the martini process is the pristine chemical clarity of what you now strain from your jug into your glass. Of course this glass is a proper conical cocktail glass, and of course it’s also just emerged from the freezer, burning your fingers. Five parts gin – let us say; or six, or four; the pretence of arithmetic exactitude is for Arthur Andersen’s felons – to one part dry vermouth; good. Now for the final necessary touch

¹ I Peter v⁸.

of oiliness to make the drink – I’m using the word precisely – *delicious*, which is to say *edible*. If you are the sort of person who likes to teach his children not to burp at table by kicking them off their chairs and stomping on their rib-cages fork in one hand furious napkin in the other, if you are that sort of person, by all means drop the greasiest olive you can find into your martini glass: it is permitted {so long as the olive isn’t *stuffed* with anything: horror}. You’ll enjoy the sight of vegetable fat bubbling to the surface of your martini and icing it with an oil slick, if you are that sort of person. But if you are one of the Elect, you will eat your olives, and lubricate your martini after this fashion: a lemon (never a lime); a sharp knife; a strip of zest shaved off the lemon’s knobbly skin above the glass so that the ‘essential oils’ spray out invisibly. They shimmer, tiny diamond droplets on the platinum triangle of cocktail. The lemon twist sinks honourably to the bottom, like a gallant battleship. – There! you have performed one of the [classic rituals of Western Civilisation](#), comparable to fox-hunting or composing a sonnet or rugby or subdeaconing High Mass, and demonstrated once more to the sceptical Heavens that, despite its shallowness and coldness and greed and cruelty and oafishness, OUR CIVILISATION is still BETTER than Confucian China or the Aztecs).²

Co-mixture at the Last Supper.

YOU’RE WONDERING WHY I’m handing out recipes for mixed drinks when I ought to be describing, and even defending, the co-mixture of water with wine at the Most Holy Mass. But I am defending it.
(And you –

² The Only Permissible Variation on the dry martini is this: when France is occupied by enemies of the human race (as happened in the ‘Forties and, pray God, will never happen again, but *might*), French vermouth becomes unobtainable. In such black years, pour chilled gin into a chilled glass, turn east or south, as the case may be, toward the fallen greatness of France, bow profoundly, drink. – This Wartime Martini, this Only Permissible Variation, was devised by Churchill himself. It is by no means the same as drinking neat gin, always a depraved habit.

The best martinis in the District of Columbia are concocted by my good friend M.W. The second best are at Legal Sea Foods, where other friends took me last week and which cannot be too much praised. The worst are flung together in a bar I shall not name, where I was actually asked “D’y’want yours *on the rocks*, sir?”, as if to say “We usually add a big scoop of chocomint ice-cream to ours: how about it?”

The primal martini – a horrible sticky affair with too many ingredients, but the seed of greatness – was invented by a Californian called Martinez. (We could debate this for hours; we shall not.) The Italian vermouth brand called Martini has simply cashed in on American innocence. Italian vermouth is itself pleasant as an *aperitif*, especially before lunch, but it is too fruity to work well in cocktails.

‘You! *hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère!* ‘

as that Missouri prattle-rustler Eliot says, rudely, in *The Waste Land* – but he didn’t think of the phrase himself – *you* are secretly rather pleased to hear about secular *aperitifs*, and not about ritual co-mixture of the chalice, because you fear being a trifle bored by my explanation of why we perform yet another recondite ceremony. How wrong you are.)

In the modern West drinking straight gin is unthinkable and heinous, as I was saying. In the much the same way drinking wine neat in the ancient Mediterranean was unthinkable and heinous.

Why? I don’t exactly know, and I suspect no one else does, since the books I’ve looked at (books about the history of ritual and books about the history of wine and books about Plato) are either evasive, or provide *too many* explanations.

Was the wine of the ancients simply stronger and more viscous than ours? Perhaps; the Bible of the food, *Larousse Gastronomique*, lays down the law like this:

The Greeks dried the grapes in the sun on wicker trays which were brought in each evening to prevent the dew falling on them; they tried to make wine that was strong and heavy, and the Romans, too, liked their wines to be very concentrated; they exposed them to the heat in *amphoræ*. This wine was always mixed with water at mealtimes.

Fair enough; and perhaps ancient wine was indeed made so that the flavour was released by splashing in water, like scotch. But another, almost equally authoritative book insists:

The Greeks, like their more ancient neighbors to the east, cultivated grapes carefully and honored the wine they yielded. [Yet] . . . they nearly always mixed their wine with water, reserving till the end of the meal a few mouthfuls of pure wine to be sipped. This custom has led many people to believe that the wine drunk by the ancient Greeks would be unpalatable by modern standards. However, H. Warner Allen, one of wine’s noted scholars, is convinced that the Greeks put water in their wine only because they were a highly temperate people, with their motto of *nothing in excess*, and also because they enjoyed the taste of water. They were proud of their springs and would compare the water

of one spring with that of another in the same way that a modern gourmet will compare two vintages.³

Plausible at first glance: modern Italians, also notoriously (even intemperately) temperate, always eat with both a bottle of wine and a bottle of water on the table.

But it seems inconceivable that anyone could really savour this or that spring-water once it was drowned in sticky-strong *amphoræ*-heated wine: this would be feeble affectation, and the vibrant Greeks didn't do feeble affectation (the Romans are a different story). Moreover, I can't believe *most* of the water drunk in the happy ancient world was *chef de haute cuisine* spring-water: that's not true even in contemporary, plutocratic New York.

So was the impulse not to do with the sublime goodness of their water, but with its *badness*? This has been suggested too: that the ancients' daily intake of water, dubiously safe as most of it might have been, was sterilised by mixing it with a little alcohol.

Or did the ancients – shocking idea – sometimes spike their wine when they mixed it, using the custom of admixture to add spirits or magic mushrooms along with the water? That would explain why in Plato's *Drinking Party*, or *Symposium*, everyone's pretty much off his head after the drinking bowl goes round twice.

Or was it merely that everyone in the ancient world grew up with a weaker head for wine than ours, having to drink less because they were used to drinking less, and drinking less because they had to?

Or is it simply this: that in Greece and Rome men dined reclining on supper couches, eating with their fingers; I suppose two cups *per* diner would have been awkward. If they were going to take water at all, it was easier to mix it in a vessel rather than in the stomach.

Anyway, I don't think we have the whole story yet.

For whatever reasons, the Greeks always diluted their wine in a huge urn from which shallow drinking cups were filled. They called these big mixing vessels *kraters*: the handsome Greek red-on-black vases you see in museums are almost all *kraters*, and there are so many of them because dinner was impossible without them. For all wine was drunk mixed with water, except by degraded libertines who were on for anything.

The Jews, who except in religion were much like everyone else, never drank unmixed wine. *Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it*

³ Time/Life *Wines & Spirits* cookbook, c.1968. I am grateful to John Overall for both quotations.

giveth his colour in the cup their proverbs decreed;⁴ it ought to be pinkish from dilution (and what alcoholic ruination would have fallen upon them, rule-bound as they were, if someone had introduced *rosé*!). At the Jewish Passover, this co-mixture became a little ceremony: a special shared cup of thanksgiving sat mixed on the table until after supper, when a longish fixed prayer of thanksgiving to God was recited over it: *Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, eternal King, Who feedest the whole world with Thy goodness . . .* This was “*the cup*” Paul refers to in his account of the Last Supper;⁵ he also gives it its formal name, “the cup of blessing”;⁶ and when the Gospel records that JESUS *took the cup, and when he had given thanks, . . . gave it to them: and they all drank of it*, this is the thanksgiving meant.⁷

Co-mixture at Mass.

THE CHURCH WOULD NOT BE the Church if she were not imitating the Last Supper. At Mass, therefore, she has always recited a thanksgiving over a shared cup in which she had mixed wine and water. Only a little water had to be added, since everyone was sipping only a tiny amount of wine, but the mixture was a necessary part of the rite. *Bread is presented to the president and a cup of water mingled with wine*, says Justin Martyr, if you remember him, when he tersely describes Mass.⁸

At Rome, once persecution of the Church ended, the bishops maintained a choir-school for orphans; when everyone brought up gifts to the altar at the Offertory, these children, who had nothing else to give, touchingly brought up the water.⁹

There were indeed, from the late second century, a few fanatics, most of them actual heretics outside the Church, who went in for bread-and-water Eucharists, for the same reason that they also condemned all sexual intercourse. Many Protestant sects nowadays perform their parody-Masses with grape juice. These are all morbid ascetics of the sort Our Lord smilingly condemned, since they had unsmilingly condemned Him: *The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man*,

⁴ Proverbs xxiii³¹.

⁵ I Corinthians xi²⁵.

⁶ I Corinthians x¹⁶. Dix, *Shape of the Liturgy*, p. 57.

⁷ Mark xiv²³. A *pastiche* of this thanksgiving prayer was adopted, not very happily, by most of the Western Christian Church in the 1960s in *lieu* of the traditional Offertory prayers: *Blessèd are you, Lord, God of all creation . . .*. An ugly cadence, and shoddy rhetoric.

⁸ Justin Martyr, *Apos. i*, 65. Dix, p. 111.

⁹ Dix, p. 104.

*and a winebibber.*¹⁰ But if these bigots left the wine out of the chalice, for fifteen centuries no one ever thought to leave out the water – even in the Middle Ages, when men began to drink wine at dinner uncontaminated with water, and no one was scandalised (it’s hard not to think of this as an advance for civilisation). The Church maintained the custom of co-mixture because it was integral to the Last Supper.

There is no frenzy or idiocy which has not been loosed on the world by the Reformation, however, and the bizarre practice has arisen of not adding water to the wine, merely out of cussedness and contempt for tradition. Alack for humanity.

How the co-mixture is performed.

WHILE THE CELEBRANT WAS SUBMITTING that large wafer of bread to God, asking Him to make it His, the deacon got the chalice ready. He took in his left hand the chalice, which the subdeacon has meanwhile wiped out with the purificator, the twice-folded napkin that arrived on the altar amidst that delicate bundle of vessels. The subdeacon, standing to his right, handed him the [cruet](#) of wine which a server has borne over from the credence. (A cruet is just a cruet, though as it happens the glass cruets we use at Ascension and St Agnes are the least spectacular part of our equipment: a shame.) The subdeacon – *meanwhile* – has taken from the server the other cruet, of water. He holds it aloft.

This is our first frozen frame of action. From left to right, from high to low, celebrant, deacon, subdeacon and server stand ranged along the Epistle side of the altar. The celebrant, having slipped the paten out from under the Host – a notable act; we’ll return to it (for the paten now *vanishes*) – swivels slightly to his right, and, at the subdeacon’s request (*Benedicte, Pater reverende. Pray, reverend, Father: a blessing*), blesses the water with the sign of the Cross. The deacon then pours the wine-plus-blessed water into the chalice, carefully preventing drips with the purificator, the napkin.

Why? I mean, not why bless the water, or anything else involved in the Sacrifice of the Mass; but why bless the water and not the wine? The answer is that wine gets solemnly blessed in a few moments’ time, by which time the water will be gone, already dissolved in it.

And more than just dissolved in it, according to mediæval theologians. Many argued (because Aristotle’s physics said) that by mingling with wine, water was naturally converted into the *substantia*, the substance, of wine;

¹⁰ Luke vii³⁴.

then, in the miracle of the Mass, it became Christ's Blood. Others maintained that the water remained water and was not transubstantiated into the Precious Blood at all. This sounds to us like the sort of angels-dancing-on-the-head-of-a-pin debate that gives mediæval theology a bad name – the reason it sounds like that to us is that we are woolly-headed and wouldn't notice a precise theological thought if it bit our legs off.

In any case, the idea is not seriously to dilute the wine, but to add a token few drops, and in some churches little spoons are still used to make sure the amount of water added is small. The mixed chalice remains a cup of wine: and one of the rich minor beauties of the Mass (for anyone close-up enough to watch) is the way the small amount of water drops into depths of the golden wine in the golden cup – it swirls, silvery, like inverted smoke before diffusing.

The sight is so lovely it suggests that the co-mixture might have some special significance. Maybe it's not just a question of fidelity to the Last Supper. Many Christians have thought so, and so, as this essentially utilitarian business is performed, the celebrant murmurs the second (and most noteworthy) of the seven offertory prayers:

Deus, qui humanæ substantiæ.

Deus, qui humanæ substantiæ
dignitatem mirabiliter condidisti,
et mirabilius reformasti:
da nobis per hujus
aquæ et vini mysterium,
ejus divinitatis esse consortes,
qui humanitatis nostræ
fieri dignatus est particeps,
Jesus Christus, Filius tuus, Dominus noster:
Qui tecum vivit et regnat
in unitate Spiritus Sancti, Deus;
per omnia sæcula sæculorum. Amen.

O God, Who in creating man
didst wonderfully exalt his nature,
and yet more wonderfully hast remade it:
grant us by this
water and wine (in a mystery),
to share in His divinity
Who in our humanity,
humbling Himself, shared:
through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, Our Lord,
Who with Thee liveth and reigneth
in the unity of the Holy Ghost: God,
world without end. Amen.

IN OTHER WORDS, the co-mixture of water with wine has been turned into a symbol of the co-mixture of humanity with divinity in Christ.

There isn't all that much [symbolism](#) in the Mass, if by symbolism we mean one small thing or action being understood as the specific sign of some larger and more significant thing. Despite what Protestants think, the Mass does not deal with resemblances, it deals in realities. The Offertory is not a symbol of our offering of ourselves to God; it *is* an offering to Him of bread and wine, which in His shattering love He accepts. The shining garments worn at High Mass are not *symbols* of anything, they are shingin

garments. It's in bad taste (and of course it is the contemporary taste) to cover them with heavy-handed symbols – bunches of grapes, ears of wheat, plunging doves, smiling dancing children and the rest of it. Our green High Mass set of chasuble, tunicle, dalmatic, humeral veil and so on are just the noble apparel proper to the noble sacrifice: they're essentially tarted-up ancient Roman day-wear. (The orphreys, or strips of damask, on these particular vestments bear the stylised design called the [lily-pot](#), which is a subtle allusion to the Annunciation; for Gabriel traditionally carried a lily when he came to tell Our Lady that God had looked on us to make us free. But such delicate symbolism is not intrusive.)

The co-mixture of the chalice is an unusual instance of one of the inherent, necessary elements of the Mass having symbolic (or 'mystical') meaning heavily read into it. The co-mixture is, declares this prayer, a [mystery](#). In Christian theology mystery, *mysterium*, is a technical term: it doesn't mean *something hidden*, but *something that is beyond full human understanding because of its magnitude*. The mixing of wine and water, apparently so pedestrian, opens up realities too huge for us to grasp.

We are reminded of John's Gospel, which takes a historical, an essentially medical fact about the death of Christ – *one of the soldiers with a spear pierced His side, and forthwith came there out blood and water* – and clearly wants to invest it with larger significance, crying, passionately, *And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe.*¹¹ What are we to believe about it, exactly? John is so shy about speaking openly of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist that he describes the baptism of Christ without blurting out that Christ was baptised, and describes the Last Supper without mentioning What was eaten and drunk.¹² But the sacraments must be what John means by the blood and water breaking forth from Christ's pierced Body. Certain rites of Mass, although not ours, plainly connect the mingled water and wine with that mingled water and Blood. Baptism is thus invoked by the co-mixture – as is the Church herself: did not her sacraments stream from His side, as Eve was formed by Adam's flank? – and so forth.¹³

Such weaving of symbols is splendid wisdom, although generally outside the scope of the Mass.

¹¹ John xix³⁴⁻³⁵.

¹² John I²⁹⁻³⁴, John xiii-xvii.

¹³ Genesis ii²². The Council of Trent, session XXII, *De Missa*, vii, makes much of what flowed from Christ's pierced Heart, as does the old Protestant hymn 'Rock of Ages' (471 in the 1940 hymnal): *Let the water and the blood, From Thy side a heavenly flood, Be of sin the double cure . . .*

In any case, the remarkable prayer *Deus, qui humanæ substantiæ* is clear: the co-mixture reminds us of the mixture of God and humanity in Christ. But the argument of the prayer, which is an adaptation of a Christmas Collect, is so amazing that I've translated it literally, and therefore clumsily, so the Latin can be followed. In creating or substantiating man, *humanæ substantiæ*, God made human dignity to be wonderfully exalted; but even more wonderfully, *mirabilius*, re-made us, reformed, *reformasti*. How? through the incarnation, in which He who humbled Himself to share, *particeps*, in our humanity, allowed us – and here comes the stupendous boldness – allows us to share in His divine essence, *divinitatis esse*. We demand to share Christ's divinity, we tell God we insist on becoming divine. That is what is expressed in *aquæ et vini mysterium*, the mystery of water and wine

Offerimus tibi Domine.

THE OBLATION OF THE CHALICE follows immediately after this daring prayer about *aquæ et vini mysterium*. The celebrant lifts the chalice, as he did the paten, up off the corporal, up toward God; the deacon holds its foot, to steady it and share in the offering, for the deacon is anciently the minister of the chalice. The celebrant and deacon say together the third offertory prayer:

Offerimus tibi Domine,	We offer unto Thee, O Lord,
calicem salutaris,	the chalice of salvation,
tuam deprecantes clementiam:	beseeching Thy clemency:
ut in conspectu divinæ majestatis tuæ,	that it may before Thy
divine Majesty	
pro nostra	(for our,
et totius mundi salute	and for the whole world's
salvation)	
cum odore suavitatis ascendat. Amen.	with sweet odour ascend.
Amen.	

Again, I'm offering a grisly, almost word-by-word translation of the *Offerimus tibi Domine*, obliterating the elegance of the Latin to disclose the meaning. The meaning is smell: the 'primitive' idea that Heaven savours the scent of burning sacrifices. Homer is fond of this notion: so is one of the oldest passages in the Old Testament, describing Noah's holocaust of burned animals after the Deluge: *the LORD smelled a sweet savour; and the LORD*

*said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake.*¹⁴

Now like much of religion, this sounds laughably infantile at first blush – because it is so profound. If God exists He made the cosmos; if He made the cosmos He loves it, because He cannot hate what He makes; if He loves it He loves us most of all, because we are incomparably the most interesting thing in the universe; and if He loves us most of all nothing can be better than for us to make the gesture of giving Him material things, which He also delights in.

The gesture of giving God things is touchingly vain, because everything is His anyway: we cannot make this cup of aromatic wine *His* any more than we can stop it being His – unless He resolves to *accept* it from us. Love might just leap to such humility, because love (which after all we know about, inasmuch as we know about anything good) does indeed go in for such humilities. Very well: if the Unimaginable chooses to present Himself to us as Love – if, for practical purposes, God *is* love, *Deus est amor* – then He might well also present Himself to us as Desire. He might choose to Love us so intently that He even wills to desire us. And if He desires our love, then He desires our gifts, and the scent of wine which we want Him to receive from us would indeed be *sweet* to Him.

We might imagine (although this is a bit tinged with sentimentality) a mother charmed by her small child's toddling up to her with flowers picked, a bit messily, from her own flower-bed. The present is, legally speaking, not much of a present, but the smell of them is still matchlessly sweet.

This talk of God flaring His nostrils in Heaven over the sacrifice on earth deliberately states the idea of sacrifice with scandalous richness. Already in the first century Christians were telling each other that Christ's Body and Blood in the Mass is *an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour*.¹⁵ We use this shocking and sensuous language now of wine – for so far, it is only wine, a little wine in a silver goblet. We speak of it so lovingly and lusciously because of What it is soon to become. We anticipate the Consecration, as often in the Offertory. We have hailed bread (so far, merely a wafer of bread) as *hanc immaculatam hostiam*, this perfect victim. Now we exult over the wine as the cup of salvation, *calicem salutaris*.

It's worth remembering that all the prayers at Mass were composed by priests who knew what it is like to celebrate Mass (it is like nothing else on

¹⁴ Genesis viii²¹.

¹⁵ Ephesians. George Bernard Shaw's *Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God*, a short and irresistibly good-tempered book, is the one good protest I know of against this religious idea of sacrifice. Merely to shudder at it – which is the commonest modern response – is no argument.

earth), and knew all its sensuous pleasures. At this moment, with the wine stirred up by a splash of water, and then heaved a few inches into the air, its fragrance has been released and is swirling about the altar. In the midst of all the grave bustle of Offertory the celebrant and deacon are suddenly struck by a heady fragrance, almost an amorous pang: and they beg God to share in this joyance.

The chalice.

WHILE THE CHALICE IS UP IN THE AIR, being offered to God, while both God and celebrant are relishing its aroma, let's have a look at it.

We had pages and pages two weeks ago on why that primal Cup fascinates the Christian imagination, and why every chalice, being a reprise of that Cup, is treated with awed respect even when empty. Now let's be empirical.

It's a metal cup. *Calix* is simply Latin for cup, although the English *chalice*, which comes from *calix*, is a technical word meaning precisely this: a stemmed goblet of precious metal, with a large 'foot' and (usually) a bulbous 'knob' or 'knop' half-way up the stem, made for Mass. The knob is not just decorative: at Communion, whoever is dispensing the Precious Blood holds it tightly so the woe of spillage can be avoided.

The earliest Christian chalices were large, almost stemless, and had big handles to them: this was the probable shape of the Cup at the Last Supper, and is the shape we imagine the Grail to be. But the present form had established itself by the Dark Ages, classically with an entirely, dramatically smooth bowl sitting on top of a heavily decorated, and ideally jewel-encrusted, stem.

Gold and precious stones are the ideal. But Dark Age Europe was at the political and economic level of modern Africa, and it could be a struggle to celebrate Mass becomingly. Just over a thousand years ago, at the Council of Celchyth (that is, Chelsea), and at various northern synods, the Church of England decreed that the chalice in which *the housel is hallowed* – *housel* is the fine old English word for the Blessed Sacrament, *hallowed* is the fine old English word for *consecrated* – must be of molten work (*calic gegoten*): that is, metal or glass. Other Councils, going further, specifically forbade frangible glass and porous wood, brass which rusts into *verdigris* and causes nausea, and horn, which comes from animals and thus had blood in it.¹⁶ Clay

¹⁶ Herbert Thurston, 'CHALICE', in *The Catholic Encyclopædia*, www.newadvent.org.

was, of course, unthinkable. Eventually a high standard prevailed: modern chalices must be of gold, or at least of silver (pewter, in times of persecution) with the inside of the bowl gilded.

Then, from the 1960s, came another Dark Age, and monstrous rubbishy clay returned. But we're not going to think about that.

Chalices were the finest works of the silversmith and goldsmith for a thousand years. They were the most impressive objects our civilisation produced, before our civilisation began to specialise in machines and bombs. I resist giving a history of their shape, which would be just a history of fashion, although a significant fashion. You can go into any great museum to see examples which make the mind leap with admiration (and grief that they are not being employed to hallow the house). All chalices are consecrated as God's before they are used; they cannot legally be alienated from the Church; they are only in museums because they have been plundered or, even more blasphemously, discarded). Washington's National Gallery has some very lovely chalices in glass cabinets. When the counter-revolution come these cabinets should be smashed, and their contents borne back to sacristies through streets misty with the blaze of barricades and reeking of Federal troops slain in heaps – while overhead I.N.S. officers who ran too slowly from righteous rage swing now this way, now that, in the sweet evening breeze

A Bouts chalice.

OPPPOSITE IS A DETAIL of a white and scarlet painting by a Dutch Renaissance painter who died in 1475, the magnificent Dieric Bouts the Elder. (We've seen a lot of Bouts' works in *The Freeze-Frame Mass*, and are going to see more; the intelligent and contemplative man behind standing St Peter, posing as a servant of the house, is perhaps a self-portrait.)¹⁷

Here's a *Last Supper* geometrically sober and stylistically restrained, indeed static – a freeze-frame of the Mass. Christ is saying *This is My Body*, and holding a wafer over a gold cup. We are recognisably in everyday life; but the weekly vision of the Mass weighs on Bouts, who shows us the bread as a priest's Host, the cruet of wine as an ecclesiastical-looking marvel, and two small patens on the serving hatch, top left. The big pewter dish which held the roast lamb is very like a big paten from the first centuries of the

¹⁷ See it in colour at http://gallery.euroweb.hu/thml/b/b/bouts/dirk_e, or simply at gallery.euroweb.hu under BOUTS. Or fly to Leuven and say your prayers in Sint-Pieterskerk!

Church. It's the chalice I want to draw your attention to: this is the short-stemmed, wide-open 'lily' design popular in the fifteenth century (Christianity's gorgeous high summer). *The chalice of benediction, which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?*¹⁸

Donation.

BOUTS HAS CLEARLY PAINTED THIS CHALICE from a specimen in the treasury of a local church. chalices were donated to churches by people who could afford the joy of such a gift. This still happens: our own silver chalice bears this inscription from an anonymous donor, TO THE GLORY OF GOD AND IN HONOR OF ST AGNES AND IN MEMORY OF MANY LOVED ONES. ALLELUIA. It's a good piece of work, with its foot formed of six curves, each showing a scene of our redemption: Annunciation, Nativity, Transfiguration, Last Supper, Crucifixion, Resurrection; Mass here is celebrated with the Crucifixion facing out toward the celebrant. Its knob is also six-fold, with six protuberances meant to hold six jewels, which sadly it has never had. Even more sadly, its gold is rubbing off with age and happy use. It needs another donor to re-gild it.

That is all that can be *seen* of the chalice, of our chalice; though no meditation can ever exhaust thought of what it is and does and holds.

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¹⁸ I Corinthians x¹⁶.