

## **Celebrating Our Memories and Dreams**

(The Eucharist as the Celebration of Christian Foundational  
Memory and Eschatological Hope)

**Dr. D. Alphonse,**  
St. Paul's Seminary, Tiruchirapalli.

### **I Ritual and Remembrance**

Dreams are the prime stuff that human greatness is made of. The ability to dream and to creatively envisage new possibilities is a special characteristic of the human beings which in part differentiates them from other creatures that coinhabit the earth with them. It is through their dreams and visions that men and women fashion new images of themselves and their societies. Some such images they project into the future as ideals to be realized and by pursuing them they create and give concrete shape to their history. This ability to image the future anew and realize it is one of the most sublime exercises of human transcendence and is profoundly expressive of the human nature as created in God's own image and likeness.

The ability to imagine and fantasize, to dream of and envision new possibilities is the source of all human inventiveness and creativity. As such, it is not a marginal or secondary faculty that human beings can do without, but rather it is vital for human survival and societal progress. Even the tragedies of the worst kind and the most devastating disasters do not necessarily reduce the human beings to total helpless and paralyzing fatalism precisely because of their ability to conjure up in their minds paradises of well being and happiness. Even under the cruelest of tyrannies and chains of oppression they can dream of a future full of freedom and brotherhood. It is by imagining such utopias that they derive the

needed strength not only to survive through such dehumanizing conditions but also to challenge and change them.

## **From Memories to Hopes**

Dreams are closely associated with and are rooted in the memories of the past, many of which are subconscious as S. Freud has clearly shown.<sup>1</sup> Without memories there are no dreams. Vacuous pasts and vapid presents are not the fertile grounds from which visions for the future can blossom. What is true of individuals is also in some way applicable to societies. A people without memories is also a people without hopes. When they have the memory of a past, mythical or historical, they can readily return to it for inspiration to visualize new shapes for the future and for the vitality to realize them.

Memory is also one of the key components that go to constitute the individual human identity. Amnesia spells loss of the sense of self and identity. This is also true of communities and societies. They have collective memories which provide their members with a common sense of identity. Of these collective memories the most basic one and that which continues to shape and deeply colour the subsequent ones is the foundational memory.

Foundational memory arises from the founding events or originating experiences that first forged together a variety of individuals into a community or a people giving them a new collective identity realized as a common sense of purpose and destiny with their corresponding core vision and values. In so far as the community's way of life and basic values devolve from the originating experiences the foundational memory is also determinative of its ethics and conduct. It also provides a sense of continuity to the community by functioning as the basic framework to interpret the later experiences.

In moments of crises when the community is confronted by discordant experiences or deviance that threaten its historical identity it can survive and sustain itself as one and the same community only if it succeeds in reviving and revalidating in the minds of its members

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1. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, vol.4 of James Strachey(ed.), *The Pelican Freud Library*, Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1976, 69 - 81.

the foundational memory. Otherwise the community invariably breaks up sooner or later. Such a return to and rerooting in the foundational memory is possible by enabling the members to reexperience the originating events through the repetition of the foundational narratives brought alive by the corresponding rituals. David Power expresses this succinctly:

It is from these [foundational narratives] that the communities draw their vigor, in reference to them that they express the horizon within which they live. As the community develops over time, new events are illumined by their relation to the foundational narratives.<sup>2</sup>

While the foundational narrative retells the originating paradigmatic events the accompanying mimetic rites reenact them symbolically.

### **Ritual Remembrance - Historical and Prophetic**

The purpose of the foundational narrative and the ritual is never merely the recollection of images or data from a dead past. The proclamation of the narrative and the performance of the ritual seek, as David Power remarks, "to show how persons, communities and events belong in a time greater than their own time."<sup>3</sup> They always have a reference to the present because the primordial event is brought to shed its light on it. Through them the future with its expectations and hopes is sought to be aligned with the past as proceeding in continuity and as a consequence of it.

Such harmonization of the present and the future with the past that is inherent to all foundational narratives and rituals generally results in the reinforcement of the established socio-political, cultural and religions, institutions and structures along with people's traditional patterns of interaction and behaviour that are mostly dictated by such institutions.

However, the recital of the foundational narrative and the performance of the ritual rarely take place in an entirely fixed format that is absolutely immutable. Innovation in style, variation

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2. David Power, *The Eucharistic Mystery : Revitalizing the Tradition*, New York: Crossroad, 1995, 306.

3. Power, *Eucharistic Mystery*, 307.

in emphasis and elaboration of themes, abandonment of certain outdated forms and the addition of new forms and motifs due to the sheer compulsion of changing circumstances may in course of time bring about significant and even radical changes of interpretations and meanings of the recital and ritual. Some such interpretations might show tolerance to deviance and even legitimize behaviors that are subversive of the established institutions, structures and styles of relationships .

Besides, as Victor Turner has elaborated, rituals have a transformative potential in so far as they have a *liminal* phase or character.<sup>4</sup> In the liminality of the ritual with its recital there is space for the emergence and experience of the original *communitas* experienced in the founding events but not adequately realized in the structural and institutional articulations of the society.<sup>5</sup> This may bring to the fore in the consciousness of the participants their hidden and pent-up aspirations for the change of the prevalent social order and provide legitimation for their struggles to bring about a better and more just society. This is why festivals are also in most societies, past and present, occasions when popular aspirations for justice, peace and unity are more spontaneously and boldly expressed and people are easily mobilized for struggle towards social change.

This potential of the ritual and recital may be analysed as follows. The idealized foundational event experienced anew in and through them, enables the participants to become acutely aware of the incongruence of the present condition of their lives as well as of their society in the face of the vision and values expressed in the founding events. The perception of such incongruences results in either of the two processes or more frequently a combination of both in differing proportions. The past gets reinterpreted to legitimize the conditions

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4. **Liminality** is the condition of being "neither here nor there." It is the state of being "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial." - Victor Turner, **The Ritual Process : Structure and Anti-Structure**, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977, 95.

5. **Communitas** refers to the perstructural basic equality of human beings. It is prior and more fundamental than the community's organization, role differentiation and hierarchical system. As Victor Turner shows, "Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality." Turner, **Ritual Process**, 128. For a more detailed treatment of liminality and communitas see pp. 94 - 130.

of the present or a resolve is generated to transform the present degenerate condition in accord with the idealized vision enshrined in the foundational memory. What becomes evident here is the ethical and eschatological implication of the ritual remembrance.

Ritual, in so far as it is a celebration of memories and in particular of the foundational kind, is also a privileged occasion for the anticipated experience of our future in God. For the ultimate past from which all individuals and communities take their origin is God himself and when we seek to reach the ultimate depths of our memories it is he who will be encountered there. But God is not only our ultimate past but also our ultimate future. And our memory celebrated in the ritual, by linking us to our past opens up to us the horizons of our future too. As Léon-Dufour says, "Through memory, the present that is mine finds itself caught up in a creative movement that is divine."<sup>6</sup>

Rituals have thus, though in varying degrees, a triple time character. The memory they celebrate has reference not only to the foundational past, either mythical or historical, but also to here and now in so far as the present is prophetically critiqued and even to the future with the elicitation of hope and thus releasing the power to realize it. The words of David Power are quite applicable here: "History provides continuity from one event to the next, from one era to the next, by way of imaginative recall that reveals potential for the future, even when apparently discontinuity emerges."<sup>7</sup>

## **II Passover : Remembrance of a People**

Memory and hope find an important place in all religions. However, in the religion of the people of Israel they have a far greater role. So much so Judaism and Christianity have been called "memory religions."<sup>8</sup> The powerful memory it cherished and celebrated along with the equally vibrant hope it had given rise to had sustained the

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6. Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread*, New York : Paulist Press, 1987, 105.

7. Power, *Eucharistic Mystery*, 48.

8. Eduardo Hoornaert, *Memory of the Christian People*, Maryknoll, N.Y : Orbis Books, 1989, 3.

people of Israel even amidst the worst defeats, devastating conquests and tragic exiles. Scarcely can one find in human history another people with such a depth of memory and irrepressible strength of hope.

For the Hebrews memory and hope are deeply interlinked. Unlike the Greeks for whom memory meant mostly the reminiscence of images from the irrevocable past, for the Hebrews it is a recall of the past events in so far they have a bearing on the present and openness to the future that in some way it has already anticipated. The meaning of the Hebrew *zkr*, the root for words related to memory, is not only to remember and to mention but also to recall, preserve, and to invoke.<sup>9</sup> So the extension of the past events is in some way or other implied in the act of remembering. Through memory the effects of the past are prolonged and made present. In Israel, as Léon-Dufour remarks, "Memory is time seen as a single whole; this applies to God as well as to human beings."<sup>10</sup>

It is God's memory that is the most eminent of all memories and the supreme exemplar of human memory. In the Old Testament Yahweh is depicted as the God who remembers and does not forget his name or promises. Remembering for him means remaining faithful to the covenantal promise. It is not a mere mental exercise but a salvific action in history. As Joachim Jeremias puts it, "God's remembrance is always an action in mercy or judgement."<sup>11</sup> That is why when the Psalmist appeals to God to remember what he is praying for is that God should bring his covenantal promises to fulfillment (Ps 105 : 8; 1 Chr 16 : 15) which included among others the granting of his blessings (Ps 115 : 12) like food (Ps 115 : 5) and showing compassion (Ps 106 : 45).

Israel, as the people of God, is also called to be a remembering people. Moses' warning to them is that they should not forget: "Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God ..." (Deut 8 : 10ff.). Despite this warning often they forget their God. Forgetfulness is the

9. Jean Corbon, "Memory," in Xavier Léon-Dufour(ed.), **Dictionary of Biblical Theology**, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1973(2nd ed.), 350.

10. Léon-Dufour, *Sharing*, 109.

11. Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, London: SCM Press, 1966, 249.

fundamental sin of Israel: "The Israelites did not remember their God, who had rescued them from the hand of all their enemies on every side" (Jud 1 : 34 f). Forgetting Yahweh spelt abandonment by him and the loss of his blessings, particularly the fulfillment of his promises. Remembering him, on the contrary, meant hope of receiving an abundance of his blessings. It implies the unfailing assurance that his promises, already getting fulfilled now, will be fully realized in the future. This we see all the more explicitly in Israel after the exile. In this period, as Jean Corbon points out, "The recalling becomes expectation and the memory ends in apocalyptic imagining."<sup>12</sup>

But what does it mean to be a remembering people? If for Yahweh remembering meant bringing his covenantal promises to fulfillment on the part of Israel it meant faithfulness to him and his covenant shown by the observance of the covenantal laws (Deut 8 : 1 - 2; 5 : 15; 15 : 15, 16 : 12; 24 : 18, 22). By the mutual remembrance of God and Israel their covenantal relationship is renewed and gets deepened resulting in greater glory to God's name and fullness of life and blessings to the people of Israel.

### **Memorial Meal Par Excellence**

The people of Israel had many ways and means to keep alive in their minds God's call and covenant and to repeatedly remind themselves of their identity as his chosen people with its attendant obligations. The land, law, the temple with its sacrificial rites and the solemn festivals were the major memorials that enabled the people to remember their history in continuity with which they defined themselves and directed their lives and endeavours.

The cultic celebration of the major festivals with their impressive rituals and the recital of the relevant historical narratives had a privileged role in perpetuating in the minds of the people of Israel the memory of their call and destiny as the people covenanted with Yahweh. However, for our purpose here, it suffices to examine more closely the memorial character of the feast of the Passover in so far it was the festival par excellence of the Jews and it is above all the Passover meal, of all the Jewish rites, that is more closely associated with the Christian Eucharist.

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12. Corbon, "Memory," 350.

The most central and climaxing event of the Passover festival was the *seder* meal in which all the family members and friends gathered together shared in the meat of the sacrificial lamb along with unleavened bread, bitter herbs and wine. It was a memorial celebration commanded by Yahweh himself to mark in the minds of the generations of the Israelites the founding event of freedom from the bondage of Egypt. "This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall keep it as a festival to the Lord" (Ex 12 : 14; 13 : 3 ). The retelling of the exodus event that was part of the celebration of the ritual meal (Ex 13 : 8) ensured that the participants remembered all the wondrous and mighty deeds the Lord had done to save their ancestors from slavery and to bring them to the land of freedom and prosperity.

The Passover celebration was never a mere recollection of some events of a bygone past. Rather it was a memorial event in which the participants saw themselves as involved in the happenings of the past and appropriated the story of their forefathers as their own. For God's saving actions are rarely for any single person or generation alone. In Abraham "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12 : 3). Yahweh's covenant was made not with Israel's ancestors alone but also with the subsequent generations. "The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us who are all of us here alive today" (Deut 5 : 2 - 3). It is along these lines that the *Misnah*, referring to the Passover feast, suggests, "In celebrating the feast, we must act as though we ourselves had come from Egypt (*Pesahim* X, 5)."<sup>13</sup>

Thanksgiving was another predominant motive of the Passover feast. The various blessings, the *Hallel* (singing the psalms of praise) and the different prayers that were part of the Passover meal celebration were the chief ways in which the Jewish people rendered thanks to Yahweh.<sup>14</sup> Deliverance from the slavery of Egypt was the mightiest saving action of God in favour of Israel. It was the most definite and striking proof to his remembrance of the promises he

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13. As cited in Léon-Dufour, *Sharing*, 106.

14. For a brief description of the order of the celebration of the Jewish Passover meal with its various blessings and rituals, see Lucien Deiss, *It's the Lord's Supper : Eucharist of Christians*, New York : Paulist Press, 1976, 38 - 39.

had made to the forefathers. Every generation of Jews, as they felt involved in those saving events, were also filled with a sense of wonder and gratitude.

The passover meal implied also the assurance on the part of the people of Israel that Yahweh who had acted in the past to liberate their ancestors and also continued to act in their own lives and history to save them from diverse situations of peril would decisively act in the future to carry out his promises to the full and bring them total salvation. As Howard Marshall indicates, "The feast also became an occasion for looking forward to the future redemption which God would bring through the Messiah."<sup>15</sup> This hope was not a passive waiting though there were some groups whose apocalyptic expectations could be categorized as such. Rather it was generally an active and faithful obedience to the law that was carried, in the case of Pharisees, to the extreme of legalism and, in the case of the Zealots, to nationalist political violence.

### **III Do This in Remembrance of Me**

Christianity inherited from Judaism not only its basic memorial character but also its main memorial meal. The memorial character of Christianity and its apex sacrament, the Eucharist, is rooted in the very person of Jesus Christ who is the fullest and the most definitive expression of God's remembrance. Since for God to remember means to fulfill his promises, Jesus in whom all God's promises find their supreme and unparalleled fulfillment, is the incarnate expression of God's faithfulness to and gracious remembrance of humankind. That is why as the birth of Jesus drew near Luke presents both Mary and Zacharias praising God for the "remembrance of his mercy" (Lk 1:54, 72).

The Christian Eucharist is not a mere replication or adaptation of the Jewish Passover meal. However it is in the context of the Passover meal that Jesus instituted the Eucharist and the latter shares many of the former's features, particularly its memorial character.<sup>16</sup>

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15. Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper*, Exeter : Paternoster Press, 1980, 23.

16. Despite the earlier and more recent attempts to harmonize the differing New Testament traditions which place the last supper of Jesus in the Passover feast (Synoptics) or earlier (John) there is still no scholarly consensus in this matter.

Jesus' command in this regard is very explicit as reported by both Luke and Paul : "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk 22 : 19; 1 Cor 11 : 24,25). And following his command, Christians of all ages have celebrated the Eucharist as the supreme memorial of Christ.

However, Joachim Jeremias has disputed the Church's traditional understanding of the Eucharist as the memorial of Christ. Rather, it is for him the memorial of the Christian community's commitment to the eschatological realization of the kingdom of God through coming together as the eucharistic community in prayer:

the command to repeat the rite is not a summons to the disciples to preserve the memory of Jesus and be vigilant ('repeat the breaking of bread so that you may not forget me'), but it is an eschatologically oriented instruction : 'Keep joining yourselves together as the redeemed community by the table rite, that in this way God may be daily implored to bring about the consummation in the *parousia*.'<sup>17</sup>

That there is in the command of Jesus an eschatological petitionary implication, as suggested by J. Jeremias, can be readily agreed with. But the exclusion from it of any reference to the historical remembrance of Jesus is certainly not acceptable. For, the historical with its reference to the past and the eschatological pointing to the future are not contrast categories that are mutually exclusive. Rather they have greater validity if they are mutually related. Besides, for the disciples the Eucharist meant above all a memorial celebration in which they experienced the risen Lord present among them is clearly shown by the episode of the disciples on the way to Emmaus. For it is in the breaking of the bread that "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" (Lk 24 : 31). The recognition of the Lord which the Christian communities down the ages have experienced in the Eucharist is not that of a vague and subjective presence in the minds of the believers alone but the real presence of the enfleshed Christ who though is now risen. That is why Paul could say, "The

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However, there is basic concord among most interpreters with regard to the Passover context of the last supper as articulated by Max Thurian already more than forty years ago : "— it is certain that the Eucharist was instituted within the paschal framework —." Max Thurian, *The Eucharistic Memorial*, Richmond, Virginia : John Knox Press, 1960, vol. I, 17. For a brief summary of the different views with regard to the day of the last supper see Marshall, *Last Supper*, 57 - 75 .

17. Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, 255.

cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread we break, is it not sharing in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor 10 : 16).

Paul goes further to articulate very well the interlinking of the historical and eschatological implications of the memory of Jesus celebrated in the Eucharist: " For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Cor 11 : 26). This he could say because through the historical memory of Christ celebrated in the Eucharist the effects of his salvific work are opened up to the community gathered together at present so that they can realize in the future the fullness of the kingdom. Thus what takes place in the Eucharistic celebration is not the repetition of a past event as such nor a mere reminiscence of the past by symbolically reenacting it. But rather what is involved here is that by coming together to celebrate the memory of Jesus the community is enabled to experience him as crucified, dead and risen and thereby it is renewed and strengthened to live his mystery today leading to the future fullness. The words of Léon-Dufour are quite appropriate here:

The Eucharistic action is not a monument to be erected before God; it is the actualization of the event that was Jesus. The "day" is a day that is still, even today, a day for me: unceasing thanksgiving, a laying hold of the eternal in time, an opening to my true destiny.<sup>18</sup>

The overflow of the historical memory into the present filling it with eschatological hope is also to be found in the thanksgiving motif that runs through the eucharistic celebration. As evident from the very name, Eucharist is above all an act of thanksgiving. All the synoptic gospels as well as Paul witness to Jesus giving thanks at the institution of the Eucharist ( Mt 26 : 27; Mk 14 : 23; Lk 22 : 17,19; 1 Cor 11 : 24). His thanksgiving, in accord with the Jewish tradition, was motivated by all the salvific deeds of God particularly all those performed in favour of Israel. In addition to all these for Jesus at the final moments of his life his entire ministry would have become another reason for thanksgiving. We have also reason to believe that even at that dark moment when the cruel death on the cross was looming large in front him he had the firm hope in his resurrection.

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18. Léon - Dufour, *Sharing*, 114.

and in the final realization of the Kingdom of God. His seeming vow of desistance that he would not eat the Passover and drink wine "until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God" (Lk 22 : 16,18) is certainly indicative of this. Thus the description of the last supper by J. Jeremias as "an anticipatory gift of the consummation,"<sup>19</sup> applies to the eucharistic celebration as well. As Louis Bermejo points out, "The very remembrance of the past (death and resurrection of Christ) thrusts the Church forward in a movement of longing anticipation towards the unfulfilled climax of her complete, final liberation."<sup>20</sup>

### Remembering Jesus Today

Authentic remembrance of Jesus Today, as we have seen, is an act that is much more profound and seriously consequential to Christian historical praxis. Remembering in the full sacramental sense implies an active personal encounter with the risen Christ who accompanies our human journey as a living and life-giving presence. It also means that by participating in his death and resurrection through the Eucharist we let ourselves be swept into the stream of salvation history and open up ourselves to the saving love of God and the liberating power of his Spirit that have flowed into human lives and history through them.

The risen Lord is not an abstract entity nor a transcendent being untouched by and not involved in the contingencies of human history. Though Divine, he is also historical human being who lived at a particular point of time and in a specific socioeconomic, political and cultural situation with his unshakable ideals and uncompromising values. It is this ideal of the kingdom of God with its basic values of love, truth and justice that constituted the very core of his self and identity. So remembering Jesus means that we not only keep alive in our minds and hearts his presence but also realize his vision by carrying it over into our attitudes, relationships and social involvements. Only thus can his memory be rendered authentic and living. In other words to celebrate the memory of Jesus in the Eucharist means, to appropriate his core concerns and to act out his commitments and thus realize his vision of the kingdom of God.

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19. Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, 261.

20. Louis Bermejo, *Body Broken and Blood Shed: The Eucharist of the Risen Christ*. Anand : Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1986, 42.

Remembering Jesus today is authentic only if it includes also the forgotten members of our society and the victims of the prevalent unjust socio, economic, political and cultural systems operating through their exploitative structures. The priority accorded in Jesus' mission to the poor, sinners, sick and suffering is the necessary consequence of his preferential remembrance of those whom the ruling elite of his day had contemptuously dismissed and callously forgotten as "this crowd, which does not know the law - they are accursed" (Jn 7 : 49). It also led him to identify himself with those victims of the oppressive structures of his society to the point of himself becoming a victim on the cross. The Eucharist, as the celebration of his sacrificial life, death and resurrection, demands from its participants the appropriation of his preferential remembrance of the forgotten ones and victims of our own society and our identification with them. In this sense, it is never a mere memorial but always a true sacrificial memorial. So a cultic remembrance of, and contemplative communion with Jesus' passion, death and resurrection, though vital and necessary, are not adequate. What is required along with them is the preferential identification with the victims with whom the historical Jesus had cost his lot, and thereby making at-one-ment with his death and resurrection. As David Power points out, "Relating the suffering humanity to the remembrance of Christ is a matter of critical importance for the eucharistic celebration."<sup>21</sup>

For God and therefore for human persons to authentically remember is to act. For Christians too the eucharistic remembrance of Christ is authentic and full only when "the least of these who are members of my (Jesus') family" (Mt 25 : 40) are also included and their remembrance is translated into individual and community action in their favour by the promotion of equality, sharing and structures and relationships of true brotherhood. The Johannine substitution of the synoptic command of the eucharistic commemoration with the prescription of footwashing goes to confirm this. So the eucharistic celebration to be fully meaningful in the new millennium will have to be powerfully evocative of the dangerous and subversive memory of the historical Jesus as he is risen today in the dreams, hopes and struggles of humanity, particularly of the least of its members.

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21. Power, *Eucharistic Mystery*, 312.