

FR. ETIENNE VETÖ

Member of the Chemin Neuf Community, Professor of Theology,
Advisor of the Centre for Jewish–Christian Relations

The Eucharist, Illuminated by Jewish Tradition

The point of departure of the Eucharistic celebration, called the Mass, the Divine Liturgy, the Holy Communion Service by different Christian traditions, are the words and acts of Jesus during the Last Supper. Nevertheless, Jesus and the early Christians were Jews and prayed according to the Jewish tradition. The first Christian Eucharistic celebrations were generated and became themselves in a Jewish environment. Our aim during this workshop will simply be to see how understanding the Jewish tradition from which the Eucharistic derives illuminates our comprehension of this great gift and mystery we have received from Christ and the Church.

In itself this is not a particularly original endeavor, since the Jewish background of the Eucharist has been studied quite extensively in the past decades. However, I will focus on two less studied aspects. We will start by looking at how the text of the Eucharistic Prayer echoes not only the words and expressions of Jewish liturgy, such as the prayer after meals (*Birkat Hamazon*) or the Eighteen Blessings (*Amidah*), as many have done, but how it corresponds to the movement and inner dynamics of these prayers. This will enable us to perceive how the main thrust of the Eucharistic prayer is not the transformation of the bread and wine but the transformation of the faithful through the transformation of the bread and wine. In a second moment, we will widen our perspective to the whole celebration. Perceiving how the Christian celebration derives from and unites three types of Jewish liturgy – the Seder meal, the synagogal prayer and the sacrifices of the Temple – allows to receive the full richness of the Eucharist, which is all at once the celebration of the Word of God, the Bread of Life and the Sacrifice of Christ, and should not be reduced to only one of these dimensions.

1. The meaning of Real Presence: a reading of the Eucharistic Prayer in the framework of the Jewish prayer

The central novelty of the Eucharist is the treasure of the Real Presence, the transformation of the bread and wine in the body and blood of Christ. This truly is a priceless gift of God. It is also a mysterious gift: why does Christ give us his flesh and blood? Why through a transformation of bread and wine? Paradoxically, the Jewish tradition can illuminate this very specifically Christian mystery. The whole movement of the Eucharistic Prayer, or Anaphora, understood in the framework of the dynamics of Jewish prayer, will show us that the transformation of the bread and wine is not an end in itself but it is *pro nobis* – for us. The bread and wine are transformed so that we may enter into the Passion and Resurrection of Christ and so that we also may be transformed into members of the Body of Christ. Much of what I will explain is based on the studies of Cesare Giraudo,¹ who demonstrates that many prayers of the First Testament and of Jewish liturgy have three moments. They start with praise and thanksgiving for God's past blessings. Then they proceed with a supplication, asking for the same blessings for now. The third component is an insertion, either in the first or second part, of a scriptural quotation with a promise or a commandment made by God and which serves as a justification and foundation for the supplication. Let us take an example from the Bible and one from Jewish liturgy, before seeing how this helps understand the Eucharistic Prayer.

The biblical prayer is from the eighth chapter of the book of Tobit. Tobias and Sarah pray before consummating their marriage, because Sarah has been married seven times and each of her husband has died on the wedding night. Sarah's father, by the way, is in the garden, digging a grave for Tobias as the newly wed meet in their chamber.

5 They began to pray and implore that they might be kept safe.

Tobias began by saying:

* "Blessed are you, O God of our ancestors,

and blessed is your name in all generations forever.

Let the heavens and the whole creation bless you forever.

6 You made Adam, and for him you made his wife Eve
as a helper and support.
From the two of them the human race has sprung.
You said, *'It is not good that the man should be alone;
let us make a helper for him like himself.'* [Gn 2:18]
** 7 I now am taking this kinswoman of mine,
not because of lust,
but with sincerity.
Grant that she and I may find mercy
and that we may grow old together.”
8 And they both said, “Amen, Amen. ”

The blessing and thanksgiving, indicated here by an asterisk (v. 5b-6), praises God for the creation of Adam and Eve as a couple. The supplication, indicated by two asterisks (v. 7), follows logically: it asks God to bless their newly formed couple. The insertion, in italics, is a quote from Genesis: Tobias reminds God, so to say, that God is the one who wants men and women to be together as couples and thus what he and Sarah are asking for is God's will. It is a justification of the supplication.

The prayer from the Jewish liturgy we will look at is the *Birkat Hamazon*.² We will only take some excerpts because it is too long to comment in detail in the present setting. It starts with two blessings. God is thanked for the food he provides and then for the land he gives, on which this food is grown. The blessing is then widened to all of God's presents and salvific acts: the liberation from Egypt, the covenant and the gift of the Torah.

* 1. “Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe,
who in his goodness feeds the whole world
with grace, kindness and compassion. ”

[...]

2. We thank You, Lord our God,
for having granted as a heritage to our ancestors
a desirable, good and spacious land;
for bringing us out, Lord our God, from the land of Egypt; [...]
for Your covenant which You sealed in our flesh;

for the Torah which You taught us; [...]
and for the food by which You continually feed and sustain us,
every day, every season, every hour. [...]
For so it is written: “*You will eat and be satisfied,
then you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given
you.*” [Dt 8:10]

The insertion is a verse of Deuteronomy that promises plentiful food and that commands the people to bless God for his gifts. The third part of the prayer can then proceed as a supplication for food and salvation: those who are praying the *Birkat Hamazon* are observing God’s commandment expressed in Deuteronomy and can thus ask for what he promised.

** 3. Have compassion, please, Lord our God,
on Israel Your people, on Jerusalem Your city [...].
Our God, our Father,
tend us, feed us,
sustain us and support us,
relieve us and send us relief. [...]
Blessed are You, Lord, who in his compassion
will rebuild Jerusalem. Amen.

In both of these prayers, there is a movement from the past to the present. All three sections are important and necessary, although the main thrust is the present: we are asking that, according to God’s promise and command, the past blessings may be given again in the present.

We can now turn to the Eucharistic prayer or Anaphora. We will read parts of the second Eucharistic prayer of the Latin rite. Many liturgists say that the words of institution are the nucleus of the prayer and its chronological starting point, and that the rest was progressively added afterwards as secondary developments. Conversely, Giraud, although he does not pronounce himself on the chronology, claims convincingly that the Eucharistic Prayer is in its essence a prayer of thanksgiving followed by a supplication, and that the words of institution are built in as a scriptural insert to justify and give foundation to the supplication.

In many Jewish prayers, the thanksgiving and supplications are not neatly divided and there are repetitions. Likewise, in the second Eucharistic Prayer there are two thanksgivings and two supplications that are intertwined with each other and with the scriptural insertion: it starts with the first thanksgiving, then the first supplication, the insertion and second thanksgiving, and finally the second supplication. We will comment together the two thanksgivings, with the insertion, and only afterwards turn to the two supplications.

The first blessing and thanksgiving are constituted by the Preface and Sanctus.

* It is truly right and just, our duty and salvation,
always and everywhere to give you thanks,
Father most holy,
through your beloved Son, Jesus Christ,
your Word through whom you made all things,
whom you sent as our Savior and Redeemer,
incarnate by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin.
Fulfilling your will and gaining for you a holy people,
he stretched out his hands as he endured his Passion,
so as to break the bonds of death
and manifest the resurrection.

[...]

Holy, Holy, Holy... [...]

After the initial dialogue, the Preface thanks God for the creation of the world, the incarnation of Christ and his Passion and Resurrection, which gathers together the “holy people”. Let us note the Passion and Resurrection and the formation of the people, because these themes are central for what will follow.

The Sanctus is partly composed of the song of the Seraphs in Isaiah. Interestingly, this also is part of traditional Jewish prayer, the *Kadosh*, which one finds for example in the blessings that precede the recitation of the *Sh'ma* or in the *Amidah* on Shabbat. Through the *Kadosh*, the assembly joins itself to the angels, those who truly know how to praise

God as he should be praised, in a way that human beings are incapable of by themselves.

We skip the first supplication for now and go directly to the insertion, a composition of the words of institution of the three Synoptics and of 1 Co 11,23–26. It is immediately followed by the second thanksgiving, made of an exclamation by the assembly and a short praise, which are called the “anamnetic exclamation” and the “anamnesis”.

*At the time he was betrayed
and entered willingly into his Passion,
he took bread and, giving thanks, broke it,
and gave it to his disciples, saying:
“Take this, all of you, and eat of it:
for this is my Body which will be given up for you.”
In a similar way, when supper was ended,
he took the chalice
and, once more giving thanks,
he gave it to his disciples, saying:
“Take this, all of you, and drink from it:
for this is the chalice of my Blood,
the Blood of the new and eternal covenant,
which will be poured out for you and for many
for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this in memory of me.”*

P: The Mystery of faith.

A: *We proclaim your death, O Lord,
and profess your resurrection,
until you come again. [1 Co 11,26]*

* 2. Therefore, as we celebrate
the memorial of his Death and Resurrection,
we offer you, Lord,
the Bread of life and the Chalice of salvation,
giving thanks that you have held us worthy
to be in your presence and minister to you.

These two sections are strongly connected by the words “memory” and “memorial”. The insertion justifies what is being done by recalling Christ’s command: “do this in memory of me”; and the anamnesis picks up on this: “therefore, as we celebrate the memorial”. The idea of memorial (*zikaron*) is a central aspect of Jewish festivities, in particular at Pesach. Indeed, after God explains in Exodus how to celebrate Pesach, he concludes: “*This day shall be a day of memorial for you*” (Ex 12:14). *Zikaron* in a liturgical context has a strong meaning: it is not only the evocation of a past event, but rather it signifies that those who celebrate are made present to the saving act, or that the saving act is made present to those who celebrate. Indeed, in the liturgy of the Seder evening, it is said: “This is done because of what the Lord did *for me* when *I* went forth from Egypt.”³ And the explanation is given: “In every generation, each individual must regard himself as if he personally had gone forth from Egypt.”⁴ This shows us that the repetition of the act of Jesus with the bread and the wine aims at making the celebrants of the Eucharist present to his saving act.

What is this saving act? Both the exclamation and the anamnesis insist clearly on the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus. And so does the institution narrative. Indeed, it starts with the context of the Passion: “at the time [...] he entered willingly into his Passion”. More importantly, Jesus speaks not only about his body and blood, but precisely his “body given up for you” and “blood poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins”. This is not only the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ but of the body that will die and the blood that will be poured out on at the Cross for our redemption. The memorial does not only make present the body of Christ but his Passion and Resurrection. It makes the celebrants “enter” into the Passion and Resurrection, partake in them.

Some considerations on the word “body” will confirm this and open up to further dimensions. Jesus was most probably speaking Aramaic, and it is difficult to know how he said “my body”, because there are three words: *gufà*, *bisrà*, *pigrà*.⁵ However, it is relevant to know that *gufà* and *bisrà* were used also for the Paschal lamb or the flesh of the animals sacrificed in the Temple. This confirms what was just said above about the reference to the Passion and Resurrection. Moreover, all of these words have a second connotation. They are used to indicate not only a

part of the person (the corporal dimension), but the whole person. “This is my body” means: this is me. Additionally, the word *pigrà* has a third connotation: it evokes a corporate body, the “body” of a society or of a community. Jesus may be speaking of his risen body into which all are called to be incorporated. The fact that the blood is said to be of the “New Covenant” confirms this because the Covenant is what forms the people. In the end, we can say that there are three aspects that the memorial makes present, in the strong sense of *zikaron*: the person of Christ, the Passion and Resurrection, the corporate “body of Christ” that formed by the community of his disciples.

Now we can better understand the supplications. The first one is a calling of the Holy Spirit on the bread and wine, the second one is the calling of the Holy Spirit on the assembly, which extends to the whole Church and to the departed, and evokes the saints.

** 1. Make holy, therefore, these gifts, we pray,
by sending down your Spirit upon them like the dewfall,
so that they may become for us
the Body and Blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

** 2. Humbly we pray
that, partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ,
we may be gathered into one by the Holy Spirit.
Remember, Lord, your Church,
spread throughout the world,
and bring her to the fullness of charity,
together with N. our Pope and N. our Bishop
and all the clergy.
Remember also our brothers and sisters
who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection
and all who have died in your mercy [...].
Have mercy on us all, we pray, that with the blessed Virgin Mary,
Mother of God, [...]
we may merit to be co-heirs to eternal life,
and may praise and glorify you through your Son, Jesus Christ

After our comments on all that comes before, we better understand what we are asking when we pray for the bread and wine to become the body and blood of Christ. We pray that they make the person of Christ present: not only his flesh and blood, but Christ himself. We pray also for the Passion and Resurrection of Christ to be made present, or for us to be made present to that saving act. To paraphrase the Haggadah: *“At every Eucharist, each individual must regard himself as if he personally had been at the foot of the Cross.”*

Likewise, at this point, we have a better understanding of the movement of the whole Eucharistic Prayer in its similarity with the movement of Jewish prayer: we are asking for what has been thanked for in the Preface and exclamation-anamnesis, to be saved by the Passion and Resurrection, and we dare ask for it because, as recalled in the insertion, that is what Christ commanded us to do at the Last Supper. From the movement of the whole prayer, we see that the aim is not only a transformation of the of the bread and wine, but, in a way, our own transformation. Let us note what the supplication requests about the species: *“so that they may become for us the body and blood of Christ”*. The bread and wine are transformed so that *we* may live the Passion and Resurrection, so that *we* may be transformed. When we will take communion, we will eat and drink of a Crucified and Risen body and blood and be taken up in the movement of the Passion and Resurrection. We will be made capable of dying to sin and entering into a new life.

The 2nd supplication continues in this direction. It asks for the unity of the people of God: *“[may we] be gathered into one”*. We pray for the unity of the assembly, with the rest of the Church on earth, with the departed and with the heavenly Church. Here also, we are asking for what we thanked for, since the Preface evokes the gathering of the people of God. And we are justified to do so because Christ at the Last Supper evokes the corporate dimension of his body, the community of his disciples, which will be gathered through the wine of the New Covenant. The first and second supplications are related: the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ not only makes us enter into the Passion and Resurrection of Christ, but also into the Church as Body of Christ. When we will take communion and eat the body of Christ, we will be integrated into this body. And this is what will bring us

into unity with all those who eat of this body, whether they are present in the assembly or not. The bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ so that we may be transformed into the body of Christ.

Reference to the Jewish background of the Eucharistic Prayer or Anaphora has helped us understand some of its most significant aspects: what it means to do something “in memory” of a saving act or what the word “body of Christ” could mean on Jesus’ lips. However, the main contribution has been to understand its inner dynamics, in the light of the movement of other Jewish prayers. The Eucharistic Prayer is not centered on the words of institution, it is not a simple development of these words, but it is a complete movement of thanksgiving and supplication. The words of institution have a key role, they are the justification and foundation of the supplication, but all of three aspects are essential. And if one feels the need to single out what is most important, it is the supplication, because it is the end and culmination of the whole movement. This points to the deep meaning of the Eucharist, which is celebrated for the transformation of the faithful. The Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist truly is an extraordinarily precious gift, but it is so principally because of what it changes in the faithful, because it gives them Communion with Christ, brings them into the Passion and Resurrection of Christ and transforms them into his Body, in unity with all those who are part of it.

2. *“A cord of three strands is not easily broken” (Eccl 4:12):
the Eucharist understood in the light of the Seder meal,
synagogal liturgy and Temple sacrifices*

The Eucharist is an incredibly rich reality and one of our main difficulties is to grasp it according to the full spectrum of the treasures it contains. We often have a form of “Eucharistic monovision”: some single out its sacred dimension, others its community aspect, others still underline the importance of the Scripture readings and the homily – and all forget that one cannot reduce this beautiful gift of Christ to one dimension.

Understanding how the Eucharist derives from three strands of Jewish prayer helps to truly receive its fulness and to avoid these “monovisions”. Indeed, the Eucharistic celebration brings together aspects of the Seder meal, the festive meal that marks the entrance into the Passover week, since the Last Supper of Jesus was almost certainly a Seder evening, as well as the synagogal liturgy and the Temple sacrifices. The early Christians were all Jews and they continued to go to the synagogue and to take part in the Temple rituals (Acts 2:46). However, on Saturday evening, once Shabbat was over, they met in households, and would “break the bread” (Acts 2:42,46), as Jesus had commanded. As more and more gentiles who did not go to the synagogue joined this “Jewish-Christian” community, the singing of psalms and readings of the Scripture of the synagogal liturgy needed to be integrated. The third strand came into the picture with the destruction of the Temple in 70 C. E., which brought an end to the sacrifices commanded by God in the Torah. While the rabbis re-elaborated daily Jewish prayer, incorporating evocations of the Temple sacrifices into them to replace these, the Fathers of the Church started reading a sacrificial dimension into the Eucharist. This came about quite naturally because the Seder did have a connection with the sacrifices, through the Passover lamb sacrificed at the Temple and eaten during the meal. Moreover, the Eucharist was a celebration of the Passion, understood in many New Testament texts as the greatest sacrifice.

This unification into one celebration is a richness. It underlines the novelty of the Eucharist and of Christ. It celebrates the fact that Christ is the fulness of the three aspects that were brought together: Christ is the Word of God, Christ is the Bread of life, Christ is the Lamb of God. However, this unification brings the risk of losing one or the other of these aspects. I will now show how each of these strands contains a treasure for the Eucharist and how each should be taken into consideration and nurtured. This may also give us some creative ideas to revive our celebrations in the future.

From the synagogal liturgy one can underline the treasure that is Scripture. The synagogue invented the annual cycle of readings which inspired the Church’s. One can simply go to a Synagogue today to see

how the Torah is treasured: the Torah scroll is placed in a form of tabernacle, the *Aron Kodesh*, which is the origin of the tabernacle of the real Presence in Christian Churches. When the Torah scroll is taken out, it is kissed by the reader, and in some rites the rest of the assembly will touch it and kiss it as well. After the prayer service a study session takes place, where many pour lovingly over the details of the text and discuss it.

Taking into consideration the love of Torah found still now in the Jewish community can help us fully reap the fruit of the Liturgy of the Word we have received from the Synagogue. Mass is the place in which the faithful can and should fall in love with the Scriptures. It is also the place where God acts through Scripture. Yes, the consecration is an act of the Holy Spirit, that transforms the bread and the wine and transforms the celebrants. However, one needs to remember that the Word of God, through the Holy Spirit, is active and transformative as well: *“The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword”* (Heb 4:12). One should go to Mass expecting to be transformed by the readings and preaching. The reading of the Scripture and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, in ways that are different but both very substantial, are “real” and living presences of Christ in the Mass.

Is there any way to reclaim this synagogal heritage? Many things have been done already. The Reformation put the Bible at the center of the Sunday celebration. In the Roman Catholic Church, the liturgical movement of the XXth c. focused our attention again on the importance of the Liturgy of the Word, one of the two “tables” of the Eucharist. In some church buildings the ambon and the alter occupy two distinct spaces to convey the importance of both in a celebration that has two centers of gravity. In the Eastern rite the Evangeliary is brought in a procession at the moment in which it is proclaimed: this also is a beautiful rite. All of this needs to be kept alive. An additional idea that could be explored would be, inspired by the *Aron Kodesh*, a type of tabernacle or shrine for the Lectionary and Evangeliary.

Another essential strand to be taken into consideration is the memorial of the Passover Seder, which is a festive meal eaten in the family context – although “family” is taken in a wide sense of the extended family with friends. I often hear people repeat: “the Eucharist is not only

a meal". This is deeply true, since it contains the Liturgy of the Word and has a sacrificial dimension. However, the Seder truly is a meal. It is a ritual meal, with many very regulated, liturgical aspects, but there is a true meal set inside those rites. Indeed, the Jewish tradition manages to hold together liturgy and meals in one movement. There are many such meals in the First Testament, as we see with Moses and the seventy elders who are contemplating God on Sinai after the gift of the Law: "they beheld God, and they ate and drank" (Ex 24:11). Likewise, the Messianic Age is presented as a banquet: "*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear*" (Is 25:6). Indeed, the early celebrations of the Lord's Supper included a meal (1 Co 11:20–34).

Both of these aspects, the meal and the family dimension, progressively disappeared as the synagogal and sacrificial aspects were brought in. The synagogue was a public place and the evocation of the Temple liturgy necessitated an altar and a priest, so the Eucharistic celebration migrated from the family house to the public sphere of the church buildings. This is an expression of the universal dimension of the Eucharist, which brings together people from all generations and social conditions. And the unification process that produced the Eucharistic celebration makes for, we will never repeat it enough, an extraordinarily rich liturgy. However, there is always the risk of losing the celebrative joy and community spirit of the meal. Moreover, the past eighteen months of pandemic have shown us how easily public Church life can be disrupted. In this context it would have been a great richness for the Church if the Jewish tradition of family prayer and celebrations had been more part of our Christian culture.

Is there any way of reviving some of these aspects while being unfaithful to Christian tradition? I will just propose two ideas to explore. Would it not be possible to pay much more attention to the wine? In the biblical and rabbinic tradition one of the elements most associated to joy and celebration is the wine, both in meals and in liturgies. It is quite striking to see how in a Seder meal the participants drink at least four chalices of wine. In many Catholic Masses, only the ministers drink the chalice and even when all do, they barely dip their lips into it. One should choose

an excellent wine – that should not be difficult in Hungary! It could be prepared in a transparent pitcher so that all may see it. And, as often as possible, all should have access to it⁶ – as is the case in Eastern Divine Liturgies and Protestant Holy Communion Services – and all should have a real drink and not only a sip.

Another idea to explore would be to bring some echo of the Eucharistic celebration back to the family meal – rather than to try to bring the family meal back into the Eucharist. One could read the Gospel of the day at the beginning of the meal; one could light candles; one could pray for a special intention that has been presented during the Mass especially for families to pray for. As in Jewish meals, each person of the family, from the youngest to the eldest could have a role. This would allow to avoid confusion between the liturgy and the family meal but would relate the two and help the family develop its vocation to be a “domestic Church”.⁷

The third heritage of Christian Eucharist comes from the Temple sacrifices. It is also the most debated, either by those who think that there may be a risk of negating the fulness of Christ’s sacrifice – this is a constant preoccupation of the Reformation – or by those who believe that after the Second Vatican Council the Church has forgotten this dimension. I believe that reflecting on the Jewish roots of this aspect helps not to make it the exclusive center of our understanding of the Eucharist, since it is balanced by the two other traditions, but that it also helps to appreciate its vital significance.

Sacrifices are certainly a major dimension of religious life according to the Torah. They cover the whole story of salvation, from Cain and Abel, to Noah, to the Patriarchs, to Moses and Aaron, Joshua, the Judges and the Kings. They are codified in detail in lengthy parts of Exodus and Leviticus. Though they always comprise the offering of a material reality, this is in fact the expression of the offering of oneself, of one’s person and life, to God. The sacrifices also include the role of a priest which expresses the deep conviction that what is happening needs a “minister”, someone who is set apart and ordained for this role. Overcoming sin and entering into communion with God, offering one’s life to God, is beyond human capabilities: it is sacred, and calls for someone who represents God. However, let us note that in the Temple sacrifices, both the person

offering the sacrifice and the priest have an active and necessary role. In most animal sacrifices, for instance, the faithful bring the animal and kill it, while the priests lift it up towards God or burn it and sprinkle the blood on the alter (Lv 1:10–13; 3:1–5). This is quite coherent with the deep meaning of the sacrifice as both an offering of oneself and of something that cannot be done through our own limited strength.

The relation between offering of oneself, role of the faithful and role of the priest are crucial to the Christian understanding of the Eucharist. We partake in the Passion and Resurrection of Christ to be able to offer ourselves to God and to others as Christ did: *“brothers and sisters, [...] present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God”, exclaims Paul (Rm 12:1). Moreover, the role of the ordained minister is essential and irreplaceable, as he reminds us that only Christ can accomplish this. But the active role of each member of the assembly, of all those who celebrate the Eucharist, is essential as well, since all, through their baptismal priesthood, ‘take part (concurrent) in the offering the of the Eucharist’*”.⁸

Being attentive to some details that express the sacredness of the liturgical action and were part of the rites of the Temple may help underline the sacrificial-offering strand present in the Eucharist. Let me just evoke the incense, which was to be burned twice a day on its own specific alter (Ex 30:1–8; 34f). There is a beautifully gratuitous dimension in incense which is being consumed “for nothing” during a liturgy. Romano Guardini comments that this corresponds to a form of spiritual “generosity”. It is analogous to the inner motion that leads Mary of Bethany to pour precious perfume on Jesus’ feet (Jn 12:3). Indeed, prayer cannot be measured and evaluated, it is “not a matter of bourgeois common sense”.⁹ And, as a Jewish friend told me once: “now that the Temple no longer exists, Christians are the ones observing the commandment concerning incense... Please continue to do so!”

In the same way as studying the Eucharistic Prayer in the framework of the inner dynamics of Jewish prayer illuminates its deepest meaning, likewise, setting the whole Eucharistic celebration in the perspective of its triple background – synagogal liturgy, family Seder meal and Temple sacrifice – leads to a fuller, richer and more balanced understanding. It is a remedy against many forms of Eucharistic monovisions: clericalism,

ritualism without joy, loss of sense of sacredness, lack of love and taste for the Word of God. The book of Ecclesiastes says: “A cord of three strands is not easily broken” (Eccl 4:12). “Pulling apart” the three strands that are united in the Eucharistic celebration enables us to truly have three strands, and thus to have a much stronger cord when they are put back together. It allows Christians to grow in understanding and love for the treasure of the Eucharist given to us by Christ and the Church.

Notes

1. GIRAUDO, C., “*In Unum Corpus*”, *Trattato mistagogico sull’eucaristia*, Cinisello Balsamo, San Paolo 2007.
2. English translation: *The Koren Siddur*, Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 2013, p. 974–984.
3. *The Passover Haggadah*, Palphot, Herzlia, p. 15 (Dialogue with the four sons); I am underlining.
4. *The Passover Haggadah*, p. 30, Narrative of the Flight out of Egypt.
5. See GIRAUDO, C., “*In Unum Corpus*”, p. 169–171. In Hebrew: *guf, basàr, pèger*.
6. “*The sign of communion is more complete when given under both kinds, since in that form the sign of the Eucharistic meal appears more clearly*” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1390).
7. On the family as *ecclesia domestica*, see for example *Lumen Gentium* 11 or Saint John Paul II’s homily *Expedit ut laborem*, 26 September 1980.
8. See Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* 10.
9. GUARDINI, R., *Sacred Signs*, Pio Decimo Press, St. Louis (Mo) 1956, p. 24.