

Priest Stephan Lipke

The Recognition of the Addai and Mari Anaphora by the Catholic Church in 2001: the Theological Contribution and the Main Arguments of Archimandrite Robert Taft

This essay examines R. F. Taft's role in the papal decision to recognize the Addai and Mari Anaphora a true eucharistic prayer, but even more so the pros and cons of this decision. The main obstacle was the position that exactly the Lord's words "This is my body" and "This is my blood" are the sacramental "form" of the Eucharist. Yet, R. F. Taft showed that the (Roman) Catholic teaching does not mean that the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ takes place exactly when these words are pronounced. It is more in line with tradition to hold that the transformation of the eucharistic gifts takes place because Christ himself pronounced these words on Holy Thursday and because, during the anaphora, prayers of thanksgiving, epiclesis and offering express the faith that the gifts are really transformed into Christ present in the sacrament.

KEYWORDS: Liturgy, Eucharist, sanctification, Christian unity, Assyrian church.

In 2001, the Papal Council for Promoting Christian Unity published *Guidelines for Admission to the Eucharist between the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian Church of the East*, in which it allows — in cases of pastoral necessity — Assyrian Christians to partake in Eucharistic communion in Chaldean (Catholic) liturgies, and Chaldean Catholics to receive communion in Assyrian liturgies [*Guidelines*, 4]. This important practical decision was the result of a clearly developed theological position regarding the anaphora of Addai and Mari. The necessity for Eucharistic hospitality is quite a common occurrence, given that in our day and age most of the Christians from Iraq, Syria and Eastern Anatolia are scattered across the whole world, and are not always able to attend liturgies of their "native" churches [*Guidelines*, 1]. Chaldean Catholics, of course, can find Latin rite parishes without much trouble, and are able to partake legitimately of the sacraments there. The same is not true, however, for Assyrian Christians, who do not have the same possibility (as they are not in communion with Rome). Moreover, the faithful from both groups experience a mutu-

al belonging, as members of a single spiritual family, and therefore strive for spiritual and sacramental communion. In 1994, Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV signed an agreement on Christology, in view of which the question of Nestorianism no longer divided the two communities [*Guidelines*, 2]. The Roman Catholic Church had always acknowledged the priesthood and apostolic succession of the Assyrian Church [*Guidelines*, 3]. Yet despite agreement on the above-mentioned questions, the question of the anaphora remained in dispute for quite some time. It should be noted that the anaphoras of the Eastern-Syrian Tradition, and especially the Anaphora of Addai and Mari (i.e., the most-often used of three anaphora prayers in the common usage of the Assyrian Church), have long been a subject of interest for historians and liturgists, and have occupied such authors as J. P. M. Van der Ploeg [*Van der Ploeg*], A. Gelston [*Gelston*, 48–55], V. F. Macomber [*Macomber*] and Mar Jammo [*Jammo*]. The works of Jesuit scholar and liturgist Archimandrite Robert Taft played a very particular role in influencing the Papal Council for Promoting Christian Unity to recognize the legitimacy of the Anaphora of Addai and Mari as an authentic Eucharistic prayer.

The primary problem consisted in the absence of the “words of institution” in the anaphora prayers when, according to the appointed usage, priests from the Assyrian Church use the Anaphora of Addai and Mari. This situation gave way to a discussion of whether a Eucharistic prayer can be considered “authentic” if it does not directly use a recitation of the Lord’s words. This, in turn, became the central question to answer in order to determine whether Assyrians could receive the Eucharist at Chaldean Catholic liturgies and vice versa. The question was thoroughly researched and, as early as 1998, pastoral guidelines for caring for Assyrian and Chaldean Christians were drawn up. At that point, the question of Eucharistic hospitality in the Assyrian Church was put to 26 different theologians, who were to draw conclusions and make recommendations. Many told Archimandrite Robert Taft that this was an extraordinarily large group of experts. He finds that “this was only reasonable”, given the seriousness of the question at hand [*Taft*]. Formally, Taft was just one of these 26 experts; whose recommendations, in particular, formed the basis upon which the Holy See recognized the Assyrian Eucharistic prayers as authentic, was not a question that was ever asked. However a 2003 article by Taft, “A Mass without the Consecration?” [*Taft*] shows that the theological position put in short form in the declaration of the Papal Council, is primarily the position of Archimandrite Robert Taft. He

also became the “face” of the decision that was taken. It is natural that conservative circles who disagree with the decision that was taken also criticize Archimandrite Robert Taft, in particular [*Santogrossi*].

In order to understand the decision of the Papal Council and, in the first instance, the position of Archimandrite Robert Taft who developed and broadened the Council’s decision, we will look firstly at the arguments against recognizing the Anaphora of Addai and Mari as an authentic Eucharistic prayer. It is apparent that the most authoritative argument against the position of the Papal Council is a thesis recorded in a decree of the Council of Florence on Unity with the Armenians. There it is written that the words of the Lord, “This is My body”, and “This is My blood” are the “form” of the sacrament of the Eucharist. [*DH, 1321; Exultate Deo, 81*]. As such, the traditional position looks like this: where a truly ordained priest pronounces these words over bread and wine with the intention of celebrating the mystery, there, at that moment, the bread and wine undergo transubstantiation into the body and blood of Christ. If something is missing from this picture, transubstantiation does not occur. Thus also, the Council of Trent teaches that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ “immediately after consecration” [*DH, 1640, 1642, 1654*].

This approach to the holy mysteries is the result of a narrow understanding of the words of St. Augustine, “The Word unites with the [material] element and [in this way] the mystery takes place” (*Accedit verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*) [*In Ioannis Evangelium tr. LXXX, 3*]. Archimandrite Robert Taft follows this line of thinking, beginning with St. Ambrose of Milan, who says that consecration happens through the priest’s pronouncement of the “Lord Jesus’s” words [*De sacramentis IV, 4.14–17, 5.21–23*]. According to Ambrose, the words of the Lord turn the bread and the wine into the body and blood of Christ. Developing this thought, St. Thomas Aquinas says that sanctification of material in this mystery consists in the “miraculous transfiguration” which takes place when the priest pronounces the words of the Lord [*Sth III, quaest. 78, art. 1, corp.*]. Later, Pope Pius VII (1742–1823) condemned “the new opinion...according to which the form [of the sacrament of the Eucharist] consists not only in the words of the Lord,” but also necessitates the pronouncement of the Epiclesis, thereafter [*DH, 2718*].

Therefore it is natural that some of the most conservative Catholic theologians consider the recognition of the Anaphora [of Addai and Mari] by the Catholic Church to be not a step in the direction of the Assyrian Church (especially as there are very few Assyrian Christians),

but rather a step toward the abolition of the Eucharist as an offering of the true body and blood of Christ [*Reversal*]. Nevertheless, the Papal Council for Promoting Christian Unity came to the decision to recognize the Anaphora of Addai and Mari as a true and effective Eucharistic prayer.

In explaining this decision, Archimandrite Robert Taft introduces two understandings which move beyond the boundaries of this specific question and which, according to his understanding, have significance for ecumenical relations as a whole, and in particular when we speak of ecumenism and liturgy. The first understanding is ecumenical scholarship. Taft believes that ecumenical scholarship must, of course, be based in historical accuracy and, more specifically, upon six particular principles [*Taft, 4*]:

1. The affirmation that those differences which were allowed and did not divide the church in its first thousand years, should not divide the church today;
2. The recognition that both the western and eastern orthodox traditions are relevant for the faith of the Church;
3. The priority of the general teaching of the united Church over particular, polemical and later teachings;
4. The responsibility of those who changed, or in a one-sided manner narrowed the generally accepted tradition of the undivided Church of the first millennium, for the divisions in the church to which these changes led, and their obligation to search for acceptable answers to these problems;
5. The need to consider the fullness of the tradition of every church and not only the most recent or popular version of its tradition;
6. The interpretation of strict dogmatic formulae within the context of the polemic out of which they arose (for instance, in the case of the Council of Trent, the polemic with the Protestants), and a refusal to generalize such strict dogmatic formulae.

The second important understanding is the distinction between primary theology (*theologia prima*) and secondary theology (*theologia secunda*). Primary theology is the expression of faith in liturgy, and secondary theology is teaching with its necessary refinements. Taft believes that these refinements are necessary, but is against introducing them into the more ancient tradition [*Taft, 7–8*]. For this reason, it is possible to say that if an ancient text lacks some element which later came to be seen as necessary, this does not mean that the ancient text is not fully orthodox. On the contrary, we should believe that which was always the faith of the Church and which later found its expres-

sion in particular refinements is also found in the ancient text, though possibly in an implicit fashion.

Taft proposes that the Assyrian Eucharist, and the Anaphora of Addai and Mari in particular, be considered within the context of these principles. It is indisputable that Assyrian Christians always had the intention of celebrating the Eucharist in an authentic fashion, which is to say in a fashion that united them to what Christ did at the Last Supper. Formerly, Catholics did not doubt the efficacy of the Assyrian Eucharist. In particular, at the time of various unions between Assyrians and Catholics between the XVI and XVIII centuries, no one demanded that Assyrian Christians include the words of institution in their anaphora prayers, even if Chaldeans later began to pronounce them [*Guidelines*, 2].

Moreover, the Assyrians have an obvious sign which links their Eucharist to the Last Supper; this is their practice of preparing the dough for the Eucharistic bread from so-called “holy leaven”, which according to tradition contains traces of the dough used for the bread consumed at the Last Supper. As the Papal Council emphasizes, this “is certainly to be seen as a visible sign of historic and symbolic continuity between the present Eucharistic celebration and the institution of the Eucharist by Jesus” [*Guidelines*, 2]. This, too, is confirmed by the words of the anaphora itself, in which they ask God to be merciful to His people, “in the commemoration of the body and blood of thy Christ, which we offer to thee upon the pure and holy altar, as thou hast taught us” [*Missel Chaldéen*, 88]. In view of this, it may be said that the text contains, without question, teaching on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic gifts. Therefore we may be justified in saying that the Eucharist of the Assyrians, including the anaphora of Addai and Mari, is imbued with faith in the real presence of Christ in the mysteries, thanks to His own words “This is My body” and “This is My blood”, even if they are spread throughout the text of the Anaphora [*Guidelines*, 2]. For this reason, the declaration comes to the conclusion that the Assyrian Church, in using the “holy leaven”, and the words “offering” and “body and blood”, is within the tradition of the Last Supper and celebrates an authentic Eucharist, just as in the [Roman] Catholic, [Eastern] Orthodox and Coptic Churches [*Guidelines*, 3].

Considering the argument from the Council of Florence: in several of its points of decision, it reflects not so much a mandate for obligatory teaching throughout the whole church as an attempt to defend Roman tradition from possible criticisms of heterodoxy from the perspective of the Eastern churches. For instance, in the Council’s decisions it is

stated that the instruments necessary to every service, i. e. the chalice and paten (discos) with the bread and wine for priestly ordination, the Gospel book, for the deacons, etc., are the matter and necessary outward sign of holy orders [DH, 1326; *Exultate Deo*, 85], although it is well-known that the Catholic Church had always acknowledged the ordinations in churches where this ritual is absent [Taft, 10]. Consequently, Pius XII teaches that the matter of the sacramental mystery of priesthood is the laying on of hands [DH, 3859]. Accordingly, the definition of the words of the Lord as the “form” of the sacramental mystery of the Eucharist is more likely a declaration of the legitimacy of the practice of the Roman church of recognizing the moment of pronouncement of these words as the moment of transubstantiation, rather than a declaration of the only allowable viewpoint [Taft, 10].

Furthermore, the Council of Trent’s teaching that the bread and wine become the body and blood “immediately after consecration” is not quite as clear-cut as it may first seem. Within itself, this statement contains the question of when exactly consecration occurs, and the Council doesn’t answer this question. Therefore, Archimandrite Robert Taft invokes the entirety of Roman Catholic tradition (Fulgentius of Ruspe, G. Lombard, J. B. Bossuet), according to which consecration takes place not as the result of particular words, but arises out of the Eucharistic prayer as a whole [Taft, 9]. In particular, after the words of the Lord in the Roman canon, the priest recites the following prayers:

Supra quæ propítio ac seréno vultu respícere dignéris: et accépta habére, sicúti accépta habére dignátus es múnera púeri tui iusti Abel, et sacrificium Patriárchæ nostri Abrahæ: et quod tibi óbtulit summus sacérdos tuus Melchisedech, sanctum sacrificium, immaculátam hóstiam.

Upon which do thou vouchsafe to look with a propitious and serene countenance, and to accept them, as thou wert graciously pleased to accept the gifts of thy just servant Abel, and the sacrifice of our patriarch Abraham, and that which thy high priest Melchisedech offered to thee, a holy sacrifice, a spotless victim.

Súpplices te rogámus, omnípotens Deus: jube hæc perférri per manus sancti Angeli tui in sublíme altáre tuum, in conspéctu divínæ majestátis tuæ: ut, quotquot ex hac altáris participatióne sacrosánctum Fílii tui Corpus, et Sánguinem sumpsérimus, omni benedictiόne coelésti et grátia repleámur. Per eúndem Christum, Dóminum nostrum. Amen
[*Missale Romanum*, 334].

We most humbly beseech thee, almighty God, to command that these things be borne by the hands of thy holy angel to thine altar on high, in the sight of thy divine majesty, that as many of us as, at this altar, shall partake of and receive the most holy Body and Blood of thy Son, may be filled with every heavenly blessing and grace. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Judging by the prayers in these texts, after the words of the Lord the consecration of the gifts is not yet complete. This shows that even within the Roman tradition there has not always been a single and unified opinion which fixes transubstantiation at a particular moment.

As regards the formula *Accedit verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*, the *Guidelines for Admission to the Eucharist Between the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian Church of the East* states that, “the words of Eucharistic Institution are indeed present in the Anaphora of Addai and Mari, not in a coherent narrative way and *ad litteram*, but rather in a dispersed euchological way, that is, integrated in successive prayers of thanksgiving, praise and intercession” [*Guidelines*, 3].

St. Ambrose of Milan and even St. Thomas Aquinas show in their works that a recounting of the Last Supper and the words of the Lord are required for the sacrament, yet both are speaking about the fact that Christ pronounced these words. What matters is a link to this event — the pronouncement of the words of institution. This is what the *forma sacramenti* is about. It is precisely due to this link that the sacrament takes place, given that through the link with these words that were pronounced by Christ himself, the Lord is present upon the altar. But the important thing here is the link with Christ, and not at all the pronouncement of a magical formula [*Taft*, 12–14]. And this link can be implicit, through unbroken church tradition, passed through the holy leaven and through the words “body”, “blood”, and “we offer”.

Finally, there is no break with church tradition in the Assyrian anaphora, insofar as the Church does not recognize those anaphora prayers which contradict faith in the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist or the character of the Eucharist as an offering, but on the contrary recognizes that all this is implicitly present in the Anaphora of Addai and Mari. Moreover, the Church does not henceforth allow the composition of Eucharistic prayers which ignore the theological developments of the second millennium. In this regard, the Anaphora of Addai and Mar is not an innovation, but rather the recognition of an ancient tradition.

Thus, Archimandrite Robert Taft’s article, which was published nearly two years after the Papal Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity’s *Guidelines for Admission to the Eucharist Between the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian Church of the East*, shows that Taft’s position significantly influenced the text of the *Guidelines*. We might summarize his approach by saying that the principle decision taken and reflected in the *Guidelines* remains true to historical accuracy, his ecumenical approach to theological questions and shows a priority

for *theologia prima*, i. e. for direct liturgical experience over *theologia secunda*, which is theological reflection on liturgical experience. On the basis of these principles, the Papal Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity came to the decision — justifiably in our view — that Eucharistic liturgies which are celebrated using the Anaphora of Addai and Mari are true and authentic, despite the absence of an explicit pronouncement of the words of institution.

References

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Abbreviations

PL Patrologia Latina