

# The Water and the Wine of the Eucharist

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translated from the Italian  
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After Vatican II there was a tendency to eliminate the ever so many symbolisms that had been developing without sufficient base and, in the atrium of Via degli Orsini, some elements (e.g. the symbology of the priest's vestments) were dropped. There was also a discussion as to whether or not it was opportune to continue to present to the children the "mingling" of the few drops of water with the Eucharistic wine. We observed the children and we realized that they repeated the gesture with such a great concentration that it couldn't be something devoid of meaning.

We observed, moreover, that the older ones refer constantly to the mingling in order to express our participation in the Mass, particularly when it speaks of the fact that Jesus is not alone in offering Himself to the Father. Very often the children clarify our presence in the offering saying, "We are also in the chalice, in the drops of water."

It's one of those cases in which an element of the highest theology and an essential aspect of Christian life are seemingly connatural to the child, so much does he/she possess it in a deep and, at the same time, spontaneous manner. The meaning of the "mingling" is one of those things that the child has learned without knowing why: one of those things that is his/her own, which has penetrated into the deepest part of himself/herself, not so much through the words of the catechist but through the child's own personal meditation, helped by the work of the hands.

The "mingling" is also a document of that essentiality of the child which has guided us to lay aside some elements of the catechesis while preserving those which have remained alive in the tradition of the Church, even when we'd somewhat lost the meaning of them. Indeed, the "mingling" has a place in tradition which goes back to the first centuries, and the richness of its significance is made evident by the Fathers of the Church. From among the many citations that could be made, I select only a few.

Hear how St. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, expresses himself around 250 A.D.:

Divine Scripture declared in the Apocalypse (1:15; 14:2; 19:6)\* that the waters represent the people. And this we obviously see also in the sacrament of the chalice. In fact, as Christ carried all of us and carried our sins, so we see that in the water the people are signified, and that in the wine the blood of Christ is signified. Therefore, when the water is mixed with the wine in the chalice, it is the people that unite with Christ, it is the throng of the faithful that conjoin and unite with Him whom they believe in. This union, this mingling of the water and the wine in the chalice of the Lord is something that is inseparable. Thus nothing could ever separate the Church from Christ; nothing could separate from Him the people who are in the Church, and who faithfully and firmly persevere in the faith, so as to be always united with Him by a love which, of the two of them, will make one, unique whole. When the chalice of the Lord is consecrated, water alone cannot be offered, just as wine alone cannot be offered. Indeed, if wine alone is offered, the blood of Christ is present without us; and if there is only water, the people are present without Christ.<sup>1</sup>

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\*English translator's note: St. Cyprian refers to Revelation 1:15. Revelation 14:2 and 19:6 are related references of great importance.

<sup>1</sup>St. Cyprian, Letters, Number 63.

Even before Cyprian, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons between 130 and 200 A.D., knew that there were some heretics, the Ebionites, who didn't admit to the union of God with the people and "for this reason they condemn the mixing of the celestial wine and want only earthly water."<sup>2</sup>

In the Middle Ages, St. Thomas Aquinas comes back to the subject in an explicit and precise manner; thus he writes in the Summa Theologiae:

The wine which is offered in the Eucharist must be mixed with water. First of all, on account of its institution: for it is believed that probably the Lord instituted this sacrament in wine mixed with water according to the custom of that country (Prov. 9:5).

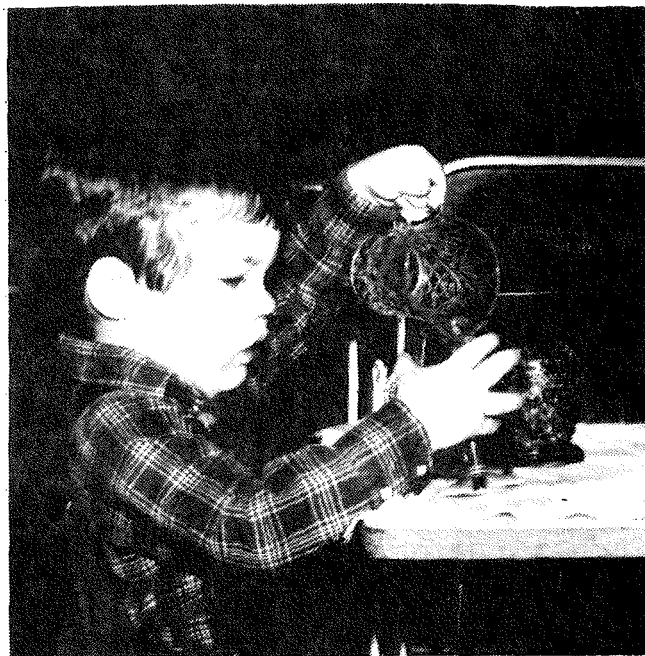
Secondly, because it harmonizes with the representation of Our Lord's Passion....(John 19:34).

Thirdly, because it serves to signify the effect of the sacrament, which is the union of the Christian people with Christ.

Fourthly, because this is appropriate to the ultimate effect of this sacrament which is the entering (eschatological) into everlasting life. St. Ambrose says, in fact: 'The water overflows in the chalice and springs forth into life everlasting.'<sup>3</sup>

How many of the faithful have there been throughout the world and down through the centuries, who have followed the hands of the priest and of the deacon carefully pouring a few drops of water into the chalice?

It has been beautiful to rediscover the richness of this gesture with the children. It has been beautiful to see once again how the children have been our teachers in remaining faithful to all that is essential which has been preserved in the tradition of the Church.



Matthew Brown, Atrium of the Church of St. Frances Cabrini, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

In Matthew's words, the wine is "Jesus" and in the water are "Jesus' friends."

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<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, Against the Heretics, V, 1, 3.

<sup>3</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, III, qu. 74, art. 6.