

Worship from the Catacombs

INTRODUCTION

What mysteries and more importantly what insights emanate from the catacombs of Rome; where the bones of saints, and yes, even sinners rest in silent repose. Weil (1992:275) notes that "... Rome boasts the first catacombs to house the remains of persecuted Christians." However, Weil (1998:381) also notes that "Even older Jewish burial areas came to light in Rome in the 1970s, when a pair of two-thousand-year-old Jewish catacombs were restored." Thus the catacombs are not just a burial city of persecuted Christians, as "pagan, Jewish, and Christian tombs may occur almost side by side, and may indicate that ... relations (*between these social groups, added by author*) were not as bad as literary sources suggest ... (Stevenson 1978:14)." The commonly held belief of early Christians hiding from imperial persecution, while conducting ecclesiastical rites within these subterranean passages and mazes has generally been rejected. The persistence of this thought continues because the romance of the Roman catacombs easily evoke mystical visions of a martyred Roman sub-culture, visions that are not just a recent phenomena.

Early writings from the past served to bolster a belief of a Roman sub-culture that escaped into these cities of the dead and that through their magnificent sacrifice; the survival of early Christianity was obtained. The veneration of these tombs has been noted by such luminaries as Jerome (c. 413) who: recalled his Sunday visits with friends and fellow-students to the catacombs while a young man studying liberal arts in Rome. He carried a lifelong memory of the 'horror of the black darkness' of the passages that housed the bodies of countless Christians, including martyrs and Apostles (Frend 1996:11)." It was the desire to somehow participate in the early sufferings of the Christian church that led many pilgrims to seek out and participate in trips to the catacombs following guides or *Itinaries* which described in accurate detail routes a pilgrim could follow in their desire to venerate a particular saint or martyr of the faith (Frend 1996:11).

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This desire to vicariously share in the sufferings of the early church during the time of the Persecutions led Christians such as Pope Damasus (366-384) to follow Jerome's example and visit the tombs. In fact, Pope Damasus composed a poem commemorating the Martyrs and Christians buried in the catacombs which was carved into marble and placed in front of his tomb.

*"If you are looking for, know that here lies a host of the Blessed.
The venerable sepulchres enclose the bodies of the Saints,
but the royal palace of heaven carried off to itself their sublime souls.
Here lie the companions of Sixtus who bear the trophies won from the enemy.
Here the group of the elders who keep guard of the altars of Christ.
Here the bishop who lived through the long peace.
Here the holy Confessors sent to us from Greece.
Here the young men and children, the old men and their chaste nephews
who preferred to keep their virgineal purity.
Here too, I, Damasus, confess I would have liked to have been buried
were it not for fear of vexing the holy ashes of the Blessed".*

The romantic notions that Jerome and Pope Damasus espoused above continues even today, where there is a desire to see more utilization by the saints of the Christian faith of these mazes of tunnels, expansive rooms, and burial crypts. This can be seen in Pope John Paul's speech to the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology on 7 June 1996 where he noted that "By visiting these monuments, one comes into contact with the evocative traces of early Christianity and one can, so to speak, tangibly sense the faith that motivated those ancient Christian communities. Again on 16 January 1998, at the assembly of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology, the Pope stated that "While the catacombs depict the eloquent features of Christian life in the first centuries, they are also a perennial *school of faith, hope and charity.*" It is these types of sentiments that can cause misuse of the data gathered from the Roman catacombs. For instance, the data has been used for apologetic purposes proving, "that the Roman Catholic Church was indeed "The Church of the Martyrs", and that the paintings decorating many of the richer tombs were held to prove the legitimacy of the Church's teaching, for instance, concerning the Eucharist and the status of the Virgin (Frend 1996:xvi)."

Seeking to understand the plethora of frescoes, artifacts, inscriptions, drawings, etc. extracted from the catacombs mines, one must be cognizant that while these artifacts may

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represent an understanding of the faith, liturgy and worship from the time of the burial, they may just as easily represent an understanding of some cultural motif. A good example of this are the beautiful frescos of the “good shepherd” which could as easily be representing the image of Jesus as the Shepard as portrayed in the gospel of John, Acts, I Peter, and Hebrews, as it could be a societal or cultural reference to a man carrying a sheep, a concept that “goes back as far as 1000 BC, to Carchemish and the Hittites (Stevenson 1978:99).’ It should be remembered that representations of the “good shepherd” are found on sarcophagi that are not Christian and as such are “construed to represent *humanitas* or *philanthropia* (and) it is in this sense they have a link with the Christian Good Shepard, whose function is to save (Stevenson 1978:99).”

This is not to say, however, that some understanding of the Christian culture from the time of the catacombs cannot be developed, only that when the evidence from the catacomb is analyzed, we must be careful with generalizations based on our own colored lenses. How then should an examination of these catacombs relics be accomplished in order to elicit an understanding of worship from the catacombs? Let’s start by looking into an understanding of worship in general.

WORSHIP

Too many times worship in today’s environment means a hurried arrival at ones local place of worship, the singing of some songs with lackluster vigor, dropping a few coins into the offering, pretending to listen to a sermon, all followed by a hurried exit from the church to beat the other church goers to a favorite restaurant. We do this all so we can say that we have met our obligation to God and we can now enjoy Sunday afternoon sport shows or some other activity. Today’s society in many cases has lost that sense of mystery and desire that has in the past surrounded worship of God; a worship of “... something inherently ‘wholly other’, whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb (Otto 1950:28)” that causes miracles to occur. It is this type of worship that causes men and women to exceed the expectations of their fellows, as for instance, with the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas.

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Perpetua is a young Christian when she is arrested along with several others, including a slave girl, Felicitas. Perpetua's father desires to save his daughter from the potential outcome of the arrest by pleading with her to renounce being a Christian. She affirms that she will be martyred. Her worship events as a Christian had led her to understand that through martyrdom "she will get to God through Jesus...." Clark (2005) describes the closing of this document, by stating how Perpetua:

faces down the animals and gladiators, and finally, after being tormented by several animals, a young gladiator is sent into the arena to dispatch her. And it's just an incredibly moving scene; his hand is trembling so much he can't cut her. And she grabs his hand and guides his sword to her own throat There are other members of her community and the person who draws me the most is a slave girl who's also part of this group. Her name is Felicitas. She is in an advanced stage of pregnancy when the group is in prison. And, they all pray around her so that she is delivered of her baby just before going into the arena. And she's also killed with this group.... There's an intense sense of community that binds together these people who are insisting on being martyred. They take care of each other. There is a very affecting scene of Perpetua and Felicitas helping each other to arrange each other's clothes so they're not exposed after they've been jostled by these animals. And finally they say good-bye to each other in this life with the kiss of peace (Clark 2005).

Worship in the early church caused men and women to be willing to truly suffer for their God and King. Early Christian worship was a deliberate event that had as its essential element God and worship was focused on the subject and object of God. Only in this manner could proper worship be obtained. God was and should be "the Infinite Center, of our worship (Dawn 1999:8)." In many ways we need to regain the wonder that can be evoked by worship of God. In a way we need to be like Pasquale from the comic strip *Rose* who is depicted in one strip walking together with his mother in the snow. Rose has a big smile on her face, while Pasquale has a more serious expression on his face. As the strip proceeds, Pasquale is standing by himself with eyes brightly open and his mouth shaped into an O. He then is seen peering intently up into the falling snow, while his mother is seen glancing back at him with a questioning look. In the final frame, Rose asks Pasquale what happened, and he reverently replies, "The quiet is so deep I got stuck in it! (Dawn 1999:71)." Worship today should cause the rapt attention that is described

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by Pasquale and it is this type of worship from the early Christian church we turn our attention to now.

EARLY CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

The New Testament contains significant clues relative to the worship practices of the early church. In Philippians 2:6-11, we have one of the earliest Christian hymns. It is a hymn that proclaims Christ “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself” In Ephesians 5:14 we have another early Christian hymn where the Christian is called a sleeper which Byars (2000:23) states might have been sung at the baptism of the new Christian: “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you.” Even creedal statements can be found, for instance, in Ephesians 1:3, where Paul evokes a blessing with “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, etc., and may even be a liturgical formula recited in worship. Other worship characteristics such as offerings are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16:2. The types of roles that are to be expected in a gathering of the early church are detailed in 1 Corinthians 14:26. While these are all important, as stated earlier, worship is to be centered on God as the subject and object of the worship. It seems appropriate then that in 1 Corinthians 26:1 Paul states that all things are to be done for edification. Worship centered on the subject and object brings edification to the participants. In Acts 2:42 a summary of the early church worship experience is found from which it can be stated that worship was composed of two major events – the Word and the Table. From Acts 2:42 and other scripture, we can see a basic order of worship emerging; an order that with some minor variations has endured through the centuries and is used in worship services today. It is a pattern that emerged from two primary roots: synagogue worship and the meal experience of the Upper Room. Thielen (2000:19) states that the early church fused together what happened in the synagogue (songs, prayer, Scripture, sermon) and what happened in the Upper Room (the Lord’s Supper) to create a two-part order of worship. In Luke 24:13-25, Jesus leads a worship experience as two disciples of Jesus walk home from Jerusalem to Emmaus and in that experience Jesus brings together the two events of Word and Table together. In this

worship experience Jesus affirms that “The true ethos of Christian liturgy is that the web of grace through word, sacrament, and song, through eating and drinking together, and being remembered by God, whereby God’s saving power in the flesh transforms and transmutes all human pathos (Saliers 1994:38).” Byars (2000:27) states this in a slightly different and simpler manner by stating that “the purpose of worship is to participate, as God may make it possible, in God’s own life. God has shown us that we are to open ourselves to this participation.”

It was this type of worship experience that the early church proclaimed to the culture around them; a culture that was somewhat at odds with what was being taught in that worship. As noted earlier it was this type of worship experience that strengthened the church, especially when the worship is focused on the subject and object. Byars (2000:31) states that:

It’s possible that God’s provision for us of Word and Sacrament is ideally suited to the complex beings that we are. It’s possible that we may, in words and actions just beyond the horizons of understanding, meet God who is always greater than the capacity of our minds to grasp. It’s possible that our instinctive craving for ritual is part of the original equipment. It’s possible that God intends the sacramental drama to be a means by which God may meet us and touch us.

If this is all true, worship provides the strength by which men and women develop a level of faith and confidence in their faith that causes them to “develop their own art to demonstrate their trust in Jesus’ message depicted through His authoritative teaching and acts of healing, and their hopes for the life beyond (Frend 1996:370). It was through the use of the arts and specifically pictures that catechumens could learn the doctrine of hope and salvation. Artistic efforts became the written language of the early church. It was through the artistic artifacts created and seen in the catacombs that “the first Christians found that it was in Words and Sacrament that God engaged them in all these dimensions. The God who met them, and whom they met, in Word and Sacrament was none other than the One whom they had know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Byars 2000:31).”

THE WORD

In Luke 24:13-25 one sees expression of the Word during a worship service. Note that the disciples relate how their hearts burned as Jesus was proclaiming the gospel to them. Saliers (1994:51) states that the early Christians were discovering every time they assembled for worship that the risen Lord made His presence known to them in the scriptures read and proclaimed. Jesus was, in fact, the host at each Sunday assembly. The reading of the scripture was centered on the subject of the worship: God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It was an understanding of scripture that was pulled through the Jewish apocalyptic expectation, but reshaped to focus on the future promises of God already being made real. The service of the Word during worship concentrated on human history as seen from the standpoint of the object of hope: namely, God's new covenant promises for the future of the world. This worship in word focused on the subject that Christ was resurrected and that in some meaningful way the eschaton had already occurred, but that its final realization among human beings was in the future. This "paradox of the "already" and the "not yet" of the kingdom of God" (Saliers 1994:51) was an essential facet for the worshipping Christian community: the Word was proclaimed and through that word the assembled congregation met the risen and living Lord (Byars 2000:25).

THE TABLE

It is interesting that the worship at the Table was for the early church quite different than for the modern day church. The early church associated the sacramental meal not only with "Jesus' last meal, but also with pleasant meals before His death, and with post-Resurrection encounters as well (Byars 2000:79)." Thus in the early church we see that the worship at the Table was shaped by the post-Resurrection meals as well as the last meal of Jesus prior to His crucifixion. The early church "expected not only to reflect on the Lord's Death but also to rejoice in his living presence through the meal. Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the central role of the risen Christ in the early Eucharistic practice of the church (Byars 2000:80)." It was through their reflection on the meal that demonstrated that there was hope for the future and that this hope came

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about through a risen Lord and Savior. This concept of meeting a risen Lord can be seen in Luke 24:13-25, when Jesus leads two of His disciples through the meal, which culminates in the disciples seeing and knowing their risen Lord and Savior. This is the key aspect of the meal; meeting the Lord through that meal. When Jesus “took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them” at that point on the road to Emmaus, a remarkable thing had happened. Luke states that their “eyes were opened, and they recognized him ...” “Luke’s message is that in the Lord’s Supper – the taking, blessing, breaking, and giving of bread – the church meets the risen Lord over and over again. Jesus was “known to them in the breaking of the bread (Byars 2000:25).” In the worship at the Table the early Christians were discovering the fact that the risen Lord made his presence known to them in the Lord’s Supper as well in the Word. Thus the early church believed that another essential for the worshipping Christian community was the Sacrament (bread and wine taken, blessed, and shared). And just like in the Word, in the Sacrament, the worshippers met the risen and living Lord.

CATACOMB ANALYSIS

Worship for the early church was identifiably Christian through its reliance on the Word and was oriented towards hope as expressed through the Table. Additional aspects of the worship service would be prayer for the world and service to the world, while being confident that God is in charge, but they are outside the scope of this paper as the focus has been on how the Word and the Table would be reflected in the artifacts within the specific Christian culture displayed within the catacombs. In the catacombs of Rome, certain artifacts were created reflective of the early church’s worship experience associated with the Word and Table. There is a desire to be careful, however, and not be like Wilpert and Marucchi who from their deeply conservative mindset would attempt to find the origins of Roman Catholic beliefs and liturgy in catacomb art where other explanations were more convincing. For example, is the banquet scene in the *Capella gracca*, the little subterranean chapel in the Priscilla catacomb, part of ‘the earliest representative of the Eucharistic sacrifice as they claimed? Or should they have asserted that a young woman, aged 25, kneeling before Christ and the apostles Peter and Paul, her arms outstretched in supplication to a welcoming Christ, represented ‘the Mother of God

praying to the Child Jesus', instead of the deceased's fervent entry into Paradise? Sometimes Wilpert and Marucchi are correct in their assessment, such as on a judgment scene in the catacomb of Hermes where a soul appears to be conducted by a saintly patron before a seated Christ, while an accuser stands on his left. This could be an early representation of an individual's entrance into the hoped-for *refrigerium* (refreshment) in Paradise. While their analysis is suspect in some cases, no one disavows that the artifacts from the catacombs can provide a means to evaluate and validate the worship expectations of the early church or that these artifacts reflect the deceased understanding of the subject and object of that worship: namely God. Literally, the catacombs artifacts in many cases assist in understanding worship since the "liturgical practices and sacraments of the Churches were being illustrated as early as the third century (Frend 1996:161)."

THE WORD IN THE CATACOMBS

Use of the arts to depict scripture in the catacombs is beyond doubt. One small self contained catacomb has 115 distinct pictures and represents in a sense a small 'fourth-century museum of the understandings of the deceased concerning their faith. Forty one of these pictures are from the Old Testament, including Adam and Eve being driven from Paradise, episodes from the life of Joseph and Samson, of Phineas transfixing Zimri and Cozbi with his spear, and of Jacob blessing Ephraim and Manasseh, which do not occur elsewhere in the catacombs. The New Testament was represented by thirteen scenes which included Christ delivering the Sermon on the Mount to the assembled people, the tomb of Lazarus in which Jesus escorted by a crowd of 80 figures is shown calling the dead man still in his tomb, and an enigmatic painting of a soldier casting his lot into an urn hanging against the outer wall of a building – very curious, if casting lots for Christ's tunic at the crucifixion was in the artists mind (Frend 1996:344)." Another collection called the Dura frescos – demonstrate the symbolic character of paintings selected from scripture and are designed to represent the hope of the early Christians in obtaining the *refrigerium* of paradise. As Frend (1996:248) states: The catacomb paintings were more than just literal representations of selected biblical scenes."

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Of course, a predominate figure within the catacombs is that of Christ. Whether through artistic depictions or symbols the Christocentric nature of the catacombs is evident. Christ as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end; Christ as a healer and miracle worker; Christ as a Savior, and many other subject areas seen in scripture are seen in the catacombs. Of course, this is what one should expect since the predominate theme of scripture is Jesus. The scripture represented in the catacombs is that related to Jesus as the object of worship or those associated with His characteristics or subject of worship. Over and over again we see the same themes represented in the catacombs.

So, it is no wonder that we see scenes that celebrate the miracle at Cana where Jesus changed the water into wine. It is interesting to note in some of these scenes that Jesus does not have a beard and as such represents a youthful god; a new comer to the pantheon of gods that were acknowledged by the Romans. Additionally, many times He has a wand by which He is performing the miracle. While these are interesting side notes, it is the importance of Jesus as a miracle performer that is being celebrated in the pictures. Since Jesus is a miracle performer one can have hope that Jesus will also provide the saving grace and ultimate acceptance into that heavenly place where continued refreshment can be had at His Table.

Other frescos depict the New Testament scene of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. In the scriptural story, we learn that the food Jesus is most concerned about is the great joy obtained when one of God's creatures accepts the saving grace provided by Jesus. Again, the catacomb emphasis is on Jesus as Savior. The artistic display is a strong reminder that through Jesus, all, just like the Samaritan woman, can obtain salvation and the hope that Jesus will also provide the saving grace and ultimate acceptance into that heavenly place where continued refreshment can be had at His table.

But pictures are not the only artifacts that reflect the scripture. Many of the sarcophagi associated with Roman nobility reflect similar messages as the frescos, but are in some cases more reflective of a total summary of the gospel. For the men and women that are buried in the catacombs, there is a "confident hope of the deceased and his relatives

concerning happiness beyond the grave through belief in Christ. Thus the raising of Lazarus, the Good Shepherd, the miracle of Cana and the miracles of healing, along with Old Testament themes, such as the Jonah cycle and Daniel, are all frequently represented (Frend 1996:374).” These pictorial bibles provide a glimpse into the early church’s faith and beliefs derived from their worship experiences.

A beautiful example of this type of artifact is called the *sarcophagus of the Child*, so called because of its size. The richly sculptured front is in a sense a concise illustrated Bible. The biblical scenes reflect Noah in the ark with the dove above him, a prophet holding the scroll of the divine law, Daniel in the lions' den, a child praying between two saints, the miracle of Cana and the resurrection of Lazarus, and Mary, the sister of Lazarus at the feet of Jesus. At the center of the lid two little genii are holding the tablet; at both ends two ornamental faces are sculptured. While it is possible to attribute various meanings to the scenes, the impact of the Word on the family of the deceased from their worship experiences is readily evident. This family desired to proclaim to all that came into the catacomb that these scenes were important to them and reflected their hope in their risen Lord and Savior. The Catacombs of Saint Callixtus web site states that the:

scenes in this sarcophagus describe real events and reveal a profound symbolism. The succession of the scenes is not fortuitous and the message is at once evident. A Christian is born to divine life through Baptism (Noah). This divine life is nourished by the bread (Habakkuk) and the wine (Cana) consecrated in the Mass, that is, with Holy Communion. The Eucharist is offered as a pledge of final resurrection (Lazarus). In this way a Christian (the child) will reach and live in paradise (Orante). We find the following words of Jesus echoed here: *"He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day"* (Jo 6.54). (The Catacombs of Saint Callixtus).

While not all would render the same meanings here, it is evident that the scripture is being proclaimed and had value to this bereaved family. Again and again, the impact of the Word obtained during their worship experiences provides the deceased and their

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family hope for ultimate joy as they all come together into heaven through their Lord and risen Savior.

THE TABLE IN THE CATACOMBS

The art in the catacombs also provides an additional understanding of the worship experience. In the so called *Cubicles of the Sacraments* depictions and symbols of the Eucharist and Baptism are found. While some feel that this was a means by which the family of the deceased could “recall their catechumenate (i.e. their preparation to Baptism) and leave a message to their contemporaries. (that) They had become Christians through Baptism and had persevered in their Christian life by frequent communion.” More importantly, it seems that they also wanted to remind their dear ones, and whoever visited their tombs, that one day they would be united again only if they shared the same means of salvation. Thus the meal or Table aspect of the worship experience seems to have been a powerful influence on what they desired to be depicted in the catacombs. As mentioned earlier, it is at the Table that the early Christian church understood that Jesus met them and ministered to them.

It was not just the Last Supper meal that these Roman men and women were concerned with in their Eucharist celebration. The Table was also a celebration of the pre-death and post-Resurrection meals that Jesus enjoyed with His disciples. Many of the pictures that depict a meal seem to be more along those lines and suggest that the meal aspect of worship was a remembrance of all three meal occasions.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The frescos and sculptures presented represent just a small number of the plethora that have come to light from the catacombs, but they are representative. Within the catacombs they represent the subject and object associated with the worship experiences of those buried in the crypts. Pictures, sculptures, icons, and symbols of Jesus are predominate in the catacombs and should be seen as a depiction of the object of the worship experiences. In many cases the catacombs depictions also display the subject of the worship as well. These artifacts display the understandings of those buried

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concerning Jesus' characteristics as healer, savior, redeemer, and others. Additionally, the catacombs demonstrate that the early church's understanding of the Table was more than a remembering of Christ's last meal before his death, but also a reminder that through the Table we can also come to know Jesus. Through the early church's worship experiences with the Word and Table, they created these artifacts that show their worship experience. We can learn much from this worship from the catacombs. In today's chaotic world we need to regain the intensity of the early church worship, where the subject and object of worship is Jesus Christ, our risen Lord and Savior. This yearning for worship is reflected in a late 1990's song which goes like this:

In Christ alone my hope is found
He is my light, my strength, my song
This Cornerstone, this solid ground
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm
What heights of love, what depths of peace
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease
My Comforter, my All in All
Here in the love of Christ I stand

In Christ alone, who took on flesh
Fullness of God in helpless babe
This gift of love and righteousness
Scorned by the ones He came to save
'Till on that cross as Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I live

There in the ground His body lay
Light of the world by darkness slain
Then bursting forth in glorious Day
Up from the grave He rose again
And as He stands in victory
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me
For I am His and He is mine
Brought with the precious blood of Christ

No guilt in life, no fear in death
This is the power of Christ in me
From life's first cry to final breath
Jesus commands my destiny
No power of hell, no scheme of man
Can ever pluck me from His hand

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'Till He returns or calls me home
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand

Hopefully, someday in the future, archaeologists will be able to say that like the early Christians, the Christians of the 21st century knew how to worship because our artifacts demonstrate that Jesus was the subject and object of our worship. The early Christians were able to do so; we need to do so as well.