

The Stones Will Cry Out

Exploring the Eucharist through the Eyes of the Holy Land

The most memorable place I have ever celebrated Mass was on a train traveling through the Canadian countryside. My parents and I boarded a five-day, scenic excursion train from Toronto to Banff. It was breath-taking gazing upon the crystal clear lakes, peering up at the snow-capped mountains, and catching sight of the skittish wildlife. I felt like I glimpsed the Garden of Eden looking out the frosty window. Canada, as Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Jesuit poet, remarked in his poem "God's Grandeur" still does not "wear man's smudge and share man's smell."

We spent a week on the train, which included Sunday. I planned to say Mass with my traveling Mass kit in our tiny cabin with just my parents for parishioners. But suddenly it occurred to me: surely there must be more than three Catholics in Canada! So like a conductor I went up and down the train inviting perfect strangers to Mass. A generous couple kindly offered their spacious double-cabin for the Mass, so I thought, surely there will be plenty of space. But by the time Mass started, a flash mob of Catholics had converged, and lined up far down the hallway.

As the earthly Garden of Eden flashed by outside, we enjoyed the eternal Garden of Eden inside. Indeed, Rv 2:7 hints at this Eucharistic connection between Eden and the Eucharist, saying: "To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." That is, Genesis' tree of earthly life in Eden turns out to be Revelation's Tree of Eternal Life which is the Eucharist. That unforgettable train ride taught me something profound: the land reveals deep

secrets about the liturgy. You know how traditionally Catholic churches were built so that priest and people were facing east – *ad orientem* – toward the rising sun, which symbolized Jesus Christ, the Risen Son. In other words, land and liturgy are always mutually illuminating.

Today I want to take you on a tour of the birthplace of the Eucharist, namely, the Holy Land. Just like the untarnished beauty of Canada helped us passengers appreciate the untarnished beauty of the Mass, so I am convinced the topography of Israel can help us Christian appreciate the theology of the Mass. Pope Benedict XVI, in his apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* referred to the land of Israel as "the Fifth Gospel." He observed: "The stones on which our Redeemer walked are still charged with his memory and continue to 'cry out' the Good News. For this reason the Synod Fathers recalled the felicitous phrase which speaks of the Holy Land as 'the Fifth Gospel'" (VD, 89). In a sense, the stones of the Holy Land are almost as inspired as the saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Analogous to the traditional four gospels, the Holy Land is a unique fifth gospel, giving us even more good news.

Last Spring Bishop Erik Pohlmeier invited me to accompany him and some pilgrims on a tour of the Holy Land. Since then, of course, the events of October 7, 2023, and the ensuing retaliation in Gaza have shelved any tourism or pilgrimages to Israel. Nonetheless, true pilgrims can still take a virtual tour of the Holy Land with the Bible as our infallible tour guide. Like I walked through that train offering tickets to Canadian Catholics to come to Mass (where the land shed light on the liturgy), so this morning I would like to offer you a ticket in this talk to tour the Fifth Gospel, the original land of the liturgy. Specifically, we will hear how the stones will cry out to help us penetrate the mystery of the Mass.

Our first stop on the tour of land and liturgy is the prototypical Mass of Melchizedek and Abram recounted in Genesis 14: 18:20. Incidentally, in my master's thesis in seminary I investigated the identity of this mysterious Melchizedek and called it, "Who the Heck is Melchizedek?" But I didn't get any extra credit for the catchy title. Notwithstanding his obscurity, the Bible nonetheless punctuates critical junctures of salvation history with cameos of Melchizedek, like Alfred Hitchcock unexpectedly appeared out of nowhere in his movies. Besides Genesis 14, Melchizedek shows up again in Psalm 110:4, rubbing shoulders with royalty, King David and his son Solomon. He enters the scriptural stage a third time in the Letter to the Hebrews, where Jesus is said to be "a high priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek" (Hb 6:20). You know, if you associate with scriptural hall of famers like Abraham, David, and Jesus, your name is not nobody.

Whatever his name on his real driver's license, one fact remains indisputable, this priest-king brings out bread and wine as a thanksgiving offering to God on behalf of Abram. Now, what was Abram feeling so grateful for? Well, if we read the verses of Gn 14 before Abram's meeting with Melchizedek, we discover the details of an against-all-odds military campaign Abram wages against four kings who had just vanquished five kings, and rescues his nephew Lot. Within the confines of Canaan, therefore, Abram stood tall as the king of kings and the one who brought peace or "shalom" (a variation of Salem) to a war-torn land. And Melchizedek's Mass of bread and wine was how Abram thanked God for his impossible victory and his rise to patriarchal prominence. 1800 years later the archangel Gabriel would assure Mary not to be overwhelmed by the against-all-

odds changes of her being the Mother of God, saying: "For with God nothing will be impossible" (Lk 1:37).

I will never forget how Scott Hahn once illustrated how God's grace accomplishes everything good or great we do. One afternoon he was going for a jog in his neighborhood. He saw a man trying to mow his front yard. But his small son, who was pretending to mow the yard with his toy mower, kept crossing in front of him, and getting in the way. Hahn decided to make another loop around the neighborhood to see how the father would deal with his diminutive dilemma. When he came around the corner, he saw that the father had now picked up the son with one arm, and was steering the mower with the other arm. The small boy, meanwhile, had both his hands on the real mower and a huge smile across his face. Can you guess why he was grinning from ear to ear? The little lad thought he was moving the yard.

Abram, through Melchizedek's Mass, humbly acknowledged that he was just that little boy in God's arms, and that ultimately, God had mowed down his enemies. That is why Abram is called the Father of faith. And that is also what the stones would cry out, who witnessed that first Mass of Melchizedek: "For with God nothing will be impossible"; that 318 men can overcome the combined power of nine armies.

And by the way, no place on earth is more fraught with fighting than the Middle East, especially the Holy Land, particularly the family feud between the sons of Abraham: the Israelis (those born from Isaac) and the Palestinians (the issue of Ishmael). That is, the stones around Jerusalem would not be surprised by today's war in Gaza. Why not? Well, these stones have been watching silently for millennia how "no one fights like family." But more importantly, they stand as

eyewitnesses of how only Jesus Christ, the Eucharistic King of Kings, will one day end all war and bring lasting peace (*shalom*) as it was one betokened in the meal between Melchizedek and Abram. And so surely, the Eucharistic Lord can bring peace to the infighting in our own families.

In case you think I am making a theological mountain out of a Melchizedekian molehill, consider these sober reflections by Bishop Robert Barron on the significance of the Promised Land from his recent book *The Great Story of Israel*. Listen now:

Throughout the history of Israel, this particular plot of earth, east of the Mediterranean, west of the Jordan, from Dan in the north to Beer-sheba in the south, would be of crucial importance. Whether they were loving it, longing for it, fighting over it, defending it, planting it with cities, counting its peoples, mourning its loss, or singing of its beauty, the Promised Land would be a unique obsession of the descendants of Abram. This, of course, is because it was much more than a piece of real estate; it functioned as a symbol of the divine favor, the land flowing with milk and honey, the base of operations for the announcement of God to all the nations, and ultimately, an anticipation of the ultimate homeland of heaven" (*The Great Story of Israel*, 19-20).

In the movie, "Gone with the Wind," Gerald O'Hara taught his spunky daughter a similar love for the land. He gently chided her: "Do you mean to tell me, Katie Scarlett O'Hara, that Tara, that land, doesn't mean anything to you? Why, land is the only thing in the world worth workin' for, worth fightin' for, worth dyin' for, because it's the only thing that lasts." Of course, we Christians know the only land that truly lasts forever is the old earthly Jerusalem when it is finally transformed into the new, heavenly Jerusalem, when stones of sand and dust will glitter as "the streets paved with gold." And the stones of that Promised

Land cry out that God's grace will ultimately defeat all foes and establish lasting peace. Why? Because these stones have seen it happen before and saw it celebrated in the Mass of Melchizedek.

The curious thing about saying Mass on board a moving train is that the place where we start the Mass with the Sign of the Cross is always miles away from the location where we end the Mass with the dismissal "Go in peace." My parents and I started celebrating our Canadian train-Mass with that flash-mob of the faithful in the peaceful prairielands of Manitoba. But we did not finish the liturgy until we reached the borders of Saskatchewan. By the way, have you ever noticed how Mass in our local parishes can feel a lot like traveling on a train. Some priest--conductors are driving furiously fast, while others go agonizingly slow. I know one priest who can celebrate a Sunday Mass, and give a homily, in 15 minutes. I'm not going to tell you what parish he is located in.

Well, I want to suggest that the second Eucharist we will explore, the Lord's Supper, was also surprisingly a traveling Mass. That is, the liturgy of the Last Supper commences in one location but it concludes in an entirely different place. The Last Supper of Jesus begins in the Upper Room but ends on the heights of Calvary on the Cross. Further in this way, the Holy Land – upon which this liturgical procession took place - bears a unique witness to how movement is indispensable to the Mass. If you carefully watch the choreography of the Sunday liturgy in your home parish, you will notice how the Mass also visually travels from the Liturgy of the Word at the ambo to the Liturgy of the Eucharist at the altar. In other words, movement is constitutive for the Eucharist. Every Mass is a traveling Mass.

Now, in order to grasp how every Eucharist travels, we need to take a detour and do a deep dive into the rubrics of the Last Supper. You may know the Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) present Jesus celebrating the Last Supper as the fulfillment of the Passover meal. But you may not know that the Passover, or Seder, consisted of consuming four cups of wine, each highly charged with historical and spiritual significance. The first cup was consumed after the initial blessing, called the *kiddush*. The second cup was drunk after reciting the Exodus story, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The third cup followed eating the lamb and the unleavened bread, and was called the cup of blessing. Fourthly, and climactically, the Great Hallel was sung, Psalms 114-118, and 136, after which the fourth cup was consumed, fittingly called the cup of consummation.

Scott Hahn, in his book *The Fourth Cup*, draws attention to the astonishing fact that Jesus interrupts the Seder Meal by not drinking the fourth cup. That is the equivalent to a priest celebrating Mass and stopping right before Holy Communion. It is unthinkable. Rather, he takes the Last Supper, in effect, on the road. Hahn observes: "Among the difficulties presented by the Last Supper narratives is the way they end the Seder prematurely, leaving the liturgy unfinished. Jesus and his disciples exit the room and go off into the night singing a hymn (see Mark 14:26). But they neglect to drink the cup of wine prescribed to accompany the hymn - the fourth cup" (*The Fourth Cup*, 106).

Then Hahn answers the burning question on everyone's mind: well, did Jesus finally drink the fourth cup, and if so, when? In order to find the answer, Hahn takes us to the scene of the crucifixion and comment: "Finally at the very end, Jesus was offered 'sour wine' or 'vinegar' (John 19:30; Matthew 27:48; Mark

15:36; Luke 23:36). All the Synoptics testify to this. But only John tells us how he responded: 'When Jesus had received the sour wine he said, 'It is finished'; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit' (19:30)" (*The Fourth Cup*, 116). In other words, at the moment he took that sip of Wine, Jesus not only concluded his passion and death by announcing, "It is finished", but he also finally finished the suspended Seder supper. By doing so, he also gave the Eucharist its definitive form, that is, as a traveling Mass: always moving between the Upper Room (the supper) and Calvary (the sacrifice).

In *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Pope Benedict XVI insisted that these two foci (locations) of the Eucharist could be detected in ancient church architecture. He wrote:

Thus, in the early church buildings, the liturgy has two places. First, the Liturgy of the Word takes place at the center of the building. The faithful are grouped around the *bema*, the elevated area where the throne of the Gospel, the seat of the bishop, and the lectern are located. The Eucharistic celebration proper takes place in the apse, at the altar, which the faithful 'stand around'" (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 72).

Now, with this liturgical roadmap of the Mass in mind, let's return to look at the land during the Last Supper. Along the road between his supper and his sacrifice, Jesus stops to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. And here I would propose the land gets a very privileged taste of the liturgy. How so? Well, the ground of Gethsemane was the first to sip from the chalice of the Blood of Christ, the fourth cup.

In his classic work, *The Life of Christ*, Archbishop Fulton Sheen described the dark and dangerous scene in the Garden: "No wonder, then, with the

accumulated guilt of all the ages clinging to [Jesus] as a pestilence His bodily nature gave way...He now sensed guilt to such an extent that it forced Blood from his Body, Blood which fell like crimson beads upon the olive roots of Gethsemane, making the first Rosary of the Redemption" (*The Life of Christ*, 321-22). The name "Gethsemane" literally means "an olive press," because presses were present there in the garden to squeeze out the juice of the olives. In like manner, Jesus' Precious Blood was squeezed out of him in that spiritual olive press called his Passion. And the land drank deeply of the Blood of divine love as our Lord traveled from his supper to his sacrifice.

You know, in the 2,000-year history of the Church, great liturgical wars have been waged about the road between the ambo and the altar, between supper and sacrifice. In other words, what form should the Eucharist take? And liturgists – those who study and argue over the shape and structure of the liturgy – have staked out positions on all sides. You have heard the old joke, what's the difference between a liturgist and a terrorist? You can negotiate with a terrorist. For example, the way we celebrated the Mass before Vatican II is markedly different from the way we celebrate it today. Before the Council we emphasized its sacrificial nature, now we highlight the supper side of the Mass. This debate gets so heated that some have left the Church over that dispute. It is no small matter. My home state of Kerala, India, for the past two years has seen such serious skirmishes over the liturgy. It has gotten so bad that the archbishop had to close the cathedral for a time to cool things down.

But in the land of the liturgy, the stones would cry out, "Don't lose the forest for the trees!" Don't fight over the minutiae of the Mass, and miss the main point: the drama of our salvation enacted between the two foci of the liturgy,

ambo and altar, supper and sacrifice. The liturgy not only travels between Word and Sacrament, but also travels down the ages with different emphases but always remaining the same Eucharist. In other words, the stones would cry out repeating Psalm 34:8, "Taste and see the goodness of the Lord!" The land would remind liturgist to stop acting like terrorists, because the Mass is always in motion, from ambo to altar, and from age to age.

Now in order to learn the third lesson the land has to teach us about the liturgy, we need to open the book of Revelation or the Apocalypse. Until now we have focused on the land under the earthly Jerusalem. But now John the Seer invites us to gaze upward toward the heavenly Jerusalem. He writes: "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Rv 21:2). But why should we avert our eyes from the old Jerusalem at all? One of the main motifs of the book of Revelation is not only the retirement of the old Jerusalem, but its replacement by the new Jerusalem.

Scott Hahn summarizes how Revelation records his retirement:

The details of the destruction described in Revelation correspond closely to the history of Jerusalem's destruction [in A.D. 70]. In Revelation 17-19, John shows a city destroyed by fire; Jerusalem was entirely destroyed by fire...Revelation closely tracks the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, and Ezekiel's single outstanding message is that the curse of the covenant will come upon Jerusalem. We see this curse fulfilled in the Book of Revelation" (*The Lamb's Supper*, 95).

In a word, Jerusalem had an expiration date, namely, 70 A.D. when General Titus led the Tenth Roman Legion and leveled the Holy City, and burned it to the ground. You all have visited Jerusalem and know better than anyone, all that

remains of the Great Temple Mount is the West Wall, the Wailing Wall. The extinction of the Temple was not an accident of history, but the deliberate design of divine providence, at least according to Revelation.

But the book of Jerusalem's story was not entirely closed. It has an epilogue in eternity. Just like Jesus' death on Calvary was not the end of his story, so John would see these earthly stones transformed – indeed resurrected – into streets of gold in Rv 21:21, paving a glorious heavenly Jerusalem. Jesus had already intimated how his body and the Jerusalem Temple would share a similar fate when he prophesied: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn 2:19).

By the way, are you familiar with the fifteen psalms called "The Songs of Ascent"? They are Psalms 120-134, and were sung by the pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem for the three major Jewish feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. For example, Psalm 122 begins: "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!' Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem! Jerusalem, built as a city, which is bound firmly together, to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord..." You see, the topography of Jerusalem at an elevation of roughly 2,500 feet above sea level reinforced the theology of the psalms of ascent. In other words, the land – and even the stones the pilgrims stumbled over – point pilgrims to the place of the truly liturgy, and invite them to raise their eyes to look beyond the earthly Temple to the heavenly Temple.

Pope Benedict put it perfectly in *Verbum Domini*: "The Holy Land today remains a goal of pilgrimage, a place of prayer and penance, as was testified to in antiquity by authors like Saint Jerome. The more we turn our eyes and our hearts

to the earthly Jerusalem, the more will our yearning be kindled for the heavenly Jerusalem, the true goal of every pilgrimage..." (VD, 89). That is, the stones, like the psalms, cry out: "The tribes go up," and we must indeed go up as high as heaven to celebrate the true and lasting liturgy.

Sometimes on my day off, I celebrate Mass by myself in a little chapel we have in the rectory. It feels like I am talking to myself because I say, "The Lord be with you." And I reply back to myself, "And with your spirit." A priest friend of mine insists that I should not say "And with your spirit" because my guardian angel supplies that response. We priests suffer from spiritual schizophrenia when we celebrate Mass by ourselves. But it is theologically inaccurate to say "I celebrate Mass by myself." Why? Well, if we were to peer inside that rectory chapel with the eyes of faith, we would behold it is crammed with all the angels and saints of heaven. Vatican II taught: "In the earthly liturgy we share in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims" (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, 8).

In other words, during every Eucharist we mere mortals stand spiritually in that Holy City and rub shoulders with the glorious heavenly hosts, St. Peter and St. Paul, with St. John Paul II and St. Teresa of Calcutta, with our deceased grandparents, and my beloved nephew Noah. The Eucharist sacramentally - but no less really! - unites us not only with those we can see (you and me), but especially with those we cannot see, because the Sunday Eucharist is also the Mass of the heavenly hosts. And therefore, the stones on the slopes of Jerusalem cry out the words of Ps 122:4, "There the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord!" to inspire ascending pilgrims to look up and raise their minds and hearts to the heavenly liturgy. The land has much so teach us about the liturgy.

Now if all this is true - and it is! - then why do so many Catholics find the Mass so boring? Because we bring little knowledge to the Mass. And you cannot love what you do not know. Golf is boring to those who know nothing about birdies, eagles, and bogies. They don't know "How you drive for show but putt for dough." Chess is boring to those who know nothing about how knights and bishops move, and how the most powerful piece is the queen. Chess is an elegant analogy for the Catholic faith. Cooking is boring to those who know nothing about spices and seasonings, and side dishes. And why Emril Lagasse shouts, "Bam!" when he tosses spices into his dishes. But when you know these things suddenly you fall in love with golf, and chess and cooking.

This, then, is how the land can help us fall in love with the liturgy, that is, when we listen to and learn from what its very stones cry out. The land teaches us in the Mass of Melchizedek that God mows down our foes and makes ultimate victory and lasting peace possible. The land teaches us in the traveling Mass of Jesus to desire to drink of the Lord's love in the fourth cup, and not be distracted by the minutiae of the Mass, the liturgy wars. And the land teaches us, as we scales the sides of the Holy City that the true home of the liturgy is heaven. In other words, by studying the terrain and the topography of the Holy Land we learn the theology of the liturgy. Well, so what? Well, so that we can bring a little more knowledge of the liturgy when we go to Mass next Sunday. And once you know the meaning of the Mass, you cannot help but love it. And then the stones will cry out: "Bam!"

Praised be Jesus Christ!