



The Middle Ages

“Behold, I Make All Things New”: The Holy Grail and the Eucharist

By Michael Martin

An idealistic young knight, an ailing and aged king, a chalice bathed in light: such, in miniature, are the trappings of The Story of the Holy Grail. The very concept of this object, this relic, testifies to the existence of the ideal in the face of the real, and is an avowal of the power of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness in the world, despite all the evidence to the contrary. A young man searches through forest and wasteland, through castle and hermitage for this mystery of Christ. The knight seeks this sacred token made an agent of miracles and grace through contact with the Holy Blood. Many on this quest have failed. Many have died. Many have ended in disillusionment and despair. Yet he perseveres.

Over the years an amazing number of books have been published whose authors boast that they have “found the real secret of the Holy Grail.” The “real secret” ranges from a revelation that Jesus was “secretly” married to Mary Magdalene (as made all-too popular in *The Da Vinci Code*), to a description of the Grail as a cipher for a “secret” Johannine Church, to a postulation that the Grail is in reality the Ark of the Covenant, held to this day “in secret” by the Ethiopian Coptic Church. While the conclusions found in these approaches range from the ludicrous to the plausible to the irrelevant, there is something in all of them which suggests the Grail is the sigil for some kind of arcane conspiracy theory that the benevolent authors are just now bringing to light for a benighted humanity.

But what about the men who wrote these stories? Were they, indeed, sending literary messages in bottles in hopes that some enlightened souls from the future would be able to decipher them and reveal the “truth” to mankind? Were they setting up a rival to the established Church, anticipating a “once and future Church” purified of all corruption? While no theory on the whys and wherefores of the authors’ purposes can ever be absolutely conclusive, we can still make a pretty good hypothesis. Maybe, just maybe, they were trying to write down a ripping good tale. That, I think, is reason enough.

For the Christian mind of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it was only a short step from seeing the Grail as the vessel containing Christ’s blood to seeing it as the chalice of the Mass.

The History of the Holy Grail

What we do know about some of the writers of the Grail literature is sketchy. Chrétien de Troyes, the author of the incomplete *Le Conte del Graal*, which is also known as *Perceval*, was a poet and scholar in France who has left us several works on the Matter of Britain in addition to this, his best known work. Wolfram von

Eschenbach, whose *Parzival* is based on Chrétien’s work, was a Bavarian knight and small land-holder. Robert de Boron, the author of *Joseph of Arimathea*, may have been a Burgundian knight with little scholarly training, owing to his clumsy style. The *Queste del Saint Graal* (*The Quest of the Holy Grail*), the flower of the Vulgate cycle, was almost certainly written by a Cistercian cleric, but his name is unknown to us.

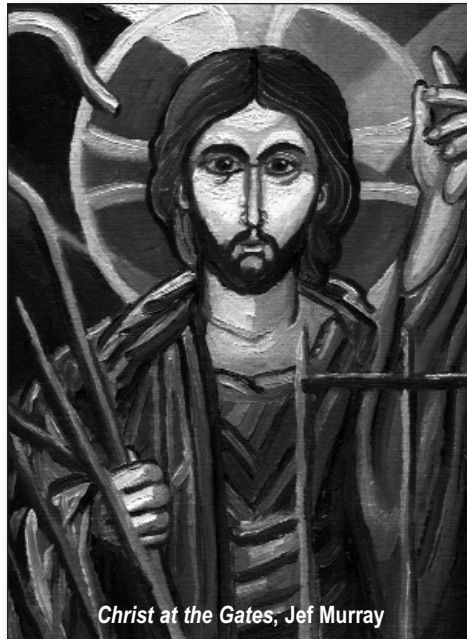
The Grail literature is by no means a uniform whole. “There never was a Story of the Grail”, writes A. T. Hatto, “and never could be. On the other hand there were stories of as many different Grails as there were writers or syndicates exploiting the potent name.”¹ *Le Conte del Graal* and *Parzival* have as their hero Parzival (Perceval), a knight who develops from a country bumpkin, a pure fool, to the ideal of knighthood. Parzival is flesh and blood; he has a wife and children. He is a sinner, albeit an unconscious one. On the other hand, the hero of the *Queste* is Galahad, a chaste and noble knight who, though born of sin, is spotless otherwise. The *Queste* was written c. 1225, a good fifty years after the *Conte* and roughly fifteen years after *Parzival*. Considering the author was probably a Cistercian it is no wonder Galahad is such a Christ-like figure. Boron’s tale, based on the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* and other works, breaks ranks with all of the different approaches and tells how the Grail came to Britain.

The times in which the Grail literature was written were marked by a level of cultural cross-pollination as Europe had never

known. From c. 1174, when Chretien's *Le Conte del Graal* was written, to 1235, the date of the last of the Vulgate cycle, Europe was transformed. The Crusades had opened up the European mindset. Encounters with Muslims, Arab or African, initiated Europeans into the wonders of algebra and Aristotle among other things. Contact with Byzantium opened European eyes, at times suspiciously, to a different style of Christianity. This period also witnessed the careers of St. Francis of Assisi, whose simplicity and devotion vastly altered European devotion, and St. Albertus Magnus, magnanimous scholar and mentor of Aquinas. Gothic architecture and the sublime prayer of the Rosary also found their origin at this time.²

The Real Presence and the Holy Grail

Perhaps inspired by Western Christendom's contact with the liturgical practices of the Byzantines coupled with the advent of the intellectual rigor of Scholasticism, one issue that was particularly relevant at this period was that of the Real Presence in the Eucharist. Christians did not doubt whether they really partook of the Body and Blood of Christ in Communion. What they were wondering about was when the bread and wine became the Divine Flesh and Blood. Was it at the words of Institution, or at the *Epiclesis* as the Byzantines suggested? As James Douglas Bruce puts it "in no other period of the Church has the doctrine of transubstantiation been so immediately the centre of theological interest and discussion as in the later part of the twelfth century and the early decades of the thirteenth."³ Theologians were also concerned as to whether or not one needed to communicate in both Species. This subject was eventually resolved in the ordination of the Feast of Corpus Christi in 1246. The chalice, however, had been gradually removed from lay communion over the course of the twelfth century in the Latin West, although some places practiced intinction (dipping the Bread into the Wine) until it was forbidden at the Council of Westminster in 1175.⁴



The withdrawal of the *chalice* from the laity may have influenced the writers of the Grail literature, even if subconsciously; but, whether or not the Grail is supposed to be a chalice, a paten, a ciborium, or even a stone (which may suggest an altar) is not always clear.⁵ From author to author we have different representations. However, in the Byzantine Liturgy Communion in both kinds is from the *chalice*. But the writers of the Grail literature did not necessarily need to go to Asia Minor in order to find a variety of Christianity different from their own. They could go to Ireland.

The Celtic Church

Prior to the twelfth century, the Celtic Church was more akin to its Eastern than to its geographically closer Roman brethren. Like the Byzantines, the early Irish Church had a married priesthood. Indeed, the apostle of the Irish, St. Patrick, was the son of a deacon and the grandson of a priest.⁶ "*Patrem habui Calpornium diaconem,*" he writes, "*filium quondam Potiti presbyteri*"⁷—"I had for father the Deacon Calpurnius, son of one Potius, a priest." The Irish also had a tradition of monasticism more compatible with that of the North African desert fathers than to the Benedictine Rule. Also like the Byzantines, the bishops were celibate, having risen from the monastic ranks, and often referred to

Eastern authority in conflicts with Rome.⁸ Most likely the Celtic Church was Eastern via Gaul and the form of monasticism and liturgy developed by St. Martin of Tours.⁹ As late as 1185, Giraldus Cambrensis describes an Irish monastery in North Munster where a few monks "called Culdees devoutly serve God."¹⁰ The Culdees observed liturgical customs similar to those found in the Christian East. But the Celtic liturgy is not Ireland's only contribution to the milieu that creates the background of the Grail literature.

In the Grail stories one notices something that is atypical of other twelfth century literature: women are assigned roles of authority and importance. At the Grail castle a company of women process with the Grail and offer healing. In Wolfram, Parzival receives all of his best advice from women, until he meets the hermit Trevrizent.

The prestige which women held in Celtic society betrays a reality that did not completely disappear with the Romanization of Ireland by the Church. Irish women bore a tremendous influence on the religious life of the island. Abbesses held great esteem and authority in the early days of Irish Christianity; and the power swayed by St. Brigit, in particular, was indeed formidable.¹¹ Given the esteem of women in Irish society, it is no wonder that women have such an important role in the Grail literature. Yet the tendency to allude to a conspiratorial and clandestine "Church" that permitted the feminine participation in the Grail procession proves false, as such participation was allowed in the East as well as in Ireland and Britain.¹² Although initial contact between Rome and the Celtic Church was not always friendly, the Celtic Church was no rogue community. On the contrary, the Celts "never ceased to see Rome as the spiritual capital."¹³ Like the pre-schism Byzantine Churches, the Celtic Church had different cultural and liturgical practices, but adhered to the same dogma as Rome.

The Holy Grail and the Eucharist

While the writers of the literature were

not using the Grail in the context of a Mass, they were certainly employing a *Eucharistic* atmosphere. Like the Agape Feast of the early Church, the Grail repast is somehow connected to the Eucharist without *being* the Eucharist. And, for the Christian mind of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it was only a short step from seeing the Grail as the vessel containing Christ's blood to seeing it as the chalice of the Mass. While the Grail for these writers may or may not be a liturgical vessel, it is one which is at the very least surrounded with Christian mystery. Even in Wolfram, where we witness the least liturgical of the Grail feasts, Parzival's half-brother Feirefiz is not able to behold the Grail prior to being baptized.

Another symbol in the Grail literature which has been a point of interest for scholars is the spear which precedes the Grail in the Procession of the Grail. This spear is born into the hall causing all present to be struck with a deep sorrow. Blood gushes forth from the tip of this spear and drips onto the hands of the squire who carries it. Certainly, in Celtic lore magical spears exist. But these weapons flamed, they did not bleed.¹⁴ The spear as a symbol seems to have at least two sources. One is the spear of Longinus, the Roman soldier who tradition identifies as he who thrust his lance into the side of the crucified Christ in the nineteenth chapter of John's gospel. The other has a relationship to the spear of Longinus. This is the "spear", actually a knife, which is used in the *Proskomedia*, or Rite of Preparation, of the Eastern Church.

The *Proskomedia* is the preparation of the species prior to the Divine Liturgy (the Mass). A part of the rubric, said as the "spear" cuts the bread (called the Lamb), is from Isaiah 53,

Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter;
And like a sheep without blemish, that
before its shearer is dumb,
so he opened not his mouth.
In his humiliation, judgment of him
was taken.
Who shall declare his generation
for his life is being cut off from earth.

The Lamb of God, who takes away the
sins of the world,
is being offered for the life and salva-
tion of the world.

As apt as these spear references are to the Eucharist, some scholars, such as Jesse Weston, dismiss the Longinus story and the Byzantine connection as irrelevant to the Grail literature. Others, however, such as Fr. G. Ronald Murphy and Konrad Burdach, believe them to be pertinent.¹⁵ Charles Williams suggests the spear being Longinus' and the Cup being Christ's is the poetic, if not theological, center of the stories.¹⁶ Certainly, because of the constant intercourse between Constantinople and the West during the twelfth century Chrétien's source may well have contained a description of the Byzantine Divine Liturgy which some crusader brought home.¹⁷ While Celtic miraculous vessels and spears exist as sources and even may have informed the writers of the literature, the authors were using them in a decidedly Christian and Eucharistic context.

The Achievement of the Grail

As literary achievement, the Grail canon stands as a magical high water mark of Western literature. Arguably, no other literature outside of the Bible, not even Shakespeare, has been food for more artists and writers. Indeed, new fiction on Grail or Arthurian themes appears regularly, not to mention popular and reissued editions of the originals. In the last decades several films have treated this theme, *The Fisher King* and *Excalibur*, not to mention the classic send-up *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Perhaps what makes this literature so appealing and resilient is that it stands at the threshold of myriad literary frontiers. The stories embody Christian truth as well as pagan romance. They are both religious and secular. They are cosmopolitan, having European, Eastern, and Celtic elements. Women play an important part in the progress of the hero. But most importantly, the hero, Parzival, is an Everyman who must amend his wrongs and become the

Grail King. He represents, according to Hatto's insight, "the regeneration of Man".¹⁸

As Jean Frappier suggests, Chrétien's refusal to pin-down a deliberate symbolism for the Grail "creates an atmosphere of Christian spirituality".¹⁹ It also opens itself up to manifold interpretations. That is part of the charm, and danger, of these tales. One can take any aspect of the rich symbolism and motifs and build a literary or esoteric construct around it. The literature invites its audience to write what is not written.

The Grail literature, though it signifies many things, is at heart a story of transformation. Parzival is transformed, and so transforms his world. Galahad, though born of a sinful union, transforms the kingdom of Logres. The interest in the Transubstantiation of the Eucharistic elements, so animated a topic in the times in which the Grail literature was written, is itself a meditation on transformation.

Christ tells John in the Book of Revelation, "Behold, I make all things new". In transforming Celtic and other sources into a Christian mythos of such a compelling and enduring character, the authors of the Grail literature made their sources new, changing their essence and giving them new life. Parzival, at the end of Wolfram's account, asks the suffering Anfortas, "Uncle, what is it that troubles you?" That so simple a question would be the key to the mystery Parzival is invested with solving is surely profound. That he has such a difficult time discovering its truth is all too human. Scholars look for the sources of the Grail as if their quest will lead them to truth. Esotericists seek hidden knowledge they believe the Grail contains. But we should never forget that it is not what the Grail brings to Parzival which is central to the story, but what Parzival brings to the Grail. The Grail does not heal Parzival; but when he is before the Grail cognizant of its nature, the Fisher King is healed. The Psalmist describes Parzival's condition at the moment of achieving the Grail: "My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit; a heart contrite and humbled, O God, you will not

spurn" (Psalms 51:19). Seeing the Grail is not enough. Only participation in its nature heals the Wounded King.

Michael Martin teaches English at Marygrove College in Detroit, Michigan. His criticism, essays, and poetry have appeared in many journals and magazines. He lives on a small farm outside of Ann Arbor, Michigan, with his wife and eight children.

References

1. A. T. Hatto, "Forward," *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach (New York: Penguin, 1980), p. 7.
2. Indeed, Sister M. Amelia Klenke suggests that the builder of Saint-Denis, Abbot Suger, was an influence on Chrétien. See Urban T. Holmes Jr. and Sister M. Amelia Klenke, O.P., *Chrétien, Troyes, and the Grail* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), p. 98.
3. James Douglas Bruce, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance from the Beginnings Down to the Year 1300* 2 vol. (Baltimore: Johns

Hopkins, 1923), vol 1: pp. 241-42.

4. Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 70-71.

5. According to G. Ronald Murphy, Wolfram's Grail is an altar stone. See *Gemstone of Paradise: The Holy Grail in Wolfram's Parzival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

6. F. E. Warren, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church* (1881) (Willits: Eastern Orthodox, 1979), p. 13.

7. "St. Patrick's Confession," in *History of the Irish Primitive Church, together with The Life of St. Patrick*, by Daniel de Vinné (New York: Francis Hart, 1870), p. 207. My translation.

8. Warren, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*, p. 56.

9. Barry Cumliffe, *The Ancient Celts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 166.

10. Warren, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*, p. 35.

11. Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in*

Early Irish Society (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 88.

12. Bruce, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance from the Beginnings Down to the Year 1300*, vol. 1: p. 259.

13. Geoffrey Ashe, "The Visionary Kingdom." *The Quest for Arthur's Britain*, ed. Geoffrey Ashe. (London: Paladin, 1971), p. 170.

14. Charles Williams, *Arthurian Torso from Taliessin through Logres* by C. S. Lewis and *Arthurian Torso* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 249.

15. G. Ronald Murphy, S.J., *Gemstone of Paradise: The Holy Grail in Wolfram's Parzival*, p. 159 and note 23.

16. *Ibid*, p. 250.

17. Bruce, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance from the Beginnings Down to the Year 1300*, vol. 1: p. 259.

18. A. T. Hatto, "An Introduction to a Second Reading," *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach (New York: Penguin, 1980), p. 415.

19. Jean Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and His Work*, trans. Raymond J. Corrier (Athens: OUP, 1982), p. 130.

Talks by Joseph Pearce

A range of talks given by Joseph Pearce are now available on compact disc for only \$8 each.

- Unlocking the Catholicism of The Lord of the Rings
- A Matter of Life and Death: The Battle for a True Education
- A Call to Catholic Responsibility in a Hostile Government
- The Orthodoxy of Shakespeare
- Personal Conversion Story

Please send orders to: Matt Willkom
1196 Edgcumbe Road
Saint Paul, MN 55105
c. 612.251.9329
mwillkom@gmail.com

Checks should be made payable to **Matt Willkom**.

