Consecration, thanksgiving and the missing institution narrative – the nature of Eucharistic praying in the Early Church

Linards Jansons

Linards Jansons is a pastor of the Lutheran Church of Australia who from 1996 to 2007 served parishes in Hamilton, Victoria, and Adelaide. In 2009 he completed a Master of Theological Studies at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA, and now teaches liturgy and worship, among other things, at Australian Lutheran College.

Introduction

It is well known that in the sacramental theology of Luther and the reformers, the words of institution play a central role in the consecration of the elements. The words of Christ, and not our speaking, ensure that Christ's body and blood are given in, with and under bread and wine. This theological conviction finds expression throughout Luther's sacramental, catechetical and liturgical writings, and is a view that is reiterated by his colleagues, confirmed by the Confessions, and reinforced by Lutheran theologians of every generation.¹

In keeping with this theological view of the reformers there is a corresponding historical understanding. It goes something like this: in the earliest days of the church's communion celebration, there was simply the recital of the Lord's own words. In time, however, other prayers and thanksgivings attached themselves to the dominical institution. At first, these human additions only enhanced the Lord's own words. But as time went by, they would multiply and overshadow the words of Christ. Even worse, they would become infected with a doctrine of works, obscuring the gospel and robbing it of its character as pure gift. The only solution was to restore the sacrament to its ancient purity by removing these human additions and letting Christ alone speak his consecrating word.

But recent liturgical scholarship² claims that, historically, early eucharistic praying developed precisely the other way around. First, there were prayers of thanksgiving, and only later did the recital of the institution narrative become part of the consecration. In fact, what we call the institution narrative may not have functioned as a distinct and

¹ John Stevenson (86–94) notes the way Luther, Chemnitz, the Formula, John Gerhard and Walther understand the consecration. Teigen's longer treatment of Chemnitz's theology of consecration (76–163) also includes the views of Bugenhagen on this matter.
² For this paper I am drawing particularly on the work of Paul Bradshaw, Maxwell Johnson, Enrico Mazza and Andrew McGowan.
privileged rite of consecration until the late 4th century. The understanding that the *verba domini* must be recited over bread and wine in order for them to become the body and blood of Christ is nowhere spelt out, or even suggested, many scholars say, until Ambrose of Milan in the late 300s. And if this was the early historical picture, then the early theology of consecration may also have looked somewhat different.

It is important to qualify what is *not* meant by this claim. It is not suggested that the *verba* had no eucharistic function at all—clearly, the church celebrated the Eucharist in response to our Lord’s words to ‘do this in remembrance of me’. Nor is it claimed that the early fathers had a low sacramental understanding; quite the opposite is the case. Nor are these scholars attributing to the patristic theologians the belief that human capacity could effect the consecration. But what *is* maintained by recent scholarly opinion is that before the time of Ambrose in the late 4th century, there is no evidence that the institution narrative functioned as the privileged liturgical *formula of consecration*.

For Lutherans, this is a fairly significant and perhaps troubling claim. In theology, history and practice, we regard the *verba* as the liturgical kernel of the entire communion order. If we run out of bread and wine in the celebration of the Supper, we re-consecrate, and we do so using the *verba*. On the other hand, if lay people take the consecrated elements to the housebound, the one thing they do *not* do is re-consecrate using the words of institution. What does it mean, then, if the church of the first four centuries operated with some other kind of theology or practice? Does this mean that our emphasis on the institution narrative is misplaced, or historically conditioned? Or was the church theologically deficient in its sacramental understanding from its earliest days?

**The consecration in Luther and Chemnitz**

This problem becomes even more acute when we consider the central and exclusive role the institution narrative played in Luther and Chemnitz’s theology of consecration. In his 1523 *Order for Mass and Communion* Luther writes:

> We cannot deny that the Mass, ie, the communion of bread and wine, is a rite divinely instituted by Christ himself and that it was observed first by Christ and then by the apostles, quite simply and evangelically without any additions. But in the course of time so many human inventions were added to it that nothing except the names of the Mass and communion has comes down to us. (LW 53: 20)

A little later he adds: ‘All that matters is that the Words of Institution should be kept intact…’ (LW 53:31). For Luther the words ‘quite simply and evangelically’ meant the recitation of the words of institution over bread and wine. Later that decade, locked in controversy with the un-sacramental Sacramentarians, Luther spelled out unambiguously what ‘Do this’ meant in liturgical terms:

> If we are to do what he did, then indeed we must take the bread and bless it, and break and distribute it, saying ‘This is my body’. For all this is included in the imperative word ‘Do this,’ and we must not leave out these words. (LW 37: 187)
Luther knew that technically ‘Do this’ could be seen as having a narrower referent, but he rejects such an interpretation:

It is true that the text does not read, ‘You shall say “This is my body,”’...but I dare them, no matter how bold they may be, to leave these words out as if they were not commanded! (LW 37: 187, my emphasis)

The next generation of Reformers would follow suit. In his Examination of the Council of Trent, Martin Chemnitz distinguishes the Lutheran position from both the Sacramentarians and the Roman church. The former ‘rejected the papistical consecration in such a way that they imagined the Lord’s Supper could also be celebrated without the words of institution. This is manifestly false’ (Examen: 225). False also is the position of the Romanist, for ‘he acts wickedly who takes away the consecration of the Eucharist from the words of divine institution and transfers it to the prayers of the canon...’ (Examen: 226). The theology of consecration that Chemnitz advocates, however, places the recitation of the words of institution front and centre. The basis for this recitation is the command of Christ himself: ‘Christ has commanded us to do in the action of the sacrament what He Himself did. He did not, however, perform a mute action, but spoke’ (Examen: 226). And because those words are the creative words of the living Christ, they alone are powerful to bring about the substantial presence of his body and blood in the sacrament.

But Chemnitz is of particular interest because he also bolsters his theological reasoning with historical testimony. He asserts that

the ancient church, though it used also other exhortations and prayers in the administration of the Eucharist, nevertheless simply and correctly judged that the blessing or consecration of the Eucharist is performed with the speech of Christ, that is, with the words of institution’. (Examen: 226)

Ambrose, Gregory, and Augustine are invoked, and there can be no doubt that these fathers did in fact hold to such a view. But for our purposes, we should note that Chemnitz also enlists the second century figures Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons, and that is something to which we will return.

Finally, we note that while the Formula of Concord understood ‘Do this’ as comprehending the entire action of consecration, distribution and consumption, the consecration itself is limited to the words of institution. For example, 1 Corinthians 10:16 (‘the cup of blessing which we bless’) is understood as that ‘which happens precisely through the repetition and recitation of the words of institution’ (FC SD 7, 82; Tappert: 584). And by referring to ‘the consecration or words of institution’, the Formula seems to regard these two as quite synonymous (FC SD 7, 86; Tappert: 584).

3 Chemnitz proceeds from Augustine’s definition of a sacrament: ‘Let the Word come to the element, and it becomes a sacrament’ (Examen: 225).

4 While most exegetes today distinguish between Christ’s blessing or thanksgiving on the one hand, and the words, ‘This is my body’, on the other, the Formula identifies them.
Given this *theological* understanding of the consecration, it is understandable that a complementary *historical* picture has developed, one that sees the institution narrative as the primary liturgical kernel, and eucharistic prayers as later additions.

**The claim in detail**

What evidence, then, can be given for the claim that the words of institution did not serve as a consecratory formula until the late 4th century? In attempting to answer this, I have gathered together a number of arguments discussed by liturgical scholars under four main headings, as well as sketching out the form that early eucharistic praying may have taken.

1. **Eucharistic prayers with no institution narrative**

First of all, we note that some early eucharistic prayers simply do not contain an institution narrative at all. The *Didach* is one of the best known of several examples from various centuries. This document is one of the earliest of the so-called ‘church orders’, a collection of moral, pastoral, ecclesial and liturgical instructions for the life of the church, and it is certainly the earliest liturgical document known outside the New Testament. In the second half, the *Didach* provides rubrics and text for a eucharistic celebration. Chapter 9 reads as follows:

*Concerning the thanksgiving, give thanks thus:*

*First concerning the cup:*

We give thanks to you, our Father, for the holy vine of David your child, which you have made known to us through Jesus your child; glory to you for evermore.

*Concerning the broken bread:*

We give thanks to you, our Father, for the life and knowledge which you have made known to us through Jesus your child; glory to you for evermore.

As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and having been gathered together became one, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom; for yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for evermore.

*Let no-one eat or drink of your Eucharist but those who have been baptized in the name of the Lord. For concerning this also the Lord has said, ‘Do not give what is holy to the dogs’. (Bradshaw: 24,25)*

Many things are worth noting about this early Eucharistic prayer: the similarity to Jewish meal graces, the cup-bread order, the exclusion of the unbaptised. But most significant of all is the lack of an institution narrative. This led earlier 20th century scholars (such as Joseph Jungmann and Gregory Dix) to assume that the *Didache* must be referring to

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5 The full title is *The teaching of the twelve apostles.*

6 Other examples are the *Liturgy of Addai and Mari*, the liturgical material in Book VII of the *Apostolic Constitutions*, and the liturgical fragment known as *Strasbourg Gr. 254.*
a non-Eucharistic *agape* meal. However, apart from the simple assumption that a true Eucharist would have to contain an institution narrative, nothing else in the order actually suggests this. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that the distinction between a sacramental Eucharist and a non-sacramental *agape* meal exists more in the minds of later scholars than in the practice of the early church. Nor is there any evidence to support that some kind of *disciplina arcana* led to the suppression of the institution narrative in its written form. Finally, we also know that the *Didache* is a kind of parent document for other church orders of the first few centuries. One of these is the mid-fourth century *Apostolic Constitutions*. In book VII of this much larger work, *Didache’s* prayers have been greatly expanded and made more explicitly sacramental and eucharistic: ‘the holy vine of David’ from the *Didache*, for example, has been replaced with ‘the precious blood of Jesus poured out for us’. Yet despite these sacramental developments, the institution narrative is still absent.

2. **The institution narrative understood as thanksgiving**

Secondly, when the institution narrative does first appear in early eucharistic prayers, it does not function as an exclusive text of consecration. Instead, it often concludes an extended act of thanksgiving, as well as providing the basis for the church’s offering. The church order commonly known as the *Apostolic Tradition*, traditionally dated around 230, provides us with the earliest example of this kind. In the fourth chapter of *Apostolic Tradition* there appears a Eucharistic prayer for the ordination of a bishop, a prayer that has inspired the second eucharistic prayer in the current Roman Missal, as well as a number of Anglican and Lutheran eucharistic prayers.

The structure of this prayer, which contains a number of recognisable features, is as follows:

*(Preface dialogue)*

The Lord be with you: And with your spirit.
Up with your hearts: We have (them) with the Lord.
Let us give thanks to the Lord: It is fitting and right.

*(Extensive thanksgiving culminating in the institution narrative)*

We render thanks to you, O God, through your beloved child Jesus Christ, whom in the last times you sent to us as a saviour and redeemer and angel of your will; who is your inseparable Word, through whom you made all things, and in whom you were well pleased. You sent him from heaven into a virgin’s womb; and conceived in the womb, he was made flesh and was manifested as your

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7 The *disciplina arcana* refers to the practice of concealing certain rites or texts from the uninitiated lest they be profaned.
8 Today it is recognized that *Apostolic Tradition* contains a number of strata, perhaps ranging from the 2nd to the 4th century, and is more likely of Syrian, than Roman, origin.
Son, being born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin. Fulfilling your will and gaining for you a holy people, he stretched out his hands when he should suffer, that he might release from suffering those who have believed in you. And when he was betrayed to voluntary suffering that he might destroy death, and break the bonds of the devil, and tread down hell, and shine upon the righteous, and fix a term, and manifest the resurrection, he took bread and gave thanks to you, saying, “Take, eat; this is my body, which shall be broken for you.” Likewise also the cup, saying, “This is my blood, which his shed for you; when you do this, you make my remembrance.”

(Anamnesis and oblation)
Remembering therefore his death and resurrection, we offer to you the bread and the cup, giving you thanks because you have held us worthy to stand before you and minister to you.

(Epiclesis of Holy Spirit)
And we ask that you would send your Holy Spirit upon the offering of your Holy Church; that, gathering her into one, you would grant to all who receive the holy things (to receive) for the fullness of the Holy Spirit for the strengthening of faith in truth; that we may praise and glorify you through your child Jesus Christ;

(Trinitarian Doxology)
through whom be glory and honour to you, to the Father and the Son, with the Holy Spirit, in your holy church, both now and to the ages of ages. Amen (Jasper and Cumming: 34-35, adapted).

In this example, the institution narrative is the culmination of a great Eucharistic prayer that begins by thanking God for the incarnation, proceeds to narrate the spoils of Christ's passion, and concludes with the recital of the Last Supper. All the mighty acts of God in and through Jesus find their end in his institution of the Supper, and by extension, in the present liturgical act. But the dominical words ‘Do this in my remembrance’ also point liturgically forward to the ecclesial words ‘remembering therefore his death and resurrection, we offer to you the bread and the cup, giving you thanks…’. On the one hand, the words of institution conclude the thanksgiving. On the other hand, they provide the basis for the church’s offering, the ‘sacrifice without blood’, as it would later be known.

At this early stage, then, the institution narrative is not set apart as the unique consecratory element. It is not a rite within a rite as in later eucharistic prayers, nor is a contrast made between divine words of institution versus human words of prayer, as

10 The very fact that a third person narrative now functions as a prayer in the second person is one of the reasons scholars such as Bradshaw and Johnson argue that the narrative is a later insertion into an older Eucharistic prayer lacking such a narrative.
Later theology would have it. Such a theology of consecration simply states that bread and cup are offered, and through this offering with thanksgiving, they become the body and blood of Jesus. Maxwell Johnson offers this summary:

Whatever the early eucharistic usages of the ‘institution narrative’ and *epiclesis* may have been, however, they certainly did not function early on as ‘consecration formulas’ for setting apart the bread and the cup in the context of an anaphoral prayer. Rather, what ‘consecrated’ the bread and wine appears to have been the prayer of thanksgiving (*eucharistia*), the anaphora itself. Nevertheless, it is also clear that Christians of the first three centuries understood the eucharistic bread and wine to be identified in a realistic manner with the ‘body’ and ‘blood’ of Christ. (57,58)

3. **Institution narrative as theology, but not as liturgical text**

Apart from strictly liturgical texts, a number of non-liturgical texts also describe the early church’s eucharistic theology, practice and liturgy. In these cases we find that the eucharistic *rite* being described contains no reference to the words of institution. But the eucharistic *theology* accompanying the description of the rite often does refer to the institution narrative. In other words, where the institution narrative is cited, it serves not to describe the text or ritual of the liturgy, but its theology.

**1 Corinthians 11:17-34**

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians provides the earliest example of a theological, but non-liturgical, use of the institution narrative. In contrast to the position of Luther, Chemnitz and the Formula of Concord, recent liturgical opinion maintains that when Christ said ‘do this in remembrance of me’ he did *not* mean, ‘recite these words which I have just spoken’ (McGowan: 77–80). Rather the natural referent of ‘do this’ is eating and drinking in the context of thanksgiving. Such an interpretation does not preclude the recitation of the narrative (or some other formula), but neither does it require it in the way the confessors assert.

A closer look at the text sheds light on this. Paul cites the dominical words he has received as part of his plea for proper conduct in the eucharistic assembly. He cites the words of Jesus to help the Corinthians appreciate two things: the true *nature* of their eating and drinking—they are eating ‘the body and blood of the Lord’ (1 Cor 11:27,29), and the *manner* in which they should eat and drink—they must do so worthily, recognising both the sacramental and ecclesial body of Christ (1 Cor 11:20–22, 29, 33,34). But Paul *doesn’t* say that these words of Jesus provide the text for recitation at the Lord’s Supper, or that these specific words consecrate the supper. As Enrico Mazza writes in his detailed study of eucharistic origins:

> In chapter 11 Paul presents the account of institution (with its bread-cup sequence) in order to offer the Corinthians the archetype and model that

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11 Even if the institution narrative admits of a formulaic nature, that is not itself proof of its liturgical or consecratory use. Here and elsewhere, the stylised form of the narrative may better suggest repeated catechetical use, as will become clear in the examples below.
would serve to correct and heal the deficiencies and errors of their eucharistic celebration, not in order to give suggestions of a ritual kind (71).

One other detail can be given in support of this argument. If this was a text for liturgical recitation, one would expect that the order of ritual words would match the order of ritual actions. But while the order of the words in chapter 11 is bread-cup, the order of the Corinthians’ ritual action in chapter 10 is cup first, then bread: ‘Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?’ Of course, the cup-bread order might only be serving Paul’s rhetorical needs at this point, but we have seen that some early eucharistic liturgies, such as the Didache, did observe the cup-bread ritual order. This observation has led Mazza to demonstrate considerable affinity between the ritual text and sequence of Didache 9 and 1 Corinthians 10:16-17. ¹²

**Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons**

The earliest citation of the words of institution outside the New Testament is found in Justin Martyr’s *First Apology*, a defense and explanation of the faith made to Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius in the mid second century. It includes some of the most helpful descriptions we have of early Christian worship and, along with *Apostolic Tradition*, has been immensely significant in modern liturgical renewal and ecumenism. ¹³ Later in the century Irenaeus makes a number of references to the Eucharist, especially in his vast anti-gnostic work, *Against the heresies*. Both Justin and Irenaeus are important to us, not only because they are vital witnesses to early church theology and practice, but also because they are the two pre-Ambrosian sources Chemnitz quotes in his assertion that the ancient church employed the institution narrative to effect the consecration.

In Apology 1:65 and 1:67 Justin offers an outline of the church’s liturgy in which several references are made to the eucharistic prayer offered by the president of the assembly. In 1:65 we read that the president

> sends up praise and glory to the Father of the universe through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and offers thanksgiving at some length that we have been deemed worthy to receive these things from him (Richardson: 286).

In 1:67 the description is briefer: the president ‘sends up prayers and thanksgivings to the best of his ability’. Nothing in this description suggests the recital of the institution narrative, let alone a consecratory understanding of it.

But in between these two passages, in 1:66, we do have an account of the narrative. However, its function is not to give information about the liturgical rite, but rather

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¹² Both texts share five elements: the cup rite, the bread rite, the theme of unity, the cup-bread sequence, and the unity theme taking the form of an embolism of the bread text (Mazza: 80–94).

to support a tightly phrased argument that the sacrament is not ordinary food and drink, but ‘the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus’. In a few compact lines Justin draws the connection between the incarnation of Christ, the flesh and blood of Christ in the meal, and the transformation of our flesh. Furthermore, when Justin cites the institution narrative, he still associates these words with the literary gospels, and not as yet with the liturgical celebration. The logic of Justin’s eucharistic thought in 1:66 proceeds as follows:

A  For not as common bread or common drink do we receive these things; but just as our Saviour Jesus Christ, being incarnate through (the) word of God, Incarnation of Christ (dia logou)

B  took both flesh and blood for our salvation, Flesh & blood taken up for human salvation

C  so too we have been taught that the food over which thanks have been given through (a) word of prayer which is from him, ‘Eucharistised’ food (dia logou)

B'  from which our blood and flesh are fed by transformation, Human blood and flesh nourished by this food

A'  is both the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus. Our food is the flesh and blood of the incarnate Christ

For the apostles in the memoirs composed by them, which are called gospels, have handed down what was commanded them: that Jesus, having taken bread, having given thanks, said, ‘Do this in my remembrance; this is my body’; and similarly having taken the cup and having given thanks, said, ‘This is my blood’; and gave to them alone (Bradshaw: 62, my emphasis).

Nevertheless, one phrase in this passage has long been held to refer to the liturgically recited institution narrative. That is Justin’s enigmatic statement that the Eucharistic transformation is said to take place ‘through a word of prayer which is from him’ (di’ euxes logou tou par’ autou). This ‘word of prayer’ was held by Chemnitz, and many others, to be none other than the institution narrative. But apart from the fact that ‘a word of prayer’ more naturally suggests the unspecified ‘prayers and thanksgivings’ sent up by the president (1:65), it again seems that Justin is outlining Eucharistic theology, not referring to a liturgical text. Furthermore, some scholars now believe the context of the passage admits a different reading altogether: ‘through the prayer of the Word which is from him

14 These words, says Justin, are written by the Apostles ‘in the memoirs composed by them’.

15 This is precisely the use that the Formula makes of this phrase, arguing for the analogy between the incarnation and the consecration (FC SD 7, 39; Tappert: 576).
(God). The parallel between the process of incarnation and the process of eucharistic consecration, both taking place dia logou, suggests that Justin’s reference to logos is first and foremost about the Word—the one who became flesh and dwelt among us.\textsuperscript{16} In any case, Justin’s phrase is difficult to pin down, and it resists any easy identification.

Like Justin, Irenaeus also develops his eucharistic thinking around the incarnation of the Word, offering profound reflection on the centrality of matter and flesh in God’s saving economy. While he does not provide many details about the rite itself, what is clear is that the Eucharist, understood as the true and God-pleasing sacrifice foreshadowed in Malachi 1:11, involved thanksgiving and invocation (epiclesis) over bread and wine. But did this thanksgiving or invocation involve reciting the institution narrative? Chemnitz certainly thought so. He cites Irenaeus’ words from Against the Heresies:

> When to the cup with its mixture and the bread which has been broken the Word of God is added, it becomes the Eucharist of the body and blood of the Lord (Adv Haer 5.2.3; Examen: 227).

This ‘Word of God’ must refer to the institution narrative, says Chemnitz. However, Irenaeus’ reference to the ‘Word of God’ is unspecified, and there is no mention of the institution narrative in the context of this section. The only time Irenaeus has recourse to these words of Christ in a liturgical context, in Adv Haer 4.17.5,\textsuperscript{17} is when he is developing his rich theology of the Eucharist. The passage reads:

> The Lord gave directions to his disciples to offer first-fruits to God from God’s own creatures, not as though God stood in need of them, but that they themselves may be neither unfruitful nor ungrateful. Thus he took the bread, which comes from creation, and he gave thanks, saying: ‘This is my Body’. He did likewise with the cup, which is part of the creation to which we ourselves belong, declaring it to be his blood, and [so] he taught the new offering of the new covenant. (Power: 15,16)

As we have seen with Justin, Irenaeus weaves portions of the institution narrative\textsuperscript{18} into his eucharistic theology, in this case furthering his argument that the Eucharist is the one true and God pleasing offering, the means by which God’s good creation is caught up in the economy of salvation and humankind glorified in the process. But what Irenaeus does not do here is suggest that the institution narrative provides the text of the church’s eucharistic rite. Even if some contemporary liturgical inference were drawn from these words, it would only be that Christ’s words are part of the act of thanksgiving, as we saw with Apostolic Tradition.


\textsuperscript{17} There is actually one other passage where Irenaeus draws on the institution narrative (Adv Haer 5.33.1). But while he quotes Matthew’s account of the narrative in part, no liturgical connection is made.

\textsuperscript{18} In this case lifted out of the passion context and amplified with further statements: ‘which comes from creation…which is part of the creation’.
Irenaeus' frequent references to 'the call of God' (invocation/epiclesis) are also taken by Chemnitz to happen 'when Christ declares concerning the bread “This is my body”' (Examen: 227). But again, there is little direct equivalence between the invocation/epiclesis and the institution narrative. Irenaeus writes:

For as the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the **invocation of God** is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, the earthly and the heavenly, so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, but have the hope of resurrection. (**Adv Haer** 4.18.5, Power: 21, my emphasis)

It would be as anachronistic to regard ‘the invocation of God’ as the recitation of the institution narrative as it would be to see this as a fully developed Spirit epiclesis that characterised later eucharistic prayers. David Power suggests that 'Irenaeus has the invocation of the name of the Word Incarnate in view', reminding us that '[n]either prayer forms nor vocabulary had in his time reached the clarity and stability to which we have become accustomed'. He concludes that

> [t]he format of the Eucharistic prayer is not clarified, and invocation (**epiclesis**) may refer to the whole prayer as done in the name of Christ, or to a section of the prayer which is invocation by way of distinction from that part which is thanksgiving. (26)

**Cyril of Jerusalem**

One of the most striking examples of a ‘missing’ institution narrative at a late stage is found in Cyril of Jerusalem's fifth mystagogical sermon,19 delivered to the newly baptised around the middle of the 4th century. In this address, Cyril describes the eucharistic rite section by section:

- Introductory dialogue
- Preface
- Sanctus
- Epiclesis
- Intercessions and commemorations
- Lord’s Prayer
- Communion

The omission of the institution narrative is glaring. Some have argued that it was in fact recited at this point, either before or after the epiclesis, but that Cyril has passed over it in his mystagogical description.20 But two factors tell against this argument from silence.

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19 ‘Mystagogical’ refers to the ‘mysteries’ (sacraments) whose meaning was often only unfolded to neophytes at the end of their lengthy catechumenal process, or even after initiation itself.

First, the *epiclesis* itself seems to take the entire weight of consecration. Cyril writes that:

> we call upon the merciful God to send the Holy Spirit on our offerings, so that he may make the bread Christ's body, and the wine Christ's blood; for clearly whatever the Holy Spirit touches is sanctified and transformed. (Yarnold: 92)

And immediately after this, just before describing the intercessions, Cyril reports that 'the spiritual sacrifice – this worship without blood – has been completed'. After the *epiclesis*, according to Cyril, there is no further need for consecration.

The second factor is even more telling. In the same way that Justin cited the institution narrative, not in order to describe the liturgical rite but to support his eucharistic theology, so also does Cyril, but in his *previous* address, the fourth mystagogical sermon. Appealing to his perhaps incredulous converts Cyril draws on Christ's words to impress upon them the true nature of the Eucharist:

> Since, then, Christ himself clearly described the bread to us in the words ‘This is my body’, who will dare henceforth to dispute it? And since he has emphatically said. ‘This is my blood’, who will waver in the slightest and say it is not his blood? (Yarnold: 86)

But in all this there is no reference to these words being spoken in the liturgy, aloud or silently. And that is very strange, since it is his express purpose to describe the liturgy to these newest members of the church. It seems clear that Cyril appeals to the institution narrative as Scripture, but not as yet to Scripture used liturgically.\(^{21}\)

4. **The shape and nature of early Eucharistic praying**

At this point it might be worth considering what shape early eucharistic praying did take, if the institution narrative was not yet the liturgical kernel of the church's celebration. While mindful of the diversity characterising this early period, scholars propose that the basic original pattern was one of thanksgiving (in which Christ's saving deeds were recalled) and supplication (in which the promised fulfillment of those deeds was sought). Thanksgiving and supplication, remembrance and request—this comprised the primitive nucleus of early eucharistic praying.

Almost from the beginning these two sections would be linked with an offering formula, often citing Mal 1:11, as seen in the following fragment known as *Strasbourg Papyrus*, an important precursor of later Egyptian eucharistic prayers.

\(^{21}\) Enrico Mazza shares this opinion: ‘The sequence of elements in the *anaphora* attested to by the fifth catechesis does not include the account of institution, and nothing allows us to suppose that it had to be there’. However, he also believes that Cyril's fourth sermon reflects a time of considerable liturgical evolution and the recent trend to use the narrative liturgically. The fourth catechesis ‘has all the elements for being of liturgical origin’ and ‘there is a movement toward the presence of the institution account in the anaphora. But matters are in an unstable and variant rate of growth and adaptation’ (328).
Only in time would the thanksgiving culminate in the institution narrative (as we saw with *Apostolic Tradition*), while at a similar stage of development a more developed *epiclesis*, or invocation of the Spirit, would form within the rite. And as we have seen with Cyril of Jerusalem, it was the epiclesis that first attracted more explicitly consecratory statements.

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<tr>
<td>Offering</td>
<td>we offer the reasonable sacrifice and this bloodless service, which all the nations offer you, “from sunrise to sunset,” from south to north, [for] your “name is great among all the nations, and in every place incense is offered to you holy name and a pure sacrifice.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplication</td>
<td>Over this sacrifice and offering we pray and beseech you, remember your holy and only Catholic Church, all your peoples and all your flocks….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doxology</td>
<td>….through whom be glory to you to the ages of ages’ (Jasper and Cuming: 53-54).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. The first witness to the institution narrative as an exclusive formula of consecration

Finally, it is in a context very similar to Cyril’s that we encounter the first clear reference to the institution narrative understood as a distinct consecratory formula. That reference occurs in St Ambrose of Milan’s late 4th century treatise, *De Sacramentis*. Like his mystagogical counterpart Cyril, Ambrose sought to explain to the newly washed the sacramental realities they had just participated in. The Milanese bishop anticipates the questions of his somewhat mystified converts who seem puzzled by the stupendous claims made about ordinary bread and wine:

> Perhaps you say, ‘The bread I have here is ordinary bread’. Yes, before the sacramental words are uttered this bread is nothing but bread. But at the consecration this bread becomes the body of Christ. Let us reason this out …
by what words is the consecration effected, and whose words are they? The words of the Lord Jesus. All that is said before is the words of the priest: praise is offered to God, the prayer is offered up, petitions are made for the people, for kings, for all others. But when the moment comes for bringing the most holy sacrament into being, the priest does not use his own words any longer: he uses the words of Christ. Therefore it is Christ's word that brings this sacrament into being (De Sacramentis 4.14, Yarnold: 132-133).

Concluding his argument a few lines later Ambrose says: ‘To answer your question, then, before the consecration it was not the body of Christ, but after the consecration I tell you that it is now the body of Christ’ (my emphasis). From then on, this explanation would form the distinctive theology of consecration in western Christendom, a theology of consecration that prevailed even when the prayers of the canon (of which Ambrose is also the first witness) assumed their monumental status throughout medieval Europe.22

The exact reason for the emergence of this more precise theology of consecration is hard to pin down. No explicit reasons are given. But it could be that as Christianity received official tolerance, and then approbation, a sudden influx of converts heightened considerably the catechetical needs of the church. Now that there were advantages in entering the fold, not all converts were as dedicated or convinced as in the age of the martyrs. More effort was required, not only to teach the meaning of the faith, but also to inculcate the appropriate awe and reverence such mysteries deserved. The liturgy itself would become the prime location for this to happen. And since the institution narrative, along with the epiclesis, was by the fourth century already finding its way into the eucharistic prayer, all that remained was to draw out its true significance.

**Responding to the claim**

What then do we make of all this? How shall we respond to the claim that thanksgiving formed the original nucleus of the supper liturgy, and that the institution narrative would only assume its central role much later?

We could just dismiss the claim as irrelevant, a purely historical question with no bearing on theology or liturgical practice today. We could go further, perhaps, and write off the sacramental theology of the patristic era as sacramentally deficient from the outset. But as we have seen, the Reformers themselves were deeply devoted to the fathers, and the patristic era continues to be a great source of theological inspiration and renewal for the church today. Or maybe we could try to disprove the claim. That's a better response, since scholarly trends always need to be tested, and the arguments presented here do invite a number of questions. However, it is my opinion that the historical claim described in these pages is, on the whole, reasonably convincing. We can recognise, therefore, that in the earliest centuries thanksgiving was the central theological motif of the church’s

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22 John Chrysostom’s well known words about the efficacy of Christ's words of institution in the present (MPG 49:380), which are quoted in the Formula of Concord (FC SD 7, 76; Tappert: 583), also come from this time period (the late 4th century).
meal, as the very word ‘Eucharist’ suggests. No wonder the whole rite began with the words, ‘Let us give thanks to the Lord’.

The tendency, therefore, within some Lutheran circles to limit this part of the liturgy to the words of institution alone has little to do with the practice of the early church. Nor does the suspicion that eucharistic praying detracts from the gift nature of the sacrament receive much support from these early centuries. The early church gave thanks precisely because this was pure gift; it offered the sacrifice of praise because the church was a new humanity, because God was bringing his church together from the four corners of the earth. Yes, one can and should distinguish Christ’s instituting words from human eucharistic words, for our words are nothing, and Christ’s word sustains all things. But when liturgical thanksgiving is depicted as ‘our work’, we misconstrue this act entirely, because true thanksgiving is nothing less than the proclamation of God’s creative and redemptive acts in Christ. Furthermore, such thanksgiving prayer is led by Christ himself, our great high priest and chief liturgist. True thanksgiving is not inimical to faith which receives, for it is precisely in giving thanks that we acknowledge ourselves to be beneficiaries.

Thanksgiving is what the church is called to do, in the life of its members, in its prayer for the world, in its proclamation of the gospel, and in its foretaste of the feast to come. In thanksgiving we ‘lift up our hearts’ – we get out of ourselves, and begin to celebrate here and now the life of the world to come.

In Eucharist, we acknowledge that sanctified bread and wine bear witness to our transformation and to the renewal of all things. In thanksgiving we fulfill our role as priesthood and show before the world what kind of an existence is ‘truly fitting and right’ for the human race. In short, the eucharistic liturgy of the early church invites us to look at our sacramental life, and consider whether we are giving adequate expression to its inherently eucharistic dimension.

Nothing here should cause us to doubt or downplay the words of Christ. We cannot transport ourselves back to some era of liturgical infancy, because the words of institution are now embedded in the theology, practice and piety of our entire tradition. We can and must continue to confess that Christ's powerful word, spoken through the mouth of the minister, makes the sacrament what it is. But perhaps we can also see that such words belong in the liturgical cradle of thanksgiving, as witnessed to by the infant church.

We have much within our own theological tradition that awaits exploration, such as Article 24 of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, with its unique way of addressing the whole area of Eucharistic sacrifice as something quite different from propitiatory sacrifice. And a strong case for Eucharistic thanksgiving can be found in the LCA’s Commission on Worship statement 32, ‘The Celebration of the Lord’s Supper with Thanksgiving’, the liturgical implications of which await development. See http://www.lca.org.au/resources/cow/worshipstate32.pdf
References


