

Chapter xxix:

Chalice and paten brought to the altar

THE TABLE WAS NOT OF SILVER, the chalice was not of gold in which Christ gave His blood to His disciples to drink, and yet everything there was precious and truly fit to inspire awe.¹ So praught St John, nicknamed *Chrysostom* or *Golden-Tongue*, the greatest preacher of his age (which was the late fourth century. His eloquence made him Patriarch of Constantinople, but then a grubby ecclesial *coup* did for him – which shows the limited usefulness of preaching in a clerical career).

Reverencing the chalice before it is filled.

JOHAN GOLDEN-TONGUE raises the issue we have to consider this week. For we've reached the point in Mass when, with solemnity – although it only takes a few seconds – gold and silver vessels are placed on the altar and prepared for the Body and Blood. Precious vessels are brought to the altar so that they may contain what is, beyond thought, more precious. The mind swims with an excessive weight of glory.

These vessels demand reverence because they are worth unfathomably *more* than what they hold, and they demand reverence even when they are not holding it. Everything here is *precious and truly fit to inspire awe*. When the subdeacon bears the empty vessels to God's imposing Table, his hands are gorgeously covered against the exorbitant rareness of what he grasps. The chalice is empty, but its function – its only function; it is never used for anything else – has made it altogether honourable. It was made for nothing but holding the deathless blood of the dying God. It is, as it were, outside time, outside the perishable earth. It is easy to imagine a chalice surviving the wreck of worlds. Seeing it, our minds run back through many centuries to that chalice, not of gold, in Christ's hand in the Upper Room. We recall the Last Supper. We find ourselves musing on the Holy Grail.

¹ *Hom. i in Matt.*

The subdeacon fulfils the quest for the Grail as he goes to the credence. Chrysostom's idea is juggled before our eyes. Here is gold; then, at the Last Supper, there was (conceivably) only earthenware (although the Passover feast may have called forth plate even then). But our awe is the same as the awe of the Twelve then, because of What both vessels hold – the same Substance now as then.

Now, as it happens, the chalice in which Christ gives His blood to His disciples to drink *is* of gold, at least on the inside (our normal Sunday chalice is silver, gilded within). Indeed, in some of Christendom's greatest churches, the table is literally made of silver. Gold and silver inspire a certain reverence which is a good metaphor for Eucharistic reverence. The Church therefore celebrates Mass using vessels of precious metal. That is, theologically, a detail, although an entirely *appropriate* detail. The cup and plate used in this rite are of bullion, not to make the Rite more noble (it cannot be made more noble), but because it would be jarring to use anything less.

*Non corruptibilibus argento vel auro redempti estis
sed pretioso sanguine quasi agni incontaminati et
immaculati*

Christi :

*You were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or
gold . . .*

*but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and
spotless,*

*the blood of Christ.*²

Profound mines are sunk into our planet to bring up, through millions of tons of rock, precious ore. But that Blood is more rare than gold – and older, and stronger; more universally useful. It is the Blood, not yet in the cup, that makes the silver cup so very fine. It is the timeless nearness of that Blood which makes the empty cup superlative – so superlative that the subdeacon handles it only through his cloak of silk.³

² I Peter i^{18a, 19}.

³ Over the last three decades there has been a fashion to use pottery goblets and saucers, usually of startling gawkiness – it's part of the fashion of making the Mass more *authentic*. *Authentic*, being interpreted, turns out to mean *shabby, casual, patronising, and loyal to 1970s design*. The results of earthenware chalices are: (i) people, shuddering at accessories they'd never allow in their houses, cannot endure to go to Mass any more; (ii) so they don't; while (iii) those who still do lose all reverence, and therefore lose hold of the doctrine of the Real Presence. And this is not a theological detail.

The sacrifice of blood.

WHY IS CHRIST'S BLOOD *USEFUL*, EXACTLY? Before we think about the chalice, let's quickly run over the theory of the redemption of the universe by what is within the chalice: the Precious Blood. This theory is known as Christianity.

Ante contitutionem mundi, Before the foundation of the world, declares St Peter,⁴ it was known in Heaven that the world was to be re-founded on the shed Blood of God-made-man. That Blood, infinitely the most valuable thing in the world, was poured out one Friday afternoon on a hill in Palestine (in circumstances almost unbelievably squalid and violent). The shaky constitution of the universe was thereby obliterated. *The earth did quake, and the rocks rent,*⁵ declares St Matthew, poetically; *there was a darkness over all the earth,*⁶ adds St Luke, outdoing him. A new universe began to come into existence; its renewal will continue to grow until a wholly renovated world is seen coming down out of Heaven from God, like a bride adorned for her husband,⁷ earth as we know it having fled away from the unveiled Presence.⁸ For then the Blood shed on Golgotha as a Man died will have blasted away evil, and washed the cosmos clean of death, *the last enemy.*⁹ The Blood, awful in its price, will have made all things new.¹⁰

Monday was the Feast of the Most Precious Blood, which I should have mentioned last week last week, and the 'Secret' at that Mass begged God that His altars should yet again be sprinkled with blood.¹¹ I know how this sort of language jars with the queasy modern sensibility about blood and guts. I'm aware how we flinch from crucifixes which emphasise bleeding, how we wince when old-fashioned hymns declare

*Lift ye then your voices: swell the mighty flood;
louder still and louder praise the Precious Blood!*¹²

or
*His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o'er His Body on the tree,
Then I am dead to all the world,*

The present chapter isn't going to include any more jeering at the Church's decadence, although there's a lot to be said on that score when it comes to liturgical metalwork.

⁴ I Peter i²⁰.

⁵ Matthew xxvii⁵¹.

⁶ Luke (xxiii⁴⁴) is improving on Matthew (xxvii⁴⁵), who merely darkens Palestine.

⁷ Revelation xxi².

⁸ Revelation xx¹¹.

⁹ I Corinthians xv²⁶.

¹⁰ Revelation xxi⁵.

¹¹ *American Missal*, 1 July.

¹² 'Viva, viva, Jesu!' (335 in our hymnal).

*And all the world is dead to me.*¹³

We cringe.

But Christian doctrine can't do without this idea of salvation through Blood; and Christian devotion can't do without this cult of the Blood (*cult* or *cultus* is the Church's word for systematic veneration). How can we translate the traditional, explicit, dogmatic language about the sacrifice of Christ's shed Blood – how can we translate the traditional, explicit, doctrinal language exulting that bloody sacrifice – into language suitable our frail sensibility?

We can't. So it's our sensibility that has to be crushed. We have to steel ourselves to this sanguinary language. There is no other way to say what has to be said.

We need to be able to say this: that our wounded fleshy selves, fated to die and rot, are reclaimed from oblivion only by the offering of divine Flesh, by being (as all the saints loved to say) sprinkled with, immersed in, inebriated by, what Christ shed at Calvary. This image is too immense, and too central to the Faith, for our prim squeamishness to stand in its way. So down with our squeamishness.¹⁴

¹³ 'When I survey the wondrous cross' (337 in our hymnal).

¹⁴ A speculation follows of no direct importance (I admit) to liturgy. Skip it if you like.

Why is contemporary society so squeamish about biology? Why did the Attorney-General feel that he had to cover up that personification of Justice with her innocent bare breast? Why is vegetarianism everywhere on the rise, ravaging and laying waste, battenning on our abhorrence of corpses? Why, even where meat is still for sale, must we buy it aseptically wrapped in plastic, rather than from an honest butcher with carcasses frankly dangling in his windows? Why were we quite so hysterical about anthrax spores in the mail last autumn? Why must we be so abnormally priggish about race, especially as regards good-humoured jokes about races? Why is the debate on capital punishment (there are good arguments to be made on both sides) so histrionic? Why do we recoil so hysterically from all gore, all harmless dirt, all humble bodily functions? Why (I think it's the same question) did Pope Paul VI, with a shudder, suppress the Feast of the Most Precious Blood?

My theory, for what it's worth, is that our civilisation is sick with biological squeamishness – with morbid dread and disgust at the mammalian body in general – *because* it is over-familiar and reckless with sexuality.

There is a certain healthy instinct within mankind for restraint, discretion concealment, propriety. That instinct is very wisely applied to erotic matters, because love really is *as strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave; the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame* (Song of Songs viii⁶). Any fool can see – or ought to be able to see – that the god Eros, in all his danger and glory, his titanic might, has to be treated with care, and guarded against riot (or lassitude) by elaborate conventions.

But for the last forty years, our culture embarked on a Sexual Revolution. That is, we are trying the experiment of treating Eros as if he were a contemptible, biddable, tame wee god, a plaything. We have abandoned many of the ancient conventions of propriety. I don't think the main result of this experiment has been an increase in sexual

The blood of the Old Testament.

THE ANCIENT WORLD in which Christianity arose was not at all squeamish about the sacrifice of blood. All religions cut the throats of animals and offered their gods the sacrifice of blood. Bloodshed was what made religion serious, lifting it above mere popular culture. Judaism was in this matter no different from any other religion. The contract or covenant or testament between Yahweh and the Israelites was, according to their legends, sealed by Moses' pouring hot bulls' blood into basins and flinging it over the altar and over the people.¹⁵ Israel's sacrificial cult did not cease until the Romans destroyed the Jerusalem Temple in A.D. 70.

The Jews' greatest sacrifice occurred in spring. Every year each Jewish family took a blemishless male lamb and slew it, on the fourteenth day of the spring month of Nisan. They dashed its blood *on the two side posts and on the upper door post of the houses*, and ate it *that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; and with bitter herbs . . . it is the LORD's passover*.¹⁶ One of the last things Christ did before His own death was to offer this Passover lamb – which is to say that He cut its throat and, as a layman, handed it across the rails into the sanctuary, to a priest who performed a rite of offertory with it, declaring it to be God's. Then Christ and His adopted family, the disciples, took the lamb back to their rented room to eat. This was the lamb which lay in the centre of the table at the Last Supper.

Now, although Judaism offered blood to the heavens, like every other ancient religion, there was a tradition within Judaism which was embarrassed at presenting such offerings to the Creator of everything – not

delight or sexual energy; and I am certain that one side-result has been a sickly rise in prudery in every sphere except the erotic. (Eros, after all, is a unruly boy, easily offended, and his revenge on us for despising him is to turn us into glum debauchees and unchaste prudes.)

The instinct for propriety, thwarted in one area of life, breaks out in others. In a way which would have amazed all our ancestors, we shrink from dealing openly with the facts of hunting, with the fact of our own biological death, with the facts of plumbing – go to a furnishing store and listen to the euphemisms! – even with non-erotic nudity (can we still even *imagine* non-erotic nudity?). We pay for speaking of eros with foolish profanity by being prudes about every other biological facet of life. And hence our rather childish aversion to speaking of blood, even the Precious Blood.

My speculation ends.

Now back to the more robust ancient world.

¹⁵ Exodus xxiv⁵⁻⁸.

¹⁶ Exodus xii^{7, 8, 11}.

because bulls' blood is disgusting – it isn't; it *isn't* – but because bull's blood is inadequate. In one of the most startling Psalms (but then all the Psalms are more daring than our pious hymns) God is imagined bellowing profanely:

*Si esuriero non dicam tibi
meus est enim orbis terræ et plenitudo eius :
numquid manducabo carnes taurorum
aut sanguinem hircorum potabo
If I be hungry, I will not tell thee;
for the whole world is mine, and all that is therein.
Thinkest thou that I will eat bulls' flesh,
and drink the blood of goats? ¹⁷*

No, we can't think that. Therefore the perpetual offering to Heaven of animal blood (or even, horribly, the blood of murdered human victims) left mankind feeling religiously unsatisfied, and therefore sad. It was not that men wanted to stop sacrificing: *without the shedding of blood is no remission*, no escape¹⁸ – some drastic action was necessary for humanity and divinity to draw close; somehow, everyone knows this. But men also knew that the insistent offering of oxen and lambs was defective.

Men wanted, not an end to sacrifice, but a consummation of sacrifice, an offering incomparably greater. What?

The Blood of the New Testament.

ON THE EVENING OF THE FOURTEENTH OF NISAN, one spring two thousand years ago, a rabbi named Joshua ben Joseph celebrated the Passover feast with His friends, in obedience to the Law of Moses. We hellenise His Name and call Him JESUS. Although absolutely human, as human as you are, He was (as He had somehow come to understand) also absolutely divine. He was God.

He knew that He was about to be killed this Passover. And He had long contemplated what He was going to do at this Passover feast. As they sat and feasted on the lamb, JESUS took the bread – flat, unleavened bread, because Passover is the feast of unleavened bread – blessed it (as the custom was), and offered it to them saying – well, you know what He said. We'll

¹⁷ Psalm xlix¹²⁻¹³ (Vulgate), 1¹²⁻¹³ (Prayer Book).

¹⁸ Hebrews ix²².

come to those extravagant words in a few chapters' time. Again, He took the big cup of wine they were sharing, blessed it, and said:

Bibite ex hoc omnes:

*hic est enim sanguis meus novi testamenti
qui pro multis effunditur in remissionem
peccatorum*²

Drink ye all of it;

*For this is my Blood of the new testament,
which is shed for many for the remission of sins.*¹⁹

His disciples must have so entirely shocked that their brains stopped working (and indeed, twenty centuries on, His disciples are still gaping in wonder at these words). But the next day the Blood He had already given them was, in brute fact, shed – splashed on the gallow-beams, as the lambs' blood was painted on the door-jambs. And then His disciples realised that JESUS had gone beyond what Moses did when Moses established the first testament between God and man. Here was *the Blood of the new and everlasting covenant* (as the Mass declares in the words of institution): here was the one acceptable sacrifice, the one satisfying sacrifice – acceptable because It was divine: satisfying because mankind could offer it.

Blood, the Blood of God! Of course! What had all those sad centuries of sacrifice been but an education for humanity, so that we could realise at last what it was we needed? We needed the Blood of God, to offer to God, and to drink, so that we could become ourselves divine. All the millenia of man's futile faith came to a head that evening in Palestine, that 14th of Nisan, when God-become-man reconciled man and God by offering both God and man His own Blood in a chalice.

Longing for the Chalice after it was emptied.

THAT CUP! THAT CUP! We are back at the words of John Chrysostom: it was not of gold, and yet it was infinitely *precious and truly fit to inspire awe*. Bread can merely sit on the table (as, indeed, the Host merely sits on the corporal at Mass once It is consecrated). The incarnate divine Body lies motionless on the altar. But it is not just God become man, it Christ *broken*, Christ *outpoured*, Who saves us. Wine needs to be contained a cup, God's swirling Blood requires a goblet; and this necessary cup spans every Mass and takes us back to that 14th of Nisan in Jerusalem.

¹⁹ Matthew xxvi.

That cup! What happened to it? Where is it? If you don't see the urgent romance of that question, you aren't in *rapport* with the spirit of Catholic Christianity. Already, a generation after the Last Supper, the most creative Christian theologian of the day was speaking rather wistfully of that primal cup. *The chalice of benediction, which we bless, writes St. Paul, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?*²⁰ Of course we see that chalice of benediction every Sunday at Mass; but that whets our longing to see the first chalice, with which man and God were first reconciled. As early as the sixth century pilgrims to the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem were shown a chalice of onyx with handles to it, and invited to honour it *as* the Last Supper cup; and then, it seems, a little later, they were being shown an even more impressive affair of silver. At Valencia in Spain they still reverence a cup of agate as the first receptacle of God's Blood; in Genoa there was for many centuries a *cultus* paid to broad drinking dish, fifteen inches wide, the *sacro cantino*, said to be carved of a single priceless emerald. Then in the late nineteenth century some idiot dropped it and it smashed: it wasn't an emerald at all, but thick green glass. In a curious way the Genoese sulkily decided their *sacro cantino* therefore wasn't the Last Supper chalice either, and hustled it out of sight²¹

The history of Christian relics is heady and magnificent, but sometimes a bit fatuous, as is the way with all great human affairs. That cup! The cup of the Last Supper! What happened to it? Where is it? If we don't retain a decent scepticism, we have lost our heads. I don't imagine the disciple band went about fully equipped with crockery and cutlery, as if they were caterers. The room they rented for the Passover feast presumably came set up, with table and places laid. Christ offered the renovation of the cosmos in a rented drinking bowl, which was (say) smashed during a rowdy lunch party four years later. Why not? Nothing would fit the divine humility better.

The reasonableness of the Grail legend.

BUT AS IT HAPPENS, the romance of that chalice fired the happy heart of the high Middle Ages; and the land where men's hearts burned most for the sight of the Last Supper cup was England. Christian mediæval Englishmen spun from that desire "[the matter of Britain](#)", England's great national epic. This epic or cycle of stories is about the quest

²⁰ I Corinthians x¹⁶.

²¹ www.newadvent.org under CHALICE. I read of the *sacro cantino* in Evelyn Waugh.

for the Faith's most precious relic, the Last Supper Cup, which in England was known as [the Grail](#) (from French *Graal*, a serving dish), or as the *Sangrail* (which, perhaps punningly, was taken to mean *sang real*, *Blood of the King*).

The word *Grail* perhaps causes you to shiver a little. It ought to. For the Anglican Communion is the religious tradition of the English people, as the Grail epic is the English national legend. The Gospel history is our family story; so is the tale of the quest for the Holy Grail. It bites deep into our imagination. The Englishmen who concocted the Grail cycle wove it in with the semi-historical story of Arthur, the young splendid king who lived (if he did) in the fifth century, in that hidden age after the Romans left Britain and before the barbarian Saxons – the English themselves! – overran the land. They wove into it the story of Perceval, who is perhaps in origin a Celtic god (and turns into the rather nasty figure of Parsifal into the bombastic works of Wagner). They wove it into the story of Jesus, and of the conversion of Britain.

And they also mingled with it an older story – the oldest story of all, perhaps. This is the story that there is, amidst the world's endless variety, a certain hidden something: the one most precious thing, [the world's desire](#). The world's desire must be found through terrible searching, and heroes must overcome their terror to undertake the quest for it. The Greeks turned this story into the epic of Troy: Helen was boundlessly lovely, the desire of nations, the provocation of every heroism. Christianity identifies the world's desire as Christ. To quest for Him is mankind's great odyssey and noblest epic, and to find Him has all the intoxicating charm of coming home, and also the strangeness of beholding the utterly exotic, the final remoteness. [Christianity is thus romantic](#). In twelfth and thirteenth century England that romance spilled over into the Grail stories. Men already mad with love for Christ and His Mother and His blessed saints imagined what it would have been like, in a magical heroic age, to search across their own country for the Cup of the Blood of the King.

The completed “matter of Britain” (which owes a lot to a canny Archdeacon of Oxford named Walter Map) goes like this. Joseph of Arimathea – the rich member of the Sanhedrin who wrapped Christ's Body in a clean linen cloth, the first corporal, and buried It in his own tomb²² – was present as Christ died. He was indeed a sort of great-uncle of JESUS. Having perceived the significance of Christ's words, *This is My Blood*, Joseph had secured the Cup, and caught some of the Precious Blood as it ran

²² Matthew xxvii⁵⁷⁻⁶⁰.

down the scaffold. Thirty years later, Joseph and his band of followers came to Britain, which was not yet a Roman province, but a land Joseph knew from his travels as a tin merchant (this last bit is more historically probable than it sounds). Joseph of Arimathea brought with him the Gospel of Christ; he also brought with him the staggering relic which had held the divine Blood, both at the Last Supper and the next day on Golgotha: the Grail. In time the Grail was lost, perhaps at Glastonbury; and long afterward, when Arthur ruled Britain, a vision of it electrified Arthur and his knights to search for it, most especially the pure Sir Galahad, who in finding it passed from the world And the Grail legend spreads out in every direction, for it really is the great epic of the British Isles, and can encompass every legend that has ever touched Britain. For instance, it develops the lovely, impossible idea that Joseph, on an earlier tin expedition, brought the teenaged JESUS with Him to the West Country.

*And did those feet in ancient times
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy lamb of God
On England's pleasant pasture seen?
And did the countenance divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?*²³

Victorian England got inflamed all over again by Arthurian stories. To be frank, there was in this Victorian enthusiasm a touch of self-conscious nationalism, which is a bit creepy – and there was even, horribly, a touch of whimsy. Still, the Grail stories brought a rumour of the world's desire to a people gloomed over by Protestantism, and also by liberal Christianity, which pretends that following the man JESUS is essentially a matter of trying to be conscientious, like Him. The Grail legend at least cuts across that error: it forces the imagination to attend to the core of Christianity, which is mysterious, ancient, menacing, supernatural.

All life is a Grail-quest.

PERHAPS FOR PEOPLE IN THE ENGLISH CULTURAL TRADITION (including all those within the Anglican Communion) the best way to the core of the Catholic Faith is still through Quest. [We are romantics](#). Beneath

²³ William Blake, 'Jerusalem'. If you are stimulated by this outline, I recommend the great poem of the *Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Mallory (on-line at www.luminarium.org/medlit/malory.htm), or – for a modern treatment – the Grail novel of Charles Williams.

our conservatism and superficial nostalgia there is, I think, a genuine, heroic passion for something strange and fine and rare and ancient – for an unknown prize which lurks within the world, of which a whisper has somehow reached us, maddening us with desire. O to find it – or to fall in the attempt – or indeed to come one final twilight, sick with weariness, into a ruinous chapel in the woods, and see, hovering, bright amidst a radiance of uncreated light, what we have longed for without knowing what . . . !

It is easy to mock any romantic mood. But mockery is not always the last word of wisdom. The heart *does* leap with craving, all the sweeter for being painful; tears of desire do blur with tears of joyous consummation; the Quest does burn away baser impulses, even when it seems to be futile; the Christian's life really is a gallant pilgrimage after we-know-not-quite-what; we do yearn to seek the cryptic Sangreal, the chalice of the King. We want the Grail, and one day we shall have it: for deeper than the any pilgrimage after esoteric secrets is the thirst for the Blood of the Eucharist; and beyond even that is the unimaginable wine of which Mass itself is only a foretaste: the wine which Christ at the Last Supper knew He would soon be drinking *new in the kingdom of God*,²⁴ the vintage of eternity.

Anyway, to give you a taste of the Victorianised Grail cycle, here are Tennyson's famous verses from *Sir Galahad*, with an illustration of them by the American Edmund H. Garrett:




And also here – much better art – is an illustration to Mallory by Arthur Rackham: *How at the Castle of Corbin a Maiden Bare in the Sangreal and Foretold the Achievements of Galahad*.




²⁴ Mark xxiv²⁵.



And here (I'm under no illusions about its artistic merit) is a picture of the Grail appearing to Arthur and his knights.



Here, finally, is a fine cartoon by the incomparable Max Beerbohm titled *The Sole Remark Likely to Have Been Made by Benjamin Jowett about the Mural Paintings at the Oxford Union*. Dante Gabriel Rossetti is executing his famous murals of the quest for the Grail. (Try to see these when you are next in England: they were recently restored). Jowett, Eminent Victorian, Master of Balliol College, the great oracle of Liberal Christianity, demands: *“And what were they going to do with the Grail when they found it, Mr Rossetti?”*



Exactly! only a Liberal Christian could ask such a thing, and a Liberal Christian has no capacity to hear the reply.

The Grail is wholly desirable because it is the Grail. We want to see it, because there is nothing better for man to do than see it (except drink from

it). We do not *do* things with it. Joseph of Arimathea treasured it, King Arthur and Sir Lancelot and Sir Galahad and Sir Perceval sought it, and we venerate it, for the unspeakable deed that was once done with it. That deed is not remote: we shall see it done again in a few minutes' time.

The most romantic moment of the Mass.

LIBERAL CHRISTIANITY IS TRUE, as far as it goes, which isn't far: it tells about one tenth of the truth. Protestantism is a heresy, flatly untrue. Here is the truth.

The chalice which is (without pretence) to hold God's Blood for us is off to the side. It has been sitting all this while on the credence table. Across the mouth of that empty chalice hangs a snowy folded linen napkin, called the [purificator](#); on top of *that* is the shallow silver dish called the paten, upon which is the Host of bread; on top of the paten and Host is the stiff square white pall.

At Low Mass, and at the end of High High, all these things are finally honourably veiled with a silk cloth the same colour and material as the vestments, the [chalice veil](#). Of course the chalice veil is *de trop* at the beginning of High Mass, when everything is shrouded in the much larger humeral veil. The smallish chalice lies folded in a corner of the credence; it'll appear with a flourish after Communion.

Meanwhile, here's a diagram of this elegant bundle (which chalice veil hovering over where it will finally rest).²⁵

The huge humeral veil, which in turn covered the entire credence, with this bundle and all the other silverware and cruets, is now around the shoulders of the archdeacon – we saw him reputedly draped with it last week. Now, in this week's freeze-frame, we see the subdeacon reach for this bundle, and, having taken it in his veiled hands (as all the chivalry of Europe longed to do with the Grail!), bear it to the altar. With his left hand, under the humeral veil, he holds the chalice's [knob](#) – more of that knob next week. His right hand, reverently swathed, rests on top of the bundle and holds it in place. He carefully (without any reckless genuflections) places the bundle on the Gospel side of the altar, on the deacon's right hand. The deacon whisks away the chalice veil, flips off the pall, takes up the paten with the Host on it, and – we'll come to the paten next week. But meanwhile the subdeacon uses the purificator to rub the inside of the chalice clean of any dust that has floated there in the last hour or so, since the Altar Guild laid it on the credence. He hands it, purified, to the deacon, who meanwhile has been –.

We're getting ahead of ourselves again. The subdeacon turns, breaking out of today's freeze-frame, and shunting this moment of Mass into the next.

Of course what we've just seen is a domestic moment: butler and footman deftly laying the table. But the moment when the subdeacon, a gorgeously apparelled figure, even more gorgeously arrayed than usual, reached for the chalice, was also the most romantic moment in the Mass.

This long chapter was meant to explain why this was the most romantic moment in the Mass. That chalice is sumptuous not because it is cast from ingots but because its only job is to hold What Christ gave on Thursday evening and shed on Friday afternoon (*Ah, blessèd vision! blood of God!*). What it holds remakes the worlds; we might imagine redeemed galaxies swirling in its depths. It is, if you like, merely a metal bowl on a metal stem, a gadget, an object men designed and made. But it is also – not a

²⁵ Provided by the thorough chaps of the U.S. Navy website, for the aid of servicemen appointed to wait on chaplains. The Navy does not, thank God, sail with pottery vessels.

My Grail pictures came from an excellent Rochester University site, the Beerbohm cartoon from an even better site, The Victorian Web.

<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/grlmenu.htm>

<http://65.107.211.206/decadence/mb/dgrcircle4.html>

copy, but – a use, an application, of that blessed vessel Christ first proffered at the Last Supper: this planet's paragon: the Holy Grail. All our lives we strive after the rapture of having Christ, and there is no object we hunger for more among the universe's object than this object, which gives Him to us, and offers a foretaste of an unimaginable union with Him beyond time.

We quest after the world's desire, which is Christ, and therefore for the Sangreal that cups His Blood, and behold! a man in robes of silk gravely reaches for it, and brings it to the altar of God, so that we are dazed (the more for seeing it so often) with a perfect and swelling wonder.