

The Word Chalice

By Br. Paul Quenon
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The drinking vessel at Mass is called “a chalice”. The Greek word in the New Testament is cup (poterion) , a common word for an ordinary cup. The word Chalice to me suggests a gem studded, shiny metal vessel with a stem. Or at least a silver or gold vessel. The liturgical reform under Pope Benedict XVI restored this older term and replaced the “cup” of the earlier English translation. It also outlaws anything not made with precious metal, anything wooden like the two large, elegant, dark wooden chalices we once had, carved by a neighboring Marion County craftsman named Spalding.

Although the alternative Greek word for cup, kaliz, is not used in the Gospels, it is a common word for a bowl used for drinking wine.

“Cup”, to my taste, seemed a word more measured to monastic modesty, if not to Gospel simplicity. “Chalice” evoked the high style of liturgical posh. I searched the Hebrew and Greek scriptures, to see whether there was any other word for a special drinking vessel; any word with a specific focus. The ordinary word in Hebrew is *coh*s. There is also the *sefel*, as in “the cup of salvation”, or in “the cup of wrath”. There is another interesting example: *gabia*. That is to

be found in connection with Joseph in Genesis 44:5, 15. There it indicates the special silver cup Joseph used for divination. One can easily imagine gemstones on it as well, since gems focus the psyche, according to some teachings. The Genesis story is about Benjamin, Joseph's younger brother, who is accused, as a ruse by Joseph, of a sacrilegious crime of stealing Joseph's *gabia keseph*, the silver goblet used for divining.

In a similar way, in the Sufi poems, or Ghazal, of Hafiz, there is a reference to the cup of Jamshid, one of the first mythical kings of Persia. He possessed a goblet which revealed the entire world to the person looking into it. Such divining practices were in Egypt, Nubia and Persia. Not to mention China, and the reading of tea leaves in England, Ireland and Scotland.

This word "chalice" suits all this perfectly—a vessel for divining time and history. "This is the chalice (*gabia*) of the new covenant in my blood, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"—in other words, the chalice was the summary of all that was to come. In our act of drinking this chalice might we dare to think, at the same time, of drinking the sum of history, drink its sins and its forgivenesses; in fact, drink both covenants earlier and later? That is normally too much to even think about, much less to comprehend; but nevertheless, it is all there, implicit in what is given us in faith. It also implies that each and ordinary Christian to be

“a diviner”; to become a diviner. In Jesus’ own plainest of terms, “to interpret the appearance of of the sky” and to interpret “the signs of the times”. (Mt. 16:3)