LITURGY ON THE AUTHORITY OF THE APOSTLES

Gerard Rouwhorst

Rituals are closely connected with tradition. People who take part in rituals tend to believe that their origins reach back to a remote past and have remained more or less unchanged over the centuries. Whether this belief can stand the test of critical historical research or not—very often it cannot—, there is no doubt that ritual traditions owe their authority for a considerable part to their aura of antiquity. Their prestige will increase further when these rituals are believed to originate in a period which not only belongs to a distant past, but is also regarded as foundational and therefore particularly authoritative. The belief in the power of rituals will be strengthened even further when it is coupled with the conviction that authoritative persons have instituted these rituals.

No doubt these phenomena have also played an important role in the history of Christian liturgy. Throughout the centuries we encounter Christian groups and Christian leaders defending and legitimising liturgical customs by appealing both to authoritative persons and to authoritative and foundational periods. As for the appeal to authoritative persons living in the period of the origins, two types of argumentation may be distinguished here. Firstly, ritual traditions have been traced back to Christ himself. In case this proved not to be possible—for example because such an idea could not be made plausible on the basis of the Gospels—, often an alternative strategy was adopted. It consisted of attributing the origins of certain ritual practices to the apostles or otherwise to persons who had lived in a close relationship with them or had been their successors. The notion of apostolic authority misses the cogent persuasiveness of the idea of the institution by Christ Himself. On the other hand, it has the advantage of being more open-ended and, therefore, leaving more possibilities to one’s own imagination. In fact, there were twelve apostles and the information the canonical New Testament provides about most of them, is extremely scarce. Moreover, precisely the fact that the authority of the apostles was less absolute than that of Christ Himself, may have made its appeal easier and, in addition, ecclesiastical
authorities may have been less concerned about combating claims of apostolic authority which were dubious or even dangerous in their eyes. In this regard, one may point to the fact that in early Christianity, apocryphal ‘Acts of the Apostles’ were tolerated for a longer period than non-canonical Gospels.

There is no doubt that this process has already started in early Christianity. This is, for instance, testified by the numerous church orders which, at least from a certain period onward, were ascribed to the apostles and deal for a considerable part with issues closely related to liturgy.¹ However, many other early Christian sources might be adduced here as examples as well.²

The question may then be raised how the process of underpinning liturgical traditions by apostolic authority has developed in the early church. When did it start? Which were the rituals that were preferably attributed to the apostles? What theological and political factors played a role in this process? What strategies did it reflect? How was it related to the development of Christian communities, which sought to establish their identity by several means but in particular also by their rituals?

The best way to discuss these kinds of questions is not to deal with them in a generalising way—by talking about early Christian liturgy as a whole—, but rather to start from concrete examples. Among the rituals that might be selected for that aim, probably the most intriguing one is the celebration of Christian Passover. It is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it played a central part in the life of early Christian communities and it is highly illustrative of their religious beliefs. Furthermore, celebrating it in the right way was considered by many early Christians as vital to their identity. Second, during the first three or four centuries it underwent a remarkable development.³ It started as a celebration held on the date of the


² I will limit myself here to pointing to a number of anaphoras attributed to the apostles, such as the *Anaphora of Addai and Mari*, the Syriac *Anaphora of the Twelve Apostles*. See A. Hänggi and I. Pahl, *Prex eucharistica* (Spicilegium Friburgense 12; Fribourg 1968).