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Redeemably Awful: The Eucharist as Meal

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O Sacrum Convivium, the famous *Corpus Christi* antiphon, usually attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas, is one of the most popular definitions of what the Eucharist is about. In it the Church exclaims, "O sacred Banquet, wherein Christ is received, the memory of His passion is recalled, the soul is filled with grace, and there is given to us a pledge of future glory." While the Eucharist is often defined as a sacrifice, here the sacrificial aspect is only alluded to. In this article I aim to reflect on the primary element of this definition, that of the Eucharist as a *banquet* or *meal*.

In the April issue I offered some reflections on the altar, one aspect that I neglected was the aspect of the altar as a table, and not just a sacrificial altar. As the altar is both an altar for sacrifice and a table for the Eucharistic banquet, in a wonderful liturgical paradox, the Church requires that the altar-table always be covered with a cloth. A true altar for sacrificing animals cannot have a white cloth, as this would be destroyed by blood. Christians know that "bulls' blood and goats' blood are incapable of taking away sins" (Heb 10:4). Therefore, in our liturgies we do not repeat the sacrifices of the Old Testament, but approach "Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to sprinkled blood which pleads more insistently than Abel's" (Heb 13:24). This is why many altars are made of wood and not stone. Both are valid options, but the stone can tend to underline the sacrificial aspect, whereas the *wood* underlines the banquet. Number 301 of the *GIRM* expresses a preference for natural stone as the material of the altar. However, the Irish edition adds the following "in the dioceses of Ireland, wood which is dignified, solid, and well-crafted may be used, provided that the altar is structurally immobile." Indeed, from my own research into the Eucharistic practices of medieval Ireland, I would add that in medieval Ireland it seems that more churches used wooden altars than was common on the Continent. In the 1186 diocesan synod held under John Cumin, the first Norman archbishop of

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Dublin, priests are prohibited “from celebrating Mass on wooden tables, according to the usage of Ireland,” although later on in the same canon it admits that the practice isn’t going to change and recommends that the wooden altars at least have an altar-stone.¹

However, the main aspect of meal that needs to be considered is that of the *food* itself. It should be of no surprise to anyone that “at the heart of the Eucharistic celebration are the bread and wine that, by the words of Christ and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, become Christ’s Body and Blood. Faithful to the Lord’s command the Church continues to do, in his memory and until his glorious return, what he did on the eve of his Passion: ‘He took bread...’ ‘He took the cup filled with wine...’ The signs of bread and wine become, in a way surpassing understanding, the Body and Blood of Christ; they continue also to signify the goodness of creation” (CCC 1333).

The aspect of *physical* eating and drinking is important. The Last Supper took place in the context of a Jewish Ritual meal, probably the Passover. The earliest Christian Eucharists may also have taken place in the context of a meal, although already in New Testament times these were already causing problems (1 Cor 11:17-34) and the aspect of a physical meal soon dropped from the celebration and the focus came to be almost exclusively on the elements of bread and wine.² While there has been a tendency to over-spiritualize the spiritual dimension of communion, the value of the physical act of eating and drinking has remained within the Church. I am always struck by the comment of St. Therese of Lisieux and the great joy she experienced when the priest gave here two hosts as she received Communion: “For the first time in my life I saw the priest take *two* hosts which were well separate from each other and place them on my tongue! You can understand my joy and the sweet tears of consolation I shed when beholding a mercy so great!”³ St. Therese knew that a Christian receives the same grace from receiving one or two hosts, but here this Doctor

1 See Neil Xavier O’Donoghue, *The Eucharist in Pre-Norman Ireland* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 165 for sources and further discussion.

2 There is still a lot of academic discussion on the earliest form of the Eucharist and some other vestiges of meals remained in certain communities for a few centuries. For example, the early Christian Church Order known as the *Apostolic Tradition* (which was highly influential in the renewal of the liturgy after the Second Vatican Council) mentions a blessing of cheese and olives after the consecration of the bread and wine in the context of the Eucharist. For a popular edition of this document, see Alistair Stewart-Sykes, trans. and ed., *Hippolytus: On the Apostolic Tradition*, Popular Patristics Series, Number 54 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Second Edition, 2015)

3 John Clarke, trans., *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux Translated from the Original Manuscripts*. 3rd Ed. (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1996), 173.

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of the Church gives obvious importance to the physicality of the Eucharistic Bread.

EUCCHARISTIC BREAD

There are many aspects of the elements of bread and wine that can be reflected on, but here I suggest that we take the simple instruction that is given in number 321 of the *GIRM*

‘By reason of the sign, it is required that the material for the Eucharistic Celebration truly have the appearance of food. Therefore, it is desirable that the Eucharistic Bread, even though unleavened and made in the traditional form, be fashioned in such a way that the Priest at Mass with the people is truly able to break it into parts and distribute these to at least some of the faithful. However, small hosts are not at all excluded when the large number of those receiving Holy Communion or other pastoral reasons call for them. Moreover, the gesture of the fraction or breaking of bread, which was quite simply the term by which the Eucharist was known in apostolic times, will bring out more clearly the force and importance of the sign of the unity of all in the one bread, and of the sign of charity by the fact that the one bread is distributed among the brothers and sisters.’

A wag once said that the regular Catholic needs faith to believe that in the Eucharist the bread becomes the Body of Christ, but that they need as much faith to believe that the host is bread to start with! In today’s Ireland most Catholics would understand the word “bread” to mean something very different to the small pre-cut host that their local parish uses. In earlier times the bread used for the Eucharist was actually the *same* as the domestic (wheat) bread that was used at home. The famous medieval *Golden Legend* tells of one of the first Eucharistic Miracles that took place during a Eucharist celebrated by Pope Gregory the Great, where a woman had difficulty believing that the loaf of bread that she had baked earlier that morning was to become the Body of Christ. In the eleventh century the custom of using wafers to celebrate the Eucharist developed in the famous monastery of Cluny. It became widespread only in the fourteenth century. A question that bears asking today is whether the wafer is the best expression of bread which the *Roman Missal* calls “fruit of the earth and work of human hands.” The main distinction is that bread is made from kneaded dough, whereas a wafer is made from a batter that can be poured and, although it is made by a person, it is untouched by human hands. The wafer has the additional quality of appearing

even whiter than regular unleavened bread, as the batter can cook quicker than dough.⁴

At the very minimum, we ought to consider more substantial forms of hosts that the priest “is truly able to break it into parts and distribute these to at least some of the faithful.” The small “priest’s host” that breaks into four pieces is ritual minimalism at its strongest and to make matters worse the priest often consumes all four pieces himself! Some companies already produce hosts that are more bread-like in their form. We ought to encourage more companies to do likewise. The Eucharistic bread must be more than a “Little White Guest” as one pre-conciliar hymn put it. The requirement that it “truly have the appearance of food” must be respected. It is true that we need strong catechesis on the meaning of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. But that in no way takes away from the fact that the matter for the Eucharist is, first of all, bread. Additionally this bread is *broken*, one of the earliest names for the Eucharist is the *fractio panis* or breaking of the bread and one of the weaknesses of the pre-Conciliar liturgy was that people never saw any broken bread. Today some priests have adopted the habit of reattaching the two halves of the Host before showing it to the assembly at the *Behold the Lamb of God*, this diminishes the earliest Eucharist symbolism of the bread that is broken.

The *other* aspect that bears restating is the faithful have a right to receive Communion that has been consecrated at the actual liturgy they are attending. Habitually using the reserved Sacrament in the Tabernacle to distribute to the faithful during the Eucharistic liturgy is a serious liturgical abuse. Pope Benedict XIV wrote the famous encyclical *Certiores Effecti* in 1742 to condemn this liturgical abuse and insist on the legitimacy of the faithful’s desire to partake of Holy Communion consecrated at the Eucharist they are attending. This encyclical was quoted in *Mediator Dei*, Benedict XIV’s call was taken up again in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 52 and the current *GIRM* quotes it in number 85.⁵ Distributing Communion from the Tabernacle has a terrible sign value. If I was to invite you to a meal in my house and you saw me preparing a beautiful dish and then proceed to serve myself and go to the refrigerator and take out some left overs and prepare a plate for you to heat in the microwave, you might feel short-changed. My argument that the microwaved leftovers are just as valid and efficaciously nutritious might not convince you! In this context I was happy to see the June 2020 *Framework Document* for the return to parish liturgies in the

4 Barry M. Craig, *Fractio Panis: A History of the Breaking of Bread in the Roman Rite* (Studia Anselmiana: Rome, 2011), 181. 191.

5 I offer a translation and commentary on this encyclical in “Partakers of the Same Sacrifice.” *Antiphon* 16:2 (2012): 130-143.

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wake of the COVID-19 shut down recommended in number 11 that “care should be taken to avoid the contamination of the hosts which are to be consecrated. It is recommended liturgical practice to consecrate at each Mass a sufficient number of hosts for that celebration only.”

RECEIVING FROM THE CHALICE

The other aspect of meal is the Eucharistic cup or chalice. Most liturgists advocate that the Eucharistic Cup be offered to all those who receive Communion. There is a very simple reason for this, Jesus told us to do so. During the Last Supper, as recounted in the Eucharistic Prayer, he told his disciples ‘take this all of you and drink from it’. Today we know very few details directly from Jesus as to how we should celebrate the Eucharist. We don’t have an explicit instruction to proclaim a Gospel reading or have a homily. Jesus said nothing about proclaiming the Creed or distributing parish newsletters after Mass. But he *did* say that everyone should receive from the Cup.

In medieval times the chalice was gradually withdrawn from the laity in the West. Justification for this was found in the theological theory of *concomitance*. This theological development understood that Jesus was present “Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity” in both the eucharistic bread and the eucharistic wine. Therefore, theologians gradually came to the conclusion that there was no “need” for everybody to receive from the chalice. While *concomitance* is the teaching of the Church, it is undeniable that it is better to offer the chalice to all communicants.

I realise that during the time of COVID-19 it was decided not to share the Eucharistic Cup. This was probably a sensible precaution for that time. Although in *earlier* studies presented to the US Department of Health and Human Services, admitted that we need ‘achieve a balance of adherence to scientific principles and respect for religious beliefs,’ and stated that ‘the risk for infectious disease transmission by a common communion cup is very low, and appropriate safeguards—that is, wiping the interior and exterior rim between communicants, use of care to rotate the cloth during use, and use of a clean cloth for each service—would further diminish this risk.’⁶ A more recent study on the matter has concluded that while there is some theoretical possibility of a shared communion cup contaminating the Eucharistic wine, that ‘there has never been a documented case of illness caused by sharing a chalice’and that

6 Lilia P. Manangan, Lynne M. Sehulster, Linda Chiarello, Dawn N. Simonds and William R. Jarvis, “Risk of Infectious Disease Transmission from a Common Communion Cup,” *American Journal of Infection Control* 26:5 (1998), 538-539.

the purificators will remove 90% of any germs.⁷ Again, while at the moment it might be better, as an exception, not to offer the Eucharistic Cup, we must be careful not to allow this to become our default position. The legal adage that hard cases make bad law is also true in this context. What we do during the time of COVID-19 ought *not* become our default, just because it is easier.

Finally, I will conclude with a few thought about the wine of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist we must use wine made from grapes. However, the wine we use in our parishes is often of dubious quality. In 1864 St. John Henry Newman wrote about his experience of wine as an Anglican parish priest:

‘When I began early communion in St Mary’s in 1837, one or more communicants applied to me to the effect that the wine was strong and on account of its strength was unpleasant to them the first thing in the morning, and on that account I mixed water with it ... It must be recalled that the so called wine used for the Anglican Communion used to be a strange composition ... I think that the sacramental wine at St Mary’s was complained of, not so much as getting into men’s heads, as having an unpleasant taste in the mouth.’⁸

Over the last few years, many people in Ireland have come to appreciate fine wines. There is now a developed wine culture here. However, the *quality* of altar wines has remained in a time warp. I could not imagine serving a vintage similar to our altar wine at a dinner party or being given a glass of it in a restaurant. Surely we need to also rethink the quality of our altar wine given that most altar wines bear more resemblance to Newman’s “strange composition” than to the fine vintages that can even be found in many of our petrol stations.⁹

7 James Pellerin and Michael B. Edmond, “Infections associated with religious rituals,” *International Journal of Infectious Diseases* 17 (2013), 947.

8 John Henry Newman, *Letters and Diaries*, XXI, 76-7. Letter 11 March 1864 to William John Fitzpatrick, in Donald A. Withey, *John Henry Newman, The Liturgy and the Breviary: Their Influence on his Life as an Anglican* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1992), 13.

9 For some initial thoughts on this subject, I would recommend Gisela H. Kreglinger, *The Spirituality of Wine* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2016).