EUCHARIST

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Introduction

BABETTE'S FEAST

In the Spring of 2007, I was privileged to be a scholar in residence at the North American College in Rome. During that period, I had the opportunity, on three occasions, to distribute communion at Mass in St. Peter's Square. Standing on one side of a partition, I watched as scores of people came forward to receive the Eucharist. In the typically Italian style, things were a tad disorganized, and the faithful were compelled, in the press of the crowd, to stretch out their hands toward me. I saw all sorts of hands—old and young, dirty and clean, lined and unlined—reaching out for the Bread of Life. When I would move along the partition, some would cry out to me plaintively, "Padre, Padre, per favore" (Father, Father, please). Never before in my priesthood, though I had distributed communion to thousands, had I had the sense of carrying food to those who were desperate for it. Those faithful in St. Peter's Square embodied a truth that is deep in our Catholic tradition, though too infrequently stated: the Eucharist is not a luxury but a necessity, for without it we would, in the spiritual sense, starve to death.[1]

The fathers of the Second Vatican Council expressed this truth in a lyrical and oft-repeated phrase from the document *Lumen Gentium*: the Eucharistic sacrifice is "the fount and apex" (or, as another translation has it, "the source and summit") of the whole Christian life.[2] It is both the fountain from which life in Christ flows and the goal toward which

1. This image was suggested to me in a marvelous sermon preached at the North American College by Fr. James Quigley, OP, in the spring of 2007.

2. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11, in *The Word on Fire Vatican II Collection* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2021), 59.

it tends; it is the alpha and the omega of Christian discipleship; it is the energy without which authentic Christianity runs down. Without the Eucharist, we could be a pious congregation of like-minded people or a society dedicated to the memory and teaching of Jesus, but we couldn't possibly be the Church. As John Paul II argued in what was, fittingly enough, his last encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (the Church comes from the Eucharist), the Body and Blood of Jesus are not simply the sacred objects at the center of the Church's concern; they *are* the Church, its lifeblood and raison d'être.

In one of his sermons on the Eucharist, the great English Catholic preacher Ronald Knox made the following observation. The vast majority of Jesus' commands—to love one's enemies, to turn the other cheek, to forgive seventy times seven times, etc.—have been rather consistently disregarded. (As Chesterton pointed out, it is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting, but rather that it has been found difficult and never tried.[3]) However, Knox says, amid all of these commandments honored, at best, in the breach, there is one command of Jesus that has, up and down the centuries, been massively obeyed. Throughout the long history of the Church, through a whole series of dramatic successes and failures, despite the stupidity and wickedness of so many Christians, the command "Do this in memory of me" has been and continues to be obeyed. It is as though Christians, in all of their sin, have realized from the beginning that the spiritual life depends upon the Eucharist the way that physical life depends upon food, oxygen, and water. And so, almost despite themselves, they do what Jesus told them to do in his memory.

The topic of the Eucharist is huge and multivalent. Thousands of treatises, essays, sermons, and reflections have been dedicated to it over the centuries. Its mysteries and dimensions are endless precisely because the Eucharist *is* Christ, the one in whom, according to Paul, are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. One could easily construct

3. See G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (New York: Dodd & Mead, 1910), 48.

an entire systematic theology around the central motif of the Eucharist, showing how it is intimately related to the doctrines of creation, revelation, Christology, grace, redemption, and the last things. However, I am going to follow the lead of many Eucharistic commentators and focus on three major themes: meal, sacrifice, and Real Presence.

The Eucharist is, first, the great meal of fellowship that God wants to establish with his people, the joyful bond in which the divine life is shared spiritually and physically with a hungry world. However—and this will emerge as a major argument of this book—communion in a fallen world is impossible without sacrifice. In a universe that has become twisted and off-kilter, beset by division, hatred, and fear, the establishment of real love and justice will come only at the price of suffering. Hence, the Eucharist is also the embodiment of Jesus' great act of sacrificial suffering on the cross at Calvary; in the separate consecration of the bread and the wine, we see, symbolically expressed, the separation of Christ's body and blood that took place in the process of his dying. What we eat and drink at the fellowship meal, therefore, is nothing other than the death of Jesus, the act by which he gave himself away for the salvation of the world. And both of these themes are gathered up and given full expression in the Catholic doctrine of the *Real* Presence of Jesus in the Eucharistic elements. Though it contains a symbolic dimension, the Eucharist is more than a symbol, more than a concoction, however moving and evocative, of our own religious imagination. In it, Jesus is present to us through his own power and in his dense objectivity as both food and sacrificial offering. There is something terrible and uncontrollable in the *reality* of this presence. The Eucharist is not our product but our Lord, and as such, it calls us to conversion. The rest of this book will be a further elaboration of the three themes that I have just sketched.

I should like to begin, not with doctrine or liturgical practice or theological arguments, but rather with a story, since, as usual, the poets say it best.

Babette's Feast

In 1956, the Danish writer Isak Dinesen (the pen name of Karen Blixen) published a short story called "Babette's Feast," which, many years later, provided the basis for an extremely popular film. Dinesen's story is about many things—friendship, loss, religious devotion, sensual delight, loyalty—but it is, I think, primarily about the Eucharist. In fact, I know of no other literary text that so fully expresses the complex of themes that cluster around this central Christian mystery.

The narrative is set in the late nineteenth century in a remote village nestled at the foot of a mountain at the edge of a Norwegian fjord. Two sisters—Martine and Philippa—the daughters of a revered Lutheran pastor who had founded an ardent sect of followers, preside over the small community. Though these disciples of the "Dean" were still admired throughout the country, their numbers were diminishing and the remaining adepts were getting "whiter, balder, and harder of hearing." The great mark of this austere fellowship was puritanism, the conviction that earthly joys had to be set aside if the journey toward the heavenly Jerusalem was to be facilitated. They would eat the simplest meals and live in the most frugal surroundings so that they would be free to help the poor and give themselves to prayer. We hear that Martine and Philippa have a maid called Babette.

When they were young women, both sisters were remarkably beautiful and accordingly attracted a number of suitors. But when prospective husbands would come forward seeking the Dean's permission, the old man would respond that his daughters were "his right and left hand"[4] and thus indispensable to him. Indeed, the girls themselves had accepted an "ideal of heavenly love" and therefore "did not let themselves be touched by the flames of this world."[5] Nevertheless, in their youth

4. Isak Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," in *Anecdotes of Destiny and Ehrengard* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 22.

5. Dinesen, 22–23.

both were beguiled by romantic possibilities. In 1854, when Martine was eighteen, a dashing military officer named Lorens Löwenhielm presented himself at the Dean's home and was immediately smitten by the young woman. He followed her about, sought her out, visited her home, but became hopelessly tongue-tied and self-conscious around the Dean's table, incapable of communicating his feelings. He loved her, but he knew that he would never be able to break down the wall of pious reserve that she had constructed around herself. Finally, on the day before he was due to leave, Martine showed him to the door. In his desperation he grabbed her hand, pressed it to his lips, and uttered, "I am going away forever! I shall never, never see you again! For I have learned here that Fate is hard, and that in this world there are things which are impossible."[6] Upon returning home, he resolved to forget about romance and to concentrate upon the cultivation of his military career.

A year later, an even more distinguished person came to the small town. Achille Papin, one of the most impressive opera singers of the time, had spent a week with the Royal Opera of Stockholm. He had heard of the ravishing beauty of the Norwegian coast and decided to see it on his way back to France. On a Sunday he wandered into the small church of the Dean's congregation and heard Philippa sing. The girl had a voice so glorious that Papin became convinced that the music world of Paris would be at her feet. Through the sheer force of his personality, he managed to secure the Dean's permission and commenced to work with Philippa. His original intuitions were confirmed in the course of the lessons, and he predicted that soon she would be the finest singer of her time: "My greatest triumphs are before me! The world will once more believe in miracles when she and I sing together!"[7] So ecstatic would be her reception that nobles and ladies in Paris would conduct her, after her performance, to the finest restaurant in the city, the

6. Dinesen, 24.
7. Dinesen, 27.

Café Anglais, where a sumptuous supper would be spread before her. During one of their sessions, Achille and Philippa sang the "seduction duet" from Mozart's *Don Giovanni.* As the last notes faded into the air, the master took his disciple in his arms and kissed her. Immediately afterward, Philippa asked her father to write to M. Papin, informing him that she wanted no further vocal lessons. Heartbroken, the great singer returned to France on the first boat, convinced that something irrevocable had been lost.

Fifteen years later, the bell-rope of the sisters' home was violently pulled. When they opened the door, they found a pale, frightened woman who, upon taking one step inside, fell into a dead swoon. When she came around, the mysterious visitor produced a letter, written in French and signed by Achille Papin. It served as an introduction to the woman who stood trembling and anxious before them: Babette Hersant. She had been, Papin explained, a *pétroleuse* during the recent communard uprising in Paris and had lost both her husband and her son in the fighting. Unable to remain in France, she was seeking, at Papin's suggestion, refuge with the kind sisters whom he had known so many years before. He closed the letter with the tossed-off remark: "Babette can cook."[8] In great generosity of spirit, the sisters took in this forlorn character, and in time, in the friendly surroundings of their household, Babette "acquired all the appearance of a respectable and trusted servant."[9] Because they were suspicious of French cooking (the French, they had heard, ate frogs), they taught Babette how to prepare their customary meal of split cod and ale-and-bread soup. Given their religious commitments, they explained, their food must be as plain as possible. Luxury at the table they considered an immoral extravagance. Though she never mastered Norwegian and though she remained something of an enigma to the people of the village, Babette was eventually accepted as a respected member of the community.

8. Dinesen, 30.
9. Dinesen, 31.

We learn (returning to the present day) that the one hundredth anniversary of the Dean's birth is approaching and that the sisters want to do something special to celebrate the date. Even as they contemplate this happy prospect, they are chagrined that the spirit of their father seemed to have dissipated among his followers, for "discord and dissension had been raising their heads in his flock."[10] The essential problem, expressed in a variety of ways and contexts, was the inability to forgive. Martine and Philippa vaguely hoped that the upcoming festivity would bring the spiritual family together again. As they were considering how best to mark the great day, a letter arrived from France for Babette, containing the improbable news that she had won ten thousand francs in the national lottery. Soon after, Babette begged the sisters to let her cook a celebratory dinner in honor of the Dean's birthday. This suggestion took them aback, for though they intended to celebrate the day, they had no intention of sponsoring a festive dinner. But their cook was so insistent and eager in her pleading that eventually they gave in. And Babette had more to say: she wanted to cook for their guests, not the simple, unappetizing fare to which they were accustomed, but a real, sumptuous French dinner; and she wanted to pay for it herself. When the sisters balked, Babette stepped forward with great and even frightening resolve and said, "Ladies! Have I ever, during twelve years, asked you a favor? No! And why not? . . . What would I have had to pray for? Nothing! Tonight I have a prayer to make, from the bottom of my heart."[11] Their resistance broke down, and they granted her request.

A month before the feast, Babette went on a journey (her first in twelve years). When she returned, she announced that the goods necessary for the dinner were ordered and on their way. Though the very idea of elaborate preparations for a meal, requiring a journey to a

10. Dinesen, 34.

11. Dinesen, 38 (slightly adapted for clarity).

foreign country, was preposterous to the sisters, they "gave themselves into their cook's hands."[12] During the next days, the food, drink, and other accoutrements began to arrive. They were surprised by the numerous bottles of wine, each with a label carefully providing its name and point of origin (Martine never dreamed that wines could have names!); but they were flabbergasted beyond words by the enormous and primordial-looking turtle that poked its snake-like head out of its greenish-black shell. The sisters began to fear that, in surrendering to the wishes of their French cook, they were making their father's house into the setting for a witch's sabbath. When Martine and Philippa communicated these fears to their friends and neighbors, everyone agreed that they would eat the French meal out of deference to Babette but that, as a protest, they would not speak of it nor take any pleasure in it. One of the white-bearded elders said, "On the day of our master we will cleanse our tongues of all taste and purify them of all delight or disgust of the senses, keeping and preserving them for the higher things of praise and thanksgiving."[13]

The great dinner took place on Sunday, the Lord's Day. The first guest to arrive was old Mrs. Loewenhielm, who, at ninety, had lost practically all of her hearing and sense of taste, and who was, as such, the embodiment of the community's puritanical indifference to the pleasures of this world. She was escorted by her nephew, General Loewenhielm, the man who as a young officer so many years before had sought unsuccessfully to court Martine. He happened to be visiting his aunt at this time, and the old lady, concerned about his listless spirits, had pressed the sisters to invite him. Though he had achieved all of his worldly goals, satisfying all of his career ambitions, the general felt unaccountably depressed and came to the dinner only reluctantly. In time, the other guests arrived, until the drawing room was filled with twelve celebrants. One very old brother, in his

12. Dinesen, 39.
13. Dinesen, 41.

trembling voice, then began to sing a hymn that had been composed by the Dean himself:

> Jerusalem, my happy home
> name ever dear to me.[14]

Gradually, the guests took up the well-known tune, and as they sang, they joined hands in fellowship. So caught up were they in the spirit of the moment that they took up a second hymn and, hands still joined, sang it through to the end.

After this impromptu choral prelude, they entered the dining room, where they saw the table elegantly prepared, the glasses and silverware gleaming in the light from a row of flickering candles. When everyone was seated, one of the elders recited the lovely grace that the Dean had given them:

> May my food my body maintain,
> may my body my soul sustain,
> may my soul in deed and word
> give thanks for all things to the Lord.[15]

Then they all commenced to eat and drink. General Loewenhielm, the only guest at the table who had not vowed to take no sensual delight in the meal, now wore a puzzled expression. For the wine he was sipping was (he could barely believe it) "Amontillado! And the finest Amontillado that I have ever tasted."[16] And the soup was turtle soup—the best he had ever had. Then a new dish was served, and as everyone quietly ate, the general thought to himself, "It is Blinis Demidoff!"[17] But when he tasted the main course, his

14. Dinesen, 43.
15. Dinesen, 48.
16. Dinesen, 48.
17. Dinesen, 49.

astonishment was complete. Many years before, at the Café Anglais, he had eaten "an incredibly recherché and palatable dish"[18] called Cailles en Sarcophage, which had been invented by the chef of that establishment. Turning to the man on his left, the general said, "But this is Cailles en Sarcophage!" Having no idea what the general was talking about, the man said, with utter blandness, "Yes, Yes, certainly. What else would it be?"[19] As the meal progressed, something strange and wonderful was happening. As stories of the Dean were exchanged and as the fine food and wine gradually were having their effect, old animosities were melting away, old resentments were being healed, broken friendships were being repaired. A spirit of forgiveness and good cheer seemed to take hold of all those around the table.

So moved by what he had experienced at the banquet, and still regretting his tongue-tied self-consciousness in this same home so many years before, General Loewenhielm rose to speak. He himself was surprised by the words that came out of his mouth, for though he had been formally trained to give commands and orations on drill grounds and in royal halls, he now felt that he was but a vehicle for a higher presence. "In our human foolishness and short-sightedness," he said, "we imagine that grace is finite. . . . But the moment comes when our eyes are opened and we realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends," he went on, "demands nothing of us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude. . . . Grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty."[20] In the wake of this extraordinary oration, the entire place seemed suffused with the very grace that the general spoke of: "The rooms had been filled with a heavenly light, as if a number of small halos had blended into one glorious radiance. Taciturn old people received the gift of tongues; ears that for years had been almost deaf were opened to it. Time itself

18. Dinesen, 50.
19. Dinesen, 51.
20. Dinesen, 52.

had merged into eternity."[21] All during the meal, it had snowed, so that when the guests were taking their leave, they noticed the entire countryside blanketed in white. As they set out, they staggered and wavered on their feet, slipping and sliding in the snow. Some slipped down or fell forward, so that their elbows, backsides, and knees were covered in white, and as they walked away, they were "gamboling like little lambs."[22]

But the story does not end on this gentle note, all things simply reconciled, all enemies simply forgiven. Our attention shifts to the kitchen, so that we can see the price that was paid to make this mystical, grace-filled gathering possible. We are told, bluntly enough, that "Babette alone had had no share in the bliss of the evening."[23] Like a sacrificial victim, "Babette sat on the chopping block,"[24] surrounded by a plethora of greasy pots and pans, as exhausted and deadly white as she had been on the night when the sisters first took her in. After twelve years of silence on this point, she then spoke her identity: "I was once cook at the Café Anglais."[25] This meant little to the sisters, but Babette continued, laying out to them the full extent of her sacrifice. Her husband and son were gone—lost, as we have heard, in the communard uprising—but gone too were the whole bevy of gentlemen and aristocrats who used to frequent the Café Anglais. Babette's world had disappeared. Moreover, she said, "I have no money."[26] When the sisters protested that she had just won the French lottery, Babette calmly explained that she had spent every centime of her winnings on the great dinner.

This summary that I have presented can barely hint at the artistry in Dinesen's beautifully understated narrative, but it can serve at least

21. Dinesen, 53.
22. Dinesen, 54.
23. Dinesen, 55.
24. Dinesen, 56.
25. Dinesen, 56.
26. Dinesen, 56.

as a framework for discussing the Eucharistic symbolism that suffuses the story. The fundamental motif is that the gracefulness of the meal is interwoven with, and made possible by, a whole series of sacrifices, most notably Babette's. We recall that the Dean's congregation is characterized by a rather marked dualism or puritanism, according to which the things of God are divorced from the affairs and pleasures of this world. Though it has haunted the Christian tradition from the beginning, this kind of dualism is, in fact, deeply unbiblical. According to the scriptural reading, God is intimately involved in the world that he has made, and every nook and cranny of creation speaks of the beauty of the Creator. Accordingly, the biblical imagination is not dualist, but sacramental. Though the world is other than God, the world serves as an icon of the one who made it, and therefore, whatever is good, true, and beautiful in creation functions as a potential point of contact between human beings and God. In their conviction that the heavenly Jerusalem is attained only through the eschewing of the pleasures of this world, in their exaggerated asceticism, the Dean's congregation had lost sight of this basic truth. In fact, the very sadness and dwindling size of the community could be seen as consequences of this forgetfulness. One of the most poignant features of the story is that this dualist asceticism extended as far as precluding the sisters from romantic involvement. They had, as we saw, rejected "the flames of this world" in order to give themselves to the service of God, and hence both had turned away from giving themselves in love to a man.

Into this dualist milieu, came, unexpectedly, a visitor from another world. Babette, the master chef accustomed to the highest and finest things, arrived from Catholic France, but she was weak and lonely and bore the haggard look of a beggar. This is our first clue that the exiled cook is a figure of Christ. In his Letter to the Philippians, Paul said that Christ, "though he was in the form of God . . . emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:6–7). Christ left his natural dwelling place and willingly entered into

the limitations of our world in order to transfigure it by his presence. Paul comments, in a similar vein, that by his poverty, we became rich (see 2 Cor. 8:9). Dinesen says, in the very cadences of Paul, that though Babette "appeared to be a beggar . . . she turned out to be a conquerer."[27] But the transformation that she effects is not an immediate one. Rather, it is prepared for by a long period of humble identification with those to whom she was sent. Although she was one of the finest chefs in Europe, she willingly agreed to prepare the simplest and least appetizing of meals; although she was used to mingling with the elite of French society, she acquiesced to making the rounds of an obscure Norwegian fishing village. But all the while, clandestinely, secretly, she is having her effect: "Her quiet countenance and her steady, deep glance had magnetic qualities; under her eyes things moved, noiselessly, into their proper places."[28] In a word, Babette's humble self-emptying was remaking a disordered world from within.

But we see the full extent of this sacrifice and this remaking only in regard to the great meal. It is a biblical commonplace that God desires to express his intimacy with his people through a festive meal. In the prophet Isaiah, we find wonderful images of a great feast that God will host on the summit of the holy mountain. There will be, we are told, "rich food filled with marrow" and "well-aged wines" (Isa. 25:6). In the book of Wisdom, moreover, God is pictured as a Jewish mother spreading a sumptuous feast before her people. A meal at which the good things of this world become evocative of the divine presence, and at which brothers and sisters sit down in intimacy with God and one another, is a consistent biblical symbol of what God wants for us. It is absolutely no accident that Jesus takes up this theme, embodying it in his ministry of table fellowship. All were welcome around the table of Jesus—the rich and the poor, the respectable and the marginalized, the saint and the sinner, the healthy

27. Dinesen, 31.
28. Dinesen, 31.

and the sick. This festive eating and drinking was appreciated by Jesus as an eschatological symbol, as the concrete realization of Isaiah's dream of divine-human fellowship. And at the culminating moment of his life, Jesus sat down with his twelve Apostles and hosted a final meal. Recapitulating the whole of the biblical tradition of the festive meal and summing up the whole of his life and ministry, Jesus fed his Apostles with his very self, offering himself to them in a total sacrifice, dying that they might live: "Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is my Body. . . . Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my Blood."[29]

And so Babette, as the culmination of her life and work among the people of the village, hosted a meal, which, at the symbolic level, is both the Last Supper and the Mass. It commenced, appropriately enough, on Sunday, the day of the Christian liturgy. As soon as the guests assembled, they sang a hymn, evocative of the opening song of the Mass. They then entered a great dining room and sat at a table bedecked with candles, in the manner of an altar. And at this table, a sumptuous, expensive, delightful meal was served. As they ate and drank, their spirits were uplifted, old memories were stirred, resentments seemed to melt away, forgiveness was offered, and in the words of Martine, "the stars have come nearer."[30] General Loewenhielm's magnificent speech, in which he invoked the infinity of God's grace, named precisely the dynamic of the meal. God (who is nothing but grace) had indeed, through the mediation of the sensual sign of Babette's feast, addressed and blessed his people. Heaven was not, as they had imagined, far away, and in its light, they saw the earth for the first time as it really was. The liturgy is a sacred meal at which God, in sheer graciousness, feeds his people with his own substance, thereby uniting them to him

29. *Roman Missal* (ICEL, 2010). See 1 Cor. 11:24–25; Matt. 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19–20.

30. Dinesen, "Babette's Feast," 55.

and to one another, offering the forgiveness of sins, and displaying a new vision of the world.

But then we see that this communion was made possible by a terrible sacrifice. Babette had paid a price, emptying herself out utterly, spending money, talent, and energy in abundance, in order to allow the grace to flow. It is a basic biblical truth—and we will elaborate upon it more fully in the course of the book—that a world gone wrong can be corrected only through sacrifice,[31] that is to say, through an act of love which takes on evil and reworks it from within. In Jerusalem, the night before his death, Jesus indeed hosted a festive meal at which humanity and divinity were reconciled; but at the heart of the feast was sacrifice, the giving away of his Body and Blood. An act of self-negating love made possible the communion that they enjoyed. Like Babette, Jesus situated himself on a chopping block as the festivity unfolded.

There is a rather shocking detail mentioned at the very end of "Babette's Feast." As the dumbfounded sisters were trying to take in the full significance of their maid's gift, Martine remembered a tale that an African missionary had recounted to her father. It seems that the missionary had saved the life of an old chief's favorite wife and, in gratitude, the chief had treated the Christian to a meal. Only many years afterward did the missionary learn from one of his own servants that the main course at the meal had been "a small fat grandchild of the chief's, cooked in honor of the great Christian medicine man." Meal and sacrifice coalesced around the densely textured *reality* of what was offered. Though it repulsed her even to think of it, Martine realized that Babette had effected something very similar, giving herself away as a sacrifice that made possible a meal of grace. So *real* was her gift that it was as though they were eating and drinking her very

31. See Matthew Levering, *Sacrifice and Community: Jewish Offering and Christian Eucharist* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).

substance. At the Last Supper, Jesus said, "Take, eat; this is my body" and "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant" (Matt. 26:26, 27–28). What the disciples are invited to eat *is* the very self that Jesus offers in sacrifice. The grace of communion was so real because the sacrifice of self was so real. In this interweaving of meal, sacrifice, and Real Presence, we discover the heart of a Catholic Eucharistic theology. And therefore these three themes will be the focus of the remainder of this book.

Chapter 1

THE EUCHARIST AS SACRED MEAL

I would like the images, aromas, and characters of "Babette's Feast" to stay with us as we commence our more technical exploration into the meaning of the Eucharist. John Henry Newman reminded us that the act of religious assent involves much more than acceptance of logical inferences; it is, he argued, as much a matter of hunch, intuition, and feel as of thought.[1] I would be glad, therefore, if you approached the theology of the Eucharist with the symbolic world of Dinesen's tasty story very much in mind.

The Sacred Meal in the Old Testament

We shall begin with the theme of the sacred meal, and we shall set this theme in the widest possible biblical framework. The opening line of the book of Genesis tells us that "in the beginning . . . God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Why did God, who is perfect in every way and who stands in need of nothing outside of himself, bother to create at all? There are mythologies and philosophies galore—both ancient and modern—that speak of God needing the universe or benefiting from it in some fashion, but Catholic theology has always

1. John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979) 230–269.

repudiated these approaches and affirmed God's total self-sufficiency. So the question remains: Why did God create? The answer provided by the First Vatican Council gives expression to the mainstream of Catholic theology: God created the heavens and the earth "of his own goodness and almighty power, not for the increase of his own happiness."[2] The ancient theologian Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite said that the good, by its very nature, is diffusive of itself.[3] When you are in a good mood, you don't hide yourself away; on the contrary, you tend to effervesce, communicating your joy. God is the supreme good, and hence God is supremely diffusive of himself; the intensity of his joy is such that it overflows into creation.

Now let us take one more step. Love, in the theological sense, is not a feeling or a sentiment, though it is often accompanied by those psychological states. In its essence, love is an act of the will, more precisely, the willing of the good of the other as other.[4] To love is really to want what is good for someone else and then to act on that desire. Many of us are kind, generous, or just, but only so that someone else might return the favor and be kind, generous, or just to us. This is indirect egotism rather than love. Real love is an ecstatic act, a leaping outside of the narrow confines of my needs and desires and an embrace of the other's good for the other's sake. It is an escape from the black hole of the ego, which tends to draw everything around it into itself. In light of this understanding, we can now see that God's creation of the world is a supreme act of love. God, it is true, has no need of anything outside of himself; therefore, the very existence of the universe is proof that it has been *loved* into being—that is to say, desired utterly for its own sake. Moreover, since God is the maker of the heavens and the earth (biblical

2. Heinrich Denzinger et al., *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), no. 3002, 601.

3. *The Divine Names*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), chap. 4. See also Thomas Aquinas' discussions of Dionysius' principle in *Summa theologiae* 1.5.4, 1.27.5, 1.73.3, 1-2.1.4, and elsewhere.

4. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* 1.91.2–3, trans. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Hanover House, 1955).

code for "absolutely everything"), all created things must be connected to one another by the deepest bond. Because all creatures—from archangels to atoms—are coming forth here and now from the creative power of God, all are related to each other through the divine center. We are all—whether we like it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not—ontological siblings, members of the same family of creation and sharing the same Father. In the Middle Ages, Francis of Assisi expressed this idea in his "Canticle of Brother Sun," speaking of "Brother Sun" and "Sister Moon," "Brother Fire" and "Sister Water."[5] That was not simply charming poetry, but rather exact metaphysics. Everything in the created order—even inanimate objects, even the most distant cosmic force, even realities that I cannot see—is brother and sister to me. We notice how the author of Genesis exults in describing the wide variety of things that God makes, from the light itself to the earth and sea, to all of the trees and plants that grow from the ground, to those lowly beasts that crawl upon it. From ancient times to the present day, the Church has battled the Gnostic heresy, according to which materiality is a lowly or fallen aspect of reality, the product of a lesser god. The book of Genesis—and the Bible as a whole—is fiercely anti-Gnostic. The one Creator God makes all things, pronounces all of them good, and declares the assemblage of creatures *very* good. Therefore, we can say that the universe, in the biblical reading, has been loved into existence by a joyous God and is marked, at every level and in every dimension, by a coinherence, a connectedness and mutuality. As the culmination of creation, God made the first human beings and gave them mastery over the earth: "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'" (Gen. 1:28). We must be careful to interpret this passage correctly, aware of the numerous critiques

5. Francis of Assisi, "Canticle of Brother Sun," in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, trans. Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 37–39.

that have emerged in the last century or so concerning ecological indifference and a sort of human-centered chauvinism. The "dominion" spoken of in Genesis has nothing to do with domination and should definitely not be construed as a permission for human beings to take advantage of the world that God has created; just the contrary. What God entrusts to Adam and Eve might best be explained through the term "stewardship." They are to care for creation and, if I can put it this way, they are to be the spokespersons for it, appreciating its order with their illuminated minds and giving expression to its beauty with their well-trained tongues. This responsibility is nowhere better represented than in Genesis' account of Adam giving names to all the animals—that is to say, consciously designating the order and relationality of the created world. Human beings were intended to be the means by which the whole earth would give praise to God, returning in love what God had given in love, uniting all things in a great act of worship. This is why it is no accident that Adam is represented in the tradition of rabbinic interpretation as a priest, the one who effects union between God and creation. As he walks with Yahweh in easy friendship in the cool of the evening, Adam is humanity—and by extension, the whole of the cosmos—as it is meant to be, caught up in a loop of grace, creaturely love answering divine love.

Now, what could be a better symbol of this entire theology of creation than the sacred meal, the banquet at which the Creator shares his life with his grateful creatures? Indeed, Genesis tells us that God placed Adam and Eve in the midst of a garden of earthly delights and gave them permission to eat from all of the trees in the garden save one (Gen. 2:15–17). He instructed them, in short, to participate in his life through the joy of eating and drinking. The ranginess and abandon in the Garden of Eden is evocative of God's desire that his creatures flourish to the utmost. The Church Father Irenaeus of Lyons commented that "the glory of God is a human being fully alive."[6]

6. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.20.7, in *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith: A Condensation of* Against Heresies, trans. and ed. James R. Payton Jr. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 116.

But why then the prohibition? Why is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil forbidden to them? The fundamental determination of good and evil remains, necessarily, the prerogative of God alone, since God is, himself, the ultimate good. To seize this knowledge, therefore, is to claim divinity for oneself—and this is the one thing that a creature can never do and thus should never try. To do so is to place oneself in a metaphysical contradiction, interrupting thereby the loop of grace and ruining the *sacrum convivium* (sacred banquet). Indeed, if we turn ourselves into God, then the link that ought to connect us, through God, to the rest of creation is lost, and we find ourselves alone. This is, in the biblical reading, precisely what happens. Beguiled by the serpent's suggestion that God is secretly jealous of his human creatures, Eve and Adam ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They seized at godliness that they might not be dominated by God, and they found themselves, as a consequence, expelled from the place of joy. Moreover, as the conversation between God and his sinful creatures makes plain, this "original" sin entailed that the connection between Adam and Eve and between humanity and the rest of creation is fatally compromised: "The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' . . . The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate'" (Gen. 3:12, 13).

This complex symbolic narrative is meant to explain the nature of sin as it plays itself out across the ages and even now. God wants us to eat and drink in communion with him and our fellow creatures, but our own fear and pride break up the party. God wants us gathered around him in gratitude and love, but our resistance results in scattering, isolation, violence, and recrimination. God wants the sacred meal; we want to eat alone and on our terms.

But the God of the Bible is relentless in his love. He will not rest until this situation is rectified. The whole of the scriptural story, though contained in a wide variety of texts written at different times for different purposes, can be seen as a coherent narrative of God's

attempt to restore the fallen creation, to reestablish the joy of the banquet. In the language of the biblical scholar N.T. Wright, much of the Bible is the account of God's "rescue operation" for his sad and compromised creation.[7] The choosing of Abraham, the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt, the giving of the Law on Sinai, the victories of David and Solomon, the sending of the prophets, the setting up of the temple—all are moments in the story of liberation. And in the Christian reading, the rescue operation culminates in Jesus, who recapitulates, sums up, the sacred history that preceded him. He is the one to whom Abraham looked; he is final freedom from the slavery of sin; he is the embodiment of the new Law; he is the true successor of David and Solomon; he is the final teller of the divine truth; his body is the new Temple. This entire saga is the story of God's desire to walk once again in friendship with Adam, to sit down once again with the whole of his creation at a great festive banquet.

Let us look a bit more closely at two Old Testament presentations of the sacred meal. At the very center of the Jewish story of salvation is the event of Exodus and Passover. The children of Israel, who had wandered into Egypt during the time of the patriarch Joseph, became, after many centuries, slaves of the Egyptians, compelled to build fortified cities and monuments for the pharaoh. The Church Father Origen provided a symbolic reading of this narrative, according to which the Israelites stand for all of the spiritual and physical powers that God has given to his people, and the pharaoh (and his underlings) stands for sin and the worship of false gods.[8] Sin, the story is telling us, has enslaved the human race, pressing what is best in us into its service, using mind, will, imagination, courage, and creativity in a perverted way. This perversion, in turn, has set us at odds with one

7. See, for example, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 11, 66.

8. Origen of Alexandria, "The Homilies on Exodus," in *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, 227–387 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982).

another, prompting the war of all against all. It is from this state of false worship and dissolution that God wishes to free the Israelites, and so he does battle with the pharaoh and his minions. The plagues that God sends should not be interpreted as arbitrary punishments but as the means by which God enters into the spiritual struggle on our behalf. The final plague, according to the narrative, is the killing of the firstborn throughout Egypt. To protect the children of Israel from this disaster, God instructs them to daub their doorposts with the blood of a slaughtered lamb so that when the angel of death comes, he will see the blood and pass over the homes of the Israelites. Hence, the feast of *Pesach* or "Passover," one of the most sacred events on the Hebrew calendar.

In the next section of this book, I will return to that sacrificed lamb and its blood, but for now, I want to focus on the meal that accompanied Passover. In the twelfth chapter of the book of Exodus, we hear that God, after announcing what he will do to the firstborn of the Egyptians, told Moses to instruct the entire nation of Israel to celebrate a ritual meal. Each household was to procure a young, unblemished lamb and to slaughter it in the evening twilight. Then they were to eat its roasted flesh, along with bitter herbs (reminding them of the bitterness of their slavery) and unleavened bread (because they were on the run, unable to wait for the bread to rise). This sacred Passover meal involving the whole nation must become, God commands, "a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance" (Exod. 12:14).

The English word "sin" is derived from the German word *Sünde*, which has the sense of "dividing." The closest English relative to *Sünde* would be "sunder." Sin divides and scatters us, since, as we saw, it involves a severing of our relationship with the Creator God through whom alone we find our unity. As he led the Israelites out of slavery (which is to say, bondage to sin), God established a meal that united

the whole people, gathering them, in their households, around a common table and a common food. And he declared that this act of unity must be repeated down through the ages as the defining gesture of the Israelite nation. The Passover meal, in a word, was a recovery (however imperfect) of the easy unity and fellowship of the Garden of Eden, God hosting a banquet at which his human creatures share life with him and each other. Though this theme is a bit muted in the Exodus story, the united Israel was intended by God to be a catalyst for the unification of the world. We must recall that the rescue operation is directed to the descendants of Adam and Eve—which is to say, to the whole human race. God chose Israel neither because of their special merits nor for their peculiar advantage, but rather as a vehicle to carry his salvation to the nations. These slave families, gathering in hope and fellowship around a meal of roasted lamb, bitter herbs, and unleavened bread, were, in the biblical reading, the seeds from which the family of God will grow.

The second Old Testament instance of meal symbolism that I would like to examine is found in the book of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is one of the greatest poets in the scriptural tradition, and one of his master images, on display throughout his writings, is the holy mountain. In the second chapter of Isaiah, we find this splendid vision: "In days to come, the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD'" (Isa. 2:2–3). The mountain of the Lord's house is Zion, where the temple, the place of right worship, is situated. What Isaiah dreams of here, therefore, is the coming together of all the scattered tribes of Israel, indeed of the world, around the worship of the true God. The division that commenced with the idolatry in the Garden of Eden ("you will be like God, knowing good and evil" [Gen. 3:5]) is healed through a grateful acknowledgment of God's primacy. The

distinctive mark of this rightly ordered worship is peace: "For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" (Isa. 2:3–4). Having found friendship with God, Isaiah implies, human beings will rediscover friendship with one another, and they will not feel the need to train for war anymore. The cosmic implication of this reconciliation is made plain in the eleventh chapter of Isaiah, where the prophet dreams of the age of the Messiah. "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid. . . . The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together. . . . The weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain" (Isa. 11:6–9). We saw that the original sin entailed a falling apart of the whole of God's creation, a setting at enmity of humanity and nature. Here, on the holy mountain, the place of right worship, all is reconciled and reintegrated.

But there is a third and culminating feature of God's holy mountain that Isaiah specially emphasizes. The mountain is the place of right worship and cosmic peace, but it is also the locale of a magnificent meal. In the twenty-fifth chapter, we find this: "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear" (Isa. 25:6). In Isaiah's vision, the gathered community is fed by a gracious God with the finest foods, calling to mind the situation in the Garden of Eden before the eating and drinking was interrupted by a grasp at godliness. The prophet envisions all the nations of the world, living in nonviolence and informed by right worship, able to share life with God and one another, receiving and giving grace. We've seen that this holy mountain is Zion, Jerusalem, the place of the temple. In "Babette's Feast," the members of the Dean's community sang often of the heavenly

Jerusalem for which they longed. What they were singing about is precisely what Isaiah is dreaming about: God's festive meal shared with his holy people.

The Sacred Meal in the Life and Ministry of Jesus

For Christians, the most important thing to note about Jesus is that he is not simply one more in a long line of prophets and teachers. He is not merely, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Moses, or David, a good man who represents God. Rather, he consistently speaks and acts in the very person of God. In the words of N.T. Wright, Jesus is like a portrait of Yahweh, in all of its richness and complexity, sprung to life.[9] When he claims interpretive authority over the Torah, when he forgives the sins of the paralyzed man, when he calls his disciples to love him above mother and father, indeed above their very lives, when he cleanses the temple, Jesus says and does things that only Yahweh could legitimately say and do. In its later creeds and dogmas, the Church expressed this biblical conviction, speaking of Jesus as the Incarnation of the Word of God, as "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God."[10] Now, we've been arguing that one of the principal desires of Yahweh was to reestablish the sacred meal, to restore the community and fellowship lost through sin. Thus, it should be no surprise that Jesus would make the sacred meal central to his messianic work. Throughout his public ministry, Jesus gathered people around a table of fellowship. In the Palestine of his time, the table was a place where the divisions and stratifications of the society were particularly on display, but at Jesus' table, all were welcome: saints and sinners, the just and the unjust, the healthy and the sick, men and women. This open-table fellowship was not simply a challenge to the societal status quo, but also an

9. N.T. Wright, "Jesus and the Identity of God," *Ex Auditu* 14 (January 1998): 42–56.
10. *Roman Missal* (ICEL, 2010).