This Is My Body

A CALL TO EUCHARISTIC REVIVAL

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WORD on FIRE

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The Source and Summit

In 2019, the respected Pew Forum released the results of a survey of Catholics in regard to their belief in the Eucharist. Along with many others, I was startled when I read the data, for I discovered that only one-third of those questioned subscribed to the Church's official teaching that Jesus is really, truly, and substantially present under the signs or appearances of bread and wine. Fully two-thirds held that the Eucharistic elements are merely symbolic of Jesus' presence. Mind you, this was not a survey of the general population or of all Christians, but of *Catholics*. Whether you saw it as a failure in catechesis, preaching, theology, liturgy, or evangelization, it was an indication of a spiritual disaster. I say this because the Second Vatican Council clearly taught that the Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life." Therefore, the Pew study revealed that the vast majority of our own Catholic people did not understand this central and crucial reality, the beginning and the end of Christianity.

Soon after I read these dispiriting statistics, I attended a meeting of the Administrative Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, of which I was a member by virtue of being Chair of the Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis. At the end of a long session, I asked for the microphone and said to the bishops around the table, "Brothers, I think we have a serious problem." At the end of the meeting, seven or eight of the other committee heads came up to me and said, "What can we do to help?"

We resolved to gather by Zoom (this was during COVID) and share ideas. From these conversations, the Eucharistic Revival, presently underway, was born. We resolved that there should be a concerted effort to restore a vibrant belief in the Eucharist and that this should take place at the local, regional, and national levels. We further specified that the process should be structured along the lines of the three transcendentals—namely, the good, the true, and the beautiful. Under the rubric of the good, we would look at the social and ethical implications of our Eucharistic faith, the manner in which a commitment to the poor and to social justice flows naturally from our reception of the Body and Blood of the Lord. Under the heading of the true, we would teach, catechize, and preach about the meaning of the Blessed Sacrament, especially the Real Presence of Jesus. And finally, under the prescript of the beautiful, we would draw attention to the liturgical and devotional practices that surround the Eucharist.

This rough outline was presented to all of the bishops at our various regional meetings, and then, at the following

plenary gathering in November, we voted to launch this revival. By this time, my term as Chair of the Committee on Evangelization had come to an end, and I confidently handed the project over to my successor, Bishop Andrew Cozzens. Bishop Cozzens and his colleagues are magnificently bringing this idea to fulfillment.

The book you are about to read is designed to accompany the Eucharistic Revival. I analyze the source and summit of the Christian life according to the categories of meal, sacrifice, and Real Presence. My sincere prayer is that it might help you understand the sacrament of Jesus' Body and Blood more thoroughly, precisely so that you might fall in love with the Lord more completely.

CHAPTER I

The Eucharist as Sacred Meal

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 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." The ancient theologian Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite said that the good, by its very nature, is diffusive of itself. 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. 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 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." 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 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."

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. 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. 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 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 the 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.

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. 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." 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 expression of God's deepest intentions vis-à-vis the human race, the realization of Isaiah's eschatological dream. In fact, very often, Jesus' profoundest teachings took place at table, calling to mind Isaiah's holy mountain where a festive meal would be spread out and where "instruction" would go forth.

Let us examine just a few instances of this meal fellowship in the New Testament, beginning in a perhaps surprising place: the story of Christmas. The account of Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Luke is not, as Raymond E. Brown reminded us, an innocent tale that we tell to children. Instead, all of the drama and edginess of the story of Jesus are adumbrated there. We are meant to notice

a contrast between the figure mentioned at the outset of the narrative—Caesar Augustus—and the character who is at the center of the story. Caesar would have been the best-fed person in the ancient world, able at the snap of his fingers to have all of his sensual desires met. But the true king, the true emperor of the world, is born in a cave outside of a forgotten town on the verge of Caesar's domain. Too weak even to raise his head, he is wrapped in swaddling clothes and then laid "in a manger," the place where the animals eat (Luke 2:7). What Luke is signaling here is that Jesus had come to be food for a hungry world. Whereas Caesar—in the manner of Eve and Adam—existed to be fed, Jesus existed to be fed upon. He was destined to be, not only the host at the sacred banquet, but the meal itself. And to Christ's manger came the shepherds (evocative of the poor and marginalized, the lost sheep of the house of Israel) and kings (evocative of the nations of the world), drawn there as though by a magnet. Thus commenced the realization of Isaiah's vision. A story that can be found in all three of the synoptic Gospels is that of the conversion of Levi (or Matthew) the tax collector. We hear that as Jesus was passing by, he spotted Matthew at his tax collector's post. To be a tax collector in Jesus' time—a Jew collaborating with the Roman occupying power in the oppression of one's own people—was to be a contemptible figure, someone akin to a French collaborator during the Nazi period. Jesus gazed at this man and said, simply, "Follow me" (Matt. 9:9). Did Jesus invite Matthew because the tax collector merited it? Was Jesus responding to a request from Matthew or some hidden

longing in the sinner's heart? Certainly not. Grace, by definition, comes unbidden and without explanation. In Caravaggio's magnificent painting of this scene, Matthew, dressed anachronistically in sixteenth-century finery, responds to Jesus' summons by pointing incredulously to himself and wearing a quizzical expression, as if to say, "Me? You want me?" The hand of Christ in Caravaggio's painting is adapted from the hand of Adam in Michelangelo's depiction of the creation of man on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Just as creation is *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), so conversion is a new creation, a gracious remaking of a person from the nonbeing of his sin. Matthew, we are told, immediately got up and followed the Lord. But where did he follow him? To a banquet! "And as he sat at dinner in the house" is the first thing we read after the declaration that Matthew followed him (Matt. 9:10). Before he calls Matthew to do anything, before he sends him on mission, Jesus invites Matthew to recline in easy fellowship around a festive table. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis comments, "The deepest meaning of Christian discipleship is not to work for Jesus but to be with Jesus." The former tax collector listens to the Word, laughs with him, breaks bread with him, and in this finds his true identity. Adam was the friend of Yahweh before becoming, through his own fear and pride, Yahweh's enemy. Now Jesus, Yahweh made flesh, seeks to reestablish this lost friendship with Adam's descendants.

The Gospel then tells us that many other sinners and tax collectors, inspired, we presume, by Matthew's example, "came and were sitting with [Jesus] and his

disciples" (Matt. 9:10). This is but one example of how Jesus embodies the Isaian vision of all the nations of the world streaming to unity around Mt. Zion. Christ himself is the meeting of divinity and humanity, and hence he is the temple, the place of right worship. And thus it is around him that the nations will gather to be fed "rich food filled with marrow" and "well-aged wines" (Isa. 25:6). The same grace that summoned Matthew now, through Matthew, summons the rest, and a community of sinners-become-diners is formed. Naturally, this coming together stirs up the resentment of the Pharisees, who ask the disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Matt. 9:11). In our dysfunction, having lost contact with the God through whom all are one, we tend to order ourselves in exclusive and domineering ways, determining the insiders precisely in contradistinction to the outsiders. But this is just the kind of phony, self-destructive community that Jesus has come to interrupt. And so he responds to this criticism: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. . . . For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Matt. 9:12, 13).

Here we find a theme that will be developed throughout the tradition—namely, the sacred meal as medicine for the sin-sick soul. In light of Jesus' observation, we can see that the inclusion of sinners is the very heart and raison d'être of the meal that he hosts.

The miracle of the feeding of the thousands with a few loaves and fish must have haunted the imaginations of the early Christian communities, for accounts of it can be

found in all four Gospels. These narratives are richly iconic presentations of the great theme of the sacred meal that we have been developing. In Luke's version, crowds began to gather around Jesus when they heard that he had retired to Bethsaida. Moved with pity, Jesus taught them and cured their sick, but as the day was drawing to a close, the disciples worried about what this enormous crowd would eat. "The twelve came to him and said, 'Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place'" (Luke 9:12). The Twelve, symbolic of the gathered tribes of Israel, act here in contradiction to their own deepest identity, for they want to scatter those whom Jesus has drawn magnetically to himself. So Jesus challenges them: "You give them something to eat." But they protest: "We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people" (Luke 9:13). Oblivious to their complaint, Jesus instructs them to gather the crowd in groups of fifty or so. Then, taking the loaves and fish, Jesus says a blessing over them, breaks them, and then gives them to the disciples for distribution. Everyone in the crowd of five thousand eats until they are satisfied.

There is no better exemplification in the Scriptures of what I have been calling the loop of grace. God offers, as a sheer grace, the gift of being, but if we try to cling to that gift and make it our own (in the manner of Eve and Adam), we lose it. The constant command of the Bible is this: what you have received as a gift, give as a gift—and you will find the original gift multiplied and enhanced.

God's grace, precisely because it is *grace*, cannot be held on to; rather, it is had only in the measure that it remains grace—that is to say, a gift given away. God's life, in a word, is had only on the fly. One realizes this truth when one enters willingly into the loop of grace, giving away that which one is receiving. The hungry people who gather around Jesus in this scene are symbolic of the hungry human race, starving from the time of Adam and Eve for what will satisfy. In imitation of our first parents, we have tried to fill up the emptiness with wealth, pleasure, power, honor, the sheer love of domination, but none of it works, precisely because we have all been wired for God and God *is* nothing but love. It is only when we conform ourselves to the way of love, only when, in a high paradox, we contrive to empty out the ego, that we are filled. Thus the five loaves and two fish symbolize that which has been given to us, all that we have received as a grace from God. If we appropriate it, we lose it. But if we turn it over to Christ, then we will find it transfigured and multiplied, even unto the feeding of the world. At the outset of the story, the disciples refused to serve the crowd, preferring to send them away to the neighboring towns to fend for themselves. At the climax of the narrative, the disciples become themselves the instruments of nourishment, setting the loaves and fish before the people. Within the loop of grace, they discovered their mission and were themselves enhanced, transfigured. The little detail at the end of the story—that the leftovers filled twelve wicker baskets—has an eschatological overtone. We are meant to think, once more, of Isaiah's holy mountain to which the

twelve tribes of Israel and, through them, all the tribes of the world would be drawn.

All of these themes are summed up, drawn together, recapitulated (if I may use St. Irenaeus' language) in the meal that Jesus hosted the night before his death. Luke tells us that, at the climactic moment of his life and ministry, Jesus "took his place at the table, and the apostles with him" (Luke 22:14). At this Last Supper, Jesus, in a culminating way, embodied Yahweh's desire to sit in easy intimacy with his people, sharing his life with them. He said, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15). As we saw, Yahweh established the Passover meal as a sign of his covenant with his holy people Israel. Thus Jesus, Yahweh made flesh, gathered his community around the Passover table. All of the familiar Passover motifs of liberation, redemption, unity, and festivity are at play here, but they are being redefined and reconfigured in relation to Jesus. The Isaian vision of the sumptuous meal on God's holy mountain is described as "eschatological," implying that it has to do with God's deepest and final desire for the world that he has made. At the commencement of the Last Supper, as he settled in with his disciples, Jesus explicitly evoked this eschatological dimension: "For I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God" (Luke 22:16). And when he took the first cup of Passover wine, he reiterated the theme: "For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes" (Luke 22:18). It is most important to remember that this meal took place on the night before

Jesus' death—which is to say, at the moment when he was summing up his life and preparing for his own Passover into the realm of the Father. Therefore, insisting that he will not eat or drink again until the kingdom arrives is tantamount to explaining that this meal has a final and unsurpassable symbolic significance, that it is his last word spoken, as it were, in the shadow of the eternal and thus redolent of the divine order. The room of the Last Supper *is* Isaiah's holy mountain, and the meal that Jesus hosts *is* the supper of rich food and well-aged wines. It is as though the longed-for future has appeared even now in time. What stood at the heart of this event? Jesus took the unleavened bread of the Passover, the bread symbolic of Israel's hasty flight from slavery to freedom, blessed it in accord with the traditional Passover prayer of blessing, broke it, and distributed it to his disciples saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). And then, after they had eaten, he took a cup of wine—traditionally called the cup of blessing—and said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). Acting once more in the very person of Yahweh, Jesus fed his friends with his very substance, effecting the deepest kind of coinherence *among* them because of the radicality of his own coinherence *with* them. To say "body" and "blood," in the nondualist context of first-century Judaism, is to say "self," and thus Jesus was inviting his disciples to feed on him and thereby to draw his life into theirs, conforming themselves to him in the most intimate and complete way possible. We must never keep the account of the fall

far from our minds when we consider these events. If our trouble began with a bad meal (seizing at godliness on our own terms), then our salvation commences with a rightly structured meal (God offering us his life as a free gift). What was foreshadowed when Mary laid the Christ child in the manger came, at this meal, to full expression.

It is of great moment that, immediately after this extraordinary event—this constitution of the Church around God's gift of self—Jesus speaks of treachery: "But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table" (Luke 22:21). In the biblical reading, God's desires have been, from the beginning, opposed. Consistently, human beings have preferred the isolation and separation of sin to the festivity of the sacred meal. Theologians have called this anomalous tendency the *mysterium iniquitatis* (the mystery of evil), for there is no rational ground for it, no reason why it should exist. But there it stubbornly is, always shadowing the good, parasitic upon that which it tries to destroy. Therefore, we should not be too surprised that, as the sacred meal comes to its richest possible expression, evil accompanies it. Judas the betrayer expresses the *mysterium iniquitatis* with particular symbolic power, for he had spent years in intimacy with Jesus, taking in the Lord's moves and thoughts at close quarters, sharing the table of fellowship with him, and yet he saw fit to turn Jesus over to his enemies and to interrupt the coinherence of the Last Supper. Those of us who regularly gather around the table of intimacy with Christ and yet engage consistently in the works of darkness are meant to see ourselves in the betrayer.

What follows is a scene that, were it not so tragic, would be funny. Having experienced firsthand the intense act of love by which Jesus formed a new humanity around the eating of his Body and the drinking of his Blood, having sensed that the deepest meaning of this new life is self-sacrificing love, the disciples quarrel about titles and honors: "A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest" (Luke 22:24). In the table fellowship that he practiced throughout his ministry, Jesus, as we saw, consistently undermined the systems of domination and the social stratifications that marked the culture of his time. His order (God's kingdom) would be characterized by an equality and mutuality born of our shared relationship to the creator God, who "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good" (Matt. 5:45). Therefore, games of ambition and claims of social superiority are inimical to the community that finds its point of orientation around the table of Jesus' Body and Blood. And this is why Jesus responded so promptly and unambiguously to the disciples' childish preoccupations: "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves" (Luke 22:25–26).

If, as Feuerbach said, we are what we eat, then those who eat the Flesh of Jesus and drink his Blood must constitute a new society, grounded in love, service, nonviolence, and nondomination. Reminding them of their crucial importance as the first members of the Church,

Jesus said, "I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom. . . . And you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:29–30). The order of love that obtains within God became flesh in Jesus and, through Jesus, was given to the community that he founded. That community in turn, the new Israel, would be, in accord with Isaiah's prediction, the means by which the whole world would be gathered to God. Here, the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fish comes to mind. Initially, as we saw, the disciples refused their mission to be the new Israel and feed the crowd, but then, in light of the miracle of grace, they became the distributors of grace. A very similar dynamic is on display in the account of the Last Supper. It is never enough simply to eat and drink the Body and Blood of Jesus; one must become a bearer of the power that one has received. The meal always conduces to the mission.

The Last Supper preceded and symbolically anticipated the terrible events of the following day, when Jesus' body would indeed be given away and his blood poured out. In the next section of the book, I will speak much more of this sacrificial dimension of the supper, but for now I would like to focus on what followed the dying of Jesus. If Jesus had died and simply remained in his grave, he would be remembered (if he was remembered at all) as a noble idealist, tragically crushed by the forces of history. Perhaps a few of his disciples would have carried on his program for a time, but eventually the Jesus movement, like so many others like it, would have run out of steam. N.T. Wright, echoing the opinion of the Church Fathers,

argued that the single most extraordinary fact of early Christianity is the perdurance of the Christian Church as a messianic movement. There could have been, in the first century, no surer sign that someone was *not* the Messiah than his death at the hands of the enemies of Israel, for one of the central marks of messiahship was precisely victory over those enemies. That Peter, James, John, Paul, Thomas, and the rest could announce throughout the Mediterranean world that Jesus was in fact the long-awaited Israelite Messiah and that they could go to their deaths defending this claim are the surest indications that something monumentally significant happened to Jesus after his death. That something was the Resurrection. Though too many modern theologians have tried to explain the Resurrection away as a wish-fulfilling fantasy, a vague symbol, or a literary invention, the New Testament writers could not be clearer: the crucified Jesus, who had died and been buried, appeared alive again to his disciples.

The risen Christ was—as all of the accounts attest—strange. On the one hand, he was the same Jesus with whom they had eaten and drunk and to whom they had listened, but on the other hand, he was different, in fact so changed that frequently they didn't immediately recognize him or acknowledge him. It was as though he stood on the borderline between two worlds, still existing in this dimension of space and time, but also transcending it, participating in a higher, better world. Through certain hints in the Old Testament, some first-century Jews had begun to cultivate the conviction that at the end of time God would bring the righteous dead back to

life and restore them to a transfigured earth. In the risen Jesus, the first Christians saw this hope being realized. In Paul's language, Christ was "the first fruits" of those who had fallen asleep—that is to say, the initial instance of the general resurrection of the dead. In him, they saw the dawn of the promised restoration. And thus they began to see that the sacred banquet was not simply an expression of full-flourishing in this world, not simply about justice, peace, and nonviolence here below, but also the anticipation of an elevated, transfigured, and perfected world where God's will would be completely done and his kingdom completely come.

One of the most beautiful evocations of this heavenly meal is found in the twenty-first chapter of John's Gospel. The author of John's Gospel was a literary genius, and his work is marked by subtle and intricate symbolism. Therefore, we must proceed carefully as we examine this story. He tells us that the risen Christ appeared to his disciples by the Sea of Tiberias in Galilee. Throughout the Gospels, beautiful Galilee, Jesus' home country, is symbolic of the land of resurrection and new life. After the Paschal events in Jerusalem, the disciples of Jesus had returned there and taken up, it appears, their old livelihood, for John tells us that seven of them, under the leadership of Peter, were in a boat heading out to fish. But we must attend to the mystical depth of the narrative. When he appeared to them after his Resurrection, Jesus, according to John, breathed on these disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" and "as the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21–22). Therefore, we should appreciate this fishing

expedition as a symbol of the Church (the barque of Peter), across space and time, at its apostolic task of seeking souls. At the break of dawn, they spied a mysterious figure on the distant shore, who shouted out to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" (John 21:5). When they answered in the negative, he instructed them to cast the net over the right side of the ship. When they did so, they brought in a huge catch of fish. The life and work of the Church, John seems to be telling us, will be a lengthy, twilight struggle, a hard toil that will often seem to bear little or no fruit. But after the long night, the dawn of a new life and a new order will break, the transfigured world inaugurated by Jesus. The catch of fish that he makes possible is the totality of people that Christ will gather to himself; it is the new Israel, the eschatological Church. We know this through a subtle bit of symbolism. When the fish are dragged ashore, John bothers to tell us their exact number, 153, a figure commonly taken in the ancient world to signify the total number of species of fish in the sea.

After the miraculous haul, the "disciple whom Jesus loved," traditionally identified as the author of the Gospel, shouted, "It is the Lord!" (John 21:7). St. John, the one who rested on the breast of the Lord at the Last Supper and who had the greatest intuitive feel for Jesus' intentions, represents here the mystical dimension of the Church. Up and down the centuries, there have been poets, preachers, teachers, liturgists, mystics, and saints who have an instinct for who Jesus is and what he desires. They are the ones who, typically, see the working of the Lord first, who recognize his purposes even before the leadership of

the Church does. John's cry in this story anticipates their intuitions and discoveries. What the mystics and poets are ultimately sensing is the eschatological purpose of the Church, the shore toward which the barque of the Church is sailing. When Peter hears that it is the Lord, he throws on clothes. What seems like an incidental detail is symbolically rich. After their sin, Eve and Adam made clothes for themselves, for they were ashamed. So Peter, who had three times denied Jesus, felt similarly ashamed to appear naked before the Lord. He therefore represents, in this symbolic narrative, all those sinners across the centuries who will, in their shame and penitence, seek forgiveness from Christ. As the disciples come ashore, they see that Jesus is doing something altogether in character: he is hosting a meal for them. "They saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. . . . Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast'" (John 21:9, 12). Symbolically, they have arrived at the end of time and the end of their earthly mission, and they are, at the dawn of a new age, ushered into the definitive banquet of which the meals from Eden through the Last Supper were but anticipations. Disciples, mystics, saints, and forgiven sinners are welcome at this breakfast inaugurating the new and elevated manner of being that God had wanted to give us from the time of the Garden of Eden.

THE EUCHARISTIC LITURGY

This entire story that I've sketched—creation, the fall, the formation of Israel, the Passover to freedom, the vision of Isaiah's holy mountain, the gracious table fellowship of

Jesus, the Last Supper, and the eschatological banquet—is made present to us at the Mass. The Eucharistic liturgy of the Church sums up and reexpresses the history of salvation, culminating in the meal by which Jesus feeds us with his very self. What I would like to do in the remaining pages of this section is to walk through the Mass with this complex motif of the sacred meal in mind, demonstrating how the various features and elements we have explored are on vivid display in the liturgy.

Yahweh formed the people Israel as the means by which the whole of creation, wrecked by the fall, would be healed. The Passover supper was, as we saw, the symbolic expression of this communion so desired by God, the Isaiah mountain its eschatological anticipation, and Jesus' meals its concrete embodiment. The opening move of the Eucharistic liturgy takes place before the ritual proper commences, when people from all walks of life, varying educational backgrounds, different economic classes, of all ages and of both genders gather in one place to pray. In principle, there is no block or obstacle to those who wish to come to the Mass. When she was considering the possibility of becoming a Roman Catholic, Dorothy Day commented that what impressed her the most about the Mass was that the rich and the poor knelt there side by side in prayer. A community that would never exist in the harsh world of 1930s America strangely existed around the altar of Christ, God's desire for the world becoming incarnate even in the midst of sin. When the great English historian Christopher Dawson informed his aristocratic mother

that he was converting from Anglicanism to Catholicism, she objected, not to his shift in doctrinal affiliation, but that he would be obliged, in her words, to "worship with the help." The gathered community, coming together to worship the Lord and to feed on him, is indeed the seed of a new way of being, the contravention of the divisions and hatreds that flowed from the fall. It is the new world emerging within the very structure of the old.

Once assembled, the community rises to sing. Liturgical music ought not to be seen as secondary or merely decorative, for it gives expression to the harmonizing of the many. Just as the tribes that stream up the holy mountain do not lose their individuality as they gather to worship in common, so the participants at Mass do not surrender their distinctiveness when they sing together. Rather, they contribute, individually, to a consonance. Just after the sign of the cross and the greeting, the people are invited to acknowledge their sin and seek the divine mercy; they say, "*Kyrie eleison; Christe eleison; Kyrie eleison*" (Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy). Jesus came, not for the healthy, but for the sick. He was Yahweh in person calling home the scattered sheep of the house of Israel, and that is why he was so gracious in his welcome to Matthew and his disreputable friends. And so we sinners (once we accept that we are indeed sinners) are forgiven and welcomed into easy intimacy with Christ at the liturgy. At Sunday Mass and at more festive Masses, the Kyrie is followed by the great prayer of the Gloria, which begins with this line: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will." Much of the theology that

we've been presenting is packed into that statement. Peace will break out on earth, in accord with God's first and deepest desire, when we all come together in a common act of worship. Aristotle remarked that a friendship will never last as long as the friends are simply in love with one another. In time, he said, such a relationship will devolve into mutual egotism. Rather, a friendship will endure only in the measure that the two friends fall together in love with a transcendent third, with some great value or good that lies beyond the grasp of either of them. This Aristotelian principle applies in regard to our relationship with God. The indispensable key to peace—that is to say, a flourishing friendship among the members of the human race—is that we all fall together in love with the transcendent Creator. Only when we give glory to God in the highest—above nation, family, culture, political party, etc.—will we, paradoxically, find unity among ourselves. To put this in more explicitly scriptural language, only when we sit together at the meal hosted and made possible by God will we truly sit together in peace.

After the Gloria prayer, participants in the Mass are seated for the proclamation of the Word of God. Since Christ is, as St. John insisted, the Word of God made flesh, the entire Scripture—Old Testament and New—is the speech of Christ. Having been gathered by Jesus, we listen to him, as did the crowds who heard the Sermon on the Mount. In the ancient world, the meal, at which convivial friends reclined in easy company, was the place where philosophical conversation often took place. (Think of the *Symposium* of Plato, an account of a festive supper

during which the conversants discoursed on the nature of love.) Thus, just as Jesus taught people around the table of conversation and good cheer, so he teaches us who have gathered in fellowship for the Eucharistic liturgy.

The second major section of Mass—the Liturgy of the Eucharist—commences with the offertory presentation. From the midst of the congregation, simple gifts of bread, wine, and water are brought forward and placed on the altar. Here we have a quite exact symbolic re-presentation of the multiplication of the loaves and fish. The priest, who is acting in the person of Christ, sees the crowd gathered before him and wonders how he might feed them spiritually. From the people, he garners a small amount of food and drink, which he then presents to the Father: "Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread and wine we offer you." Because the Creator God stands in need of nothing, he is able to receive these gifts and send them back elevated and multiplied, transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus. Our small offerings, in short, break against the rock of the divine self-sufficiency and return to us as spiritual food and drink. The Mass, accordingly, is the richest possible expression of the loop of grace, God's life possessed in the measure that it is given away.

At this point, I would like to say a word about the cosmic dimension of the Mass. As we have seen, sin is construed, in the biblical reading, as not simply a personal and interpersonal problem, a strictly human concern. Rather, sin compromises the integrity of the entire created order. Thus, the salvation wrought through Israel and Jesus and

made present in the Mass has to do with the healing of the world. We see this dimension especially in the gifts of bread and wine presented at the offertory. To speak of bread is to speak, implicitly, of soil, seed, grain, and sunshine that crossed ninety million miles of space; to speak of wine is to speak, indirectly, of vine, earth, nutrients, storm clouds, and rainwater. To mention earth and sun is to allude to the solar system of which they are a part, and to invoke the solar system is to assume the galaxy of which it is a portion, and to refer to the galaxy is to hint at the unfathomable realities that condition the structure of the measurable universe. Therefore, when these gifts are brought forward, it is as though the whole of creation is placed on the altar before the Lord. In the older Tridentine liturgy, the priest would make this presentation facing the east, the direction of the rising sun, signaling that the Church's prayer was on behalf not simply of the people gathered in that place but of the cosmos itself.

Next, through the power of the words of the Eucharistic Prayer, the elements of bread and wine are transfigured into the Body and Blood of Jesus, and the people are invited to come forward and feast on the Lord. This, once again, is the Christ of the Bethlehem manger, offered for the sustenance of the world. The participants in the Mass don't simply listen to the teaching of Jesus; they don't merely call his memory and spirit to mind. They eat and drink him, incorporating him into themselves, or better, becoming incorporated into him. An element of Catholic ecclesiology that modern Americans find especially difficult to comprehend is that the Church is

not a collectivity of like-minded individuals, something akin to the Abraham Lincoln Association or the Chamber of Commerce. In accord with St. Paul's master image, the Church is a Body, a living organism composed of interdependent cells, molecules, and organs. Christ Jesus is the Head of this Body, and its lifeblood is his sacramental grace, especially the grace of the Eucharist. The members of the Church, those who consume his Body and Blood, become therefore the limbs, eyes, ears, and sensibilities of Christ's Body, the means by which his work continues in the world. Furthermore, they come to be connected to one another by an organic bond that goes dramatically beyond the cohesiveness of even the most intense of voluntary societies. Just as the stomach (if I can extrapolate a bit from Paul) could not possibly remain indifferent to a cancer growing in an adjacent organ, so one member of the Body of Christ couldn't possibly ignore the spiritual plight or physical need of another. And *all* people, Thomas Aquinas taught, are either explicitly or implicitly members of Christ's Body. The radicality of Catholic social commitment—a concern for any and all who suffer—follows directly from the radicality of this distinctive ecclesiology.

Now, the Mass does not conclude with the reception of the Eucharist; it concludes rather with a commission: "Go forth, the Mass is ended." It has been said that, after the words of consecration, those words of dismissal are the most sacred in the liturgy. We must recall, once more, that the community gathered around Jesus, descended from the twelve Apostles, is the new Israel and that the

purpose of Israel was to be a beacon for the nations, the magnetic point to which all peoples would be drawn. Therefore, once filled with the Body and Blood of the Lord, galvanized as a new community formed according to the purposes of God, the people must go forth to Christify the world. Just as Noah released the life that he had preserved on the ark, so the priest sends the community out as the seed of new life. It is in this mission to feed a hungry world that we see the real point and purpose of the sacred meal.

We saw that the sacred meal is not limited in meaning and scope to this context of space and time alone; rather, it is situated within a properly eschatological framework. The Mass signals this transcendent dimension in a number of ways. In the Confiteor, the liturgy invokes another world: "I ask blessed Mary ever-Virgin, all the Angels and Saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God," and the great Gloria prayer calls to mind the song of the angels early on Christmas morning: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors" (Luke 2:14). From the beginning of the rite, therefore, we are situated in a properly heavenly context that stretches beyond that of the community gathered immediately around us. We are praying to and with the heavenly court, composed of glorified human saints and spiritual creatures at a qualitatively higher pitch of existence. Furthermore, between the preface and the commencement of the Eucharistic Prayer proper, we find this distinctive prayer: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of your glory, hosanna in the highest." The triple holy mimics precisely

the cry of the angels in a scene from the sixth chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah. As the prophet saw a vision of God, he heard attendants at the heavenly throne invoking the Creator of the universe with this triple chant. The Christian tradition has, naturally enough, taken these three angelic "holies" to designate the three persons of the Blessed Trinity. The point is that as the worshiping community enters into the most sacred part of the Mass, it becomes conscious, once again, of the supernatural community that worships in tandem with it.

In his treatment of the Eucharist in the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas said that the sacrament has three names, each one corresponding to one of the dimensions of time. As we look to the past, we call the sacrament *sacrificium* (sacrifice), for it embodies the self-immolation of Christ on the cross. About this feature we will have much more to say in the next section. But secondly, as we look to the present, we call it *communio* (communion), since it realizes the coming together of the Body of Christ here and now. Finally, as we look to the future, we call it *Eucharistia* (Eucharist), since it anticipates the great thanksgiving that will take place in heaven when we are in the company of the holy ones, at the eschatological banquet. It is this final feature that the liturgy emphasizes when it invokes so consistently the angels and saints.

CONCLUSION

God is, in his ownmost reality, not a monolith but a communion of persons. From all eternity, the Father speaks himself, and this Word that he utters *is* the Son. A perfect image of his Father, the Son shares fully the actuality of the Father: unity, omniscience, omnipresence, spiritual power. This means that, as the Father gazes at the Son, the Son gazes back at the Father. Since each is utterly beautiful, the Father falls in love with the Son and the Son with the Father—and they sigh forth their mutual love. This holy breath (*Spiritus Sanctus*) *is* the Holy Spirit. These three "persons" are distinct, yet they do not constitute three Gods. They are the way the one God is constituted in the depth of his own being. This means that, for Christian faith, God *is* a family of love, a sharing of life, a breathing in and breathing out, a looking toward another. Whereas for the ancient philosophers substance is ontologically superior to relationship, for Christian theology relationship is metaphysically basic, for God *is* nothing but love. The whole history of salvation can be read as the Trinitarian God's attempt to draw the human family into a relationship that mimics the love that God is. When we love God with our whole heart and mind, we necessarily love all those whom God has loved into existence.

This family love is expressed in the great biblical image of the sacred banquet that we have been exploring throughout this chapter. The Eucharist sums it up and brings it to perfect expression, and hence the Eucharist is the richest participation in the very being of the God who is nothing but love.

69% of Catholics do not believe the Eucharist is the Real Presence of Jesus Christ . . .

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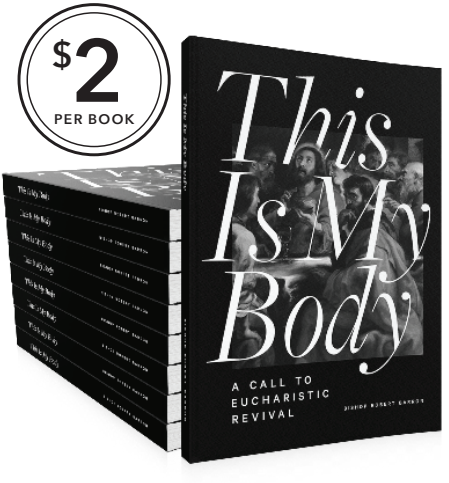

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