

The Eucharist and Bread for a Hungry World

On the most fundamental level, the Eucharist is a sharing of food. Monika Hellwig, a Catholic theologian, writes “The simple, central action of the Eucharist is the sharing of food—not only eating but sharing. The simple, central human experience for the understanding of this action is hunger. However, the experience of hunger, which we all share, should not be simply taken for granted and allowed to slide out of focus in the action.”

The way this sharing is done and the meaning attached to it have enormous consequences because it is an action performed by hundreds of millions of people on our globe each week. In the conclusion of his book, *The Lord’s Table: Eucharist and Passover in Early Christianity*, G. Feeley-Harnik points out that food language was the basic way Christianity was understood in the ancient world and was the reason it had such a deep impact: food seems to have been regarded as the most accessible, the best way of introducing ordinary mortals to the ineffable wisdom of God, and perhaps also the best way of transcending the babel of tongues in which early Christians found themselves.

The writer emphasizes that the Eucharist, unlike the Jewish Passover, was not a family meal in the traditional sense. The Old Testament regulations for the Passover carefully prescribed that each blood-related family should have a lamb for its household (Exod. 12:4). **However, Jesus celebrated his Last Supper not with his family but with his disciples. Jesus’ relationship with them constituted a new solidarity that transcended traditional family bonds and sometimes even opposed them.** Jesus’ sharing of bread and wine was an effective symbol that every man and woman could be brother and sister and thus share together the earth’s resources and body and blood of Christ. Closely connected to this is the food language announcing that Christians are a covenantal community pledged to work together to continue the ministry of Jesus to the poor. It is a community coming together for a definite action, an action to bring about change.

What is the world’s food language? Jack A. Nelson’s *Hunger for Justice: The Politics of Food and Faith* offers a profound analysis. Nelson argues that food has become the principal economic and political weapon of

leading nations. One of the ways he illustrates this is by listing the far-reaching effects of Public Law 480 (the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act of 1954), a program of “surplus agricultural disposal policies.” In Nelson’s words, through this program the United States was able to do the following:

- profitably dispose of harmful surpluses and bail out the U.S. economy;
- create future markets by undermining local food producers and encouraging production of agricultural products for export based on the principle of comparative advantage, make optimal use of poor countries as consumers of U.S. agricultural and industrial goods;
- encourage poor nations to abandon policies directed toward self-reliance and to integrate their economies into the international free-enterprise system;
- facilitate U.S. corporate expansion abroad through Cooley loans;
- fund counterinsurgency and other military efforts that protect U.S. political and economic interests;
- and finally,
- foster poor-country indebtedness and dependency.

Sales of food and military weapons have become interwoven and have increased. Nelson points out that during the 1972 trade deficit two “solutions” soon emerged to the impending crisis: a massive campaign to sell weapons abroad and food sales to a world experiencing shortages the United States had helped create.

The horrible specter of world hunger is not due to overpopulation but to patterns of land and food distribution. A prime example of this is India, where, as Nelson points out, An estimated 50 percent of the land is owned by 8 percent of the people and 70 percent of India’s farmers have less than one acre. Absentee landlords and moneylenders are powerful groups in the countryside. Landless peasants pay high rents, borrow money, and receive pitifully low wages. India’s agricultural production is organized in a manner that serves the interests of a small group of people at the expense of a vast majority. Large numbers of children thus become the only basis for old age security.

Food has become more and more an affair of big business. It is estimated that 5 percent of the farmers in the United States now control over one half of the nation’s



farm lands. The eight largest oil companies own sixty-five million acres of land. Nelson states, "Within our capitalist economy, land has become a commodity to be traded, an opportunity for investment, and no longer a public trust. The results of all this are shocking and appalling: Millions of our children grow up believing that the origin of food is the supermarket. They, and many of us as well, no longer appreciate the delicate interface between creation, soil, and human labor. This interface, which is known as agriculture, has been rapidly replaced by agribusiness. With the onslaught of agribusiness has come violence to ourselves and our soil. Ours is literally a throw-away society, and we throw farmers off the land and replace them with chemicals and machines as easily as we dispose of nonreturnable bottles and cans.

We are confronted by an enormous, overpowering, and confusing Tower of Babel that has been created by the world's food language. To overcome this confusion, the Christian today must recover the revolutionary food language that is expressed in the fundamental meaning of the Eucharist. There is a profound connection between discipleship and feeding the hungry. It is important to understand the link between the Eucharist and food sharing in the early church.

In the earliest New Testament description of the Eucharist, we find that Paul writes to the Corinthians about an agape meal or food sharing that preceded the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Paul had received shocking news "First of all: I hear that when you gather for a meeting there are divisions among you, and I am inclined to believe it." (1 Cor. 11:18). Groups of people were sharing a common meal before the celebration of the Lord's Supper, in accord with their social or economic status. Many wealthy Christians sought out friends of similar status and shared rich food and drink with them. Thus the rich and poor ate in a glaringly different fashion. So Paul writes: "When you assemble it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for everyone is in haste to eat his own supper. One person is hungry while another gets drunk. Will you show contempt for the Church of God and embarrass those who have nothing?"

To emphasize his point, Paul recalls the Last Supper of Jesus as an example of sharing and love, even in the face of betrayal: The Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread, and after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body which is for you."

Paul is convinced that eating Christ's body is an intimate sharing and that the communicants become one body: "Is not the bread we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, many though we are, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." In Paul's view becoming one body implies a serious responsibility to brothers and sisters who are poor. Thus, before eating, a Christian should examine her/himself first; only then should s/he eat of the bread and drink of the cup--Paul emphasizes this because a special sign of the body of Christ is love and concern for those who are suffering and in need. Paul compares the interdependency of the communicants with the body and he writes, "If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it." (12:26) And Paul's concerns were not only for sharing within the local community; they also extended to people in need in distant places.

Paul believed that only a new food language that promoted equality and sharing could make possible a unification of Jews and Gentiles. Furthermore, it could make the ideal of sufficient bread for the world community a reality. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus feeds a huge gathering and becomes a role model: we are called to share our resources with the larger global community, to ensure all can eat.

Jesus experienced hunger. His ministry was not purely spiritual. He came to bring change in the political, economic, and social structure of first-century Palestine. The Eucharist is a renewal of the covenantal relationship Christians have with Jesus, a renewal of our pledge of discipleship to him. To be a disciple of Christ means to imitate him--it means to struggle for structural change in our societies and to be obedient to the Father, the God of justice. It means to learn about the complexities of the food system and work with others to ensure that all are fed.

Reflection Questions

What is the implication for us of Jesus' sharing of the Passover with friends who were not blood relations?
How is Christ a role-model for feeding the hungry?

How has food been tied to political and economic dominance in our global society?

Why was Paul shocked about the ways in which some new Christians were acting before taking the Eucharist?
What could be a contemporary parallel to this behavior?
How can we begin again to feed Christ's children?

