

Corpus Christi

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In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it's estimated that 80% of a laborer's diet consisted in bread. Maybe some vegetables, maybe a little meat now and then, but mostly bread. Now I have also read that in Jesus' time a laborer earned a denarius a day which was just enough to keep his family in bread for that day. The days you did not work, were days you did not eat. So when Jesus has us pray in the Our Father for our daily bread, he is not talking about dinner rolls he is talking about the whole dinner, along with breakfast and lunch too..

Wine first enters the bible with Noah. After the flood Noah plants the first vine. He was also naturally the first to get drunk and the first to pass out from drinking too much. But in general wine was seen as a blessing, a welcome respite from the hard work of the day. Wine was also associated with parties and festivals. Wine was associated with life.

Bread was the staff of life. It's what kept people alive and strong enough to work another day. Wine brought relief from that work. It roused their spirits. It made them feel alive. In identifying bread and wine with his own body and blood, Jesus identifies himself with the necessities of life—with what we need to stay alive, with what we need to feel alive.

Now the history may be new to you, but the spiritual point is a well worn one. We all know that we need God in our lives. Or at least we say that we know it, we think that we know it. But nothing brings this lesson home more than when our lives begin to fall apart and we have nothing left to rely on. Nothing brings home the importance of God in our lives than when our health fails us, or our job disappears, or when a loved one dies, our marriage disintegrates, our kids worry us. When the very ground on which we stand drops away, it is then that we come to appreciate how much we need God. And as our grasp on God himself starts to slip through our fingers, as our grip tires and loosens from the dead weight of our lives pulling us down into despair, it is then that we learn how God grasps us, holds us, sustains us day by day, sometimes hour by hour. For ultimately it is not our faith in God that counts most, but God's faith in us, God's hope for us, God's love of us that descends upon us like manna from heaven.

Paul also speaks of the body of Christ as the Christian community gathered around the table to share this bread and the wine. For we find Christ in our life together in our sharing with one another, our caring for one another, our working with one another to bring Christ to all those whose lives are heavily burdened by toil, or in distress by the lack thereof-- all those in need of new life, physical, mental and spiritual.

At the dawn of the second century Ignatius of Antioch taught that just as a

multitude of grains of wheat are gathered and ground together to be baked into a common loaf so we are called to join together, to support one another as we are ground down by life's burdens, to be there for one another through the heat of suffering, the fiery trials and tribulations of our lives to become together the very body of Christ in our midst. Indeed Augustine will later understand our partaking of the body and blood of Christ not as a reward for good behavior, or a testimony to our holiness, but as medicine to heal our broken, and wounded souls. When we eat Christ's body and drink his blood we not only digest it, it digests us, it not only becomes become part of our body, we become part of His.

Aquinas will extend the identification of the body of Christ even further, speaking of the Eucharist as a foreshadowing of the eschatological banquet in Heaven, in which the entire Church over the entire course of human history, the communion of saints, come together, bringing to fulfillment God's plan for creation. And as at any party, the fun and joy is contagious for we are not just feeling good about ourselves, we are feeling good that everyone is feeling good, that we are all sharing a good time.

There are two traditional images of heaven. One is the Beatific vision, you and God, face to face, locked eye to eye in the Beatific vision. And the other, every one having a good time at a wedding feast, a sensuous image, that draws in all our senses, seeing lost loved ones, eating great food, hearing great music, dancing to the beat . Aquinas teaches that the eucharist is an anticipation of both. That every time we gather to share Christ's body and blood, we anticipate the coming of that day when God will be all in all.

Our first reading traces the ritual of bread and wine back to the ancestral days of Melchizedech. Aquinas stretches the eucharist out into the future to the end of days. As we partake of the bread and wine become body and blood today, we join in that long history, that communion of saints. May it nourish us as it nourished them, and inspire us to redouble our commitment to join in Christ's work, to become his, and all Christians companion, literally one that one breaks bread with, breakfast at the start of our day, lunch in the heat of the day, and dinner after a hard day's work, building the Kingdom of God.