

Two Levels – and Uses – of Communion

a sermon for the Holy Supper by Rev. Michael Gladish
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There were three major sacred feasts among the Jews of the Old and New Testaments, the feast of Passover, the feast of first fruits, and the feast of weeks, or ingathering at the end of the harvest. Each one in the spiritual sense marks the completion of a critical stage in the process of human development or regeneration (AC 9286). These stages are all about the business of removing evils and falsities from our lives and joining the truths we learn from the Word with a genuine goodness of life, and the feasts themselves represent the shared delights of this conjunction as it is achieved.

But the idea of communal feasts goes way back to ancient times, as we read in AC 7996: –

“In general the banquets within the Church in ancient times, both dinners and suppers, were held in order that people might be brought into association with one another and joined together in love, and in order that they might inform one another about matters of love and faith, and so about the things of heaven, see 3596, 3832, 5161. Such were the delights surrounding feasts in those times, and they were the end in view in holding dinners and suppers. People’s minds were thereby nourished, and also their bodies in a parallel and corresponding way. As a result they enjoyed good health and long life, they received intelligence and wisdom, and they were also brought into communication with heaven, some into open communication with angels.”

Thinking about this in connection with a life of useful service to others sheds a whole new light on the value of church social life. *Of course* we don’t imagine heaven to be a state of perpetual feasting (CL 6), but what better uses are there than that people’s minds and bodies are nourished so that they enjoy good health and long life, receive intelligence and wisdom, and come into communication with heaven! Isn’t this really what our lives on this earth are all about?

As we read, however, in our lesson from TCR 433 and from the continuation of the passage just quoted, the critical factor is the tone and content of the conversations. When people of like faith in states of mutual love eat and drink together they talk (among other things) about the church – not just other members of the church, and they certainly do not gossip, but they “inform one another about matters of love and faith, and so about the things of heaven,” nourishing one another and entering into a communion with heaven. In TCR this is listed among the recreations of charity, and the suppers themselves are called feasts of charity. We used to have these here almost every Friday night at the church, followed by a doctrinal class. Today they are much more likely to take place in members’ homes without a class, but the real benefits of shared insights and perspectives on spiritual things are still precious goals for which we can – and should – strive. These are things that truly build community, another word, we might say, for the communion of thought and affection that is the church.

And so we come to that special communion called the holy supper. And we note, as it suggests at the end of our lesson from TCR, that this is not *only* a communion between us as individuals and the Lord, but *also* a communion of believers striving to be nourished by the Lord. That’s

why we say it's "OK" for married partners to share the elements between them, and it would be "OK" for all of us to do so as well, if we ever decided to set it up this way.

In the heavenly doctrines we are taught that there are two gates of entrance into eternal life, baptism and the holy supper (TCR 721). The first gate introduces us to the teachings that prepare us for heavenly life and the second gate introduces us to the heavenly life itself. This is explained in some detail, though in other terms, in TCR 571: –

“There are two states which a person must enter and pass through as he progresses from the natural to the spiritual. The first state is called reformation, and the other regeneration. In the first, a person looks from his natural state towards the spiritual and desires to attain it; in the second, he becomes a spiritual natural man. The first state is formed by means of truths which will belong to faith, and by which he looks towards charity; the second is formed by means of the goods of charity, by which he enters into the truths of faith; or, what is the same thing, the first is a state of thought from the understanding, the other is a state of love from the will. When this state begins, and as it progresses, a change, a complete turn round as it were, takes place in the mind; for the love of the will flows into the understanding, guiding and leading it to think in agreement with its love. Therefore, as far as the good of love plays a leading part in a man's life, and the truths of faith a secondary part, the man is spiritual, and a new creature. He then acts from charity, and speaks from faith; he feels the good of charity, and perceives the truth of faith. He is then in the Lord and in peace, and thus regenerated.”

Now where are we in this transition? It's important to note that it is all a process. We do not change suddenly from one to the other. Indeed, if baptism is an introduction to the first state, then it's pretty obvious that membership in the church implies a lot of work on reformation, it is *not* a sign that reformation has been achieved. Similarly when we participate in the holy supper it represents an introduction to the state of regeneration but it is not a sign that we are or need to be regenerate in order to partake. Rather it gives us a *taste* of that state, and like baptism it signifies our desire to enter more fully into it.

And how is this achieved? Well, like the communion of people eating and drinking together in faith and charity at ordinary dinners and suppers, it is achieved by entering into the right kind of conversation, but in this case a conversation with the Lord Himself through His Word. For the things we hear, see, taste, touch, smell and do during the sacrament all bring the stories of His Word to life as we *actually do* what He told His disciples to do. Thus the conversation includes all the normal gestures, sights, sounds, body language and other sensory input that is part of any face-to-face dialog.

As we take the bread, for example, we might recall not just the story of the Lord's last supper, but His teaching in the Gospel of John about the bread of heaven after he fed the multitude of 5,000 in Galilee. Or we might remember how He broke bread for the two disciples walking to Emmaus after the resurrection, or how after that He fed the disciples early in the morning by the sea of Galilee with fish and bread. In each case the bread was a tangible sign of His care and compassion, not to mention His unfailing ability to provide for His disciples. And in each case the incidents involved healing miracles or teachings that can speak to us even in our fear and

apprehension if we are receptive.

To be more specific about the holy supper, the bread itself, which is made with wheat flour, olive oil, water and salt, and is prepared by hand without the use of any cutting or shaping tools and without any leavening or yeast, represents the goodness of the Lord's love in its purest form. The Lord offers us this love at all times through His Word and providence; all we have to do is reach out and take it, accepting it fully into our lives.

Yeast in particular generally represents what is false, in the case of bread simply puffing it up with carbon dioxide as a by-product of its own growth. On the other hand the flour and oil represent the nourishing and binding elements of the Lord's love, the water His truth that makes it - literally - workable, and the salt, because of its characteristic tendency to arouse thirst, the longing inspired in us by the Lord's love to seek its complement in truth.

The red wine, which is the refined product of a fermentation process involving yeast, represents the refined truth of the Word itself in what we learn about its spiritual sense. This, too, is offered by the Lord continually, and all we have to do to receive it is to read or listen attentively, drinking it in and making it a part of us just as we would drink any liquid. We use wine in particular, and not just grape juice or water, though, because we know that the Lord Himself suffered temptations as to the things of His understanding, and those temptations are represented by the fermentation process. But He overcame them all, purifying and clarifying the truth in Himself and for His people, so that when we take the wine, free of impurities, we can feel refreshed and satisfied by the whole spirit of truth and not just the murky, cloudy substance of the letter, as tasty as it may be in its own right.

When our doctrines describe the uses of the holy supper they explain that eating the bread and drinking the wine represent the appropriation of Divine love and wisdom, that is, the incorporation of these things into the body of our spiritual lives, making them our own. And of course this may or may not happen during the service. But coming forward to participate *can* do three things for sure: –

1. It can affirm your willingness and your desire that this should happen;
2. It can help you focus your attention on the Lord so that it can;
3. And in keeping with the spirit of the ancient feasts of charity it can help establish bonds of community within the church as we share something deeply meaningful together.

It is not something to take lightly. On the other hand it is not something to be anxious about. It is something we should be able to relax and appreciate, even enjoy. After all it can provide a small symbolic introduction, a little taste, of the delights of heaven.

Amen.

Lessons: *Genesis 26:15-31*
 Children's talk on Isaac & Abimelech's feast
 John 6:22-35 & True Christian Religion #433