

## How to Enjoy the Holy Supper

an address by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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The bread is not holy. The wine is not holy. So why do we call it “the holy supper”? What is this ritual we are about to observe and what can it possibly do for us?

The roots of the celebration are in the Old Testament and reach down into the centuries where they draw meaning from the hidden soil of the past. At one time the Jewish people made all their worship to consist of meal and animal sacrifices. This was an adaptation from pagan or heathen forms of worship which often included animal sacrifices.

Why sacrifices? There are many reasons but the general idea was that by giving something precious and important to God His favor could be gained – or regained in cases where some sin had been committed. But beyond this, farther back in history, there was a knowledge that the flesh and blood of any living thing represented the essential qualities of truly human life, namely, love to God and charity toward the neighbor. An offering of love and charity was therefore symbolized in the sacrifice of real flesh and blood. Furthermore the feasting on things sacrificed – which they also did – represented the sharing of these loves – with God and with one another. It was only through time and various perversions that the real meaning of these things was lost and they were reduced to mere external rituals serving only to hold the people in a rather crude form of external order.

Eventually, when God came into the world in His own human form to restore the internal quality of life and worship He did away with all the representative sacrifices of the Jewish religion and inaugurated in their place just two special sacraments, baptism and the holy supper. (Baptism, like the ritual washing of the Jews, was for preparation, and the supper, like the sacrifices and the feasts themselves, was for fulfillment.)

The Lord made this change primarily to focus attention on Himself as the embodiment of all that is good and true, and so He spoke of His body and His blood as the essential elements of the supper, His body being Divine GOODNESS and His blood Divine TRUTH. Knowing, however, that He was about to be glorified and so removed from worldly perception, He deliberately associated His body with the bread and His blood with the wine in the holy supper so that physical images of His own life could be re-created and shared again on the natural plane at any time. So He said,

“I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.... Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed” (John 6:51, 54-55).

Please note, such graphic symbolism is very important, but it only works when we think beyond the appearances to the uses that are represented. So the “body” represents what is substantial, or the substance itself of the Lord’s love. Whereas “blood” is a cleansing, purifying medium of exchange or communication of various elements within the body, so it represents the truth that communicates the Lord’s love.

When we participate in the holy supper today we will share unleavened bread to represent the Lord's body and fermented wine to represent His blood. We will eat and drink these things together (at the chancel rail) somewhat as the first disciples ate and drank at the Passover – each one with different thoughts and feelings, each one with different concerns, hopes, joys and fears. But as we join together we can all benefit from certain insights that the New Church brings to this occasion to make it more enjoyable and fulfilling.

First, eating represents appropriating, taking something in and making it one's own. We sometimes use this expression in reference to the good of love, as when Sally pays Tom a compliment and being hungry for praise he loves it and "eats it up." Drinking represents the same thing but usually with reference to truth, as when young Andrew goes to school and "drinks in knowledge" with an eager thirst. When we eat and drink together in our service of worship we bring our "hunger and thirst for righteousness" before the Lord in a ceremonial way and remind ourselves that HE is the only one who can really satisfy this need. We may not take much (although we should not take too little; it might betray a false modesty or lack of willingness to receive), but what we do take will be a reminder of the love and faith that we may have from Him.

The bread will be offered first. In a very external way, consistent with the letter of the Word, this bread will represent the Lord's body which indeed was broken for us at the crucifixion – not that we need to focus on that harsh reality but we do well to remember the love and mercy His suffering revealed. The fact is that the Lord was *pure* love and mercy in bodily form; He neither did nor even contemplated anything that made Him worthy of death, least of all by torture. And just as there was nothing impure in His body, so there will be nothing impure in the bread that is offered here: no leavening of yeast, no chemical refinements, no artificial colors or flavors, no preservatives, just the whole natural goodness of the specially prepared fine wheat, olive oil, water and salt, each of which is also significant in its own way as part of the whole.

Still, it isn't for bread or for the Lord's physical body that we come together here. "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing" (John 6:63). So the purity of the bread, like the purity of the body, only reminds us of the purity of the Lord's Divine love which is His spiritual substance or body. When we reach out in the sacrament to take of the bread it is a symbolic act of reaching out in the sacrament of daily life, as if of ourselves, for the solid substance of Divine love to nourish and sustain us as human beings.

And yes, the bread is offered, as is the love, but not placed in our hand or mouth for us. Some effort is required to receive it. So the Lord gives us the freedom and the responsibility, consequently the delight of co-operating to fulfill His promise. But if we do co-operate then His love will enter into us and be incorporated at the very elemental level, making us into likenesses of Him: we will be in Him and He in us (John 6:56), for His good will be our good, the good of pure and generous, uncompromising love.

After the bread is shared, then comes the wine, as in the Gospel when the Lord "took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to (the disciples), saying,

"Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins..." (Matthew 26:27-28).

Again, in a very literal sense the wine is said to represent something natural, the blood that the Lord shed in His conflict with evil in the world. But again, it is not the letter but the spirit that brings life (2 Corinthians 3:6), so we understand that the wine and the blood both represent the Divine truth or wisdom which in application to human life becomes the good of faith. And drinking it “new” with Him in the Father’s kingdom is understanding it in a new way from love and further revelation, as in the New Church.

Contrary to popular belief, faith is not the acceptance of things unknown or impossible to understand; it is the acknowledgment of truth because it is seen to be true. This is the message of the New Church. But to what purpose?

The purpose of seeing and acknowledging truth is to provide for an orderly life of human cooperation, blessing and peace. Therefore the essence of faith in human life is CHARITY or love toward the neighbor. This is something that we have to learn in life. It does not come to us as a spontaneous perception or natural gift. In fact many things that appear at first to be true in our relations with one another ultimately prove to be false, as we sometimes see in the study of psychology, which seems to have new theories every year to compensate for some shortcomings in the old theories.

So in the course of our education falsities are mingled with truths, setting up a kind of fermentation in the mind not unlike the fermentation of grape juice when yeast is present. There is turmoil for awhile but the result of this mental fermentation is a refined and purified understanding or faith represented by a fine, clear wine. When we share the wine of the sacrament, then, we really are sharing the perception we all have that the Lord is the only source of pure, spiritual truth – wisdom accommodated to our fallen states but then refined and clarified by Him in the world so as to lift us up as He was lifted up into everlasting life.

Now, therefore, these two things, love and wisdom in the Lord Himself, or love to the Lord and faith in Him as we receive them, are the essential elements of the holy supper. These are what make the supper “holy” and not anything in the bread and wine themselves. So if we come to the chancel hoping for some profound and sudden change because of this one act, or if we come without any of the essential ingredients in our hearts and minds already, what can we really expect? At best we will experience the *presence* of the Lord, but not conjunction. At worst we could profane, taking the supper in a hypocritical or self-centered way.

Still, there is nothing to be concerned about if we take it with a lively sense of humility and need. In fact, while preparation in daily life is useful and good, the only real requirement for worthy participation in this most holy sacrament is the acknowledgment of our need for the Lord. In this acknowledgment there is a receptiveness that allows the Lord to work; in this acknowledgment there is a sense of spiritual hope and care; and through it we can be prepared – even if only in a short time of sincere self-examination – for the experience of confirmation and joy that real love and wisdom brings.

In preparation for the institution of the holy supper the Lord commanded His disciples to go into the city (that is, Jerusalem), to find a certain man carrying a pitcher of water, to follow him into a certain house and look for a large, upper room, furnished and prepared, and there to get themselves ready. The city is the doctrine of the church – the doctrine of charity, by the way! The

man carrying water is the understanding of truth in the light of that doctrine. The large upper room is the greater, higher plane of the human mind above mere worldly and external things prepared in every way by the Lord for our meeting with Him.

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We have reviewed the doctrine. We have entered with understanding into the truths of the sacrament. Now let us complete the preparation by going within, and up a little to the quiet peace of that special place withdrawn from the Lord where we can feel the presence, the power and the conjunctive sphere of the Lord's pure goodness and truth coming to us as love and faith – love to the Lord from the Lord, and the faith of genuine charity toward our neighbors.

Divine love offered and received: "This is My body which is given for you; this do in remembrance of Me."

Divine wisdom taking form as hard-won faith: "This cup is the New Covenant in My blood which is shed for you" (Luke 22:19-20).

Whether you come forward for the sacrament today or not, and whether you partake of both elements or not when you participate, let this ritual be a sign and token of the spiritual gifts that the Lord offers each one of us every day of our lives. And let us pray that we may be *nourished* and *sustained* by these things no matter what limitations or challenges we may face in our natural lives.

Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 18:1-8; Isaiah 55:1-5  
Children's talk on eating and drinking, and  
Children's Prayer & Benediction by Rev. Ryan M. Sandstrom

John 6:25-59, selections  
True Christian Religion #571 & 721, selections