



# Eating and the Eucharist: A Transformation of Desire

Food is important and eating implies transformation at multiple levels. In this article Ángel Méndez-Montoya considers some of the transformations we meet in the Eucharist, where God's love becomes food to eat and share with others.



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### Food matters

Every act of eating implies transformation of some sort. The food that we eat is transformed into energy, vitamins, proteins, minerals and nutrients that our body and mind require for proper functioning. Our bodies can be strengthened or weakened by eating or abstaining from certain substances. Eating food not only transforms our concrete physicality and experience of embodiment, it can also transform our state of mind and heart and even awaken our spiritual sensibility. As so beautifully portrayed in *Babette's Feast*, food can be transformed into a lavish meal that not only awakens aesthetic sensibility, but also transfigures time and space into a heavenly banquet that heals all wounds and brokenness.<sup>1</sup> Eating certain dishes can trigger memories from the past, of beloved people, or from cherished experiences around the table. Sometimes the actual food that we eat is not that important, for what really matters is that which transforms our hearts and spirits, the experience of gathering around the table and rejoicing with people that we love and that love us, immersing ourselves into the transformation of measurable time (*kronos*) into an immeasurable experience of eternity (*kairos*).

Eating also transforms our sense of relationality: creating strong links with other people who are directly or indirectly connected with the larger network of food production, distribution and preparation. Even when we eat on our own, without the company of other people, eating can remind us that the self is interrelated with the Other. The Other can be a piece of bread or another person calling and responding to physical and

spiritual hunger, hunger for bread but also hunger for relationship and for a sense of belonging.

There are cultures where eating traditional dishes in the context of a national feast can give shape to a gastronomic sense of common identity. Food becomes a dynamic language of communication between self and Other, displaying a complex system of communication that provides food for thought regarding the open-ended question of who we are and how we relate with one another and with the planet. Eating not only displays interpersonal relationships, it also connects us with the earth, with the planet we all live on. By eating the products of the earth, our personal sense of selfhood is transformed into a planetary realisation that can help us to integrate a sense of the self as being also nourished and transformed by an ecological source.

It is perhaps for this and for many other reasons that most religious traditions integrate food-related rituals, such as sacred feasting and fasting. This can become a way of undergoing a both individual and communal spiritual transformation, taking communion with one another and with the planet, and going beyond the realm of the immanent by even participating with divinity through ritual commensality. For many religions, eating can be charged with sacred power that enables a system of communication between the immanent and the transcendent, thus becoming a means of spiritual transformation. Eating food at religious rituals and ceremonies evokes the inexpressible, a mystery that recreates food as divine sustenance, a means for profound intimacy with the sacred. In some religious rituals, food becomes an epiphany of the sacred in the

midst of the materiality of food and in the context of eating in communal ceremonies. Likewise, eating in some religious rituals arouses a spiritual transformation in the midst of a physical and material reality.

### Sharing in the body of Christ

If eating implies transformation at multiple levels, what sort of transformations may we meet in the Eucharist, which, from the perspective of the Christian belief and practice is one of the most intense and radical gestures of God's love transformed into food to eat and to share with others? I am aware that it is impossible to answer this question in such a limited space. The Eucharist is not a homogenised notion or practice, since it springs from a wide multiplicity of contexts and theological traditions. When compared to music, this plurality of Eucharistic traditions can be analogous to a polyphonic aesthetic event. It is like a musical polyphony harmonising a vast diversity of sounds, tones, voices and chords. Although diverse, all these elements and parts constitute one harmonising music composition. The Eucharist is a polyphonic event giving voice to diverse local communities. In spite of the myriad existing communities, at an ecumenical level we could envision a communal partaking of and transforming into the same gesture of God's love becoming nourishment, transfiguring communities into one same 'mystical body' of Christ.

Rather than trying to provide a homogenised and exclusively dogmatic notion of the Eucharist, I would like to share my personal insights regarding some kinds of transformation that I suggest we can find in Eucharistic practices. As a Catholic, I realise that my context of reasoning, believing, and practicing is also part of a larger ecclesial body. I thus speak from an experience that is personal as well as it is nourished by a widely diverse faith-community, hoping that it may resonate with a broad spectrum of Christian traditions, including world faith traditions wherein food ritual becomes a means of spiritual transformation that shapes the life of individuals and communities.

Again, if food in general activates multiple transformations, what could be said about taking the Eucharist, ingesting Christ's flesh? The Eucharist is a celebration of thanksgiving for God's presence among us, for God's becoming nourishment, healing our hungers and inviting us to let ourselves be transformed into nourishment for one another, particularly for those who are most physically and spiritually hungry. The Eucharist invites us to become Eucharistic people. Beyond being a concept, it is an action, a performance of God-with-us by means of sharing a divine gift. This gift is freely given by God. It is an expression of divine *caritas*, God's kenotic love-as-nourishment. The Eucharist is an invitation and a challenge to become God's nourishing gift for one another. God's gesture is one of radical love for creation, so much so that God not only feeds us, but more extravagantly so, becomes nourishment. The Eucharist is an interweaving of desires since God freely desires to be *with us* – even within the deepest realms of our flesh soul – and so make us part of God.

Eating at the Eucharist invokes a spiritual transformation expressed as co-abiding: God in us and we in God. There is nothing more blissful and plentiful than being desired by God and being in intimate communion with God. For many Christian mystics, divine desire is also intertwined with the human appetite for God, a longing for being shaped by God's superabundant love, a hunger for plenitude, but also for awakening the appetite for an excess of divine desire, a foretaste of the beatific desire for the One who so intensely desires us. At the Eucharistic sharing, human and divine desire constitute and co-abide with one another, simultaneously becoming both a divine and human body. The Eucharist steers a transformation of the ecclesial body into the paradox of the 'one' body of Christ: simultaneously being a divine and created body, being both a local and a planetary body. Christ's paradoxical body performs a body of difference that is never indifferent, overcoming all antagonisms and enmities, making community with a difference.

The Eucharist echoes the Last Supper that Jesus celebrated with his disciples before undergoing the terrible violence of his death. Nevertheless, the Christian narrative unravels the knots of this cycle of violence and death, for the resurrected Christ offers peace and promises eternal life, sharing a divine desire in order to make us part – in time and space – of an eternal (*kairos*) and eschatological nuptial banquet. His gesture transforms desire by moving beyond dominion and violence to the Other towards becoming a desire for *koinonia* (loving communion) and for rejoicing with the Other. Moreover, the Eucharist echoes the post-resurrection narratives of Jesus eating with his disciples, breaking and sharing bread with them, as well as calling to table fellowship and discipleship, a call to perform this same gesture with one another, from generation to generation, until the end of time.

In the Gospels food has both a literal and symbolic meaning that reminds us that God cares for us and desires to make community with us, intensifying our appetite for God and for communion with all creation. Jesus delights in eating and feasting with others. He shares many parables regarding food and food-ways, including many stories that contain agricultural images that relate to an intimate connection with the earth, with all creation and with God's delightful creativity. He shares stories and performs miracles that evoke a communal banquet as a symbol of God's infinitely hospitable Kingdom. It is very telling that Jesus rejoices in dining with sinners and people that were excluded from circles of inclusion. In response to such a violent cycle of exclusion of the Other, Jesus invites us to imagine and perform a desire for inclusion and caring for those who physically and spiritually most hunger. Jesus breaks with the ethnic, cultural and religious boundaries that were constructed in his time, inviting at the table those who are marked as Others by a society that excludes them to sit at his table. Jesus invites those who are excluded to sit at his table and shares with them not only food, but also the plenitudinous caring love of God, our *Abba* to whom we pray for our daily bread.

### Notes

1. I Dinesen, *Babette's Feast*, in *Anecdotes of Destiny and Ehrengard* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

2. In Mexico, for instance, it is scandalous to live in a so-called Catholic and Christian country where there is an extremely high percentage of abuse against women, against the GLBTQ (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) community, against the vast majority of poor people while there is a very insignificant minority of the grotesquely rich, against journalists and citizens that demand justice and an end to hunger and violence.

Food in the gospels suggests a soteriological dimension of nourishment. Food and nourishment evoke a sacred and liberating communion. God is compassionate and cares for his people by giving the manna that satiates hunger. Perpetuating God's healing gesture, Jesus offers himself as food, a divine figure as manna. God's desire to make communion with us is now undertaken by the Son of God becoming food. Also, the Eucharist is God's self-offering that mirrors the Hebrew paschal banquet, which commemorates a liberation from slavery, a saving and caring action, a gift of salvation initiated by a loving God. Jesus is now the Lamb of God that transforms the paradigm of violent desire and rivalry, envisioning a different imagery and performance of desire. Jesus propels a desire for God's *caritas* and for everlasting life, for a communal banquet of love and inclusion.

The Eucharistic communities re-narrate God's self-offering as food, so that the partaker can be transformed into God's healing and liberating gesture. It is a reminder of both the crucified and the resurrected Christ giving himself as bread of life in the midst of a communal sharing, as an expression of God's solidarity with the powerless. The monstrosity of the cross calls to unmask the historical crucifixion of many vulnerable people, hungry bodies dying of starvation every day, bodies that are excluded because of their particular gender, sexuality, ethnicity and religious beliefs.

### Radical inclusion

The Eucharist invites a spiritual transformation that also implies the materiality of the world. As food matters, the Eucharist also *matters*. There is so much work still to undertake in order to engage in the radical inclusion summoned in the sharing of the Eucharist. Moreover, the resurrected Christ offers peace and not war to his persecutors. He shares eternal life rather than promoting death. Eating at the Eucharist invites us to let ourselves be transformed by breaking, eating and sharing the bread of eternal life that invokes a spiritual transformation that does not exclude the bodily, the everyday material reality.

The crucified Christ is also the resurrected Christ, who opens his table up to inclusion, healing all hungers from past, present and future generations. The crucified-resurrected Christ is transformed into a sacred banquet, attending to our hungers, and inviting to make a planetary communion with one another, with creation, and with God. As a Catholic, I painfully realise that the material transformation that the Eucharist challenges us to undertake is made unreachable by an attitude of fear and exclusion of the Other, or by an 'spiritualising' of the Eucharist to such an extent that it forgets that our daily eating at the table and that eating at the Eucharistic sharing are inter-connected matters. At the Eucharistic sharing, Christ's radical gesture of hospitality questions who are those not being invited to sit at the same table, why this is so, and what we can do to transform Eucharistic celebrations into an all-inclusive feast?

Perhaps this attitude of a more individualistic understanding of the Eucharist that is so indifferent to

daily life has to do with the dichotomy raised between liturgical space and everyday public space. As Jesus breaks with many boundaries that separate us and invites us to become one body, so the Eucharistic performance reaches beyond liturgical space and challenges us to transform public space, particularly by questioning why there are so many people in the world who die because of poverty, starvation and physical and emotional violence.

Throughout the world, thousands die because of malnourishment and starvation, while a few have more than plenty and even waste tons of food on a daily basis. Taking the Eucharist and eating food reminds us of the geopolitics of food, a shared living space broken by power abuse, global capitalism, labour exploitation, environmental destruction, selfishness and indifference to the Other. The world's hunger is accelerating and it is not so much caused by food scarcity, but by the unjust speculation of a global food market that denies the poor what they need for their survival, by the refusal to share of those who have more than plenty. Eucharistic sharing must assume a prophetic voice in order to call Christians to transform a world in crisis, a broken and divided world. Such a transformation demands that we first look at our immediate relationship with the food we eat, that we reflect upon what it expresses about who we are, that we reflect about what we most hunger for and how and why many people experience hunger, that we acknowledge how our eating is or is not a means of changing a hungry world, and that we create ways of becoming active participants to this transformation. At the Eucharistic eating and sharing, God's radical gesture of hospitality activates a transformation of our desire for dominion over the Other into a desire for divine *caritas* and mutual nurturing. Eucharistic celebrations are a reminder that making communion with God initiates a spiritual transformation that challenges us to transform both the micro and macro contexts that we live in.

The oneness of the Body of Christ no longer marks the Other as a stranger, for it is a peaceful and hospitable body where difference and plurality are embraced and celebrated. At the Eucharistic sharing, the self and the Other are no longer juxtaposed. Rather, self and Other, the human and the divine constitute one another, becoming one bread, one body. As God's desire blends with food, humanity and creation as a whole, God's self-giving and nourishing gesture calls for a spiritual transformation that no longer annuls the hunger for cultural, social, political, religious and environmental transformation. It calls for *metanoia*, a radical conversion of the heart. The world hungers for bread, but also for radical love, justice and mutual respect and care. The Eucharist calls for a transformation of a selfish and oppressive desire into a desire to share God's gift as nourishment. This desire to become Eucharistic people is not only inter-human, for it is a desire also to perform divine *caritas* with the planet we live on. Only then, the Eucharist becomes a foretaste of the beatitudes: 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled' (Mt 5.6).