

# Love Made Food: The History & Intimacy of the Eucharist

by Fr Chris Borah

“And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.” (Gen 1:29)

In the beginning, God told man to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth with goodness and beauty and life and loving rule. People, like God, are called to lovingly reign as kings and priests to God.

Immediately following this “creation mandate,” God does not teach Adam a lesson on kingship. He doesn’t list the laws of serving in the temple-garden. He doesn’t even teach Adam how to pray. God gives Adam a meal. “You shall have them for food.”

In the beginning, God set a table to commune with him, a table filled with grain and fruit. Fr Alexander Schmemmman says it simply, “[In the beginning] divine love made food.” In the wilderness, food is either miraculous or it is simple and bland. But when you are at peace in the land, in the garden of the Lord, food is rich—grain is transfigured into bread, fruit into wine.

But from the beginning, we have sought to satisfy our hunger and quench our thirst at the tables of famished gods. We serve the creation rather than the Creator (Rom 1:25). And rather than give us life-giving food, these gods always devour us. Like Adam and Eve at the tree, our god is our belly (Phil 3:19). We turn from our father’s bountiful feast and we wander, perpetually unsatisfied with all our prodigal meals.

Hunger isn’t bad. God created us hungry. What’s more, man was not made to eat *alone*. God created us with a thirst for intimate relationship: Adam groaned for fellowship at the table (Gen 2:18). He made us to touch, to feel the pleasure of intimate and joyful conversation and embrace. Ask anyone who has lost their sense of taste because of an infection or neurological damage. It is *not good*. Our loving

Father created us with about 10,000 taste buds, and every two weeks, our taste buds are made new. Our tastes literally change with age.

“Our lives are directed by our hungers,” Peter Leithart says, “and we find rest only when we hunger for the One who opens His hand to satisfy the desire of every living thing more than we hunger for the things in His hand” (Leithart, *Blessed are the Hungry*, 20).

The gospel renews and restores our deep longings to be satisfied, God in Christ quenches our thirst. The Spirit brings new life, he redirects our longings to find true satisfaction at his table, in the fellowship of the Holy Trinity and with all the saints. This was the edenic hope of the prophets fulfilled in Christ (Isa 49:10). Saints wearing white robes washed in red blood, gathered in the throne room of the Father and the Lamb, worshipping and feasting.

“They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Rev 7:16–17)

We were made to hunger and thirst. Jesus did not come to heal your head and heart alone. He came for all of you. Your stomach is his (1 Cor 6:20). He came to redeem and restore your love for umami. He came to kill drunkenness and gluttony, and raise to life jovial feasting in his presence. Come ye disconsolate, earth has no pleasures heaven cannot heal.

### **A Wine of the Times**

We, modern people, approach food merely as technology. A piece of bread is not simply “bread,” it is the sum of all its constituent parts (Nutritional Facts). We don’t buy wine or beer because of flavor or craftsmanship. We look at the price tag and the alcohol content and we consume. We live in a sad and delightless age. Our creed is “live longer, maximize pleasure, never feel pain.”

We use technology—medicine, food, machine learning, phones, etc—to achieve our goal, eternal pleasure. Fasting is no longer a spiritual discipline, it is the newest scientifically-proven health technology. Christian philosopher Peter Kreeft says that “technology has replaced religion at the center of our

consciousness and our life. We have a new [*highest good*]-power-and a new means to it-technology, or technique” (Kreeft, *C. S. Lewis for the Third Millennium*, 24).

The modern imagination is anemic. We choose either detached spirituality (gnosticism-only the spiritual matters) or soulless materialism (there is nothing transcendent-if I can't touch it, then it's not real). These are our only options. We desperately need a renewed biblical and historical imagination. To borrow an image from G. K. Chesterton, we need to be like a tree with roots firmly established on the earth (love and care for creation) and with branches always stretching to the heavens (always recognizing God as Creator and giver of every good gift).

### **The God of Bread and Wine**

In the Old Testament, as in the garden, we should always bring our best animals, our best bread, and our best wine to restore joyful communion with God (Gen 4:1-8; Ex 29:40; Lev 23:12-13; Num 15:5). The Priest-King Melchizedek brought bread and wine to Abram to commune with God (Gen 14:18). Jesus too, the Priest-King after the order Melchizedek, brings bread and wine (Heb 6:20-8:13). Bread and wine are meant to be bring gladness and joy as a gift from the Creator: “wine gladdens life” (Eccl 10:19; *see also* Eccl 2:24, 8:15; Zech 10:7; Ps 4:7; Ps 104:14-15). King Lemuel says that wine is *not* a gift for kings and rulers (Prov 31:4-5; *see also* Prov 23:20-21; Eccl 10:17-19), but it *is* a gift to the downcast and distressed (Prov 31:6-7; *see also* 2 Sam 16:2). As God's people ascend to worship, they sing:

(Psalm 128) “Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways!

You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table.

Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD.

The LORD bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life!

May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel!”

Gisela Kreglinger says that in the Old Testament imagination, the “moderate enjoyment of wine in the context of family and community life can become a wonderful event for physical, emotional, and spiritual renewal” (Kreglinger, *The Spirituality of Wine*, 23). Wine is not *necessary* to experience this renewal. Indeed, if we *use* wine as the means to achieve happiness—if we *grasp* for the fruit of the vine, rather than receive it with an open hand—it always brings destruction (Gen 9:20-21; 1 Cor 11:29). This is why priests are commanded to not drink wine when they bring the sacrifice: God reconciles us first, then we feast (Lev 10:9-13). Wine isn’t required, but the image of flourishing in Holy Scripture—in the land, with family, and joy restored—this is nearly always accompanied by the fruit of the vine.

### **The New Covenant in My Blood**

Jesus, the True Vine (Jn 15:5), talks about wine a lot. In his first miracle, he turns water to wine (Jn 2:1), and not just miraculously; Jesus demonstrates his awareness of how to make wine (Mt 9:17; Mk 2:22; Lk 5:37-38), indeed, aged wine is better than new wine (Lk 5:39). Jesus warns his disciples to stay awake for when he returns, don’t be dissipated and drunk or you’ll miss me (Lk 21:34). But neither does he list drunkenness as the deadliest of sins (Mt 15:19-20).

While Jews feasted for weeks multiple times a year, they were not known for drunkenness. They divided Passover wine into four separate cups to be drunk at for separate times throughout the feast (probably as a sign of temperance). Jesus was regularly accused of being a glutton and a drunkard (Mt 11:19; Lk 7:34), and this for eating and drinking with sinners (eating and drinking *like* a sinner).

The Apostle Paul, the minister to the Gentiles, started churches among people who drank excessively, especially in their pagan temples. So Paul regularly addressed the sin of drunkenness (Gal 5:19-21; Rom 13:13; 1 Tim 3:3). But his answer to drunkenness was not abstinence but Godward temperance (1 Cor 9-12). It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles someone (Mt 15:11-18). With Jesus, Paul says that wine is a gift (1 Tim 4:3-4), but we must never worship the gift.

### **A History of the Vine**

We live in an age of excess—excess everything. Nearly everything we drink has a drug mixed in: sugar, caffeine, alcohol, you name it, we drink it. And not just a little bit. More energy—fructose becomes high fructose. Stay awake—coffee becomes espresso. Get drunk—beer becomes liquor—fifths become liters become boxes become kegs. We live in a world of gluttons and drunkards, and it’s no wonder that we disdain alcohol. What was once only the temptation of kings and queens of old, drinking excessive alcohol (Prov 31:4-5), is now the vice of every modern person (indeed, the poor are whom we think of first, how sad!). The gift has become a god, and it has destroyed kingdoms and families for generations.

But it was not always this way.

Fourth century church father, St John Chrysostom had a cheerful disposition to wine. He wrote,

“Wine was given to make us cheerful, not to make us behave shamefully; to make us laugh, not a laughing-stock; to make us healthy, not sick; to mend the weakness of the body, not to undermine the soul.” (Kreglinger, *Ibid.*, 37)

Chrysostom clearly acknowledges the negative use of wine, but he invites us to view wine not through the distorted lens of human sin, but with the open hands of a creature receiving from a loving Creator. A contemporary of Chrysostom, St Augustine points to the “necessity” of wine.

“In many instances wine is necessary for human beings. Wine strengthens the stomach, renews one’s energy, warms the body of the cold-blooded, poured onto wounds it brings healing. It chases away sadness and weariness of soul. Wine brings joy, and for companions it fuels one’s pleasure for conversations.” (*Ibid.*, 43)

Borrowing a metaphor from C. S. Lewis, we can no more go back to the fourth century (in both our medical understanding or our cultural *milieu*) than a divorcée can go back to virginity. But we can acknowledge, with Lewis, that our age is filled with misery and depression, we worship “the iron works of [our] own hands, cut off from Earth [our] mother and from the Father in heaven” (C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, chpt 13). Alcohol as technology is hellish. Alcohol as gift from the Creator is heavenly.

Fast-forwarding to the Reformation, John Calvin ponders,

“...God created food, we shall find that he meant not only to provide for necessity but also for delight and good cheer... [God] bestows upon them as much as is sufficient for the ordinary purposes of life, but [he also]... in his goodness he deals still more bountifully with them by cheering their hearts with wine and oil.”

Luther delights that “by wine the hearts of men are gladdened, their strength recruited, and the whole man strengthened, so by the blood of our Lord the same benefits are received by our souls” (*Ibid.*, 55-57). Even the Puritans were well known to regularly enjoy drinking wine and beer.

“John Wesley drank wine, was something of an ale expert, and often made sure that his Methodist preachers were paid in one of the vital currencies of the day—rum. His brother, Charles Wesley, was known for the fine port, Madeira, and sherry he often served in his home; the journals of George Whitefield are filled with references to his enjoyment of alcohol.” (Mansfield, *The Search for God and Guinness*, 32)

It was not until the devastations of war, rapid industrialization, and the prevalence of distilled liquors in the earth 20th century that Christians became known teetotalers. It was this cultural excess and the rapid growth of wealth that led to the collapse of the American economy and the completely ineffective (and short) experiment of prohibition. Into this world,

“Thomas Welch, a Methodist minister turned dentist, discovered how to remove yeast bacteria in grape juice that naturally transforms grape juice into wine; that is, by removing or killing yeast bacteria, one can keep grape juice from fermenting.” (Kreglinger, *Ibid.*, 63)

Thousands of years of Christian cultivation of wine and beer was discarded in one generation. Comparing the Benedictine vision of the flourishing Christian life, that of working the land and tending to the fields and fruits God has given us to cultivate, Kreglinger concludes,

“... the emerging evangelical culture of the late nineteenth century focused on the salvation of the individual and the pursuit of one’s moral perfection. With the absence of wine from the Eucharist, the antiseptic effect of alcohol disappeared from the communion cup. As a consequence, and for hygienic reasons, grape juice began to be served in individual cups, which helped deepen the emphasis on the formation of the individual. Drinking from the common chalice emphasized the communal nature of the spiritual life and helped symbolize that the believers are one in Christ, and the individual grape juice cups could no longer capture this important aspect of the Lord’s Supper.” (*Ibid.*, 63)

### **From Somber Remembrance to Glad Celebration**

Christians began art. Christians created music (as we know it today). Christians have always been new-creational cultivators, sub-creators working with

the gifts of God and offering them back to him with thankfulness and worship. But you and I were born into a world that has conceded all of this rich Christian history (and biblical imagination) to the pagans. We have abandoned biblical and historic *Christian* teaching about food and drink to “health professionals,” beer commercials, and fearful ascetic spirituality.

Christ came to redeem our head, our hearts, our lips, our stomachs, our taste buds, our sexual pleasure, our hands, our feet, our eyes, all of us. Christ came to redeem his entire Creation, the heavens and the earth, field and forest, land and sea, the Lord’s table and our dinner tables, grain and fruit, bread and wine, all of it.

God created fields of grain and fruit trees *out of nothing*. We take his good creation, grain and fruit, and we re-create it into bread and wine. But we cannot stop there.

Bread and wine, the work of our hands, these gifts are meant to be given back to God as our shared sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. And by God’s grace, he gives our offering of bread and wine back to us! Such a marvelous and beautiful God we are invited to worship! We are welcomed in to share in the *koinonia* of Christ. We gather at His table, we eat his body and we drink his blood, “that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood.” And with the saints throughout time, we must respond, “Thanks be to God!”