

DISPUTED QUESTION

In the Middle Ages, the disputed question was one of the major forms of academic investigation. A master of theology would pose a question on which great authorities seemed to disagree, and then entertain objections from fellow masters and students. After others attempted to reconcile the various authorities, the master would give a determination that resolved the question.

In our form of the disputed question, two student brothers approach a difficult issue from different angles in order to reveal its complexity. While traditionally the dispute was settled by a master, here we will allow readers to form their own decision.

ON A FAITHFUL APPROACH TO FOOD

John Paul Kern, O.P. & Josemaría Guzmán-Domínguez, O.P.

THE QUESTION

In his description of the early Church community in Jerusalem St. Luke writes, “Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart” (Acts 2:46). To be Catholic is to approach food with a glad and generous heart. In the following conversation, Br. John Paul Kern and

Br. Josemaría Guzmán-Domínguez provide a culinary tour of Catholicism, discussing what a Catholic approach to food might look like for the faithful in today's world.

Br. John Paul Kern (JPK): Food is a wonderful part of Catholic life!

As a convert to the Catholic faith, back in 2006, I remember that as I was going through RCIA I was struck by how food was involved in so many aspects of the life of the Church. Food plays a role in our celebration of feast days throughout the year, and Catholicism gave birth to many different types of food as it came into contact with and baptized diverse cultures throughout the world. For example, King Cake helps celebrate the Epiphany, Hot Cross Buns celebrate the Triumph of the Cross, and croissants the Feast of Our Lady of Victory (or Our Lady of the Rosary as it's now called). A little closer to home we have various Irish-American and Italian-American foods associated with different feast days, such as the Feast of the Seven Fishes on Christmas Eve.

I also came to realize that the Catholic faith uses food as an opportunity to build up and foster community, not only on feast days, but as a regular part of life. Many traditionally Catholic countries seem to understand dinner as an opportunity to enjoy time with friends or family, something to be savored and cherished and not to be rushed. Here in the U.S., we also see the omnipresent coffee and donuts after Mass as an opportunity for the parish community to spend time together, and it seems that campus ministry dinners serve a similar purpose in Catholic communities at universities.

Br. Josemaría Guzmán-Domínguez (JGD): And if you grow up as a cradle Catholic, like I did, you also know about food's centrality in Catholic culture and Catholic life. I remember growing up having

a special place for weekend dinners with all the family, especially Sunday meals after Mass. For many years growing up in my family we always ate fish on Fridays—which wasn't much of a penance for me since I love fish! This was a way to parallel the liturgical celebrations of the Church and to remember ancient Christian practices. Of course in the old countries, in Italy and Spain, that approach to food is somewhat kept even by those who maybe have distanced themselves from the Church. Their heritage is so deeply rooted that it's just a part of life—and a very Catholic part of life.

However, in the modern world—and at all times, with fallen human nature—we have to be concerned about a disproportionate love for food. This is something that here in the U.S. perhaps we are prone to because most of us have so much food at our disposal. It's really a temptation, then, to take food for granted—treating food as a transient good that comes and goes without remembering its broader communal and liturgical implications. This forgetfulness leaves us vulnerable to a misappreciation and an abuse of food.

Gluttony is the capital sin that relates to a disordinate love for or desire for food. It comes in different flavors. Most people just think about it as having absurd quantities of food and eating it too greedily or quickly or without sharing—distorting its proper place in human life. But also there is a kind of gluttony that is being very picky about foods. We can see this in someone who desires to eat only delicate, exquisite foods, and looks down on simpler fare. Or in the case of one who doesn't know how to eat what's given to him—say, by his mother when he's seven years old and she serves him soup, or when one is a guest in a house—there's something to gratefully receiving food that is given as a gift. On the contrary, pickiness can make us too attached to what we want and closed off to the gifts, even the simple ones, that others offer.

The tradition of the Church has always recognized the dangerous temptations surrounding food. Gluttony is one of those capital

vices, along with pride, the queen of the vices, that seeks to distract us from God, to pull us away from Him. The saints have always attacked the sin of gluttony and warned us to be careful about food. It's a good that's necessary for human life, but that can easily become a distraction.

On the other hand, the saints and the Church have always put forth models of temperance—the virtue of desiring and enjoying foods and other bodily goods with moderation and in the appropriate context. That's something we need to recover in our Catholic thinking, especially today. What are some ways that you think we could do that?

JPK: As you pointed out, it's important that we don't allow our culture to train us in an unhealthy attitude toward food. If you look around, you see an industry that seems to be catering to gluttony in many ways. On one hand you have the fast-food movement, which offers you super-sized quantities of questionable nutritional quality at an extremely fast pace. This caters to several aspects of gluttony. On the other hand, you have Whole Foods (or "Whole Paycheck"), which offers you food for a discerning palate at a high cost. You don't seem to see as many food options that hit the "golden mean," such as nice little family restaurants—places which promote spending time with family and friends and enjoying some good food at a reasonable price.

Within this cultural context, the Church offers us some help. In addition to all her feast days, which train us to use food to serve the higher ends of promoting community and the worship of God, she also gives us an approach to temperance by having days of the week and entire seasons dedicated to fasting. In this way she promotes a wonderfully balanced approach to food. We have Fridays for abstinence; Sundays for family time—and maybe some extra dessert to celebrate the Resurrection. Lent is an entire season teaching us to abstain and be able to have a healthy detachment

from food, lest, like the Philippians to whom St. Paul writes, “our stomachs become our God” (Phil 3:19). This intense penitential season prepares us to more intensely celebrate the Easter season, which immediately follows Lent. So even in the realm of food, the Church teaches us that we must embrace the Cross—we must pass by the way of the Cross—in order to arrive at glory!

JGD: I think we can be helpfully challenged by the example of the saints. In particular I’m thinking of the early monks who fled into the desert, leaving behind all earthly goods to follow Christ more closely. The way they talk about food involves eating the bare minimum to keep living. That’s a striking example—maybe not one we’re all meant to imitate exactly, but one which prompts us to reflect. Think also of St. John the Baptist. People thought he was bizarre for what and how he ate, and accused him of being possessed by a demon for denying the good things people normally enjoy. But he teaches us by word and deed, especially in Advent and Lent when the Church goes into her penitential mode. In those times, we focus on him as a particular example of the Christian life. He summons us to prepare the way of the Lord in our own hearts by distancing ourselves from the food that is good and wholesome in itself. His example shows us that renouncing food for a time can help us to grow closer to God.

JPK: Even in the relatively extreme and austere examples you mentioned of the early desert fathers and early monastics who really embraced some hardcore fasting in order to be more detached from the world and to grow closer to God, I’ve still come across examples of sober common sense about food. Some of them cite Christ’s instruction to the apostles to “eat what is set before you” (Lk 10:8), even in the midst of their extreme fasting. I also remember one story of a woman who was a renowned baker and who, in thanksgiving to a monk to whom she had entrusted a prayer request that subsequently had been answered, wanted to thank him and so baked him the most extravagant, luxurious,

delicious pastry she could make. Upon giving it to him, she realized *this man's whole life is devoted to penance and abstinence* (the “negative” detachment aspects). *Did I just put a big temptation before this man?* However, she was amazed at his response. As she put it before him, he received it gratefully, smiled, ate it, and seemed to enjoy it more than anyone she had ever seen. In having a proper relationship to food and detachment from it, he was able to enjoy it more—not less.

JGD: That lady sounds like an Italian grandmother . . . “*You look too thin!*”

JPK: Yeah, I can imagine something like this happening to St. Francis of Assisi. Or, as one of my monk friends tells me—he’s a good faster, he’s pretty thin—he’ll often recount tales of the Italian grandmothers who see him and say, “Hey Father, no one likes a skinny priest!” They’re always trying to fill him up. But even when he’s fasting or trying to abstain from meat, if they’re trying to share something like their family’s special meatball dish with him, he’ll enjoy it with gratitude—and he’s *really* enjoying it. It’s beautiful.

JGD: These stories show how for some people, and especially people of certain cultures, the making and the giving of food is a love language. For their sake—and ours too, you don’t want a *nonna* on your case for not eating her food—we have to learn also to appreciate the goodness of food. It’s part of God’s good creation. Let’s remember Psalm 104, and how it recounts the goodness of God and His creation. The Psalmist says “Lord, thou dost cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man’s heart” (Ps 104:14–15).

The Scriptures throughout tell us that creation is good. One aspect of Christian living is to appreciate that goodness—and always to



Peder Severin Krøyer — Hipp, Hipp, Hurrah!

remember that God is the ultimate Good, toward whom all these created things direct us. We are meant to *use* the good things of the earth to point us to God and to bring us closer to Him. And food can serve in this way.

JPK: Yes, just as you said, St. Augustine famously drew this distinction between enjoyment and the use of things. God Himself is the only thing that we properly enjoy in Himself. However, we can use all things, including food, in order to build up community, as you said, and to enjoy God. And actually, in enjoying God, we're able to enjoy other things *all the more*—as we enjoy them fittingly in relation to God.

JGD: Well, Br. John Paul, you're definitely right there. When we enjoy God we can enjoy the good things of God as well—in fact, better than if we don't know and love and enjoy God. For example, with the use of food, our contemporary culture tells us just to buy it

and consume as much as we can, as cheaply as we can. It's a culture of consumerism and waste that sets food in an improper context. The fast-food culture struggles to teach us how to properly use and enjoy the goodness of food. And so, as a response, starting in France and spreading throughout Europe, a "slow food" movement has developed. It's a clever idea. This involves restaurants that make a point to make the food only when you order it, not ahead of time. They encourage you to sit down, eat slowly, enjoy the food and enjoy the company that gathers around the table. This is a small wake-up call for us to really appreciate the goodness of food and especially of the human company that develops around food.

JPK: Yes, absolutely. My patron St. John Paul II often used the language of gift to explain how we can properly understand, receive, and enjoy our relationship to things and people. When I look at a thing itself, whether it be food or another person, I may be able to appreciate some of that thing's goodness. But when I recognize that it's a gift from God I can enjoy it all the more. For example, even supposing I could actually reproduce my mother's recipes faithfully, if I made the food for myself, it just doesn't taste as good as if my mother made it. It's like I can taste the love that's there. So similarly, if we recognize that food is a gift from God, we can, in a sense, taste the love in this food—God's love. The same principle applies in enjoying God's many gifts, including other people.

As you mentioned, the consumer attitude is prolific in our culture. This can affect our view not only of things but also other people. It certainly hurts the family. And the parish community, too. If we fall into the fast food mentality with parish life, we might think "this parish conveniently provides me with a Mass or a sacrament I need," and then we drive right back out again. Or we may be so trained by a fast food culture that even when we are home we rush to eat food or to grab food on the go. Learning to stop and appreciate food as a gift can also help us to appreciate the family as

a gift, the parish community as a gift. In practical ways, food helps us appreciate other gifts, like the gift of the Catholic community, or keeping “sacred” that one family meal every Sunday, as you had mentioned.

JGD: So it sounds like you’re saying there’s an attitude we could name spiritual gluttony. That when we’re trained by physical gluttony to indulge in a disordered way, we could then relate to other people and spiritual goods in the same way: we seek them out for their sweetness, quantity, or other pleasing qualities, and then we discard them, as Pope Francis has pointed out in his comments concerning the “throwaway culture.” We then move on to the next thing we want to consume for our own selfish benefit. Discard and move on, discard and move on. And we run the risk of living our whole life with this same attitude. Perhaps thinking about food in a healthy Catholic way, as we’ve talked about, can help us recover some spiritual temperance and develop a healthier, less consumerist attitude toward other things.

JPK: Certainly. I recall a few ingenious friends in college using food to rescue me during a time period in which I was hyperproductive but lacking in community. I was accomplishing a lot but looking back I was consuming both food and experiences in a somewhat utilitarian fashion, trying to find some minimum of balance between work and play, yet not truly enjoying things and people in my life. Fortunately, some friends would still call me to see if I was coming to hang out, and when I complained that I was way too busy, they would point out that I had to eat anyway, and they would offer to make food for me. Of course, once we were eating together, the conversation usually continued for a while. and sometimes I would end up realizing that it was more important to stay and spend some time enjoying our friendship. In a very beautiful way, receiving the gift of food opened me up to receiving the greater gift of our community. I hope that the “slow food” movement you mentioned earlier has a similar effect in the lives of many people!

It makes sense that as social creatures our approach toward food will also have a social impact. The Catholic Church in her social teaching has often articulated the principle of having a preferential option for the poor. So, Br. Josemaría, do you think as Catholics we should have a preferential option for the poor in our approach to food?

JGD: Of course!

JPK: It's easy to say "yes" right away, and I'm certainly not going to disagree with you. Many of us, when we were children, were told by our parents that we had to finish all the food we had on our plate and not to throw *any* of it away. Why? Because there was a starving child in Africa who would *love* to have this food. And yet, even as children, many of us realized that whether or not we ate that food or threw it away, a child on the other side of the world was *not* going to be any less hungry. So, practically, how does our awareness of the poor and our preferential option for the poor work in our approach to food? How does it actually help the poor?

JGD: Well, those children certainly have a point there—that plate of food is never going to get to Africa in time for a starving child to have it. In fact, that insight into reality is often used as a tool by the child to avoid eating something he or she doesn't want to eat!

I might suggest a few approaches that would actually help the poor. First of all, you can offer up eating some food you don't like for the people who are starving. Be conscious that you have something they don't, and be thankful for it. Giving God thanks for the food, for the people who produced and delivered it, and begging Him to feed those who are hungry—these would be good spiritual practices occasioned by the food we're blessed to have.

Another practical point is to make good use of leftovers. Making sure we don't waste what we've been given—thinking in terms of

stewardship, what we have is a gift we need to be responsible for as well.

Finally, if we have a more conscientious approach toward food, we might be able to set aside some of our food budget for almsgiving to the poor. Or we could have food ready in our car—non-perishable foodstuffs, or bottles of water, or chewy protein bars, for example—to hand out to the poor we may encounter on the streets. We should remember that feeding the hungry is the first corporal work of mercy.

JPK: Speaking of the works of mercy, and of the three aspects you have laid out here—spiritual offerings, practicing good stewardship, and practicing generous almsgiving—I'm struck by their similarity to the traditional combination of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving in Lent, and how these elements relate to each other. These Lenten practices may provide for us an approach to food more generally. First, with regard to prayer, during Lent we focus on loving God. He in turn teaches us to love other people. Just as you said, we give thanks to God for the food we have and pray for those who do not have it. In turning to God as our highest good and asking Him for grace—this is what allows us to keep ourselves from being indulgent with food, to practice fasting, and to consume less.

Fasting and consuming less teaches us a spirit of detachment which, in turn, enables us to give more to the poor both in almsgiving and through prayer. One frequent example I've heard and have recommended to others is: think of your weekly five dollar Starbucks. No, that one exact coffee is not going to travel halfway around the world for someone else to have. But these five dollar spent on coffee could support multiple meals for the hungry in the United States, or even more in other parts of the world. If, with the help of God's grace, we are able to become more detached through temperance and fasting, we will be better prepared to share with the poor.

JGD: There's another dimension to thinking about food and poverty, too: the consumerist nature of our production and distribution of food. We're generally thoughtless about the reality of human labor and its dignity. We tend to under-appreciate the labor that goes into food production. There may be a sort of excessive mechanization going on. We make technology a master in this realm, whereas it should only be a service to those who produce our food.

How is a Catholic to approach this problem? On the one hand, it's great to have technology which makes more food available to more people. It aids in the feeding of many who may not otherwise have been fed. On the other hand, there is something lost in human life when we turn over food production to totally mechanized ways and when the whole process from production to consumption becomes very impersonal. We lose an element of the humanity that should go into food. What do you think about that?

JPK: Yes, there is a certain danger in being separated from the planting, raising, and harvesting of food, especially here in the First World. I remember when I visited Haiti, I was very struck in praying with them the Lord's Prayer, this prayer we pray at Mass every Sunday. For the people there, the petition "Give us this day our daily bread" was, in addition to referring to the supersubstantial bread of the Eucharist, also a very literal prayer for their daily food for survival. In Haiti, if weather or insects destroy the plants in the neighborhood garden, the impact on the people is magnified. Because of this they more readily recognize how much they depend on God's goodness and God's providence for their daily needs. Whereas for us, I'm not even sure where the food I'm eating comes from. I don't know where it's produced, who picks it, or how it was transported. The role that God plays in this process on a daily basis is not readily apparent. We're usually pretty confident the food is just going to show up. Yet, in a real way, it is still God who is involved in the supply of this food as well. It's been

a while since this country went through the Great Depression in which regions of this country turned into a dustbowl, and many people were facing real starvation. That was a big wakeup call in the 1930s after the Roaring 20s. With increasingly industrialized processes, people were sure they could enjoy their daily bread without having to rely on God. We can certainly share the same sort of illusion today—that we are not dependent on God, which is reinforced because we don't clearly see our dependence on Him for the production of our daily bread.

JGD: And with respect to food in particular, our dependence on God is manifested in our dependence on one another: those who grow the food, those who pick it, those who make it available for our buying and our consuming, those who prepare it and cook it. But the ways we now produce and consume food often hide the human reality behind it. As Catholics we need to be more aware. We should ask ourselves, where did this food come from? From whom did it come? How are they being treated? Are they being paid enough so that they can eat their daily bread, as I'm eating mine from the fruit of their labors. Are they working and living in situations that respect their dignity? These are all realities that are bound up with the very food that we eat every day.

The Church is tasked also with being aware of today's cultural poverty and of providing the food of truth about the human person and human community. Here members of society can learn from the Church how to treat one another, how to direct all things—food, and all other social realities—to the dignity of the human person, the common good of society, and the worship of God.

JPK: I remember St. John Paul II applying Christ's teaching, that "[t]he Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" to the realm of work. Work is a gift of God for man; man doesn't exist simply for the sake of work. We could extend this logic to food as well. Food exists for man, man does not exist for food. So for those

who are involved in the work of food production, this production of food should also be of benefit to them, such that food is for the sake of man—both for those who are producing it and those who are consuming it. Food should not in some way enslave those who are working in its production, just to serve the desires of those eating that food. Certainly for those who are involved in the business of producing food, especially those in positions of ownership and roles of leadership, this is an area where they can really practice their faith—to make sure that in their production of food there are good working conditions, just wages, and that their dignity is maintained.

At the same time, while it can be challenging to try to see what's happening at the back end of the ever more complex processes involved in food production, and to be able to evaluate these processes, there are ways we can all be attentive. Many of us have ample means at our disposal, which allow us to make choices in what we eat and where we shop. There are certainly some brands of certain foods that guarantee that the producers are paid a fair price. There are also conscientious choices we can make on the local level. I remember when I was in graduate school there was a popular local restaurant with very good food, but we learned from students who worked there that the owners mistreated their workers. So several of us decided to eat meals elsewhere. We wanted to support a restaurant that promoted better working conditions. There was a desire for unity, for solidarity.

We may also find a helpful lens through which to approach food by considering the most exalted use of food made by God Himself. Jesus Christ refers to Himself as food, as being the Bread of Life. He uses bread and wine to give us Himself in the Eucharist. Simple food—something as common as bread and wine—is elevated for an extremely noble purpose: the most perfect worship of God. The Eucharist also builds up the community. God spiritually nourishes His people through the Eucharist and gives us grace to unite us in

love, in communion with God and with one another in His body the Church. The Eucharist is the supreme example of the properly ordered use of common things (bread and wine) for the love of God and neighbor, in worship of God and in building communion.

JGD: Yes. And recall that He gives us the gift of the Eucharist as the bread for wayfarers. It's not the final meal just yet. That awaits us in our heavenly home. But here during the journey He sustains us with the daily bread which is the Eucharist, so that we can travel through this life, fasting and feasting, toward that eternal heavenly banquet where we shall taste and see the goodness of the Lord (Ps 34:8).

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