

THE BREAD THAT PERISHES AND THE BREAD THAT ENDURES

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*I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of
the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ.*

– St. Ignatius of Antioch

ASSEMBLE THE INGREDIENTS

A few times in my childhood, Grandma's potato bread recipe emerged. It was a lovely thing when it did. After hours of watching Mom peeling potatoes, mashing, mixing, kneading, and waiting, our home was filled with the sweet fragrance that was a mere herald of things to come. Alas that I smelled the scent so seldomly, since baking seemed to demand too much to be a regular affair. Yet on the occasions when I ate of those rolls, they cemented one certainty in my mind and my palate: this is true bread. The bagged stuff from the store does not deserve the name.

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It was September, 16th, 2001. Aunt Jean and Aunt Catherine would not be able to come any more. All the flights were canceled. Dad had asked me if I wanted to reschedule. But, for some reason, I decided to go ahead anyway.

The Church was full. I was in the front row in my little suit and tie. I was not used to being in the front row nor in a suit and tie. I had to be good. I needed a Kleenex. I couldn't wipe my nose on the nice clothes in the front row where everyone could see. The priest got up to give his homily. There was silence. Even amidst this tragedy, he said, God has given us a sign of hope. And, he continued, that sign of hope is sitting in the front row.

I did not really understand, but I made sure to sit still and not to wipe my nose on the nice clothes. I did not even ask Mom how much time was left. This time I was not bored. This time I had the hopeful anticipation of what was to come. This is what I chose not to delay. This is what I understood. That on this day, I was going to receive Jesus.

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My mom often lamented how bored the people in the catechesis book looked. “Couldn’t they have found pictures of people who were happy to be at Mass!” Mom would say with her usual gusto as we read through the chapter together, sitting on the living-room couch.

Overall, my middle-school self found those books, like the people pictured in them, quite boring. I wonder what I would think if I looked at them again now. We went through the seven sacraments and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, read the long quotes at the end of each chapter, and answered the discussion questions. We looked at large pictures on every page, some of which were clearly stock photos, and some of which spurred my mother’s righteous indignation.

I am sure that the books were trying to do catechesis right, presenting the Church’s teachings and her traditions in an attractive, relatable way. Yet, for middle-school me, despite all its color photos, it failed.

Or did it? Judging by its fruits there must have been something right about my catechesis. After all, I remained Catholic, and even solidly so. There may have been gaps in my catechesis, but through those lessons, my mom instilled in me one rock-solid certainty: the Eucharist is Jesus.

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How do we hand down the faith? The Scriptures are full of commands to do so. There is the Shema that many Jews recite two or three times daily and the Church's liturgy proclaims as each week begins: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today. Drill them into your children. Speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest" (Dt 6:4–7). Then there is the great missionary mandate that Christ gave the Church, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19–20).

Accepting this challenge to evangelize can be a daunting hurdle today. The command to "drill them into your children" can seem like some form of indoctrination. Might we instead let them make their own judgments and decisions about faith? The mandate to "make disciples of all nations" can make us queasy. Perhaps we could just look at all the good things in diverse cultures instead.

"The Church draws her life from the Eucharist." The first line of Pope St. John Paul II's final encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, cuts through all these worries. Perhaps it was no accident that the one truth about which I had confidence, from which my faith grew, was the Eucharist. Perhaps my mother could be compared with the woman in Our Lord's parable, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of wheat meal, till it was all leavened" (Mt 13:33).

#### MIX AND THOROUGHLY KNEAD

I was a grumbling middle schooler and I did not want to go to the Amish lady's house to have her cook for us. This seemed to be the epitome of weird. But my great aunt had her heart set on it so I begrudgingly went along.

Everything changed when I ate of those rolls. The faded memory of grandma's potato bread was suddenly before me. We raved about them, and how much work it must have taken her. Yet the Amish lady simply told us that it wasn't hard at all, and that she sold recipe books.

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I could see the round moon rising outside, but my attention was not there. My eyes were fixed on a smaller circle, not visibly radiant, but piercing me with His gaze. I had not planned to sign up for the retreat: it included Confession and I could not face that. But as I waffled a new friend had pulled out her laptop and made me register. I had not planned to go to Confession—one day of course, probably, hopefully, just not yet—but the first talk on the first night of the retreat convicted me that the time had come.



Adoration at the Dominican House of Studies (Photo: Lawrence Lew, O.P.)

I had not felt so free in years, and I do not remember a step of my walk along the moonlit lake, but somehow I found myself back in the chapel. I had never seen this before, the Eucharist put into that beautiful gold thing, incense, and Latin and all—“*Praestet fides supplementum, sensuum defectui*”—but as the fresh sanctifying grace surged through my mind and heart, the Liberator reclaiming His own land, it seemed all so right. To my syllogistic mind, newly graced, it was so logical: it is good to be with Jesus; that Host is Jesus; “It is good, Lord, that we are here.”

And to think that tomorrow morning, though more aware of my unworthiness now than ever, I would have a clean conscience when He deigned to come under my roof. What amazing love that He would sacrifice Himself to save me, to give Himself to me. Perhaps I should become a sacrifice for Him.

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So many of the fears and fretting we have about sharing the faith fade away when we find the love of the Lord. Or rather, when He finds us. For our faith is not about a bunch of difficult, unpleasant things we must do, the most socially awkward being that pesky imperative to spread it. No, it is about Our Lord and His love for us: “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:9–10). When we receive the Lord’s love, when we receive Him, when “God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” (1 Jn 4:12), we find the powerful love that leads and enables us to fulfill His great commission.

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For the love of Christ impels us, once we have come to the conviction that one died for all; therefore, all have died. He indeed died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. (2 Cor 5:14–15)

LET THE DOUGH RISE

I loved baking those Amish-lady rolls. It was a simple and straightforward recipe; between a sentence of encouragement, an ingredients list, and a short paragraph of instructions, it filled only a third of a page in the spiral-bound recipe book. For a little recipe, it made a lot of rolls. Even when I made half of the dough into a loaf, there was an abundance of rolls to give to friends. Of course, I could have reduced the recipe, but what would be the advantage of that? The work and time would be the same, but with fewer good things to share.

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It was a bit of a hike over to the University of Maryland Catholic Student Center—all the way across campus. Better to make the hike together. Better to knock on some doors of Catholics in the dorm, especially the ones who seemed as lukewarm as I had been. Freshmen like free food. Maybe they would find what I had found. Or rather, be found.

There was Mass, then dinner. Mass was the key. I would receive Jesus, then go to dinner. I would find the new people, then bring Him to them. He was still inside me after all. The conversation was awkward. Usually it never got beyond name, major, and year. But sometimes it did.

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Once we decide that the Lord is worth sharing, we face the next hurdle: how? We fret about method. Should we “preach the Gospel at all times; when necessary, use words,” or should we go on a crusade against the Atheists of the YouTube comment section? Should we focus on being relevant and relatable or on being cuttngly counter-cultural? Is there a recipe for how to share and pass on the faith? Is there an ingredient list of books to use

and directions for steps to follow that will produce good Catholic children and converted friends every time?

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*From the perpetuation of the sacrifice of the Cross and her communion with the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, the Church draws the spiritual power needed to carry out her mission. The Eucharist thus appears as both the source and the summit of all evangelization, since its goal is the communion of mankind with Christ and in him with the Father and the Holy Spirit. (Pope St. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §22)*

#### SHAPE THE LOAF

**B**aking is not like cooking. The most important steps, the ones which take up the most time and in which the flavor builds, consist in letting the dough sit. You do not have to be burdened, anxious, and worried about many things. You mix the ingredients with the yeast, and let it do its work.

People notice the shape first. That is where a baker's efforts produce visible results, but it is not really so important. Some people do not make baguettes since they do not have a fancy French knife to make the slashes. That is dumb. When good dough falls into the right shape, wonderful things happen. But even if you ruin the shape you should not despair. It can still be salvaged, it should still be baked, the bread can still be good. It is the dough that really matters. And the yeast. The Baker knows the dough when He sees the loaf. It shines through in its countenance.

Baguettes are my favorite now. They are simple. You need only four ingredients: water, flour, salt, yeast. The bakers of the best boulangeries of Paris would consider it an abomination to use anything more.

But you need time. You let the leaven go for fourteen hours. When you find it in the morning, it is hardly recognizable. It has quadrupled in size. Bubbles pop every second. It emits a fragrance full of promise.

You hide it in some flour, water, and salt. The flour is good, but you would never want to eat it plain; the individual grains would taste as good as sawdust. Yet the water unites the many bits of flour into one lump of dough. Then the bubbling leaven gets to work, making this dough like itself.

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“How was Mass?” Dad would ask when I returned.

“Pretty good; Jesus was there,” I would respond.

That, of course, was the reason for going. During the semesters there were other reasons—our chaplain’s homilies, friends, the lunch group afterwards—but on break it boiled down to the main one. Sometimes things become simple.

The friends were the reason I started going, or at least were the catalyst. I had vague memories of daily Mass with Mom. When I heard the bells, I would poke her, and ask if this was the important part. She would give a solemn nod. But those memories had faded and I did not think of daily Mass as something people did, not people like me at least. But after the retreat I realized that these new friends went to daily Mass. They were happy to be there. They went as much as their schedules allowed, and their schedules were designed to allow it. Soon mine would be too.

There was a unity there that I had not seen. These friends went with me to the hospital when I slipped on ice and split my chin, and they stayed until I was stitched. Charity. And together they received Him every day. Perhaps you are what you eat.

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We can get caught up with all of the things people see, active things. But “one thing is needful” (Lk 10:42). If we seek the One thing, if we follow Him, if the dough has the True Yeast—not the leaven of the Pharisees—the external things fall into place. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Mt 6:33). The grains of flour find their place when they are washed with water and when the Leaven is hidden in the lump.

As we are joined into one in Him, we find ourselves joined to each other as well: “Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Cor 10:17). “If we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us” (1 Jn 4:12). It is not visible, but people see it: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35). They see it, they note its source, and like yeast, it spreads.

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For what is the bread? It is the Body of Christ. And what do those who receive it become? The Body of Christ—not many bodies but one body. For as bread is completely one, though made up of many grains of wheat, and these, albeit unseen, remain nonetheless present, in such a way that their difference is not apparent since they have been made a perfect whole, so too are we mutually joined to one another and together united with Christ. (St. John Chrysostom)

BAKE

A friend and I were both entering religious life soon; our lives were taking shape and our places in the loaf were becoming clear.

“My aunt thinks it is because I want to teach,” she said, “but that’s not it at all.” She paused, “Teaching is great, but . . . I just want to be with Jesus.”

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As a religious, you go to more funerals: Br. Peter, Uncle Jim, Fr. Haddad, Fr. Regis, Fr. Muller. I had not considered that before, but it is not sad. It is after death that we reach the goal. “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil 1:23).

Here we have the pledge. Even as the loaf endures the fire, it spreads its sweet scent throughout the house. But these whiffs are only a foretaste of the great banquet to begin once it is baked, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21).

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints” (Ps 116:15).

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When he had pronounced this amen, and so finished his prayer, those who were appointed for the purpose kindled the fire. And as the flame blazed forth in great fury . . . he appeared within not like flesh which is burnt, but as bread that is baked, or as gold and silver glowing in a furnace. Moreover, we perceived such a sweet odor, as if frankincense or some such precious spices had been smoking there. (The Martyrdom of Polycarp)

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