

CONTEMPLATA

THE HOLY FEASTING

THE EUCHARIST AS A SACRED BANQUET

Ignatius Weiss, O.P.

St. Thomas Aquinas loved a good feast. Born to a noble family in medieval Italy, the young Tommaso d'Aquino would have been well acquainted with magnificent banquets. His favorite feasts, however, were not the suppers of the secular world but the Supper of the Lamb. In the Eucharist St. Thomas recognized certain qualities similar to the feasts and banquets he would have attended in the secular world. Drawing on the image of a great banquet, an image also employed by Jesus in his parables, St. Thomas was moved to compose some of the Church's most eloquent writings in honor of the Blessed Sacrament. His writings were in turn adopted by the Church to be used for the Feast of Corpus Christi, now known as the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ. Among these compositions are the *Adoro Te, Devote* ("Godhead here in hiding") and the *Tantum Ergo* (the last verses of the *Pange Lingua*). The antiphon *O Sacrum Convivium* or "O Sacred Banquet," while it is the shortest of these Eucharistic poems, is far from lacking in theological profundity. The full text reads:

O Sacred Banquet, in which Christ becomes our food,
The memory of his Passion is celebrated,
The soul is filled with grace,
And a pledge of future glory is given to us.

By considering briefly the characteristic elements of a banquet, we can better appreciate why St. Thomas chose to develop his devotional poem around this metaphor. Developing our own sense for the image can in turn help us better to understand the Eucharist and stir up love for our Eucharistic Lord.

WHAT MAKES A BANQUET?

There are three important elements of a true banquet. First, a banquet is a commemoration: it is intended to honor someone or something. Second, banquets are marked by an abundance of food. Third, a banquet is structured as a series of courses, reaching its sweet conclusion with the dessert course. Taken together, these three characteristics distinguish a banquet from other kinds of meals and celebrations.

Banquets are distinct in that they are held to honor some memorable person or event. When a wise and munificent medieval king would host a feast for his royal court, the array of roasted meats and overflowing cornucopia of harvest vegetables pointed to the various fruits brought in from the kingdom. A feast can be held to celebrate any variety of occasions; what is represented at a banquet, however, is always something that is being memorialized—whether it should be some historic victory, a birthday or an anniversary, or even the memory of a person.

In every age, it is the nature of a banquet to leave the guests satisfied, full of the rich and hearty fare offered in the banquet's many dishes. The smorgasbord of food arrayed along the table is an essential part of a feast. A banquet is far more than a mere abundance of food, however; that would only be a buffet. The vast

array of food laid out before the guests is the basic “stuff” that gives occasion for the meaning and interior structure of the feast. The food communicates something of the meaningfulness of the person or event being honored.

No banquet is complete without the dessert course. Today, the presence of the dessert fork (or spoon) sitting on the table throughout the meal serves as a reminder of what is yet to come. When the entrees have been removed and one’s place has been reduced to a water glass, a cup and saucer, and this shiny, silver utensil, there is only one conclusion to be drawn: the best is yet to come. Soup and salad whet the appetite, and the entree nourishes. But it is the dessert course which concludes and consummates the whole feast with its delicacies.

Taken as a whole, the banquet supplies a feast for all the senses. While the courses are being served, and then for a while afterwards, it is inevitable that the guests should comment about the sights, scents, and flavors of the meal experienced; they sing its praises. Such lavish and grandiose memorial feasts furnished St. Thomas with a useful image for praising the Sacred Banquet, the Most Blessed Sacrament.

THE EUCHARIST AS A BANQUET

The Eucharist is the banquet to end all banquets. No earthly ruler or magnate’s efforts could ever measure up to the feast prepared by the “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev 19:16). In the Eucharistic species, mere morsels of bread and a chalice of wine become a banquet more noble, satisfying, and desirable than any earthly king could offer. Christ himself is offering to each communicant his Body and Blood. On the altar, bread and wine become the source and summit of our faith.

Just as guests comment upon the delights of the earthly banquets, so too does the Church revel in the glory of the celestial one. The “O Sacred Banquet” presents in poetic form a deep theological exposition on the Blessed Sacrament in just four

lines. Many Dominican friars, nuns, and sisters commonly recite this antiphon before praying the Divine Office or the Rosary when in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. While this brief antiphon may be the shortest of St. Thomas' Eucharistic poems, these verses praise the Eucharist so excellently that it quickly directs all these prayers to the Real Presence before them.

The four short lines of the "O Sacred Banquet" embrace a threefold dimensionality that calls to mind the full grace and power of the Eucharist. St. Thomas explains in the *Tertia Pars*, the third part of his *Summa Theologiae*, that in each Sacrament "three things may be considered; viz. the very cause of our sanctification, which is Christ's passion; the form of our sanctification, which is grace and the virtues; and the ultimate end of our sanctification, which is eternal life" (ST III q. 60, a. 3). In the Eucharist we should be able to recognize the Passion, the action of grace, and a looking forward to the glory of heaven.

THE SACRED BANQUET

The Eucharist is a banquet of grace, and so the three aspects of a true banquet correspond well with the three dimensions of a sacrament. In fact, these are the three aspects praised by St. Thomas in the "O Sacred Banquet": a lived memorial, an abundance of grace, and a pledge of glory.

The memory of his Passion is celebrated. One of the things that makes a meal a banquet is the meaning with which it is invested. Just as a banquet commemorates some important person or event, so too "the Eucharist is a commemoration of Christ's death," St. Thomas writes, "in so far as the suffering Christ Himself is offered to us as the Paschal banquet, according to 1 Cor. 5:7-8: 'Christ our pasch is sacrificed; therefore let us feast'" (ST III q. 66, a. 9, ad 5). It is the cause or purpose of the feast that, in part, gives it meaning. The Eucharistic banquet recalls, celebrates, and makes present the redeeming sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, the victory of Jesus over death.

The soul is filled with grace. The typical feast centers around a table decked with every sort of food. The spiritual feast, the sacred banquet, provides a heartier fare and more perfect nourishment in hardly a mouthful. The fullness that this banquet offers us is Christ himself, his presence, and his grace. The strength the Eucharist lends has been referred to as *viaticum*, which is Latin for “supplies for a journey.” When this term is used in the context of Last Rites, it is to provide the dying with a happy and grace-filled death. Yet we are all journeying daily in the *sequela Christi*, the following after Christ, and rely on the nourishment of this Sacrament. Reflecting on the majesty of the Sacrament, St. Thomas writes,

What could be more wonderful than this? No other sacrament has greater healing power; through it sins are purged away, virtues are increased, and the soul is enriched with an abundance of every spiritual gift. It is offered in the Church for the living and the dead, so that what was instituted for the salvation of all may be for the benefit of all. (“Manducatur utique,” *In Festo Corporis Christi*, nocturn 1, lection 2)

And a pledge of future glory is given to us. Not only does the Blessed Sacrament harken back to the salvation won for us on Calvary and provide us with the graces for our present journey, but the Eucharist also gives us here and now a share in the Wedding Feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:6–9). While the dessert fork promises sweet delicacies, the Eucharist is a sort of glimpse and foretaste of the beatific vision: “One who eats and drinks in a spiritual way shares in the Holy Spirit, through whom we are united to Christ by a union of faith and love, and through him we become members of the Church. . . . ‘He who raised Jesus Christ our Lord from the dead, will raise our mortal bodies because of his Spirit, who dwells in us’ (Rom 8:11). And so our Lord says that he will raise up to glory whoever eats and drinks; to glory, and not to condemnation” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on John*. ch. 6, lecture 7). The

Eucharist, although it is not the full and direct possession of the eternal life to come, is still a partial share in that glory. It is, in this way, like the dessert fork which is with us throughout the meal, but only achieves its use in the final course. The best is yet to come.

CONCLUSION

To illustrate the bounty that the Lord offers us in the Blessed Sacrament, Aquinas appeals to the image of a banquet. It calls to mind a great hall full of guests, goblets brimming with wine, tables covered with sundry delights, and the infectious buzz of celebration. A true banquet, as distinguished from other kinds of feasts, involves commemoration, abundance, and a sweet conclusion. Compared to the earthly meals where we stuff ourselves on fine foods in honor of some grand occasion, the Eucharist far surpasses and overshadows such mundane events, because of the immense spiritual reality that is at hand in the Sacrament.

The “O Sacred Banquet,” brief and beautiful, develops a theologically rich devotional around this metaphor of a banquet. By taking a closer look at the abundant graces of the Eucharist, we better understand the spiritual dynamics at work under the appearance of bread and wine. Using both St. Thomas’s theological treatments and his poetic praises, we can gain a great wealth of wisdom and enkindle an ardent devotion. St. Thomas’s Eucharistic poetry truly presents the Church with much to contemplate, a feast for both mind and heart.

Br. Ignatius Weiss entered the Order of Preachers in 2014. He attended Franciscan University, where he majored in philosophy and minored in theology and Latin.