

Wisdom's Banquet: Eucharist and Wisdom

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*As the years increase, they weaken us physically. We die by degrees.
But fortunately the heart doesn't age. On the contrary. it becomes
younger as it inherits what is lost by the other faculties.*

To Mrs. Antoinette de Grandville

July 19, 1868

Preface

Saint Peter Julian Eymard wrote over 2000 personal letters during the course of his priestly and religious life. Nearly 40% of them were letters of spiritual direction. The advice and wisdom he shared were usually of a personal nature, often drawing on the spiritual wisdom he had gained from years of personal and physical suffering, but more importantly from countless hours in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

As Father Eymard's own eucharistic theology evolved, his advice moved from a focus on the principles of Christian living - as it was perceived at the time - to a greater focus on the fruits of a love of the Eucharist and eucharistic living.

Father Eymard wrote 105 letters to Mrs. de Grandville, more than any other lay person for whom he provided spiritual direction. The excerpt above is from his last letter, written just before his death some weeks later. He shares a wisdom born of age.

Introduction to the Theme

During our time together we are going to be reflecting upon the Eucharist as sacrament of wisdom. This is not a very common way of talking about the sacrament, but it is quite solidly based, being founded on Jesus' words in chapter six of Saint John's Gospel.

Whereas in traditional cultures wisdom is highly prized, our culture today does not accord it the same worth. Yet in a time of great change such as ours, marked frequently by uncertainty and confusion, many people are looking for some deeper wisdom to guide their lives.

The Jews prided themselves on the superior wisdom they had received as a gift from God, especially through the Mosaic law. Christians see that gift brought to fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who taught us wisdom not only in words but by the very way he lived, died, and rose from the dead. He is, said Saint Paul, God's wisdom in person. Just as wisdom in the Old Testament is pictured as offering a banquet to all who would be willing to learn from her, so Jesus invites us to wisdom's table, in a sacramental meal in which he nourishes us with his own life so that we too might learn to live our lives in the light of God's wisdom and so find happiness.

Opening Prayer

Great and holy Creator, you fashioned this vast and evolving universe with unimaginable power and infinite wisdom.

Through the long history of our race you have been slowly bringing humankind to a new birth, guiding us in our freedom, teaching us the creative use of our gifts of intelligence and inventiveness, of curiosity and care, of energy and resourcefulness.

In every place and in every age, you have raised up wise men and women, saints and sages, to interpret this mysterious world for their peoples and to trace pathways to you. We remember with gratitude this interminable line of witnesses, most of them now forgotten, but particularly the people of Israel, your chosen ones, upon which you bestowed a special gift of your wisdom.

Sages have pictured your wisdom as a lady, *Sophia*, who calls to passers by, inviting them to her banquet, to eat the tasty bread she has prepared and to savor her choice wine. In the fullness of time you sent us Jesus, your son, the plenitude of your own wisdom become flesh, who taught us to follow your ways. He too prepared a table for us. On the night of his betrayal, the eve of his death, he offered us the bread of his body, broken on the cruel cross for love of us but now transformed, and the wine of his life's blood, poured out to set us free and now transfigured by the Spirit. This is truly wisdom's wondrous banquet.

Be with us now, loving Father, to guide our minds and hearts as we seek to uncover the riches of your banquet of wisdom. Give us insight, grant us the gift of love, and may we experience the joy of sharing the thrill of discovery, and the consolation of a sure hope that, at this table, our disappointments, our sufferings and our pain can truly be transformed and become life-giving not only for us but for many others as well, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Song

“Gift of Finest Wheat,” by Robert Kreutz, Music Issue of Today’s Missal, Oregon Catholic Press.

Work Exercise

1. What does the word wisdom mean for you? Do you know anyone whom you would call “wise?” Why would you call them that? If you yourself were offered the gift of wisdom, what qualities would you ask for above all?
2. A certain number of Old Testament writings are classified as “wisdom literature.” Do you remember the names of any of these books? The New Testament too is concerned with the theme of wisdom. What are some of the characteristics of biblical wisdom?
3. Saint Paul says that Jesus is the “wisdom of God ” and in chapter six of Saint John’s Gospel, Jesus claims that he is God’s true manna come down from heaven to nourish the world. Speaking the language of biblical wisdom, Jesus there invites us to a banquet where he will give us his flesh to eat and his blood to drink. In what ways, do you think, could the Eucharist be understood as the banquet of wisdom?

The work exercise is followed by a small group sharing and a large group sharing.

Teaching

1. Wisdom is a quality prized by all ancient peoples and by traditional cultures. Sages or wise persons are honored, and some (like Confucius or Solomon) have become proverbial for their wisdom. Such wisdom is essentially insight into life; the wise person is an acute observer of life who has thought deeply about experience and expressed insight characteristically in pithy sayings or maxims. Disciples learn the sayings of the sage and pass them on from generation to generation, and so a wisdom tradition is created.
2. Israel, like other ancient peoples, developed a wisdom tradition, and indeed it borrowed much of its wisdom from neighboring peoples, above all from Egypt and Mesopotamia. Its experience of Yahweh, “the saving God,” however, gave its wisdom a unique flavor. For Yahweh alone is truly wise. His wisdom is exhibited in creation made by the power of his word, but also in the law he gave to his people. This law was their guide, their pathway to wisdom.

In time, word, law, and wisdom were often thought of as interchangeable and were believed to be signified symbolically in the manna which God had provided to nourish Israel in its journey through the desert to the promised land.

3. Later writers personified wisdom. Wisdom was with God, like a skilled craftsman, when he created the world (Proverbs 8:22-36). Wisdom also was imagined as a heavenly being who dwells with the people (Sirach 24:1-12), or is often thought of as a woman, Lady Wisdom (*Sophia* in Greek), who gives instruction and provides a banquet of fine wine and tasty bread for all who would come (Proverbs 9:1-6).
4. This is the background that will help us to understand the rich meaning of the great discourse on the Eucharist which we find in John 6. After feeding the great crowd with the few scraps of bread (John 6:1-13), Jesus declares that it is he who can provide the true bread of God for a hungry humanity (John 6:25-58). In fact, he is that bread, the manna come down from heaven. Like Wisdom of old, he offers a banquet but the bread and wine that he provides are his own flesh and blood. They will bring eternal life and resurrection from the dead.
5. We have heard of this promise of Jesus, but we hear less often of the Eucharist as the food of wisdom. Yet, that is truly its purpose. We sit down at this sacramental banquet in order to gain insight into life, to learn the secret of true happiness. The words, “this is my body,” “this is my blood,” can really be translated, “this is me.”

Taking the proffered bread at communion time, and answering “amen” to the words, “the body of Christ,” means more than just believing that Jesus is truly present in the sacrament.

It is meant to signify as well a willingness to learn from all that Jesus lived in the body - his attitudes, his values, his way of life. Likewise, drinking from the proffered cup and answering, "amen," implies a desire to imitate Jesus' own dedication and to live by the same self-giving love that led him to shed his blood so that others might be free.

6. Wisdom was important for the first Christians, too. Saint Paul believed that in Christ, God had revealed to us his hidden wisdom - in fact, he calls Christ "the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18-25) - so that we too might live by divine wisdom, know the secret of happiness and live forever. We, however, always seem to prefer our own wisdom to being told; we want to find out for ourselves. This is the meaning of the story of Adam and Eve. Lured by the promise of living forever, they wanted to claim wisdom for themselves, to "know good and evil" on their own terms. When they had eaten, their eyes were opened, they experienced shame, and they learned of death (Genesis 3:1-24). On the other hand, when the disciples at Emmaus sat at table with the stranger (who unknown to them, was in reality God's hidden wisdom), their eyes were opened and they recognized him in the breaking of bread. Their hearts were filled with joy and they believed in the resurrection, God's victory over death (Luke 24:13-25). That story teaches not only about the eucharistic experience of believers but about the Eucharist as a sacrament of wisdom.
7. It is by attending to the symbols, then, that we can learn what the Eucharist tells us about God's wisdom. The language of gift, for example, reminds us not only how much God loves us (so much that Christ gives his whole self for our nourishment), but also that his love is freely given and does not depend on our deserving it.

The Emmaus story invites us to see the Eucharist as Christ coming to break the bread of forgiveness and acceptance with us even when we may have been losing faith in him; so that we may not be blocked by our feelings of shame and discouragement, he seeks to reawaken our sense of self-worth and renew our hope. His giving us his body and blood in the form of food teaches us a deep secret about suffering: namely that it does not have to be simply negative and meaningless, but can, on the contrary, be transformed into redemptive power for the good of others and our own transformation.

Likewise, about this table, where we share the same food and drink, we learn the lessons of true human fellowship based on inclusiveness and acceptance, forgiveness and selfless love. From the transformation of the gifts of bread and wine we learn that the whole world and all the products of our toil and industry are called to be part of God's great work of renewing creation.

8. In this way, we can explore the wisdom contained in the sacrament and if we compare what we find with values and attitudes that are widespread in our contemporary world, we will easily be able to recognize how the Eucharist inculcates an alternative wisdom for our time.

Closing Prayer

(In the presence of the Blessed Sacrament if possible)

Opening Song: “Gift of Finest Wheat,”

Robert Kreutz, Music Issue of Today's Missal, Oregon Catholic Press.

First Reading: Proverbs 9:1-6

Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven columns. She has dressed her meat, mixed her wine, yes, she has spread her table. She has sent out her maidens; she calls from the heights out over the city: "Let whoever is simple turn in here; to him who lacks understanding, I say, 'Come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed! Forsake foolishness that you may live; advance in the way of understanding. For by me your days will be multiplied and the years of your life increased.'"

Period of Silence

Second Reading: Luke 24:13-35

Now that very day two of them were going to a village seven miles from Jerusalem called Emmaus, and they were conversing about all the things that had occurred. And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him. He asked them "What are you discussing as you walk along?" They stopped, looking downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, said to him in reply, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?" And he replied to them, "What sort of things?" They said to him, "The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, how our chief priests and rulers both handed him over to a sentence of death and crucified him. But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel; and besides all this, it is now the third day since this took place. Some women from our group, however, have astounded us; they were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; they came back and reported that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who announced that he was alive.

Then some of those with us went to the tomb and found things just as the women had described, but him they did not see." And he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"

The beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures. As they approached the village to which they were going, he gave the impression that he was going on farther. But they urged him, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning (within us) while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?" So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the

eleven and those with them who were saying, “The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!”

Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Period of Silence

Intercessory Prayer

(If prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament)

Benediction

Reposition

Closing Prayer

Great and Holy Creator,
in every place and in every age
you have raised up wise men and women, saints and sages,
to interpret this mysterious world for the peoples
and to trace pathways to you.

In the fullness of time you sent us Jesus, your Son,
the plenitude of your own wisdom become flesh,
who taught us to follow your ways.
He, too, like Sophia, prepared a table for us.
On the night of his betrayal, the eve of his death,
he offered us the bread of his body,
broken on the cruel cross for love of us but now transformed,
and the wine of his life’s blood, powered out to set us free
and now transfigured by the Spirit.
This is truly wisdom’s wondrous banquet.
Thank you for calling us to the feast. Amen.

Dismissal with a sign of peace

