

# Faith and Food

JOHN 6 and the Eternal Eucharist

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I traveled widely in my youth due to military service, several continents, countless cultures and sub-cultures. Before I was twenty years of age I had traveled from western Europe to the Amazon rain forest and the Carnivale of Rio de Janeiro along with its seething barrios only blocks away from the passive parade of “beautiful people”. Regardless of the location or people we always found that the quickest, easiest and most enjoyable way to bridge the large language and culture barriers was quite simply, to eat their food. Not just any food, but the food offered by your hosts. I was constantly amazed as a young man how forthcoming many people, especially those with VERY little means of support, were always offering you food as a way of closing the wide gap of language and understanding.

Food can never be reduced to a common function of refueling the body. There always seems to be a natural excitement and celebration that surrounds food. The international success Nigela Lawson, the Food Network, Emeril Lagasse and the Iron Chef demonstrate proof of the above proposition. Who thought that shows about food and an entire network concerned with nothing but food could survive and thrive?

Can you imagine the simplest of parties or even a small wedding without food? While the most frugal of fare suffices for a good friend, it is a rule of thumb that GREAT food makes a mediocre meeting magnificent! Food is essential to our whole being, not just our bodies. The consumption of nourishment feeds us both personally and corporately. Any gathering of any people for any reason is usually calibrated in terms of success by the quality of the food.

For our spiritual ancestors the Jews, food was an all-consuming process. Not just the preparing and storing of victuals in the ancient world, but the many dietary laws concerning food in the Torah were always on the mind of the observant people of God. For those who enjoy “camping out” my point is easily proven. Even with canned

and packed food and Coleman stoves, the preparing and cleaning and preparing for food in a ‘camping’ environment takes much more time than in the convenience of a modern kitchen. The ancient world was entirely from scratch. Plant, cultivate, harvest, thresh, and knead, pound, bake, then quickly gone. The cycle was endless. In the Old Testament, their life centered on food and the dietary laws of the Pentateuch. This concern always kept the nourishment of their bodies as a sacramental reminder of the care of God. Not to mention that the ultimate act of a good Jew was to eat a meal that commemorated their liberation. It is with this in mind that we now approach the connection of Faith and Food.

The 6th chapter of St. John’s Gospel remains one of the more debated and perhaps (by some) the most avoided passages of Holy Scripture. It remains a point of great scandal for a number of Christians. What was our Lord talking about any way? “Eating His flesh and drinking His Blood!” Is eating just another term for a form of faith, that is simply an assent of the will or mind, or is this eating a reference to the Most Blessed Sacrament and an act of sacred sustenance? To appropriate a deeper meaning of the passage, we not only need to ask WHAT this passage is about but more importantly WHEN and WHO this passage is about.

John 6:5-53 *I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man shall eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews [NOT TO MENTION THE CHRISTIANS, ed.] therefore began to argue among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said to them, Verily, verily, I say to you, Except you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, you have no life in you.*

The passage itself is not only concerned with WHAT our Lord is talking about as much as it declares WHEN and WHO He is talking about!!!!

“The WHAT” that our Lord is concerned with is best stated as... WHAT is this connection between Faith & Food? The people that Christ was speaking to in this passage had “food on the brain”. Our Lord has just fed the 5,000+ with miracle bread and the crowd followed Him eagerly hoping for more. In the Jewish soul the idea of faith and food went together.

Back in the Garden of Eden, for Adam to maintain his right covenantal relationship with God, he had to obey God by eating the food that God ordained for him. Faith and obedience was based on an act.

Genesis 2:16-17 *And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, of every tree of the garden you may freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die.*

The greatest story that the Jews knew of concerning Faith and Food was The Exodus experience.

Exodus 12:8-10 *And they shall eat the flesh in that night, roasted with fire, and unleavened bread; and with bitter herbs they shall eat it. Eat not of it raw, nor boiled at all with water, but roasted with fire; its head with its legs, and with its inward parts. And ye shall let nothing of it remain till the morning; and that which remaineth of it till the morning ye shall burn with fire.*

The entire flesh of the sacrifice had to be consumed. You not only had to believe the LORD's promise to deliver your first born but you had to show your belief by partaking of the sacrifice that redeemed you. Your faith and the act of consumption go hand in hand, as it did in the Garden. With the Passover, as in the Garden, your faith was dead unless shown by the work of eating. The work literally nourished your faith.

After the Passover, when they are in the desert and the greatest lessons taught them are through the flesh of birds, the Manna and the water from the rock, the books of the Law of Moses go into much detail concerning food. Every time an observant Jew approached the table he had to dwell upon the holiness of the Most High. Every meal was a consideration of the Mercy and Love of God.

The Passover was not the first time that a "new covenant" for the people of God was inaugurated by food, and especially flesh. Back in the days of Noah after he left the ark he brought the seven pairs of clean animals with him (Genesis 7:2). After the flood with the Rainbow the LORD instituted a "new covenant" and as a part of this new life allowed them to eat flesh (Genesis 9:3). Every covenant in the Bible, small or large is always connected to a meal that seals the sacredness. Food feeds faith as faithfulness is demonstrated in the proper consumption

of food.

This leads us to the WHEN of this discourse. From first until last we are concerned with getting life from the eating of flesh. The WHEN of this passage is very important. John 6:4 says, “Now the Passover was at hand”. These people were inundated at this point with the faithfulness of food. They had to get all the leavened bread out of their house for a week and then eat the lamb, the lamb that was sacrificed for them and delivered them from the land of bondage. This event takes place during the greatest Jewish feast, Passover and week long Feast of Unleavened Bread. In St. John’s Gospel it follows directly on the heels of the miracle of the loaves and the fish. Our Lord is not only showing that Faithfulness to the New Covenant and Food goes together but also most especially the consumption of the flesh of the sacrifice. The Holy Eucharist is an everlasting food. First prefigured in Eden and continually accented and highlighted throughout the Old Testament. In John chapter 6 all these food passages point to the Eternal Eucharist fulfilled in the person of our Lord.

WHAT is this passage about? Faith and Food.

WHEN is this passage? Passover, the ultimate Jewish feast of Salvation by Faith demonstrated by the consumption of “Flesh Food”.

Lastly and most importantly WHO is this passage about. While the answer is quite easy, Jesus Christ, it is also very complicated. How we understand the person of Christ and His relation to us and how He passes the divine life of the Trinity to us through His human flesh is critical for our salvation. Our Lord is the ultimate focus of this passage. As the catechism directs us, Christianity is not a Religion of the Book but a Religion of the Word of God (CCC # 108). Christ Jesus being that ultimate WORD that feeds the Church and our souls. The Gospel of John is chock full of the Messiah and His Temple/ Feast appearances. There are many, with a different message at each one. Now Jesus appears at this Passover and declares that you must eat His flesh. He is making an obvious parallel to the Passover lamb. Christ is THE Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. That declaration at the beginning of the Gospel of John is most clear. Our Lord shows His identity and mission by speaking of himself in language that is strikingly similar to that used of the Passover Lamb.

Our Lord calls for full participation in his Redemption. Christ

the atoning sacrifice nourishes us. He is the fulfillment of the Passover and the ultimate manna in the wilderness. As St. Paul points out

1 Corinthians 5:7 *Therefore purge out the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.*

Christ the true Passover is the final sacrifice for sins. The ultimate, all-sufficient sacrifice. His flesh is true food and his blood true drink. Much better than any fruit Adam might have devoured, more pleasing than any earthly wedding feast. Much more liberating than any preceding Passover Lamb. To demonstrate our continuing faith in the Son of God, we must faithfully eat at his tree and devour the “Flesh Food” of this New and Ultimate Covenant.

No matter what land of bondage you may be living in, no sin, habit or addiction is stronger than the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ that was shed for sinners. No matter what wilderness you may be living in, he can feed you with the ultimate bread of Heaven.