



Fasting and Feasting in the Roman Catholic Community

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After teaching in high schools in Croydon and Preston and an MA, John Hammond taught RS and ran the RE PGCE at St Martin's College, Lancaster (now the University of Cumbria) for 20 years. His major academic interests have been Paul Ricoeur and the study of myth, Thomas Berry and environmentalism, Victor Turner and ritual, and Rene Girard on sacred violence and the scapegoat. In his retirement he has worked for the website Multiverse on issues of religious diversity and gives occasional sessions to RE trainees and inspectors on experiential learning in RE.

ABSTRACT

Roman Catholics do not have forbidden foods, but from the monastic tradition comes an emphasis on fasting while from the scriptures comes encouragement to feast. The author describes the links between shared meals, celebrations and fasting, and how they foster a sense of community.

What follows is personal view on food and Catholicism, but I hope it is not wholly unrepresentative of what is an ancient, world-wide and very diverse tradition. As Roman Catholicism sees itself structured by the pillars of scripture and tradition, so too its attitude to food. From scripture, as for all Christians, comes the disbelief in forbidden foods. The Acts of the Apostles records St. Peter's dream that all foods were clean, resulting in the abandoning of Jewish food taboos. And there is also Jesus' teaching in the Gospels that it is what comes out of a mouth that leads to uncleanness, not what goes in. For the Christian scriptures there is no special food, just food. Except of course the most ordinary of Mediterranean foods, bread and wine, which under the new dispensation were to become an extraordinarily food.

Turning to tradition, it is the historical importance of monasticism within Catholicism that brings to prominence ascetical practice and the discipline of fasting. Whereas the message of the scriptures made no food to be specially avoided, a traditional emphasis on fasting made all foods specially valued, and encouraged feasting as a legitimate form of celebration. Insofar as there is a distinctive Roman Catholic attitude to food it is to be found not in forbidden foods or modes of preparation, but in the tension between fasting and feasting. If Catholicism has a middle way, it is in the tradition's affirmation, rather than avoidance, of these extremes. But tensions are difficult to hold over time and so, not surprisingly, shifts by individual members or mass movements into one extreme or another has resulted in a popular legacy of emaciated asceticism and overfed conviviality, the Grand Inquisitor and Friar Tuck, with many of the faithful following one then the other.



Let us look closer at first feasting, then fasting. The shared meal as event is a human universal. The biblical metaphor for God's kingdom and presence is a banquet, and Jesus is taken to task by his critics for his frequent feasting, while his first miracle is the changing of water into excessive quantities of high quality wine at a wedding feast. The shared meal is an intimate and significant experience. In the offering and receiving of a meal, the energies of the host in acquiring and preparing the food, are taken into the body and life of the guests – which is why we are fussy about who we eat with.

As well as a physical intimacy a festive meal can also create what the anthropologist Victor Turner called 'communitas': an intense experience of conviviality and closeness with other participants which cuts across all the barriers we usually erect around ethnicity, class, and gender. During the celebratory meal the old formal divisions that separated the participants disappear and they find themselves joyfully accepting and accepted by each other. This temporary experience of unity in diversity that Turner finds in celebration is for St. Paul the mark of a new lasting reality for those who are 'in Christ': 'no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female' (Gal.3,28). Communitas of course is not exclusively religious, and in many religious settings it is palpably absent. However, from my experience of catholic communitas I offer two memories: Aged seven I moved from a county to a catholic primary school and made my first communion. Of the mass and communion I remember nothing but after the mass the new communicants walked back to the school for a shared breakfast. New to the school I was somewhat isolated and the dominant memory of the occasion is of sitting alone but with a still strong feeling of being happily and closely joined to and at ease with all the others there, and the sense that all of us were gathered in an ethos that felt benign and wholly reassuring.

Over sixty years later I was recently in Leicester Square when I called in at the French church, just off the square. The church is a quiet space in heaving Soho and I like the Cocteau murals and central tapestry. A mass had just started and I stayed. At the kiss of peace following the consecration, among the hands I shook and the friendly eyes I met were those of an African, a Chinese, an Eastern European, a Filipino, someone mentally disturbed and someone mildly drunk. It was a fleeting but trusting encounter of very disparate lives. This unselfconscious giving and accepting of human presence across class and culture was made possible by the ritualised setting and memories of an ancient shared meal.

There is a painting by Caravaggio about the disciples' meeting with the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus. In the painting the two disciples who are sharing the meal with Jesus are beside themselves in wonder at the moment of recognition. Nearby, the innkeeper, who is not part of the meal, stands by bemused. The presence of Jesus is recognised by those involved in the act of breaking bread. Caravaggio's painting is a vivid illustration of the Catholic belief that it is in the community's shared action in the Eucharistic meal that Christ is present among them.

However, another central belief, at times in tension with the emphasis on the community's action and presence, is the doctrine of transubstantiation. In formulating this doctrine Thomas Aquinas used the categories of Aristotelian philosophy to explain how the bread that still had all the appearances of bread was really the body of Christ. When, following Jesus' instructions to 'do this in commemoration of me' the priest repeated his words from the last supper, 'this is my body', then, through the power of God the 'substance', or thing in itself, changed while the 'accidents' the physical properties of the bread remained. Because the consecrated bread was the 'real presence' of Christ there must therefore be genuflections before the divine presence: it would be adored in the popular service of Benediction where an elaborate, often gold and jewel encrusted vessel, a monstrance, would be held up by the priest to show the Eucharistic bread to the kneeling congregation and bless them. Crumbs became a clerical nightmare and washing up the sacred vessels a work of piety. As a result there is a shift of emphasis away from the Eucharistic action of the community on to the holy thing, the consecrated bread, and



so an increased prominence for the clergy in managing and distributing the real presence of Christ to the individual faithful.

However, the shared meal's twin features of intimate presence and heightened sense of community remain central to the theology of the mass and are evident in the meanings of 'Corpus Christi', the body of Christ, which is both the 'real presence' consumed in the consecrated bread, and the corporate identity of the community, the church.

When we turn to fasting, though the antithesis of feasting, we can still find the same themes of intimacy and community. The practice of fasting induces a physical weariness and a sense of fragility and consequently, in a religious context, an experience of dependence on and closeness to God. When practiced by a community the shared privation and discomfort undertaken at the same time for the same motives enhances its distinctiveness and sense of corporate identity. During the fast the members experience themselves as closer to God and closer to each other. Fasting therefore is achieving the same religious aims as feasting. But fasting also makes the religious aims of feasting possible. Without fasting feasting becomes destructive overindulgence, the royal road to obesity, and the essence and real pleasure of the feast is lost. A feast can only be a heightened experience if it is occasional and prefaced by a fast. When it is Christmas every day there is no Christmas. So within the traditional calendar: the major festivals of Christmas and Easter are preceded by Advent, and Lent, rule-bound fasts within monastic communities, times of 'giving up' something (drinking, sugar in tea, sweets), and days of fasting and abstinence from meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday for the wider faithful. There was also the traditional abstinence from meat on Fridays throughout the year and fasting from midnight before communion at mass on Sunday morning. I say 'traditional' for, though it is of the tradition, much popular practice changed following the Second Vatican Council in the 1950s. When Pope John XXIII and his council opened windows to let some much needed air into the Roman Catholic Church, many of the strictures on fasting and abstinence were reviewed and rationalised. In part a welcome reaction to a somewhat masochistic mindset which saw the enthusiastic mortification of the flesh as an end in itself and a way of earning redemption, the Lenten fast was transformed from a time of 'giving up' to a period of 'doing something extra', Friday abstinence disappeared, and the fast before communion was reduced to an hour. Victor Turner saw humankind's predisposition to ritual to be part of our species hard-wiring. Perhaps the same could be said of the logic that links feasting and fasting. The witness of the religious experience of mankind provides ample evidence that the full experience of a festival is possible only after the rigours of the fast. It may be, then, that the rationalised reduction of fasting in the Catholic community following the reforms of Vatican II has adversely affected the Catholic experience of festivals and celebration. Mass attendance statistics certainly indicate there are fewer Catholics celebrating today, but there may be also other reasons for this.

Food then, or rather eating and fasting, has a special importance in Catholicism. As Eucharist and shared family or community meal, the forms often linked by a church calendar which also orders social life and leisure, the meal is the primary mode to unity with God and neighbour. Though the solitary mystic is for Catholicism a celebrated model of union with God, it is the joint focus of God and neighbour, inextricably linked in the event of the meal, which makes eating, and so food, the epitome of Catholic devotion and experience.