



SACRED MEAL

The *Sacrum Convivium*, or Sacred Banquet, is continually presented and represented throughout the Old and New Testaments. Bishop Barron depicts multiple occurrences of this sacred banquet: the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; the sacred banquet on God's holy mountain of Zion with his people, Israel; the miraculous feast of loaves and fishes that Jesus provides for his followers; and the "Last Supper" that Jesus shares with his Apostles.

Sacred Meal in the Old Testament

Genesis tells us that God placed Adam and Even in the midst of a garden of earthly delights and gave them permission to eat from all of the trees in the garden except one (Gen. 2:15-17). He instructed them, in short, to participate in his life through the joy of eating and drinking. But what about the prohibition? Why is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil forbidden to them? The fundamental determination of good and evil remains, necessarily, the prerogative of God alone, since God is, himself, the ultimate good. To seize this knowledge, therefore, is to claim divinity for oneself — and this is the one thing that a creature can never really do and thus should never try. If we turn ourselves into God, then the link that ought to connect us, through God, to the rest of creation is lost, and we find ourselves alone and not able to participate in the sacred banquet of communion with God or with others through God.

This is the nature of sin across the ages. God wants us to eat and drink in communion with him and our fellow creatures, but our own fear and pride break up the party. God wants us gathered around him in gratitude and love, but our resistance results in scattering, isolation, and violence. God wants the sacred meal; we want to eat alone and on our terms. But the God of the Bible is relentless in his love. He will not rest until this situation is rectified. The whole of the scriptural story can be seen as a coherent narrative of God's attempt to restore the fallen creation, to reestablish the joy of the banquet.



Two additional Old Testament presentations of the sacred meal are the Passover meal and the feast on the Lord's mountain as described by the prophet Isaiah. The Passover meal was established by God on the night he set the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt and was to be repeated as a ritual meal for all succeeding generations as a "perpetual institution" (Ex. 12:14).

As God led the Israelites out of slavery, which is to say, bondage to sin, God established a meal that united the whole people around a common table and a common food. And he declared that this act of unity must be repeated down through the ages as the defining gesture of the Israelite nation. The Passover meal was a recovery (however imperfect) of the easy unity and fellowship in the Garden of Eden; God hosting a banquet at which his human creatures share life with him and each other.

The second instance of Old Testament meal symbolism that Bishop Barron explores is found in the book of the prophet Isaiah. One of Isaiah's master images, on display throughout his writings, is the holy mountain. Isaiah dreams of the coming together of all the scattered tribes of Israel, indeed of the whole world, around the worship of the one, true God. All nations will stream toward the "mountain of the Lord's house," which is Zion, where the temple or the place of right worship is situated. Having found friendship with God, human beings will rediscover friendship with one another, creating total, cosmic peace. Along with right worship and peace, Isaiah adds a third feature of God's holy mountain — a magnificent meal. In his vision, the gathered community is fed by a gracious God with the finest foods, calling to mind the situation in the Garden of Eden before the eating and drinking was interrupted by a grasp at godliness.

Sacred Meal in the New Testament

Since one of the principal desires of Yahweh was to reestablish the sacred meal, it should be no surprise that Jesus would make the sacred meal central to his messianic work. Throughout his public ministry, Jesus gathered people around a table of fellowship. In his time, the table was a place where the divisions and stratifications of society were particularly on display, but at Jesus' table, all were welcome: saints and sinners, the just and the unjust, the healthy and the sick, men and women. This open table fellowship was not simply a challenge to the societal status quo, but also an expression of God's deepest intentions vis-a-vis the human

race. In fact, very often Jesus' most profound teaching took place at table, calling to mind Isaiah's holy mountain where a festive meal would be spread out and where "instruction" would go forth.

This fellowship started as early as Jesus' birth when he was wrapped in swaddling clothes and "laid in a manger," the place where the animals eat. Jesus had come to be food for a hungry world. He was destined to be, not only the host at the sacred banquet, but the meal itself. And to Christ's manger came the shepherds (evocative of the poor and marginalized) and kings (evocative of the nations of the world), drawn there as though by a magnet. Thus commenced the realization of Isaiah's vision.

A story that can be found in all three of the synoptic Gospels is that of the conversion of Levi (or Matthew) the tax collector. We hear that as Jesus was passing by, he spotted Matthew at his tax collector's post. Jesus gazed at this man and said, simply, "Follow me." Matthew, we are told, immediately got up and followed the Lord. But where did he follow him? To a banquet! "While he was at table in his house ..." is the first thing we read after the declaration that Matthew followed him. Before he calls Matthew to do anything, before he sends him on mission, Jesus invites Matthew to recline in easy fellowship around a festive table. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis comments, "The deepest meaning of Christian discipleship is not to work for Jesus but to be with Jesus." The former tax collector listens to the Word, laughs with him, breaks bread with him, and in this finds his true identity.

The miracle of the feeding of the thousands with a few loaves and fishes can be found in all four Gospels. These narratives are richly iconic presentations of the great theme of the sacred meal. In Luke's account (Luke 9:10-17), crowds gather to hear Jesus teach and to bring their sick to him for cures. It gets late and the disciples want to dismiss the crowds so they can get something to eat, but Jesus tells them to "give them some food yourselves." But they protest: "Five loaves and two fish are all we have." Jesus instructs the disciples to gather the crowd. Then, taking the loaves and fishes, Jesus says a blessing over them, breaks them, and gives them to the disciples for distribution. Everyone ate until they were satisfied.

The hungry people who gather around Jesus are symbolic of the hungry human race, starving from the time of Adam and Eve for what will satisfy. In imitation of our first parents, we have tried to satisfy our hunger with wealth, pleasure, power, and honor, but none of it works, precisely because we have all been wired for God and God is nothing but love. It is only when we conform ourselves to the way of love, only when, in a high paradox, we contrive to empty out the ego, that we are filled. Thus the five loaves and two fish symbolize that which has been given to us, all that we have received as a grace, from God. If we hang onto it, we lose it. But if we turn it over to Christ, then we will find it transfigured and multiplied, even unto the feeding of the world.



Bishop Barron calls this the “loop of grace.” God offers, as a sheer grace, the gift of being, but if we try to cling to that gift and make it our own (in the manner of Adam and Eve), we lose it. The constant command of the Bible is this: what you have received as a gift, give as a gift — and you will find the original gift multiplied and enhanced. God’s grace, precisely because it is grace, cannot be held on to; rather, it is had only in the measure that it remains grace, that is to say, a gift given away.

All of these themes are summed up and drawn together in the meal that Jesus hosted the night before his death. Luke tells us that, at the climactic moment of his life and ministry, Jesus “took his place at table with the apostles” (Luke 22:14-20). At this Last Supper, Jesus, in a culminating way, embodied Yahweh’s desire to sit in easy intimacy with his people, sharing his life with them. He said, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.”

What stood at the heart of this event? Jesus took the unleavened bread of the Passover, the bread symbolic of Israel’s hasty flight from slavery to freedom, blessed it in accord with the traditional Passover prayer of blessing, broke it and distributed it to his disciples saying, “This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me.” And then after they had eaten, he took a cup of wine and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you.” Acting once more in the very person of Yahweh, Jesus fed his friends with his very substance. To say “body” and “blood” in the context of first-century Judaism, is to say “self,” and thus Jesus was inviting his disciples to feed on him and thereby to draw his life into theirs, conforming themselves to him in the most intimate and complete way possible. We must never keep the account of the fall far from our minds when we consider these events. If our trouble began with a bad meal (seizing at godliness on our own terms), then our salvation commences with a rightly structured meal (God offering us his life as a free gift). What was foreshadowed when Mary laid the Christ child in the manger came, at this meal, to full expression.

This entire story — creation, the fall, the formation of Israel, the Passover to freedom, the vision of Isaiah’s holy mountain, the gracious table fellowship of Jesus, the Last Supper, the heavenly banquet — is made present to us at the Mass. The Eucharistic liturgy of the Church sums up and re-expresses the history of salvation, culminating in the meal by which Jesus feeds us with his very self.



3. Read Matthew 9:9-13 (the conversion of Matthew) and CCC 1348. What is the first thing Jesus does before Matthew commences his vocation as Jesus' disciple? What does Bishop Barron suggest as the reason?

4. Read Matthew 14:13-21. This miracle is a wonderful depiction of the "Loop of Grace," which is presented by Bishop Barron as the beautiful way in which our ultimate, thankful sacrifice leads to God's overflowing grace. How is this exemplified in the Mass? How does Bishop Barron say Adam and Eve interrupted the "Loop of Grace"? How does sin perpetuate these interruptions?

5. What, according to Bishop Barron, is the significance of the baby Jesus being placed in the manger? How does this relate to the Last Supper and to the Eucharist that we receive during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass?

[1] Barron, Robert. *Eucharist* (2007, Orbis Books, NY), pg. 28.

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- 1. Read CCC 1391-1397. What specific graces does Holy Communion confer on those who receive it?**

Answer: The Eucharist allows us to be united with Christ in the most physical way possible, by consuming his Body and Blood. This reception, as Christ himself points out, confers life and resurrection on the faithful. In addition, Holy Communion nourishes our spiritual life and gives us the grace to live out our baptismal calling. It separates us from sin, cleansing us from past venial sins and giving us the grace to avoid future sins. It strengthens our charity and gives us a greater propensity for love — the Christ-like love that enables us to die to self and live in humble service to God and to others, especially the poor among us. It unites us to one another as fellow participants in the Body of Christ at large. Finally, it gives us our mission as we exit the church.

- 2. Read Isaiah 2:1-5, depicting God’s holy mountain. What happens on God’s holy mountain that also happens in the Mass?**

Answer: Similar to the depiction of the gathering on God’s holy mountain, we, as faithful people, gather from all nations and all times to come and listen to the instruction of the Lord, learning to walk in his paths during the Liturgy of the Word at Mass. This gathering effects a peaceful relationship between all of God’s people, uniting us under his jurisdiction and sending us forth in his light. The Mass is a place of non-violence, where we all realize our common rooted-ness in God, and we find peace. Then, as Bishop Barron points out, God lays out a rich feast in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, which is a recovery of the lost Garden of Eden, a restoring of what God intends for humanity.

- 3. Read Matthew 9:9-13 (the conversion of Matthew) and CCC 1348. What is the first thing Jesus does before Matthew commences his vocation as Jesus’ disciple? What does Bishop Barron suggest as the reason?**

Answer: Jesus desires to share a meal with Matthew before giving him his vocational mission. As Bishop Barron points out, “Jesus wants to commune with him in friendship,” similar to the way in which “Adam once communed with Yahweh in easy fellowship.” To this banquet came all of Matthew’s tax collector friends, demonstrating how Jesus calls to himself all of the lost, the sinners, the marginalized, etc. Jesus first unites them with a sacred meal and then he gives them their mission.

4. **Read Matthew 14:13-21. This miracle is a wonderful depiction of the “Loop of Grace,” which is presented by Bishop Barron as the beautiful way in which our ultimate, thankful sacrifice leads to God’s overflowing grace. How is this exemplified in the Mass? How does Bishop Barron say Adam and Eve interrupted the “Loop of Grace”? How does sin perpetuate these interruptions?**

Answer: As Bishop Barron points out, we offer the bread and wine to Christ through the priest in the Mass, a symbol of the fruits of our labor — our “best” to Him. He then accepts our offering and transforms it through the consecration, giving it back to us as the Body and Blood of Christ, multiplied to feed the entire Eucharistic assembly. Our humble gift is accepted and returned to us, transformed to become what we never would have expected — namely, an offering of simple bread and wine transformed into the grace necessary for salvation. Adam and Eve interrupted this loop by their original sin, grasping at their idea of God’s provision rather than trusting that their participation would be met by God’s all-knowing gift. In attempting to decide for themselves what should be given to them, they made themselves into gods. We, too, make this same decision every time we sin, interrupting the bestowal of the beautiful, whole, all — encompassing gift of participation in the divine life that God desires to give us.

5. **What, according to Bishop Barron, is the significance of the baby Jesus being placed in the manger? How does this relate to the Last Supper and to the Eucharist that we receive during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass?**

Answer: As the manger holds the nourishment for the animals, so Jesus in the manger becomes food for the world, a foreshadowing of his sacrificial gift to all of humanity in the Eucharist. He desires for the faithful to partake of his Divinity in a physical way, breaking the bread that becomes his Body and pouring the cup that becomes his Blood and inviting us to approach the symbolic manger of the Eucharist to be transformed.

Catechism of the Catholic Church

1391 Holy Communion augments our union with Christ. the principal fruit of receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion is an intimate union with Christ Jesus. Indeed, the Lord said: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him." Life in Christ has its foundation in the Eucharistic banquet: "As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me."

On the feasts of the Lord, when the faithful receive the Body of the Son, they proclaim to one another the Good News that the first fruits of life have been given, as when the angel said to Mary Magdalene, "Christ is risen!" Now too are life and resurrection conferred on whoever receives Christ.

1392 What material food produces in our bodily life, Holy Communion wonderfully achieves in our spiritual life. Communion with the flesh of the risen Christ, a flesh "given life and giving life through the Holy Spirit," preserves, increases, and renews the life of grace received at Baptism. This growth in Christian life needs the nourishment of Eucharistic Communion, the bread for our pilgrimage until the moment of death, when it will be given to us as viaticum.

1393 Holy Communion separates us from sin. the body of Christ we receive in Holy Communion is "given up for us," and the blood we drink "shed for the many for the forgiveness of sins." For this reason the Eucharist cannot unite us to Christ without at the same time cleansing us from past sins and preserving us from future sins:

For as often as we eat this bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the death of the Lord. If we proclaim the Lord's death, we proclaim the forgiveness of sins. If, as often as his blood is poured out, it is poured for the forgiveness of sins, I should always receive it, so that it may always forgive my sins. Because I always sin, I should always have a remedy.

1394 As bodily nourishment restores lost strength, so the Eucharist strengthens our charity, which tends to be weakened in daily life; and this living charity wipes away venial sins. By giving himself to us Christ revives our love and enables us to break our disordered attachments to creatures and root ourselves in him:

Since Christ died for us out of love, when we celebrate the memorial of his death at the moment of sacrifice we ask that love may be granted to us by the coming of the Holy Spirit. We humbly pray that in the strength of this love by

which Christ willed to die for us, we, by receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, may be able to consider the world as crucified for us, and to be ourselves as crucified to the world.... Having received the gift of love, let us die to sin and live for God.

1395 By the same charity that it enkindles in us, the Eucharist preserves us from future mortal sins. the more we share the life of Christ and progress in his friendship, the more difficult it is to break away from him by mortal sin. the Eucharist is not ordered to the forgiveness of mortal sins - that is proper to the sacrament of Reconciliation. the Eucharist is properly the sacrament of those who are in full communion with the Church.

1396 The unity of the Mystical Body: the Eucharist makes the Church. Those who receive the Eucharist are united more closely to Christ. Through it Christ unites them to all the faithful in one body - the Church. Communion renews, strengthens, and deepens this incorporation into the Church, already achieved by Baptism. In Baptism we have been called to form but one body. The Eucharist fulfills this call: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? the bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread:"²

If you are the body and members of Christ, then it is your sacrament that is placed on the table of the Lord; it is your sacrament that you receive. To that which you are you respond "Amen" ("yes, it is true!") and by responding to it you assent to it. For you hear the words, "the Body of Christ" and respond "Amen." Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true.

1397 The Eucharist commits us to the poor. To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest, his brethren:

You have tasted the Blood of the Lord, yet you do not recognize your brother,.... You dishonor this table when you do not judge worthy of sharing your food someone judged worthy to take part in this meal.... God freed you from all your sins and invited you here, but you have not become more merciful.

1348 All gather together. Christians come together in one place for the Eucharistic assembly. At its head is Christ himself, the principal agent of the Eucharist. He is high priest of the New Covenant; it is he himself who presides invisibly over every Eucharistic celebration. It is in representing him that the bishop or priest acting in

the person of Christ the head (in persona Christi capitis) presides over the assembly, speaks after the readings, receives the offerings, and says the Eucharistic Prayer. All have their own active parts to play in the celebration, each in his own way: readers, those who bring up the offerings, those who give communion, and the whole people whose "Amen" manifests their participation.

Isaiah 2: 1 - 5

1 This is what Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. Zion, the Royal City of God

2 In days to come, the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills. All nations shall stream toward it.

3 Many peoples shall come and say: "Come, let us go up to the LORD's mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths." For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

4 He shall judge between the nations, and set terms for many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again.

5 House of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

Matthew 9: 9 – 13

9 As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

10 While he was at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat with Jesus and his disciples.

11 The Pharisees saw this and said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

12 He heard this and said, "Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do.

13 Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' I did not come to call the righteous but sinners."

Matthew 14: 13 - 21

13 When Jesus heard of it, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. The crowds heard of this and followed him on foot from their towns.

14 When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, and he cured their sick.

15 When it was evening, the disciples approached him and said, "This is a deserted place and it is already late; dismiss the crowds so that they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves."

16 [Jesus] said to them, "There is no need for them to go away; give them some food yourselves."

17 But they said to him, "Five loaves and two fish are all we have here."

18 Then he said, "Bring them here to me,"

19 and he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds.

20 They all ate and were satisfied, and they picked up the fragments left over - twelve wicker baskets full.

21 Those who ate were about five thousand men, not counting women and children.