

Celebration

Another way of putting what Larry has said so typically caustically, is that we no longer enjoy one another, and so we have to try to enjoy *ourselves*. There is a sad, almost unavoidable narcissism even in things we do together, which is often so obviously a desperate attempt to *use* others for pleasures of various kinds. This is not social enjoyment, this is masturbation in various guises. But I'm not pointing fingers at anyone, because all of us are almost forced to it – imprisoned in ourselves, involuntarily solitary. Humans aren't made to live like this, and so we have the wildest spiritual thirst. We call this thirst depression, anxiety, and loneliness. And we treat it with commodities: drugs, alcohol, sex, entertainment, pharmaceuticals, porn, screens, gadgets, and of course distraction, distraction, distraction.

If we want to avoid this, we have got to recover the ability to enjoy one another. We have got to find joy, that is, satisfaction of our deepest, but also our mundane, desires, in common, daily, regular, *celebration*. While the Catholic Worker has always rightly kept a critical perspective on the times, its attitude has nothing of gloom and doom about it. In the light of Christ, rather, we dare to indulge in the most radical hope; a practical, tangible, on-the-ground hope in the real goodness of creation and of every human being. And he who hopes, says former Pope Benedict, lives differently. So the solution to our morbid, strung out, pleasure addicted world is not some sort of prudish self-denial, but the recovery of small groups of friendship, able to savor, taste, and delight in the present, in each others' company, and in the beautiful gift that we all happen to be here together now. And this is just what the Church has always given us. For at the very heart of Catholicism lies the feast.

I mean, of course, the Eucharist. Like all feasts, it brings people together, it unites and binds. *Unifying*, in the sense of *socially binding*, is one of the Eucharist's primary tasks. Unity is one of the gifts the Church receives *through* the Mass. Or better: providing unity to a fragmented world is one of the reasons God made the Church, and the Eucharist is his instrument. So, it's true that the world is perhaps more fragmented than ever. But hey, this is nothing new for the Church, it's just the same job it's always had, in different circumstances. It is still taking fragmented, isolated, lonely humanity and binding it up into vibrant community.

If you read Scripture with an eye to this, especially the Gospel of John and the Letters of St Paul, you'll be impressed with just how much *unity* is mentioned. It's a measure of our deep *disunity* that we usually think this means something purely spiritual. Unfortunately, here as elsewhere, when we say "spiritual" we usually mean "not real". But you can't read the New Testament without finding that the oneness called for is exactly that kind of concrete social oneness we have lost. The Church is made up of these local groups, these social bonds, without which it simply doesn't exist.

I spoke above about "projects" – shared tasks of communities – that create bonds, form character, and create independent groups. The Church's main project is the Eucharist. The Catechism says not only that the "Church makes the Eucharist" but also that the "Eucharist makes the Church." So, in the first instance, and in the most basic way, we cannot get the body of Christ without each other's prayers in the liturgy. If that body quite literally is our salvation, and we can't get it without each other, the Eucharist is just the most important instance of a truth that stands at every level of our Faith: we can't be saved without each other. The highest good is a common good.

What this means is that Christianity is a practice of the common good all the way down. It starts at the top, and the logic of the Mass is meant to be the logic of our lives – to slowly work its way through our lives and eventually take it over. The commitments that we make with our bodies at Mass, the habits we form there, if they are really habits, can never simply get turned off when Mass is over. That’s the thing about habits, and that’s the thing about the Eucharist. While we are doing it we are made different people, and that means we live differently in the detail of our days. And in our age that is going to mean living differently by living *together*. There are a million ways this is meant to take place, but perhaps the first of them is the feast.

In the first centuries it was the custom, after the Eucharist, to hold a meal – they called it the Agape, or Love Feast. This was the first place the Mass invaded their lives. Mass is a feast where everyone – high and low, rich and poor, sinner and saints, doctor and dropout, are equally included, equally *undeservedly*, in the common good of salvation. Unity is there enacted unlike any known to the world. And pagan critics proved this by remarking on it: the respectable, noble, educated Christians worship with the stupid and the poor! This is because, of course, at Mass *all* become the one body and blood of Christ, so that St Augustine could say that “that sacrifice” of the Mass “you are.” It is a liturgical feast wherein food, drink and praise have the function of uniting what was separate. The consecrated bread and wine is itself called “the Eucharist” - The-Thanksgiving-Food – and again Augustine was to point out that like each grain of wheat or grape was collected together into bread and wine, so are we united into one.

In the Agape, then, the facts of the Eucharist became the facts of everyday life, and the most fundamental tasks of life began to become Christian bonds. Food was procured, prepared, and shared. The rich provided for the poor, including, often, the space for both the worship and the feast. People gave what they didn’t need so that all could have what they did need. The problems of the day were discussed in light of the ritual they had just performed, the Faith they had just professed, and the solemn vows they had just recalled. They had, in short, as Scripture says, “all things in common”, including all kinds of people in common.

And so today the most important task of Catholics, after the Mass, is just what the early Christians thought it was – feasting together: simply having some food, some drink, some conversation, without phones or screen, with a regular group of friends, on a regular basis. It shouldn’t be a huge, gourmet production. Peter Maurin preferred a shared pot of soup and the kitchen table. Such regular meals will be an essential building block for building community out of the fragments of our world.

But before we build anything, we cannot lose the nature of this feast as simply a *celebration*. Celebrations aren’t useful or functional. This feast is an end in itself. And a feast is about enjoying one another, in the flesh, face to face, in the present moment. This is important to get straight, because in the first instance, the feast is *not* about community building. It *is* the community. Ironically, it *will* create social bonds, as long as we don’t make it about that. You don’t have to get anything *done* at the feast, and that is why you can *enjoy* it. Like the Eucharist, it is what all our other efforts are *for*; it’s the climax of life. Bask in it. Soak up the good things about it. It’s meant to be a foretaste of heaven itself.

This is so important because savoring being together is itself an act of resistance to some of our worst ills. I have already hinted that we tend to try to make absolutely everything, including other people, *useful* for some goal or another. But when this happens, when we are

always looking to the next step, we never see what's in front of us. We never enjoy it. All we enjoy is "getting stuff done" – crossing one more thing off our list. We do this, I suspect, because we are control freaks, always afraid that we must *make* every inch of our lives come out right, by constantly steering everything to the *next* thing – what we want it to be. And so we miss the flow of gifts right into our laps.

But in the Mass, Christians have always celebrated the very opposite: the earth is God's good creation, and every human being is a little image of Christ himself. We are meant to be in awe of this, to be perpetually thankful for it, and to gaze in wonder at all that is, but especially the gift of each other. So when we come to feast together, it is precisely as an act of conscious appreciation of the odd fact that God has put us here together *now*, for each other. In an ever-distracted world, in being with others we can offer our *attention* precisely to that fact – to our own unique *hereness* and *nowness*, which can only be received as a gift. Once we try to manipulate it and capture it, it slips through our fingers. But because it's good and because it's God's, we don't have to be anxious to control it. We can just receive our neighbors as a gift, without fear.

Once we start to indulge in these small pleasures of friendship, simply for themselves, we may note that these celebrations contrast strongly with the rather austere *disciplines* of the World. Catholics are sometimes (mis)known for being tight wads who don't know how to have a good time, but in fact I think society today obliges us to stricter observances than the most rigid monastery ever did. Psychologists tell us beforehand what we can *expect* from people, and so we force them into prejudiced molds. Doctors tell us how it is good for our bodies to feel, and then we feel them in *that* way. Lawyers tell us what we have a right to demand from people, and what the appropriate boundaries are, and then we go about keeping them. Economists tell us what charity is, who can receive it, and under what conditions, so as not to create "dependence". Schools tell us that all of life is education, that everything is for the good of the future, and that if we let up for an instant, our poverty will be our own fault. This cast of characters (and I could add plenty more) is the police force of our isolated World. And it is relentless in its insistence that we submit to them. It defines the "good person" as those who do. So, in spite of the fact that the World licenses just about any bodily pleasure, it rigidly opposes exactly the kinds of celebration the Catholic Worker has always tried to foster. And so we must insist on receiving the one who is seated right next to me, here and now, not for any plan, not for what she must be, not because she is safe, but because she is good. This is what Peter called *personalism*.

Finally, celebration, it seems to me, is also an antidote to what you might call the deadly *seriousness* that grips our lives. Traditional Catholic morality has always taken its own discipline with a healthy sense of humor, knowing that we are all sinners who, in spite our best efforts, will only ever be able to throw ourselves on God's mercy. But, in our day, the World doesn't appear to be able to laugh much at all. This surely has a variety of causes, probably not a little to do with the underlying presumption that this life is all there is, and so we had better get it right, and fast. It is a mad rush for pleasure, achievement, consumption, and experiences, because in the end it is tragic. Death is simply the end, so life is a war where we have to hurry up and get all we can. And the inevitable seriousness of such a world is killing our souls. We're not made for this. So Catholics have once again got to be people who plan light-hearted celebrations of all kinds at all possible opportunities. We will seem to this World a people of a crazy hope, and that is exactly

what we should be – romantics who foolishly believe the world is not in our hands, that all will, and indeed has, turned out right; that even in the midst of suffering that good wins, not just at the end, but every day; that if Christ is for us, nothing can really be against us; that if we cast ourselves on him, he will not falter, and we will not fall; that the resurrection of Christ was precisely for us, to make us fearless as it did the Apostles. In this world we can *laugh*, knowing that this visible scene, and all its problems, have been dealt with in the Passion of Christ. We laugh, not at pain, but from the joy that comes from that victory. We laugh trusting that God's good world doesn't require constant management, manipulation, or social engineering.

But first we have to get started. And the very first step, for many of us, is simply to allow ourselves, over and over again, to have fun with each other. Yes, I am prescribing fun. It's baby steps for all of us, and we have to walk before we can run. Fun may lead to ceasing to be suspicious of one another, to ceasing to see each other primarily as threats, to ceasing to think that the best we can do is not inconvenience each other. Fun may lead to a discovery of shared judgements, of a growing refusal to unfriend or cancel one another. It may even lead to relationships beyond Facebook. Fun may lead to friendships. And it is only in these real friendships that we can rediscover what you might call conviviality: the art of living together.

Thankfully, making new friends does not mean we have to become best friends with, or even like, everybody we eat with. Participation does not depend on how we feel. This is important, because in our speed-dating and friend-dating culture, we are used to basing relationships on little more than sentimentality: whether we "get along", or have some sort of intangible "connection". But Catholic feasting is based on the logic of the Eucharist, where we know ahead of time that we *don't* get along. That is part of the point. We educated rich white kids don't have much immediately in common with my poor black neighbors. It's not good chemistry right off the bat. This, again, is part of the point. It's not about our personal compatibility, but our commitment to each other in light of Christ's commitment to us. These friendships are not based on what we know we have in common, but about finding the common that still lies hidden.

Of course, if these are Catholics friendships, we may find that we have much in common. The obvious place that conviviality may begin is in conversation about the Faith itself. But we also may find that this only gets us so far. When we are first getting to know people, stating some standard agreements about our postures in life, maybe some political talk, and maybe even some shared analysis of our culture, can be important to lay a foundation. But it can also come to an odd end, after we have agreed that we agree. I mean, if we agree, so what? Most of the time, it means we then go back to our lives, take the Isolated World as unfortunate but the only one that is possible, say thanks for the soup, and then live by the same logic as everyone else. We do this because we Catholics are just as divided, unimaginative, and scared as everybody else. We may be of one mind, but in real life we live in the same push-button world as the rest.

And so part of the feast, perhaps not right away but over time, becomes a discussion about the way we live together. We start becoming interested in the common good. And the good news is, given what we have said above, even this *discussion* of the common good, including its fumbling beginnings and all of the intricate complexity and negotiation and awkwardness of social gatherings, is itself part of the common good. Feasting itself is an act of resistance to the World. And it is so because having any common good is a threat to the World, because it thrives on turning all goods into nothing more than our private preferences.

No less for Catholics, then, even if we agree on each and every point of faith and morals, we will still have to venture into the unknown of exploring the way that the Church informs the microscopic fabrics of our daily lives. Not just, what do we believe about religion, and what do we do in the privacy of our bedroom, and how do we vote, but, what is the good life? If we could build it from the ground up, what would it look like? What can we do now, together, to make it more like that? When we have come to this point, we have come to what Peter called “clarification of thought.” And then we will have to resist, once again, our usual habit of heading back home to our solitary lives, for fear of disagreeing, or being an inconvenience to one another.