

## Chapter xxvi: *Bread awaits uses*

**I**N OUR LONG MEDITATION on the mysteries and joys of the Mass, we have reached the Offertory: the point where bread and wine are placed on the altar and offered to God, while splendid music is also offered to Him, and the celebrant prays elaborately over the ‘elements.’

We began describing this three-fold process last week by describing the music and by reflecting on the strange holiness of common things, particularly bread and wine.

This week we attend – at length, as it deserves – to the offering of bread. We concern ourselves with the literal material of bread. For what the theologians call the ‘[matter](#)’ of the Blessèd Sacrament is absolutely material. The ‘elements’ of bread and wine are physical things, and even in a sense banal physical things. They have been waiting all this time, totally ignored, off to the right of the altar, on the liturgical equivalent of a sideboard: the [credence table](#). On the credence, before Mass began, our Altar Guild carefully laid out a large number of objects in perfect order, under a big heavy silk veil which matches in splendour and colour the vestments of the day. As the choir sings the Offertory Proper, the veil is whipped aside and folded (we’ll see more of that veil shortly, being used very strangely). And underneath it lies –

Underneath it lies bread and wine and water, in vessels of precious metal. That is our freeze-frame: for the rest of this week’s notes our eye is simply going to move over this still-life of bread and wine and water, honing in on bread –

Which must strike a cynic as pedantic, and must make a bluff and straightforward reader impatient. Bread and wine, yes, we are familiar with these things; what more is there to say about them? They are now transported ten feet or so, from credence to altar. Good. On with the rite!

But Christianity, being the religion of the Incarnation, is also the religion of incongruity. Infinitely large matters turn on very small ones. Everyday matters work the motion of God in the world. If (as the Catholic Faith declares) the Uncreated, the source of all being, the architect of each atom, Who holds the universe in His hand like a hazelnut, deigned to come

down and be a provincial carpenter; if He does not withdraw His presence from our tiny world, but keeps giving us His human and divine Body under cover of bread and of wine; well, then, trifling things, wine and bread for instance, might indeed demand a great deal of attention. Love forces us to gaze intently on these prosaic substances, since they are to be the matter of our endless life. Bread, yes, we know it well –

*panem de caelo sed Pater meus dat vobis panem de caelo verum  
panis enim Dei est qui descendit de caelo  
et dat vitam mundo*

*dixerunt ergo ad eum Domine semper da nobis panem hunc*

*but My Father giveth you the true bread from heaven.  
For the bread of God is He which cometh down from heaven,  
and giveth life unto the world.*

*Then said they unto him, Lord, evermore give us this bread.*<sup>1</sup>

Or to put it another way: since such trouble is taken every Sunday in the sacristy about preparing the Feast; and since such controversy has raged throughout Christian history (and still, in a sense, rages) over whether the bread should contain yeast, and whether the wine should be mingled with water; it seems only decent that you should have the chance of exploring exactly what it is you are, in terms of appearance, to consume in a few minutes. Bread, wine: what, materially speaking, are they?

### **The work of human hands.**

**Y**OU MAY REMEMBER from many chapters ago Rose, the character in Alice Thomas Ellis' novel who makes sardonic asides on the Liturgical Movement's reforms. She complains that in the modernised Mass

they do a sort of advertiser's announcement. You think for a moment they're telling you God's blood is untouched by human hand, a sort of guarantee of wholesomeness – though I'd always been led to believe it was feet. But they're actually explaining it is *made* by human hands. They're very honest, you see. They don't want to feel they're putting anything over on anybody. I think it's meant for the enlightenment of the credulous, who previously thought it came straight from Heaven in vast ethereal tankers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John vi<sup>32b-34</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> *The Sin-Eater*, p. 96.

Rose is jeering at one of the weirdest innovations and lapses of taste in the modernised rites. At the Offertory all the ancient priestly prayers over the gifts are thrown away. Instead, the priest lifts up the paten, and is instructed to blare out:

*Blessed are You, God . . . .*  
*Through Your goodness we have these gifts to offer,*  
*fruit of the earth and work of human hands . . . .*

Then, with a crushing poverty of imagination (which makes these two prayers hard to remember – always a sign of bad prose), the poor celebrant is told to lift up the chalice and clamour:

*Blessed are You, God . . . .*  
*Through Your goodness we have these gifts to offer,*  
*fruit of the vine and work of human hands . . . .*

What is the point of these thunderously flat repetitions? What can they possibly mean?

I think the poor liturgical reformers were trying to remind us of the nature of the elements. Bread is complicated stuff. It is not natural. We invented it. In a parallel universe I suppose Christ could have chosen any victuals for His Eucharistic feast: apples and water, say, or fish and milk. But in fact He choose bread, and wine: the most artificial of foods, the most man-made, the most human. Those wafers do not just happen, they must be ploughed, sown, reaped, threshed, milled, baked, stamped and boxed. The wine does not just appear, it must be ploughed, sown, pruned, plucked, skinned, pressed, fermented, fortified, strained, aged and bottled. These gifts don't just appear on the altar; they are made by human hands, even by the social economy. And perhaps, mystically speaking, this is part of the consistent pattern of Christianity. The divine will is that we should grow up, in ways so radical they can sometimes seem, as we grow, to be an abandonment of God. But the trend is still spirited coöperation between God's creativity and ours, and not passivity. We bring the highest, most artificial products of humanity to the altar for human creativity to be made divine. That is one way of understanding the elements of bread and wine .... But I am only guessing what the modernist Offertory prayers are about.

In any case, such is the squeamishness of the modernised Christian that all this talk of human hands must really be distressing for some of our befuddled fellow believers. Here is an real advertisement, downloaded this week from the Internet:

We are pleased to offer by far the best altar bread. All of our breads have a carefully molded sealed edge which prevent crumbs. They are baked of only pure wheat flour and water and are made strictly without additives. The breads are produced in the United States by the highly respected Cavanagh Company in their exceptionally clean and modern automated facility. The breads are sealed minutes after baking and are untouched by human hands. The packaging is superior to all other forms and many options are available to meet your individual requirements.<sup>3</sup>

The head swims. Alice Thomas Ellis' satire cannot keep up with the ramaging idiocy of the contemporary Church. There are living Christians, there are actual priests, attracted by this nightmare vision of gleaming rushing aseptic wafers into plastic bags, untouched by human – most importantly of all, untouched by *foreign* human fingers!

In the Age of Faith, when humanity's head was clearer, the altar breads were indeed the work of human hands (and the Offertory rite rather assumed that the worshippers would realise this, and not need a little notice to that effect). The hands were often the hands of abbots and dukes, who vied to make what would become the world's ransom. Even in the ancient world, we hear of a great lady named Candida, wife to one of the Emperor Valerian's generals, who "laboured all night kneading and moulding with her own hands the loaf of the oblation". At Christianity's noon, in the Middle Ages,

religious are recommended to devote themselves to meditation while kneading the sacrificial loaf. Queen Radegunde [of France] is mentioned for the reverence with which she attended to the preparation of the hosts intended to be consumed in her monastery of Poitiers and in many surrounding churches. Theodulph, Bishop of Orleans, commanded his priests either to make the altar-breads themselves or to have the young clerics do so in their presence. . . . In monasteries hosts were made principally during the weeks preceding the feasts of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, and the process assumed a very solemn character. At Cluny three priests or three deacons fasting and having recited the Office of Lauds, the seven penitential psalms, and the litanies, took one or two lay brothers as their assistants. Novices had picked, sorted, and ground the grains of wheat, and the flour thus obtained was placed on a rimmed table. It was then mixed with cold water, and a lay

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.catholicsupply.com/churchs/wine.html>

brother, whose hands were gloved, put this preparation in the iron used for making hosts and baked it at a large fire of vine branches. Two other operators took the hosts as they were baked, cut, and pared them, and, if necessary, rejected those that were either soiled or cracked. In the Abbey of Saint-Denys those who made the altar-breads were fasting. They took some of the best wheat, selected grain by grain, washed it, and turned it into a sack to be taken to the mill, the millstones being washed for the occasion. A religious then donned an alb and ground the wheat himself while two priests and two deacons, vested in albs and amices, kneaded the dough in cold water and baked the hosts. . . . Some monasteries cultivated the Eucharistic wheat in a special field which they called the field of the “Corpus Domini”.<sup>4</sup>

Such was the merry, loving and careful making of Hosts in the glory days of the Church.

### **The Offering of bread: some regulations.**

**W**HAT WERE THEY MAKING? The Church’s law is explicit. For *valid* consecration the hosts must be: made of flour, predominantly wheaten flour; mixed with pure natural water (*distilled* water would perhaps invalidate Mass!); baked in an oven, or between two heated iron moulds. The breads must not be rotten, and they should not really be more than a few weeks old, or they’ll be stale.<sup>5</sup>

These are the basic rules. But the Western Church goes further: we have, from at least the high Middle Ages, been committed to using, not ordinary leavened bread, but unleavened bread, flat bread: wafers, then, not the usual airy bread raised with yeast which we normally eat.

The controversy is not directly a doctrinal matter. The Eastern Church consistently uses leavened bread, although it is specially baked, stamped with lettering, cut into cubes, and very elaborately prepared at their Offertory (which they perform at the very beginning of their liturgy, before the Synaxis: oddly, from our point of view). And the Biblical evidence could, and can, be read either way. Christ sometimes uses yeast as metaphor for good things – *The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven*<sup>6</sup> – and sometimes as a metaphor for bad things – *Beware ye of the leaven of the*

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<sup>4</sup> Leclercq on the ‘HOST’ in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, always a fustian delight ([www.newadvent.org](http://www.newadvent.org)).

<sup>5</sup> *Missale Romanorum*, ‘De Defectibus’, III, 1,2; *Rituale Romanorum*, tit. iv, cap. i, n. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew xii<sup>33</sup>.

*Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.*<sup>7</sup> Again, the Last Supper occurred during the feast of the Passover, and of unleavened bread: and the chief priests and the scribes sought how they might take him by craft, and put him to death.<sup>8</sup> It was one of the distinctive marks of the season of the Passover that all leaven was forbidden. Christ therefore certainly celebrated that first Mass in the Upper Room with unleavened bread, something rather like *pitta* bread nowadays. But one could argue, and Easterners have argued, that it is 'Judaising' and regressive to take Moses' ritual rules about yeast so seriously under the new dispensation of Christian freedom: a strong argument.

No, crumbs were initially the issue. The West came to dislike ordinary, raised bread because it's difficult not to end up with crumbs going everywhere. If we believe that Christ is physically present in the Eucharist, we naturally recoil from the possibility of shaking even tiny fragments of the Inexpressible Gift all over the floor. Therefore in the Latin tradition we use not ordinary bread but *bread*s: snappable wafers with (as that gruesome ad puts it) *a carefully molded sealed edge which prevent crumbs*.

### **Wafers.**

**T**HE RECIPE FOR SACRAMENTAL WAFERS is therefore very simple. Flour is mixed with a little 'natural' water and mixed to a paste: this paste is spread on a hot round plate, and then squeezed by another hot round plate – a bit like a waffle-maker. A round wafer emerges (round because circles are perfect shapes), two or three inches wide and very thin.

This stamping process allows images to be imposed on the wafers. A damaged sixth or seventh century mould found at Carthage, made before North Africa was lost to Islam, stamped wafers with the word: HIC EST FLOS CAMPI ET LILIUM . . . (HERE IS THE FLOWER OF THE FIELD AND THE LILY [of the valley]!) But the usual thing nowadays is a bas-relief of Christ crucified is impressed; sometimes the design is the monogram of the Holy Name, **IHS**, or an image of a Lamb with a book; or Christ's Sacred Heart.<sup>9</sup>

During Low Masses at this parish you can see such wafers consecrated, but at the High Mass on Sundays a particularly enormous wafer is used, without decorative stamp, because it is instead stamped with grooves

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<sup>7</sup> Luke xii<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Mark xiv<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Cong. Sac. Rit., 6 April, 1834; Ephem. Lit., XIII, 1899, pp. 686, 266.

into 24 little segments. After consecration the celebrant reverently breaks It up.

As we'll see in a few chapters, this breaking of the Body is a significant and necessary moment in the Canon of the Mass. But since no wafer can be decently broken up to feed a large congregation, the priest generally also consecrates, not just the one big wafer, but a multiplicity of little hosts, two inches or so in diameter, the size of a large coin.

Thus at most Masses there are two quite distinct sort of wafers in use. On a [paten](#), or flat dish, lies a single biggish or very big wafer for the priest to consecrate and elevate so we can adore the Body of our Saviour: the [Host](#) (we'll come to this great word in a minute). And in a [ciborium](#), or covered goblet, are a number of smaller wafers for other communicants, called, oddly, [particles](#), whether we mean the broken segments or the perfect small circles.

### **Wafer-bread and faith.**

**I**T SOUNDS LIKE a quibble over house-keeping arrangements to worry whether a loaf or a wafer be used in Mass. But the question, although of doctrinal in itself, does impede on faith.

The Greek Church, which no one has ever accused of irreverence, uses what looks like normal bread. But for us Westerners, the use of distinctive wafer-breads, whatever its practical origins, now clearly savours of the doctrine of Real Presence. To make the bread at Mass so unusual, and to protect so carefully against crumbs, are customs that imply the idea that Christ is physically present in the Host; and that idea is at the heart of Catholicism.

Contrariwise, those in revolt against the Catholic Faith dislike wafers, preferring common loaves as a way of belittling the sacrament. Ordinary bread was, alas, ordered by a rubric in the Book of Common Prayer in these miserable words:

*to take away all occasion of dissension, and superstition, which any person hath or might have concerning the Bread and Wine, it shall suffice that the Bread be such as is usual to be eaten; but the best and purest Wheat Bread that conveniently may be gotten.*

This rubric is hypocritical: it deliberately states the opposite of truth. The use of a common loaf at Mass is necessarily an occasion *of* dissension. It is the *denial* of Christ's physical presence that is superstitious. For if the Mass is only a symbolic acting out of His Death, then it is a pretentious sham; and

what good can it do us? The idea that we can be unified with God and rendered immortal merely by watching some quaint theatrical performance is grotesque and credulous. No: Christ insisted *Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life*; and if our hope of life is in eating His flesh, nothing must even appear to compromise our understanding of the physicality of His presence in the bread. *Caro enim mea vere est cibus et sanguis meus vere est potus, My flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.*<sup>10</sup>

Alas, the low habit of using table bread at Mass (by no means always the *best and purest!*) persists among some Anglicans and Episcopalians. And certain ‘progressive’ Roman Catholics have recently taken it up, although such an abuse is happily still illegal under their canon law.<sup>11</sup> Their impulse is not necessarily heretical in itself – they can often be misled by a false folksiness, or by the oddly sullen modern attitude toward any sort of gorgeous ceremonial. But whatever the motive, the habitual use of common bread at the Mass is, in the West, always dangerous. By slighting the dignity of the sacrifice, it tends to corrupt faith in the Real Presence; and if that belief is gone, then Christianity dissolves away.

### **Devotion to the Host.**

**T**HE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, impoverished by the clumsy liturgical reforms of the 1960s and 1970s, has ended up with an impoverished Eucharistic devotion. We ought because a heady cult of the Bread of the Altar is a healthy part of any Christian’s devotion. We ought to be besotted with the sight of that blank sliver of baked paste. It ought to dance before our mind’s eye. Opposite, for instance, is a painting which serves as the ‘wallpaper’ on my laptop: Jan Davidsz de Heem’s still-life *Eucharist in a Fruit Wreath*.

The Blessèd Host! It has many names, because It has been so much loved (and note the noble old custom of capitalising the pronoun). Among us Westerners It is called a **Host**, a Latin word *Hostia*, meaning the sacrificial victim – *present your bodies a living sacrifice* to God, urges Paul, which the Vulgate translates *exhibeatis corpora vestra hostiam vivente*.<sup>12</sup> Christ is our

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<sup>10</sup> John vi<sup>54, 56</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> See the latest (1983) *Code of Canon Law*, 924.2, and 926: *In accord with the ancient tradition of the Latin Church, the priest is to use unleavened bread in the celebration of the Eucharist whenever he offers it.* There’s a good article about this abuse at [www.adoremus.org](http://www.adoremus.org): *Adoremus Bulletin*, VIII, 1 (March, 2002) at

<sup>12</sup> Romans xii<sup>1</sup>.



sacrificial Victim; the wafer is that Victim, as the sacrifice of the cross is offered again daily to God; and our bodies, in our feeble way, are the offering we make back to God. And in the Middle Ages, when men thought about these things more energetically than we do, there were many other names for the blessed flake of bread: *bucellæ*, *circuli*, *coronæ*, *crustulæ ferraceæ* – I’m listing all these nicknames and pet-names because there is beauty in the sound of such a catalogue – *denaria*, *fermentum*, *formataæ*, *formulaæ*, *panes altaris*, *eucharistici*, *divini*, *dominici*, *mysteriorum*, *nummularii*, *obiculares*, *reticularii*, *sancti*, *sanctorum*, *tessellati*, *vitæ*; *nummi*, *particulæ*, *placentæ*, *placentulæ obiculares*, *portiones*, *rotulæ*, *sensibilia* . . . . The Greeks call the Host – which in their rite is, as I say, a perfect cube of bread – simply *artos*, The Bread, but also, after Consecration, *margaritai*, pearls. The Nestorians, if you remember them, knead their wafers with oil and salt, and call them *xatha*, The First-Born, or *agnus*, Lamb; the Syrian Church call It *gamouro*, burning coals ....<sup>13</sup> Ah, the inexhaustible charm of the East!

Devotion to the Host produced in previous ages miracles of the Host. There is not need for us to be credulous about them; nor is there any need for us to despise such childrens’ stories. Of such is the kingdom of Heaven. They come in two sorts: the miraculous survival of wafers, which is what the Christian heart longs for in a world of destruction: such a miracle as this, which occurred at the Benedictine abbey at Faverney:

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<sup>13</sup> Leclercq again.



On the night of 23 May, 1608, while the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament was in progress, a fire consumed the tabernacle, the linens, and the entire altar; but the ostensorium [or monstrance] remained stationary, being suspended in the air without any support. This prodigy lasted for thirty-three hours, was well authenticated by thousands of persons, and was made the object of an investigation, the documents of which have been preserved . . . .<sup>14</sup>

The other sort of story tells of a certain celebration of Mass in which, suddenly, the fact of Christ's physical presence becomes for an instant visible. When Pope Gregory I was saying Mass one day toward the end of the sixth century, He saw Christ on the altar because Christ was on the altar. Why not? Over the page is Adriaen Isenbrant's painting *Mass of St Gregory*, which hangs in the Prado.<sup>15</sup>

Such apparitions are not arbitrary. Gregory was startled to see with (in some sense) his eyes what he had long seen with his mind: Christ in the breaking of the bread. The good monks of Faverney thought they saw the Host reigning over the normal rules of nature because they knew it was indeed beyond nature. And if the contemporary Church could grasp again what this Bread means, and see with her eyes as vividly as those folk saw with their inflamed senses – well, that would be a greater miracle still.

*Domine semper da nobis panem hunc :*

Lord, evermore give us this bread!<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Once more, Leclerq.

<sup>15</sup> [gallery.euroweb.hu](http://gallery.euroweb.hu); choose NO FRAMES, and enter MASS OF ST GREGORY into the box marked TITLE..

<sup>16</sup> John vi<sup>34</sup>.

