

Bread & Wine

There is another path that leads to God. Had not Christ's own words made it known to us so plainly, and the liturgy repeated them with so assured a confidence, we should not be bold enough to speak of it. Seeing God, loving God, by consciously turning toward him with our minds and wills, though a real union, is yet not a union of being with being. It is not only our minds and our wills that strive to possess God. As the psalm says, "My heart and my flesh thirst for the living God." Only then shall we be at rest when our whole being is joined to his. Not by any mingling or confusion of natures, for creature and creator are forever distinct, and to suppose otherwise would be as nonsensical as it is presumptuous. Nevertheless, besides the union of simple love and knowledge, there is another union, that of life and being.

We are compelled to desire this union and the Scripture and the Liturgy place upon our lips words that give profound expression to our longing. As the body desires food and drink, so does our life desire to be united with God. We hunger and thirst after God. It is not enough for us to know him and to love him. We would clasp him, draw him to ourselves, hold him fast, and, bold as it sounds, we would take him into ourselves as we do our food and drink, and thereby still and satisfy our hunger to the full.

The liturgy of Corpus Christi uses these words of Christ: "As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father, so he that eateth me, the same shall also live by me." Those are the words. For us to prefer such a claim would border on blasphemy. But since it is God that speaks, we assent and believe.

But let us not presume as if they lessened the boundary between creature and Creator. In deepest reverence, and yet without fear, let us acknowledge the longing which God himself has planted in us, and rejoice in this gift of his goodness. "My flesh," Christ says to us, "is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed...He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood abideth in me and I in him...As the Father hath given me to have life in myself, so he that eateth me, the same also shall live by me." To eat his flesh, to drink his blood, to absorb into ourselves the living God - it is beyond any wish we are capable of forming for ourselves, yet it satisfies to the full what we long for from the bottom of our souls.

Bread is food, a wholesome food. Under the form of bread God becomes for us even the food of life. "We break bread," writes Saint Ignatius of Antioch to the faithful at Ephesus, "we break bread, the food of immortality." By this food our being is so nourished with God himself that we exist in him and he in us.

Wine is drink, but more than drink, more than a liquid that merely quenches thirst. "Wine that maketh glad the heart of man" is the biblical expression. The purpose of wine is not only to quench thirst, but also to give pleasure and satisfaction and exhilaration. "My cup, how goodly it is, how plenteous!" Literally, how intoxicating, though not in the sense of drinking to excess. Wine possesses a sparkle, a perfume, a vigour, that expands and clears the imagination. Under the form of wine Christ gives us his divine blood. It is no plain and sober draught. It was bought at a great price, at a divinely excessive price. *Sanguis Christi, inebria me*, prays Saint Ignatius, that Knight of the Burning Heart. In one of the antiphons for the feast of Saint Agnes, the blood of Christ is called a mystery of ineffable beauty. "I have drawn milk and honey from his lips, and his blood hath given fair color to my cheeks."

For our sakes Christ became bread and wine, food and drink. We make bold to eat him and to drink him. This bread gives us substantial strength. This wine bestows courage, joy out of all earthly measure, sweetness, beauty, limitless enlargement and perception. It brings life in intoxicating excess, both to possess and to impart.

