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From Catherine to Katniss: Disordered Eating, Resistance, and the Eucharist

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In the late twentieth century, the public became aware of a strange psychological disorder. Suddenly it seemed that adolescent girls, many of them from successful, upper-middle-class families, were starving themselves. Anorexia nervosa was first identified as a distinct disorder by physicians in the late nineteenth century, but in the 1980s it suddenly seemed to be everywhere—in made-for-TV movies, in the tragedy of celebrities like Karen Carpenter, and in conversations among worried parents of teenagers. Why would a young woman with "everything going for her" refuse to eat? Why could they not see that they were stronger and more beautiful at a normal weight? How could anyone understand, in a land of such plenty, why someone would refuse to nourish themselves?

While the intervening decades have produced much more public health concern about child and adolescent obesity, it is clear that eating disorders in general (and anorexia nervosa in particular) have not disappeared. Indeed, although anorexia usually emerges in adolescence, mental health professionals increasingly treat patients who have suffered—intermittently or continuously—for decades.

> *In a culture of bread and circuses, when some are obsessed with food and bodies but seldom name God as the source of nourishment and growth, the Christian community has the opportunity to celebrate and proclaim Holy Communion —the "body of Christ"—in life-giving ways that resist the reduction of food and bodies to market consumption.*

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Some say they no longer see the disease as a behavioral disorder to be cured but instead a chronic condition to be managed. At the same time, restricted eating habits of various kinds have spread across the mainstream culture, bolstered by dual obsessions with health and appearance across gender and age.

Flash back a few centuries. In the time when the Black Death was ravaging Europe, a young woman named Catherine became renowned for her utter devotion to Christ. She resisted an arranged marriage to her sister's widower by going on a complete fast. She was known for going weeks at a time consuming only the host of Holy Communion. She devoted herself to care of the poor and advocating for reform in the church, and was sought out as an example of holiness. She corresponded with the pope and represented Florence in negotiations for peace.

Even a cursory reading of Catherine of Siena's early life provides the armchair psychologist with plenty of fodder to presume that she was what we call anorexic—using refusal of food to wield power in a world that did not easily grant power to women; starving herself to avoid becoming a sexual object of men's desires; and pouring the trauma of a family laden with grief into ritualized asceticism. Certainly her practices were detrimental to her physical health, as Catherine died at the age of 33. Her biographers and confessors, however, understood her condition as *anorexia mirabilis*, a miraculous lack of appetite. Though she herself did not describe it as a chosen practice, like other women ascetics of her time, it was understood as holy because it drew her close to the suffering of Christ.[1]

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What previous centuries considered a holy withdrawal from the desires of the world is now a reflection of widespread secular values. Historians might quibble with our attempts to place modern medical definitions on conditions that were understood in their times as spiritual practice, but it is also arguable that the rituals of the modern anorexic—or even of your average citizen with a weight problem—can reflect our culture's desperate need to find order and meaning in places we have previously stripped of spiritual meaning. Why is it that so many people try to "save" their bodies through highly structured rituals of diet and exercise? Why does North American culture seem to lurch from one restrictive diet fad to another? Why, when we seem so desperate for connection through every possible digital means, do we have so much trouble taking time to carry out the most basic social ritual of sharing a meal? While those who devote themselves to studying

[1]Catherine was not the only woman of her time to practice such asceticism—just the most famous. For a full treatment, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

modern eating disorders point to North American culture's "disordered" relationship with food, the connections to our theological understanding of eating are rarely addressed.

The most obvious key to a Christian reclaiming of a theology of eating is in Jesus' table practices, and specifically in the Lord's Supper. But even there, our practices give us pause. What does it mean that the meal that is at the heart of Christian practice today consists of "anorexic" portions of food? What might the sharing of a meal at the center of community practice say about our disordered relationships not only with food, but with human bodies and human power as well? This article will attempt to pull back a few of the layers that surround our meaning-making about food in general and Jesus' table in particular.

On Anorexia

Anorexia nervosa is one of several eating disorders identified in the diagnostic manual of psychiatric disorders. Although other eating disorders, such as compulsive eating, are more common, and although obesity has been identified as a far greater health crisis for the general public, anorexia stands out as a disorder with visibly shocking physical consequences. Its diagnostic hallmarks are

1. a refusal to maintain body weight at or above a minimally normal weight for age and height (e.g., weight loss leading to maintenance of body weight less than 85% of that expected; or failure to make expected weight gain during a period of growth, leading to body weight less than 85% of that expected)
2. an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, even though underweight
3. a disturbance in the way in which one's body weight or shape is experienced, undue influence of body shape on self-evaluation, or denial of the seriousness of the current low body weight
4. in post-menarcheal females, amenorrhea (i.e., the absence of at least three consecutive menstrual cycles).[2]

Anorexia is life-threatening; even patients who receive treatment and change behaviors can suffer from heart damage years later. Although standard treatment includes a combination of psychotherapy, behavior modification, and medication, anorexics often suffer relapses years or even decades after their initial treatment. But what is most shocking to the general public is the way in which the disease can transform an otherwise attractive, intelligent, privileged young person into a skeletal figure who still fears being fat. Far from being uninterested in food, anorexics often devote incredible energies to feeding others and organizing their own food lives. Often other

[2]Center for the Application of Substance Abuse Technologies, "Eating Disorder Diagnostic Criteria from DSM IV–TR, 307.1 Anorexia Nervosa," at http://casat.unr.edu/docs/eatingdisorders_criteria.pdf (accessed July 21, 2013).

social and recreational ties disintegrate as the anorexic becomes increasingly obsessed with food and exercise. For the observer, this obsession makes no sense, since few anorexics start out obese or socially disadvantaged in any way. Indeed, the most typical profile of an anorexic is a young woman who seems to come closest to the cultural feminine ideal. Anorexics are overwhelmingly young, white, educated, and economically advantaged.[3]

Anorexia, though characterized by visible physical consequences and observable behaviors, is nevertheless a multilayered disease that is usually accompanied by other conditions as well. Frequently anorexics also suffer from depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress. Studies have found that many are also survivors of sexual abuse and other forms of early trauma.[4]

Attention only to root causes, however, rarely results in cure. Eating disorders often begin with socially acceptable forms of diet restriction: counting calories, ritualized eating behaviors, and "splurging" followed by strenuous exercise. In the anorexic, however, these behaviors become addictive in themselves. One of the most common triggers in young men for anorexia is the well-known practice of amateur wrestlers who diet and shed water weight in order to "make weight." What starts out as an accepted athletic practice becomes an obsession that becomes an end in itself, even when it hampers performance.

A Culture of Disordered Eating

Experts are increasingly recognizing a spectrum of food restriction, some of which raises concern even though it does not qualify as mental illness. "Disordered" eating—regular skipping of meals or eliminating food groups from one's diet—is a common phenomenon among adults, especially among younger women and athletes of both genders.

> It's estimated that three out of four American women between ages 25 and 45 practice disordered eating, according to a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill study. A 2009 report in the Journal of American College Health showed more than a quarter of female college athletes exhibit disordered eating patterns. And in surveys of collegiate athletes, some 55 percent of women tell researchers they experience pressure (both external and self-imposed) to achieve a certain weight, and 43 percent say they're "terrified" of becoming too heavy.[5]

It is not only college-age women who are afflicted. Studies are showing increases in obsessive exercise in young male athletes,[6] and the number of girls as young as eight who report "being on a diet" is also astonishingly high. In the disordered standards

[3]Joan Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988) 12.

[4]Irene Chatoor, "Causes, Symptoms and Effects of Eating Disorders: Child Development as It Relates to Anorexia Nervosa and Builmia Nervosa," in *Eating Disorders: A Reference Sourcebook*, ed. Raymond Lemberg (Phoenix: Oryx, 1999) 17–21.

[5]Caleb Daniloff, "Running on Empty," *Runner's World* 47/3 (March 2012) 70–75.

[6]Ibid.

of our culture, disordered eating is sometimes counted as simply good discipline or healthy living, but the costs of disordered eating habits can include physical consequences like anemia and lowered immunity. More dangerously, disordered eating habits can and sometimes do develop into full-blown eating disorders.

Eating disorders in general and anorexia in particular become distorted pictures of the behaviors and obsessions that characterize our culture. *The New York Times* reported in 2012 that diet restriction is an ever-growing phenomenon even among those for whom there is no pressing medical condition.

> Our appetites are stratified by an ever-widening array of restrictions: gluten free, vegan, sugar free, low fat, low sodium, no carb, no dairy, soyless, meatless, wheatless, macrobiotic, probiotic, antioxidant, sustainable, local and raw.... [M]ore and more eaters...appear to be experimenting with self-imposed limits, taking a do-it-yourself, pick-and-choose approach to restricting what they consume.[7]

Although there are a myriad of political, environmental, and health reasons to choose carefully what one eats, the pattern of restricting diets in a world of abundant choices creates an odd phenomenon. In a world where millions do not have enough nutritious food to eat, throngs of affluent Americans who *could* eat anything choose to restrict their diets.

with each new food trend, companies pour funds into developing new "food products," and it becomes difficult to judge whether industry "gives people what they want" or whether what is produced creates our demand

The result is a food culture in this society that is increasingly atomized and market-driven. The poor get cheap, empty calories from 7-Eleven and yet ironically are most at risk for diseases associated with obesity such as diabetes and heart disease. The middle class look for the best prices from Wal-Mart and occasionally splurge on organics. The most affluent among us, as if we cannot handle the abundance of options, choose to eliminate entire categories of foods, including such culturally basic items as bread. The diet industry is worth $61 billion and the fitness industry over $40 billion. With each new food trend, companies pour funds into developing new "food products," and it becomes difficult to judge whether industry "gives people what they want" or whether what is produced creates our demand. A decade ago few people had heard of gluten-free diets. Now gluten-free foods are a $4.2 billion market segment.[8]

[7]Jessica Bruder, "The Picky Eater Who Came to Dinner," *New York Times*, June 29, 2012, also http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/01/fashion/rsvp-ps-no-gluten-fat-or-soy-please.html (accessed July 20, 2013).

[8]"Gluten-Free Market to Hit $6.6 Billion by 2017," *Food Product Design*, October 25, 2012, at http://www.foodproductdesign.com/news/2012/10/gluten-free-market-to-hit-6-6-billion-by-2017.aspx (accessed July 20, 2013).

Anthropologist Richard Wilk suggests that this pattern reflects a society that no longer has the assurance of a given identity through traditional sources. What "Americans" eat now includes food from all over the world. Families are losing the centrality of the dinner table as a place to pass on religious and cultural values. Vocation is no longer an inherited family business but the thing that each individual must seek out on their own. And when it comes to the future, there is no confidence that the lives of succeeding generations will look anything like what has come before. Wilk asserts, "So much of our lives are completely out of our control. You can go to college and not get a job. You can do an internship and not get a job. The economy takes some new tack every 15 minutes."[9]

It is not only the economy that demands that individuals constantly invent themselves. Secular culture no longer rewards those who stay put, valuing place over moving ahead. Family life, especially the commitment of marriage, is considered a secondary vocation, one that should be cast aside if it holds the individual back from achievement. And spiritual practice itself is increasingly seen as a personal choice, something to be patched together by the individual from various sources rather than inherited from a religious tradition.

Restricted eating patterns also seem to coincide with the growth of the "Nones" (those who claim no religious affiliation) as a sizable segment of U.S. population. Each generation is successively less likely to claim a religious affiliation or participate in religious services;[10] at the same time, statistics show that the Millennials are twice as likely as their parents to eat out on a regular basis.[11] The "foodie" generation might not have experienced the family table in the same way as their parents did, yet, as they grow into adulthood, they increasingly build community and identity by their food choices. These choices may or may not involve calorie restriction, but they are quite likely to involve a myriad of choices laden with values: Organic or conventional? Local or not? Vegan or carnivore? Far from stripping food of meaning, the secular "foodie" culture places measures like cost and taste alongside a host of other political and ethical meanings, and asks the individual to piece them together. One could say that Nones choose their food as individually as they do their spiritual practices.

BODIES, ACTING AND OBSERVED: HUNGER GAMES

Eating habits are formed not only by attention to what is consumed, but by consciousness about what kind of *body* is being formed by that consumption. While every eating disorder involves physical habits that become ingrained or even addictive, the *thought* patterns that accompany disordered eating are not unique to

[9]Cited in Bruder, "The Picky Eater."

[10]"'Nones' on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation," *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, October 9, 2012, at http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx (accessed July 21, 2013).

[11]Bill Ward, "Millennials Are Becoming the Foodie Generation," *The Minneapolis-St.Paul StarTribune*, March 18, 2013, at http://www.startribune.com/lifestyle/taste/198510941.html (accessed July 21, 2013).

those individuals who veer into full-blown eating disorders. The "undue influence of body shape on self-evaluation" that the anorexia diagnosis describes is all too common in middle-class North America. Women have been thought to be particularly susceptible to these thought patterns because cultural constructions of gender usually place men in the status of "actors" and women in the status of "the observed."[12] Well-known male athletes are known for objective accomplishments like batting average or race times; the most famous female athletes are gymnasts and figure skaters, who are evaluated subjectively for appearance and style as well as for skill. The male body is allowed to perform with relatively little attention to how it looks; female bodies must first and foremost look good, with performance inextricably linked to appearance.[13]

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The more contact we have with the rest of the world through our global media, the more distorted these expectations of the "ideal body" seem. It is no accident, I believe, that one of the most popular books (and now movies) among middle school students of the last five years is Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, which depicts a future dystopian totalitarian state ironically named Panem— *bread!* Each year, in Panem's poorer districts, "tributes" are selected from among the teenagers to compete in a fight-to-the-death reality show. While their families struggle for basic necessities at home, the tributes are whisked off to The Capitol, where the bored and wealthy elite entertain themselves with coloring, painting, piercing, plucking, and adorning their well-fed bodies. The ritual of the Roman orgy is evoked at one feast when tributes are encouraged to vomit so that they can keep indulging. Once in the arena, the tributes compete for survival while the rest of Panem looks on. The heroine of the trilogy, Katniss Everdeen, displays both adolescent soul-searching and political resistance as she struggles to survive and to sort out her own emotions. Whereas at home she understood her health and her skills as gifts to be used for the good of her family's survival, now she must reckon with the fact that she is being watched—*all the time*—and that the response of the audience to her actions might well determine her fate.[14]

By placing normal adolescent self-consciousness in the context of an extreme version of our media culture, *The Hunger Games* gives us a vision of just how diffi-

[12]For a full treatment of this phenomenon, see Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[13]People who work with college students have told me, however, that this dynamic is changing, and that young men are increasingly prone to exercise obsession and steroid abuse that are not necessarily linked to performance but instead to achieving the perfect "ripped" body.

[14]Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2008). The subsequent books in the trilogy are *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010). The film adaptation of *The Hunger Games* was released in 2012 by Lions Gate.

cult it is for some young people to come to terms with their bodies and their real hungers for power, love, and meaning. There appears to be no religion in Panem, no higher power that people appeal to, no rituals beyond those invented by tributes and their families as they live and die under the oppressive regime. There are moments of honor, such as when Peeta offers his schoolmate a ruined loaf of bread though he knows it will get him in trouble, and when Katniss honors the body of Rue, a fallen tribute, with flowers and a song. These moments make us wonder what more resistance there could be if food was more than survival for some and entertainment for others. We wonder as well what honor might be given to human bodies—more than adornment for the beautiful or admiration of the strong. Katniss's resistance, like that of Saint Catherine, is to refuse the definitions of her power and sexuality placed upon her by an oppressive voyeurism and, instead, to claim the powers of her wit and compassion. But because she is usually isolated in this effort, her resistance continually becomes life-threatening.

Holy Communion as an Act of Resistance

In a culture of bread and circuses, when some are obsessed with food and bodies but seldom name God as the source of nourishment and growth, the Christian community has the opportunity to name the "body of Christ" in life-giving ways that resist the reduction of food and bodies to market consumption. The Lutheran tradition, with its insistence that the body and blood of Christ are "truly present" in, with, and under the physical elements of bread and wine, reinforces the value of the things of earth, rather than reducing the meal to a mere symbol of some reality that is beyond our bodies. We cannot realistically claim that the practice of Holy Communion somehow "heals" us of our disordered eating; the host did not magically sustain Catherine of Siena into old age, and the renewal of weekly Eucharist in Protestant churches has arisen side-by-side with our distorted globalized food culture. However, perhaps in proclamation and practice we can draw attention to the ways that this meal disrupts our usual calculations of costs, calories, and appearance.

From a cynical perspective, Holy Communion might seem to invite exactly the kind of life-threatening behavior that Catherine of Siena engaged in against her male-dominated society. What is the Eucharist, historically speaking, if not a meal that enacts the most extreme exercise of male power and privilege? In Catherine's day, the host was wholly controlled by a celibate male priesthood, the laity were usually denied the wine, only the smallest amounts were allowed, and "leftovers" of any kind were hastily consumed. Whereas the domestic table was a place where male and female power often came together in household sharing of resources and wisdom, the Sacrament of the Table was a place that asserted the singular power of the Holy Roman Church.

Of course, it was not always so. We know from Scripture that the evolution of the meal from a communal proclamation of faith in the midst of household fellowship to a specialized ritual stripped of domesticity was a gradual one. At the heart

of Paul's writings about table manners in 1 Corinthians was the assumption that the way the meal was shared was less controlled than even the most low-church tradition would have it now. Indeed, the excesses railed against in Paul's letters were largely a function of the class distinctions of Greco-Roman culture. Paul argued that the embodied practices of *this* body, the body of Christ, should reflect a *new* creation, one in which the distinctions of status and wealth ought not to shape who would eat what and when. Rather than reifying the culture's social stratification, the sharing of Christ's body ought to transform it.

We cannot realistically claim that the practice of Holy Communion somehow "heals" us of our disordered eating. However, we can draw attention to the ways that this meal disrupts our usual calculations of costs, calories, and appearance.

Anthropologists look at the Lord's Supper and see a pattern common to much human ritual. In ritual, we negotiate our relationships with one another, creating a space in which those relationships might deliberately be put at risk. In the same way that wolf pups play at fighting, testing out what it means to compete for dominance without actually permanently determining the social structure between them, so ritual allows us to test out different ways of being with one another, ways that may not be allowed in our everyday social structures.[15] Liturgical scholars have spilled much ink on what happens between the presider and the elements, while in fact the most "liminal" part of the sacrament is, in fact, in the eating. In the moments of distribution, we enact a way of eating together that disrupts the way we usually gather around food: we all eat at the same table; we eat only small amounts; everyone is invited; the body we eat is not one we kill, but rather one who gives himself and yet never dies.

First, the sharing of the body of Christ as a *communal act* reminds us that no food is ever eaten "individually." The very act of eating connects our bodies to other bodies, and when what we share is the body of Christ, we take in not individual spiritual nourishment alone, but a presence that inextricably links us to those who "in every time and place" have offered praise to God through our Savior Jesus Christ. Unlike in secular culture, where eating is reduced to an act of guarding one's personal health and enjoyment, in Holy Communion the meaning of eating is *only* constructed as it is linked to the gathering of Christ's body across time and space; that is, only as our *bodies* become *one body*.[16]

Secondly, the sharing of the *physical act* of eating at Jesus' table reminds us that our baptismal calling moves beyond intellectual assent. As the physical body

[15]For more on such roles of ritual, see Tom Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites That Transform Our Lives and Our Communities* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 79–105, esp. 81.

[16]The pastoral concern for those who for health reasons cannot share a common cup of wine or a gluten-laden loaf of bread are very real, but care must be taken here that the signs of our eating *together* are not weakened too much by multiple elements and means of partaking.

of Christ, we share in fellowship with those who do not share our life experience, culture, language, denomination, or intellectual capacities. Congregations who have extended the age of first communion beyond an arbitrary "age of reason" or who deliberately commune those who have mental disabilities remind us that our salvation exists as a reality beyond our individual abilities—literally beyond our brains. For those who live with eating disorders, the feast of the Eucharist might give pause—should they count the calories consumed in this moment? The act of participating in *this* meal has the potential for challenging the cultural habits of calculating every meal as an individual consumption of nutritive parts. The bread in this moment has calories because it *is* bread, but its nourishment has little to do with the numbers. At this feast, we are bodies united in Christ and the body of Christ made visible in this moment.

Finally, the *sharing* of the body of Christ, in which everyone receives more or less the same amount, is an enactment of Jubilee, a resistance to the culture of scarcity for the masses and excess for the few. Liturgical reforms that have turned us toward more frequent sharing of the Eucharist, more vigorous participation of the laity in worship leadership, and visible connections between the eucharistic bread and cup and the food of our everyday tables are all ways in which we can reclaim this table as a sign of God's reign for all people. St. John Chrysostom's Easter homily provides a welcome to the feast that proclaims this Jubilee for all:

> Therefore, enter all of you, into the joy of your Lord; and receive your reward, both the first, and likewise the second. You rich and poor together, hold high festival. You sober and you heedless, honor the day. Rejoice today, both you who have fasted and you who have disregarded the fast. The table is fully laden; feast all ye sumptuously. The calf is fatted; let no one go away hungry.[17]

Drawing on the images of abundance from Jesus' parables, the homily insists that our welcome is not predicated on our preparation for the feast of Christ's reign. Our ability to fast from self-indulgence is not the issue. The table is first and foremost God's sign of grace, breaking down every barrier in the midst of the assembly and calling us to share in one common gift.

The gift shared at the Lord's Supper is rich enough to provide a sense of both nourishment and resistance. It calls attention to the physical realities of food nourishing bodies while also pointing beyond our cultural assumptions about the meaning of tables, food, and community. Christ's presence given for us calls us to be with Christ and with one another in transformed ways, ways that might have the power to even change the next meal we eat as well. ⊕

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[17]John Chrysostom, "The Paschal Homily of Saint John Chrysostom," in *The Incarnate God: The Feasts of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary*, vol. 2, ed. Catherine Aslanoff, trans. Paul Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995) 164.