



# The Lord's Supper in Light of the Piety of Medieval Women: A Lutheran View

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**A**S A TEACHER, I AM FASCINATED AND FREQUENTLY IRRITATED BY THE HEAD-  
strong approach of students to assignments. Why, I wonder, do they go to  
such great lengths to address the topic they wish I had given rather than the one  
I actually did? For this reason I feel obliged to begin by confessing my own unor-  
thodox approach in this essay. It is appropriate to begin with my reasons for do-  
ing so.

## I. A DIFFERENT STARTING POINT

The fronts against which Luther and the Lutheran confessions formulated  
the doctrine of holy communion are well known. First they reacted against the  
Catholic understanding of the sacrificial mass and then against the Zwinglian con-  
cept of a memorial meal. There is no way we can understand Lutheran pieties  
and practices formed around this central sacrament without attending to this  
history. Yet too often it has proved impossible to traverse this familiar terrain of

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*Like Luther, certain medieval women rejected the claim that "the flesh profiteth  
nothing." In their experience of suffering, their shedding of blood, and their physical  
nourishment of others, these women encountered the incarnate Christ.*

conflict without getting stuck. As B. A. Gerrish once remarked about the title of a North American ecumenical study, "*Marburg Revisited? Why would we want to go back there?!*"

As a teacher of reformation theology and history, I have lectured regularly on the sacramental debates of the sixteenth century. I have worried that in so doing I have said things necessary for these seminary students to know but insufficient to help them consider the sacrament beyond the perspective of confessional division, to ponder anew its meaning, which is not exhausted by any one set of theological constructs and images, no matter how biblically warranted and pastorally satisfying. In the course of my reading over the last several years I came upon some material that has refreshed my own thinking about the meaning of the supper. It does not derive from Lutheran sources; indeed, it antedates the reformations of the sixteenth century. Yet I offer this as a potentially rich resource for contemporary Lutheran thinking about the sacrament.

When trying to lay out for students the differences between Catholic and protestant approaches to communion, I have suggested they consider how the different confessions would answer the question, "What *did* Jesus do in the night in which he was betrayed?" Consider this passage formulated by the Council of Trent in 1562:

Since under the former Testament, according to the testimony of the Apostle Paul, there was no perfection because of the weakness of the Levitical priesthood, there was need, God the Father of mercies so ordaining, *that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchisedech*, our Lord Jesus Christ, who might perfect and lead to perfection as many as were to be sanctified. He, therefore, our God and Lord, though He was by His death about to offer Himself once upon the altar of the cross to God the Father that He might there accomplish an eternal redemption, nevertheless, that His priesthood might not come to an end with His death, at the last supper, on the night He was betrayed, that He might leave to His beloved spouse the Church a visible sacrifice, such as the nature of man requires, whereby that bloody sacrifice once to be accomplished on the cross might be represented, the memory thereof remain even to the end of the world, and its salutary effects applied to the remission of those sins which we daily commit, declaring Himself constituted *a priest forever according to the order of Melchisedech*, offered up to God the Father His own body and blood under the form of bread and wine, and under the forms of those same things gave to the Apostles, whom He then made priests of the New Testament, that they might partake, commanding them and their successors in the priesthood by these words to do likewise: *Do this in commemoration of me*, as the Catholic Church has always understood and taught.<sup>1</sup>

Trent codified what had already been the understanding of the sacrament dominant in the Catholic church for centuries. On the eve of his death, Christ provided for the salvation of his people by instituting a new sacrifice that would keep the benefits of Calvary present and efficacious among humankind for all time and by instituting a new priesthood, empowered to perform the miracle of the mass and necessary for

<sup>1</sup>John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present* (3d ed.; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 437-38.

making sacramental grace accessible. In sharp contrast, Luther's *Small Catechism* portrays the actions of the disciples at the last supper as paradigmatic for all believers (who, remember, given Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, are simultaneously the priests to whom the sacrament is entrusted). What they are commanded to do in remembrance of him is not to offer sacrifice in his stead but to eat and drink in his presence.

The eating and drinking do not in themselves produce [such great effects], but the words "for you" and "for the forgiveness of sins." These words, when accompanied by the bodily eating and drinking, are the chief thing in the sacrament, and he who believes these words has what they say and declare: the forgiveness of sins.<sup>2</sup>

The consequences for liturgy and piety of these two different theological understandings were dramatic. In the middle ages actual reception of the elements by the congregation became infrequent. The cup was withheld from the laity. The focus was largely visual: beholding the actual miracle of the mass which took place as the words of institution were spoken by the priest, and reverencing the Savior now bodily present in the consecrated elements held aloft for all to see or in the host reserved after the mass was ended. On the other hand, for those reformers who saw the celebration as pre-eminently a meal, whether or not they held to a doctrine of real presence, what was central was communing faithfully and in both kinds. In the course of reflecting on eating and drinking as ritual action, as *the* confession of faith called for by the gospel proclaimed in the sacrament, I encountered the work of the medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum. Her studies of the religious experience and theological understandings of medieval women make the picture both richer and more complex.<sup>3</sup>

## II. THE PIETY OF MEDIEVAL WOMEN

In an essay entitled "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg,"<sup>4</sup> Bynum takes issue with the interpretation offered by the art historian Leo Steinberg in his "tour de force," *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*.<sup>5</sup> Steinberg showed that late medieval and Renaissance artists deliberately called attention to the genitals of Jesus, both in portrayals of the infant and in scenes of the deposition from the cross or of the Virgin cradling her dead son. He recognizes these peculiarities of artistic representation as deliberate

<sup>2</sup>*The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 352.

<sup>3</sup>Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982); *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California, 1987); *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University, 1995); *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991). This last volume is the chief source for what follows in this essay.

<sup>4</sup>Bynum, "The Body of Christ," in *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 79-117.

<sup>5</sup>Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon, 1983).

theological statements and interprets their meaning in the context of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century devotion to the holy foreskin and to the feast of the circumcision.

Thus, Steinberg suggests that artists intended the genitals of Christ, especially in those few pictures that he interprets as erections, as the ultimate symbol of what Christ shares with all of us. Christ was fully male in gender and sexuality, even to the involuntary movements of his penis, and as such he represents the salvation of the totality of what we as human beings are. Christ redeems not only our physiological differences as men and women; he redeems our sexual nature (if not our sexual acts) as well.<sup>6</sup>

Bynum uses the same artistic evidence as a springboard to different theological conclusions. She refers to pictures, also studied by Steinberg, in which the artist directs attention both to Christ's penis and to his mother's breast and to pictures in which the blood from Christ's wounded side is shown flowing into his crotch, thus connecting the final bleeding of the crucifixion with the initial one of the circumcision.

Perhaps readers are at this point uncomfortable if not outright repulsed by these scholars' forthright discussion of the physicality and sexuality of the incarnate one. But, as Bynum persuasively insists, it is instructive to allow for possible differences in cultural meanings at work here between our era and that in which the Lutheran confessional movement was born. The twentieth-century western audience eroticizes the body; the sight of penis and breast makes us think in terms of sexuality. Steinberg thus concludes that what this iconography conveys is the message of the salvation of human life at its most physical and problematic, that is, as sexual being. Bynum begs to differ:

The major context in which Christ's maleness was theologically relevant was the circumcision. But sermons on the circumcision did not discuss Christ's sexuality or his gender. In the scores of texts we have on this topic, blood is what is emphasized—blood as covenant, in part, but primarily blood as suffering. What the texts say is that the circumcision foreshadows the Crucifixion. Thus, blood is redemptive because Christ's pain gives salvific significance to what we all share with him; and what we share is not a penis. It is not even sexuality. It is the fact that we can be hurt. We suffer. Steinberg may be right that one could extrapolate from medieval art and medieval texts to the notion that Christ's coming in male flesh is a sign of sexuality and therefore of humanness. There may even be a profound modern need for such theological argument. My point is simply that the argument as such is not made in medieval or Renaissance texts. Those who preached and wrote in the fifteenth century associated humanness with the fleshliness of all bodily members and found in suffering (rather than in sexual temptation) the core of what it is to be human.<sup>7</sup>

Bynum further supports her claim by exploring late medieval portrayals of the body of Christ as female and of Jesus as mother.

If Christ's bleeding connoted his fully human capacity to suffer, it also connected him with the physical acts of feeding and purging which pre-eminently characterized female existence. Ancient biologists regarded blood as the basic bodily fluid and female blood as the fundamental support of human life: maternal

<sup>6</sup>Bynum, "The Body of Christ," 84.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 91-92.

blood nourished infants in the womb and then was transmuted into breast milk for nursing.<sup>8</sup> They also emphasized the healthful effects of purgation and cleansing through bleeding.<sup>9</sup> These medical conceptions readily paved the way to linking Christ's bleeding at circumcision, on the cross, and in the eucharist with female bleeding, particularly as his own flesh did womanly things in giving birth to and feeding believers.<sup>10</sup> Bynum discusses several striking pieces of iconography representative of this assimilation. In one portrayal Christ and the Virgin Mary are shown interceding with God the Father, the former cupping his hand about the wound located directly under his breast, and the latter holding and extending her engorged breast. Related to this is a figure of Christ expressing blood from his wound into a chalice juxtaposed with that of the holy infant nursing at Mary's breast. In another striking medieval image of Christ as source of nourishment, one sees a stalk of wheat and a grapevine growing out of the wounds in his feet.<sup>11</sup>

Bynum recognizes that the western theological tradition presented physicality as particularly a women's problem. To achieve union with God they had to overcome the burden of femaleness, and one can see in the vehemence of their asceticism the internalizing of their society's misogyny. This especially manifested itself in eating practices, for in a society where even women's bodies were not their own property to dispose of as they wished, the rigid, even phobic, renunciation of eating allowed them some measure of self-determination. If on the one hand this discipline appears to be motivated by contempt for and rejection of the self, on the other hand it allows for a far more positive interpretation. Even within the narrowest of limits and under the most adverse conditions, women found ways to answer the call to discipleship by asserting themselves and taking what control they could.

Bynum goes even further in making meaningful what, to modern sensibilities, seems pathological.<sup>12</sup> It was not by the rejection of their physicality that

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 100.

<sup>9</sup>"Indeed, bleeding was held to be necessary for the washing away of superfluity, so much so that physiologists spoke of males as menstruating and recommended bleeding with leeches when they did not do so" (Ibid.).

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 100-101.

<sup>11</sup>Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 208, 113, 209, 107.

<sup>12</sup>There has been much scholarly discussion of the similarities between the practices of medieval women ascetics and those of present-day anorexics. Though one cannot simply equate the two, given the historical cultural differences, still issues of control and self-definition are at work in both, and it is sobering to think that this many centuries later numbers of young women feel so threatened and helpless within their society that they end up starving themselves to death as a form of "self-protection." See Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 139-42; *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 189-208; Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985). For a concise and illuminating discussion on the causes of contemporary eating disorders, see Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1994) 166-85. In her discussion of Steinberg's work, Bynum writes that if modern people find his argument more titillating than the interpretation she offers, this may be due to the fact that contemporary society finds sex more interesting than feeding, suffering, or salvation ("The Body of Christ," 92). Indeed, given the problems with feeding that abound in our world—from rampant starvation among the poor to what Mary Pipher calls "worshiping the gods of thinness" alongside of gluttony combined with poor nutrition in affluent societies—it is clear that bondage to food drives us at least as fatefully as sex.

women found spiritual fulfillment, but rather by finding in it the very possibility of *imitatio Christi*. The body with its ability to bleed and suffer, to bleed and die, to bleed and give birth, to bleed and nourish, becomes not an obstacle to the knowledge of grace but the very locus of its realization. For it is in such a human body and for such embodied humans that Christ was incarnate, crucified, and risen, and continues to be present in the eucharist. One must take into account not just the food medieval women renounced but the food they coveted.

Thus, not-eating was complemented by holy eating. Food was filth; it was also God. The woman's revulsion at her own body, even when it took what appeared to her and her contemporaries to be bizarre forms, was given a theological significance more complex than dualism. The peasant saint Alpais of Cudot did not, after all, die of "anorexia." She survived for forty years on the eucharist and became a living proof of the efficacy of the sacrament. The point of even the oddest of these stories was ultimately not rejection of the physical and bodily, but a finding of the truly physical, the truly nourishing, the truly fleshly, in the humanity of Christ, chewed and swallowed in the eucharist. Even here, physicality was not so much rooted out or suppressed as embraced and redeemed *at that point* where it intersected with the divine.<sup>13</sup>

It is striking that, in contrast to the usual understanding of the medieval mass with its emphasis on the priest's offering of sacrifice, one finds here an experience of the sacrament in the medieval Catholic tradition that focuses on reception of the elements rather than consecration and gives the status of lay communicant a spiritual importance equal, and at times superior, to that of ordained celebrant.

### III. WOMEN'S PIETY AND LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

Lutherans have generally understood late medieval Catholic theology and practice as that which the confessors rejected in order to recover the true meaning of the sacrament of the altar. Yet the scholarship of a medievalist such as Caroline Walker Bynum makes it clear that there was more diversity in that piety than first meets the protestant eye. The witness of the medieval women she explores offers material that strengthens and deepens some of the key insights of Lutheran sacramental theology. Luther marveled at the miracle of the incarnation, at its uncompromised physicality. The images of feeding and bleeding were significant in his proclamation of the God who is with us and for us: the marvel of encountering almighty God in the vulnerable flesh of a baby nursing at his mother's breast, in the wounded body of a man dying on a cross, and in that same body on the altar.

Luther was appalled by Ulrich Zwingli's claim that "the flesh profiteth nothing," by which the Zurich reformer could dismiss as theologically irrelevant what he found physically impossible, that is, the real bodily presence of Christ in the supper. These medieval women, like Luther, lived in a paradoxical relation to the body. They knew it to be in bondage to temptation and decay, and women, identified with the fleshly, were taught that physicality was particularly their problem. But in the light of the incarnation they were also able to make it their

<sup>13</sup>Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion," in *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 142-43.

distinct opportunity. They regarded the body (theirs and Christ's) pre-eminently as a means of access to the divine; it was the very locus of the giving and receiving of grace.

Moreover, their insistence on the scandalous claim of the gospel, that God has become enfleshed, gave them the courage to embrace the terrors of human suffering. Here one encounters Christ deep in the flesh, able to make the dying body generative, able to nourish life through the spilling of blood. These are the insights of theologians of the cross.

These are also the insights of women, whose experience, in the late middle ages as today, was shaped in particular ways because of gender.<sup>14</sup> These often unfamiliar voices speak eloquently of the fullness of God imaged in the humanity of women as well as that of men. And they can speak to effect in a society like ours, still unable to come to honorable terms with the body, with issues of eating and feeding, and with the suffering to which frail flesh is heir. The sacrament assures us, as it did them, that these are the very stuff of our salvation. ⊕

<sup>14</sup>"We must never forget the pain and frustration, the isolation and feelings of helplessness, that accompanied the quest of religious women. For all her charismatic empowerment, woman was inferior to man in the Middle Ages; her voice was often silenced, even more frequently ignored. Not every use of the phrase 'weak woman' by a female writer was ironic; women clearly internalized the negative value placed on them by the culture in which they lived" (Bynum, "The Female Body and Religious Practice," in *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 235-56).