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O Sacrum Convivium!

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People who know a little bit about St. Thomas Aquinas do not usually think of him as a poet. He is most renowned for his great systematic exposition of the faith, the *Summa Theologica*. The *Summa* is a multivolume work cast in the technical vocabulary of scholastic philosophy. Its prose is unrelenting and unpicturesque, written for minds disciplined as most of ours are not. Thomas won fame for saying things that were eminently unpoetic. If you must have an example, consider this: “Since that which has the nature of a genus, species, or difference is predicated of this particular designated thing, the essence, expressed as a part . . . cannot possibly have the nature of a universal, that is, of a genus or species.”

And that was the abridged version!

Yet in 1264, when Pope Urban IV declared Corpus Christi to be a feast of the universal Church, he commissioned Thomas to write the Church’s official prayers for the feast: the “Office,” made up of hymns, sequences, and other varieties of poetry. The Holy Father’s choice must have surprised his contemporaries who had read Thomas. But his instincts proved inspired.

Six and a half centuries later, when Pope Pius XI wrote an encyclical letter about Thomas, he judged that “nothing . . . shows the force of his genius and charity so clearly as the Office” (*Studiorum Ducem*,

www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19230629_studiorum-ducem_it.html, no. 9). That’s high praise, since in the field of theology, Thomas is commonly known as “The Theologian.” Yet at least a couple of popes considered him equally to be *The Poet*.

He wrote hymns we still sing today on Holy Thursday and at Benediction, such as *Panis Angelicus*, *Pange Lingua*, *Tantum Ergo*, *Adoro Te Devote*, and *O Salutaris Hostia*.

But the piece that critics have judged the “gem” of the whole Office is a brief responsory called (in Latin) *O Sacrum Convivium*. It is profoundly poetic, though not marked off as verse.

O Sacred Banquet! In which Christ is received, the memory of his passion recalled, the soul filled with grace, and the pledge of future glory given to us.

Pope John Paul II invoked these lines to express what he called eucharistic “amazement,” the sense of wonder we should have when we contemplate the sacrament (see *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20041008_mane-nobiscum-domine_en.html, no. 29).

St. Thomas had that sense, and he also had a rare combination of gifts that enabled him to write it for the most brilliant theologians—or sing it for the average congregation. Still, the truth is

the same. In fact, *O Sacrum Convivium* follows rather precisely the exposition of one of the articles on the Eucharist that Thomas wrote for the *Summa* (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 3.60.3, tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province [Cincinnati: Benziger, 1949], online at www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.TP_060_A3.html, accessed March 10, 2011). The article says in a more expansive way what Thomas could only suggest in the short space of a responsory. And what it says should stretch our minds, hearts, and souls.

Thomas explains that every sacrament is instituted by Christ for the sake of our holiness, and in every sacrament we can consider three things:

- The very cause of our sanctification, which is Christ's passion
- The form of our sanctification, which is grace and the virtues
- The ultimate goal of our sanctification, which is eternal life

Thus, a sacrament is a reminder of something past, an indication of something present, and a promise of something in the future. A sacrament exists, all at once, at three points in time.

But we have to be careful here. We want to understand the past, present, and future dimensions of the Eucharist as Thomas did—and as Jesus did. In order to do that, we need to learn how God's people, in the ancient world, understood terms like "memorial" and "remembrance."

When the Bible speaks of memory, it is not talking about mere thinking. We

tend to define "remembrance" as just a subjective, psychological act. It is all in the mind. It is our fleeting apprehension of something that was and is no longer.

For the Jews of Jesus' time, however, remembrance was a ritual, usually marked by a sacrifice and a feast. And it was always connected with the renewed presence of a long-ago event. When God established the Passover, he commanded the people, "This day shall be a memorial feast for you, which all your generations shall celebrate . . . as a perpetual institution" (Ex 12:14).

When Jews celebrated Passover, they were not merely commemorating a long-ago liberation, the way Americans might keep the Fourth of July. According to the ancient rabbis, "In every generation a man must so regard himself as if he came forth himself out of Egypt" (Mishnah Pesachim 10.5e, in *The Passover Haggadah*, ed. Nahum Glatzer [New York: Schocken, 1989], viii). The ritual meal of the Passover, the seder, brought about a "real presence" of the past deliverance from Egypt. It was a symbol, a sign, but it accomplished, with divine power, the event that it signified. More than a millennium after Moses, every Jewish family experienced deliverance, liberation, through the power of the Passover.

In Palestine in the first century, the Passover also anticipated the day when the Messiah would arrive to reunite the tribes and gather them to their ancestral lands. Thus, the family addressed its Passover prayers "to him who restores Jerusalem." The restoration of Jerusalem is clearly a future event, yet described in the present tense. In every Passover, the future deliverance is already "fore-

tasted” in the present. Just as the past is truly re-called, re-collected, re-remembered, and re-presented.

It was in the context of Passover that Jesus instituted the Eucharist, when he took bread and wine and declared them to be his body and the “blood of the covenant” (Mk 14:24; see also Ex 24:8). Then he said to his Apostles, “Do this in memory of me” (Lk 22:19). The first Christians, who were devout Jews, could not have missed his meaning. St. Paul made the connection explicit in his First Letter to the Corinthians—the letter that contains the New Testament’s most sustained consideration of the Eucharist: “For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the feast . . . with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor 5:7-8).

The Church does not mince words when she speaks of the reality of this new Passover remembrance, now fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) tells us, “The *memorial* is not merely the recollection of past events. . . . In the liturgical celebration of these events, they become in a certain way present and real” (CCC, 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana—United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000], no. 1363). And then, “When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ’s Passover, and it is made present: the sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the cross remains ever present” (CCC, no. 1364).

The span of sacred history—past, present, and future—converges when we receive Holy Communion. We truly participate in events of long ago. We truly anticipate the glories of the future. Yet we never leave the present moment.

This is what happens when eternity comes rushing into time, as it did when the Word became flesh. This is what the sacraments make possible. Past, present, and future unite in a single moment. It is more mind-boggling than any thought experiment you read about in high school physics. Yet it is more plausible than any time-travel scheme you have seen in science fiction movies.

The eternal Word assumed a temporal life so that we might share his eternal life. When we receive Holy Communion, we “share in the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4). Then and there, the Son of God gives us everything he has—body, blood, soul, and divinity—and so “we are God’s children now” (1 Jn 3:2), though we do not yet see him as he is. We receive all of heaven in a foretaste, but not yet in a stable and permanent way. As Pope Benedict often puts it, we experience both an “already” and a “not yet.”

Pope John Paul II was right: Eucharistic amazement is the only proper response. When he described that wonder once more in his last encyclical letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, he again quoted *O Sacrum Convivium* when he called Catholics to a holy “extravagance” as they express their “wonder and adoration before the unsurpassable gift of the Eucharist” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, www.vatican.va/holy_father/special_features/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_ecclesia_eucharistia_en.html, no. 48). The passage continues:

Though the idea of a “banquet” naturally suggests familiarity, the Church has never yielded to the temptation to trivialize this “intimacy” with her Spouse by forgetting that he is also her Lord and that the “banquet”

always remains a sacrificial banquet marked by the blood shed on Golgotha. *The Eucharistic Banquet is truly a "sacred" banquet, in which the simplicity of the signs conceals the unfathomable holiness of God: O sacrum convivium, in quo Christus sumitur!* The bread which is broken on our altars, offered to us as wayfarers along the paths of the world, is *panis angelorum*, the bread of angels, which cannot be approached except with the humility of the centurion in the Gospel: "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof" (Mt 8:8; Lk 7:6).

That is the piety for the Eucharist that raised cathedrals and decorated them with gold and marble. *That* is the devotion that inspired the poetry of St. Thomas Aquinas (not least *O Sacrum Convivium*) and its glorious musical settings by history's great composers: Palestrina, Victoria, Liszt, and Tallis.

Most of us will never compose a motet or sculpt a statue or build an architectural marvel to house our Eucharistic Lord. But faith does not measure extravagance the way culture does. The widow's "two small coins" were extravagant (see Mk 12:42).

Let us be lavish in our amazement.

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