

The Eucharist In Scripture: Part I

By Greg Witherow

The Catholic Church holds the Eucharist to be the source and summit of the Christian life¹. That is why the altar, as opposed to the pulpit, is front and center in our Catholic parishes. It is also why Catholic spirituality is so focused on the Eucharist, be it practicing daily Mass or participating in Eucharistic adoration. But why does the Church take such a position? The ultimate answer is the Real Presence. But before the Real Presence was given to the Church, scripture gave clues to the centrality of the sacrament. This essay is meant to demonstrate how typology places the Eucharist at the vital center of redemptive history. In fact, minus “Eucharist events”, many of the Old Testament stories cannot be understood. What is typology? Typology is the study of New Testament types prefigured in the Old Testament. St. Augustine famously stated, “the New Testament is concealed in the Old and the Old Testament is revealed in the New”. It is why Adam can be said to be a type of Christ². Apart from typology, the scriptural basis for Catholic teaching is difficult to grasp. Our review of typology begins in Genesis.

The Tree of Life

An act of eating severed Adam’s communion with God and brought death to mankind. Adam crossed the line into sin when he ate fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. His action demonstrated a lack of faith in God’s provision. But planted in the center of the Garden was another tree. It was the Tree of Life. Eating of this tree would provide eternal life. Both trees were at the center of the Garden indicating the primacy of Adam’s choice. The tree he chose to eat from represented the hinge on which history would swing. The role of eating, as an act of faith or disbelief, serves as **the central defining moment** at the inauguration of redemptive history.

The Tree of Life represents the Eucharist. It is this tree that gives us eternal life as Christ is said to have hung from a tree offering his flesh as true food. In eating the flesh that was nailed to that tree³, we obtain eternal life. In the Fall of Adam we have the antithetical Eucharist, a reverse Communion that required an antidote from the New Adam. But through Christ the Cross of Calvary becomes a Tree of Life⁴ of which we eat.

Joseph: Resurrected, Revealed, Savior

Scene 1: New Life through bread and wine

The story of Joseph in Genesis is filled with Eucharistic imagery. The entire deliverance segment of his life is shrouded in the typology of the sacrament. While in an Egyptian prison, Joseph was joined by Pharaoh’s baker - of **bread** and the cupbearer - of **wine**. The

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1324

² Romans 5:14

³ John 6:51 - Christ states it is the flesh we need to eat was what he sacrificed on the cross

⁴ Galatians 3:13 – “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us--for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’”

baker was sentenced to die but the cupbearer was to live. Because of this, we see both death and resurrection linked to the Eucharist typology. Finally, it was through Joseph's relationship with these two that he is delivered from the dungeon. The cupbearer, who lived, pleaded Joseph's cause to Pharaoh. As a result, Pharaoh released Joseph, giving him his life back. The typology provides bread and wine, death and resurrection, and a new life for Joseph, all elements of the Eucharist. Minus the "Eucharistic events" in this story, Joseph was destined to rot in prison.

Scene 2: Revealed through bread and wine

There is Eucharistic typology employed in how Joseph **revealed himself** to his brothers. Joseph placed his cup (a device for holding wine) of divination into the grain (a form of bread) sacks of his brothers. It was through this act that Joseph would draw his brothers back to him. They were accused of stealing the cup that was buried in the grain. Through this "crime" Joseph had them escorted into his presence where they confessed their sins. The typology in this scene provides bread, wine, confession and reconciliation, all elements of the Eucharist. Minus the "Eucharistic events" in this scene, this family would never reconcile.

Scene 3: Salvation of the World

Finally, Eucharistic typology is employed when Joseph saves the world with the bread of Egypt. When the people were starving they went to Pharaoh. Pharaoh told them, "Do whatever he (Joseph) tells you"⁵. The people are told to go to Joseph, hear from Him what is to be done, and as a result be fed with life giving bread. Eating the bread **saved them**. The typology in this scene provides first hearing the Word and then the eating of bread, all elements of the Eucharist in the Mass⁶. Minus the "Eucharistic events" in this scene, the world perishes.

The Threshing Floor

In the Old Testament the threshing floor existed so that people could eat bread. After the harvest, oxen pulled a sledge over the stalks of grain on the threshing floor. The sledge was a heavy wooden board with stone (or metal) spikes underneath to break the heads of grain from the stalks. The grain was then "threshed" or thrown in the air where the wind blew the chaff away and the grain fell back onto the threshing floor. Because of this, threshing floors were often located on hilltops with access to the wind.⁷

⁵ Notice the wording of Pharaoh in this story compared to the wording of Mary at the wedding feast in Canaan. After the seven years of abundance, the famine begins and the people go to Pharaoh for food. The response of Pharaoh is, "Go to Joseph, whatever he says to you do". When the servants come to Mary after the wine ran out at the wedding feast, Mary tells them, "Whatever He says to you, do it". In these stories we have a picture of the Word and sacrament.

⁶ This is similar to the order of the Mass. We first hear what is to be done in the proclamation of the Word. Then we eat the Bread of Life.

⁷ With the wind we see the imagery of the Holy Spirit (see John 3:7).

Threshing floors were used by God to stage significant events in the Old Testament. A few are listed here.

- The Temple was where the Old Testament sacrifices were offered in the Davidic kingdom. *It was built on the site of Araunah the Jebusite's threshing floor.*
- Abraham offered his son Isaac *on the future site* of Araunah's threshing floor, which also served as the future site of the Temple.
- Uzzah was struck dead at a threshing floor when he touched the Ark⁸.
- David was judged at the threshing floor after he conducted the census⁹.
- Ahab's death was pronounced¹⁰ at a threshing floor.
- Ruth's inclusion into the Messianic line¹¹ took place at a threshing floor.
- Gideon was given a sign from God to act¹² at a threshing floor.

The threshing floor is rich in Eucharistic typology. How so? On the threshing floor the **grain was crushed** and torn by a wooden sledge with **metal spikes**, rendering an image of Christ, the bread of life, being mortally pierced on the Cross. Threshing also included separating the grain from the chaff. Those united to Christ have access to heaven while those not united are lost. And any union with Christ is an act of the Holy Spirit who blows where he wishes¹³. The grain was eventually turned into bread, completing the Eucharist imagery. The threshing floor's Eucharistic typology is employed by God to evoke redemptive acts.

In the New Testament, John the Baptist depicts Christ's ministry as taking place on the threshing floor. In Luke chapter 3 John states, "[Christ] will **baptize** you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his **threshing floor**, and to gather the **wheat** into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." The central theme of Christ's redemptive work was cast within the sacramental context of baptism and Eucharist. Christ's ministry is framed in Eucharistic and baptismal themes.

The Book of Ruth and the Eucharist

The book of Ruth is a beautiful love story. The story revolves around a Naomi (a widow), Ruth (her daughter in law) and Boaz. The story depicts how Ruth and Boaz fall in love, are married and become the great-grand parents of King David and eventually ancestors of Christ.

All of the major events in the story revolve around the barley harvest and eventually the threshing floor. The Eucharistic typology serves as the context for key events.

- Naomi and Ruth return to Israel after fleeing a famine, during the *barley harvest*.
- The two women reside near Bethlehem, the *house of bread*.

⁸ II Samuel 6:6

⁹ II Samuel 24:16-25

¹⁰ I Kings 22:10

¹¹ Ruth 3:3-18

¹² Judges 6:37

¹³ John 3:8 - The word for Spirit and wind is that same in Greek (pneuma) and Hebrew (ruwach).

- Ruth first meets Boaz while *gleaning* in a field during *the harvest*.
- At the *threshing floor* Ruth expresses a desire to marry the other.
- Boaz reciprocates by presenting Ruth with six measures of barley (an excessive amount).

Eucharistic imagery served as the context for each major event in the book. Minus these Eucharist events, the Messianic chain is broken as Christ descended from this union (see the genealogies or Christ recorded in Matthew and Luke).

Restoration Through Word and Sacrament

After years of patiently warning Israel through His prophets, God finally invoked judgment upon the nation. In time the Assyrians came from the north, sending the northern kingdom into captivity, never to be seen again. For Judah, God brought the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem, level the Temple and exile the people. However, God was merciful to the Jews. After 70 years he began to restore the Jewish nation.

Jerusalem's resettlement is found in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The two men whose names are found on these books were the leaders of the restoration. It was Ezra and Nehemiah who would rebuild the New Jerusalem and the New Temple. In doing so, these men represent the Word and the sacrament. How so? Ezra was a scribe of the Law and taught the people the commands of God. He is therefore a picture of the Word. And who was Nehemiah? He was the king's cupbearer. In him we have a picture of the Eucharist. It was through the office of cupbearer that Nehemiah, **while in the act of pouring wine for the king**, requested the rebuilding of the New Jerusalem. While the restoration of the New Jerusalem began without Nehemiah, the restoration of the New Jerusalem could not continue without his intervention. Minus the "Eucharistic event" in this story (preceded by the Word), the New Jerusalem is not re-built.

The Passover

The first Passover required two primary facets. The Passover lamb was slain and its blood placed on the doorposts of the home. Secondly, the lamb was to be eaten. Neither was an option, "and thus **you shall eat it**". As a result the angel of death would "pass over" the home when he saw the blood. The Passover was to be celebrated throughout all generations as a memorial¹⁴ followed by a seven-day feast of the Unleavened Bread (where we begin to see bread linked with the Passover). The Passover was the **central** event freeing the Hebrews from slavery. Minus the typological event, bondage remained.

The New Testament states the Passover was a type of the Eucharist. Christ is called our Passover by St. Paul where he states, "**Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us, therefore let us join the feast**", the feast being the Eucharist. The Apostle John repeatedly refers to Christ as the Lamb of God. Such a term is meaningless outside of the Passover context (what else would it mean?). And so during the Mass we pray,

¹⁴ The Passover and Eucharist are both described as memorials in Exodus 12:14 and 1 Corinthians 11:26

“Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us
Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, grant us peace.”

The Last Supper, conducted on the Passover, was in effect the first Mass and Eucharist.

The Eucharist Shatters Protestantism

Thus far we have demonstrated how Eucharistic typology is central to redemptive history as found in the Old Testament. But it is also interesting to note how the Eucharist has played a role in the history of Christendom. One outcome of the Reformation was that Protestants denied the Catholic teaching on the Eucharist. No Protestant sect claims its Holy Communion is identical to the Eucharist of the Mass. But rejecting the Eucharist, as it was historically understood, had consequences. Paul says that we are one body because we eat the one bread¹⁵. By *extracting* the historical Eucharist from their churches and *inserting* a new innovation¹⁶, Protestants denied themselves a sacramental grace.

During the Reformation there were great hopes of keeping the Catholic protesters from splintering into a thousand directions. A meeting between Luther and Zwingli, the two pillars of the Reformation at the time (Calvin came later) met for the purpose of reviewing fifteen different doctrinal issues they hoped to agree on and keep the Reformers united. The meeting is known as the Marburg Conference and it was held October 1-4, 1529 in the German principality of Hesse. Agreement was reached on fourteen issues. The fifteenth item was the Lord’s Supper. Zwingli held that the meal was a symbolic ordinance meant to remember Christ. Luther held that Christ’s flesh and blood was contained in the bread and wine¹⁷, a view later known as consubstantiation. With no consensus, the conference ended contentiously. Because of the differences Luther refused to acknowledge Zwingli and his followers as Christian¹⁸. The Protestant church was to be a “house divided¹⁹”, with over 20,000 Protestant denominations resulting. By extracting the historical Eucharist from their midst, the debate over the nature of its replacement served as the toxic brew that **shattered** Protestantism.

Summary

Eucharistic typology plays a central role in redemptive history. A studied reading of scripture elevates the Eucharist in ways that are foreign to most Protestants. The Church recognizes the centrality of the sacrament, considering it the summit of the Catholic faith. But while this essay has provided a context for Catholic teaching, it has not addressed the most important element of the Eucharist, the Real Presence and the sacrifice of the Mass. In our next essay we will examine why the Church believes the Eucharist is the sacrificed body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ. Armed with such an understanding, no Catholic would ever be tempted to abandon the Church.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 10:17

¹⁶ To be fair, Protestants sincerely claimed they were restoring the historical Eucharist, as given by Christ.

¹⁷ Most Protestants believe Christ’s words of institution *mean*, “This **represents** my body”. Lutherans believe Christ’s words of institution *mean*, “This **contains** my body”. Catholics believe Christ’s words on institution *mean (as they say)*, “This **is** my body”. This will be addressed further in the Part II essay.

¹⁸ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marburg_Colloquy

¹⁹ Mark 3:25