

'On Celebration'

Sandra Menteith

A Catholic response to keynote speech on food systems by Russ Grayson at the Pre World Parliament event at Parramatta 2nd August 2009 - Feasting and Fasting

We frequently celebrate the milestones and transitions in our lives with a shared meal. Food of course provides so much more than a full stomach. The slicing of fruit can remind us of the beauty and art provided by nature; the aroma of baking bread brings a smile of anticipation. 'Meals, whether simple or more elaborate, are meant to be a celebration. They are mini Sabbaths in our day'¹, times of rest, and times of acknowledging the life sustaining gifts of food and relationships.

Yet, when we reflect on the hunger in our world and our unsustainable agricultural practices, it is easy to feel guilty about our enjoyment of food. However our celebration of food is, in many ways, closely associated with what we bring to that food. We can eat with, or without, thanks or mindfulness, and this may determine whether the tone of our meal is a celebrative spirit, or one of arrogance and apathy.

So what is the significance of the push to fast food and industrialised agriculture, or genetically engineered food, for the Christian community that gathers each Sunday to listen to the Word of God, and break the bread in celebrating the Eucharist?

The root meaning of the word Companion is 'one who breaks bread with another'. A companion is one who comes 'with bread', and so welcomes and enables others to join in the journey of life.

In the Catholic tradition we see in the central significance of the Eucharist the profound spiritual dimensions of eating. **When we make Eucharist– the bread that is broken and shared – at our common table, we don't want the bread that has been stolen from the mouths of the poor, or come as a result of destroying our lands or diminishing biodiversity, produced as a result of unfair trade or labour without a living wage, laced with toxic elements or threatening the integrity of Creation.**

These food practices suggest a profound disengagement from the vitality of Creation. Rather than seeing eating as a sharing in the well-being and flow of all life, we have instead turned eating into the mere purchasing of commodities that we use according to convenience.

In contrast I would claim that our eating is always a 'communal act', a celebratory act of communion. Our participation in the communion meal of the Eucharist signifies a reordering of our sensibilities and a reconciling of our relationships, as Christ becomes part of us with the effect that 'old patterns of exclusion, violence and injustice are replaced with new practices of welcome, hospitality, and service. The very materiality of the meal indicates that religious life, far from being a personal 'spiritual' quest, is the embodied expression of God's peace and joy on earth' - a source of profound celebration'.²

As Catholic theologian Denis Edwards notes, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, all of Creation is *lifted up* to God in offering and thanksgiving and thereby begins to shape our ecological imagination, as well as the mind and the heart, so that we apprehend the universe as one of

¹ Mary Schramm, founder St Martin's Table

² Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God*

communion and interconnectedness in Christ³. It functions as a genuine counter-balance to a consumer culture. The realm of God is present among us shifting our priorities and perspectives out of conventional and selfish concerns, and drawing us toward the enticing promise of God's *shalom*. We recognize the possibility of the world's transformation.

Another world is possible. In the words of Pope John Paul II who spoke of food as being at the heart of our human and religious experience ... 'In the commitment to transform unjust structures to restore man's dignity... the Eucharist becomes in life what it means in celebration.'⁴

The 'lifting up of Creation' is meant to be carried out by all people around the world. The whole of Creation is one lavish feast to which the Creator invites all.

Upon our common table at this time also rests a smorgasbord of new ideas, and hearts full of hope that we can transform our food systems so that they sustain the Earth and its life forms, nurture human health, respect those who labour gives us food, and guarantee a place at the table for everyone.

This we could truly celebrate together as an earth community!

Sandra Menteith is an occasional teacher at the Catholic Institute of Sydney with research interests in Environmental ethics and Education for Sustainability, Commissioner - Franciscan Friars JPIC commission, environmental activist and Transition Towns leader.
Contact: menteith@bigpond.net.au

³ Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*

⁴ From the Synod on the Eucharist, 2005