

Caroline Walker Bynum informs readers of the importance of food and fasting during the medieval period in her article entitled “Fast and Feast: The Historical Background,” from her “Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women.” Bynum explains how “Christians male and female paid tribute to God’s power and acknowledged their own sinfulness by renouncing food” (31), and in addition, how food is used to symbolize the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Feasts were usually held days before fasting began, participants undergoing one last pleasure of food and wine before experiencing a moment of suffering.

Food’s importance in religion connects it with the story of Christ’s crucifixion and the suffering he endured on the cross. According to the New Testament, Christ paid for the sins of humanity by undergoing the physical pain and torture of death.

“Christ’s fast in the garden and his sacrifice on the cross were spoken of less as part of a cosmic drama in which hell was forced to vomit forth the indigestible bread of Christ than as moments of terrible suffering that gave significance to all human experience because the man who suffered was God” (32).

Fasting, according to Bynum, is a symbolic form of understanding the pains of physical suffering, because an individual’s moment of fasting results in the uncomfortable pangs of hunger. What this article signifies is the mere idea of understanding: the only way one can truly understand the purpose of suffering is to experience it for him- or herself. Hell could not consume Christ because of the good in his heart: the sacrifices he made for the entire human race.

As much as fasting symbolizes true suffering for the good of humanity, it may also be linked to fertility. Bynum briefly notes in her article that hunger pains were

associated with women and their purpose on Earth. Women fasted for suffering as well, but their reasons were more complex.

“The earliest forms of fasting were often connected with fertility cults, with goddesses, and with women’s physiological processes” (34).

A woman’s suffering usually links to pregnancy, such as enduring the physical process of labor when giving birth. Her understanding of the pains of labor becomes more emphasized when going through long periods of not eating. A mother-goddess was also a sign of fertility and protection for those bearing children.

Such acts of fasting can determine human individuality and emotions as well. As Bynum notes,

“Hunger meant human vulnerability, which God comforted with food, or it meant human self-control, adopted in an effort to keep God’s commandments” (54).

To be given food implied that a person became less inferior and more dominant, because food in the Bible is what ends all pain and suffering. To suffer meant to be helpless and easier to control; in other words, the person became weak and overpowering, unable to stand up for what he or she believed to be right in the world. On the other hand, hunger could also mean loyalty to God; if a person suffered by fasting, then that would mean God would have the power to control him or her. God is always the superior in the Bible, for He is known to have made the first human in His image. Therefore, undergoing physical pain and torture means that God is in the highest, reigning over all. One less than God is one more loyal to Him.

Whether we choose to fast or to be fed, it is in a way associated with who we are as people. If the food tasted a certain way, it determined what kind of person someone was emotionally.

“If the flesh was sweet as well as bitter, that was because all our humanness, including our fleshliness, was redeemed in the fact of the Incarnation. . . . If the agony was also ecstasy, it was because our very hunger is union with Christ’s limitless suffering, which is also limitless love” (67).

The Bible views Christ as the Son of God, one who loved everyone, regardless of character or emotions. He suffered due to the strength of his love for the human race, willing to sacrifice his own life as an act of forgiveness for our sins. We are who we are because of how God created us, and certain people feel more bitterness than others because they emotionally become more vulnerable. Everyone is loved equally by God, whether he or she feels smaller and more helpless than someone else.

What makes this article truly fascinating is the way Bynum connects the nature of fasting with the traditional story of Christ. Each everyday, physical action done by humans in society symbolizes some form of loyalty to God, while our emotions connect with and empathize for the Lord. When we fast on certain holidays during the year, we are actually paying tribute to Christ’s crucifixion, for, like him, we, too, are experiencing both the physical and mental pains of suffering. Eating food, on the other hand, produces the opposite: when we eat and drink, we “eat God,” or eat the body of Christ. Such action is what names Christ the official bread and wine of humanity.

The New Testament refers to Christ telling his disciples to “eat my body and drink my blood,” signifying him as a symbol of humankind. Medieval feasts often had bread and wine served, the bread substituting for Christ’s body and the wine for his blood.

“Communion, once a communal meal and the heart of the mass, became separated from consecration; devotion pivoted increasingly not around eating the host but around the moment at which the elements of bread and wine became, in the hands of the priest, Christ’s body and blood” (32).

The breaking and then the multiplying of the bread in feeding the hungry stands for the scattering of Christ's body over the Earth. "Eat my body" literally means that one is consuming the soul of Christ within himself or herself, implying that each individual on Earth has some part of him always present with him or her. We are all one with God. Christ is our Lord, and the continuous multiplying of the bread means that there is always more than enough to share with everyone. Also, the consumption of food means that we are feeding our immortal souls, which will one day leave Earth and move on to join with God. Since Christ died with good in his heart, Hell could not destroy his soul, because an act of love is always stronger than those of coldness and hatred.

"In sharp contrast to the late medieval emphasis on Christ's body as broken and bleeding...the Incarnation (is) fresh bread that feeds the hungry people of God" (40).

"Drink my blood," on the other hand, could imply the washing away of humanity's sins. Because Christ is the figure of humankind, offering part of his soul to every mortal human on Earth reminds each one of his love and forgiveness, passed out equally among person to person. Having part of Christ inside each individual reminds him or her of the exact reasons he died on the cross, and it is the very part of our soul that makes it immortal.

When Christ was taken down from the cross after his crucifixion, the New Testament refers to "his broken body." Both his physical suffering and his love for the people are inside each one of us, bringing forth the belief that there are two sides to every human being: a good and a bad. Everyone has love within him or her, although we are the ones who choose to show it or not.

“Faced with growing devotion to the bread and wine themselves, exactly because the crumbs and drops masked (thinly) the substance of Christ, theologians struggled to retain a firm emphasis on Christ’s body as one, because one church and one humanity are saved by it” (51).

Christ’s body “as one,” stating here, symbolizes the human race as one, because in our hearts, we are all alike. We feel the same emotions, we walk and talk in the same way, and we have equal authority. We fast in order to understand Christ’s suffering, and we eat to understand his love. No one individual is superior over any other, for we are all one soul under the love of God and his Son.

Bynum’s detailed storytelling of Christ and his suffering fits in with the study of Humanities. Literature, music and drama appear during different parts in the article, such as when Bynum talks about the great feasts held before the days of fasting began. The feasts often resulted in music and dancing, where people celebrated by drinking wine and consuming great amounts of food. In addition, the music and drama connects itself to literature by both the fasting and the consumption of food standing for Christ’s suffering and love inside each human being.

“When Gertrude the Great made the Eucharistic host into many crumbs in her mouth, thinking that each particle stood for a soul in the flames of purgatory, she seemed to be equating the crumbliness of bread not with the unity of Christians...but with their individualness, their separateness, their suffering” (64).

According to the story, not only did the broken bread stand for Christ’s broken body, but it also stood for human individualism.

Food was a main item of pleasure during medieval times, and as a result, people used it during feasts as a state of retelling the story of Christ’s crucifixion. Right before the moment of fasting was about to occur, the feast was held as a way of letting people have their last chance to feel fully satisfied before undergoing the physical pains of

hunger. Hunger, according to Bynum's article, meant suffering, because Christ suffered in both body and soul for the sins of humanity. His words "eat my body, and drink my blood," as he told his disciples in the New Testament, symbolizes the scattering of his soul over the earth, so each individual has both a part of his love and a part of his suffering within him or her. In conclusion, for each person in the world to have part of Christ in his or her body, he or she must feel both full (signifying love and happiness) and hungry (bitterness and tears): that which makes each one of us fully human because we have both love and anger in our hearts.