

# OUR PATHWAY TO GOD: TASTE

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**T**O BEGIN, let's mull over four Scripture quotes:  
'Taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps. 34: 8).

- 'Your promise is sweet to my taste, Lord. It is sweeter than honey in the mouth.' (Ps.119:103).

- 'The words of the Lord are 'sweeter than honey, even than honey that drips from the comb' (Ps. 19:10).

- 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Deut. 8; 3 and Matt. 4:4).

Psalms 34 is one of the Wisdom psalms. The basic theme of Wisdom literature is to recognize that God is supreme over one's life which manifests itself in worshipping God and obeying his commandments. Verse 8 cited above encapsulates all this—'taste and see that the Lord is good.' From there, the Psalm proceeds to develop how tasting the gift of God's goodness brings an imperative to embrace forms of behavior for that gift to be embodied in society and in our world.

The language of taste, therefore, is deeply Biblical, as the Psalms above have indicated. These texts remind us that to *know* God is to *share* in God's life. We are 'fed' when God speaks to us so that we are drawn closer to Him. Such 'food' can shape us spiritually, mentally, psychologically, socially, emotionally, even physically. Through the eyes of 'faith', we can 'find God in all things.' The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that people of faith have 'tasted the gifts from heaven, and received a share of the Holy Spirit, and appreciated the good message of God and the powers of the world to come' (6:4-6).

Three further thoughts, then, emerge from these texts.

First, God's 'word' suggests the Word—Jesus as God incarnate, present in his Church and the mysteries of faith. Special here are the *Scriptures*. St. Jerome reminds us, to be ignorant of the Scriptures is to be ignorant of Christ. In one opening text above, appeal is made to the sense of taste in that the words of the Lord are 'sweeter than honey.' In another text, God's word is needed to nourish us and help us respond to our deepest yearnings.

But we must also keep in mind, as Karl Barth insisted, that Scripture as God's word is identified with the person of the eternal Word. Brevard S. Childs notes that, for one who is open to the witness of the Scriptures, 'the very divine reality which the interpreter strives to grasp, is the very One who grasps the interpreter.'<sup>1</sup> To hear or read the Scriptures is not simply listening to a communication or to taste a 'word.' We not only learn 'about' God. We engage with the *person* of the Word, discover further depths in Jesus and also in ourselves through the action of the Holy Spirit. We are called to 'taste and see that *the Lord* is good.' It is to deepen and strengthen a personal relationship of faith in Jesus: 'I believe you because I *believe* in you.'

Second, God's self-revelation has a second volume—*creation*. This includes not only the cosmos and the environment but other people, events in our lives, suffering, family life and all our relationships. In these, we know God through the mediation of what God has created.

Spiritual writers, *e.g.*, John of the Cross, remind us there is a third way in which we can know God and be nourished: by *immediate* union with God. On reflection, this is an extraordinary claim. How can there be that 'nothing between us' contact of the omnipotent God and his limited, even fallen, creature? The language of 'touch' and 'taste'

are used to express this mystery. It is particularly associated with the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit. Let's pursue this further.

### *Faith and the Gifts of the Spirit*

Jesus promised the gift of the Spirit who 'will guide you into all truth' (John 16:13). Paul speaks of the body of Christ as animated and directed by 'different kinds of gifts but the same Spirit' (1 Cor. 12:4). One aspect of this mentioned by Paul and other authors is 'charisms', namely, concrete expressions of the Spirit's action enabling specific functions for building up the Church. Paul also speaks of the Spirit's presence and activity in all the baptised. As Anthony Kelly points out, the Spirit's activities (named as guiding, speaking, hearing and declaring), are explicitly related to Jesus: 'He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you' (John: 16:14). This is again seen in Paul for whom to be 'in Christ' and to live 'in the Spirit' are closely linked. Kelly explains that:

From a Pauline point of view, it is clear that the gift of the Spirit permeates Christian consciousness, for the Spirit of the risen One saturates all dimensions of Christian experience: "... no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts that are bestowed on us by God" (1 Cor 2:9-10). A new field of communication results: "And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual" (1 Cor 2:9-13).<sup>2</sup>

Approaching this from another angle, Bernard Lonergan speaks of faith as the 'eye of religious love', a knowing that stems from love, especially love that is given and directed by God. It is from 'God's love flooding our hearts' that comes 'another kind of knowledge reached through the discernment of value and the judgments of value of a person in love.'<sup>3</sup>

In his discussion of faith, Anthony Kelly reminds us that this love not only unites



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believers to God but situates them in the community of faith. The social bond associated with faith brings 'shared scriptural, doctrinal, institutional and moral beliefs' that are enacted and transform believers in the Church's sacramental and liturgical life.<sup>4</sup>

The gift of the Spirit takes more specific form in the 'seven gifts' of the Holy Spirit (as named in the Christian tradition) which are present and active within the corporate consciousness and experience of the Church which, in turn, mediates the Spirit's guiding presence in the lives of individual believers. Such a presence is transformative at the cognitive, affective and behavioural levels. As Kelly notes:

By locating the cognitive aspect of faith and shared beliefs in the affectivity of consciousness transformed by the gift of love and shared within the corporate experience of the Church, Lonergan is invoking a long tradition represented in the Thomist understanding of the connaturalising power of charity, and the operation of the "gifts of the Spirit."<sup>5</sup>

The seven gifts reflect the transformation of consciousness that is 'connaturalising', namely, of bringing about a 'new identity, spiritual activity and modes of experience' attuned to the divine domain as if this is 'second nature' and instinctive. In the cognitive realm there are wisdom, understanding, knowledge and counsel shaping and directing our perception and appreciation of the 'divine economy revealed in Christ.' Our affective receptivity and responsiveness is informed and guided by

piety, fear of the Lord and fortitude that shape the discernment of true values and inform a resolute will to pursue their call to self-transcendence. In a timely reminder, Kelly notes that 'far from destroying or compromising human intelligence and liberty, the Spirit given "instinct" manifest in the gifts enlarges and completes the Christian's affective, intellectual and moral capacities.'<sup>6</sup>

Let's put the spotlight on what Aquinas regarded as the greatest of the gifts, namely, *wisdom*.

### *Wisdom as Taste*

Building on the texts at the start of this article highlights something central in the spiritual journey: to develop a taste for God is to learn to taste with God and to grow in wisdom. Its origins are in our share in the divine life through grace. As a form of learning it is 'experiential.' What does that mean?

An earlier article suggested that touch is common to all our senses in that they all involve the body in some way. In his commentary on Ps. 34 (33) and verse 8 'taste and see that the Lord is good', Aquinas gives us a helpful insight.

We can be aware of something distant or absent by sight, smell and hearing—I can see the horizon, smell the car fumes, hear the thunder. But we can only touch or taste something that is present, within immediate range, to my hand or in my mouth.

Aquinas notes that, with touch, we make contact in an extrinsic way, namely from the outside, through the outer layer of the object. We can't touch the inner aspect of the piece of wood although when I feel the beautiful oak cabinet I can sense an underlying depth. Or touch can open up what is unseen yet profound—a hand held can trigger a moment of shared pain.

But taste is different. It enables us to experience something 'from inside what we are tasting', says Aquinas. I can fondle the apple. When I bite into it, I have another level of

sensation, a sort of 'inside knowledge' that touch can never give me. Since God is neither distant nor outside but within us, then, suggests Aquinas, it is appropriate that the experience of God and divine goodness is called *tasting*.<sup>7</sup> The closer we are to God, the more we grow in tasting God and a taste *for* God. We know God 'from the inside.'

### *God's Taste and Good Taste*

Let's pursue this further, especially in terms of 'taste and see that the Lord is *good*.' To savour God is intrinsically linked with developing *good taste*, or perhaps, more accurately, *God's taste*. We not only come to relish God. We participate in the divine taste and so are increasingly sensitized to appreciate what is truly good.

The knowing from faith that is shaped and directed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit accompanies the transforming gift of grace whereby a person participates more and more in the knowing, loving, and responding of the persons of the Trinity. Because God is the object (a new horizon), grace entails a 'gifted excess' whereby there is a shift to a higher level of spiritual activity of the intellect, will, and the virtues so that, through the gifts, their mode of operation exceeds their natural boundaries, the limits of reason. The emphasis now is not so much on our own human activity but of a receptive stance to being moved by, and responding to, the action of God.

Kelly explains this as involving 'a certain affective and cognitive 'feel', 'instinct' or 'sympathy' implied in the effusive character of the gift. It gives rise to the tradition of "spiritual senses", as found with different emphases in the writings of Origen, Augustine, Bonaventure, Ignatius of Loyola.'<sup>8</sup> The graced person is enabled to operate in a supra-rational mode, governed by divine instinct rather than by the calculative mode of reason. The person is moved to another level under the influence of grace. It is described as an instinct, a 'taste' for the things of God that draws one to

perceive, choose, and respond in a manner that is 'second nature,' namely, as if it is natural and normal for us to know, feel, love, and act as God does. For Aquinas, this is appropriately described as wisdom, an immediate knowing that comes from loving.<sup>9</sup>

We share, then, in God's way of discerning, of knowing instinctively what is truly valuable *in* God's eyes and *with* God's eyes. We slowly come to know, judge, respond and love as the persons of the Trinity do. It is very much a collaborative process. Through the gift of wisdom, we share in God's wisdom. We see, attend to and evaluate life and our actions through God's eyes and with God's mind and heart.

Let's take this a bit further in more specific terms. Take your Bible and read through 1 Corinthians 2: 6-13. What stands out for you in the passage?

Probably the verse we first recognize is verse 9: 'the things no eye has seen and no ear has heard, things beyond the mind of man, all that God has prepared for those who love him.' Perhaps we interpret those words as referring to what awaits us with God in heaven.

While it does include that, the primary context of Paul's words is captured later when he says 'These are the very things that God has revealed to us through his Spirit.' In other words, it is the wisdom that comes from God now through accepting in faith the 'plan' of God revealed to use in Christ. It is the Spirit who helps us 'to understand the gifts that he has given us.'

What sort of understanding? Paul is referring to the wisdom that does not 'know' by logic or analysis. It is a knowing that comes from love. It resembles the intuitive knowledge a mother has of her child. It can't be proved or argued. Its certainty is embedded in the bonds of love. To an outsider it may defy logic or 'reason'. But it can often be more rational and truth-bearing than the perspective of a detached observer. It is a deeply personal and 'experiential' understanding.

So it is with the 'taste' or wisdom from the

Holy Spirit. It is a sixth sense about what is right and truly good. One is convinced because it 'rings true', a kind of sympathy or co-feeling with God arising from union with God through love.

It brings a certainty that is often difficult to explain. It seems just beyond words. This occurs through the action of the Gifts of the Spirit, helping us to understand 'the depths of God.' As Anthony Kelly says, these Gifts 'attune us to the milieu in which we are called to live.' St. Ignatius of Loyola used the word '*sentir*' for the relish, the direct savouring of spiritual realities. It is based on the analogy of a wine taster, or in an earlier age, of a sauce taster (in French a *saucier*).

Since we image God uniquely in our knowing, loving and freedom, these capacities are taken to a higher level—to be more lively, supple, receptively attuned to the action of the Spirit. This sharing in divine wisdom and all Seven Gifts shapes our affectivity—our will and our emotional life. We are called to follow love's instinct as it reverberates in every level of our being.

Under the transforming action of the Spirit, then, we become God-tasters and Godlike tasters with good taste.

### *Tasting, Eucharist and Hope*

Finally, the Eucharist is often seen as 'tasting the heavenly gift.' When we eat and drink the body and blood of Christ, our spiritual taste-buds are made sharper and more sensitive. Again, Aquinas is helpful here in highlighting the aspect of affective response in a personal encounter with Christ in reception of his body and blood.

The effect of this sacrament is considered from the way in which this sacrament is given; for it is given by way of food and drink. And therefore this sacrament does for the spiritual life all that material food does for the bodily life, namely, by sustaining, giving increase, restoring, and giving delight. Accordingly, Ambrose says (*De Sacram. v*): 'This is the bread of everlasting life, which supports the substance of our soul.'<sup>10</sup>

Aquinas goes on to consider the relationship between Christ and the believer from the slightly different perspective. Richard Cross points out that when Aquinas speaks of Christ as head of the Church the emphasis is less on the Christian life as some form of personal encounter with Jesus. Rather, it is rather 'the means whereby the believer is enabled to take on the Christ's way of "looking" at things: Christ gives the believer a 'spiritual sense'—a Christ-like capacity to make proper judgments about the values of things.'<sup>11</sup>

Again, in the Eucharist we share in the work of Christ's transformation: of bread and wine into his body and blood but also in the movement towards the fulfillment of the divine plan for the created universe. Christian hope is both nourished and broadened by sharing in the mind of Christ.

Finally, let's return to one of our original texts: 'Your promise is sweet to my taste, Lord. It is sweeter than honey in the mouth.'

(Ps.119:103). The Eucharist is the 'bread of everlasting life', a fore-taste of heaven. We taste (contact from the inside) the object of our hope, namely God, already present in faith and love. The divine promise, embodied in the Risen Jesus, is partially realized in union with him on our journey. We have a real, though imperfect share in the communion of saints—a relishing in the love, peace and joy of God.

What we have said is summed up in the Church's liturgy. Let's pause for a moment and savour this prayer from the Mass of Corpus Christi.

*Lord Jesus Christ,  
You give us your body and blood in the  
Eucharist  
As a sign that even now we share your  
life.  
May we come to possess it completely  
In the Kingdom where you live  
For ever and ever. Amen.*

## NOTES

1. Brevard S Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: theological reflections on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 86-7 cited in John Thornhill, 'Do We Need a More Adequate Theology of the Scriptures?', *Pacifica* 9 (February 1996), 15-34 at 26.
2. Anthony J Kelly, 'Faith as Sight? Toward a Phenomenology of Revelation', *Australian Ejournal of Theology* (19:3, December 2012), 180-194, at 187.
3. Bernard Lonergan, SJ, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972), 115.
4. Kelly, 'Faith as Sight?', 188.
5. Kelly, 'Faith as Sight?', 188.
6. Kelly, 'Faith as Sight?', 89 and 90.
7. Thomas Aquinas, *Postilla super Psalmos* 33,8 cited in Tony Kelly CSsR, *The Bread of God; Nurturing a Eucharistic Imagination* (Pymble, NSW: HarperCollinsReligious, 2001), 89.
8. Kelly, 'Faith as Sight?', 187.
9. *Summa Theologiae* 1, 1, 5, ad 2. Beyond knowing God in what he does, "loving familiarity with God is possible (ST 1.2. q. 27, a. 2, ad 2), since love for God can go further than knowledge, to 'join' us to what exceeds our knowing" (Anthony J. Kelly, C.SS.R and Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B., *Experiencing God in the Gospel of John* [New York: Paulist, 2003] 22).
10. *Summa Theologiae* 3.79.1c.
11. Richard Cross, 'Thomas Aquinas' in Paul Gavriluk & Sarah Coakley, *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (New York and Cambridge UK: CUP, 2012), 174-189 at 181 commenting on *Summa Theologiae*.3.,69.5c.