

Jesus, Bridegroom of the Church and of Every Soul

The Jewish Roots of the Eucharist as a Wedding Feast

From an ancient Jewish perspective, the one true God—"the LORD" or "He Who Is" (Hebrew YHWH) (Exodus 3:15)—is not just the Creator. From an ancient Jewish perspective, the God of Israel is also a *Bridegroom*, a divine person whose ultimate desire it to be united to his creatures in an everlasting relationship that is so intimate, so permanent, so sacrificial, and so life-giving that it can only be described as a *marriage* between Creator and creatures, between God and human beings, between YHWH and Israel.

(Brant Pitre, JESUS the BRIDEGROOM, The Greatest Love Story Ever Told, New York, Image Publishing, 2014, Page 8.)



As we begin the National Three-Year Eucharistic Revival under the leadership of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, it is paramount that we reflect on the Jewish roots of the Eucharist and the theme of espousal between God and His people in the Scriptures.

God created mankind to be a family mirroring the family life of the Trinity. The human family was established with the bonds of a marriage between a man and a woman, Adam and Eve. When Adam sinned, God made a covenant with him and promised a Redeemer to free him and his descendants from the death sin brought by his disobedience. A covenant, then, is a sacred family bond between persons, creating a permanent and sacred relationship. God made another covenant with Abraham that he would be the father of a multitude of nations. We see how God rewarded Abraham's obedience in his willingness to sacrifice his only son in a holocaust to God by granting him victory over his enemies. Thereafter, the King of Salem, the priest Melchizedek, established a new order of sacrifice by offering bread and wine in celebration of the covenant between God and Abraham. We certainly see how this prefigures Christ's sacrificial Passover meal at the Last Supper when he established the New Covenant in His Blood with His people, His Church, built upon the pillars of the 12 apostles and the rock of Peter, His first Vicar on earth.

In time, God's people broke their covenant with Him and sinned grievously against Him. He destroyed the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, but renewed his covenant with Noah that he would never again destroy the whole earth with a flood. The rainbow became the sign of that covenant. When God's people were enslaved in Egypt, He sent Moses to deliver them and fed them manna from heaven as they passed through the desert into the Promised Land, again prefiguring the Eucharistic Bread of Christ's own Body, the true Bread come down from heaven. Salvation history for the ancient Jew is centered on the covenants God made with His people, and for them, **a covenant was a divine marriage between God and them, sealed and consecrated with a banquet.** While the Ten Commandments are the sign of God's covenant with His people in the desert, Sinai was never just about the Ten Commandments; **it was nothing less than a divine**

wedding, a love feast, with the Bridegroom God of Israel and His people, celebrated and consecrated with a magnificent meal on Mount Sinai. Moses, Aaron, his sons, and 70 elders gathered at the Mount to celebrate their people's wedding with God.

This espousal theme is carried throughout the Sacred Scriptures. The Song of Songs, while exalting the beauty of sexual love in marriage, is also an allegory exalting the splendor of God's marriage with His people in the Old Covenant, and of Christ with His Church in the New Covenant. It also symbolizes the espousal of the individual with God. God is always faithful, even when His people are not. The Book of Hosea speaks of a husband who repeatedly takes back his unfaithful wife and thus, symbolizes God's fidelity to us and our repeated unfaithfulness to Him; hence, sin is not only a failure in Faith with the worship of false gods, but a failure in love with our adulterous relationships that profane the permanence and indissolubility of our marriage with God.

When Jesus was asked why His disciples do not fast, Jesus said: **"The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."** (Mt 9:14-15)

We need to see this passage in Ephesians 5:28-33 in light of this marriage theme.

So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.

In Revelation 21:2 and 19:7 the Church is seen as a bride adorned for her husband.

"And I saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. "

"Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready."

Christian tradition follows Israel's example in using marriage as an image for our relationship with God. No wonder Jesus performed His first miracle at a wedding feast where He acted more like the Bridegroom in changing water into wine, as they had no more wine, than the bridegroom himself, responsible for the wine. Changing water into wine is a prefigurement of changing bread and wine into His Body and Blood at the Last Supper feast with His beloved apostles and disciples. It was a celebration of their oneness with each other. Each would be called, not only to live and serve the other, but to be willing to die for the Lord as well. At this banquet He gave us His two great commandments of Love, to love God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. **"Love one another as I have loved you,"** He said.

When God sent Jesus into our world, He gave us His own Heart, for Jesus is the Heart of the Most Holy Trinity. All God desires now is that we give Him back His Heart, along with our own. Sister Mildred (Mary Ephrem) Neuzil expressed that same idea in her 1958 letter to her spiritual director, Father Paul Leibold, when she wrote how Jesus came to her on Holy Thursday, holding on His hands the Host and the Chalice, saying:

“I am the Host of every communion. I am Life to all who partake of Me. They who do not eat Me will die, for no one can live who does not partake of Me, for I am Eternal Life. Come, beloved souls, poor sinners so dear to the Heart of your Host. Come receive Me that you may live and enjoy everlasting happiness in the Kingdom of My Father Who is your Father also. This I have obtained for you through My Body and Blood sacrificed for you on Calvary and become your Food and Drink in the Holy Mass offered constantly for you. Do not disappoint My hopes for I have waited long, oh so long for you.

Does this not sound like the language of a lover, a Bridegroom to His beloved?

I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.... Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in Me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. (John 6:48-58, New American Bible)

Pope Benedict XVI wrote on the imagery of marriage between God and Israel, Christ and His Church, in his encyclical **Deus Caritas Est, God Is Love**. While previously marriage with God meant standing in God’s presence, now, with Christ’s New Covenant, it means union with God through sharing in Jesus’ self-gift, His self-oblation, sharing in His very Body and Blood. He goes on to say:

Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own. Communion draws me out of myself towards him, and thus also towards unity with all Christians. We become “one body”, completely joined in a single existence. Love of God and love of neighbor are now truly united: God incarnate draws us all to himself. We can thus understand how agape also became a term for the Eucharist: there God's own agape comes to us bodily, in order to continue his work in us and through us. Only by keeping in mind this Christological and sacramental basis can we correctly understand Jesus' teaching on love. ... A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented. Conversely, as we shall have to consider in greater detail below, the “commandment” of love is only possible because it is more than a requirement. Love can be “commanded” because it has first been given.

St. John of the Cross reminds us: In the first place it should be known that if a person is seeking God, his beloved is seeking him much more.

“I am a Beggar for love...” Jesus told Sister Mildred Mary Neuzil.

On June 14th, anniversary of her perpetual vows, Jesus asked Sister Mildred:

“Bride of My Heart, do you still wish to suffer all things to give Me to souls?” She answered, “Yes, yes dear Lord, I am poor and wretched, and unworthy, but you know what is in my heart.”

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