

Course: Understanding the Profane and the Sacred

To: Fr. Louis Ha

Unit 8: 飲飽食醉 – Bounty and morsel that transform

Assignment: July 1, 2025

A college classmate once told me she would never eat alone. It made her feel stand out, alone if not lonely. I do not have the same qualms. Many of my memorable meals I had when traveling by myself -- it's like the marigold (edible flower) on my salad, just picked from the garden was still shimmering with dew (Chokoloskee Island, Everglades, Florida); a brown-feathered companion sat across the table from me where we enjoyed together a simple refreshing meal of gazpacho and fluffy Tortilla Española (Madrid); I pretended not to be drunk after having a piccolo of wine as I dined al fresco on the town square of Assisi ...

But some of my favorite meals, or special memories of eating and drinking too were in the company of family and friends. I will recall a few:

Recently my mother's elder sister in Guangzhou passed away. One of my early memories was going with my mother and my sister to visit our aunt. Like everybody else, we would bring milk powder, biscuits, any food that had a longer shelf life, clothing as well as other necessities. I also remember having gone with my mother periodically to the post office where we sent cooking oil, medicine wrapped in towels that my mother had sewn into bags to relatives in the ancestor village. But every morning that we stayed at our aunt's dormitory unit, we would wake up to the scent of fresh hot milk (that tasted better than the milk from milk powder that we drank at home) along with steaming buns or rice noodle rolls (cheung fun). My aunt was widowed not long ago then. I saw books that belonged to my uncle on a rustic bookcase. When my aunt took us on outings, I remember her carefully counting out ration tickets in order to buy us a treat. In the evenings we ate together under a very dim light a meal of meat and vegetables with rice that was coarser than what we were used to in Hong Kong. A border separating two worlds; a child's intuition of difference and of deprivation; a border crossing made interminable because they made you unpack and take out everything for inspection. Yet all that felt novel to me. As a child, I also took for granted that I would enjoy the sights, sounds and smells of this close but unfamiliar city, and that I would not want for anything at my aunt's home. A couple of years ago it occurred to me, and I asked my aunt how she managed to get such extravagant food for us in the early 70s! She admitted in her understated way that it did take some effort.

My father was the main breadwinner while my mother was (and still sees her role as) the homemaker. Sometimes my father had to work two or three jobs. He would come home late and had dinner after all of us had had dinner. My mother always saved him the fleshy part of a steamed or fried fish. It's our way of saying thanks. Though my parents both worked very hard to provide for us, my father was bounteous -- to him we owe many experiences of first taste and *bon vivant*. I also know he kept careful tally of every expense. We have fond memories of dining out at a neighborhood Hakka restaurant so my mother could take an occasional break. When Easter came around, my sister and I would check every morning

for chocolate eggs that we believed laid by the bird in a nest perched on the door of our small apartment. One Sunday after a long bus ride to Tsim Sha Tsui, and crossing the harbor, then checking out books at the City Hall library, we arrived at On Lok Yuen, where with difficulty I climbed onto a tall stool, and savored my first club sandwich and fresh orange juice with pulp. I remember it was the taste of bliss! Like St Joseph, my father was a man of few words. Our dinner table was rather quiet. But my father introduced us to interesting or exotic food, encouraged our imagination, and offered us food for thought. For this I am truly grateful, though I did not get to express my thanks.

Some of the best meals I had were during a camping trip at Sleeping Bear Dunes, Michigan, my first and only camping trip so far, complete with tent-pitching and cooking over an open fire. I was with friends who were much more experienced in the matter. As students, we were on a frugal budget. But nothing ever tasted as grand as the coffee, curried beans and basmati rice cooked over an open fire; the sound of waves lapping and tall grass swaying provided the serenade for our starlit supper!

Another nurturing and formative experience took place for over nine years when I was a member of a Chinese Catholic community in Washington, D.C. After Mass every other Sunday we had lunch together in the parish hall. Usually families (from Mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong and mixed marriages) would take turns preparing the meal for about 60 people. Sometimes singles would band together and contribute too. One time my friend and I made 梅菜煮牛肉. My arm ached for days after slicing and stir-frying beef enough to feed a multitude. It was over such meals and preparation that we bonded, discerned and discussed the liturgical, practical as well as spiritual needs of our congregation. We learned to be proactive, take responsibility for our faith-formation, practice and evangelization. In preparing liturgies, field trips and sacraments for children of new immigrant families, I experienced Church as community.

That brings me to the meal that I've had over and over again, sometimes as a solitary experience; only on rare occasions have I experienced it as communion. That is why I have such a hard time writing this part of the assignment, for quite frankly the Eucharist is something that I often take for granted. I know the meal recalls a sacrifice of love:

Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is my Body, which will be given up for you. Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my Blood, the Blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in memory of me.

Over time I am able to recall how the meal has given me sustenance through different movements of my life's journey, and how many times I have been surprised, transported, or delivered -- to communions of various colors, tongues, locales and cuisines. Yet at Mass I am prone to forget how foundational the meal is to who I am, the company I am with, and the choices that I make. The word "Eucharist" means "thanksgiving" (from Greek *eu* 'well' + *kharizesthai* "offer graciously"; from *kharis* "grace"). Ah, I am slow in becoming aware, and in giving thanks for the love that makes possible the meals that count.

For I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand.¹

¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Wreck of the Deutschland."

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44403/the-wreck-of-the-deutschland>, accessed June 30, 2025)

This afternoon I attended the solemn profession of vows by Friar Francesco Li OFM.² “The vows are not taken for the person, or even for the religious community, but for the whole (world, Creation?), said Bishop Ha during the service. Something about the “minor” (微末) offering which is all that the friar is, for a world wracked with fever and violence. That touches me. It reminds me that we are small. When invited to the table set by God’s bounty, it matters less to God whether or not we give thanks. But if we are touched by grace at the altar of life, we are transformed -- we become part of God’s self-offering. In this way we remember and participate, and reach out to the broken world and Creation with love.

² I happened to watch two videos in which Friar Francesco shares his growth and discovery of the call to be “minor.” I recommend it! 《手足情編織微末心（上、下）方濟會李皓朗修士》

Part 1. <https://youtu.be/iQtlqVulMtQ?si=rLX19tzT4qS0tvNM>

Part 2. <https://youtu.be/oQ0jM6cKUgQ?si=fVxoO0Bxi5OduzOP>