

on becoming bread



REFLECTIONS *and* STORIES
to NOURISH YOUR SPIRIT

Dr. Mary Marrocco



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PROLOGUE

It was a lively day at St. John the Compassionate Mission: lunch for a hundred was being prepared by volunteers, the drop-in was swirling with comers and goers, crises little and large waxed and waned. The usual. In those days, I was assisting at this inner-city mission, which invited neighborhood folks to share meals, work, prayer, and time together as they needed. The mission housed a parish, also available to the neighborhood.

While working at the Mission, I was engaged in my doctorate in theology at a Catholic institution, reading and studying some of the greatest teachers the church has ever known. Working there complemented my studies in ways I could never have planned but was coming to see more and more.

On this day, a young couple came to visit with their little one in his stroller. We'd known the couple, Tom and Mildred, for some time but hadn't seen them since the baby's birth. Both lived on welfare and had often dropped in for meals. Today, they'd come in to ask about having their child baptized. As they were leaving, Tom turned to me saying, "Oh, by the way, do you have any diapers? The checks won't be out till Friday and we're all out."

As I went to our storage room to find a package, the combination bemused me: baptism and diapers. Once again, "the poor" were teaching me about the church: it's concerned with baptism *and* diapers. The church's liturgy touches real life in all its mundane glory; and real life reaches into the liturgy, the sacraments, spirituality, and life of the church. It's supposed to. God became

human, flesh and spirit, body and soul, just as we are. When we call the church the “body” of Christ, we really mean it. Tom didn’t hesitate to ask the church for diapers, any more than he hesitated to ask it for baptism. To him it seemed natural that the church should think of both. And isn’t it? Can the church nourish the soul and forget the body, touch the spirit but not arouse the mind, answer the longings of the heart without engaging in the social and practical lives of its members?

For me, Tom posed the question: What is all this theology for, if not for the daily lives of regular people? “Regular people” had helped me to pursue my higher studies. Three years earlier, I’d been working as a pastoral assistant in a parish. I saw the parish as the lifeblood of the church, and I enjoyed the engagement with parishioners from whom I learned constantly. After a couple of years there, I wanted to return to school and study beyond the Master of Divinity I already had, but was torn about leaving the parish.

On Holy Saturday, following that parish’s tradition, a small coterie of parishioners was preparing the church for the Easter Vigil. Several people were going to be received into the church that evening, which meant extensive preparation of many kinds. The workers (mostly women whom I’d come to know fairly well in my time there) and I spent much of the day together. They knew I was contemplating leaving them to accept the Toronto School of Theology’s invitation to the doctoral program. As we ironed, cleaned, organized, rehearsed, programmed, catechized, decorated, and otherwise set up for the service, they kindly talked over my decision with me, as though I’d been their sister. The gist of what they said to me that day was: “You can do this, and we can’t, because we’re doing other things. We need it as much as you do. You go get that education, then come back and teach us. Do it for all of us.”

This commissioning stayed with me. I couldn’t help but notice that the theologians I was studying, including St. Augustine,

on whom I wrote my dissertation, thought theology should be engaged in daily life, not set apart from it. It was Augustine who, as a young man, sided with his friend Licentius against his mother, Monica, when she chastised Licentius for singing a psalm while in the restroom. Theology and prayer are for everywhere and everything, he assured them both. Though known for the written word (and he wrote many), Augustine liked images; his theology was often earthy. Living in northern Africa, in times of great suffering, he frequently reflected that people are like olives and the world like an olive press; if the people, when pressed, become pure oil, they will be treasured in jars for Christ. Augustine loved olive oil, and he loved bread. He delighted in reflecting on Jesus who becomes bread for his people, in self-giving love and above all in Eucharist. “Behold what you are,” Augustine urged in contemplating the Eucharist, “become what you receive.”

What could it mean to become eucharistic bread? Surely, it means being more like Christ, and therefore closer to God. Our daily lives can become daily bread for others. Our whole lives can become a self-offering. It is not easy, but it is possible, and visible all around us. Theology is not what we talk about, but how we live.

After completing my doctorate, I brought all my learning about lived theology to a new work, that of being a psychotherapist. From it, too, I daily learn about the meaning of theology—that is, about the nature of God’s relationship with us, God who “loves each one of us as though there were only one of us” (Augustine again). St. John Chrysostom saw the church as a hospital and Christ as our physician, who pitched his tent among us to bring not judgment but healing.

“Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying ‘This is the way; walk in it’” (Isaiah 30:21). I’m grateful to have been guided by that voice through the years, and to have heard it on the lips of many teachers, such as Tom and Mildred, the women of my parish, and Augustine of

Hippo. The way I've walked has been nothing I could have found on my own.

It led me, through a mutual friend, to have coffee one day with the editor of a Catholic newspaper. He was wondering how best to speak to young and older adults about things that matter to them, adults who might be searching for faith or searching to know their faith better. I told him about my quest for lived theology, and the life and faith questions I'd been hearing from adults I worked with, who came from all kinds of faith and non-faith. The two of us looked at each other with a sense of recognition.

Thus was born "Questioning Faith" (I owe my ever-creative, next-oldest brother, Bernard, for the title), my regular column in which life questions and faith questions commingle and dance with each other. These writings generally begin with questions. Some I've heard from people I know or work with. Some I've heard posed in writings or by life itself, social concerns like abortion or poverty or euthanasia, theological concerns like sin and salvation, church concerns like intercommunion and care for the bereaved. Some are specific questions readers have asked me to address. My aim is to stand up to these questions with a moment in the church's life: a teaching, a feast day, a saint or renowned Christian, a liturgical expression, a hymn. How do these church moments engage or rephrase the question, what new questions do they raise, and where do they lead us? Do they touch the grit and spit and delight and night of what really happens to us and what we genuinely wonder over, exclaim at, love and seek?

This questioning determines my trajectory in each writing. I want to fulfill my commission—to give back to "regular people" the theology I was privileged to study—to become bread for them.

As I look back over years of writing these columns, I reflect on comments, questions, and criticisms I've heard from readers, which have greatly assisted me to grow in my work. I discover certain themes that have, unprogrammed, appeared and reappeared in them, showing up in their own time like unexpected guests and

coming back again intermittently like old and dear friends. Now, in *On Becoming Bread*, I have reworked and grouped my articles together under these themes: not because I set out to address them systematically (I didn't), but because I discovered in the writing and living that they are what these writings are about.

We have a questioning faith. We question it, and it questions us. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke "learned to love the questions." They lead us into all sorts of intriguing and even holy places. These days we tend to talk about faith as though it were a supermarket item one could select or reject; some people take it and some don't, and indeed it comes in different varieties which also are a matter of taste. Faith is not like that. Faith means grasping in this earthly life, by some inner means, what our external senses, understanding, and reason catch in glimmers and hints, hiddenly but persistently: "I see now as in a mirror, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Faith is a dim but true perception of reality, beyond the unnumbered universes whose existence scientists postulate but which stagger the human comprehension. That's why it's so incredibly, urgently necessary.

Faith is not at odds with reason, or with science, or with everything that happens to us in the day-to-day. No, these things educate our faith, and our faith in turn illumines them. We need not leave it on the shelf as an extra accessory, or toss it in the trash bin as an obsolete appendage. We need it now, not in some future heaven, or after retirement when we have leisure for it and for gardening. We need to work with it, "toss it and roll it, and pat it and pat it," as my mother used to say as she taught me to make bun dough. Maybe our faith is the bun dough, or maybe we ourselves are; in any case, the tossing and rolling will raise it up and make it bake up golden and beautiful, ready for its true Maker who became bread for us and taught us to become bread for one another.



SECTION ONE

Encounter



Ever ancient, ever new

One of the three things that give meaning, according to Viktor Frankl, is an encounter with someone or something. An encounter I once had made me seek the meaning of trust.

I hadn't seen my friend Ed in a couple of years; he'd gone one direction to attend school, and I'd gone another for a new job. Now he was in the hospital, critically ill.

Seeing Ed's name beside the door I'd been directed to, I entered. It was good I'd double-checked, as the agonized man in the hospital bed bore no physical resemblance to the self-possessed, clever, good-looking young man I knew. But from the seemingly old, old man, skin stretched over bones, the familiar voice of Ed welcomed me. We talked over earlier days and the days between, leading up to this heart-wrenching encounter with a young friend dying. I never saw him alive again.

Ed had once opened his heart to me, showing me his hopes and sufferings. That first glimpse of inner pain was as astonishing as this hospital glimpse of outer pain. How connected are body and soul. Ed died years ago, but I've encountered him since, from time to time.

Some kind of trust in life, in God, died for me with him. How could the Lover of Humanity allow such suffering for his beloved children? How can one trust again, after discovering the unbearability of life? C.S. Lewis once referred to God as "the Great Vivisectionist"; in that hospital, I understood why.

Since Ed's death a newer, stronger trust has come to birth in me, but it's taken time. Our "great grief cry," as Rainer Maria Rilke calls it, is flung into the universe; is there God to answer us?

Another young man, in a different century, let out a great grief cry. He'd experienced loss (a beloved friend died at nine-

teen), betrayal (a group of religious people he'd trusted proved to be charlatans out for personal gain), his own weakness (at his mother's insistence, he abandoned his beloved for the sake of his career). His mother watched and worried none too patiently, praying he would come to Christ. Perhaps for him, too, trust was difficult.

Finally, after many encounters along the way, he met Christ. Realizing that accepting this ultimate encounter meant radical change, he hesitated on the brink. His heart urged him forward, but his will held him back. At last the young man, known to us as St. Augustine, took the leap.

Later, he wrote of his long wild search for God, no less beautiful because of his tangles getting there:

Late have I loved you, O beauty ever ancient,
 ever new!
Late have I loved you.
You called, you shouted, and you broke
 through my deafness.
You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled
 my blindness.
You breathed your fragrance on me;
 I drew in breath and now I pant for you.
I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst
 for more.
You touched me, and I burned for your embrace.

🕊️ *CONFESSIONS, BOOK X CHAPTER 27*

His leap into the encounter with God altered everything, including his difficult relationship with his mother, Monica. They had a remarkable encounter the summer after his conversion. Overlooking the garden, reflecting on eternal life, they seemed to ascend higher and higher through and beyond all things until together they encountered God. After the tumultuous path

they'd traveled, through their trust in God, they encountered one another. Only a few days afterward, Monica fell into her final sickness. This mystical encounter at Ostia helped them both prepare for her death.

Trust is amazingly resilient. Even when we think we've lost it, it can flower anew.

We learn to trust in the encounter with another; we can't encounter others unless we trust. Such encounters change us forever. Through them, we can learn to love, to suffer, to die, and to be raised from the dead.



My encounter with a leper

On a visit to Belgium, someone unexpectedly crossed my path.

For Mass, I went to St. Damien Church, where I was invited down to Damien's crypt. Sensing that door led to a life-changing encounter, I paused, then followed the guide down.

Inside, a candle burned before Damien's tomb. As a child, I'd heard of the priest who, frighteningly, went to work with lepers until he became one. Here, I learned, Damien prayed to become a missionary, left Belgium at age twenty-three, and served and died on Hawaii's Molokai island, then part of an independent monarchy.

Listening, I became aware of the face looking out at me from above the tomb: pensive, ravaged. A man in shabby clerical cloak, one scarred hand resting on his knee, the other hidden in a sling. Not long after his death in 1889, two faces of Damien were presented to the world: one holy and heroic, the other false, sinful, and selfish. Which was the real Damien?

(The disciples, perhaps, had a similarly perplexing experience of Jesus. Pretender, criminal, blasphemer? Holy man, divine one?)

Some proclaimed one face, some another. How to know the truth of someone?)

Damien was considered a selfless missionary who served quarantined lepers at Kalaupapa and Kalawao, brought wonderful reforms, contracted leprosy, and died faithful to and beloved by his people. But other stories circulated. In 1889, the *Sydney Herald* published a letter written by Honolulu minister Rev. Hyde, calling Damien a self-serving, boorish man who caught leprosy by sleeping with women on the island.

A remarkable response emerged from Robert Louis Stevenson, who read the letter and decided to find the true Damien. How? By going to Molokai, walking the earth Damien walked, and talking to those who knew him.

After seven days there, Stevenson wrote to Rev. Hyde, laying out the same facts but in a completely different way. In concluding Damien was a holy man, Stevenson depicts holiness—not good breeding, high education, or a pleasing personality. It’s easy to slip into thinking such ideas of success are God’s too.

Stevenson reconsiders many criticisms made by Hyde; for example, that Damien went to Molokai without orders—a virtue, Stevenson says, not a fault. He agrees Damien was headstrong, ignorant, not particularly popular, but he notes Damien’s holiness emerged through these qualities, for he went where others wouldn’t. By giving his life to the leper communities, he made public their plight, drawing the help of people who wouldn’t otherwise have come and who brought the gifts he lacked (nursing, building, educating). Was he bigoted? Once, he planned to distribute a gift of money only to Catholics there, Hyde reported. Stevenson learned that a colleague remonstrated with Damien, explaining why the money should be for everyone, and finally Damien not only agreed but thanked his colleague for correcting his error.

Hyde intimated Damien contracted leprosy through sexual contact. Stevenson interviewed Molokai residents, noting that

even those who disliked Damien didn't make this accusation. The well-traveled Stevenson calls Molokai, even after the reforms, the most "harrowing" place he ever visited, "a pitiful place to visit and a hell to dwell in." Even if Damien had fallen this way on that anguished island, he adds, then we, standing on safe ground, not bearing what he bore and not giving as he gave, "should be moved to tears," not judgment. Today we know what neither Hyde nor Stevenson knew: Hansen's disease is not transmitted sexually, and ninety-five percent are immune to it. Why was Damien, one of the five percent susceptible to contagion, moved to accompany these outcast, unimportant sufferers? He became like Christ by becoming like his people—even unto death, even unto unjust judgment.

Truth isn't easy, but it's real. To see truly, one might have to change where one stands, turn around (which is what "repent" means), and go places one would rather not go. In order to see truth, one might have to learn to love.



Embraced by a fast-food angel

My friend and I wanted late-night refreshment. A lengthy search uncovered one place open, a fast-food restaurant with golden arches. We thought we'd just be getting beverages; we also got a glimpse of the eternal. Serving customers, and having an absorbing conversation, were a young woman and man. As we imbibed our tea, she said loudly enough that we could hear clearly: "It's not that God doesn't talk to people. It's that we're always feeding the flesh. So the flesh gets big, and the spirit gets small and can't hear God speaking."

Hidden wisdom at the fast-food restaurant, reminding us that God does speak to us. Directly perhaps, but often indirectly, through messengers like herself. Both the Old and New

Testaments are full of God's messengers. Some are spiritual beings whom we call "angels" (from the Greek *aggelos*, "messenger"). Church doctrine about angels may seem to us modern folk quaint or a little silly. Isn't it unlikely, absurd even, the existence of invisible, ethereal beings? In the creed, we claim God as creator of "all things visible and invisible," that is, material and immaterial. Even empirical sciences are not afraid to acknowledge the existence of what can't be seen, felt, or understood by the intellect. Why should people of faith be?

Our concept of angels may be shaped more by movies than by Christian theology, but angels have a long heritage in Christian understanding. One of the most influential teachers is early-church writer Dionysius the Areopagite. He points out that scriptural images of angels are often somewhat ridiculous: beaked eagles, flaming wheels, multicolored horses. These can be readily rejected, he notes. If Scripture used nobler images (as Hollywood sometimes does)—golden figures dressed in robes of light—we might be tempted to think that's what they really are. The earthy images clearly aren't what angels are like, so we quickly recognize they're only symbols of what can't be expressed. The absurd images open us to more than we know.

Dionysius tells us the real purpose of angels is simply this: to be in communion with God. They receive the life of God and turn toward humans to share this life with us. This means they're not individualistic, nor even pragmatic. They're part of the harmony of all things. Luke's account of the angels visiting shepherds at night, filling the heavens with the good news that Christ God is born in Bethlehem, sums up who they are.

"Why don't we hear God?" the fast-food server wondered. Indeed, it's puzzling that we so often seem not to, when we glimpse through Dionysius' eyes how all creation, seen and unseen, tells of God "transcending his own transcendence" by "drawing everything into his continual embrace." The angels speak to our hearts.

On the other hand, with our ears tuned to the uncertainty, drudgery, and injustice of daily life, it's less surprising that we have trouble hearing his voice, even with all his angelic messengers carrying it to us personally. The angels themselves can close their ears (so to speak) to God's voice, as did Lucifer, "Light-Bearer," who leads humans away from God's light. The evil of Lucifer is that he contradicts his own being. (That's the effect of sin.) The angels' purpose—angels like Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael, who are named in Scripture—is to look upon God and in turn reveal him to other beings. Like us. Dionysius presents this as the harmonious ordering of things—not a pyramid of power in which the lowest serve the highest. The greater serve the lesser, and this should be our way too.

Dionysius shows we live in a universe that flows out of the Trinity and draws all creation, visible and invisible, together to know and love God in a never-ending embrace. Church teaching about angels may help us see how God draws us into his "embrace." At least, it reminds us we're not alone.



Praying for “something more”

If you're a parent of school-age children, perhaps you get those nervous school-starting feelings as much as the kids do, assisted by advertisers who start prodding weeks ahead of time. If you're not, you may remember the years when you prepared for the school year, possibly with competing feelings. Even the computer store clerk told me one Labor Day weekend not to expect my computer to be repaired any too quickly, as herds of parents were getting their kids' computers, abused over the summer, in shape for that First Day.

I may not have thought of this on my own, but a certain twelve-