

The Spirituality of Wine in Christian Life

Part II

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The glass of wine you hold in your hand at home or the chalice of wine that will once again be ours to receive when we can gather for the Holy Eucharist begins in the soil of a particular plot of land, the rock bed below, the altitude of the plot, the slope of the hill with its exposure to the sun, and the amount of rain, humidity, and wind present throughout the growing season of the grapes. The plot of land and the distinctive character of the soil and climate are what French wine makers refer to as “terroir” (*tare-whare*). Drier climates are preferred (a lesser chance of mildew and rot) with good drainage to mitigate too much water intake in the vines.



Frequently one finds vineyards planted on hillsides in order to gain as much exposure to sunlight as possible – on south-facing slopes in the northern hemisphere (e.g., France, Italy, the U.S.) and north-facing slopes in the southern hemisphere (e.g., Australia, Chile, South Africa). To the left, we see the terraced Tertulia Estate vineyards in Walla Walla. For the farmer, such terrain

may appear inhospitable to the growth and harvesting of grain or corn crops, but to the vintner, a terraced vineyard on a steep slope may be the very thing that produces a luscious grape that will become a wonderful wine.

From British Columbia to California, one can find wine association funded and university sponsored wine schools where students study viticulture (vines and vineyards) and enology (winemaking), taking courses in biological systems engineering, crop and soil science, economics, entomology, food science, horticulture, and molecular plant science (take a look at the “wine” programs offered by Washington State University: <http://wine.wsu.edu/education/>).

The degree of technical sophistication available to vineyard masters and vintners supports what is now a major industry along the West Coast. In Washington alone, there were a handful of wineries in 1980 and now, forty years later, there are close to 1,000 wineries, with four new ones added *every month*. The majority of these vineyards remain family owned. Alas, large corporations, both foreign and domestic, who are in it solely for profit, have purchased the smaller number of remaining vineyards and support industrialized wine making in which quality is frequently sacrificed for quantity – with chemical additives injected for “taste.”

CARING FOR THE VINE'S SOIL, WATER, AND SUN

The author of the book of Deuteronomy points the reader to the gift of the vineyard and its wine: *The Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat, vines, and olive trees* (8:7-8). Here we encounter the three primary foods of Mediterranean cultures: bread, wine, and olive oil. What the writer highlights is that the land belongs to the Creator and that humans are tenants rather than its owners who can do whatever they please with land, air, and water. As noted in the second creation story (Genesis 2:4a-25), a primary vocation of humankind is the call to be *keepers of the land*, rather than its despoilers.

This sentiment is echoed in a recent Eucharistic prayer: *You gave the world into our care that we might be your faithful stewards and show forth your bountiful grace.* Proclaimed at a Eucharistic table that holds the fruit of the vine in a wine cup or prayed as a table grace in one's home, the prayer invites Christians to see themselves as stewards of the earth, what may seem a novel vocation for those who live in urban and suburban centers where concrete, asphalt, glass, and steel dominate the landscape. Perhaps stewardship simply means recycling, using only the water needed, tending a garden, or composting – all good things.



Yet the prayer continues with this truth: *But we failed to honor your image in one another and would not see your goodness in the world around us; and so we violated your creation.* As I write these words, the evidence of global warming due to fossil fuel consumption is clear to see: increasing and deathly fire seasons on the West Coast, the primary region of wine production in North America; volatile hurricane seasons with greater destructive capacities in the Caribbean archipelago, the Gulf Coast states, and along the Atlantic seaboard; drying up of water sources in the Southwest, a region marked by many retirees on fixed incomes; island nations already experiencing the rise in ocean levels, necessitating permanent evacuation. Composting, recycling, and keeping a garden are good things but it seems that much, much more is needed to claim the promise voiced in another prayer: *Look with favor upon all who care for the earth, the water, and the air, that the riches of your creation may abound from age to age.* How will future generations of Christians view those who live at this moment when earth's future is in the balance? Above, we see charred grapes and vines from the 2019 Kincaid Fire.

Giving thanks to the Triune God in prayer and song – for the gift of land, for this meal, for this glass of wine drawn from the soil and nurtured with water and sunlight – is intended to shape Christian action in the world. Perhaps, then, the human and Christian vocation of stewardship of land, air, and water is rightly understood as **advocacy**: as working diligently to elect public officials who have a

record of care for the earth and will strive to make this a local, regional, and national priority; as protesting publicly the misuse of the land for quick profit and resisting the continued use of fossil fuels as the only basis for energy; as joining others who petition local, state, and federal governments to offer incentives for the production of clean and natural energy drawn from sun, water, and wind (<https://www.clickenergy.com.au/news-blog/12-countries-leading-the-way-in-renewable-energy>).

In a glass of wine, one holds the sun, water, soil, nutrients, labor, and skill of the winemaker. In that domestic glass or in the church's chalice, the sacramental



Christian encounters God's living gifts of the earth. In the short but beautiful reflection on the life of wine we hear from Maya, the aspiring vintner in the movie *Sideways*, the wine in the bottle is a living, breathing thing that once consumed becomes a part of the wine drinker: the soil, water, flesh of the grape, and its fermented juice becomes one

with our bodies. Is it just possible that sipping this gift could be seen and tasted as one's commitment to ensure its longevity and earth's health through our care and advocacy? If you missed Maya in the first handout, listen to her here:

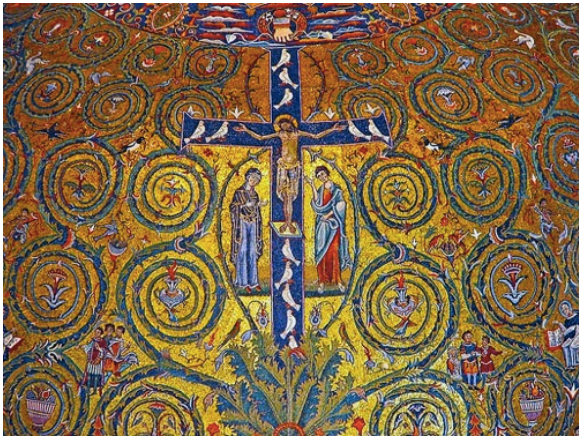
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8P3kF2DHj4>

TRAINING BRANCHES ON THE VINE

In the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus say, *I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit* (John 15:1-2). Such a statement gives evidence of Jesus' knowledge of the vineyard and the manner in which vinedressers care for the growth of vines and grapes. Pruning is done selectively in the dormant season to remove extraneous canes (branches) while retaining a good number of healthy canes. The primary purpose of pruning is to produce fruitful shoots in the coming season of growth – shoots that produce the desired grape cluster. Keep in mind that vines are rooted in the mother vine through which nutrients and water are carried to the branching vines. In other words, one dimension of the saying concerns the relationship between Jesus the Vine and his followers the branches.

The biblical scholar Bruce Malina notes that the vine saying, addressed to Christ followers at the end of the 1st c., some 70-80 years after the death of Jesus, underscored the close bond within the group that strengthened the group's identity in the absence of Jesus. At the same time, notes Malina, the vine saying asked Christ followers then and now how this relationship is nurtured so that one can ***receive the necessary nourishment the mother vine offers*** the many

branches. Below we see the amazing vine mosaic in the Roman church of Saint Clement (<http://www.basilicasanclemente.com/eng/>).



The most obvious answer to the question is found in receiving the Eucharistic wine cup and what the cup offers: the Presence of the wounded and risen Christ who comes with the nourishment of his energy, his life. Gnostics ancient and modern have claimed otherwise: that only knowledge – and let me add a secret knowledge or wisdom – will lead intelligible spirits or souls out of this decaying and dying

world into the light of God. This spirituality is fundamentally at odds with life on earth, a spirituality that has little time for history and God's presence in earthy, ordinary history. It is a school of spirituality most attractive to educators (I say this as an educator!) who deal in the creation and transmission of knowledge. And it is this: a highly individualistic spirituality that cares little for others and their struggles in life on this earth.

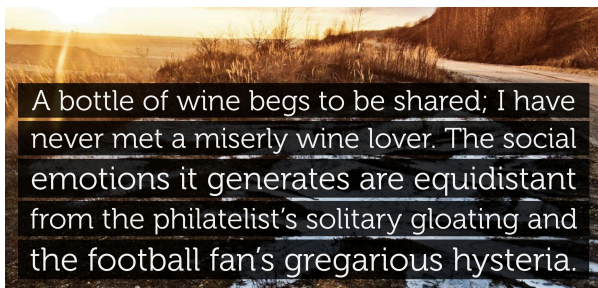
Earthy Christian and sacramental spirituality, however, takes seriously the claim in John's gospel that the Word of God has become *flesh* at a particular time, in a particular place, with a particular purpose: to invite people to embrace a way of life different than the violence, ruthless competitiveness, narcissism, and injustice of "civilizations." This offer is frequently called "salvation" – but that word cannot be reduced to one singular meaning. In the gospels alone it can refer to liberation from bondage or oppression, enlightenment as to one's true nature and purpose, reconciliation through forgiveness in the midst of conflicts, restorative justice rather than retribution, rescue from abusive forces in life, birth into a household of unconditional love, or being healed and drawn into a community of life.

An earthy spirituality will give thanks to the Triune God for the *goodness of God's creation* that supports human and other than human life. This spirituality will savor the very human and down to earth *stories of the Scripture*, stories that readily serve as a mirror of our own lives. An earthy Christian spirituality will find nourishment from the mother vine by *marking the rising and the setting of the sun* with prayer – the very sun that enables photosynthesis to take place in the buds that produce grapes. Imagine that: praying with the vineyard as it greets the rising of sun and as it bids farewell and rests in the cool of the night. Such a sacramental spirituality will be *open to the presence of the Vine* where he may be least expected: after all, who could have imagined that the Word of God, the agent through whom all things are created, would be born as peasant in the backwater colony of the mighty Roman Empire?

SHARING THE FRUIT OF THE VINE

Those of us who have grown up in the United States have been breathing the air of individualism – many historians say *toxic* individualism – since the moment of birth – and much of the time we are not even aware of what we simply take for granted. In contrast to other cultures where one is socialized into a communal life (I am thinking of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his emphasis on the South African reality of *Ubuntu*: “I am because we are” or “Humanity toward others”), it can be a singular challenge for many Americans younger than 60 to imagine that they are anything other than atomized individuals who “hook up” temporarily while they wait for a better offer.

My university students frequently profess this article of faith in the Self Alone and, though they also yearn and yearn deeply for connection with others, many have been taught by parents or peers or social media to distrust groups and institutions as sources of conformity and repression. Sinatra couldn’t have sung this creed any “better” when he crooned, “I did it my way.” What adds to the sense of loneliness that accompanies toxic individualism is the objectification of young people (and everyone else for that matter) within a culture marked by the desire to accumulate as much profit as possible. In this economic milieu, people become commodified and thus objectified, easily robbed of their distinctive personality and spirituality. Technical, abstract language replaces relational, story, and image-infused language. We know, do we not, that every click on the computer is now being monitored by Internet companies that are selling our buying and viewing habits to commercial enterprises so that an abstract algorithm can guide such enterprises in their efforts *to create a need for us that we never had* and then propose that Product X will fill that fabricated need. If you have time, you might be interested in viewing this documentary, “The Century of the Self” in which the documentarians narrate the ways in which the emerging “science” of Freudian psychology was used and continues to be used and abused to individualize and commodify American citizens: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ3RzGoQC4s>



A bottle of wine begs to be shared; I have never met a miserly wine lover. The social emotions it generates are equidistant from the philatelist's solitary gloating and the football fan's gregarious hysteria.

Well, what does any of this have to do with wine? Wine is bottled and needs to be poured into glasses to be consumed. Wine asks to be shared – an activity that rightly brings people together and forms a community of two or more. In other words, the

drinking of wine is an activity that throughout history has been communal. What did Jesus do? *He took a cup of wine, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you”* (Matthew 26:27). Notice, if you will, the sharing of one cup among friends, a common practice in the ancient Mediterranean. The practice of sharing wine with family, friends, and guests is the

spiritual practice of **nurturing community**, a true act of resistance to the individualizing and thus divisive influences in contemporary culture.

If the host has taken the time to discover the vineyard where the grapes were grown and what elements made for this particular kind of grape and wine, the *gentle* sharing of such things draws the community of wine drinkers to the land and those who created the wine: one's small community suddenly becomes *larger*, the circle is widened. [I say, "gentle sharing" in contrast to the wine snob who goes on and on about his or her "knowledge"] One need look no farther than that remarkable film, *Babette's Feast*, to see the power of shared wine to create from a gathering of complete strangers and quibbling friends a joyful community. What does General Löwenhielm say after receiving the generous pouring of wine and the carefully prepared courses served by Babette? *Man, my friends, is frail and foolish. We have all been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and shortsightedness we imagine grace to be finite. For this reason we tremble. But then, we pray, the moment comes when our eyes are opened and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it with gratitude.*

WITH ALL THE SENSES

With the invention of the printing press in the 15th c. and its widespread use in the 16th and following centuries, worship that had been marked by bodily movement, ritual actions, and visual images became a reading and listening exercise in which, for the first time in Christian history, people were locked into pews: no pews before the Protestant Reformation, only a bench around the periphery for nursing mothers, the infirm, or the exhausted. So, reading and listening while seated became the norm of Christian worship among Protestants and then among Catholics (the Orthodox, relatively untouched by the reforms of the 16th c., kept to the older practice). With the printing press, texts dominated Western Europe and North America and gave the impression that reading or listening to others speaking or singing was the primary mode by which God would be present to the people of God.

Consider, as well, the minimization of sacramental practice. Sprinkling a few water drops on the infant's head was and still is considered by some sufficient for a "valid" baptism despite the thousand-year practice of people being plunged naked into a pool or font of water and liberally smeared with fragrant chrism. Thin and tasteless wafers replaced real aromatic bread. You may know the old joke: "It takes more faith to believe a wafer is real bread than it does to recognize it as the body of Christ." In some churches of the reform, juice replaced wine and eventually little shot glasses filled with weak juice or a small gulp of overly sweet and mass produced "sacramental wine" replaced real wine created in wineries and offered in capacious chalices – some of them with handles (see [above](#)). The puritanical streak in many churches eliminated anything that would touch the senses for fear that it

would look “too Catholic,” “too exotic,” or “too sensual” (there it is again: gnostic distrust of the creation and the human body as **good** – a temptation always alive among Christians).



I want to suggest and suggest strongly that ***resistance to this puritanical temptation*** is in order, not just in church (when we are able to return safely together) but also in life. In her remarkable book on the human senses, Diane Ackerman shares this sense of resistance when she writes: *We need to return to feeling the textures of life. Much of our experience in America is an effort to get away from these textures, to fade into a stark, simple, solemn, puritanical, business routine that doesn't have anything so unseemly as sensuous zest. One who rejoiced in the sensory experience of life was a handicapped [sic] woman with several senses gone. Blind, deaf, and mute, Helen Keller's remaining senses were so finely attuned that when she put her hands on the radio to enjoy music, she could tell the difference between cornets and the strings. She listened to colorful stories of life surging along the Mississippi from the lips of her friend Mark Twain. She wrote at length about life's aromas, tastes, touches, feelings, which she explored with the voluptuousness of a courtesan. Despite her handicap, she was more robustly alive than many people of her generation.*

The amazing thing is that no two bottles of wine will ever taste the same. One can see the color of the wine when the glass is lifted to the light. One can *smell* the aromatic structure of the grape transformed into alcohol and juice: one can smell the soil where the vine grows! One can allow a sip of wine to swish in the mouth and thus *taste* the distinctive textures of this one bottle of wine. One can *hear* the pop of the cork and the pouring of the wine into the glass, that popping and pouring which heralds that last stage of wine's life before it is consumed and becomes one with our bodies. For those of us who live in wine states, we can actually go to the vineyards and with guidance *touch* the vines and soil that produce wine grapes.

One of the most popular delicatessens in the ancient city of Rome is Volpetti, named after the two Volpetti brothers, Emilio and Claudio, who established this shop in 1973 that sells cheeses, olive oils, breads, pasta, and salumi drawn from the farms just outside the city. On one of my first visits to Volpetti, I spoke with Claudio about the array of cheese products I had never heard of, much less tasted. Some were quite pungent, their taste unlike anything I had experienced. But, then,

the normally extroverted and lively Claudio became still. “The tragedy for me and our farmers,” he said, “is that the younger generation thinks these cheeses are abnormal.” Abnormal? I said. “Yes, abnormal. You see, this is the generation that



has been raised on processed foods from factories in the north, including processed, bland, unremarkable cheese, unremarkable salumi, and drab olive oil. They have no taste for the sensuality of the soil, the farm, the genius of generations of poor farmers who let nothing go to waste and so produced delicious things.” (Visit the salumeria here: <https://www.volpetti.com/en/>)

While his sad observation is a commentary on cheese, could it not also be a commentary on life that is shaped by bland and tasteless forces? FaceTime replacing the touch of skin upon skin; tasteless tomatoes grown in warehouses year round replacing the tomato grown in one’s garden or at the farm on the edge of town (and available for only a few months); neighborhoods segregated by economic class and race cutting one off from those who live much different lives; fast food replacing the meal cooked at home; industrial wine with its many chemical additives to give it a “smooth” taste replacing wine produced from a particular field with an idiosyncratic taste and smell?

The great affair, the love affair of life, writes Ackerman, is to live as variously as possible, to groom one’s curiosity, like a high-spirited thoroughbred, climb aboard, and gallop over the thick, sun-struck hills everyday. Where there is no risk, the emotional terrain is flat and unyielding and despite all its dimension, valleys, pinnacles, and detours, life will seem to have none of its magnificent geography, only a length. It began in mystery, and it will end in mystery, but what a savage and beautiful country lies in between.



If the only place left to worship were a non-denominational auditorium with video screens and a lectern from which a preacher spoke for 45 minutes and the band sang the same seven words twenty times and they served little cubes of wonder bread and tiny plastic cups filled with grape juice, I doubt I could go. I’d rather be home with a few other souls, lighting incense set next to a pitcher filled with greens from our trees and plants, gazing on the flame of a burning beeswax candle, singing an ancient chant or medieval hymn in English, Latin, Hebrew, or Greek, listening to someone read a story from the Book and inviting us to consider its meaning for us today, exchanging a kiss of peace, and smelling and tasting bread and wine placed before a crucifix, a cross with a human body on it. Resistance to a life shaped by puritanical impulses and abstract technology is in order. The screen is not life; the cup of wine is.

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