

BETWEEN STEEPLE AND STOVE

A Huguenot gourmet

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FOREWORD

I believe in God.

I believe that God nourishes me.

But why would he do it in a frugal or stingy way?

Because man shall not live by bread alone, but from the entire palette of aromas and flavors that God has created.

I believe that being near grace, being filled with grace means enjoying the holiday feast, the banquet, enjoying what's good, what is special and out of the ordinary.

“Because I am certainly a man in accordance with the flesh, but especially in accordance with flesh that's good.”

It's to this faith that I've tried to bear witness. I would like to make clear that this is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead would be merely a coincidence... apart from the ones resembling the author.

OVERTURE

*A sluggard plunges his hand in the dish
but is too lazy to lift it to his mouth.
(Proverbs 26, 15)*

I grew up between steeple and stove. My father was a pastor and my mother a professional cook.

They became acquainted, I think, at a wedding ceremony where the one nourished the soul and the other the body. They noticed each other, they liked each other, they got married, and I was born. Their mutual “kitchens” must have suited them both.

My mother always had the same tiny little restaurant. She would lay out fifteen places, never any more. At noon there would be the regular clientele, men for the most part, including masons, hair stylists and professors, and she would try to restore both their physical powers and their spirits. They were always famished and always in a hurry. Hers was an efficient kitchen, for them and for us, my father and me. We ate there, too, and at the same time. An appetizer, the day’s main course – meat and vegetable stew on Tuesdays, couscous Thursdays – desert, a carafe of wine, coffee, and the check. It was simple and simply delicious.

At the dinner table my father would talk almost as much as he would eat. When there was a pie on the menu, he loved to repeat the same well-worn joke. He would get ready to cut our slices, stop himself short and turn to me asking,

- Should I divide it up as a good Christian or half-and-half?

He had an opinion on everything and didn’t hesitate to express it. One day when the wine was better than usual – or when it was flowing in greater quantity – he launched into a perceptive theological analysis of the restaurant at midday:

- The proprietress officiates over a place of worship where the faithful participate in a daily ritual. At noon, seated at the Holy Table, the believers confess their sins to their dining companions and, in the most serious cases, do penitence by buying a round. At last, the communicants can eat and drink the two elements, the bread and the wine. When the benediction has been said, they go in peace, but not before leaving their offering.

My mother came out of the kitchen that day to the sound of the customers intoning a magnificat!

My father would reproach my mother for having but one dish on the menu.

- In so doing, you deny Man the free will which God has given him.

Several times, he accused her of being a closet Catholic! He had considered excommunicating her. But he thought better of it, realizing that he had more to lose, perhaps, by being excluded from her table than she did from his. The quarrel came to a sudden halt the day my mother naively asked:

- Are you defending salvation by performing good works? If I'm to be saved according to the number of main courses I offer, I'll put twenty on the menu, or fifty or a hundred!

That evening my mother gave free rein to her imagination and to her talent for pleasing the palate of fine gourmets. She suggested putting on the menu this time a great many dishes which would shine by their very simplicity and by the quality of the products.

- Typically Protestant, was my father's reaction, who was reassured as much by Mama's theological as by her culinary orthodoxy.

There are happy coincidences in life. At the time as he was getting married to my mother, my father was elected pastor in the same town where my mother had her restaurant. He performed all his duties conscientiously, but Sunday worship was his favorite. He prepared for all of them down to the minutest detail. The presence of my mother in church afforded him the opportunity to make gastronomic comparisons.

- I let my preparations for the Sunday worship cook very slowly. I keep them simmering on a very low flame. I want them to be full of good flavors.

My mother answered,

- In cooking, it's not just taste that matters. You eat with your eyes and your ears as much as with your mouth...

At that point, my father made the suggestion of getting together from then on with several volunteers each week to give some thought to the way the next service would be prepared.

Ah, Sunday worship... it was always a pleasure to participate in it. Of course, my father's skill had something to do with it, but I especially appreciated the presence of my mother. She would close the restaurant Sundays, and we would sit side by side in the first pew. Sundays were inevitably exceptional days.

My mother was demanding on her husband:

- In business, we aren't allowed to make mistakes. The members of your congregation could always tolerate a sermon even if it wasn't fresh. But a

Christian who's just passing through wouldn't give you a second chance. So, listen to me. I know you well enough to know your worth. If you serve us fast food, even once, I'll never set foot in your church again!

It was fortunate that she never, strictly speaking, kept her word.

During the Sunday meal, she commented on that day's offering, as a food critic! A good service was praised to the skies this way:

- The chef has the knack of bringing together a new dish with a wine as old as the hills!

A poor service was shot down with a dry,

- A cool reception and tainted fare!

Over the weeks to come, she added to my father's services – or took away from them – imaginary stars. He would grumble about her obsession to note down everything. But he was happy about the attention his wife paid to his work and especially proud of having received fairly good marks.

Contrary to what most of their "respective customers" thought, my parents saw each other often. Even if they were absorbed in their two professions more than reason would dictate, their schedules overlapped. Essentially, restaurant cooks and pastors work when others do not.

As for me, I felt somewhat neglected. I wasn't really lonely, but I became responsible for looking after myself at a very early age. And, as all children know, that can sometimes be a lot of fun and at other times a bit much to endure.

PART ONE: APPRENTICESHIP

For my part, my brothers, I could not speak to you as I should speak to people who have the Spirit. I had to deal with you on the merely natural plane, as infants in Christ. And so I gave you milk to drink, instead of solid food, for which you were not yet ready.
(1 Corinthians 3, 1 to 2)

In the kitchen of the restaurant as in the office of the presbytery, my mother and my father taped up the same verse from the Gospel of Matthew: *For John came, neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He is possessed." The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look at him! A glutton and a drinker, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners!"* (Matthew 11, 18 and 19).

Obviously, when comparing the two, Jesus seems to be the more likable. He seemed much more human to me than John the Baptist, the hermit whose *food was locusts and wild honey* (Matthew 3, 5).

But my parents' great fondness for a good cut of meat and old wine would get people talking. Many a one believed that you can't speak in the name of God on a full stomach. Some in the congregation were reproachful of my father's appetite for life, or even the profession of his wife, though they tried to keep a lid on that.

- Reverend, don't you think that a man of God should know how to fast, to do without, to abstain? We like you well enough, but we're surprised by your appetite. The religious norm had always been moderation, even frugality. You make fun of John the Baptist, but you must allow that to lead such a life, you have to have the passion of God. His asceticism attests to the seriousness of his faith. It's true that he had to have a lot of spirit to endure such a hard life. Spirit that one can easily imagine coming from God. It's suffering and martyrs that are proof of faith! Reverend, greed is one of the seven deadly sins, is it not?

My father adapted to these criticisms. With a hint of arrogance, he even liked to come back at them on a harsher note:

- Throughout the history of Protestantism, two great theologians married a professional cook. The other one was Martin Luther. His wife, Catherine de Bora, even transformed a former convent into a boarding house.

He didn't hesitate to defend his position. By quoting the Gospel, he legitimized his choice. Before God and before man, he could confess to his love of meat.

- Jesus liked to eat and drink. Now Jesus was the Son of God. It follows that all of God's children must like to eat and drink. Did you know that they said exactly the same things against Jesus? *Then John's disciples came to him with the question: "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not?"* (Matthew 9, 14). Please be aware that I am not the only member of my species. I respect the advice of Jesus: *Can you expect the bridegroom's friends to go mourning while the bridegroom is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them; that will be the time for them to fast* (Matthew 9, 15). I love this passage. Notice how deftly Jesus shifts the problem. Rather than arguing about the validity of fasting in absolute terms, he envisions the right time for practicing it. His adversaries' question doesn't make any sense. Jesus doesn't forbid one from fasting; he sets priorities. No one should fast for pleasure or out of obligation. Fasting is not meant to punish an appetite that's too hearty. It's want that inclines us toward fasting, not as a punishment but as a necessity. The throat tightens, the stomach clenches and you can no longer swallow anything. We're to fast when the absence of food takes away our appetite. Let's reread the story of the temptation in the desert, when Jesus breaks the world record for fasting: 40 days without eating. *Jesus was then led away by the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted by the devil. For forty days and nights he fasted, and at the end of them he was famished* (Matthew 4, 1 to 2). Note the movement of the text, Jesus isn't fasting to cause himself harm. He's not masochistic. He's fasting, because, alone in the desert, he's not hungry.

My father was proud of the subtlety of his exegesis. He thought he had given a definitive opinion on the value, the sense and the role of fasting.

One day, however, he was caught unawares. While we were eating, an old man invited himself to sit at our table. He ate in silence, got up, paid, and before going out, shot back at us:

- Man of God, don't you understand that the time has come when fasting has become necessary? Where are those who will listen? Don't you understand that it's now necessary for us to show our grief and sorrow? The bridegroom has left and you, you're reveling. The bride is in mourning and you, you go on eating! Don't you know how to recognize the times? The time for fasting came a long time ago!

From that moment on, my father decided to fast one day a year. That wouldn't seem like much in many people's eyes, but for him it was truly agonizing.

He had chosen Good Friday as the day when he wouldn't eat anything. He would share in that way just a little of the suffering as the one on the cross. But he added the further difficulty of not letting anyone know that he was fasting. He had invented "joyful fasting." He believed that true fasting should never be conspicuous. He applied to the letter the advice of the Lord: *So too when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites: they make their faces unsightly so that other people may see that they are fasting. I tell you this: they have their reward already. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that men may not see that you are fasting, but only your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees what is secret will give you your reward* (Matthew 6, 16 to 18).

For years he managed to fast without anyone suspecting. And yet, he fasted openly. He didn't lock himself up in his office. He participated in social activities. As on every other day of the year, he ate at the restaurant. Well, he didn't actually eat anything, he just gave that impression. He would sit down at the table, would wait for his plate and went through the motions of eating. I'm not sure if the pride he took in doing this corresponded with the intention of the passage. Did he succeed in taking in my mother? I think not. But as far as I was concerned, it took me nearly twenty years to find out that he was fasting! I regret that I was so slow about it. I think I would have liked fasting with him.

1. Jesus

My parents didn't merely nourish me. They also instructed me. They had me read the Bible. No one will be surprised to find out that it was through reading descriptions of the meals therein that I really discovered the Good Book.

My father warned me: "When the Gospel writers describe a meal, you can always expect it to be a little theatrical. What's more, meals with Jesus are probably staged. They didn't always come off the way they're portrayed in the Gospels, and perhaps they didn't even take place. But what of it? You'll always be able to nitpick over the details. It doesn't matter! Every description of a meal provides us with the same impression. The repetition, the cumulative effect leaves no room for any doubt: Jesus didn't turn his nose up at food or wine. Meals for him were special, precious moments when the essential could be said. When you eat, your ears open up. Maybe because the other senses are occupied and because the mouth is no longer occupied by talking. I am profoundly convinced of it: the best place to spread the Gospel is not in Church or catechism class but in the dining room, and the best time, during a meal!"

My mother took him at his word. She turned her kitchen into a place for evangelizing. I would spend Wednesday afternoons listening to her read me Bible stories. I would bring along some friends – my buddies, for sure, but girls, too! – who, to hide the fact that they liked listening to these old stories, could always claim that they came just for the food. Because my mother would never have begun talking to us without having fed us first. That was probably the reason for her success. Putting the slow time in the afternoons to good use, she would have us

in, offering us warmed-up leftovers or having us sample a new recipe. She would sit on a high stool. We sat around where we could find room. And then she would open her Bible.

She would start off with a number of recriminations.

“Now look at that. You never know what Jesus is eating! We never see any menus! It’s easy to see that these stories were written by men! They always emphasize the circumstances and who the dinner guests were. But, goodness gracious, what’s on the plates should count for something, too. Or, is it possible they had something to hide? Could Jesus have been eating foods forbidden by Jewish law? I’d be very surprised if he had been. If he had, they would have said so! The Gospel writers have no problem with reporting that the son of Mary broke the Sabbath or that he ate with pariahs. But they never write that he ate pork, for example. If we are what we eat, then Jesus was unquestionably a Jew. And judging from how much he ate, he must have been very Jewish.

The Unction at Bethany

My mother had a special way of reading the Bible. She would weave in her own commentaries. She sometimes asked us questions, but she never waited for our answers. None of us would dare interrupt her. What’s more, we were never sure she was even talking to us.

- Jesus didn’t gorge himself every day; his way of living his life didn’t allow for that. When there was little to eat, Jesus ate frugally. When there was nothing to eat, Jesus fasted. But those times when he was hungry and there was plenty of food available, he could really put it away. His were very rarely ordinary meals. Rather, Jesus made several of his meals extraordinary events, opportunities for meeting, conversing, and sharing teachings. Jesus, thus, does not eat alone. People invite him to dinner to take advantage of his notoriety. People would stick around him to profit from his teaching. Listen to this story: *One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to eat with him; he went to the Pharisee’s house and took his place at table* (Luke 7, 36). This is so banal. Jesus is invited to dinner. Nothing to make a big deal about. Yes, but Jesus is dining with one of his adversaries, a Pharisee. Simon, that’s his name, is not ashamed to invite Jesus to his home. And Jesus doesn’t hesitate in accepting. He doesn’t act shy or play up any kind of sectarian differences. He goes in and lies down at table. In Palestine, as it was throughout the whole Roman empire, you would eat while lying on a couch. You’ll say there’s another version of the same story. Yes! In the Gospel of Mark, Simon is a leper and Jesus eats with him. A leper on one hand and a Pharisee on the other: which one is right? Mark or Luke? I have no idea! Especially about whether or not a Pharisee can get leprosy! But whether Simon is a leper or a Pharisee doesn’t change a thing. In both cases Jesus is upsetting to people. If he dines with a leper, he’s upsetting to those who keep lepers at a distance. If he dines with a Pharisee, he’s upsetting to those who have it that the Pharisees are the enemies of Jesus. Besides, Simon is a Pharisee who is rather likable. But a woman will show what his limits are...

It would happen that my mother would act out the scenes she was recounting for us. According to what was called for, she would assign us a few things to say. But none of us would ever go beyond our walk-on roles: We kept to our parts, and my mother would play the main characters.

- A woman who was living an immoral life in town learned that Jesus was at table in the Pharisee's house. My mother, having brought in a basin full of water, kneeled down and had one of us remove his shoes. Bringing oil of myrrh in a small flask, she took her place behind [Jesus], by his feet, weeping. His feet were wetted with her tears and she wiped them with the myrrh. (I was afraid she was emptying out the little perfume bottle Papa had given her on Valentine's Day.) When his host the Pharisee saw this he said to himself, *"If this were a real prophet, he would know who this woman is that touches him, and what sort of woman she is, a sinner, Simon thought, "a slut." Simon didn't dare say it, but he thought it. His thought was so strong that Jesus heard it. He made his meaning perfectly plain. Then turning to the woman, he said to Simon, "You see this woman? I came to your house: you provided no water for my feet; but this woman made my feet wet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss; but she has been kissing my feet ever since I came in. You did not anoint my head with oil; but she has anointed my feet with myrrh. And so, I tell you, her great love proves that her many sins have been forgiven; where little has been forgiven, little love is shown."* Then he said to her, *"Your sins are forgiven"* (Luke 7, 37 to 49). Why does Simon become so angry? Certainly because the woman is not "respectable." But I think there's something more. Simon is jealous of this woman. By inviting Jesus to dinner, he thought he had done well. And he had done well. But he got more than he bargained for. He lost out, lost out to a woman, lost out to a sinner. It turned out to be unfair competition. The woman used the weapons of a woman. Would you be shocked if I were to tell you she was in love with Jesus? Because what the woman did amounted to an amorous act. I dream of meeting a man who would be prepared to do as much. Ah, love's foolishness... But whether you find it reassuring or troubling, Jesus doesn't go into the subject. He doesn't answer as a man, but as the Son of God. He forgives a sinner's sins. It's also proof of his love. But I can't get the idea out of my head that the woman hoped for a little more from it all, or for a little less. He could have given the woman a kiss. A simple kiss would have been enough to make her happy? Don't you think so, girls?

Rather than a sweet feminine voice, it was my father's voice that we heard in reply.

- It's more serious than that! The misunderstanding is not even romantic. It is, alas, a simple story of money. We men, because we buy the perfumes, always think about how much they cost.

My father must have been listening for some time already. He couldn't keep himself from putting in his own two cents, a little awkwardly, perhaps. He didn't want to contradict my mother but rather confirm what she had been saying. He continued:

- The Gospel of Mark recounts the same episode but in a different way. *Jesus was at Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper. As he sat at table, a woman came in carrying a small bottle of very costly perfume, pure oil of nard. She broke it open and poured the oil over his head. It's more dignified than the feet. Some of those present said to one another angrily, "Why this waste? The perfume might have been sold for thirty pounds and the money given to the poor"; and they turned upon her with fury. But Jesus said, "Let her alone. Why must you make trouble for her? It is a fine thing she has done for me. You have the poor among you always, and you can help them whenever you like; but you will not always have me. She has done what lay in her power; she is beforehand with anointing my body for burial* (Mark 14, 3 to 8). It was an act of love, and as such, unreasonable. Several dinner guests, maybe even some of the disciples, were offended by it! Foolishly wasting costly perfume doesn't make any sense. But when you love, you don't keep count of how much things cost... Or, if you do begin to keep track of costs, you must count every cost and especially the money spent for the meal. With the same sum, they would have certainly been able to feed more people less extravagantly. Oddly enough, this idea didn't even cross the minds of the diners. Little does it matter that Simon spends his money for a banquet, but if a woman uses a very expensive perfume, it'd be scandalous. My wife is right, perfume, that's a woman's story. Men can't understand!

My mother went over to him. She ran her hand along the side of his face.

- No, my dear, you underestimate yourself. Even you, my dear one, even you, my husband, can short-circuit reason and think with your feelings, with your heart. What does the price of the perfume matter if the thought is priceless! Jesus knows how to appreciate the moment. He ate well and now he smells good. All of his senses are satisfied. For a moment, Simon and the woman provide a glimpse of life as it should be, life as described in Ecclesiastes: *"Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest* (Ecclesiastes, 9, 7 to 9). The dinner guests were unaware, on that day, how much closer they had gotten to paradise.

"Nor did they fully understand the import of the woman's actions," my father adds. "Because this is where Jesus becomes Messiah. It's at Bethany, through the unction of a woman, that Jesus is established as Christ!"

My parents then slowly looked up at each other. They kissed. My mother drew my father away by the hand. Maybe this love story had given them some ideas.

My father had just enough time to slip in:

- If you want to hear another story of odors and of feet, come to church on Sunday.

The restaurant opened a little on the late side that evening.

Washing of the feet

The following Sunday the church wasn't full. But throughout the pews there were some who didn't attend regularly, several younger faces. The liturgy seemed very long to us. We were all waiting for the moment when the sermon would begin, and I was feeling some apprehension. Finally, my father came up to the pulpit.

"Dear brothers and sisters in Christ.

John is the only one to tell about the washing of the feet. The story appears only in the Gospel of John. It occupies the same place there, as does the Lord's Supper in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We can imagine that, in the community for which this Gospel was written, the washing of the feet played, at the beginning, the same role as communion did in the other Christian communities. Perhaps some followers of Jesus, Christians, washed the feet of their friends, as others shared bread and wine? Perhaps some did this in memory of him?

One thing is sure. And it's this that John is telling us at the beginning of the second part of his Gospel, the part that will end with the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

The devil had already put it into the mind of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. During supper, Jesus, well aware that the Father had entrusted everything to him, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from table, laid aside his garments, and taking a towel, tied it round him. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel. When it was Simon Peter's turn, Peter said to him, "You, Lord, washing my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not understand now what I am doing, but one day you will." Peter said, "I will never let you wash my feet." "If I do not wash you," Jesus replied, "you are not in fellowship with me." "Then, Lord," said Simon Peter, "not my feet only; wash my hands and head as well!" (John 13, 2 to 9).

By this deed, Jesus gives substance to his position as Messiah. The children learned this week with my wife that it was at Bethany that Jesus received the oil of his unction. At the very least, what can be said about it is that it happened in a way that had little resemblance to royal protocol: the sacrament didn't occur in a holy place; the unction wasn't administered by a consecrated person; and perfume replaced oil.

One single deed by Jesus, one that was absolutely disgraceful, would go to show that he was not any ordinary messiah: the king going so low as to wash the feet of his subjects. That the master would wash the feet of his disciples goes against all reason. The king rules and the subjects obey, that's how it is.

But this time, at this meal, it's not only reason that is disturbed. The senses are suffering. At Bethany it was the scent of perfume that filled the house. Here it's that of dirty feet. You feel like saying, "No, not those feet, not at the table!" It's just not done! Is there a part of the body, which gets dirty faster than the feet? Especially when you walk for entire days on dusty roads! Sandals certainly reduced the perspiring but increased the dirt. Jesus put his feet in the basin as well as he washed those of his disciples.

And why did he do this during a meal? Why not before going into the house? I think because this deed could not have taken place anywhere other than at table. You had to have eaten together to bear the act. The act of eating

together and the communion of spirit that it creates make acceptable that which the rest of the time seems disgraceful. Because an act of love, whatever act of love – an act which creates the desire for the Kingdom of God – is not always easy, nor is it always very pretty. It sometimes has the scent of rare perfume, but often it has that of dirty feet!

In any case, washing feet or bathing them in perfume attest to the same spiritual presence, to the same commitment, to the same idea of service. It's always a gift. And these two deeds bring about exactly the same kind of incomprehension. They are unbearable to the extent that they depart from the norm. According to common sense, it's not done, it's not good. But around a table, this love becomes acceptable, because the sharing of a meal makes the guests more accessible, more generous, more receptive. With a full belly, it is easier to give and especially to receive.

If clean water on feet burning from walking can symbolize the happiness to come, the washing of the feet, especially, lets us understand the need for humility and service.

Amen!"

My pals and I thought that that was "pretty cool... for a preacher"!

Curing the man suffering from dropsy

Every week, or nearly every week, my mother would tell us a story that centered around a meal and comment on it.

"They say that when the appetite is gone, everything is gone. But there are some meals that are just hard to digest, even when Jesus is at table."

My mother left the kitchen in order to perform the scene. She knocked on the door. Her performances were "for real" and not simply for her own amusement. She was fully capable of waiting as long as it took for one of us to make up our minds to open the door for her.

- *One Sabbath Jesus went to have a meal in the house of a leading Pharisee; and they were watching him closely. There, in front of him, was a man suffering from dropsy (which is a skin disease). Things get off to a bad start. Jesus isn't invited in to eat. He goes into the important Pharisee's house. He's the one to take the initiative. He's not welcome. And, what's more, the Pharisees don't eat with Jesus. They watch him closely. They watch him eating. The meal quickly becomes of secondary importance. Jesus asked the lawyers and the Pharisees: "Is it permitted to cure people on the Sabbath or not? They said nothing. I imagine that everything came to a halt. Each of them just stopped, hand in air, mouth open. Fortunately, things quickly came to a conclusion: So Jesus took the man and cured him and sent him away (Luke 14, 1 to 4). All's well that ends well. For the sick man in any case. But the meal is ruined. Even Jesus forgets to eat. He goes from preaching to telling parables. The food, the thing to be digested, becomes the subject of a lesson. Jesus conducts a class on table manners: how you sit at table, how you invite guests, how you excuse yourself without upsetting your host. The Pharisees are no longer, if they ever were, dinner companions, which means, literally, my young untutored ears, those who share the same bread. They have become pupils, probably no longer judges. No one can take a bite. I can assure you that if I had been at the stove, it wouldn't have happened*

like that. I would have served up a stuffed catfish that would have had everybody getting along.

My mother never ended things on a missed opportunity, a meal where either the dinner or the dinner talk was hard to digest! She would have been too afraid of spoiling our appetite. And spoiling an appetite was for my mother the deadliest of the seven deadly sins.

“Missed opportunities are, fortunately, rare. In general, Jesus liked a good meal and those who knew him knew that. When Levi accepts the call to follow Jesus, he throws a banquet right on the spot. *Afterwards Levi held a big reception in his house for Jesus; among the guests was a large party of tax-gatherers and others* (Luke 5, 29 to 30). Jesus comes to table and the banquet gets started. A banquet, which assembles those who feel that they are closest to Jesus. But they are such undesirables that the right-thinking ones, the conformists – again it’s the Pharisees, they’re always the ones who get chewed out – express their disapproval. How can Jesus prefer the company of sinners? They can’t understand that at a meal it’s love that flavors the food. And yet, the answer had been written in the Scriptures. They were familiar with it: *Better a dish of vegetables if love go with it than a fat ox eaten in hatred* (Proverbs 15, 17).

The Marriage at Cana

My mother followed a kind of annual cycle. When grape-harvest time would come around, she would always read the story of the marriage at Cana. I’m not saying she let us know beforehand everything she had in mind for us. The element of surprise was always part of the pleasure of hearing her tell stories. But for Cana, it was different. There were signs letting me know the time had come.

The night before the big day my mother would seem, somehow, too happy, even as if she were feigning indifference. She knew she was going to carry the day. She picked out a bottle of wine that she had tucked away. She behaved with just enough discretion so as not to give the impression she needed any publicity. But she didn’t try too hard to hide from me what she was planning. She would count on me to get the word out. And obviously I did. That afternoon there were more of us than usual. A great stillness settled over the group, and among us an even greater silence. We had the feeling this was a story not to be missed.

- During a wedding, the wine supply has run out. Not one bottle left, or, rather, not one amphora. Whoever was in charge really fouled up! Where was his head? You always prepare for more than you expect! Unless the supplier wouldn’t let what was left over be returned. A little excitement, a crisis, a moment of uncertainty, near catastrophe. They needed Jesus’ help to save the situation. *There were six stone water-jars standing near, of the kind used for Jewish rites of purification; each held from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water,” and they filled them to the brim. “Now draw some off,” he ordered, “and take it to the steward of the feast”; and they did so. The steward tasted the water now turned into wine, not knowing its source; though the servants who had drawn the wine knew. He hailed the bridegroom and said,*

“Everyone serves the best wine first, and waits until the guests have drunk freely before serving the poorer sort; but you have kept the best wine till now” (John 2, 6 to 10). All of a sudden, in one fell swoop, Jesus changes six stone water-jars – we’re talking about 60 gallons – into wine. Pretty magnanimous for a first miracle. His trial run turns out to be a masterful performance. And Jesus attends to the details. Even if he had come up with a cheap, vinegary wine, nobody would have held it against him. But by reason of pride and satisfaction in seeing a job well done, or because he knows that the contents of the glass influence the mood of the drinkers, he produced a wine of such quality that he astonished the caterer and earned his admiration. If Jesus had done nothing, would anyone have reproached him for it? Would the wedding guests, who were already tipsy, have said anything, or the young married couple, who weren’t expecting anything from him anyway? I know a few folks who even go as far as to say that this abundance of alcohol does nothing to further glorify Jesus. My father, a decent man, thought that this miracle “wasn’t the best thing he had done.” Look, kids, there would be good reasons, very “Christian” reasons, for not lingering over this episode. And yet, John thought enough of it to find a place for it in his Gospel. *This deed at Cana-in-Galilee is the first of the signs by which Jesus revealed his glory and led his disciples to believe in him* (John 2, 11). An irony of sorts – it’s because he’s able to change water into wine that the disciples believe in Jesus! Everything started with this sleight of hand worthy of vaudeville.

My mother would then fall silent. She’d open a bottle. We’d hold out our glasses. She’d fill them for us, saying,

– Until that day when...

And we would respond,

– ... we drink it new in the Kingdom of God.

And we would begin the wine-tasting. My mother would have us talk about the wine, describing its color and clarity, its bouquet, and its fragrance. She would complete our impressions with her own knowledge. At the same time that she was shaping our tastes, she was also teaching us moderation. None of us ever left one of these get-togethers drunk. There were some parents, however, who came complaining. She had an answer ready for them – an answer backed up one hundred percent by the Bible: *Who hath woe? Who hath sorrow? Who hath contentions? Who hath babbling? Who hath wounds without cause? Who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine; they that go and seeketh mixed wine. Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder. Thine eyes shall behold strange women, and thine heart shall utter perverse things. Yea, thou shalt be as he that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lieth upon the top of a mast. They have stricken me...! I was not sick! They have beaten me, and I felt it not: when shall I awake? I will seek it yet again*

(Proverbs 23, 31 to 35). *But given the fact that a) God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine (Genesis 27, 28); and that b) Wine maketh glad the heart of man (Psalms 104, 15), I will continue to serve wine to the children who would like to have it.*

My mother was always a mother. She would often say that drinking in order to forget your problems is a way of not looking at what's most important:

- *Keep a watch on yourselves; do not let your minds be dulled by dissipation and drunkenness and worldly cares so that the great Day closes upon you suddenly like a trap (Luke 21, 34).*

She was much harder on adults. She didn't even spare my father. When he drank too much – I hasten to add this happened very rarely – she'd quote Isaiah to him:

- *The priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgement. For all tables are full of vomit and filthiness, so that there is no place clean (Isaiah, 28, 8 to 9).*

My father, replying with his now less than nimble tongue, would say,

- Yes, wife, I'm drunk, but drunk with grace and with faith. You're making the same mistake as those present the day of Pentecost who confused the way the Apostles were moved by the Spirit with the effects they may have been feeling from the sweet wine.

The miracle of the loaves and the fishes

Everything my mother would tell us in these stories seemed obvious to us. Even the existence of miracles was no longer a problem of any kind for us.

- *A great many people had spent the day with Jesus. And when evening came they were hungry. As the day wore on his disciples came up to him and said, "This is a lonely place and it is getting very late; send the people off to the farms and villages round about, to buy themselves something to eat." "Give them something to eat yourselves," he answered. They replied, "Are we to go and spend twenty pounds on bread to give them a meal?" "How many loaves have you?" he asked; "go and see." They found out and told him, "Five, and two fishes also." He ordered them to make the people sit down in groups on the green grass, and they sat down in rows, a hundred rows of fifty each. Then, taking the five loaves and the two fishes, he looked up to heaven, said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to distribute. He also divided the two fishes among them. They all ate to their hearts' content; and twelve great basketfuls of scraps were picked up, with what was left of the fish. Those who ate the loaves numbered five thousand men (Mark 6, 35 to 44).*

This story stirred my mother with enthusiasm. Her eyes shone.

- Another success story! Jesus was able to feed five thousand men, or, if you count the women and children, 15 thousand human beings, with five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus provided something to eat for the whole crowd of people who came to hear him. Jesus filled their stomachs after having filled their hearts. He nourished their stomachs after having nourished their faith. He gave priority to one over the other, first the teachings then the food. But the passing out of the bread and the fish was still part of the sermon. Jesus insisted on this, everyone had to get their fill. Everyone but him. There's nothing in this story indicating that Jesus ate anything. Jesus took care of the others. He was concerned with them. He didn't buy their loyalty. He knew how to make the distinction between the two. If he gave them something to eat, it would be just the one time, so it didn't become a habit. Providing people nourishment, however, allowing them to survive, could be the best way of making them faithful. If Jesus had agreed to change stones into bread, what a success he would have enjoyed. His followers would have been in the thousands. But Jesus refused to perform what, for him, was a simple feat, which amounted to bribery and corruption. *The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." Jesus answered, "Scripture says, Man cannot live on bread alone"* (Luke 4, 3 to 4). When Jesus takes care of the food, he doesn't hold anything back. Whether it was the bread, the fish, the rations weren't skimpy. The catch was miraculous and the harvest was abundant. The soul is at peace once the stomach is satisfied. Jesus eats and makes it so others can eat, to the point of showing himself to be disgracefully unfair when he was unable to satisfy his own appetite. *After they had left Bethany, he felt hungry, and, noticing in the distance a fig-tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. But when he came there he found nothing but leaves; for it was not the season for figs. He said to the tree, "May no one ever again eat fruit from you!" And his disciples were listening* (Mark 11, 12 to 14). To be able to judge a tree by its fruit calls for the patience to at least be able to wait till the tree bears fruit. But Jesus settled the question out of hand. With admirable unfairness and in a burst of fury, he punished the fig tree. And the disciples heard him. Not a single one budged, no one made any remark at all. They simply reported the story, without it being a problem for them. It is still known today as the barren fig tree. But the fig tree in the story isn't barren. It's the story of Jesus being driven mad by hunger.

The miraculous catch of fish

We had the good fortune to realize that the Gospels taken as a whole meant more to my mother than each of the individual stories she told from them. It represented her way of life. "Mama," I said to her one day, "next Friday, Franck, Michel and Alain and I would like to go fishing. Would you be willing to clean and cook the fish that we catch? We could even invite you and Papa!"

After having considered the consequences of eventually turning this down, my mother chose instead to agree to the proposal.

We prepared for our expedition down to the tiniest detail. The night before, we got together everything we needed: rods, lightweight line, hooks, plenty of everything—you never know—sinkers and floats. To increase our chances of success, instead of the tiny balls of dry bread we usually pressed on our hooks, we used live bait.

As soon as school was over that day, we went down to the edge of the lake and we started fishing. Unfortunately, after three hours of crafty tactics, we had caught only one measly fish, which presented a pitiful sight turning around by itself in the hoop net. Pathetic but famished, we swallowed our pride (there was plenty of room in our empty stomachs) and went back to the restaurant.

We showed our catch to my mother. “Have a seat,” she said. “I’ll see what I can do.” To our great surprise, she quickly came back carrying heaping platefuls. That night we enjoyed the most delicious fish we had ever tasted.

In order for the little fish to satisfy all of us, powers were called for by the cook that no pastor could lay claim to himself. The form of the presentation and the flavor of the fish—unquestionably sole—could have only come out of the vastness of maternal love.

She also recoiled from the very thought of sending us away on an empty stomach.

Man does not live by bread alone

My father would get a little angry over these kitchen Bible readings. He felt that my mother was engaging in unfair competition. He was doing his utmost to assemble together his young charges at Sunday school and at catechism class with nothing more than his powers of speech and his imagination, a room in the social hall, a blackboard, and a few videos. He couldn’t compete with my mother, what with her pies, her pantry, and her wine cellar.

He would make his feelings known on little yellow scraps of paper he put up everywhere. But that didn’t stop my mother. She chose pink to fashion her responses. The battle would sometimes get to be rather fierce, but there was tacit agreement upon one rule: every comment had to be based on a verse from the Bible; you weren’t allowed to take down the messages of your verbal sparring partner. And by the color of the piece of paper, I always knew which side the blows were coming from.

One morning, I found a yellow message on the breakfast table:

“Food is not the only thing there is to life. Man cannot live on bread alone; he lives on every word that God utters (Matthew 4, 4).”

At noon there was a pink reply taped on the telephone:

“It’s necessary to eat well in order to live, and even to survive. Jesus is making assurances of life and life everlasting both at the same time. He is the one who gives wine and spirits, bread and the bread of life. *I tell you this: the truth is, not that Moses gave you the bread from heaven, but that my Father gives you the real bread from heaven. The bread that God gives comes down from heaven and brings life to the world. I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall never be hungry, and whoever believes in me shall never be thirsty*” (John 6, 32 to 36).

That evening a yellow slip of paper showed up on the refrigerator:

“If Jesus really ate as much as a certain woman maintains, why wasn’t he fat?” *The disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, have something to eat.” But he said, “I have food to eat of which you know nothing.” At this the disciples said to one another, “Can someone have brought him food?” But Jesus said, “It is meat and drink for me to do the will of him who sent me until I have finished his work* (John 4, 31 to 34).

My mother responded immediately with three pinks.

- Jesus isn’t fat because he eats infrequently. He is at table, but he doesn’t swallow anything. He talks a lot. He’s always talking. There’s no chance of his getting fat. He doesn’t eat anything.
- Unlike a certain someone I know, Jesus keeps active. He never stops walking.
- Jesus never had the good fortune to have a meal in a famous little restaurant, which shall remain nameless. His meals were very frugal and the banquets were exceptions. Jesus often drank water or wine. He ate grilled fish, bread, olives and fruit. And, sometimes, even less. *Jesus went through the cornfields on the Sabbath; and his disciples, feeling hungry, began to pluck some ears of corn and eat them* (Matthew 12, 1). If Jesus ate the way his disciples did, he was in no danger of getting fat.

I put an end to the debate by taping to their pillows a green message:

- There’s something still more important here than the Word and all this talk about grub. *Surely life is more than food?* (Matthew 6, 25).

Of course it is. We were all in agreement. But everybody would rather share the Word of God on a full stomach, my mother and my father in particular.

The meals of the risen Christ

My parents were always able to suspend their squabbling when serious matters arose. In late autumn one year a student from our school died in an automobile accident. The death had a profound effect upon us. It was the first time that we had witnessed death, had seen a dead person close up.

When we came into the kitchen the following Wednesday my mother and father were already seated there. They had obviously prepared what they were going to say and had picked out several passages from the Bible. We could see their bookmarks.

My mother was the first to speak.

- Children, we’re going to try to talk to you seriously about this. You have probably already noticed that there won’t be anything to eat today. It’s because of the importance of this. You know from my having told you many times, that Jesus took meals throughout his life and that he tried to satisfy the hunger of all those around him. This afternoon we’re going to reveal for you the big secret: Jesus continued to eat after his death. Yes, even dead, he eats still.

My father followed up with some clarifications.

- Three of the four Gospel writers are in agreement when pointing out that the eleven remaining disciples saw the risen Christ during a meal. The lack of consensus about an apparition is troubling at this strange and auspicious moment. Standing alone on this point is the Gospel of Matthew. We read in Matthew the most somber version of the appearances of Jesus. The risen Christ appears to his disciples who are reunited on a mountain in Galilee. No mention is made of a meal of any kind. Jesus delivers his final message and disappears. For Mark, on the other hand, we learn, *while the Eleven were at table he appeared to them* (Mark 16, 14). Nothing indicates that he dined with them. It was, however, while they were dining that he did, indeed, appear to them. Mere coincidence, perhaps. With the Gospel of John, there is no longer a coincidence. Because the story of one of the apparitions explicitly mentions food. Jesus shows himself to his disciples on the shore of a lake during a fishing expedition. His favorite disciple is the one to recognize him. And how does he recognize him? I’ll give you a thousand ways: Jesus indicates a spot teeming with so many fish that even with all of the disciples pulling on the net, they can’t manage to lift it completely out of the water. *He called out to them, “Friends, have you caught anything?” They answered “No.” He said, “Shoot the net to starboard, and you will make a catch.” They did so, and found they could not haul the net aboard, there were so many fish in it. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!”* (John 21, 5 to 6). Too many fish! Thanks to whom? Thanks to Jesus!

My father ended with that and let my mother continue.

- This is where it gets interesting. Those fish don’t merely serve as a demonstration of his powers. Jesus lights a fire himself. He prepares a barbecue so his disciples can have their fish grilled. In truth, Jesus had to kind of make them eat. In the presence of this man who has come back to life, the Eleven are unable to take a single bite. He insists. *Jesus said, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared to ask “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. Jesus now came up, took the bread, and gave it to them, and the fish in the same way* (John

21, 12 and 13). Like a mother, Jesus feeds his disciples, but he doesn't eat anything. Has he risen without a stomach? Before answering, we still have the Gospel of Luke to consider. Listen to what a specialist has to say.

My parents were quite adept at keeping us in suspense. The revelations had reached a crescendo. We sensed that the dramatic conclusion was near at hand.

- Luke tells the story of two disciples who come upon Jesus on the road to Emmaus. All along the way they have conversations with him without ever recognizing him. But where the word does not convince, the sharing of food is the thing to open their eyes. *When he had sat down with them at table, he took bread and said the blessing: he broke the bread and offered it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight* (Luke 24, 30 and 31). Jesus distributes the bread but disappears before eating any of it. Does he still get hungry? He still doesn't eat anything. The following passage will erase any doubts. Because scarcely do they recognize Jesus before returning to Jerusalem as fast as they can to announce the incredible news: Jesus lives. Their haste was in vain because everyone has already been informed in Jerusalem. *As they were all talking about this, there he was, standing among them. Startled and terrified, they thought they were seeing a ghost. But he said, "Why are you so perturbed? Why do questionings arise in your minds? Look at my hands and feet. It is I myself. Touch me and see: no ghost has flesh and bones as you can see I have. They were still unconvinced, still wondering, for it seemed too good to be true. So he asked them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They offered him a piece of fish they had cooked, which he took and ate before their eyes* (Luke 24, 36 to 43).
- Hallelujah! Finally, Jesus eats something, my mother adds. The passage doesn't tell us if he is hungry but it's clear: Jesus eats a piece of grilled fish and thereby proves that he is not a ghost!

She finished speaking. Nobody was saying anything. We had a feeling we knew how it would all end, but we wanted to hear it.

My mother concluded:

- Your companion is dead. I believe, we believe, that he is arisen. We believe that he has the opportunity now of eating what he wants to eat, that he dines with Jesus, with his grandparents, with all of those who are now dead and gone. Here's something I'll tell you in confidence, so don't go out telling everybody: I even believe that the cooking up there is even better than mine.... But, please, don't be in a big hurry to try it!

That evening at dinner, my friends' parents were surely astonished to see their kids going back for seconds, and even thirds!

2. The Old Testament

It had started out like a little game. My mother had blurted out:

- I bet I could prepare all the different things to eat that are talked about in the Old Testament.

I took her at her word. It was agreed. I would read through the Bible looking for any mention of food, and I would let her know what my findings were so that we could plan together the menus for the following week.

- You'll have to have a bite of everything I make! she added like an eleventh commandment and the only condition.

I borrowed a Bible dictionary from my father and got down to work. After having searched in vain for “hamburger,” “French fries,” “lemonade,” and “spaghetti,” my enthusiasm was somewhat diminished. What could they have possibly eaten during those times? I wasn't any longer all that sure about wanting to sample my menus based on the Bible. But I was already a conscientious lad. In order to get done what I'd said I'd do, I needed some help. I went to see my father the pastor.

- Let's proceed with a little order and with some kind of method, he proposed. Your problem—rest assured, is a classic one—comes from having searched in the Bible for what pleases you. And you didn't find it. God be praised! Come on, give it some thought. If a book in the Bible had only mentioned a dish you're crazy about, you'd content yourself in jotting down the name and passing your order on to your mother. And you wouldn't have dug very deeply in your search. Your major setback now requires that you reconsider your methods, to start over with a new approach. Your fiasco is completely beneficial. It has made you wise and humbled you, since it has made you feel the necessity of consulting a specialist. Here's what the specialist says: “Try to put yourself in the position of one of the characters of the Old Testament. Put on his clothes. Walk a mile in his sandals, if you will. Think like that person. Become that person.” What interests you is to eat something good. Big mistake. A Jew of the time would choose his food first according to the law, then, and only then, according to his taste. In his nourishment, as in every aspect of his daily routine, he must respect the Law that God has given him. Two fundamental principles can be found which provide a framework for all the foods that are forbidden. The first commands: *Ye shall eat no manner of blood, whether it be of fowl or of beast* (Leviticus 7, 26); and the second commands: *Ye shall not eat of anything that dieth of itself* (Deuteronomy 17, 21). It must be killed in order to be eaten.
- Even if I am living in the 21st century, I'm prepared to respect the second rule. But why is blood forbidden? It still tastes good—blood pudding!

Before my father got angry, I quickly added:

- No, I'm kidding. I know it's not a question of taste.
- Do you have the audacity to laugh about a basic theological principle? To the Hebrews blood represents life. To consume the blood of an animal, even a small amount, even by accident, means to appropriate the qualities of that animal. Forbidding blood makes it possible to preserve man from any kind of bestiality. *And whosoever man there be of the children of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourneth among you, which hunteth and catcheth any beast or fowl that may be eaten; he shall even pour out the blood thereof, and cover it with dust. For it is the life of all flesh; the blood of it is the life thereof* (Leviticus 17, 13 to 14). That is the theological version. An anthropologist would perhaps read into the Law the conflict between the sedentary groups and the nomads who weren't able to raise pigs. Your mother would perhaps have another explanation, one having more to do with hygiene. You know that in a warm climate meat is difficult to keep fresh and quickly spoils, becoming inedible. Someone eating spoiled meat runs the risk of becoming sick or dying. Forbidding the consumption of a decaying carcass or of blood is a way of avoiding illness. By having these laws elevated to the level of an injunction from God, there is a guarantee that they won't be broken. Like many other laws, the restrictions on certain foods are not arbitrary. They are to permit men to live in peace and in good health. They're good because they're good for human beings.

That was my father, to a T. He loved talking so much, he had so many things on his mind, that he had a hard time reining himself in. But for once, he realized I was no longer listening.

- I talk too much. I must start using a more active teaching method. So, here, you take the Bible and read for yourself the fundamental law having to do with food. I'll go away for a little bit. And don't think for one minute that I'm slipping away to get something to eat, even if it is tea time. Let's see, here's a little challenge for you: If you find the two contradictions inherent in the passages, I'll bring you your snack myself.

So, I began reading in silence.

- *These are the beasts which ye shall eat: the ox, the sheep, and the goat, the hart, and the roebuck, and the fallow deer, and the wild goat, and the pygarg (the dictionary said: a kind of antelope from East Africa), and the wild ox, and the chamois. And every beast that parteth the hoof, and cleaveth the cleft into two claws, and cheweth the cud among the beasts, that ye shall eat. Nevertheless these ye shall not eat of them that chew the cud, or of them that divide the cloven hoof: as of the camel, and the hare, and the coney (in the drawing in the dictionary, it looked like a guinea pig): for they chew the cud, but divide not the hoof; therefore, they are unclean unto you. And the swine, because it divideth the hoof yet cheweth not the cud, it is unclean unto you: ye shall not eat of their flesh, nor touch their dead carcase. These ye shall eat of all that are in the waters: all that have fins and scales shall ye eat (fish, probably): And whatsoever*

hath not fins and scales ye may not eat; it is unclean to you (perhaps crabs and shrimp?) Of all clean birds ye may eat. But these are they of which ye shall not eat: the eagle, the ossifrage (I recognized this one, a bearded vulture; I had been to an exhibition at the Museum of Natural History), and the ospray. And the glede and the kite, and the vulture after his kind, and every raven after his kind, and the owl, and the night hawk, and the cuckow, and the hawk after his kind, and the pelican, and the gier eagle, and the cormorant, and the stork, and the heron, after her kind, and the lapwing, and the bat (thank you, Bible, I don't want to eat them either!). And every creeping thing that flieth is unclean to you: they shall not be eaten. But of all clean fowls ye may eat (Deuteronomy 14, 4 to 20). All fowls that creep, going upon all four, shall be an abomination to you. Yet these may ye eat of every flying creeping thing that goeth upon all four, which have legs above their feet, to leap withal upon the earth (this is getting complicated). A second list confirmed and completed the first: Even these of them ye may eat: the locust after his kind, and the bald locust after his kind, and the beetle after his kind, and the grasshopper after his kind (what a lot of names there are for these leaping creatures!). But all other flying creeping things, which have four feet, shall be an abomination to you. (I don't know any, so I'm not in any danger of eating them!). These also shall be unclean to you among the creeping things that creep upon the earth; the weasel, and the mouse, and the tortoise after his kind, and the ferret, and the chameleon, and the lizard (too bad about the lizard, I've always dreamed of eating one). And every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth shall be an abomination; it shall not be eaten. Whatsoever goeth upon the belly, and whatsoever goeth upon all four, or whatsoever hath more feet (or those with one, two or three feet?) among all creeping things that creep upon the earth, them ye shall not eat; for they are an abomination (Leviticus 11, 20 to 42).

I put up my head. My father was watching me read.

- So, you've found the two little oddities? For the first one, you get your biscuit, for the second, your drink.
- I know that a bat isn't a bird. So, it isn't in the right category. But I haven't found the other one. Perhaps that they eat grasshoppers?
- You eat snails, don't you? For the first answer, you get your biscuit. But your lack of education could very well cost you your drink. Just think about it! Is either the hare or the coney a ruminant? Here, take the glass and drink it up any way. You've been spared by the grace of God.

When he became passionate about a subject, my father would forget about his resolutions concerning the best teaching methods. He became a pastor again and got back to preaching. While I was eating, he took the Bible and began pacing the room.

- Jewish law is stern and precise. Animals unfit for human consumption are plentiful. It's not easy to eat kosher. Cooks have to be able to do their utmost at all times. Because even the animals which are approved of overall, are, also in part, unfit for consumption. *Ye shall eat no manner of fat, or ox, or of sheep, or of goat* (Leviticus 7, 23). Otherwise, they are kept aside for sacrifices. *And he shall offer of the sacrifice of the peace offering an offering made by fire unto the Lord; the fat that covereth the inwards, and all the fat that is upon the inwards. And the two kidneys, and the fat that is on them, which is by the flanks, and the caul above the liver, with the kidneys, it shall be taken away*(Leviticus 3, 3 to 4). The Law also forbids certain ways of cooking: *thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk* (Leviticus 7, 23). Anyone who is able to figure out the principles for separating the categories of clean animals from the unclean must be mighty clever. My legendary prudence was the only thing holding me back from giving it a try. I can only say that every one of these laws is involved with the consumption of the flesh of animals. There are no fruits or vegetables which are forbidden – it's only meat that is worthy of regulation. Certain animals weren't clean enough for consumption, as if they were going to pass on their impurity. Carnivorous beasts are forbidden, but others are too pure to be eaten. It's to be understood that they are "reserved" for God. Other laws could be justified by the will to preserve the species, *If a bird's nest chance to be before thee in the way in any tree, or on the ground, whether they be young ones or eggs, and the dam sitting upon the young, or upon the eggs, thou shalt not take the dam with the young. But thou shalt in any wise let the dam go, and take the young to thee* (Deuteronomy 22, 6 and 7). Every Jew must respect these rules when he's at table. But after all, they're not unique to Judaism. Nobody eats solely according to his taste.

My father stopped to catch his breath. I took the occasion to ask him a question.

- Anyway, it's a little strange to decree all these laws. It's just for cooking. . .
- Don't put words in my mouth. That's not what I said. Jewish law is not solely concerned with forbidding foods, It also guarantees the survival of the poor. It establishes a way of sharing; it codifies solidarity, all the while respecting property. *When thou comest into thy neighbour's vineyard, then thou mayest eat grapes thy fill at thine own pleasure; but thou shalt not put any in thy vessel. When thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbour, then thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand; but thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbour's standing corn* (Deuteronomy 23, 24 to 25). Even the animals can profit from this generosity since the law takes pains to be specific on this point: *Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn* (Deuteronomy 25, 4) so that he may eat some of it.

- Papa, if the Bible forbids certain foods, it's because they were, in fact, considered to be food. Some people at least wanted to eat them. You're not going to forbid food that no one wants to eat!
- My techniques for acquiring knowledge are contagious, my father said. You yourself are becoming a specialist. The forbidden foods must obviously be available and appealing. If not, these laws wouldn't make any sense.
- But do I have to give the names of all these foods to Mama now? Will she have to prepare them all?
- I am obliged to remind you of your personal responsibility. Put another way and more politely, "Make do as best you can!" Personally, I give you permission not to mention the grasshoppers to her.
- My dear father, you're helping way too much. Let's see, in doing my research, I'll follow a chronological order. I've gone to Sunday school, of course, so I know the important periods in the history of Israel. I think in three weeks, we'll be able to sample more than a thousand years of history.

None but wild plants for you to eat

I never knew if my parents dreamed up this culinary project just to get me to read the Bible, but, whatever their reasons, I sure had to get started on it. Fortunately, the entire first period, that of the patriarchs, was contained in the Book of Genesis. I noted down some basic passages:

- Mama, the menus for the first week don't offer anything I'd really call mouth-watering. Whether we're talking about living in the Garden of Eden or not, everyone in those times ate quite simply. Adam and Eve's departure from paradise didn't bring about any real change. Before, it was: *Behold, I have given every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat* (Genesis 1, 29), and afterward, it was: *Thou shall eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face thou shalt eat bread...*(Genesis 3, 18 to 19).
- When just the act of eating can make you break out in a sweat, my mother cautioned, it's because the bread is too hard to chew!
- Very funny! But seriously, the only thing that changes is that now there's a harvest. They are to work hard to get the same things that were available just for the taking before.
- Duly noted, said my mother. We'll have bread. For the "green herb bearing seed," we'll have a salad buffet, spinach, cream of sorrel soup, or a gratin of Swiss chard; we can decide. You haven't mentioned fruits. Maybe I'd be creating problems by bringing apples into the picture.
- Mama, please, don't ever say that to the other man in your life. In the passage you're thinking about, the Bible doesn't speak of apples, but of "fruit," without anything more specific. As a consequence, you renounce all fruit or none at all. I'd say you can plan on your famous "tarte Tatin." It's okay to eat dairy products

- the nomads drank the milk and cheese they got from their sheep and goats – and we can eat cereals – *Esau sold his birthright unto Jacob, who gave him bread and pottage of lentils* (Genesis 25, 33 and 34). And add in meat because after the Flood, God authorized the eating of meat: *Every creature that lives and moves shall be food for you; I give you them all, as once I gave you all green plants* (Genesis 9, 3). When all is said and done, our meals will be like those Abraham provides for his three special visitors. He said to his wife: *Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it and make cakes upon the hearth. And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetcht a calf tender and good, and gave it unto a young man; and he hasted to dress it. And he took butter, and milk, and the calf he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat. And they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent* (Genesis 18, 6 to 9).
- Fine wheat flour! A boy to cook the roast! What luck to be blessed by God, scoffed my mother. And how heroic, Abraham, who spares his wife! He even goes to the trouble of choosing the meat himself. Notice that he doesn't go so far as to offer to do the cooking or the dishes himself. Mister enjoys the good food and good talk while the old lady slaves over a hot stove. He's some kind of hero, this guy? I'd say more of an old patriarch with a beard. And, coming from me, you better believe it, that's no compliment.

The results from the first week proved to be pretty good. The goat's milk was certainly a little hard to swallow. Anyway, my mother didn't insist. But the griddle cakes and the veal were great.

Manna

The period of enslavement in Egypt is quickly passed over in the Bible. In actual fact, it provides us with only one menu, one for the Easter feast: *Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year: ye shall take it out from the sheep, or from the goats. And they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire and unleavened bread, and with bitter herbs they shall eat it. Eat not of it raw, nor sodden at all with water, but roast with fire, his head with his legs, and with the purtenance thereof* (Exodus 12, 5 to 9). Our first menu then was all arranged. But we still had the other days of the week to consider. Our meals, therefore, would be ones that would have been eaten by the people in the desert. Obviously, the climate seriously limited the gastronomic possibilities.

The most essential part of the story was to be found in Exodus. So, I read my mother the passages in question.

- *And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying: At even ye shall eat flesh, in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God. And it came to pass, that at even the quails came up, and covered the camp: and in the morning the dew lay round about the host. And when the dew that lay had gone up, behold upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as*

small as the hoar frost on the ground. And when the children of Israel saw it, they said to one another, it is manna: for they wist not what it was. And Moses said unto them, This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat (Exodus 16, 11 to 15).

- The quails are easy enough, but where am I going to find the manna? I'd be very surprised to find it on the shelf at the supermarket. And your father, in spite of his many talents, is no Moses.
- Don't forget your bargain!
- I'm not trying to get out of it, but I need a little bit more information.

I got down to work again and was able to come up with something that would help:

- *And the manna was as coriander seed, and the colour thereof as the colour of bdellium (a fragrant resin, yellow in color). And the people went about, and gathered it, and ground it in mills, or beat it in a mortar, and baked it in pans, and made cakes of it, and the taste of it was the taste of fresh oil (Numbers 11, 7 and 8).*
- Thank you. Our menus aren't going to be humdrum! commented my mother. I like quail very much, but *every night...*and the manna? What did you say, cakes tasting of fresh oil? I don't know, I don't feel very inspired...

We were preparing ourselves for a nourishing yet unappetizing week when my father salvaged the situation:

- You two are being as difficult as the Hebrew people were being in the desert. They also complained about what God was providing them. There were a bunch of them who began suddenly to covet something more; and the sons of Israel themselves began weeping: *Who shall give us flesh to eat? We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick. But now our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all, besides this manna, before our eyes (Numbers 11, 4 to 6).* Include those things the people remember from Egypt, even if they could only dream of actually having them, and I'll eat with you. As far as drinks are concerned, sorry, I can't perform miracles. We'll remain sober. We'll drink only water. That's all that Israel drank for forty years.

The quail went really well with the manna. But the manna you have to get very fresh and then there's lots and lots of grinding. It has to be really fine. I'm not going to say anything more about it, though. Preparing manna has become a family secret.

A land of milk and honey

- My reading of two books was sufficient for me to be able to establish the menus for the first two weeks. That meant that for the third week I'd have to read the rest of the Old Testament. And it's so long! The Israelites lived for a long time in

Canaan and in the kingdoms of Israel and Judea. It wasn't my intention to read every book that could potentially say something about food. I made some soundings. But first I had to confirm one detail:

- Mama, would you rather make a dish as promised in the wager or one that makes us dig right in?
- I had committed myself to serving dishes that were actually eaten. But if there's something really good you have in mind instead, I can make an exception.
- You decide. In the time of King Hezekiah, during the siege of Jerusalem, the people had to *eat their own dung, and drink their own piss* (II Kings 18, 27). But, I'm warning you, if you prepare a meal like that, I'm going to try to get invited to eat over at a friend's house.
- All very well thought out. I won't be serving that dish.
- My mother is a wise woman, very wise indeed. And she has very good taste. She did well in opening a restaurant. So, listen to this and take some notes: *And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows. And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey* (Exodus 3, 8). Do you realize how lucky you are? For an entire week we're going to eat what nature brings us. Aren't you glad? It's healthy and full of vitamins. Listen to what the ones exploring the land of Canaan brought back with them from their first trip there: *And they... cut down... a branch with one cluster of grapes, and they bare it between two upon a staff; and they brought of the pomegranates, and of the figs* (Numbers 13, 23). And since we're not sectarians, I think we can add in the food promised by the King of Assyria. *Make an agreement with me by a present, and come out to me, and then eat ye every man of his own vine and every one of his fig tree, and drink ye every one the waters of his cistern. Until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of corn and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of oil olive and of honey, that ye may live and not die* (II Kings 18, 31 to 32).
- Yes, it's healthy, but it's still a little along the same lines as before: vine and grape, wheat and bread, olives and oil. Fortunately, there's some honey to put on your bread. And what about fish, son? Haven't they said anything about fish?
- They don't say much about fish. But one of the gates of Jerusalem is called "the Gate of the Fish." Since fish have no interest in coming to town on their own, I deduce from this that they're brought to market to be sold. Whether they're caught in the lake or the sea, you can add them to the menu. And if you'd like to try an original recipe, you can try wild cucumber soup. But be careful how you prepare it. For this one, you really have to feel inspired. You'd even do well in asking God's help. *And Elisha...said unto his servant, Set on the great pot, and seethe pottage for the sons of the prophets. And one went out into the field to gather herbs, and found a wild vine, and gathered thereof wild gourds his lap*

full, and came and shred them into the pot of pottage: for they knew them not. So they poured out for the man to eat. And it came to pass, as they were eating of the pottage, that they cried out, and said, O thou man of God, there is death in the pot. And they could not eat thereof. But he said, Then bring meal. And he cast it into the pot; and he said, Pour out for the people, that they may eat. And there was no harm in the pot. (II Kings 4, 38 to 41).

We decided not to take the chance.

The three weeks were over, and we had succeeded in making the rounds of foods in the Bible. My mother had won her bet. True, a Hebrew man or woman might not have recognized what we had to eat. Ours was a contemporary and European reinterpretation of the foods of the Middle East of two thousand years ago. Contrary to what we had thought, the cuisine of the Old Testament was not all that humdrum. Jewish Law did not forbid gastronomy at all. And as for us, we ventured away somewhat from the beaten path. I have to say, the results were worth the effort.

Satisfied with the results, my father suggested that we invite the congregation to a Biblical meal. I kept a copy of the menu.

Appetizers

Wild Cucumber Soup (II Kings 4, 39)
Beans and roasted corn on the cob (I Samuel 17, 28)
Pottage of lentils (Genesis 25, 34)
Vinaigrette (Ruth 2, 14)

Entrées

Leg and tail of lamb (I Samuel 9, 24)
Roebuck and hart (Deuteronomy 12, 15)
Partridge (I Samuel 26, 20) and fish (Nehemiah 13, 16)
Cheese (I Samuel 17, 17) and quail (Genesis 18, 8)

Desserts

Date cake and raisin cake (I Samuel 6, 19)
Almonds (Ecclesiastes 12, 5)
Grapes, pomegranates and figs (Numbers 13, 23)

Beverages

Spiced wine and pomegranate juice (Song of Solomon 8, 2)

Goat's milk (Proverbs 27, 27)

*Unleavened cakes (Exodus 12, 39), cumin (Isaiah 28, 25), saffron
(Song of Solomon 4, 14), capers (Ecclesiastes 12, 5), salt (Job 6, 6),
and honey (Ezekiel 16, 13)*

The members of the congregation were a little surprised by the quantity of dishes. The experience moved them on from our soup dinners, famous for never having made anyone let their belt out a notch but still charging five-star restaurant prices. Even if those affairs were always for a good cause and the money taken in went to support the needy, the quality of the meal versus the amount paid for it usually left something to be desired. For once, everyone really stuffed their faces! Content at having eaten so well, though, we all showed ourselves to be quite generous. And our "Missions" certainly didn't come up short.

PART TWO: RESPONSIBILITIES

*Come, all who are thirsty, come, fetch water;
come, you who have no food, buy corn and eat
come and buy, not for money, not for a price.
Why spend money and get what is not bread,
Why give the price of your labour and go unsatisfied?
Only listen to me and you will have good food to eat,
And you will enjoy the fat of the land.
Come to me and listen to my words,
hear me and you shall have life.
(Isaiah 55, 1 to 3)*

They say that love is blind, but it might be deficient in another sense as well – taste. That’s not to say that the woman with whom I live doesn’t possess all the qualities that a husband might well expect in a wife. She has them in spades. But we do have different tastes. She’s a vegetarian!

I don’t know whether I’m to read into this marriage an unconscious desire on my part to repeat the quarrels of my parents, or the sense of humor of a God who thinks it’s funny to bring together extreme opposites. But let’s just say, for simplicity’s sake, it’s made our life as a couple somewhat “novel”!

It could have taken me a while to figure out that she didn’t eat meat, if she hadn’t had her militant side. Early on, we shared relatively few meals together, and, I’ll confess, it wasn’t what was on our plates that interested me the most. After all, even the most hardened carnivore sometimes eats vegetarian dishes: pastas, vegetables, fish, cheeses, rice, eggs, and mushrooms. And there are so many ways to prepare them: spaghetti with pesto, sashimi, zucchini au gratin, pizza, risotto with boletus mushrooms, raclette, or omelets. So many, in fact, that a whole lifetime wouldn’t be sufficient to sample them all!

But my lady friend had the soul of a missionary. Right away, she tried to get me to give up meat. Knowing my father’s profession, she tried making a biblical argument:

- In the Old Testament, the consumption of meat was the cause of grief. Just for a mouthful of meat, the old man Isaac committed a great injustice. Speaking to his son Esau, he said, *Behold now, I am old, I know not the day of my death: Now therefore take, I pray thee, thy weapons, thy quiver and thy bow, and go out to*

the field, and take me some venison; and make me savoury meat, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat; that my soul may bless thee before I die (Genesis 27, 2 to 4). But Jacob, the other son – Esau’s twin, who had the misfortune of being born a few minutes after him – is going to go out first, bring back the meal, deceive his father and receive his blessing. This meat dish will then create hatred between the two brothers. Just as meat makes Cain kill his brother merely because God turned down his offering of crops harvested from his field while He accepted the beasts sacrificed by his brother. *Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering. But unto Cain and his offering he had not respect* (Genesis 4, 3 to 5). No, believe me, meat is never a good contribution to anything.

Did she really think that I was going to let myself be pushed around like that? It wasn’t going to take long for the love of my life to see that I could more than hold my own ground when it came to the Bible.

- I think you’re being unfair. In the story of Cain and Abel, the tiller of the soil kills the stockbreeder. And even fruit can cause problems. In the Garden of Eden, the man and the woman could eat any fruit except the one growing on the tree at the center of the garden. But this tree’s fruit, exactly as it was created to be, was *good for food, ... and was pleasant to the eyes, ... a tree to be desired to make one wise* (Genesis 3, 6). First the woman, then the man gave in. They ate of the fruit. Do you happen to know the crossword clues for the story of Adam and Eve? You don’t? “An apple, a couple of pumpkin heads, and a big pickle!”

I won the first battle. But my wife returned to the attack.

- By eating meat, my love, you put your health at risk. People have died from having ingested meat tainted by Mad Cow disease or from poultry containing dioxin. I don’t want to lose you. What would I become without you?
- Ah, yes, the old “Be careful what you eat, it could kill you” argument! Just so you know, I harbor the same feelings of fear and dread. When you eat an egg I think of salmonella, and when you have cheese, listeriosis. I tremble at the very sight of you eating all that genetically altered organic matter. Just consider it for a second it: the corn, soybeans, colza, and, soon, tomatoes and potatoes. I have visions in which all this genetic engineering makes you start mutating. I look at your pretty little face and imagine you suddenly with these enormous ears, or a third arm sprouting somewhere from your body. Or even, that all these antibiotics that you swallow up from the salmon you eat will render medicines ineffective!
- It doesn’t matter. I use homeopathic remedies!

So ended the second jousting match, in a tie: there were the same number of risks on both sides. Since I’m somewhat sure of myself, I wasn’t expecting to lose the war.

One Saturday afternoon when we were running errands at the grocery store, she requested, with an air of mystery, that we each take our own cart. She took me down the aisle to the meat case; she put a roast weighing a couple of pounds into my cart. Then I followed her to produce, where she filled hers with over thirty pounds of carrots.

I asked her:

- What are we doing exactly?
- Make a quick comparison. In which cart is there more to eat?
- In yours, obviously. Over thirty pounds of carrots can last at least a month, whereas I can eat the two-pound roast in three days. But what would be great, would be to combine the two. We could make a good stew that could easily last a week.
- Don't be such a dummy! In order to produce that much roast beef, these thirty pounds of carrots were needed, at least!
- But cows don't eat carrots. They graze in the meadow, feeding on grass. What are you trying to say? I don't understand anything any more.
- I'm saying your steer has a low yield. It grazes all day on grasses, but in the end, it provides almost nothing to eat. Since it takes fifteen vegetable proteins to produce one animal protein, it would have been much smarter to have planted carrots in the field where your steer had grazed. How many people can you feed with your meat? And how many can live off of my carrots? In a vegetarian world, there would be fewer who die of hunger.

What kind of answer could I possibly come up with for that? Nothing. So I didn't say another word. And I decreased my consumption of meat. Gradually! I don't know how strangely I might have begun acting had I gone cold turkey.

I had had hesitations for quite some time about introducing this militant vegetarian to my parents. Such an encounter had the potential, it seemed to me, of turning into fireworks. I was afraid of her seeing their various moods. But she insisted on meeting them. I couldn't put it off any longer. The moment of truth had arrived.

I gathered up all my courage and I decided to invite her to the family restaurant. The only thing remaining for me to do was to make the announcement to my parents.

I had learned my lesson well. I knew that in order to break such news, there was no better time than during a meal. I took my time. When we were on the appetizer, tomato soup that I still remember well – I said nothing. I let the roast and vegetables be passed around, and I went for it when the cheese came.

- I have something important to tell you. I met a...

As if by design, my father knocked over his wine glass, providing me with a short reprieve. And so it was at dessert that I took the plunge. The time had come. I swallowed hard and in one breath, said:

- The woman I love, the woman I want to spend my life with, is vegetarian! That's not so bad, is it?

My mother, who, for twenty years said to me over and over that I was to eat what was put in front of me, just said:

- She's vegetarian? She has good reason to be. What's more, I think you and your father eat too much meat. It can only do you good!

And my father added,

- It could be worse. She could have been Catholic.

Ah, this cursed Protestant sense of propriety that keeps us from expressing our feelings! But I think that, in spite of appearances, my parents were happy. My mother often invited my wife into the kitchen to concoct vegetarian menus that my father always took great pleasure in eating. A true conversion! As my father would say while this was sorting itself out:

- Idiots and fundamentalists are the only ones who never change their minds!

1. The strong and the weak

A few little concessions sufficed in order to make our life as a couple possible. We rarely ate meat, but I could grill my ribs whenever I really felt the craving. The birth of a little girl forced us to make some radical decisions. When breast feeding was over, I asked:

- Will we feed our daughter meat?

I knew I was embarking upon a difficult discussion, but I had no idea that the issue would require us to review the theology of the New Testament in its entirety.

So as to keep from divorcing each other right away, we wisely searched for areas of agreement. We found one, an important one, absolutely essential: Christian faith does not prescribe one way of eating.

My wife was vegetarian, I was an omnivore, we were both Christians. We had heard and fully understood to words of Jesus: *a man is not defiled by what goes into his mouth, but by what comes out of it* (Matthew 15, 11). With this succinct statement, Jesus has forbidden making a manner of eating a criterion of the faith. There isn't any kind of food that is impure, because whatever we eat makes its way quickly through our body. Is it necessary to be more explicit? Jesus was: *Do you not see that whatever goes in by the mouth passes into the stomach and so is discharged into the drain?* (Matthew 15, 17).

Our disagreement centered more over an ethical question. When it comes to our family's eating habits, what's fairest for everyone?

I said:

- I eat a little of everything and I claim for myself the freedom Paul demanded: *Therefore, since Jesus was delivered to you as Christ and Lord, live your lives in union with him. For in baptism you were buried with him, in baptism also you were raised to life with him through your faith in the active power of God who raised him from the dead. And although you were dead because of your sins and because you were morally uncircumcised, he has made you alive with Christ. And the conclusion seemed to me to be indisputable: Allow no one therefore to take you to task about what you eat or drink (Colossians 2, 6 to 16).* Our daughter will be able to eat meat!

My theological reasoning was unassailable. In any case, it was what I believed. My wife, shrewd as she is, positioned herself on the same terrain. She knew she would find in Paul the only arguments capable of convincing an authentic Protestant.

- I am only demanding the respect that you are obliged to give me. It's true you are a man, strong, handsome, tall, and generous. You eat meat and you feel fine. But look at me! I'm just a weak woman. I have nothing more than my conviction that by renouncing meat, I can make some kind of very modest contribution to the establishment of justice in the world. Through Christian charity, apply the principal of Paul: *If a man is weak in his faith you must accept him without attempting to settle doubtful points. For instance, one man will have faith enough to eat all kinds of food, while a weaker man eats only vegetables. The man who eats must not hold in contempt the man who does not, and he who does not eat must not pass judgement on the one who does; for God has accepted him ((Romans 14, 1 to 3).* I have absolutely no scorn for the carnivore that you are. But I'm weak. Keep me from temptation! Don't make me renounce my convictions. I am of the same opinion as Paul: *Let us therefore cease judging one another, but rather make this simple judgement: that no obstacle or stumbling-block be placed in a brother's way. I am absolutely convinced, as a Christian, that nothing is impure in itself; only, if a man considers a particular thing impure, then to him it is impure. If your brother (or your wife in this case) is outraged by what you eat, then your conduct is no longer guided by love. Do not by your eating bring disaster to a man for whom Christ died! What for you is a good thing must not become an occasion for scandalous talk; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but justice, peace, and joy, inspired by the Holy Spirit.* I make the same entreaty to you as Paul did to the Romans: *Do not ruin the work of God for the sake of food. Everything is pure in itself, but anything is bad for the man who by his eating causes another to fall. It is a fine thing to abstain from eating meat or drinking wine, or doing anything which causes your brother's downfall (Romans 14, 13 to 21).* Do you dare force me to feed our daughter meat?

She was obviously quoting Paul out of context. But from the look on her face, I knew it was not the time to discuss interpretation. She had brilliantly turned the tables. I believed myself to be weak because I couldn't swear off on meat and I found myself to be strong because I was able to eat all of what God gives us. With my male pride flattered, I accommodated myself to her arguments. At home out of respect for the "weak vegetarians," none of us were to eat meat. But outside of the home, I maintained the right to eat it and our daughter as well if she so desired. I insisted on this so as not to complicate socializing with others.

2. Give us our daily bread

Our daughter grew up. Like all the other women in the family, she had a fondness for contradicting many things. From early on, she liked to start up great debates, not always the ones we expected.

We had decided to pray every morning as a family. We would begin with an open prayer and would end with the Lord's Prayer. This was a very simple way of allowing us to find God again together and to ask him to bless our day.

But one morning, our daughter asked:

- The people down there, do they believe in God?

We had to show some prudence here. "Down there," was just as much the Antipodes as the next house over. I tried to figure out what it was she meant:

- Certain people believe as we do, others believe differently and there are surely some who don't believe at all.
- Do those who believe as we do pray like us?
- They speak other languages, but what they say must be similar to what we say.
- Why, then, doesn't God give them their "daily bread?"

"Thank you, television!" The night before we had been watching scenes from a famine. I don't even remember the country anymore! The camera had lingered over a woman with flat, barren breasts that a baby was trying in vain to suck at. The reporting had had its effect. Our daughter had been turning the images from the show around in her mind. She must have been associating the daily "kneading" of bread with "needing" it daily. Why didn't the one follow the other if you just prayed for it?

Our daughter's question was a good one. The only thing was, she was coming along a little too quickly for us. We hadn't found an answer yet that would have made sense. Honest parents that we were, we asked for some time to think about it. Generous in spirit as she was, she allowed us the time we requested. And she left for school.

Eternal God hath given...

Like all existential debates, my wife began this one in our bedroom. She waited until midnight and the moment when I was beginning to fall asleep to share her thoughts with me.

- Hunger in the world is not the result of God’s negligence, but of the injustice of man. There are some who explode by their eating so much, while others are starving to death.

Did you know there are 1.2 billion people who eat too much or eat poorly, while 1.2 billion others don’t get enough to eat? Overweight people in the North are trying to avoid the calories that would allow those starving in the South to live. That is what we should tell our daughter. If the food supply were better distributed among everyone, every child in the world could get his fill.

I was tired, but I didn’t want to miss out on the opportunity to have a discussion on this. I lifted up my head, fluffed up my pillow and propped myself against the head board.

- But it’s not as simple as that. Obese people and the undernourished are side by side in the same country, in the North as well as in the South. The problem is national as well as international! It has overtaken the planet and every life it supports. I don’t agree with you. By excusing God, you accuse us. I understand your argument very well. “Eat less, eat better and the whole world will be able to eat!” But “Our Father who art in heaven” quickly withdraws from the scene. In his infinite wisdom, he created exactly what is needed by the 6 billion human beings that we are now. And we’re the ones, in your view, who are responsible for the famines and the deaths that they cause, because we don’t know how to divide among us what he so generously gave. But God by then made his commitment. No sooner had he created the animals and the humans than he distributed the different kinds of food. *I give you all plants that bear seed everywhere on earth, and every tree bearing fruit which yields seed: they shall be yours for food. All green plants I give for food to the wild animals, to all the birds of heaven, and to all reptiles on earth, every living creature (Genesis 1, 29 to 30).* Given the current situation, of God, I’d say: “There’s room for improvement!”

My wife turned around to face me. I had been able to take her by surprise.

- You, the son of a pastor critical of God? The world is being turned upside down. But I see your argument, too, my dear: “If God is the one who is responsible for hunger in the world, I don’t have to change any of my habits!” And no longer made to feel guilty, you’ll continue to devour your quarters of beef and pound after pound of sausages. I learned to thank God for what he gives us. We owe all of what we have to eat to him. I’m not ashamed to praise him: *He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and the herb for the service of man: that he may bring food out of the earth; and wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil*

to make his face to shine, and bread which strengtheneth man's heart. These wait all upon thee; that thou mayest give them their meat in due season. That thou givest them they gather; thou openest thy hand, they are filled with good (Psalms 104, 14 to 28).

She didn't catch me off guard. Everything she was saying followed logically, was classic, too much so. She had come exactly where I was waiting for her. I had my answer ready.

- In these conditions, the efforts of men seem quite useless: *In vain you rise up early and go late to rest, toiling for the bread you eat; he supplies the need of those he loves (Psalms 127, 2).* What could we do that would be more than what God has done? How could our efforts, so inadequate, change the course of events? *Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow and reap and store in barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. You are worth more than the birds! Is there a man of you who by anxious thought can add a foot to his height? No, do not ask anxiously, "What are we to eat? What are we to drink? What shall we wear?" All these are things for the heathen to run after, not for you, because your heavenly Father knows that you need them all (Matthew 6, 26 to 32).* You have to be honest from beginning to end. If God is monitoring the availability of food, he can also refuse to provide it in the first place. If it is he who makes fruits and vegetables grow, then you have to admit that it is he as well who causes famines and droughts to occur.

My wife asked for a time out. She wanted to make herself a tisane. We got settled down again in the kitchen. She heated the water. I got some cheese out of the refrigerator and poured myself a glass of red wine. In silence, we restored our strength. At the end of half-time, we were ready to take up the debate again.

My wife had found a way to reply to me:

- It looks like I'm defending the worst kind of heresy. What would you like me to do? Would excommunication suffice or do you prefer burning me at the stake? The theology I'm defending is based entirely on the Bible. I haven't invented anything. I'm satisfied with reading the Bible! *It was I who kept teeth idle in all your cities, who brought famine on all your settlements: yet you did not come back to me. This is the very word of the Lord. It was I who withheld the showers from you while there were still three months to harvest. I would send rain on one city and no rain on another; rain would fall on one field, and another field would be parched for lack of it, yet you did not come back to me. I blasted you with black blight and red (let this be just a little warning to you – these diseases affect not only grain but also vine crops), I laid waste your gardens and vineyards; the locust devoured your fig-trees and your olives; yet you did not come back to me (Amos 4, 6 to 9).*

- My dear, my better half, please go and explain this theology to those who are dying of hunger. I can see you now, preaching to them: “If only you would place your confidence in God, you would have everything you need! Pray, and a little miracle will be performed!”
- Man of little faith! was her sharp reply. But the people dying of hunger are exactly the ones who have developed this theology that displeases you so much. They know that God takes care of those he loves. Remember Elijah on the banks of the brook. The drought had created the famine, but God was watching over. Elijah won’t die from hunger. *I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there* (I Kings 17, 3 to 6). When the brook is dried up, God sends his prophet to the house of a widow, where he should find what he’ll need to survive. Elijah realizes this and asks the woman for something to eat and drink: *“Please bring me a little water in a pitcher to drink. “As she went to fetch it, he called after her, “Bring me, please, a piece of bread as well.” But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have no food to sustain me except a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a flask. Here I am, gathering two or three sticks to go and cook something for my son and myself before we die.” “Never fear,” said Elijah; “go and do as you say; but first make me a small cake from what you have and bring it out to me; and after that make something for your son and yourself. For this is the word of the Lord the God of Israel: “The jar of flour shall not give out nor the flask of oil fail, until the Lord sends rain on the land.” She went and did as Elijah said, and there was food for him and for her and her family for a long time. The jar of flour did not give out nor did the flask of oil fail* (I Kings 17, 10 to 16). The woman, at the risk of dying, agrees to divide up the little she has left. And God rewards her for her generosity, by guaranteeing provisions till the famine is over.

I had become quite weary. It was already two in the morning. In five hours I had to get up. But I didn’t want to give in. Even so, I suggested going back to bed. When we got to the bedroom, I felt inspired again.

- And those whom God doesn’t love, they die of hunger? Or should I say instead: “Those who die of hunger die because God doesn’t love them?” That isn’t the God I believe in. For me there’s just one thing that counts: “God is love.” There’s no need of miracles. All that’s needed from time to time is some common sense to avoid the worst from happening. Recall Joseph. He leaves his Egyptian prison warning of seven good years followed by seven years of no harvests. He finds a way to overcome the dark years. His solution isn’t exactly brilliant, but it’s one that will work: All that’s needed is to make provisions. And thanks to Joseph, Egypt survives the famine. It becomes the country people in the surrounding region can fall back on. Egypt was where they could buy the grain they lacked. Even Joseph’s family found what they needed to survive there. *The whole world came to Egypt to buy corn from Joseph, so severe was the famine everywhere.*

When Jacob saw that there was corn in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you stand staring at each other? I have heard that there is corn in Egypt. Go down and buy some so that we may keep ourselves alive and not starve" (Genesis 41, 57 to 42, 2). God didn't cause the famine: he didn't prevent it. But he didn't calmly sit by and watch the people die. He entrusted Joseph with the task of limiting the most extreme consequences of it.

My wife, greatly vexed, shook her head,

- I can't help laughing a little. Your model of wisdom is a nasty piece of work. His framed photograph must hang in honor above the desks of the worst capitalists, bosses of multinationals and proponents of globalization. Joseph did little out of charity and much out of his fondness for turning a profit. He wasn't guided by love. It was just business: *There was no bread in the whole country, so severe was the famine, and Egypt and Canaan were laid low by it. Joseph collected all the silver in Egypt and Canaan in return for the corn which the people bought, and deposited it in Pharaoh's treasury (Genesis 47, 13 to 15).* And when there was no more money, Joseph had the people make payment in kind: *Joseph said, "If your silver is spent, give me your herds and I will give you bread in return."* (Genesis 47, 16 to 17). And then when the Egyptians have nothing left anymore, Joseph comes up with the semblance of a "land for grain" humanitarian program. The U.N. has nothing over him. *So Joseph bought all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh, because the Egyptians sold all their fields, so severe was the famine; the land became Pharaoh's (Genesis, 47, 20 to 21).* So, we've come full circle. The Canaanites became Pharaoh's slaves. It's true that this story serves as an example, an example of what should not be done. Joseph is a model for every defender of economic liberalism, and his story a cynical economics textbook. Especially since I'd be surprised if Joseph lost a single gram throughout the famine. He was, rather, the type that would have eaten like a glutton while watching others waste away. So, please, I prefer counting on God's providence. Or, if you want an example, take that of Ezekiel. He's one who paid dearly, with his own flesh. In order to warn Jerusalem of the coming famine, God commanded him to fast for a year. *Then take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and spelt. Mix them all in one bowl and make your bread out of them. You are to do it during the one hundred and ninety days you spend lying on your side. And you must weigh out your food; you may eat 200 grams (I'll spare you the Biblical measurements) a day, taking it from time to time. Measure out your drinking water; you may drink 7.5 quarts a day, taking it from time to time (Ezekiel 4, 9 to 12).* Dry bread and water for over a year, would your Joseph have been able to make do with so little?

The alarm clock went off. Our daughter was standing at the door of our bedroom.

- Mama, Papa, I'm hungry...

Our daughter was counting not on Providence but on us to make her her morning's hot chocolate and two slices of toast and jam. We got up. The day was getting under way.

If love fails

The all-nighter we spent in our discussion had brought our positions closer together. We had understood that God was asking us to divide up the bread that he was giving us. My wife thought that the existing food supply was sufficient to feed the 6 billion human beings who lived on the planet. She was militating for a more equal redistribution. And I thought that an improvement of yields could facilitate the distribution. But how do you say that to a little girl? The best thing was to think it all through with her.

Certain parents would have drummed it in to her: "Finish everything on your plate!" Think of the little Chinese children who are dying of starvation. Parents like that do exist. I know it. That wasn't our way. Through what kind of miracle could a single gram that she left on her plate have helped to feed someone else in the world?

It was our judgment that she should be able to express her anger. We bought a big white board she could mark on. At the top, serving as title, we wrote with a black marker: "IT'S NOT FAIR..." With an erasable felt pen, each of us was allowed to write down our grievances. Our daughter went at it with a will.

IT'S NOT FAIR...

That people are dying of hunger!

That some parents can't feed their children!

That a boy stole my snack!

That some children have to struggle to find enough to eat!

Of course, our complaints denounced all sorts of injustices, large and small, auto accidents, bad grades, quarrels with companions at school... There were all kinds, but scandals concerning food made up an important part. It was our original idea – somewhat naïve, I'll admit – to erase the complaints as justice became reestablished. Inevitably, we became disenchanting, of course. Most injustices have been going along unresolved – nobody has been able to do much. At the end of a week, the board was full.

We had to quickly adopt a new tactic.

- The complaints that remain at the end of each week will be copied down on sheets of paper and filed in a folder. They will become exhibits in a trial brought against neither God nor Man, but a trial brought with God against those who make us incapable of achieving justice and real sharing of the food supply.

We prepared the trial meticulously, down to the last detail. The setting, assignment of roles, compilation of the files, list of witnesses... We sweated over the writing up of the indictment. We needed to take care not to accuse the wrong suspect. With no better solution, we stayed with our first idea of “a complaint against X.” The anonymity of the accused would release any one of us from having to play that role. Perhaps the trial would make it possible for us to make the accused's identity a little clearer.

My wife wanted to be the presiding judge. As for our daughter, generous and idealistic as is her entire generation, it was a given that she would defend God and Man, against whatever makes them, against whatever makes us, suffer. She would then become the prosecuting attorney, with the responsibility of proving the guilt of the accused. As for me, appointed by the court, I became X's lawyer.

The big day finally arrived. In order to make the trial more solemn, we set the stage with immense care. The dining room became the courtroom. The furniture was moved out, with

the exception a table and three chairs. In order to get into our roles better, we all three wore robes: red for my wife, black for my daughter and for me. We entered the praetorium with grave faces, our files under our arms. We waited for my wife to be seated before taking our seats.

The judge grabbed her gavel, rapped it once.

- The case “God and Man versus X.” We’ll hear from the defense.
- Madam President, I said, I call to the stand my first witness.
- Approach the stand. Sir, please state your name and profession.

I stood up. I tried to imitate the way a peasant from the Middle East would walk and talk. Judging from hilarious reaction of my daughter, the effect must not have been the best.

- My name is Amos, I raise a few animals. It doesn’t surprise me that there are people who die of starvation. *I see rich people who loll on beds inlaid with ivory and sprawl over... couches, feasting on lambs from the flock and fatted calves, ... who pluck the strings of the lute and invent musical instruments like David, ... who drink wine by the bowlful* (Amos 6, 4 to 6). As long as the rich don’t share what they have, there won’t be any justice.
- Objection, your honor! The defense is attempting to make human beings the ones responsible for famine. They’re not the ones who are on trial here.

This was my daughter speaking. Her only knowledge of the law came from what she saw on TV.

I wasn’t about to let myself be taken in.

- Madam President, we’re not accusing anyone. Amos is simply describing what he saw. Would the prosecution have the impertinence to deny that food is poorly distributed? My second witness will confirm the point. Will the court summon the prophet Isaiah to the stand?
- Objection denied. Bring in your second witness.

All I knew about Isaiah was how young he was. In such circumstances, it wasn’t easy to create my character. I approached the witness stand and opted for a sober performance.

- *I’ve already seen, in my short life, how rich people live as parasites. Shame on you! You who rise early in the morning to go in pursuit of liquor and draw out the evening inflamed with wine, at whose feasts there are harp and lute, tabor and pipe and wine, who have no eyes for the work of the Lord, and never see the things that he has done. Shame on you, you mighty toppers, valiant mixers of drink* (Isaiah 5, 11 to 22). *And all the while the poor tighten their belts another notch. He starves the hungry of their food and refuses drink to the thirsty* (Isaiah 32, 6). I understand their revolt.

- Mr. Isaiah, the prosecuting attorney asked, does humanity, in its injustice, leave you with any hope at all? Are human beings condemned to injustice? Aren't they capable of behaving otherwise?

I couldn't lie to the court.

- Yes, they are! Their weapon is solidarity: *If you feed the hungry from your own plenty and satisfy the needs of the wretched, then your light will rise like dawn out of darkness* (Isaiah 58, 10).

Madam President, said my daughter, that's the core of the problem. Human beings are capable of solidarity. It's not just a dream, it's also the reality. I've read in an excellent book, the title of which is the Bible, this quote, which I submit to you for consideration: *The kindly man will be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor* (Proverbs 22, 9). Remaining unjust or committing ourselves to our interdependence, it's up to us to decide. And we should do it sooner rather than later if we want to be admitted into the Kingdom of God. You're familiar with the ways by which we're judged: *When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit in state on his throne, with all the nations gathered before him. He will separate men into two groups, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Then the king will say to those on his right hand, "You have my Father's blessing; come, enter and possess the kingdom that has been ready for you since the world was made. For when I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty, you gave me drink... Anything you did for one of my brothers here, however humble, you did for me* (Matthew 25, 31 to 40). We can do it. We have the capability. It's not our fault if we don't do it! It's "X" who makes us selfish and bad. Are you still mulling over "X's" identity? Isn't it clear? His name is "Selfishness," "Indifference," and even "Faith," when there's no "Love" to go along with it. *Suppose a brother or a sister is in rags with not enough food for the day, and one of you says, "Good luck to you, keep yourselves warm, and have plenty to eat," but does nothing to supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?* (James 2, 15). I ask you, Madam President, to condemn "X" so that we can then be permitted to divide up our food more fairly.

- Charity isn't a feat to be registered in the record books, I was quick to jump in with. It loses its meaning when love is missing from it. Not even the greatest act of generosity can assure our entry into paradise. *I may dole out all I possess, but if I have no love, I am none the better* (I Corinthians 13, 3). Even though I'm a lawyer, I insist on remaining honest. I can't ask for "X" to be acquitted. But I would ask that man and mankind be condemned jointly with him – or her.

The president withdrew to deliberate. My daughter and I remained silent during the time of her absence. We stayed in character. Instinctively, we rose when my wife came back to deliver the verdict.

- Since both the defense and the prosecution are convinced of "X's" guilt, I am, too. I therefore sentence "Selfishness," "Indifference," and "Faith without Love"

to prison in perpetuity. They shall remain behind bars till the end of time, except in the event that the Kingdom of God come before that time. I leave it to each of you to unmask them and carry out the sentence. But human beings do not escape from this trial without blame. I condemn us collectively to make resolutions which shall contribute to reducing the injustices inherent in the dividing up of the food supply. Attention will fall upon any who eventually quit – or are likely to – but they shall never have a police record because of it. The question of God remains to be resolved. After having reviewed the pieces of evidence in the files and having heard the witnesses, I'll give him the benefit of the doubt. But, so that he does not forget his promises, we shall continue to remind him every morning to "give us this day our bread."

The judgment was a good one. Neither my daughter nor I tried to appeal.

We hadn't entirely finished with this trial. We still had to decide upon our resolutions. Together, we got started. We didn't really come up with anything truly inspired. But the efforts that went into it increased its value.

We would invite all those who passed by our house to come in and eat with us. I pointed out to my better half that this decision was a matter concerning her. Because the model wife is *Like a ship laden with merchandise, she brings home food from far off. She rises while it is still night and sets meat before her household* (Proverbs 31, 15). Decency prevents me from recording her response here.

We would be watchful as regards the origins of our food. We would favor those foods raised or grown according to ecological principals. As much as possible, our concerns about food would be twofold: we'd scrutinize the product itself and remain vigilant as regards the environment. But at the same time we would be thoughtful with respect to the situation of the producers. Out of solidarity, we would accept paying higher prices for products, provided that the difference in price would go to the farmer and not to middlemen. In short, we would be as much concerned with a food's origins, its "traceability," as with its taste. By going to stores distributing "fair commerce" products, and ones selling organic foods, we have discovered the two often go hand in hand.

On her own initiative, our daughter made an additional decision. She said yes to any and all request for food donations. She kept it up, too. Throughout her entire time at school, she provided, for those in need throughout the entire world, bags of pasta and packages of rice or sugar numerous as the stars or as the countless grains of sand on the seashore.

3. Do this in memory of me

It was never my desire to become a pastor like my father or a cook like my mother. But I now did the cooking at home and by vocation my work was in our church community. I had even joined our congregation's governing body, its council. I participated regularly in its meetings, and I would always try to have an opinion on the topics we discussed, an opinion that I always hoped was both intelligent and Christian. But it was always the Lord's Supper that I had an ardent interest in. Probably because that was where I could bring together my two passions of theology and gastronomy. It's probably obvious by now that I wouldn't have been satisfied with the way we celebrated the Lord's Supper in that church. I decided to bring up the problem at our annual meeting.

- In our Christian faith, we put a supper at the center of worship. Not a meal to be talked about, not one to be recalled, not one to be explained, but a meal that is eaten, swallowed up, thoroughly digested. It's not enough to recall the death and the resurrection of our Christ. We have to become familiar with the taste of it, too. For two thousand years, everywhere in the world it's through a meal, a supper, that Christians recall the meaning of the death of their Lord, whether they call it the Last Supper, the Lord's Supper, Eucharist, or Communion. We all know the story of how it came to be. *On the first day of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to ask Jesus, "Where would you like us to prepare for your Passover supper? He answered, "Go to a certain man in the city and tell him, the Master says, 'My appointed time is near; I am to keep Passover with my disciples at your house.'" The disciples did as Jesus directed them and prepared for Passover. Jesus, a good Jew, wanted to commemorate the freedom that God gave the people of Israel. In the evening he sat down with the twelve disciples; and during the supper he said, "I tell you this: one of you will betray me." In great distress they exclaimed one after the other, "Can you mean me, Lord?" He answered, "One who has dipped his hand into this bowl with me will betray me. "What showmanship! Among the twelve men symbolically gathered around their master, there's one who will betray him. Each of them wants to know if he's the one, because each one of them feels himself capable of handing over the one he has chosen as his master. During supper Jesus took bread, and having said the blessing he broke it and gave it to the disciples with the words: "Take this and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and having offered thanks to God he gave it to them with the words: "Drink from it, all of you. For this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, shed for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, never again shall I drink from the fruit of the vine, until the day when I drink it new with you in the kingdom of my Father" (Matthew 26, 17 to 29). Jesus changed everything. The disciples thought they were eating lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs, recalling the history of the Jewish people. But they ate bread and drank wine together, giving them a taste of the future.*

I hadn't done so deliberately, but I had adopted my mother's oratorical technique. I had been reading the passage at the same time I was commenting upon it. But I hadn't created her same effect, and I could sense that there were some who were growing impatient.

- I'm coming to my point, rest assured. Pastor, you invite us sometimes to "come now and eat for the Lord is good"! But frankly, when the bread is dry, when the wine is bad, what have we of the goodness of the Lord? Do you really think that the bad wine that you serve will make us want to go and drink the same in the Kingdom of God? Does bread that's hard to chew and wine that's bitter, and so, hard to swallow, increase our chances to get into paradise? Would that the Lord's Supper become some kind of picnic? No, of course not. But a good communion supper should also appeal to the taste buds. If not, what reasons do we have for eating and drinking in the first place?

There was silence throughout the congregation. Then a tiny voice, that of the treasurer, shyly asked,

- How much do you think this would all come to?

I swept this aside:

- If our austere offerings are nothing more than a matter of economizing, just let me say I find that kind of calculating attitude to be mean and grudging. How could we ever saddle our Lord Jesus Christ with that kind of penny-pinching? How can we even think of skimping on first fruits of the Kingdom?

Then, delivering what turned out to be decisive, I replied with this:

- If it's only a question of money, I'm prepared to pay for the bread and wine out of my own pocket.

Having finally convinced them, or having just worn them down, I'm not sure which one, the assembly gave their consent. And so, in a nearly unanimous decision – my own was the only dissenting vote – I was appointed as both Steward of the Loaves and Official Cupbearer. From then on, I was responsible for supplying the Lord's Supper.

I met with the baker and the three wine-growers in the village. Over the course of one unforgettable evening, made even more memorable by its outpouring of spirituality, we tasted the elements worthy of the Lord's Supper.

I had thought that a sweet wine, but not too much so, might please all the communicants, men and women, young and old, but I was quickly disabused of this notion.

The oldest wine-grower replied dryly:

- A good wine has to retain the taste of the ground in which the vine grew and must attest to the love of the grower who transformed grapes to wine.

The growers all suggested their own reds and whites. So as not to hurt anyone's feelings and because their wines were worth it after all, we decided that we would use them all, each in its turn.

The baker wished to be informed on a regular basis of the topics of the sermons. He could then, when inspired, come up with a confection that would call to mind the day's reading: farmhouse loaf to emphasize the Christian faith's simplicity and natural authenticity, a brioche-like bread for Sunday holidays, etc. He had given it all pretty much thought, going as far as to suggest a woven crust for the times when our pastor would speak about the Trinity and jaunty little bread men he would have rise from his dough on Easter, which some felt was in bad taste!

I have to admit that attendance at worship didn't increase in any spectacular way, nor did sales for the bakery or the wine merchants. But there were those who expressed their satisfaction. And the treasurer was greatly relieved to discover that the wine-growers and the baker provided their products and their work to us at no charge.

Concern over what constituted the elements of the Lord's Supper had another, more surprising and unexpected, outcome.

This is my body

As unlikely as it might seem, we had among us a woman from Tahiti. Her name was Maeva. How was it that she wandered from those climes all the way to our cold winters? I don't know. I think she had met an expatriate teacher back in Tahiti. She had decided to follow him when his contract was up. They settled in our village. Every Sunday she worshipped with us, always in a white dress, summer and winter, wearing a hat of woven fiber. In ten years I don't think she missed more than three services.

One night she rang our doorbell. We invited her in and sat in the living room. She had come to suggest that we celebrate the Lord's Supper "the Polynesian way," with coconuts.

I was, of course, enthusiastic about it, but it was necessary to convince the other church members. We went to see our pastor to present her with our request. She proved to be much more skeptical.

- In general, I'm not against change, she said, but here you're asking for something difficult. Jesus didn't choose just anything at all. Among all the kinds of food available in his times, he deliberately decided on bread and wine. He could have

chosen other kinds of food: lamb, olives, water... Bread and wine are consequently indispensable for celebrating the Lord's Supper.

But "my Tahitian" wasn't ready to be let herself be taken in.

- And just suppose, Pastor, he had simply taken what he could have found on the table? Suppose he had just used up what was left over from the supper. Those of us in Polynesia, we believe that we have the right, in a climate such as that, to use up what is found on our tables. Back home, it's too hot for wheat to grow. And we hardly have any grapevines at all. So, we use what our land gives us, especially coconut!

Our pastor was nobody's fool. She had followed Maeva closely as she demonstrated her idea. She had put her finger on the argument's one weak point.

- If I go to you back at your home in Tahiti, I will be delighted to take communion by eating coconut. But here, in our home, wheat and grapes can grow! So why not use them? We're all the more faithful to Jesus!

I felt I had to step in here.

- In any case, Jesus' bread and wine resemble in no way the bread and the wine that we consume today. To truly do as he did, we would have to use unleavened bread. But that's something that the Reformers did not want to do. They wanted to serve "real bread," the bread used every day, the bread that everybody ate with their daily meals.

I think I was wrong to have brought the debate back onto theological turf. In the first place, because I wasn't so sure of myself, and secondly, because I was treading on the area of our pastor's expertise

Fortunately, Maeva redirected the question back over to the realm of emotion. When she spoke again, her eyes were filled with tears but she kept on beaming her lovely smile:

- You see, Pastor, I haven't been back to my island since the day I came here. Perhaps I'll never go back. It would give me so much pleasure to take a communion that had coconuts as one of the elements. Do it for me! Just this once!

Our pastor couldn't say no. So, she said:

- Yes!

We were all looking forward to the next Sunday with communion. As soon as they came into church, the congregation could see a coconut placed at the center of the communion table.

It's reason for being there remained a mystery right up till the beginning of the celebration of the Lord's Supper, at which time it became up to us to explain the innovation.

I spoke first:

- As family suppers do, too, in their way, the communion suppers celebrated for 2,000 years – from the one done in memory of the death of Jesus to the one done in the hopes of arriving in the Kingdom of God – bring together the participants, those taking bread, coconut or other kinds of food, those drinking wine, grape juice or other drinks, into a single community with a common destiny. In spite of the time and the space separating them, or the forms of observance and doctrines that divide them, sitting around the same table can be found all those who renew this supper. Communion should make us all feel a sense of interdependence, in our memories, in shared hopes, and in the lives we lead. This morning we would like to recall the universality of the Gospels. The word was made flesh just once. But it can be conjugated in other modes and times.

I was particularly proud of this last phrase. In order to give it adequate time to create its effect, I waited a few seconds before handing the microphone over to a very emotional Maeva.

- This morning we are going to celebrate communion by having coconut. In the Pacific, it represents for us our entire life. We eat its meat, we drink its water. We use the shell for bowls, the fibers to weave mats, the trunk to make furniture and the oil we use as a beauty product. This is why, in all of our islands, God makes the coconut tree grow. In addition, the coconut has a wealth of Biblical symbols: the patience needed in waiting for the Kingdom because we have to wait for the coconuts to fall before we can gather them up; God's tenderness toward small folks because the coconut rolls along till it comes to the lowest spot. This is why we use it to celebrate the Lord's Supper. By dividing up and sharing a single coconut, its pulp and its milk, we remember that it was one single man who gave his life, his body, his blood. Yes, the coconut is a gift from God. No life without the coconut tree, no life without God!

Maeva had tears in her eyes. And I, from watching her, was starting to cry, too. Across the thousands of kilometers that separated us, we felt close to the Polynesian Christians. We had never gotten so much out of communion. Despite the distance that separated us, the love of God was bringing us together.

People liked the experience. We invited Africans, Asians to celebrate from time to time an "exotic" Lord's Supper.

Here is the lamb of God!

For quite a long time, it had been the custom in our church to celebrate the Passover lamb. Certainly I was no mere bystander in all of this, but, still, my appreciation of that worship service was always profound and personal.

The Thursday before Easter we would gather to celebrate the two covenants that God had made with men. In a real religious supper, where food mingles with words, we relive the last supper that Jesus had before his death. This was a feast day, an exceptional supper, and even my wife would consent to the eating of a little meat.

We would begin preparing by mid-afternoon, when we would start grilling a lamb whole. That was the men's task. At the same time, the women would be making a "little salad." Of course, there was no real liturgical justification for the salad, but it gave us a great deal of pleasure, so there you have it. When evening came around we would all sit down together and begin eating. As the Hebrews did on the night before leaving Egypt, as the disciples did the night before the crucifixion, we divided up the lamb among ourselves and distributed the unleavened bread. When we had finished eating we filled a glass with the wine that was still left on the table – always one to plan ahead, our pastor would keep a bottle in reserve – and we would have it passed from hand to hand to remind ourselves of the time Jesus had set for us to meet again.

This was no doubt the worship service I most preferred. It would have been my hope to recapture that same spiritual atmosphere in the communion suppers we celebrated throughout the year. I thus proposed to the members of the Council:

- And why not celebrate the Lord's Supper at a real meal?
- But you're not serious! came the reply. It's unthinkable! It's just never done! The Lord's Supper is a liturgical act, not a banquet!

My position was well documented:

- But, yes, it is done! One of the characteristics of the Reformed church is to think of the Lord's Supper as a meal bringing together those that Jesus invites to his table. At the time of the Reformation, Zwingli replaced the silver dishes with ones of wood, the kind that the people of Zurich used every day to eat. In Scotland and in Holland the Reformers received communion seated around a table. And why do we use leavened bread rather than the host? Because no one has buttered hosts for breakfast! Having said that, I'll just say, too, that we haven't really invented anything. The early Christians put dinner-time at the center of their community life. *And breaking bread in private homes, they shared their meals with unaffected joy* (Acts 2, 46). In those times, the Lord's Supper wasn't made to differ from a meal. The Lord's Supper extended the meal, or the meal, the Lord's Supper. "Communion" didn't yet have a place, a liturgy, or a

designated time when it would occur. You would eat and you would give grace. You would celebrate and be nourished. Happy times they must have been, when you didn't have to nitpick over every word of the liturgy or over the qualifications of the one presiding over the meal. Why couldn't we do the same thing?

All I can say is that the council members had their doubts:

- And what about the abuses? Your “good old times” weren't really all that good. Do you know how the supper went at Corinth? It was nothing short of an orgy of food and drink. Paul reproached them for it: *When you meet as a congregation, it is impossible for you to eat the Lord's Supper, because each of you is in such a hurry to eat his own, and while one goes hungry another has too much to drink. Have you no homes of your own to eat and drink in? Or are you contemptuous of the church of God that you shame its poorer member? What am I to say? Can I commend you? On this point, certainly not! Therefore, my brothers, when you meet for a meal, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that in meeting together you may not fall under judgment* (I Corinthians 11, 20 to 34).

I was in rare form:

- So, let's establish as our first rule that there shall be no overindulging! I can see it now, our campaign slogans can read, “No One Has Ever Been Further Imbued with Grace Through Excessive Consumption of Christ's Blood.” Or perhaps a more puritanical version would be more to your liking: “Take One Swallow but None to Follow.” And, of course, we could always just opt for the more contemporary, “Drink Responsibly!” which would be especially good as regards the young people. And our second rule shall specify that the Lord's Supper always be eaten in common. It isn't a sprint, and the one finishing first shall not have gotten anything more than the one who took his time to chew.

I, at least, thought I was convincing, but this time the Council voted no. I had to content myself with the Passover lamb. And, well, anyway, that wasn't so bad.

4. The Kingdom of God is like...

Of our parents, it was my mother who was the first to die. Just after having told her of her grandmother's passing, my daughter asked:

- What's it like where Grandma is? Is it like being in church?

Now it was up to us to speak about our hopes for the resurrection. It was a little awkward, seeing as how difficult it is to talk about something in simple terms when you yourself don't know what it will be like. But we needn't have worried about that. As usual, Jesus has gone before, preparing the way. He had already shown us what we could say. Rather than trying to

explain what the Kingdom of God is like we would illustrate it. My mother obviously knew the parables about food and gastronomy the best.

- Like Grandpa’s services in church? My God, no! I hope she really is in paradise. You could say that the Kingdom of God is like a great marriage feast. *A man was giving a big dinner party and had sent out many invitations. At dinner-time he sent his servant with a message for his guests, “Please come, everything is now ready.” They began one and all to excuse themselves The first said, “I have bought a piece of land, and I must go and look over it; please accept my apologies.” The second said, “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am on my way to try them out; please accept my apologies” The next said, “I have just got married and for that reason I cannot come.” When the servant came back he reported this to his master. The master of the house was angry and said to him, “Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town, and bring me in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.” The servant said, “Sir, your orders have been carried out and there is still room.” The master replied, Go out on the highways and along the hedgerows and make them come in; I want my house to be full. I tell you that not one of those who were invited shall taste my banquet” (Luke 14, 16 to 24). Close your eyes and imagine you’ve just sat down to eat. Do you smell all the aromas, do you taste all he flavors?*

My wife added:

- My mouth is watering already. At this dinner there’s nothing but the tastiest dishes and the most delicious drinks. You like sweet peppers? There are sweet peppers! Trout? There’s trout! Sweet, juicy fruit... And everything in abundance. And you don’t even have the classic dilemma of having to decide on taking seconds or leaving room for the next course. The Kingdom of God will be a feast where I will be able to eat even after having eaten, a meal I won’t be afraid of making me fat, a meal where I can take seconds on everything, a meal both sublime and ideal!
- And does Grandma do the cooking? asked my daughter.
- She certainly will from time to time, to please God. But only if she feels up to it. When she’s too tired, she can sit down with everyone else and just eat.

Our daughter was also worried about us:

- And do you think, Papa, that Mama, you and I will also eat up there?
- For you and your mother, yes, it’s a given! I responded. You’re saints, the two of you! As for me, it’s no sure thing! But I’ll have my chances to join in, since all one need do is to keep to the highways and along the hedgerows and be made to go in. There are no requirements, no separating out of one from another. All that matters is that you’re ready and willing. All who desire to go and eat can do so. No one has to worry about it. There will always be enough to eat. In the Kingdom of God everyone eats, especially those who may not deserve to.

My daughter already by that time had a solid grounding in the Bible. She knew her classic Bible stories:

- It's like the story of the two sons. *The younger son returns to the family and is ashamed. But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Fetch a robe, my best one, and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us have a feast to celebrate the day. For this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found. And the festivities began* (Luke 15 21 to 24). And do you remember the big brother who became angry because his papa had never given him anything? Do you think he would have spent a lot of time sulking over it? What I think is that after a while he too came to the table to eat.
- I agree with you. In the Kingdom of God everyone will be able to satisfy his hunger, especially those for whom a full belly represents an unimaginable luxury: *Happy are you who are hungry now: you shall be made full* (Luke 6, 2).

Just before the burial, our daughter drew up a menu for a meal that she would like to eat one day in the Kingdom of God. She carefully folded it up, put it in an envelope and placed it on the coffin.

- You see, now Grandma will know what to make for me when I go there to eat with her!