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'This my body'

Some theological reflections on food

as a way to understand our relation to the rest of creation

1.

Maybe the briefest and clearest summary of the understanding of the human being in her relation to the rest of creation, in Western, post-Mediaeval Christianity, can be found in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556). Ignatius writes in what he himself calls the 'principal and foundation' of his exercises:

Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. And the other things on the face of the earth are created for man and that they may help him in prosecuting the end for which he is created. From this it follows that man is to use them as much as they help him on to his end, and ought to rid himself of them so far as they hinder him as to it.

The main problem in this statement, as I see it, is its voluntarism: as if human beings *can* get rid of 'the other things on the face of the earth', and break off our relations with them. As if we are not intrinsically related to them and 'to praise, reverence and serve God' is not intrinsically connected with our relations to our fellow creatures.

It is exactly through what this round table conference calls 'our daily bread', through our relation with our food, that we can see how much we are what we are in and by our relations with other things that make up God's creation. The things we eat and drink become what we are, become part of our bodies. This suggests that from a theological perspective we could best express our relation with the rest of creation not as if it is a collection of possible tools we could freely use to reach a certain end, but by repeating the words Jesus pronounced at his last supper and the Church through her priests has repeated ever since in the Eucharist: 'this is my body, this is my blood'. We should look upon 'the earth... and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it' (Ps. 24,1) as our bodies, our blood. Like we cannot choose our bodies we cannot *choose* to be part of the earth, related to our co-creatures or not. We are connected, we are in and through this connection, as we are in and through our bodies.

2.

With this I in fact did launch my first thesis in this brief presentation: we should understand and live our relations to the earth and our fellow-creatures in analogy to our relations to our bodies. This, from a theological point of view, almost immediately leads to a second thesis. 'No one ever hates his own body', the apostle Paul writes, 'but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it'. and the Apostle adds to this the highest authority thinkable, at least for him: 'no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church' (Eph. 5.29). This is my second thesis: We should *care* for the world in which we participate together with and through fellow creatures in the way we *care* for our own bodies in the image of Christ caring for the church, his body.

This, on the one hand, is a much more intimate relationship than the one expressed in the category 'stewardship'. We should not take care of the earth as stewards care for an estate, but as corporeal beings taking care of their bodies. The earth is not our environment, but an aspect of what

we are; not what we live but what we live by: we live our lives as our bodies. On the other hands, I would argue, the body-metaphor leaves ample room for freedom in how to design our care for the earth. The word 'stewardship' suggest that taking care of the earth is a task, a job, something we should do and in a general sense is in competition with the other task we have. We have to take care of the earth *and* to take care of our children, for instance, to sustain the environment *and* to sustain our fellow human beings, especially the ones that are not routinely sustained: the poor and the needy. But if we live through and as parts of the earth and all that is in it as we live through and in our bodies, we can say that we take care of our needy fellow human beings through our care for the earth. Thus, I suggest as my third thesis, we could escape the current impasse of thinking in terms of either social or environmental responsibility: should we either produce as much food as possible, or should we produce it as green as possible?

3.

Of course we have a responsibility to the earth, our fellow beings and fellow creatures, things, plants and animals, the soil, the air, the very space we inhabit – just as we have a responsibility to our bodies. But that responsibility, as we all know, can take a wide range of different forms. We are allowed, from a Biblical point of view, to 'use' our bodies. It is a certain kind paganism that thinks that we have to die in bodies that look like they have never been used, really. It is all right to have our body scarred, damaged, worn. We can temporarily use our bodies in a way that is ultimately not sustainable. We can intensify the use of our bodies in order to train them athletically, for instance, or in order to solve an emergency. In short: care of our bodies, responsible care of our bodies as an expression of the fact that 'no one ever hates his own body, but nourishes and tenderly cares for it', can take many different and divergent shapes.

Love for our bodies as our dwelling places on earth can take many different shapes, but it should remain love, and not become hidden indifference or even hatred. Love for the earth and its parts and products can take many different shapes, dependent on the circumstances, on what we are asked to do by our situations and on what we are necessitated to produce by our needs and inclined to strive for by our wants. But it should remain love, and not become hidden indifference or even hatred.

4.

This, I would argue finally, is the kind of conversion we need: not a conversion to sustaining our environment, our earth, our natural resources, but a conversion to experiencing them as participating in our bodies, of living not by simply making use of them as far as they benefit us, but in and by them as we live in and by our bodies. What we need, ultimately, is a conversion to loving the earth as Christ Jesus loves his body, the church. And as Saint Augustin wrote: *Ama et quod vis fac*, love and do whatever you want. It is love that makes us want to do what is good, and to find out what it can be to do good, here and now. Eating means saying: this is my body and is therefore a sacred act.