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Eucharistic Imagery in Film: Two Patterns of Usage

Abstract

In Christian tradition, the primary effects of the Eucharist are the formation of *koinonia* and the facilitating of *metanoia*. Metaphorically, these effects make the Eucharist a symbol of community building and personal transformation. However, the way that such symbolic meaning is emplotted in film can vary between two distinct approaches. Augmentative usage uses Eucharistic symbols to deepen and amplify narrative instances of community building, such as by family gathering or reconciliation between characters, or character growth. In ironic usage, Eucharistic symbols elicit standards of virtue and goodness that help critique actions or events that damage *koinonia* or prevent characters from achieving *metanoia*. In addition to addressing these patterns of usage, this paper will also suggest criteria for when filmic content can be reasonably interpreted as Eucharistic. Examples to be discussed for augmentative usage include *Moonstruck*, *Romero*, *Babette's Feast*, and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Examples to be discussed for ironic usage include *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *The Godfather Part II*, *The Searchers*, and *Pan's Labyrinth*.

Keywords

Eucharist, metanoia, koinonia, Moonstruck, Romero, Babette's Feast, Beasts of the Southern Wild, Arsenic and Old Lace, The Godfather Part II, The Searchers, Pan's Labyrinth

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The Eucharist is one of the most important and rich symbols in the Christian imagination. However, as much as filmic presentations of Christianity and its symbols have been analyzed in various ways there has been relatively little systematic reflection on Eucharistic symbolism in film. The intent of this paper is to offer a starting point for focusing in a general way on how Eucharistic imagery has been used in film. I will be suggesting two primary patterns of how Eucharistic imagery has tended to be employed cinematically: augmentative in which Eucharistic symbols are used to amplify elements of the film's story, and ironic in which such symbols are set up as a contrast to elements of the film in order to critique them. In the latter half of the paper I will offer several examples to illustrate each pattern; however, to frame the discussion, I will first describe what I am taking as a basic and fundamental theology of the Eucharist, and will secondly offer some criteria for calling filmic symbols or images Eucharistic. My intention is to open avenues by which theological reflection on the Eucharist might be enhanced by considering the reappropriation of Eucharistic meaning in cinematic narrative, as well as ones by which the interpretation and criticism of film can find new opportunities for framing religious meaning and plumbing theological and spiritual depth. This theological lens is one that may in some cases be unintended by the filmmakers, or filmmaker intent may play into validating the lens, but in either case the argument is that a theological interpretation through the Eucharist can be legitimate and fruitful.

A Working Sense of Eucharistic Theology: *Koinonia* and *Metanoia*

In developing a theological background, my own thought comes from the perspective of Catholic systematic theology. But, I will be trying to keep to the most basic stratum of Eucharistic sensibilities, and I think that this approach will lend itself to various ecumenical perspectives, doctrinal views, understandings of community, and theologies of grace. To that end, I offer the two following concepts as a synopsis of the basic effects of the Eucharist in Christian thought: *koinonia*, the idealized sense of the Christian church's community identity, and *metanoia*, the process of conversion or turning one's life around that is necessary for the reception of salvation.

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is one of the primary keys for understanding the essential relationship between *koinonia* and the Eucharist; in chapter 10, Paul emphasizes the oneness of body formed by the sharing of the one Body of Christ in the Eucharist: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (10:17). And in chapter 11, while admonishing the Corinthian church for developing factions within itself (11:17-22), he turns to the *koinonia* of the Lord's Supper as a basis of his criticism (11:23-26), telling them that to partake in the body and blood in an unworthy manner, that is, amid communal division, is to condemn themselves (11:27-29). For an association with Eucharist and *metanoia*, there is the scene in

Luke 24 of the road to Emmaus. As the risen Jesus converses with the two disciples, Luke leaves the disciples completely unaware of Jesus' true identity until the moment when he enacts the breaking of the bread. It is only at that point that *metanoia* occurs, that the disciples' eyes are opened and they turn to recognition and belief in the risen Christ (24:31). Theologically, these concepts ultimately are inseparable. Turning again to Paul, crucial to *koinonia* is that the fellowship it describes is necessarily formed only in Christ. For the horizontal effect of community formation, there must be simultaneously a vertical turning to Christ in the individual members. In Romans 2, Paul describes that the fellowship characteristic of the Christian community should be rooted in allowing God's kindness to lead one to *metanoia* (2:4). The end result of *metanoia* is becoming an authentic part of the Christian community; and for *koinonia* to be achieved individuals must first undergo authentic conversion.

In the course of discussing the biblical interconnections of the Eucharistic Supper, David N. Power succinctly explains: "What is done at the Supper thus appears as the fulfillment of past figures and events and as the eschatological anticipation of the fullness of God's rule."¹ In this sense, the Eucharist is a central symbol of the final fulfillment of the Christian church as the realization of the Kingdom of God, and *metanoia* and *koinonia* are central conceptual components of this dynamic. Power associates this eschatological importance of the Eucharistic symbols with their effecting of a "transformed humanity"

(*metanoia*) from which “church emerges” (*koinonia*).² He describes the Eucharistic table as itself representing the people gathering as community, and that after the ritual of the sacrament “it continues to represent the people, now caught up in the fullness of their being in Christ.”³ The shared meal of the Eucharist is an essentially communal event, completely misunderstood without its base *koinonia*, but the *metanoia* brought about by the ritual perfects that *koinonia* in union with Christ.

J.M.R. Tillard is a theologian who has stressed the dimension of *koinonia* as key to understanding the Eucharist. In the opening of an article describing the Eucharist as the symbol, cause, and actual manifestation of authentic *koinonia*, Tillard states a formula that he repeats in varied fashion throughout the essay: “the Eucharist is at the heart of the Christian *koinonia* because, in the celebration of the gift of grace made by Jesus Christ, it accomplishes the work of reconciliation with God and between believers which the Scripture presents as salvation.”⁴ For Tillard, the Eucharist symbolizes the spiritual depth of communal meal sharing, provides the means by which authentic community can be realized, and concretely manifests at the local level the reality of authentic community. And central to this *koinonia*-dominated vision is the effecting of reconciliation and a call to conversion. Tillard writes later: “But the effect of the Lord’s body is neither magical nor violent. It does not deny the essential part played by freedom in the salvation of the creature ‘made in the image and likeness

of God.’ Hence the constant call to conversion which is the proper reaction of the free person to the invitation and action of the grace of the Spirit.”⁵ *Metanoia* is in this sense inseparable from and necessary to the formation of the *koinonia* that the Eucharist is meant to effect. In developing a theology of food Angel Mendez-Montoya affirms such a double movement of *koinonia* and *metanoia* in the Eucharist, taking the presence of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament as enabling individuals to become united to Christ in order to realize true communion, as the participants are moved by the holy nourishment to fellowship in mutuality and sharing.⁶

Establishing When Cinematic Imagery Can Be Eucharistic

With this theological background in place, I would like to suggest some criteria for when images in film might be reasonably considered Eucharistic. As I list these criteria, I will offer some examples drawn from the films I will be addressing shortly as case studies for the patterns of usage I am presenting.

First, there is explicit reference to the Eucharistic ritual. In the film *Romero*, for instance, Raul Julia’s Archbishop Romero interacts with the actual Eucharistic objects at key points in the film, but does so in a way that suggests broader meaning to the *metanoia* and *koinonia* the sacrament involves. When the performance of the ritual or the interaction with the items of the Eucharistic

celebration attach to the film's meaning, that meaning becomes interpretable in conjunction with the theological weight of the Eucharist.

Second, the presence of food in a cultural context in which Eucharistic imagination could be reasonably assumed. For example, in *Moonstruck* the ethnic identity of the Italian-Americans portrayed is bound tightly to Catholic religion, and the film demonstrates the religious backdrop with elements like jewelry worn by the characters and the celebration of the sacrament of penance. In such contexts, it is reasonable to interpret scenes of food as symbolically connected to the religious canvas on which such scenes are positioned, opening them up to Eucharistic imagination.

Third, solemn or ceremonial focus on the role of food in transformative action. In *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, explicit treatment of religion is never much developed, but the dramatic focus on the main character feeding her dying father during a moment of reconciliation can awaken a spiritual imagination drawn from the constellation of Eucharistic meaning. When a film demonstrates instances of *koinonia* being developed or *metanoia* being effected, as in a moment of reconciliation like the one just described, and food is involved in the process, it is reasonable to invoke Eucharistic thought in the analysis or interpretation of the scene or scenes.

Lastly, extended metaphor in which an element of the wider complex of Eucharistic imagery, such as the household or food production, can be conjoined

with other suggestive factors like filmmaker intent, association with other religious images, or presence elsewhere in the film of one of the three prior criteria. This last point is the one for which an example is probably the most useful. In *The Searchers*, the final scene involves John Wayne's Ethan standing just outside the doorway of the household to which he has returned a kidnapped girl. Given the Christian background of filmmaker John Ford, it becomes possible to think through the meaning of the household, as a basic unit of community, in light of the Eucharist. Either element alone, a household or a filmmaker with Christian roots, might not give credence to a theological interpretation of a film or parts of it, but when such elements are able to corroborate one another as religiously significant, Eucharistic ideas can be valid ones upon which to draw. This pattern includes obvious latitude in interpretation, and the elements here that I would call Eucharistic could often be interpreted in alternate ways, but the suggestion here is that Eucharistic interpretation in such cases is one legitimate possibility.

Patterns of Eucharistic Imagery in Film: Augmentative and Ironic

My main idea in this paper is that within the presentation of Eucharistic imagery, which I hem with these aforementioned criteria, two primary strategies can be discerned. First is *augmentative usage*, which uses Eucharistic symbols to deepen

and amplify instances of community building—*koinonia*, or character development or change—*metanoia*. In such cases Eucharistic imagery can invoke a spiritual dimension to the actions involved and connect them to larger religious themes like redemption or salvation. Such cases may also serve to challenge theological understandings of Eucharist, by presenting dimensions or experiences of community or conversion that the actual church may fail to recognize or incorporate, or just fail to recognize or incorporate adequately. In this latter sense, the film may represent a cultural appropriation of Christian tradition that suggests ways in which tradition can or ought to grow or develop. And in the former sense, the film may represent a social or existential problem that religious ideas, drawn from Eucharistic thought, can help frame in order to break them open to more profound interpretation or suggest greater weight than they may otherwise be seen to have.

Second is *ironic usage*, in which Eucharistic symbols elicit standards of virtue and goodness that help critique actions or events that damage *koinonia* or prevent characters from achieving *metanoia*. In such cases the audience is led to consider the positive meanings of Eucharistic imagery in contrast with the negative events that unfold or the problematic patterns that take shape in the film. Alienation, marginalization, inequality, discrimination, brutality, or other dehumanizing or community-eroding forces can be revealed and confronted by such contrasts. As a result, the real-world correlates of these events or patterns

can then be considered in light of the religious significance granted by the ironic usage of the Eucharistic images that highlight their pernicious nature. Furthermore, the church can be interrogated in terms of how well it marshals its resources to address such damaging realities.

Examples of Augmentative Usage

1. *Moonstruck* (Norman Jewison, 1987)

In Jewison's *Moonstruck*, the main focus is Loretta, a middle-aged Italian widow who has just accepted an engagement of convenience with Johnny, who is called away to Sicily to visit his dying mother. While he is away, he asks Loretta to visit his brother, Ronny, with whom he has mysterious "bad blood" in an effort to reconcile and invite him to the wedding. Loretta visits Ronny at the bakery where he works. In a rage, he explains that the "bad blood" is that Johnny took his life from him. Ronny blames Johnny for distracting him while he was operating a bread slicer, leading to him maiming his hand and having his fiancée leave him. Loretta returns with Ronny to his apartment and it is only after she cooks him a steak "bloody to feed his blood" that his anger is allayed and a transformation occurs.

The trappings of bread and blood surrounding this scene make Eucharistic overtones plausible, and the change that occurs in Ronny is given a gravitas that

signals a real bond developing between him and Loretta. Here is the *metanoia*, and it is at the movie's conclusion that the *koinonia* comes in.

Loretta and Ronny fall in love, and it remains for them to figure out how to tell Johnny. Ronny, emboldened by his love for Loretta, shows up at her family home the morning that Johnny is due to return. Loretta's family members gradually filter in, and several familial tensions that develop throughout the film reach their crisis point, such as Loretta's mother confronting her father about him having an affair. However, these crises also all achieve resolution, and it all occurs over the breakfast table. Finally, Johnny enters and announces that he has decided to end the engagement himself because he believes the marriage would threaten his mother's recovery of health. Ronny, borrowing the engagement ring his brother Johnny has just taken back from Loretta, proposes. The brothers as well as the rest of the family are reconciled and *koinonia* is effected, all over the shared meal table, emphasizing in an ultimately light-hearted and romantic but nonetheless profound way the domestic dimension of the Eucharistic imagination.⁷ It challenges the church to recognize these important family-based aspects of its own ecclesial life, and it offers a deeper spiritual understanding of the mundane and tumultuous dramas experienced in family life, noting how the family can be the context in which individuals work out their own processes of conversion and develop understanding of what true community is.

2. *Romero* (John Duigan, 1989)

Romero, being based on a Catholic priest, is obviously steeped in sacramental imagery. However, I would like to focus on two key moments of Eucharistic imagery in the film. In the article cited earlier from Tillard on the Eucharist, he notes that an essential piece of the Eucharistic *koinonia* is solidarity with the poor and suffering.⁸ Mendez-Montoya complementarily argues that the *metanoia* called for in the Eucharist criticizes any form of oppressive power.⁹ The film's use of Eucharistic imagery reflects this ethical dimension in its presentation of Romero's efforts to bring liberation to the oppressed of El Salvador.

In a scene approximately two-thirds into the film, with Romero's stance against the military government well established, the Salvadoran army occupies a town in an effort to break up a base ecclesial group that the government believes to be fomenting communism. The army seizes the town church as a temporary barracks, and Romero enters the church to remove the Eucharist, believing that it is defiled by the presence of the military. The captain of the group opens fire on the altar and tabernacle and expels Romero, who, after facing the crowd whom he is trying to defend, returns and blows past the captain to gather the spilled communion hosts. He is again expelled, intimidated and threatened with gunfire, but again returns, this time in full vestments, and leads the crowd in a march to

the church. The army stands down and allows them to enter and celebrate the Eucharistic liturgy.

Second, at the end of the film, Romero's assassination is presented in connection with Eucharist, imitating the actual history in this case. Romero's increasing and continued criticism of the military government finally leads the government to seek to kill him. An assassin enters the rear of a church where Romero is celebrating mass, and shoots him as he elevates the host during the Catholic rite of institution during which it is believed the bread is sacramentally transformed into the body of Christ. Romero's death is thus allegorically connected to the death of Christ, placing the ones whom Romero dies to defend in the position of the ones for whom Christ dies his sacrificial death, commemorated in the Christian church with the Eucharistic meal that harkens to the Last Supper, the words of which make up the institution rite Romero is enacting while shot.

These scenes powerfully make the statement that the *koinonia* of the church is not authentic without solidarity with the poor to whom it is meant to show a preferential option. The Eucharist here amplifies Romero's defiance of the agents of oppression, highlighting the social justice mandates wrapped up in the ideal of *koinonia* as the Body of Christ who suffered with and for the poor. This challenges the church to remain vigilant about its commitment to the poor and vulnerable, and it invites the continued application of Christian social ethics

to political and economic regimes that dehumanize and violate the sense of being embodied in the Christian ideal of *koinonia*.

3. *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel, 1987)

Babette's Feast focuses on a French refugee in Denmark fleeing the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. As is eventually discovered, the refugee, Babette, was a celebrated chef in Paris. Before that information is revealed, she is taken in as a cook and servant for a pair of elderly sisters who are the daughters of the founder of an ascetic and sectarian Protestant community, and its acting leaders. When Babette wins a lottery back in Paris, she decides to use the winnings to flex her culinary muscles and offer a lavish feast for the sisters and their community, an act for Babette to free her artistry as well as one of gratitude to the sisters who took her in. The austere community decides to partake in the meal, but with an agreement to not discuss the “papist’s” cuisine, which to them is scandalously garish. However, what ends up occurring is summarized well by Clive Marsh:

The film records the shift from the community’s initial resolve to think nothing of the food, and to avoid talking about it, through their unavoidable enjoyment of the food, drink, and general conviviality, to a new found enjoyment of each other, via a process of healing and reconciliation of the wounds of scarred relationships between them.¹⁰

Marsh also emphasizes the necessity of *metanoia* for the *koinonia* of the meal to be yielded, writing: “It is the community’s sin—their estrangement from each

other, their gradual disintegration, their loss of relationship, their loss of common purpose—which renders their members in need of fresh salvation,” and in Marsh’s assessment it is the Eucharistic character of Babette’s meal that fosters this needed *metanoia* to restore *koinonia*.¹¹

The implications that Marsh observes from this lesson in the film include what theology can learn from the experiential qualities of meal-sharing as well as what our experience of meal-sharing might be able to learn from theology. He notes a challenge to Eucharistic theology to recover a sense of the ordinariness of the meal-sharing on which the Eucharistic symbols are based, because an over-spiritualization of the sacrament can detract from the communal dimensions of it.¹² This observation is similar to the idea that has changed Catholic liturgical practice to have congregants stand during communion rather than kneel, thinking the latter posture is one that isolates the individual into a vertical spirituality that loses touch with the horizontal dimensions of the experience. The other lesson Marsh notes from the film is how eating habits of industrialized society should be sacralized to return to them the power of reconciliation and community that is inherent in them.¹³ Eating in a fast-paced and busy world can become a strictly utilitarian prospect, and Marsh is arguing that a profound sense of community is lost when people capitulate to such a utilitarian sense of food. The film serves a reminder of the spiritual power of meal-sharing, giving a reminder of the religious

power that can be present when simply eating together and sharing the joy of the experience.¹⁴

In sum, *Babette's Feast* very artfully demonstrates the power of Eucharistic imagination to bring about *metanoia* and accomplish *koinonia*, and this Eucharistic meaning is put to great effect to augment the dynamics of healing, bonding, affection, and joy between the characters and within their small community, and thusly to remind the audience of the potential for those same dynamics to occur in their own meal-sharing experiences and to remind the church to maintain in its practices memory of the every-day experiences of community and relationship that underlies its Eucharistic ceremonies.

4. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Benh Zeitlin, 2012)

The protagonist of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is a six-year old girl, Hushpuppy, who is part of a fictional impoverished bayou community outside New Orleans. Her mother is deceased, and her father is fierce in every way: in his desire to love and protect Hushpuppy, in his verbal and physical abuse of her, and in his drinking. After a major hurricane strikes, Hushpuppy is left to salvage what pieces of her life and community she can and to try to find meaning in it all. To Frederick Ruf, the central theme of the film becomes Hushpuppy's power to "pull the universe together, with her wisdom and her imaginings," serving as a reminder of the importance of the subaltern in the creation of mythic meaning.¹⁵

One particularly important piece of this mosaic is Hushpuppy's relationship with her abusive father. By the end of the film he is lying on his deathbed, and when Hushpuppy reunites with him, she brings one of their favorite foods, fried alligator. She carries it in a brown paper bag, and the film focuses closely and intimately on her deliberate and ceremonial unwrapping of the bag and extraction of the container. The scene is silent and somber, the only words exchanged being the father telling Hushpuppy she is good, and both characters crying as they tell each other, no crying. Hushpuppy breaks the piece of breaded gator, dips it in the red sauce, and feeds it to her father before taking a bite herself, reminiscent of Eucharistic intinction. After the storming rage of their relationship, the scene is a poignant resolution, one of love and reconciliation mediated through the shared food.¹⁶

As this scene takes place, neighbors and friends wait outside. The event is personal and private, yet communal, placing Hushpuppy and her father into a social fabric that defines them as much as anything in their personal history. In the closing of the film that follows from this scene, Hushpuppy leads a defiant march of her bayou community along a flooded levee, apparently toward the edge of the city that represents the privilege and protection contrasting with their poverty and vulnerability. The community is claiming its identity and worth, and Hushpuppy is its heartbeat. And her priestly moment sharing a Eucharist with her

dying father serves to powerfully yet quietly amplify her position as the mediator of *koinonia* for her community by the power of her mythic imagination.

Examples of Ironic Usage

1. *Arsenic and Old Lace* (Frank Capra, 1944)

I will begin with *Arsenic and Old Lace*. An ironic Eucharistic sensibility is put to rather simple and straightforward comedic effect here. The film centers on Mortimer Brewster, who on the day he is to elope, discovers that his bubbly, jovial, maiden aunts have been committing mass murder. They have been luring elderly, familyless drifters and loners to their home with ads of a room to rent, only to poison them with arsenic-laced elderberry wine. They believe this to be a Christian service, essentially euthanizing the men and freeing them from their lonely suffering. They even bury the men in their basement with full Christian burial services, with the help of Mortimer's brother who suffers from mental illness and thinks he is Teddy Roosevelt digging locks for the Panama Canal as he digs graves for the poisoned men. As Mortimer's other brother, a murderous fugitive, returns to the house to lay low from law enforcement, the slapstick and absurdity mount as this returned brother sees the aunts' killings as a way to cover a criminal murder of his own and Mortimer tries to thwart his efforts.

Yet behind it all is the simple ironic conceit of wine being put to Christian service by killing. If the Eucharist is meant to be a life-giving gift that creates

koinonia, using the Eucharistic symbols while murdering is about as stark of a juxtaposition as there could be. The moral of the contrast here is not dramatic or complex enough to invite much in the way of theological or ethical reflection, but the comedic eloquence with which the film presents the irony makes it a good, clear starting point to present my idea.

2. *The Godfather Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974)

In his examination of the religious imagination of Coppola, Richard Blake describes the central arch of Michael Corleone, the main character of the *Godfather* storyline, as an embrace of American individualism and a gradual release of his Italian-Catholic roots.¹⁷ The final isolation that is the end result is most powerfully depicted in *The Godfather Part II's* climactic moment, as Michael sits in solitude while his order to kill his own brother is carried out. Blake describes the significance of this scene being followed by a flashback to when Michael went against his family's wishes and abandoned his university education to enlist in the marines after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. He claims that the dinner table around which this flashback takes place offers Eucharistic symbolism, and he situates it as the beginning of Michael's shift to individualism.¹⁸ The gravity of Michael's rejection of his cultural tradition, the dissolving of this essential *koinonia*, is highlighted by the ironic presence of Eucharistic symbolism that ought to represent the opposite.

An even more powerful connection to the Eucharist put to the same effect comes from the beginning of the film. After a prologue that traces the immigration backstory of family patriarch Vito Corleone, the film picks up with the first communion ceremony of Michael's son Anthony. Coppola's camera shows Anthony receive the Eucharist from behind. Anthony turns around to look at his father, and the camera never shifts to allow the audience to see Michael acknowledging the look. The viewer is left feeling the disconnection between Michael and his son, confirmed later after the very long scene of Anthony's elaborate party. The film shows Michael immersed in business affairs and dealing with the rest of his family, but he never interacts with Anthony. Anthony is seen only once in the nearly 22 minutes worth of the party, and it is at a great distance, standing beside Michael as he is given ceremonial public thanks from a senator for a university donation. The scene concludes with Michael entering his bedroom to find a gift of a drawing from his son set on his pillow, showing how Anthony views Michael: alone, distant, apart, driving away in a car.

The previous chunk of the movie is a celebration of a sacrament that is meant to focus on redemption and community, and Michael is by contrast shown to be withdrawing further and further from those values. The audience is invited to see the spiritual damage being done to Michael and his family by framing the sequence in the religious practice of Eucharist. In addition, the cultural motifs that Blake identifies as allegorically present in the *Godfather* saga, the adoption of

American individualism and the consequent loss of integrated community life, are subjected to theological critique.

3. *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956)

In *The Searchers*, Ford portrays stark loner Ethan Edwards, a former Confederate soldier who has been displaced from his home and has bitterly renounced the new world left by the South's losing the Civil War. The film opens with him calling upon his brother's home, and soon after the house is raided by Comanches. Ethan's brother and sister-in-law are killed, and his two nieces kidnapped. Ethan's latent rage is awoken, and he begins a quest wherein motivations for vengeance and rescue become intertwined.¹⁹ Along with his brother's adopted son, Martin, he sets out on a multiyear quest. He finds the body of one niece, Lucy, raped and killed, and eventually resolves to find and kill the other, Debbie, because he believes she has become corrupted through being made a wife to the Comanche chief.

Blake attaches Ethan's search to his own spiritual search for redemption. However, he points out that for Ford's religious imagination such redemption is only accomplishable through community, and that since Ethan rejects community his efforts for redemption are doomed to fail.²⁰ In his biography of Ford, Joseph Malham argues that due to the Eucharistic imagination of his Catholic background, the family meal table becomes an important way for Ford to

symbolize community in his films. While meal-sharing can often be simply an economical filmmaking device that gives a setting to reveal characters' relationships and motivations, Malham supports his imposition of religious freight in meal table scenes by describing Ford's on-set practice of English-style "high teas" during the period in which *The Searchers* was made, calling the meals "hieratic" and "almost liturgical" in their formalism.²¹ Malham takes this as an indication of appreciation for sacramental ritual and Eucharistic meaning, an appreciation that Malham argues also seeped into his filming of meals in a way that made such scenes about more than simple storytelling economy.²² Given a claim such as Malham's, the ending visual of the film becomes a powerful instance of holding up the Eucharist and the value of *koinonia* and the meaning of *metanoia* in contrast to Ethan and the failed spiritual quest described by Blake.

Once he finally reaches Debbie, Ethan relents in his resolve to kill her, and after he carries her to the home of the Jorgensens, friends of the slaughtered Edwardses, the final shot is from the inside of the home, with Ethan framed in the doorway, unable to bring himself to enter. The homestead can represent Eucharistic *koinonia*, and Ethan's inability to engage it can then represent his own failure to finally achieve *metanoia*.²³ Writ larger, through Ethan the American cultural mythos and its roots in manifest destiny is critiqued by the Eucharistic symbols.²⁴ Ethan represents the savagery of that cultural history, and as he remains outside the household, the inconsistency between the manifest destiny

ideology and Christian values of community and redemption are highlighted. The audience is invited to appreciate the spiritual dimension of Ethan's search, and association between Christian identity and American triumphalism and exceptionalism is problematized. The historical and spiritual violence shown to be behind that American ideology disallow a too easy grafting of the Christian church to American national identity.

4. *Pan's Labyrinth* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006)

Pan's Labyrinth is set in Spain in 1944 under the fascist Franco regime. The central narrative device of the film is that the main character, a young girl of about ten named Ofelia, discovers a hidden fairy-tale world that mirrors the real one with diverse bits and pieces of various cultural and religious symbol systems. Ofelia's new stepfather, Captain Vidal, is in Franco's army, and the film begins with her family moving to a rural village in order for the captain to lead an effort to root out liberation forces in the countryside. In one scene, Vidal hosts a dinner party with several of the wealthy elite of the region and announces his plan to restrict rations in the area in order to prevent villagers from using excess to support guerilla forces.

As these figures of power discuss limiting the poor's access to bread while feasting, ironic connections to the Eucharistic table seem obvious. Del Toro strengthens the connection further though. First, there is a priest present at the

dinner, and he voices total support for the rationing plan, even defending it against one guest who questions the wisdom of the measure. Second, in the ensuing scene when the villagers line up for their rations, at the mill that had once been the source of bread for the village, one of the soldiers marches up and down the line announcing “This is our daily bread in Franco’s Spain,” alluding to the words of the Lord’s Prayer.

Meanwhile, Ofelia’s adventures in the fairy-tale realm direct her to the completion of three tasks. The second task, which begins just after this dinner and rationing sequence, is to enter the lair of a mysterious pale monster and retrieve a dagger. When she enters the monster’s hall, he is slumbering at the head of a sumptuous banquet table, in the same position occupied by Vidal in the prior dinner scene. The walls are decorated with pictures of the monster devouring children and a pile of discarded children’s shoes is stacked in a corner, recalling the imagery of victims’ shoes discovered in Nazi concentration camps. Ofelia mistakenly awakens him by trying to eat one of the enormously plump grapes on the table, and is only narrowly able to escape, although two of her fairy guides are grabbed and eaten by the monster. In this whole sequence, the Eucharistic imagery is associated with the exact opposite of what the Eucharist actually represents.

At the dinner and in Ofelia’s phantasmagoria with the monster, bread and food and the meal table are warped into becoming implements of violence and

domination. Just as Vidal is starving the peasants of the region by rationing, the monster is a killer of the vulnerable as it hoards its food. The audience is presented with Eucharistic symbols of *koinonia* and *metanoia* in order to deepen the horror of Vidal's inhumanity and oppression that stand as a stark antithesis. And placing the symbols into the context of myth in Ofelia's fantasy world with the monster serves to point the criticism to an ideological level that transcends the particular instance of fascist dictatorship and applies to any dehumanizing system built by the same tools of violence and oppression.²⁵ The church built on the symbols of the Eucharist is not authentically itself when it ignores such dehumanization; like the priest in the film who sanctions the rationing, the church that does not address such systems aligns itself with evil.

Concluding Remarks

In sum then, *koinonia* and *metanoia* represent the primary experiential meanings of the symbols of the Christian Eucharist. Whether those symbols are employed to augment a film's depiction of community or conversion and grant them greater depth, or ironically to contrast with a deterioration or repudiation of community or an instance of character development that refuses or moves away from conversion, the filmic emplotment of those symbols can enrich theological

reflection on *koinonia* and *metanoia* as well as offer theological commentary on the other themes with which such imagery is associated.

¹ David N. Power, "Eucharist," in *Systematic Theology* v. 2, eds. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, 268 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

² *Ibid.*, 283.

³ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁴ J.M.R. Tillard, "The Eucharist and the Visibility of *Koinonia*," *Mid-Stream* 27 (1988): 337.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 348.

⁶ Angel F. Mendez-Montoya, *The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 138-139.

⁷ For example in the tradition of Catholic thought, the family was described as the "domestic church" by the Second Vatican Council in the text of *Lumen Gentium* (1964) §11. Pope John Paul II took up the same terminology in his exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (1981). In §21 he offers the basic description of family as domestic church, and in §57 he describes the importance of the Eucharist in building up the family as a unit of ecclesial *koinonia*.

⁸ Tillard, 350.

⁹ Mendez-Montoya, 43.

¹⁰ Clive Marsh, "Did You Say 'Grace?': Eating in Community in *Babette's Feast*," in *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning*, eds. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, 209 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹² *Ibid.*, 216.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁴ Given the intent of this paper to deal with the Eucharist in an ecumenical way, it should be noted that *Babette's Feast* deals directly with contrasting Christian ideologies, one of which the present interpretation is accenting more than the other. Wendy Wright ("*Babette's Feast*: a Religious Film," *Journal of Religion and Film* 1 (1987), <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/BabetteWW.htm>) describes the film's contrast between a de-sensualized Reform pattern and a sacramental Catholic one. The narrative contour of *Babette's Feast* involves the sacramental view of Babette infusing into the more de-sensualized one of the sisters, and the focus here on Eucharist gives that sacramental dimension of the film more attention. Wright, however, gives a more intertwined examination of the contrasting theological views at work in the film.

¹⁵ Frederick Ruf, "Beasts of the Southern Wild," review of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, *Journal of Religion and Film* 17:1 (2013): 2-3, <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss1/30>. See also Kette Thomas, "With an Eye on a Set of New Eyes: *Beasts of the Southern Wild*," *Journal of Religion and Film* 17:2 (2013), <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss2/6>. Thomas criticizes negative interpretations of the film that accuse it of fetishizing race, gender, and class for the way they approach the film ideologically rather than mythically. She contends that the film intentionally situates itself within mythic storytelling and so, similar to Ruf, sees in its portrayal of Hushpuppy's mythic imagination a positive expression of the power of meaning-making enabled by the dynamic nature of mythic thought in contrast with the ideological interpretations she claims remain static in their critical lenses and that thus dismiss the positive elements of the movie's mythic dimensions that do not fit their ideological concerns.

¹⁶ See Thomas, 9. Thomas specifically cites this example as place where ideological interpretation mutes mythic value. She notes that instead of recognizing in this scene possibilities of nobility and honor, or as it is framed here reconciliation, the ideological interpretation narrows the scene to a stereotyping of African-American girls only being valued as "caregivers to abusive authority figures."

¹⁷ Richard A. Blake, *After Image: The Indelible Catholic Imagination of Six American Filmmakers* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2000), 197.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

²¹ Joseph Malham, *John Ford: Poet in the Desert* (Chicago: Lake Street Press, 2013), Kindle Edition, location 990-991.

²² *Ibid.*, location 991: "In another sense, these rituals went deep into the heart of his Irish Catholic soul and represented the sacredness of the table and the almost Eucharistic dimension of the people gathered around it. This sacramental element was not lost on Ford, and from this point on meals, poetically choreographed scenes of family seated around a patriarch or parent, begin to figure prominently in his work. From *Four Sons* and *Stagecoach* to *How Green Was My Valley* and *The Searchers*, the table as altar becomes a locus of unity, healing and revelation."

²³ See Blake, 165. Blake frames the idea as Ford's adherence to a spiritual anthropology that disallows a too easy resolution for Ethan, and that despite his "moment of grace" (164) in deciding to not kill Debbie, he remains affected by his savage demons. Blake focuses on Ethan walking away from the doorway as an indication of his continuing journey for atonement, but still as a loner.

²⁴ See Blake, 163. Blake argues that this film in particular marked a complexifying turn in Ford's valuation of the American military in westward expansion, moving away from an idealized vision to one that dwells on the sinfulness and brutality that were beneath the mythic veneer. See also Peter Stowell, *John Ford* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 73-93. Stowell argues that this attempt to demystify the American frontier in the form of an interrogation of cultural

individualism and violence represented in military life on the western frontier is the central theme of Ford's cavalry films (1945-1950) that precede *The Searchers*.

²⁵ Kam Hei Tsuei, "The Anti-Fascist Aesthetics of *Pan's Labyrinth*," *Socialism and Democracy* 22 (2008): 242-244.

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