

Eucharistic Communion or Competition? Reading John 6 with St. Thomas Aquinas and in Light of John 1

MICHAEL A. DAUPHINAIS
Ave Maria University
Ave Maria, FL

In his popular work *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis offers a memorable line: “The whole philosophy of Hell rests on recognition of the axiom that one thing is not another thing. . . . ‘To be’ means ‘to be in competition.’”¹ Lewis was not only a Christian apologist but also a prominent professor of medieval and Renaissance literature, so it is safe to say that he was contrasting the demonic and counterfeit point of view to that of the heavenly and true vision expressed by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*:

think carefully what love is and you’ll see
such discord has no place within these rounds,
since *to be here is to exist in Love*.²

There are then two ways of conceiving reality: “to be in competition” and “to exist in love.” The challenge before the human creature is to recognize

¹ C. S. Lewis, “Letter 18,” in *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Collier, 1961), 81.

² Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso* 3.76–78, in *The Portable Dante*, trans. Mark Musa (New York: Penguin, 1995), 406 (emphasis added; “che vedrai non capere in questi giri, / s’essere in carità è qui necesse, e se la sua natura ben rimiri”). A few lines later, the poem continues: “In his will is our peace—it is the sea / in which all things are drawn that it itself / creates or which the work of Nature makes” (13.85–87). For C. S. Lewis’s scholarship on medieval literature, theology, and philosophy, see his *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

that the discord and competition in the world does not come from God's gift of being to creation, but from the corruption of free wills both angelic and human.

In discerning the Gospel of John's teaching on the Eucharist, much depends upon the prior interpretive principles presupposed by its readers and by the Gospel itself. I propose Aquinas to be a helpful guide in reading John, since his extensive commentary on the Gospel provides the philosophical and theological framework necessary for reading it well. In comparison to modern interpretive lenses that are often empiricist and competitive, Aquinas's interpretive practices allow the Gospel to be read on terms closer to its own.³ He helps us to recognize that a key interpretive question is the prior principle of competition versus communion.

We might begin by noting that there is something shocking and almost offensive in the claims to uniqueness presupposed in the traditional doctrines of the Incarnation and the Eucharist. Why should one man and one man alone be the unique Incarnation of the divine Logos? Why should one sacrament and one sacrament alone—and, even more, the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church that makes the sacrament possible—be the unique form of worship? Again, much depends upon whether we bring to this question a worldview of competition or of communion and participation. Communion and participation open a way of coming to see that the unique claims about Jesus Christ have power to reorient the rest of reality to share in his unique relation to the Father communicated to us in the unique form of the Eucharist.

In this essay, I will examine authors who articulate a view of the Incarnation and the Eucharist through the lens of competition and so come to reject those teachings as they have been held by the Catholic Church. Then I will consider how the Gospel of John presumes a metaphysics of communion in retelling the story of creation and wisdom from the Old Testament now located in Jesus Christ. Then I will draw upon the resources of Thomas Aquinas to show how the lens of communion—which he addresses primarily with the language of participation—allows for a proper interpretation of the Incarnation and the Eucharist as the unique source of a new communion. I will focus on his commentary on the Gospel of John to show how the eternal Logos or divine Wisdom may be present in creation, in the Incarnation, and in the Eucharist, all of which are distinct

³ For an extensive analysis of linear-historical and participatory ways of reading the Bible, see Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

modes of presence yet in communion with one another. The goal of the essay is to understand better the divine mystery of the Eucharist.

Competitive Accounts of the Incarnation and of the Eucharist

The Catholic sociologist, priest, and religious author Diarmuid O'Murchu argues that it is time to reinterpret the doctrine of the Incarnation in order to safeguard God's presence in creation. In his *Incarnation: A New Evolutionary Threshold*, O'Murchu writes: "This is a book about Incarnation, which, for the moment, I understand to mean *God's embodiment in creation as experienced and named by human beings*."⁴ O'Murchu continues: "In this context, Incarnation cannot be reserved to one outstanding human-like divine figure; the primary Incarnation of the Holy One in our midst is in creation itself"; "according to the belief in the Great Spirit, God's primordial Incarnation is *not in the human but in the cosmic creation*."⁵ Elsewhere, he critiques the beginning of the Gospel of John:

⁴ Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Incarnation: A New Evolutionary Threshold* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017), 44. A sampling of several other passages will further show his thought: "When God and Jesus are adorned with metaphysical, patriarchal qualities, inevitably Christian believers become ensnared in codependent relations wherein adulthood is compromised and undermined. . . . Codependency has several meanings, but of the present work, it denotes *those collusive behaviors whereby a person ends up behaving like a passive child, thus undermining the evolution of adult maturity*" (24); "Incarnation denotes embodiment. That all forms of embodiment—from bacteria to the universe—evidences a God who loves bodies and chooses the corporeal form in every initiative of cocreation" (33); "This brings me to the view gradually gaining acceptance in the twenty-first century: The mystery and reality of God is manifest (or revealed) to us *primarily in God's creation*, in a process that has been unfolding over several millennia—and will continue to evolve into the open-ended future" (37–38); "Finally, the notion of a divine rescue so central to the soteriology of the Christian faith has no place in the spirituality of the Great Spirit. The responsibility for overcoming sin and evil is a *human undertaking* facilitated by a more discerning collaboration with the Great Spirit" (47).

⁵ O'Murchu, *Incarnation*, 25, 46. In a similar vein, Ilia Delio, O.S.F., presents creation as an incarnation with an evolutionary thrust: "Every act of evolving nature is the self-expression of God, since the very act of nature's transcendence is the energy of divine love. God unfolds in the details of nature; thus, evolution is not only of God but is God incarnate" (*The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011], 51). Delio writes further on: "These emerging Christ fields are new basins of attraction, transcending institutional religion, signaling a new religious consciousness, a new God-centeredness that inspires and empowers co-creativity for a new humanity and a new earth" (145). See also Richard

[Such] anthropocentric priority dominates the rest of the Christian Bible, with Jesus emerging as the deepest and primary identity of God, proclaimed in John's version of the beginning as the organizing definitive Logos (John 1:1), embodied first and foremost in the historical Jesus. At this stage it looks like the "letting be" of the Spirit [in Genesis 1:1–2] has been eclipsed if not largely subverted.⁶

O'Murchu thus poses a conflict between God's presence in all of creation, "the Spirit hovering over the waters" (Genesis 1:1–2), and God's unique presence in Jesus Christ, "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14). In a deliberate revisionist presentation of the Christian faith, he writes, "God's revelation to us, God's presence with us, and the divine incarnational insertion among us, *belongs, first and foremost, to creation itself*."⁷

O'Murchu claims to be recovering the primordial revelation of creation by eschewing the traditional Christian interpretation of John 1 as articulated in the ecumenical creeds. He even goes further and alleges that John 1 is already complicit in turning to an anthropocentric and exclusive view of the Incarnation in Jesus Christ. In this way, he expresses a somewhat popular opinion that, when Christianity confesses the uniqueness of Jesus as Lord and Savior, Christianity becomes blind to God's presence in

Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* (New York: Convergent, 2019).

⁶ Diarmuid O'Murchu, *In the Beginning Was the Spirit: Science, Religion, and Indigenous Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 22. He later writes: "*Incarnation is still postulated primarily on the historical Jesus of two thousand years ago*. I proposed in an earlier work (O'Murchu 2008) that Incarnation—denoting God's unambiguous affirmation of the divine in the human—needs to be redefined and reconceptualized in terms of our human evolutionary story of 7 million years, and not merely within the context of the past two thousand years" (152).

⁷ O'Murchu recognizes the pantheistic appearance of his claims and distinguish their views from pantheism, sometimes describing them as panentheistic: they affirm that creation as incarnation has primacy over the traditional view of Jesus Christ as the Incarnation. "What I am presenting and unraveling in this chapter [on the Great Spirit] is the spiritual insight of the First Nations peoples all over the world, that God's revelation to us, God's presence with us, and the divine incarnational insertion among us, *belongs, first and foremost, to creation itself*. This is not pantheism in any shape or form. It is a new way—albeit very ancient—of understanding God's participation in our world and requires us to revision afresh our role in that creation" (*Incarnation*, 47–48). See, however: "Without body, however, the Spirit goes nowhere; *it is in and through bodies that spirit becomes grounded and generic at every level of creation's evolution*" (62).

creation, as well as other human traditions of philosophy and religion.⁸ In sum, O'Murchu views the teaching of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word in competition with all of creation as the incarnate Word, and so jettisons the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation.

In contrast to O'Murchu, the conservative Protestant biblical scholar Ben Witherington III affirms the unique presence of the cosmic Word in the man Jesus Christ. He nonetheless simultaneously rejects the Catholic teaching on the Eucharist to safeguard God's saving presence in Jesus Christ accessible to us through faith. In his 1995 commentary entitled *John's Wisdom*, Witherington writes:

Many interpreters have made and do make the mistake of reading the dialogue material in John 6:35ff. in the very way that the evangelist would not want it to be read—at the material and earthly level. By turning this material into a discussion about the Eucharist and eucharistic elements, rather than about the One to whom all signs, including the sacraments, point, one has read this material on a mundane level when it shouts out, “Come up higher, brother and sister.” . . .

While the passage has implications for seeing the sacraments as signs that point away from themselves and do not in themselves provide eternal life any more than the eating of the physical bread and fish by the five thousand provided eternal life, it is not about the sacraments, but rather about receiving Jesus. “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless.”⁹

In this passage, Witherington interprets the discourses in John 6 as about either Jesus or the Eucharist. If it is about Jesus, then it is not about the Eucharist; if it is about the Eucharist, then it is not about Jesus. It should be noted that Witherington's commentary masterfully treats how the Wisdom of God from the Old Testament through which the world is created now finds definitive expression in the incarnate Word. Although he presents the incarnate Word in a non-competitive relationship to the creative Word, he presumes that the substantial presence of Christ in the

⁸ See then-Cardinal Ratzinger as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.

⁹ Ben Witherington III, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 162–63.

Eucharist, the Eucharistic Word, is in competition with the incarnate Word, and so jettisons the Eucharist.

I propose that both readings are worth taking seriously, since they illumine two ways in which students of theology and theologians—both Protestant and Catholic—are prone to stumble, especially in the contemporary mindset of competitive realities. Ever since the rise of Francis Bacon (and Thomas Hobbes and John Locke), the modern mind has tended to an empirical mode of rationality in which individual things are in competition with other individual things. Nominalism and empiricism flatten reality so we no longer have higher and lower modes of being in which the lower realities participate in the higher ones.¹⁰ Although empirical reasoning may be helpful in dealing with empirical realities, the competitive worldview makes it difficult to appreciate the depth and richness of interpersonal communion and divine revelation. The remainder of this essay will draw upon the Gospel of John and Thomas Aquinas on the Eucharist in John 6 to present an alternative mode of reasoning, one that sees the world through the metaphysics of participation, ultimately a metaphysics of communion versus one of competition.¹¹

Non-Competitive Wisdom in John 1 and 6

Before exploring Aquinas's exegesis of John 6, I will consider how John's Gospel presupposes a non-competitive schema among three levels of divine presence: the creative Word, the incarnate Word, and the Eucharistic Word. I want to address the possible concern that Aquinas is importing his own version of neo-Platonic participation in his exegesis of the Gospel of John. It is rather the case that, in contrast to modern competitive empiricism, John and Aquinas share a more classical view of reality grounded in creation and participation.

We may first attend to the Gospel's literary and theological context to recover a broader view of God, wisdom, and creation. In his *Word and*

¹⁰ For more on the varieties of shifting away from higher modes of knowing among modern and Enlightenment intellectuals, see the classic works of Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite or The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), and Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1937).

¹¹ For a pivotal consideration of the role of participation in reading Scripture, see Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, in which he particularly contrasts a reductive linear-historical approach to that of attending to biblical revelation within "an ongoing participation in God's active providence, both metaphysically and Christologically-pneumatologically" (1).

Glory: On the Exegetical and Theological Background of John's Prologue, Craig Evans makes a convincing case that Old Testament passages and teachings, including the later writings included within the Catholic canon, are the dominant influences on John's prologue.¹² John 1 echoes the Genesis 1 creation story now as read through the later depictions of wisdom (*sophia*) and word (*logos*). Richard Hays, in his *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, writes: "All this works hermeneutically [in John's prologue] because, at the beginning and the end of the day, Jesus is the Logos, the Word present before creation. All creation breathes with his life. He is the divine Wisdom whose very being is the blueprint of all reality."¹³ Here are some textual and thematic themes from the Old Testament as taken up in John 1.

John 1:1: "In the beginning [Ἐν ἀρχῇ] was the Word [ὁ λόγος] and the Word was with God [πρὸς τὸν θεόν]."

- Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning [Ἐν ἀρχῇ] God [ὁ Θεὸς] created the heavens [τὸν οὐρανὸν] and the earth."¹⁴
- Sirach 24:3: "I [Wisdom] came forth from the mouth of the Most High."
- Sirach 24:9: "Before time began [πρὸ τοῦ αἰῶνος ἀπ' ἀρχῆς] he created me, and I shall remain forever."
- Proverbs 8:23: "Before eternity [πρὸ τοῦ αἰῶνος] he established me in the beginning [ἐν ἀρχῇ]."
- Proverbs 8:30: "I was with him [ἡμην παρ' αὐτῷ]."

¹² Evans is responding to Raymond Brown, among others, who suggested gnostic influences on the Johannine prologue. The passages that will be listed are sufficient to show that the primary context are Israel's scriptural tradition of law and worship. The majority of the listed passages are found in Evans; I've added a number as well.

¹³ Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: University of Baylor Press, 2016), 344. Hays develops an extensive figural interpretation of the Gospels by attending to the ways in which they draw upon the imaginative and literary forms of Israel's Scriptures, especially in the LXX: "The remarkable identification of Jesus as the incarnate Word who was the agent of all creation carries wide-ranging hermeneutical implications for the way that John reads backwards to reinterpret Israel's Scripture and Israel's worship traditions: he asserts that Jesus, as the incarnation of God's Word, takes up into himself the significance of all that has gone before in God's dealing with Israel" (310); "For John the Evangelist, therefore, all of Israel's Scripture is a figural web woven with latent prefigurations of the One without whom not one thing came into being" (344).

¹⁴ I've included the Greek from the Septuagint to show the verbal echoes used by John.

John 1:3: “All things were made through him [δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο], and without him was not anything made that was made.”

- Psalm 33:6: “By the word of the Lord [τῷ λόγῳ τοῦ Κυρίου] the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth [τῷ πνεύματι τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ].”
- Proverbs 8:27,30: “When he established the heavens, I was there; . . . then I was beside him, fitting together [ἀρμόζουσα].”
- Wisdom 9:2: “O God of my fathers and Lord of mercy, who hast made all things by thy word [ἐν λόγῳ σου], and by thy wisdom [σοφίᾳ] hast formed man [ἄνθρωπον] . . .”
- Psalm 136:5: “To him who by understanding made the heavens [τοὺς οὐρανοὺς ἐν συνέσει] . . .”

John 1:4: “In him was life [ζωή] and the life [ζωή] was the light [φῶς] of men [ἀνθρώπων].”

- Genesis 1:3: “And God said, ‘Let there be light [φῶς]’; and there was light [φῶς].”
- Genesis 2:7: “The Lord God formed man [ἄνθρωπον] of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life [ζωῆς]; and man became [ἐγένετο ὁ ἄνθρωπος] a living [ζῶσαν] being.”
- Psalm 36:9: “For with thee is the fountain of life [ζωῆς]; in thy light [φωτί] do we see light [φῶς].”

John 1:12: “he gave power to become children of God [τέκνα θεοῦ].”

- Wisdom 7:27: “In every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God [φίλους Θεοῦ], and prophets.”

John 1:14a: “And the Word became flesh [ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο] and dwelt among us [ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν].”

- Exodus 25:8: “And let them construct a sanctuary [σκηνηῖς] for me, that I may dwell [σκενῶν] among them.”
- Leviticus 26:11–12: “And I will make my abode [σκηνήν] among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.”

- Joel 3:17: “You know that I am the Lord your God who makes his dwelling [κατασκηνῶν] in Zion.”
- Sirach 24:8: “Then the Creator of the universe laid a command upon me; my Creator decreed where I should dwell [σκηνήν]. He said, ‘Make your home [κατασκήνωσον] in Jacob; find your heritage in Israel.’”
- Sirach 24:10: “In the sacred tent [ἐν σκηνῇ ἁγίᾳ] I ministered in his presence, and so I came to be established in Zion.”
- Wisdom 18:15: “Your all-powerful word leaped from heaven [ὁ παντοδύναμός σου λόγος ἀπ’ οὐρανῶν], from the royal throne, into the midst of the land.”

John 1:14b: “We beheld his glory [δόξαν], glory [δόξαν] as of the only Son from the Father, full [πλήρης] of grace [χάριτος] and truth.”

- Exodus 40:34: “And the cloud covered the tent [σκηνήν] of the witness [μαρτυρίου], and the tent [σκηνή] was filled with the glory of the Lord [δόξης Κυρίου].”
- Sirach 24:16: “My branches are branches of glory [δόξης] and grace [χάριτος].”
- Sir 24:26: “[Wisdom] makes them full [ἀναπληρῶν] of understanding.”
- Sirach 24:19: “Come to me, who desire me, and eat your fill [τῶν γεννημάτων μου ἐμπλήσθητε].” (See also John 6:12: “they were filled [ἐνεπλήσθησαν].”)

As the above lists show, the opening passages from John are saturated with verbal and theological allusions to the Old Testament. The Gospel interweaves the various depictions of the wisdom and word of God and its creative and indwelling activity. The representative teaching here from the old-covenant literature is that the Wisdom who was with God in the creation of the world dwells in the world anew through God’s covenant and may be found by those who seek this creative wisdom. Creative wisdom has become indwelling wisdom, among the people of Israel by means of the law and the temple.¹⁵ Since such indwelling wisdom is also the wisdom through which life is created, such wisdom gives life and refreshes the believer who

¹⁵ See Jon Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: HarperOne, 1987). Matthew Levering and I develop these themes from the perspective of Christian Bible in *Holy People, Holy Land: A Theological Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

seeks it. The wisdom dwelling in the law and temple does not compete with the divine wisdom since it is the same wisdom now present in a way configured to the present needs of humanity for redemption.

As echoed and retold by John, the broader context of creative and indwelling wisdom from the old covenant is now concentrated in the figure of Jesus Christ. Hays suggests that what is implicit in the prologue of John is later made explicit in John 5:46—"If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me." Hays writes: "And so in John's Gospel, just as in Luke's, there is a call for a retrospective rereading of Israel's Scripture, a reading backward that reinterprets Scripture in light of a new revelation imparted by Jesus and focused on the person of Jesus himself."¹⁶ John presents Jesus as the same creative and indwelling wisdom and word already present and active in the story of Israel.

So, then, is Jesus merely another example of the indwelling wisdom and glory of God present in the old covenants? The earlier sources certainly have broadly incarnational themes in terms of the creative divine wisdom dwelling in various ways amidst creation. Nonetheless, John intensifies the old-covenant themes of indwelling in a radical way: the Wisdom and Logos of God now "became flesh" in the man Jesus Christ. Hays helpfully summarizes the continuities and discontinuities of John's approach:

The prologue of John's Gospel is best understood as a midrash on Genesis 1, a midrash that links the idea of a preexistent creative divine logos to the motif of divine Wisdom seeking a home in the world (e.g., Sir 24:3–8). In contrast, however, to those earlier Jewish traditions that identified the earthly presence of Wisdom among the people Israel or in Israel's law (Sir 24:23; Bar 3:35–4:4), John insists that Logos/Wisdom found only rejection in the world, even among God's own people [see John 1:10–11 and 1 Enoch 42:1–2]. . . . [As seen in John 1:14,] the prologue of the Fourth Gospel immediately situates Jesus in relation to Jewish scripture traditions about creation and Wisdom, while at the same time transforming those traditions through the startling claim that the Word/Wisdom through whom everything was made has become enfleshed in Jesus.¹⁷

¹⁶ Hays, *Echoes*, 283. Hays notes the thematic similarity between John 5:46 and Luke 24:27 ("Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them all the things about himself in the Scriptures").

¹⁷ Hays, *Echoes*, 310.

Hays observes that John introduces two novelties: first, that divine wisdom has been rejected; second, that the same rejected divine wisdom is present in Jesus Christ. Witherington expresses a similar view:

By the time *Wisdom of Solomon* was written, around the turn of the era, wisdom had come to be associated with concepts like eternal life, resurrection, and salvation. . . . This is also the ethos out of which the Johannine literature is produced, the major difference being that now Jesus is seen as Wisdom in the flesh, and knowing him is the key to obtaining eternal life and light.¹⁸

Wisdom not only indwells parts of creation, but has become enfleshed. The man Jesus Christ is a man about whom John the Baptist and others offer testimony (John 1:34, 41), and yet, at the same time, he is the divine Word who testifies to himself and to whom his Father testifies (John 5:31–37; 8:18).

Although they do not use the language of non-competition, both Hays and Witherington perceive in the Gospel of John a non-competitive relationship between the divine creative wisdom and the divine indwelling wisdom in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ functions as the hinge of the reception of such divine creative wisdom. John's emphasis on the uniqueness of the Incarnation does not evacuate the divine presence from the rest of creation. Instead, we are invited to read John as teaching that Jesus Christ opens a renewed appreciation for all of creation now revealed as bearing his personal wisdom and glory.

Such a reading provides a compelling alternative to the criticism proffered by O'Murchu that sees the doctrine of the Incarnation in competition with the doctrine of creation. O'Murchu alleges that the Incarnation of divine wisdom in Jesus Christ evacuated the indwelling of the divine Spirit in all of creation, and so argues for a view of Jesus Christ as merely another incarnation of the divine spirit alongside of all of creation. Creation becomes the real incarnation or indwelling of God. O'Murchu so calls Catholics and Christians to reinterpret the Scriptures and traditions in a way that rejects the exclusive focus on Jesus Christ and pursues a more inclusive focus on all of creation. The irony is that O'Murchu's views are themselves subject to the very competitive viewpoint he criticizes. By

¹⁸ Witherington, *John's Wisdom*, 57–58. He writes further: "The course of life of Jesus was not fortuitous; it was part of God's plan from all eternity to save the world, and was foreshadowed if not foretold, according to this Gospels' creators, in the story of Wisdom."

drawing upon the literary theological background, it is clear that John 1 shows that the wisdom incarnate in Jesus is the same wisdom indwelling in the old covenant and the wisdom through whom all of creation was made. The Incarnation is a story of how God is restoring communion with himself to a creation beset by sin and wounds.

Let us turn then to how John moves from the rich and multilayered textual background of John 1 to that of John 6. Recalling the same themes of divine wisdom, creative, indwelling, and now enfleshed, we can see in a couple instances how John 6 recapitulates this pattern and connects it with the bread of life and the flesh and blood of Jesus.

John 6:35: “I am the bread of life [ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς]; he who comes to me will not hunger [πεινάσῃ] and . . . will not thirst [διψήσῃ].”

- Sirach 24:19, 21: “Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill [ἐμπλήσθητε] of my produce. . . . Those who eat [ἐσθίουστές] me will hunger [πεινάσουσι] for more, and those who drink [πίνοντές] me will thirst [διψήσουσιν] for more.”
- Genesis 2:7: “The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life [ζωῆς].”
- Psalm 36:9: “For with thee is the fountain of life [ζωῆς]; in thy light [φωτί] do we see light [φῶς].”
- John 1:4: “In him was life [ζωή] and the life [ζωή] was the light [φῶς] of men.”

John 6:53: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat [φάγητε] the flesh [σάρκα] of the Son of man and drink [πίητε] his blood, you have no life [ζωήν] in you.”

- Proverbs 9:5: “Come, eat [φάγετε] of my bread and drink [πίετε] of the wine I have mixed.”
- Proverbs 8:35: “For he who finds me finds life [ζωῆς] and obtains favor from the Lord.”
- John 6:57: “As the living [ζών] Father sent me, and I live [ζῶ] because of the Father, so he who eats me will live [ζήσῃ] because of me.”
- John 1:4: “In him was life [ζωή] and the life [ζωή] was the light [φῶς] of men.”

These passages from the bread of life discourses continue the rich interweaving of the old-covenant literature present in John 1. The verbal echoes of divine wisdom and life now incorporate themes of hunger and thirst, of eating and drinking, often with the precise language of the Septuagint. Here we have the divine wisdom—creative, indwelling, and incarnate—now with one further mode of presence in the flesh and blood of Jesus to be eaten and drunk.¹⁹

How to interpret the flesh in John 6 and the language of eating and drinking such flesh? As Witherington notes earlier in his dismissal of a Eucharistic interpretation of John 6, does John not clarify 6:53 subsequently in 6:63: “It is the spirit that gives life, *the flesh* is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life”? What then of the “flesh”?

The key is to see that, in both John 1 and John 6, we witness parallel accounts of *inefficacious flesh* contrasted with *efficacious flesh*. John 1:14 gives a positive account of flesh: “And the Word became *flesh* and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.” Yet, the preceding verses (12–13) present a negative view of flesh, “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the *flesh* nor of the will of man, but of God.” John uses the word “flesh” to describe the old limits of human reasoning and willing (1:12–13) as well as the new manifestation of God’s glory and power (1:14).

We hear a similar contrast of *flesh versus flesh* toward the end of the discourse in John 6:63: “It is the spirit that gives life, *the flesh* is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” Here, the flesh is lifeless, but just prior to this the flesh is used five times in 6:51–58 in a life-giving manner: “The bread which I will give for the life of the world is *my flesh*. . . ‘How can this man give us *his flesh* to eat?’ . . . Unless you eat *the flesh* of the Son of man and drink his blood; . . . He who eats *my flesh* and drinks my blood has eternal life. . . For *my flesh* is food indeed, and

¹⁹ Neither Hays nor Witherington identify, however, the way that the divine creative wisdom now indwelling in the man Jesus Christ, so dominant in John 1, continues to inform John’s presentation of Jesus Christ in John 6. They overlook the Eucharistic implications of Jesus’s teachings about being the bread of life and about having his followers eat his flesh and drink his blood. Just as wisdom is to be eaten and drunk, so Jesus Christ is to be eaten and drunk. As wisdom was not properly flesh and blood in the old covenant, it could not be properly eaten and drunk but only metaphorically. The wisdom-become-flesh changes this.

my blood drink indeed. He who eats *my flesh* and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.” Here the flesh is connected to the biblical tradition of wisdom in which wisdom is eaten and drunk, giving life and communion with God. This is the flesh of 1:14, announcing that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The Spirit and the flesh thus are opposed to one another only when the flesh is separated from the Holy Spirit, and so fails to give life and leaves us in confusion. When the flesh is joined to the Spirit, then it may become the means of manifesting (1:14) and receiving (6:51–58) the glory of God. And just as the decisive shift in John 1 is that that creative and indwelling wisdom is not incarnate, the natural reading is that this same shift continues in John 6, so that the eating and drinking of such enfleshed wisdom now is an enfleshed eating and drinking.

The above is not meant to be a comprehensive account of how to interpret John 1 and 6. The goal is to attend to the literary and theological background and to suggest a way of reading these texts that teaches overlapping levels of divine presence: divine wisdom; creative wisdom; indwelling wisdom in the old covenant; incarnate wisdom in whom we are called to believe; and incarnate wisdom received as food and drink. The natural home of John is not one of competition between various divine presences but rather one of various levels of communion with God made possible through the creation, and the renewal of creation through the Incarnation of the Word of God and his life, death, and resurrection and his gift of himself in the Eucharist.

Aquinas’s *Commentary on John* and the Metaphysics of Communion and Participation

To understand what Aquinas teaches in his commentary on John, it is helpful to recover one of its pivotal considerations, the theological teaching on creation and its philosophical counterpart of participation. When thinking about Aquinas’ notion of participation, we ought not imagine grades for class participation or one’s participation in a local parish by which the individual contributes to the improvement of the whole community. Instead, his primary conception of participation refers to the understanding that certain things do not stand on their own but rely upon something higher. Aquinas describes participation as follows: “When something receives in a particular (or limited) manner that which belongs to another in a universal (or total) manner, the former is said *to participate* in the latter.”²⁰

²⁰ Aquinas, commentary on Boethius’s *De hebdomadibus*, lec. 2 (Leonine ed. 50:271

A primary instance of this is when effects are said to participate in their causes. Consider a lake in the summer sunshine. The effect is that the lake warms up; the cause is the sun's heat. The lake's warmth participates in the warmth of the sun. Aquinas regularly employs the image of things heating up in fire: the hot iron poker participates in—or receives heat from—the fire that is hot in itself. The effect shares in the cause so much so that it may become a true cause as well. The lake truly becomes warm in the sun, and the red-hot poker will truly burn.

Aquinas employs the doctrine of participation to describe the relationship between the Creator and the creature. Here it is no longer the case of receiving a specific form from another being that has that same form—the lake receiving heat from the hot sun. Instead, Aquinas focuses on the way all created realities receive their very existence (*esse*) from God, who is existence himself (*ipsum esse subsistens*). Gaven Kerr explains this unique relationship as follows:

Reflecting on Aquinas's definition of participation, a participation relationship obtains when we have something that is in itself universal but received in a partial manner in a receiving subject. Such is the case with essence and *esse* given that *esse* is limited to the confines of the essence it actuates. . . . He holds that things in which essence and *esse* are distinct exist not per se, but *per participationem*. It is the consistent teaching, then, of Aquinas that individual creatures participate in their individual acts of existence.²¹

The doctrine of participation as employed by Aquinas places creatures in intimate dependence upon God's act of sharing his existence with them. Creation itself then is a manner of communion with God. All things that do not exist on their own receive their being from God.²² Aquinas aligns

[lines. 71–73]), as cited and trans. John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 96.

²¹ Gaven Kerr, "Goodness and Being, Transcendentals, and Participation," in *The New Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Thomas Joseph White, O.P. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 85–106.

²² Joseph W. Koterski, S.J., shows how Aquinas's commentary on John adapts Platonic participation so that the forms are in the Word of God as co-eternal with the Father, and thus equally sharing in God's free creation of the universe ("The Doctrine of Participation in Aquinas's *Commentary on John*," in *Being and Thought in Aquinas*, ed. Jeremiah M. Hackett, William E. Murnion, and Carl N. Still [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004], 109–21).

participation and creation in *Summa theologiae* I, question 44, on creation, in which he cites Romans 11:36: “Of Him, and by Him, and in Him are all things,” Thomas continues:

For whatever is found in anything by participation [per participatio-nem], must be caused in it by that to which it belongs essentially, as iron becomes ignited by fire. . . . Therefore it must be that all things which are diversified by the diverse participation of being, so as to be more or less perfect, are caused by one First Being, Who possesses being most perfectly.²³

“Participation” names the ongoing relationship of creation to the Creator. Creation is not something that happened merely in the beginning, but something happening at each moment—a mode of relating to and receiving existence from the perfect being of God.

“Participation” denotes an ordered level of causality that is non-competitive. The doctrine of participation and the metaphysics of creations presuppose a cooperative ordering of primary and secondary causes.²⁴ Aquinas develops this insight of the non-competitive nature of God’s relationship to his creation by maintaining that God shares with his creatures “the dignity of causality,” so that creatures receive existence and operation from God and yet still act as true causes.²⁵ Aquinas else-

²³ The portion of *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 44, a. 1, corp., elided above reads: “Now it has been shown above (Q. 3, A. 4) when treating of the divine simplicity that God is the essentially self-subsisting Being; and also it was shown (Q. 11, AA. 3, 4) that subsisting being must be one; as, if whiteness were self-subsisting, it would be one, since whiteness is multiplied by its recipients. Therefore all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation” (trans. Fr. Laurence Shapcote, O.P., ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alacaron, as published on the aquinas.cc website).

²⁴ See James Dominic Rooney, O.P., “The Metaphysics of Creation: Secondary Causality, Modern Science,” in Stump and White, *New Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, 107–25, at 115: “The very claim that God is a radically different sort of cause allows Aquinas to say that God’s causal action is not in ‘competition’ with creaturely causality. Creaturely ‘secondary’ causes remain dependent on God’s ‘primary’ causality for their efficacy, but that does not take away their causal efficacy.”

²⁵ Aquinas distinguishes between two aspects of God’s providence: first, the ratio of the order itself; second, the execution of that order. The first lies wholly with God and allows for God to have immediate providence over all things. With regard to the second, however, God uses other things to carry out his providence: “God governs things inferior by superior, not on account of any defect in His power, but by reason of the abundance of His goodness; so that *the dignity of causality* is imparted even to creatures. Thus Plato’s opinion, as narrated by Gregory of Nyssa [*De provid.* 8.3], is

where describes this participatory causality with the language of primary and secondary causality or primary and instrumental causality.²⁶ Bishop Robert Barron describes this aspect of the Creator–creature relationship in Aquinas and shows how it makes possible the Incarnation:

The general principle of what I will call noncompetitiveness between God and creatures. Because God is not a being in the world, that is to say, not something that exists alongside of other creatures, God can enter into the being of a finite thing with great intimacy and *without compromising the independence and integrity of that thing*.²⁷

The divine presence in each thing does not compete with or weaken the individual presence of each created reality. This noncompetitiveness is what makes the reality of the Incarnation a miracle but not absurd—and so with the Eucharist. Lewis likewise articulates the principle of non-competitive participation as what makes possible the Incarnation: “We catch sight of a new key principle—the power of the Higher, just in so far as it is truly Higher, to come down, the power of the greater to include the less.”²⁸ The

exploded [excluditur]” (*ST I*, q. 22, a. 3; emphasis added). C. S. Lewis echoes this same phrasing: “Pascal says that God ‘instituted prayer in order to allow His creatures the dignity of causality.’ It would perhaps be truer to say that He invented both prayer and physical action for that purpose. He gave us small creatures the dignity of being able to contribute to the course of events in two different ways” (“Work and Prayer,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970], 106).

²⁶ Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt helpfully distinguishes Aquinas’s view of the secondary causality of creatures (as expressed particularly in the *Summa contra gentiles*) from the occasionalism of many medieval Islamic philosophers, which fails to see intrinsic communion among creatures: “God, for Aquinas, is not first glimpsed by reason in particular causal actions, particular gradations of being, or particular instances of ends being attained, but in all these things thought in terms of the world as ‘a great big object.’ It is in grasping the network of causality among creatures that we come to see the world as a whole, and it is precisely this wholeness of the world the atomist metaphysics of occasionalism would deny to us” (*Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2013], 122–23).

²⁷ Robert Barron, *Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 57. See also Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), who develops the idea of “the Christian Distinction” between God and the world. He writes that, because of the Incarnation, “we must think of God as the one who can let natural necessity be maintained and let reason be left intact: that is, *God is not himself a competing part of nature or a part of the world*” (36; emphasis added).

²⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, rev. ed. (1960; repr. San Francisco:

principle most fully displayed in the Incarnation shows itself to be already the principle of creation.²⁹

As do Barron and Lewis, Aquinas frequently turns to the metaphysics of participation in explicating the doctrines of the Incarnation as communicated in the Gospel of John. The metaphysics of creation and the resulting shared dignity of causality make it possible to attribute to the lower realities the action received from the higher in a non-competitive manner. For example, because boiling water truly receives heat from elsewhere, boiling water may truly scald. Because the created flesh of the Incarnate Lord truly receives life from the uncreated creative Logos, the created flesh may truly communicate life. So also, because the Eucharistic flesh truly receives its life from the incarnate Logos, the Eucharistic flesh may truly communicate life.

Divine Wisdom as Incarnate and Eucharistic

In his commentary on John, Aquinas offers his readers themes that draw together the entire Gospel.³⁰ Aquinas unifies the Gospel by presenting John the Evangelist as a “contemplative” who is able to discern God and

HarperCollins, 2001), 178.

²⁹ Lewis writes: “What we can understand, if the Christian doctrine is true, is that our own composite existence is not the sheer anomaly it might seem to be, but a faint image of the Divine Incarnation itself—the same theme in a very minor key” (*Miracles*, 178). Elsewhere, he describes the asymmetrical relation between the higher and the lower such that communion is kept in a proper hierarchical order and destroyed by the reversal of that order: “Nature by dominating spirit wrecks all spiritual activities: spirit by dominating Nature confirms and improves natural activities” (205).

³⁰ Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., dates the *Lecture super Ioannem*, “with reasonable certainty,” to 1270–1272, during which time he was writing much of the *Summa theologiae*. The commentary is a *reportatio* from Reginald of Piperno with Aquinas likely correcting the first five chapters in his own hand. Torrell identifies it as “certainly among the most excellent of the commentaries that Thomas left behind,” in *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and His Work*, 3rd ed., trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2023), 401, 229–32. For a helpful overview of the theological themes of this commentary, see Matthew Levering, “Reading John with Saint Thomas Aquinas,” *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to his Biblical Commentaries*, ed. Thomas G. Weinandy, Daniel A. Keating, and John P. Yocum (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 99–126. For a broader consideration of Thomas’s biblical commentaries, see Eleonore Stump, “Biblical Commentary and Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzman and Eleonore Stump (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 252–68. For this article, I have used the English text of the commentary as translated by Fr. Fabian R. Larcher, O.P., edited and revised by The Aquinas Institute, and published on the aquinas.cc website.

wisdom in creation and in Jesus Christ.³¹ Aquinas describes the primary content disclosed in the Gospel: “While the other evangelists treat principally of the mysteries of the humanity of Christ, John, especially and above all, makes known *the divinity of Christ* in his Gospel.”³²

Following medieval and patristic exegetical practice, Aquinas selects a biblical verse to help students remember and understand the book in question.³³ For the Gospel of John, he selects Isaiah 6:1: “I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, and the whole house was filled with his majesty, and the things that were under him filled the temple.”³⁴ Aquinas uses the order of Isaiah 6:1 to show the order of the Gospel:

From God: “I saw the Lord”—“In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1);

To creation: “The whole house was filled”—“Through him all things came into being” (1:3);

To the Incarnation: “The things that were under him”—“The Word became flesh” (1:14).

Here we witness the divine Word itself as it communicates itself in distinct modes: first, in himself fully; second, in creation via participation; third, in the Incarnation via presence and participation.

Moving from this participatory relationship between creative and

³¹ See Stefan Magnus, O.P., *The Divinity of the Word: Thomas Aquinas Dividing and Reading the Gospel of John* (Leuven, Belgium: Peters, 2022). For more on the division of text in Aquinas’s scriptural exegesis, see John F. Boyle, *The Order and Division of Divine Truth: St. Thomas Aquinas as Scholastic Master of the Sacred Page* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2021).

³² *Super Ioan*, prol., no. 10. Perhaps surprisingly for contemporary readers who have a caricature of Aquinas’s as an ahistorical theology, he makes the historical argument suggesting that, after the other Gospels had been written emphasizing Christ’s humanity, further heresies crept up denying the divinity of the incarnate Word, and so John wrote his Gospel with this in mind.

³³ See Randall Smith, *Aquinas, Bonaventure, and the Scholastic Culture of Medieval Paris: Preaching, Prologues, and Biblical Commentary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

³⁴ The selection of Isaiah 6:1 is not merely a convenient mnemonic device, but suggested by the Gospel itself. When Aquinas interprets John 12:41—“Isaiah said this because he saw [Jesus’] glory and spoke of him”—he links this verse to Isaiah seeing Jesus’s glory in Isaiah 6:1, although Aquinas does not hold that Isaiah saw the Trinity itself, but a prophetic vision of the imagination “with understanding” (*Super Ioan* 12, lec. 7, nos. 1703–4).

incarnate wisdom, now I turn to the relationship between incarnate and Eucharistic wisdom as seen by Aquinas. Aquinas relies upon the same participatory metaphysics as he attempts to receive what is taught in John 6. In sum, the overall approach depends upon the idea that the life-giving Word enfleshed in Jesus Christ continues to act through his flesh given to his followers. In his outline (or division) of John 6, Aquinas summarizes the chapter as addressing “the spiritual food by which Christ sustains those to whom he has given life.”³⁵ The first part, 6:1–25, presents the visible miracle of the loaves in which Christ gives bodily food; the second part, 6:26–71, presents the invisible miracle of the bread of life when Christ gives spiritual food.

Aquinas’s interpretation of the miracles of the loaves and the bread of life discourses in John 6 frequently draws upon the Old Testament wisdom tradition. He quotes especially the following passages:

Sirach 15:3: “He fed him with the bread of life and understanding.”

Sirach 1:5: “The fountain of wisdom is the only begotten of God.”

Sirach 38:25: “He that is less in action, shall receive wisdom.”

Psalm 23:5: “You have prepared a table before me.”

Proverbs 9:5: “Eat my bread.”

Psalm 22:27: “The poor will eat and be satisfied; and they will praise the Lord.”

Aquinas thus holds his Eucharistic interpretation of John 6 within the broader context of wisdom literature.³⁶ These are not in competition with

³⁵ *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 1, no. 838.

³⁶ The Catholic biblical scholar Raymond Brown, in his two-volume commentary on John in the Anchor Bible Series emphasizes the distinction between the sapiential (wisdom) and Eucharistic meanings of the overall Bread of Life Discourse. Brown discerns in the present Bread of Life Discourse two discourses that were later compiled together. Thus John 6:35–50 forms the original discourse, and 6:51–58 a later discourse. The first is primarily sapiential in character (eternal life comes from believing in Jesus, receiving wisdom from on high); the latter is primarily Eucharistic (eternal life comes from receiving Jesus’s Eucharistic flesh). Rather than dividing the discourses based upon a hypothetical historical reconstruction, Aquinas discerns the different foci of both parts and suggests an overall interpretation that allows us to see an incarnational unity

one another. Aquinas paraphrases Jesus's comments to the crowd: "You seek me, not for the sake of the spirit, but for the sake of the flesh, because you hope for more food."³⁷

Incarnate Wisdom as Spiritual Food

The spiritual food that gives life is not simply one thing. Aquinas, instead, presents the spiritual food "which the Son of man will give you" as having multiple levels by employing participation. First, the spiritual good is "God himself, insofar as he is the truth which is to be contemplated and the goodness which is to be loved, which nourish the spirit: 'eat my bread' (Proverbs 9:5); 'wisdom will feed him with the bread of life and understanding' (Sir 15:3)." Second, it is "obedience to the divine commands: 'my food is to do the will of him who sent me' (John 4:34)." Third, it is "Christ himself: 'I am the bread of life' (John 6:35); 'for my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed' (John 6:56)." How is it that Christ's flesh could be spiritual food? Aquinas specifies that "this is insofar as the flesh of Christ is joined to the Word of God, which is the good by which the angels live."³⁸

It is significant how Aquinas connects all three as meanings of the spiritual food Christ promises: God himself known and loved; our obedience in response; and the flesh of the incarnate Word. Aquinas does not present these in competition, but rather emphasizes that it is faith that makes such obedience possible: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him who he has sent."³⁹ He continues here: "For the fact that we believe, and any good we do, is from God: 'It is God who is working in us, both to will and to accomplish' (Phil 2:13)." God and his Incarnation are the driving forces that find their completion in our graced reception of his gifts.

Of course, there is a higher-order question here. Why do we need a new kind of spiritual food from Christ? In Aquinas's treatment of John 1, he holds that human reasoning—even among its best traditions of wisdom—is insufficient for bringing human beings to our telos. Drawing upon the

to the sapiential and Eucharistic meanings. See my contributions in *Reading John with St. Thomas: Theological Exegesis and Speculative Theology*, ed. Dauphinais and Levering (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

³⁷ *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 3, no. 894, on John 6:26—"Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.'"

³⁸ *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 3, no. 895.

³⁹ Aquinas highlights the wisdom of the Jews in John 6 for interpreting spiritual food in terms of "the works of God": "Indeed, they were not far from the truth, since spiritual food is nothing other than performing and accomplishing the works of God: 'what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' (Luke 18:18)" (*Super Ioan* 6, lec. 3, no. 900).

distinction between the infinite Creator and the limited nature of any created reality, Aquinas teaches that “the knowledge by which God is seen through creatures is not a knowledge of his essence, but a knowledge that is dark and mirrored, and from afar [sed aenigmatica et specularis, et a remotis].”⁴⁰ This is hardly the rationalism of the eighteenth century that would seek to replace the knowledge proffered by faith.⁴¹ Aquinas concludes:

It was necessary that the Creator himself come into the world in the flesh, and be known through himself. And this is what the Apostle says: ‘Since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God by its wisdom, it pleased God to save those who believe by the foolishness of our preaching’ (1 Cor 1:21).⁴²

In treating John 6, he returns to our radical insufficiency and develops it further:

The Son of Man gives this food in a spiritual way, because human nature, weakened by sin, found spiritual food distasteful, and was not able to take it in its spirituality. Thus it was necessary for the Son of Man *to assume flesh and nourish us with it*: ‘You have prepared a table before me’ (Psalm 23:5).⁴³

Aquinas holds that we were not able to take spiritual wisdom “in its spirituality.” In other words, even the wisdom and glory traditions of creation and redemption in the Old Testament were not enough because our nature had been weakened. In setting up this interpretation, Aquinas affirms that Christ is the “author of this spiritual food” and that he receives this authority from “God the Father [who] has sealed him.”⁴⁴

Aquinas does not interpret John 6 in a narrowly Eucharistic sense as though the bread of life discourse were not also about the whole Incarnation and the enfleshment of wisdom.⁴⁵ Instead, the Eucharistic

⁴⁰ *Super Ioan* 1, lec. 11, no. 211.

⁴¹ Aquinas addresses the same theme of the Creator making himself known in John 1:18: “No man has ever seen God: the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known.”

⁴² *Super Ioan* 1, lec. 5, no. 141.

⁴³ *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 3, no. 897.

⁴⁴ John 6:27; *Super Ioan* 6, lect. 3, no. 897.

⁴⁵ For a complementary yet divergent contemporary reading, see Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, rev. ed., Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005). Moloney holds that the Bread of Life Discourse is one long homiletic midrash on 6:31,

interpretation draws upon the creative and indwelling wisdom from the Old Testament that is now enfleshed in Jesus Christ. When Aquinas interprets “the true bread is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world,” he writes: “Christ, the true bread, gives life to the world by reason of his divinity; and he descends from heaven by reason of his human nature, for he came down from heaven by assuming a human nature: ‘he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant’ (Phil 2:7).”⁴⁶ Here “the true bread” is clearly the incarnate Word.

When Aquinas turns to “I am the bread of life,” he again affirms three levels to such teaching that are non-competitive, but rather participatory. First, the bread of life is divine wisdom: “The word of wisdom is the proper food of the mind, because the mind is sustained by it: ‘He fed him with the bread of life and understanding’ (Sir 15:3).”⁴⁷ He will say further: “The bread of divine wisdom is life-giving of itself, and no death can affect it.” There is no competition between wisdom in general and the Word of God. Aquinas writes: “Since every word of wisdom is directed from the only begotten Word of God—‘the fountain of wisdom is the only begotten of God’ (Sir 1:5)—this Word of God is especially called the bread of life.” Second, it is not merely divine wisdom that is life-giving, but also the flesh of Christ gives life “because it is united to the Word of God.” Third, the sacramental flesh is also life-giving: “So, too, his body, sacramentally received, is life-giving: for Christ gives life to the world through the mysteries which he accomplished in the flesh.” Aquinas here clearly

“He gave them bread from heaven to eat”: vv. 32–48 on “He gave them bread from heaven”; vv. 49–58 on “to eat” (207). “The Passover context must not be forgotten. As once Israel ate of the manna in the desert and was nourished by adhesion to the Law given at Sinai, so now the world is summoned to accept the further revelation of God in the broken body and spilled blood of the Son of Man” (222). Moloney emphasizes that it now stands as one discourse: “The discourse closes as it opened, comparing the bread that Israel’s ancestors ate in the desert and the bread that comes down from heaven (v. 58, cf. vv. 30–33)” (223). Thus, he claims that 6:51c–58 is not Eucharistic, but a midrashic commentary on the verb “to eat” summoning up a rich tradition of wisdom language: “The discourse, from v. 25 down to v. 59, presents Jesus as the true bread from heaven, replacing the former bread from heaven, the manna of the Law. The believer must accept the revelation of God that will take place in broken flesh and spilled blood (vv. 53–54), a never-failing nourishment (v. 35) that the Son of Man will give (v. 27)” (223). While there is much in this reading that is compelling, the exclusion of the Eucharistic meaning in favor of the revelatory life and death of Jesus illustrates the competitive lens through which these presences are often interpreted—in contrast to the one offered by Aquinas.

⁴⁶ *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 4, no. 910.

⁴⁷ *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 4, no. 914.

interprets the “bread of life” to have three levels: divine creative wisdom itself, incarnate wisdom, and sacramental wisdom.

When Aquinas considers the meaning of the true manna, he affirms it likewise has three meanings: first, “bread of divine wisdom”; second, the incarnate Word, illustrating the meaning of manna as inspiring wonder, since “nothing is more a source of wonder than the Son of God made man;” third, the sacrament, as “it is also a cause for wonder how Christ can be present in the sacrament.”⁴⁸ The sacrament of the Eucharist is not in competition with the Incarnation, but is a new way of entering into one and the same incarnate life and death of Jesus Christ.

Aquinas develops the theme that the flesh of Christ is truly spiritual food. In this way, Aquinas sees these discourses in John 6 as both incarnational and Eucharistic. The flesh of Christ is saving because it is united to the Word of God. We may discern a repeated threefold manner of salvation: first, the Word of God; second, the Word made flesh; third, the flesh made sacramental. In commenting on “and the bread that I will give is my flesh” (John 6:52), Aquinas writes:

For he had said that he was the living bread; and so that we do not think that he is such so far as he is the Word or in his soul alone, he shows that even his flesh is life-giving, for it is an instrument of his divinity [organum divinitatis]. Thus, since an instrument [instrumentum] acts by virtue of its agent [agat virtute agentis], then just as the divinity of Christ is life-giving, so too his flesh gives life, as Damascene says, because of the Word to which it is united. Thus Christ healed the sick by his touch. So what he said above, ‘I am the living bread’ (6:51), pertained to the power of the Word; but what he is saying here pertains to the sharing in his body, that is, to the sacrament of the Eucharist.⁴⁹

As we mentioned earlier, the principle here is the non-competitive relationship of the higher and the lower. The flesh of Christ is an instrument of the divinity, so it never stands on its own; neither is it merely a docetic apparition without true agency.⁵⁰ Aquinas observes this principle at work in Christ’s healings through bodily touch and later through Christ’s sacramental

⁴⁸ *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 4, no. 914.

⁴⁹ *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 6, no. 959.

⁵⁰ See also Ignatius of Antioch (d. 107), traditionally held to be a disciple of John along with Polycarp. Ignatius emphasizes the saving role of the flesh in the Incarnation and in the communal celebration of thanksgiving or the Eucharist.

touching. The effects are fully attributable both to the principal cause and to the instrumental cause. The flesh of Christ truly heals, for it is the instrument of the Word of God—in its historical and sacramental presences.⁵¹

To understand these claims about the Eucharistic bread of life, it is important to see how Aquinas sees the Eucharist as inseparable from Christ. Nothing saving is attributed to the Eucharist that is not fully attributable to the flesh of Christ or to the eternal Word. As it is through the flesh of Christ that we go anew to the Word as children of God, so the sacrament opens a new way to the saving reality of Christ. See how Aquinas unites what otherwise might appear as disparate and conflicting realities:

It is great, indeed, because it produces spiritual life within us now, and will later produce eternal life, as was said. For as is clear from what was said, *since this is the sacrament of our Lord's passion, it contains in itself the Christ who suffered*. Thus, whatever is an effect of our Lord's Passion is also an effect of this sacrament. For this sacrament is nothing other than the application of our Lord's Passion to us. For it was not fitting for Christ to be always with us in his own presence; and so he wanted to make up for this absence through this sacrament. Hence it is clear that the destruction of death, which Christ accomplished by his death, and the restoration of life, which he accomplished by his resurrection, are effects of this sacrament.⁵²

The effects of Christ and his Passion and resurrection are thereby the effects of the sacrament. Why? Because they participate in the same reality: the Word's eternal presence as the Creator; the Word's eternal presence now as incarnate; the Word's eternal presence become incarnate now as Eucharistic. Just as we saw earlier with the relationship between the Word and the flesh of the Word, so here we see the Word made flesh and the Word-made-flesh-made-sacrament.

⁵¹ In interpreting John 6:51, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh," Aquinas notes that the words "I am the living bread" pertain to the power of the Word, whereas the second part, "the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh," pertains to the sacrament of the Eucharist (*Super Ioan* 6, lec. 6, no. 959). The distinction affirms that the Eucharist is properly understood only in its connection to the Word of God.

⁵² *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 6, no. 963. Aquinas repeats this same teaching in the *Summa theologiae*: "The Eucharist is the perfect sacrament of our Lord's Passion, as containing Christ crucified" (*ST* III, q. 73, a. 5, ad 2).

The Eucharist Wisdom as Spiritual Food

As we saw earlier, any interpretation of John 6 as both Incarnational and Eucharistic must address the oft-contested text of John 6:63, "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing." To understand Aquinas's specific treatment of this verse, it is helpful to his division of the text for the latter portion of John 6. He outlines John 6:47–72 in three parts: 6:47–52 as Jesus' defense of the origin of this spiritual food; 6:53–60 as his defense of the eating of this same food; 6:61–72 as his removal of the scandal that occurred among his disciples at his teaching. John 6:63 does not stand on its own, but has a place with the narrative unity of the discourse.

Aquinas, perhaps surprisingly, places the chief point of controversy in this latter section of John on the Incarnation and not exclusively the Eucharist. He identifies the primary scandal for the disciples as "when they heard our Lord say divine things about himself." Jesus then responds by speaking even more openly about his divinity: "What if you should see the Son of man ascending and descending to where he was before?" (John 6:62).⁵³ The Eucharist is nonsensical apart from the Incarnation. As we have seen, it is the divinity of Christ that is the fulcrum of Aquinas's exegesis of the whole of John.

In terms of the text in question—"It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing,"—Aquinas presumes the incarnational exegesis of the larger section and then argues for a Eucharistic reading. He presents two interpretations: one following Chrysostom and one Augustine. From Chrysostom, he distinguishes this understanding from eating his flesh in a "fleshly" (*carnalem*) sense. It must be understood to be spiritual food, "not as though the true flesh of Christ is not present in this sacrament of the altar, but because it is eaten in certain spiritual and divine manner."⁵⁴ Furthermore, the words have a spiritual meaning, "because they are from the Holy Spirit." Following Augustine, Aquinas interprets "the flesh profits nothing" as referring to the flesh of Christ. Flesh is flesh so to speak, and this is true even of the flesh of Christ. "But if [Christ's flesh] is considered as united to the Spirit and the divinity, it profits many, because it makes those who receive it abide in Christ, for man abides in God through the Spirit of love."⁵⁵ As we saw earlier, Aquinas insists that a corollary of the proper understanding of the Incarnation is that the flesh of Christ does not stand on its own but as a true instrument of the Word of God.

⁵³ *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 8, no. 989.

⁵⁴ *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 8, no 992.

⁵⁵ *Super Ioan.*, chap. 6, lec. 8, no. 993.

The sacrament therefore is likewise an instrument of the Word. This is how Aquinas helps us to read John 6 as the Word's Eucharistic presence participating in his prior incarnate presence: "One eats his flesh and drinks his blood in a spiritual way if he is united to him through faith and love, so that one is transformed into him and becomes his member. . . . And so this is a food capable of making man divine and inebriating him with divinity."⁵⁶ Such a reception requires what Aquinas describes as eating both "sacramentally" and "spiritually." "Sacramentally" names the receiving of the spiritual food in faith; "spiritual" names the attainment of the reality signified, being united to the whole Christ "through faith and love" and to the mystical body of Christ "through the Holy Spirit."⁵⁷ As such, Christ's flesh spiritually and sacramentally received is the means of accomplishing the overall purposes of the Gospel of John per Aquinas, namely, that we become children of God and the temple of God. The Eucharist is the way in which we are in communion with the incarnate Lord.⁵⁸

Conclusion

We began this essay by noting two distinct ways of considering reality: one through the lens of competition; one through communion. We then examined two objections to the Catholic doctrines of the Incarnation and the Eucharist that draw upon a competitive understanding of reality. This competitive view was seen, in greatly divergent ways, by O'Murchu's and Witherington's truncated interpretations of the Gospel of John. O'Murchu claims that the traditional Christian focus on Jesus Christ as the unique Incarnation of God eclipses the presence of God in the rest of creation. Witherington accepts and robustly articulates the traditional reading of the Incarnation but eschews a Eucharistic reading of John 6, which, for him, only reaffirms the good news of the Incarnation.

Beginning with the Old Testament tradition of the indwelling of divine

⁵⁶ *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 7, no. 972.

⁵⁷ *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 7, no. 972. He draws upon a traditional distinction between receiving the Eucharist sacramentally and receiving it spiritually when he interprets John 6:55, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him." To eat sacramentally is to receive the sacrament. To eat spiritually is to attain to the reality of the sacrament: Christ Himself primarily as his body, blood, soul, and divinity (both signified and contained), and secondarily as his mystical body (signified, but not contained).

⁵⁸ Aquinas elsewhere writes of the Eucharist: "It is called Communion [communio] because we communicate [communicamus] with Christ through it, both because we partake of His flesh and Godhead, and because we communicate [communicamus] with and are united to one another through it" (*ST* III, q. 73, a. 4).

Wisdom amidst the faithful who seek her, we considered how John's prologue and parts of John 6 draw heavily upon this literature. In the old-covenant literature, we saw the presence of the Word or Wisdom with God before creation, the indwelling of wisdom and of glory among the faithful, the restoration to life and to friendship with God, and even strong language of eating and drinking wisdom. At the heart of John is the claim that this Wisdom and Logos are fully present in the man Jesus Christ, one seen and witnessed to by John the Baptist and the evangelist. The newness of Jesus Christ, however, does not evacuate all the rest of the wisdom tradition, but rather personifies it. Furthermore, this same Word made flesh is to be received not merely through metaphorical eating of creative wisdom, but now through spiritual eating of spiritual flesh.

Turning to Thomas Aquinas's commentary on John, we saw this tradition of wisdom's incarnation developed. He maintained that there is a wisdom visible in all of creation as coming forth from the Creator, and yet such wisdom has not been received by humanity in a life-giving manner. Creation now becomes a temple filled with God—as seen prophetically by Isaiah, discerned by John, and made actual by Jesus Christ. Finally, per Aquinas, God communicates his divine life to his children through Jesus Christ received in the spiritual food of the Eucharist: the Word made flesh, now believed, loved, eaten, and drunk.

Aquinas sees in John a Eucharistic incarnate Word who restores and elevates creation to the relation of children of the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. Eschewing assumptions of competition, he articulates a metaphysics of participation and communion. Rather than the path suggested by O'Murchu, Aquinas helps us to see in John that the Incarnation presupposes that the one who is incarnate is the same divine Wisdom through whom the universe continues to be created. Contrary to Witherington's interpretation, Aquinas shows how John fully attends to the way in which Jesus Christ needs to be received in faith and surrender while still holding that this faith and surrender find their ultimate expression in the substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Here we see a pattern of participation and of communion: the creative Word descends into the indwelling and now-incarnate Word, and so into the Eucharistic Word. This descending pattern becomes the way of ascending to God: those who receive the Eucharistic Word receive the incarnate Word, and so attain the creative Word. In this way, Aquinas helps us to resist viewing these modes of divine presence in competition with one another. Instead, the traditional doctrines of the Incarnation and the Eucharist as expounded by Aquinas in his reading of John 6 help us to discover with Dante that "to be here is to exist in Love."