

*Food and Faith*  
*A Theology of Eating*  
by Norman Wirzba

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 264 pages. \$24.99.

In *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*, Norman Wirzba issues an invitation to the Christian community to reimagine its relationship with food. His proposal is both sweeping (attentive to a variety of food systems) and specific (with rich descriptions of everyday table and gardening practices). “Created life,” he claims in the preface, “is God’s love made tasteable,” and eating is “a summons to commune with the divine Life that is presupposed and made manifest in every bite” (xii). If the central claim of the book is that table practices bring us into communion with God, then the interpretive key to that claim centers on the metaphors of membership and exile. For Wirzba, the reciprocity and hospitality of intra-Trinitarian relations is extended into the created world through eating, which binds us together not only with our fellow diners, but also with the natural order in which we are embedded, an order that offers us good things to eat. It is only to the degree that we embrace our membership in vast web of creation that our eating is good and, therefore, a practice that connects us with God. Exilic eating tempts us to eat in isolation from our human community and in denial that we are members of the broader natural world. Wirzba aims to show us how we arrived in exile and to guide us back from Babylon to Jerusalem.

After an introductory chapter that introduces the central themes—social trinitarianism, membership, and exile—the book is organized into six chapters that lead us from creation and life in gardens (Chapter 2), through exile and death (Chapter 3), and towards resurrected life (Chapter 7) through sacrificial and sacramental table practices (Chapters 4 and 5) that cultivate delight and gratitude (Chapter 6).

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Once Wirzba establishes the idea that good eating is eating that connects us with others, with nature, and with God, it becomes clear that the processed, industrialized food we often consume alone in our cars cannot serve its sacramental purpose to make visible and tasteable the invisible grace of God. Such food is decontextualized from the earth in which it grew and from the plant and animal lives that were sacrificed to produce it. Wirzba proposes that the simple practice of gardening can serve as a powerful form of education for our affections. By sinking hands into soil, learning the rhythms of the weather, and tending to plants that miraculously become food that can nourish and delight us, we learn gratitude and wonder that reconnects us to the earth and renews our sense of membership. By bringing food that we have cultivated ourselves to our tables, we renew our membership in human communities. When these forms of membership are renewed, then we begin to glimpse the divine life and to participate in it here and now.

Along the journey back from exile to membership, Wirzba offers fresh interpretations of animal sacrifice (as a practice that cultivated gratitude and called for self-giving), Christ's death on the cross (as an act that transformed violence rather than as one that appeases God's need for violence), vegetarianism, gluttony, feasting and fasting, the Eucharist, table prayers, and many other topics. Each one is woven seamlessly into the fabric of the argument that good eating is rooted in membership and draws us more deeply into communion with others. The result is a highly cohesive book in which each chapter builds on the previous one and draws the reader into increasingly nuanced analysis of everyday table practices. In a time when many books feel like a collection of articles that have been stitched together, it is refreshing to find one that holds together so well.

The book is carefully argued and beautifully written. It advances a form of practical theology much in need. Instead of taking an approach that focuses on preaching or pastoral care, things pastors do, this is a theology of ordinary practices. It invites Christians to reimagine their relationship with food and to rethink their table practices in ways that have broad and deep implications for how we engage our food system. The call is both to personal transformation and to structural realignment. The book would be ideal for pastors to use in reading groups with one another. With careful guidance, educated lay members of churches could also make use of this book. A congregation that wished to engage in a comprehensive reevaluation of its food ministries, potlucks, and Eucharistic practices would do well to begin with conversations structured around the themes of this work. *Food and Faith* would be ideal for use in seminary classrooms and could function very well in advanced level undergraduate ethics courses. I highly recommend this work for anyone who is serious about food and faith.

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