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METAPHORS OF COMMUNION AND SPIRITUAL IDENTITY

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### INTRODUCTION

I am interested in the notion of sacrifice and how food has been used in the iconography of Christian art, particularly in relation to the sacrament of the Eucharist. In what follows, I will discuss my art practice through the metaphor of communion and spiritual identity, which I find manifested in my daily art practice. I am a chef, a jeweller and a Christian. This is my personal journey from the kitchen via the jewellery workshop. The final installation piece in my postgraduate exhibition "Sacrifice, Food and Death" (4-8 April, 2022) was a metaphorical exploration of sacrifice and deliverance, expressed through the form, colour and materials of nine copper communion cups resting on a stone altar; juxtaposing the ephemeral aesthetics of the Catholic baroque fantasy with the austere Anglican architectural aesthetic.

I am not always fully engaged in the mental and spiritual demands of communion when at church. At times, I drift off and show more interest in the iconography within the Anglican cathedral. My gaze settles on the leadlight windows and I reflect on the image of the crucifixion and the message of suffering it embodies and how this is conveyed in outline, colour and light. When I visit the Polish Catholic church in Broad Bay once a month, my mind wanders during the service to the ornate crucifix behind the altar and its depiction of outer and inner suffering and sacrifice.

As I wait my turn for communion, I deliberate on the dichotomy between the spiritual encounter of transubstantiation<sup>1</sup> and consecration and my focus on the beauty and embodied agony of the artwork of Christ dying on the cross. Have I betrayed my Protestant theology and idolised the cross? I suspect this is a fusion of both approaches, as I have a Protestant father and a Catholic mother:

### THE MEMORY OF KITCHEN RITUALS

To give my artwork some context, I started my chef's apprenticeship at age 15 in 1975 in Invercargill. My head chef had been a Dutch commando as well as an Olympian in jujitsu. Knife throwing and hand-to-hand combat techniques were demonstrated in quiet evenings in the kitchen of the Grand Hotel. Boning knives were flung from one end of the kitchen into sacks of potatoes at the other end. The projected construct of kitchen masculinity was performed so as to remove any doubt that one's occupation might be perceived as effeminate. In her article "Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium" Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett discusses performance within food preparation as being about display, about executing and completing something, and how to behave within that context.<sup>2</sup> Today the same attitudes can be observed in characters such as Gordon Ramsay and Marco Pierre White.

### Food, Sacrifice, Death

*"It requires more courage to suffer than to die"*

(Napoléon Bonaparte).<sup>3</sup>

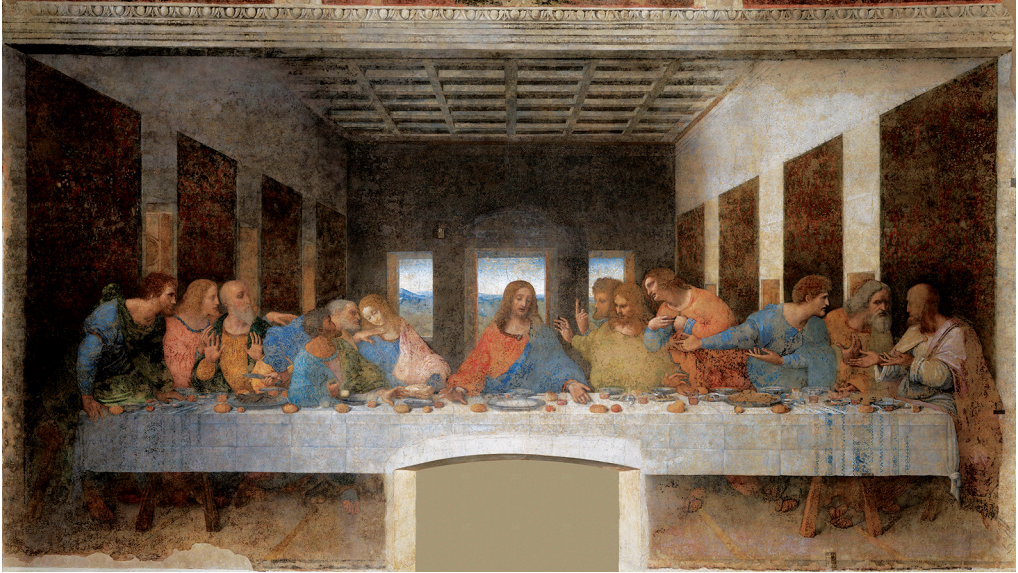


Figure 1. Leonardo Da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, c1495-98, oil on canvas, 70 x 88 cm.  
Wikimedia commons.

In the Bible, death means separation. There are two types: physical (first) death involves the separation of the body from the spirit, and spiritual (second) death involves the separation of the spirit from the presence of God.<sup>4</sup> While all must face the first, not everyone must face the second death. For obvious reasons, food and death are associated: without sustenance and warmth, we die.

The Greek understanding of sacrifice was in part based on guilt and the relationship with the animal immolated. This emphasis can also be seen in the Christian notion of sacrifice as evidenced by the sacrificial lamb, "a metaphorical reference to a person or animal sacrificed (killed or discounted in some way) for the common good."<sup>5</sup> It can be argued that the notion of sacrifice juxtaposes two theologies. On the one hand, a Greek sacrifice means "I am released of guilt because I am grateful for the death of an animal and the meat that I consume," while, on the other hand, "I am aware of how my Christian God sacrificed his only son. Jesus was the metaphorical sacrificial lamb to cleanse my sins. Greek and Christian theology allow me to live without guilt, providing I remember who sacrificed themselves for my sustenance."

Christianity reinforces the spiritual meaning of bread and wine as the representation of sacrifice<sup>6</sup> and, by extension, the taking of life in many ways. Therefore, both spiritual and physical life depend on death. As explained by Dorita Hannah,<sup>7</sup> in Judeo-Christian traditions, the slaying of the beast (animal) was associated with the use of the altar. Sacrificial slaying is an act performed to establish or sustain a proper relationship with the divine, through an offering consecrated by its own destruction. This offered victim acts as an intermediary between the sacred and the profane. Its existence allows for the two worlds to be present and interdependent while simultaneously remaining distinct.<sup>8</sup>

Judeo-Christian tradition and texts are full of examples of sacrifice, overwhelmingly related to food/sustenance – the bread and wine, the offering of an animal.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, however, the central sacrifice is Jesus Christ himself, who died on the cross and who prefigured his own sacrifice through the Last Supper. In Christian belief, the Eucharist/communion – the taking of bread and wine – quite literally embodies sacrifice. One element cannot work without the other: suffering, death and sacrifice depend on one another.

Cooking reminds me primarily that food is a facet of the struggle for life. Life depends on death. Butchering the animal's body still requires the human body to complete the process: a machine cannot suffice; only the organic can adapt to the organic. The hand guides the transition from life to death efficiently and humanely.

Multiple meanings can be found in Jesus's final meal with his disciples, the feast that sealed food's significant role in religious art and symbolism. The Last Supper was a goodbye, of course, but was also, symbolically, Christ offering himself so others could atone for their sin. It was the first Eucharist: the bread and wine offered as atonement for sin, a central philosophy in Christian belief.

## DAILY RITUALS FOR SUSTENANCE

A kitchen is one of the last places where we still use raw objects that have a connection to the natural environment. Natural ingredients and hand tools, such as my wooden-handled knife, cutting board and wooden spoons. These objects, such as my knife, have a relationship: the hand and the knife are one. The chopping block involves the daily ritual of scraping salt into the wood to kill the bacteria. Rituals are often derived from everyday objects, such as my chef's knife. A daily ritual attributed to the kitchen is my apron: it corresponds to the categories of ritual dress. When I put the apron on, I perform an act of initiation. I fold the apron into a three-folded band; I tie a bow around my belly. Putting on an apron means exiting my everyday world: I enter the poetical world of the kitchen. It is functional, but also symbolic. My general mood changes on wearing the apron. Food in this context becomes a rich narrative, a fusion of cultures and ingredients. Combine this with the process of physical production and it becomes philosophical consumption. Consumption becomes a spiritual nourishment.

## SACRAMENTAL VESSELS AND SYMBOLISM IN THE TIME OF COVID

A Christian chalice is a utensil used in communion to hold the consecrated body and blood of Jesus Christ in the liturgy of the Eucharist. A chalice is a goblet-shaped wine cup. It symbolises the cup from which Jesus Christ drank with his disciples during the Last Supper. The cup of love and unity is unavoidably a cup of sacrifice. Sharing the cup is an intimate action that may make me feel uncomfortable during communion in Covid times. Our lives have changed since the Covid-19 pandemic; internationally, many churches have closed their physical doors. One of the practices at issue is the use of the common cup versus individual communal cups. Many denominations have looked to the common cup used in the sacrament of Holy Eucharist as a site of germ transmission. However, the Church of England has controversially said "no" to the individual cup.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of individual cups seems self-centred and individualistic, an outlook which is contradictory to the spirit of the shared unity of the sacrament cup. While the Rev. Dr Hilary M Bogert-Winkler argues that "the urge to use individual disposable communion cups as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic is understandable for hygiene reasons,"<sup>11</sup> she asserts that the use of pre-filled individual disposable cups undermines the aesthetic and liturgical significance of the shared silver communal cup. She continues that the importance placed on hygiene and hygiene reform is a way of associating physical health with moral superiority, effectively excluding particular groups such as African-Americans and immigrants.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the individual cup 'reformers,' church leaders in favour of retaining the common cup argued that hygiene reform was closely allied with separation of class and therefore argued against it.

## A PERSONAL COMMUNION

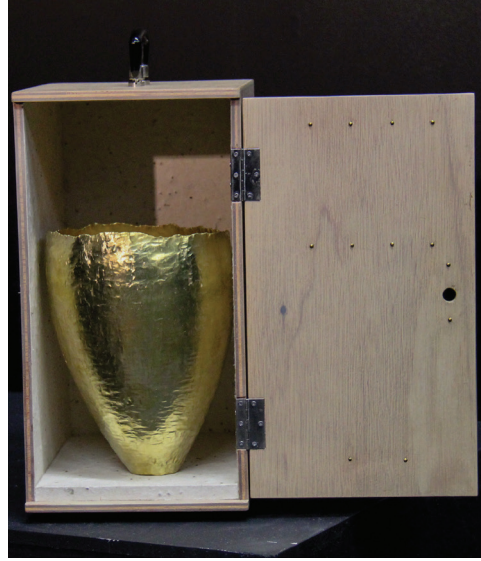
My final work in the exhibition started with the production of a single raised brass cup. However, given the context of the pandemic, I realised that the sharing of the common cup in Covid times might cause unnecessary material pain and suffering. As a result of this, I transformed the project into the production of nine individual copper

communion cups. My intention is to partake in communion with nine friends. I chose the number nine as it is symbolic of divine completeness. In Christian numerology it conveys finality, as Christ died at the ninth hour. The copper communion cups rested on a stone altar:

My exploration of the Christian communion rite set out to examine the links between sacrifice, food, death and the visual arts. My research has led me to the raising of a final urn to hold the ashes of the dead, and so the tenth and final vessel will symbolise the final sacrifice.



Figures 2-6, Sabin Perkins, 2022, selection of installation images and details from the exhibition.



**Sabin Perkins** is a chef, jeweller and a Christian who is interested in the notion of sacrifice. He notes that in this essay "I discuss my own histories as a chef, artist, educator and practitioner of Christianity and how these come together in the production of sacramental artworks discussing food and sacrifice. I describe what I am doing metaphorically, frequently using the metaphor of communion, which I find manifested in my daily practice."

Photographs: Pam McKinlay.

- 1 The sacrament of communion is based around the notion of the transmutation of the body, as flesh and blood, into a spiritual essence that is consumed by the body of the person partaking in the Eucharist.
- 2 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium," *Performance Research*, 4 (1999), 1-30.
- 3 Ray Hamilton, ed., *Military Quotations: Stirring Words of War and Peace* (Chichester: Summersdale Publishers, 2012).
- 4 John Ankerberg and Dillon Burroughs, *How is Christianity Different from Other Religions?* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2008).
- 5 Ernest Milner and Frank Hoerner, *A Dialogue on Christianity* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2010), 48.
- 6 Lawrence Feingold, *The Eucharist: Mystery of Presence, Sacrifice, and Communion* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2018).
- 7 Dorita Hannah, "Butcher's White: Where the Art Market meets the Meat Market in New York City," in *Eating Architecture*, eds Jamie Horwitz and Paulette Singley (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2004), 279-300.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 285-6.
- 9 Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 10 Hilary M Bogert-Winkler, "Individual Communion Cups, Community, and Covid-19," *Montreal Dio* [Montreal Diocesan Theological College], blog post, 30 June 2020, <https://montrealdio.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Bogert-Winkler-Common-Cup.pdf> (accessed 5 December 2021).
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Daniel Sack, *Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).