"Il piatto è Essere Chiesa Insieme"

Analysis of *Agape* Forms in a Super-Diverse Community and Their Significance Based on an Ethnographic Study[1]

Luca Ghiretti

1 A Brief Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics of Food

In the context of *doing conviviality,* discussed in this volume, it is of particular importance to look at ritual and bodily practices that clearly show us the operation of fundamental dynamics of interrelatedness. Sharing food (the practice that is observed in the given settings in this chapter) falls within the dynamics of *doing conviviality* as a heuristic tool as elaborated on by Bieler in this volume. More specifically, the analysis of this practice can illuminate the dynamics of the *repertoire of convivial interactions* by focusing on more or less dense (ritual) forms of interaction. The same applies to *convivial dynamics* (remembering that the very nature of *doing conviviality* as a heuristic concept does not permit an analysis of two extrapolated dynamics but should always be linked to a contextual analysis that is within the flux of the different dynamics in relation to one another). In cross-cultural encounters sharing food is a gray area where interactions can range from a genuine desire to understand the other to a (colonizing) exoticization of the other. Therefore, it can be interesting to look at these kinds of practices through the lenses of boundary making and belonging. From Bourdieu, it is apparent that the body is the clearest manifestation of how class differences affect taste and represent the most intimate dispositions of *habitus*; this is even more true when looking at the activities of eating (2013: 34 [1979]). The ways one eats and the food one eats acquire social value and represent belonging; the body and the physical act of eating as well as the food one consumes are thus assigned social and cultural meanings (ibid: 36–39). Commensality, the practice of eating together, is a very powerful form of sociability, because human beings tend to eat in groups (Fischler 2011:

1 This chapter emanates from the author's research in the context of the research project *Conviviality in Motion* (SNSF 100015_192445), University of Basel, Faculty of Theology, Department of Practical Theology, head: Prof. Dr. Andrea Bieler. The chapter is related to the author's dissertation project "'Essere Chiessa Insieme': Konviviale Praktiken und Theologien der methodistisch-waldensischen Union in diachroner und synchroner Perspektive".

529). However, it serves a dual function, as Claude Fischler points out: "Commensality[2] is both inclusive and exclusive: it creates and/or sanctions inclusion (even transient inclusion) in a group or community, as well as exclusion of those not taking part." (2011: 533) Further, the very act of eating together, including what is eaten and how it is eaten, places us directly in a power relationship with one another that concerns our physicality, our animal nature, our corporeality. It forces us to look at our bodily, animal, and affective lives and observe the power dynamics that go beyond language and that also involve our bodies (Schaefer 2015: 207). In commensality, equality as well as hierarchy are both possible (Fischler 2011: 533).

Examining different culinary cultures may be a return to colonialism by engaging in a cultural colonization of food that maintains positions of privilege and oppression (Heldke 2013: 394–396). Those who have power are seeking something exotic (exciting or unusual) in directories or cookbooks; it is a form of appropriation that allows them to become somewhat exotic themselves (ibid: 396–398). The other culture is colonized and the people who are members of it become resources for the colonizers (ibid: 399). At the same time, food can reveal cultural stereotypes, which are often the basis of discrimination (Herzfeld 2016: 31–35): "Since eating is both a social and a personal activity, it provides a sensitive arena for judging who belongs and who does not." (ibid: 35) The explosion of food from different cultures in the West brings with it a confrontation of hierarchies of tastes, smells, and ultimately values (ibid: 38). On the other hand, the food itself, its preparation, the places where it is prepared and eaten, and the words spoken during meal activities can be practices of social and cultural exchange. This occurs because these practices incorporate a certain idealization of ancient traditions and have a sense of authenticity attached to them (ibid: 40–41).

Here it becomes interesting to observe what Inga Reimers calls *Ess-Settings*.[3] These are situations in which cooking and eating are consciously enacted as collective activities (2014: 76–78). In these forms of meal practice sensory knowledge is experienced and the interaction between individual senses is explored, so that an exchange takes place that has to do with the whole body (ibid). Cooking, eating, and being together have to do with taste, touch, and smell. Mădălina Diaconu speaks of an aesthetics of touch, smell, and taste: "From the perspective of sensuous experience, a meal resembles a *Gesamtkunstwerk* [original emphasis], addressed to all the senses and is served by all sorts of auxiliary arts […] As for the food itself, it arouses the appetite through its colors, smell, consistency and even sound […]." (2006: 10) This aesthetic of the "secondary senses" produces a form of freedom that is experienced as a kind of tuning and resonance with the environment: a possible trust in the world and in other human beings through an emotional dependence with what surrounds us; a (from the French *passibilité*) "passibilty" that indicates vulnerability and sensitivity of the subject on the one hand, and intentional engagement with the object on the other (Diaconu 2006: 12). It is a body-related ethics: A reflexive hedonism that acknowledges that sensory pleasure is part of a good life both individually

2 Meaning a sense of sharing food habitually with some degree of dependence or reciprocity (Fischler 2011: 533).

3 This can be translated as "eating contexts".

and collectively (ibid). In cooking and eating together people find themselves in an ethical-aesthetic dimension that acts as a force field where they can be attracted or pulled away, drawn closer or repelled (ibid: 13). The relationship of the animal and individual dimensions of taste to the relational dimensions of eating together echoes the distinction between sex and love made by Alain Badiou. Taking up Lacan he explains: Sex is not a relationship and only appears to create bonds because it remains in the realm of the material. Only love creates relationship of significance, through the symbolic power of the Two (2019: 10).

There are many reflections to be made on the applicability of the concept of hospitality today;[4] though this is beyond the focus of this chapter. Instead, for this study, an important perspective is that of Raymond D. Boisvert. Within his analysis of the concept of hospitality, some key elements are revealed as follows: "A new 'we' results. It is a 'we' identified by relationships and mutual interests that might not have been antecedently in existence, at least not in the exact forms that they have taken after the contact and interaction. Here is where the bidirectional arrow of hospitality comes into prominence: both guest and host benefit" (2014: 33). Individuals in relationships understand themselves as not complete (humility) and this may produce a situation of overabundance (ibid: 34). Building on the Latin word *fecunditas*,[5] the author speaks of the *fecunditas* of the encounter in which individuals are more than stereotypes, as well as incomplete and needy, in whatever position they find themselves (ibid: 34–35). Eating together allows precisely the experience this *fecunditas*. A "convivial" epistemology can arise that goes beyond a depersonalized and a pan-textualist epistemology (ibid: 63–65).[6] This is because the situation itself makes it clear where concrete action takes shape: in the prepositional realm of the *in-between* (ibid: 64).[7] It cannot be relativized how much this dynamic can produce structural practices that foster reconciliation in a religious context. John Paul Lederach, looking at Jesus' breaking of the bread, speaks of "alongsideness". He defines it as (in a traditional theological manner, normatively and for practical purposes): "[T]o come alongside our deepest struggle to understand, to come alongside the story and struggle of another, and to come alongside the unexpected presence of God in both." (2014: 56) Donovan Schaefer reminds us that all of this happens through the materiality of our corporeality. The reality of our bodies embeds us in extended embodied histories, which, in their fuzziness and by producing anomalies and exceptions, become the beginnings of trajectories of transformation over time (2015: 58). So: "The materialist shift,

4 For an interesting application of the term from a theological-ecclesiological perspective (Russell 2009: 77–124). Also of particular importance is the volume *Religion and Migration: Negotiating Hospitality, Agency and Vulnerability*, edited by Andrea Bieler, Isolde Karle, HyeRan Kim-Cragg und Ilona Nord and the article by Andrea Bieler and Katherine Kunz for its discussion of the dynamic host-guest relationship, (2019: 133–146).

5 This term is used by the author, as attributed to Francis of Assisi, to refer to the divinity and abundance in which creatures live.

6 This is a form of narratology in structural linguistics that risks reifying language in an a-temporal dimension as merely a network of signs.

7 An interculturally defined interpretation of how this *in-between* can be understood at the level of church theory is offered by Friedemann Burkhardt (2018: 209–227).

especially thought through in conjunction with affect theory, means we can talk about religious bodies as material things that are not determined from top to bottom by regimes of discourse (or even learning) without being essentialist." (ibid) All this takes place in what Boisvert calls the prepositional realm of the *in-between*: An "alongsideness" that cannot be conceived (only) rationally, but also takes into account our materiality, corporeity, and animal nature. This epistemology replaces mind-body dualism, highlights intermediaries, and makes clear that the subject needs to be understood in a flow in which an "I" is seeking to understand a "You" (Boisvert 2014: 65). A form of trust arises from the "I-You" acquaintance (ibid: 68). This knowledge can be present in cooking and eating together. When it comes to the relationship between food and migration, however, it should be remembered that: "People, foods and ideas about foods, as well as food's material culture, travel. They are also continually (re)rooted and embedded." (Abbots 2016: 128) It must always be kept in mind that the exchange that takes place through food in the host country also has consequences in the country of origin, because related practices are constantly changing both here and there (Abbots 2016: 128). It is also useful here to recall that even for sharing food practices, the following principle applies: The lifestyles and self-positionings of more and more people happen in "very complex combinations of different spatial frames of reference" (Pries 2010: 132. My translation).

On the other hand, food shared by heterogeneous communities in the same country can also have a political value in society as a symbol of communities trying to overcome homogenization (Boisvert 2014: 115–117). It can identify communities in society that are open to building "fraternal bonds", as a transformational model of blending and mixing, giving fraternity[8] a social political value as well (ibid).[9] There are always narratives tied to food and narratives in general have five functions: to interpret events, portray characters, depict scenarios, make arguments, humanize characters, and make events relatable (Kaplan 2020: 41–42). In relation to food there can be liberationist, utopian, dystopian, romantic, or political narratives (ibid: 42–45). So, food should not only be analyzed as a mere object, but as an element placed within a narrative. There are eating narratives (of the simple act of eating); traditional narratives[10] that developed around the three genres: culture, religion, and gender; othering narratives (which fetishize differences); and meat narratives: namely, for or against meat consumption (ibid: 46–49). Finally, in the religious sphere the function that Boisvert calls the "symbalic"[11] of sharing food should be remembered: An event where multiple dimensional strands are not only presented but brought to consciousness and celebrated (2014: 126). Ritual practice gives another religious awareness of the holy, not an abstract one, but an engaged, behavior-centered

8 Boisvert himself uses this term to describe a form of fellowship.

9 Boisvert speaks of "fraternization" for the *communitas* in which the metamorphosis of fraternity takes place (blending Aristotle and Dewey), (Boisvert 2014: 116).

10 Which create what Gadamer calls the effective story, (1975: 284–290).

11 Boisvert invents this neologism from the Greek word *sumballein* because, in his view, the adjective "symbolic" has multiple uses, whereas he wants to indicate the sense of "that which links together" (2014: 126).

one (ibid: 131).[12] Sharing food, when it has a ritual function, plays a role in deep religious meaning-making. Cooking and eating together need to be placed in a multilayered context.[13]

2 Food and Community

This chapter aims to focus on several dimensions of sharing food observed by the author in an ethnographic study at a Methodist community in Milan, Italy.[14] In addition, in the author's ongoing research project, an attempt is made to place what has been elaborated in the field in Milan in dialogue with a process. That process, "Essere Chiesa Insieme", Being Church Together, covers about thirty years of the Waldensian (Union of Methodist and Waldensian churches) church's ecclesiastical policy and the Milan community is an exemplar of a certain significance. To summarize, the process of "Essere Chiesa Insieme" is an attempt to "be church together" with sisters and brothers who come from different backgrounds than that of the Italian Methodists and Waldensians, but who share an evangelical faith. The organizers attempt to do this without creating separate churches, but trying, when and where possible, to be together utilizing different models of integration.[15]

Starting from the observation of different *Ess-settings*, it is possible to reconstruct five different dimensions of sharing food in the community. From these dimensions it is possible to identify practices of belonging and boundary making. In the following I will give a synthesized account of this process.

---

12 The main elements of religion for Boisvert are: "(1) a conscious embrace of a particular narrative or figure, (2) commitment to the significance of a cluster of life guiding texts, and (3) membership in a community of observances." (2014: 129)

13 On this topic see the contribution of Walthert and the dimension of *repertoire of convivial interactions* in the contribution of Bieler on conviviality as analytical tool in this volume.

14 These observations took place over about two years in which the author lived with the community for longer or shorter periods, made participatory observations, and conducted episodic interviews. This data is being analyzed according to the methodology of (reflexive) grounded theory.

15 The publication, "Fratelli e Sorelle di Jerry Masslo," deals intensely with this theme. The text includes a description of the different forms of evangelical Christian communities (of the Waldensian church) present in Italy: 1. *Mono-cultural models*: consisting predominantly of residents with national language ability and engaged in traditional worship; 2. *Hospitality models*: consisting of a majority of mono-cultural residents but also welcoming migrants; this leads to a linguistic mix within the traditional worship, but also a willingness to make small liturgical innovations; 3. *International models*: the majority of congregants are migrants; with some local residents as well. This leads to multilingualism and worship that is a mix of different traditions; 4. *Intercultural models*: these are multiethnic communities, with a mix of languages and reimagined forms of worship seen in songs, music, locations, and prayers; 5. *"Ethnic" models*: comprised of migrants from the same ethno-linguistic group utilizing their own language and traditional worship styles. (Naso/Passarelli/Pispisa 2014: 30–31). On "Essere Chiesa Insieme" see also the contribution of Naso in this volume.

2.1 Coming Together

Particular forms of mutual relationships can arise from the practice of sharing food. What is interesting is that the most highlighted dimension of these relationships is the practical one. There is a pull to get to know one other and enjoy being in community. The practice of appreciating different dishes together and mixing flavors can become a manifestation of overabundance in which an epistemology of *in-between* is experientially possible. In recalling this experience, and in reflecting on the performed practice, this dimension acquires no small importance for the very identity of the community:

> After worship (..) you see that two people just immediately before the blessing sprint up and throw in the noodles (..) and each one of us before going down to worship (..) has already brought things up to the hall (..) his prepared things (..), be it (..) – sets the table (..), strictly ceramic plates, no plastic (..), for environmental protection, so then you wash everything (..), there are an average of seventy people, every Sunday for lunch: bring and share (.). Children included (..). And there is the assault on the diligence[16], I mean but there is so much stuff that it is not a problem (..). There are some who come here pretty much just to eat (..). […]. (Int. Carlotta 1. My translation)

For such a concrete practice of togetherness, COVID-19 has created structural problems (because of the lack of physical gatherings) from which communities are perhaps only now beginning to recover (but with difficulty). The practice of eating together is possibly considered more important than worship:

> The lunches together helped [the community] so much in its path of integration (…) more than worship, more than preaching, maybe I will say a heresy, but eating together, tasting and learning even to cook from each other, and sharing different traditions helped the church in this path, in my opinion, so much (…) that in fact there was an acceleration i.e. the more food that was shared, the simpler other things were (…) […] during worship you're sitting there, you're praying together, for heaven's sake, you're singing together, however, you don't have that additional moment – where you can really get to know each other like you can at lunch. (Int. Rossella. My translation)

One could say that concrete practice around the table is more important than worshipping together: That knowledge gained through the stomach is more important than knowledge gained through religious forms of expression. But practices are theory-based and we already know from *Prosperus of Aquitaine* (*Indiculus de gratia Dei*: 435.442) that theology reflects praxis in the relationship between *lex orandi* and *lex credendi*, at the moment when the practice is ritualized.[17] And from Boisvert we know that the "symbalic"

16 The Italian expression, "assault on the diligence", is used here simply to indicate how everyone runs to fill plates with food.

17 This makes sense if one interprets broadly a debate that begins with Prosperus of Aquitaine and his position on prayers in the relationship between faith and liturgy: then the two poles become theology and ritualized practice.

function of food has deep religious meaning. In shared meals and celebrations, as in the Lord's Supper, we experience a reshaping of traditional boundaries (Leinhäupl-Wilke 2007: 109).

The narrative that the community gives to sharing meals is political and defines a tradition: that of being a familial community of diverse people that gathers to share a meal together. This also serves as a symbol in a country where politics and a certain national narrative tend to see the "non-Italian" subject (with all that this may mean) as a problem, if not quite a danger. Does this mean that a bond is created that leads to hybrid identities? Not really. Indeed, if we use Andreas Wimmer's theory to look at this community phenomenon, not only in a constructivist way (as an "imagined community"), then we see not only fluidity, situational variability, and strategic malleability in regards to the ethnicities gathered around the table, but also ethnic categories of particular social groups that define the identity of its members (2013: 26). The *Ess-setting* discussed here is the lunch after worship or, more generally, after a religious meeting. It must be said that the observation period covered community gatherings in a reduced form due to COVID-19: Activities were restarting after a period of closure yet in-person events were limited and cautious. In spite of this, it was possible to analyze behavioral patterns and practices that had broader significance.

First, it is possible to see that the groups are less mixed than one would think: There is a consistent group comprised mainly of people of Filipino background to which a group of people of Indonesian background sometimes joins. People from Ghanaian backgrounds also create a group of their own. These are porous groups, open to contact with other people and above all united by bridging persons, people who go between two groups and facilitate connections. During the potluck meal[18] for the pastor's farewell after worship, for example, I observed some of the movements of people creating bridges between the Filipino, Ghanaian, and Italian groups:[19]

> The Italian component is yes present, but several people present at the worship did not stay. […] I meet with Moché. Meanwhile, I see that Theodor has gone to chat with the Ghanaian group. (Pastor's farewell worship 3.7.2022. Protocol. My translation)

Also of some significance is the varying role and importance given to these meals from different components of these meetings.[20] The family dimension is strongest for those who do not directly have an Italian background: Things such as celebrating festivals of the

18 Called "Bring and Share" by the congregation.

19 The community refers to the Italian group, Filipino group, Ghanaian group, etc. It also defines itself in two "components": Italian and English-speaking. This is true regardless of the subjects' acquired or not-acquired nationality. To understand how and to what extent this may change for the so-called "intercultural generation" (Naso/Passarelli 2018: 95–119).

20 The terms "groups" and "components" are not always differentiated in how the community refers to them. "Component" is not the ideal term to use to refer to groups such as: "Italian component", "Ghanaian component", "Filipino component", "English component" etc. However, I have chosen to use it here because it is how subjects refer to their groups.

church year in the church hall, as well as personal feasts (e.g., birthdays), acquire significant meaning. A clear example of this is the celebration of Easter 2022 in which people from the "Italian component" were only briefly present and were always keeping an eye on the clock. This is because, for many of them, the celebratory feast takes place with family shortly after the service at home. The situation is different for other members:

> There are pizzas, scones, and homemade desserts. Also chips, popcorn. I and the other "Italian" people present are almost present-absent […]. Who seems to be the host group is the Filipino group, with Dina behind the table giving tiramisu, advising me to have a rice cake, etc. […] I eat something and drink two glasses of prosecco after Clara begins the day by giving thanks for being able to have a potluck meal on Resurrection Day after so long, but also indicating that it is not as big it could be. She points out as part of the blessing that there are "three pastors present: pastor Delia, pastor Luke, and pastor Shaggy…" (Easter 2022. Protocol. My translation)

The so-called Filipino group acquires the host role for the celebration after service and within it some people have positions of responsibility (both of a practical and spiritual-religious nature). The event is smaller compared to the traditional celebration, and this does not go unnoticed and is expressed (in the congregation there is generally a persistent longing for what was in the past). A certain fluidity among groups is evident, however, this fluidity does not dissolve them. Groups have different roles, responsibility, size, and visibility among themselves:

> Earlier they had taken a photo of the Filipino group. From the way the photo was staged and how people posed, there appears to be some pride. Only Delia (or maybe Ida too?) was asked to be photographed with them. The room appears to be divided: behind the table is the Filipino group, which also extends to the other side of the table where some other people stand, some of whom are called to join the main group: Ida (chatter) and Delia (photos) and now me. Other people can "cross to the other side", even if not invited. There is some fluidity, but some division also remains. (Easter 2022. Protocol. My translation)

Also worth mentioning are dynamics of voluntary exclusion that, however, are of some importance. See, for example and in another context, the case of the teenager who participates with her parents in a church event, but does not eat the shared food after the ritual performance, because she simply does not like the food:

> Davide comes up to me and says then we will go eat something. In fact, he does not eat. Neither does his daughter and wife. He adds in a tone that is meant to explain the situation, "I do it especially for my daughter. She doesn't eat anything here!" (Prayer for the death of Nelly 05.01.2023. Protocol. My translation)

I hear no embarrassment in hearing him sharing this.

2.2 Role Changes and the Misunderstanding of Roles

Unfortunately, it was not possible for me to observe many cooking school meetings organized by the community. These meetings were held in the past (with sometimes more than 100 people) and will likely be held in the future. The pandemic prevented them from occurring and resuming them has been difficult. I was, however, able to observe the Malian dinner. This is again what Reimers refers to as an *Ess-Setting*: specifically, collective food experiences and relationship-building activities organized by the community as an opportunity to gather around food and mission in the neighborhood. They are sometimes organized in collaboration with the diaconal institution, as in this case. Three young men from Mali, who receive aid through diaconal projects, taught the group how to cook dishes from their culture.

This example moves between the two poles of Heldke's reflection: the risk of cultural colonialism through food, on the one hand, and practices of cultural and social exchange on the other. Compared to the past meetings, twenty attendees are a relatively small group, but larger numbers were not possible due to restrictions following the pandemic; therefore, the missionary dimension of these gatherings is also relatively small. However, it is interesting to look at the roles. First, the vice president of the church council has a role that is like a ritual director of the meeting: she is careful that the group does not get lost in conversations, brings attention back to what is happening, invites people to offer suggestions, and provides a rhythm for the event. This ritual direction is not imposing but it certainly guides the event. She invites participation in a gentle voice, never speaking loudly. Although the pastor is present on this occasion, it is this other person who takes over as the improvised ritual director. This indicates a certain elasticity and ability of the community to respond in the moment.

Taking on this leadership role, the vice president creates a context in which the event can occur and other people can step into other roles. The young men from Mali are first standing behind a table (presenting the recipe ingredients), then they move to the kitchen. With these movements, it is clear how they play the role of teachers. We approach the table to get a better look at the food; we approach the kitchen to observe the cooking; we listen to what they have to say about the process. People, like these men from Mali, who are in the position of receiving social help, here become teachers. These people who are told what they can and cannot do in a foreign country become those who have something to say and teach. As we participate, we know what to do through repetition of the gestures we are taught: We learn by practicing. This is an ethical-aesthetic dimension in which subjects can be brought closer together as well as pushed further apart: a flow of mutual acceptance and boundary making within a "convivial" epistemology. In this context, it can be said without shame that one dish is better than another, indicating a hierarchy of taste (and thus value) on one hand:

> Ramona – after having tasted it – looks at me with wide eyes and an expressive face and says without mincing her words, "The other one was better…" I immediately turn around to see if any Malian men heard her comment. I feel embarrassed and don't know how to answer her. (Malian ethnic dinner 21.5.2022. Protocol. My translation)

On the other hand, moments of thick encounter can also be created: in the kitchen, during the food preparation, a young person tells me about his journey to Italy including family events, the year he lived in Libya, his failed attempts to come to Italy, the harassment he endured, and his arrival on a barge: "He says this as if telling a story, beginning with a fairly tired tone, although he becomes more assertive in the passage about the confrontation with Libyan authorities." (Mailan ethnic dinner 21.5.2022. Protocol. My translation)

A misunderstanding of roles is also observed at this event:

> When Susan arrives she is dressed in a yellow, embroidered party dress. Once she realizes that she will have to do some work and she misunderstood what Ida told her: she is not doing the work of cleaning, but will be part of the cooking course (which still involves a bit of work – Ida tells me, her daughter, and her husband about this at the end of the evening) – she goes to change her clothes, putting on work clothes (the ones she uses to clean the hall). (Malian ethnic dinner 21.5.2022. Protocol. My translation)

In this example, the cleaner comes to the party and realizes she has to work, so she takes off her party dress and puts her work clothes back on. Nevertheless, she also experiences a different role than the one she fills two days a week when she serves the community:

> Meanwhile, plantains have arrived to be peeled and fried. Susan ends up in charge of the preparation and frying with a small group of people who peel them. […] After showing them how to cut them, she puts the slices in water and salt and fries them. She is proud when she is told how good they taste. (Malian ethnic dinner 21.5.2022. Protocol. My translation)

Finally, there is the example of someone whose role includes concrete authority as given by tradition.[21] A woman of Filipino background used to lead the women's group and was a "historical" leader for the so-called "ethnic"[22] dinners. Now this person no longer participates as frequently in the activities of the church. She is, however, at home in the community hall and in the kitchen, and "her role" is recognized by long-term members of the community.

> Also, Fiona arrives and seems particularly at ease in the living room while cooking. She moves confidently, her tone of voice is high, she jokes with various people: she really seems to feel at home. […] She tells me about when she started the "ethnic" dinners. She was head of the women's group. She proudly tells me that when she did the Filipino dinner there were 150 people: "even Baptists, Waldensians, people from the neighborhood, from the block of flats, and Elisabeth's friends…!" Ida, Ilaria, and Ramona tell me with smiles on their faces that I chose the wrong period to do the research: laughing they claim there was more to eat then… Then they tell me about the various trips Fiona organizes "for Filipinos". (Malian ethnic dinner 21.5.2022. Protocol. My translation)

21 Gadamer 1975: 284–290.

22 Called so by the congregation.

A family-like, informal atmosphere is present at these meals, but certain group divisions also persist: sometimes in the form of physical groupings, such as the long-term members, the young Malians and their friends, or other groups sitting together.

2.2 The Attractive Power of Food

It is precisely around food that the dynamic of perceived *fecunditas* can be created. It is interesting to see how the time of sharing food after the confirmation of someone's nephew is described by one person in an interview:

> [T]ogether with Suzette (...), with Nelda, Suzette's sister who made (..) food – there were more than a hundred people (..) between ours and theirs, all in the hall, sitting (..) and I saw the faces of the families from the rugby team (.), three families from the rugby team where my nephew played, in shock (.). That they came to worship (..), so how to say, absolutely Catholic, classic families (..) – beautiful, a beautiful, a beautiful moment. (Int. Carlotta 1. My translation)

Here, the shock of families who do not know the congregation is a positive shock. It is the shock of seeing more than a hundred people from different backgrounds eating food that can be defined as "ethnic" or "fusion". Of course, this is an interpretation that may very well be imbued with a certain vision on the part of the person expressing it.[23] However, it does at least indicate the possibility of the community to represent something different from the local context. At the very least, there is a context created in which eating together (positioned in a religious-ethical-political narrative that unites the congregation to the overall project of the church[24]) generates, or can generate, *fecunditas*. That is the experience, on a mental and physical level, that individuals are more than stereotypes while at the same time they have fluid, complex, and partial identities: a fragmented self:

> Ah exactly, what was of course also important for the neighborhood were the, our "ethnic" cooking classes that we organized and there were (.) at least half of the people simply from the neighborhood or a bit further and that was actually also always a good opportunity so a (.) to be in conversation so o/of these people no one finally came to the church [service] but they were very benevolent or also, yes, so interested in the community and there you could simply (.) then have quite good contacts [...]. (Int. Elisabeth. My translation)

This *fecunditas* can be described as an exemplary characteristic that attracts people to the community. While we cannot rule out excitement about the exotic, this paragraph indi-

23 The fact that we are dealing with an interpretation, unfortunately precludes an in-depth analysis of what happened from the perspective of practices and atmospheres.

24 "And yet we have chosen this term [Essere Chiesa Insieme], which should be self-evident, to define the process of mutual integration with evangelical sisters and brothers who come from other continents; this process is not self-evident at all." Bernardini (2013. My translation.) At the national level, a process of mutual integration was pursued that would, on the one hand, take into account different identities and, on the other hand, focus on mutual changes by project participants.

cates that moments of ephemeral or deeper connection are possible. This contact occurs in a distinct atmosphere and with a different set of roles (those who produce the food are not serving, but teaching) from that found in so-called "ethnic" restaurants in which there is only a colonizing appropriation of the food.[25] Through this lived *fecunditas* the strong religious significance of eating together and sharing food becomes even clearer. We can take the *Langar* practice, in the Sikh religion, as an example of eating food together that, in its differences, nevertheless has similarities to the phenomenon analyzed here. *Langar* is the free-of-charge food that, in Sikhism, is served to everyone regardless to religion, status, gender, ethnicity, or caste. It is a voluntary service and characterized by sitting on the floor and eating together in a position, therefore, of equality. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh calls *Langar* a form of overcoming the mind-body dualism, as well as a celebration of the five senses and a recognition of the importance of all bodies experiencing the world (2023: 346–347). *Langar* practice "also revealed that sharing a common belief with strangers can also be a form of commensality and may not require making divine gestures in a faith-inspired gathering" (Rana 2022: 8). Here it is significant to say that Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh reminds us of how important taste is to both Christianity and Sikhsm, but with a significant distinction: For Christian mystics God and the world are separate, for Sikh gurus they are not (2023: 352–353). The possibility of experiencing *fecunditas* in the community that is the subject of this study can thus have a missionary function by making visible a defining aspect of the community itself and generating interest in it.[26]

2.3 The Diaconal Meaning of Food

> [O]r in the pandemic it was very important, for example, to be able to give people shopping vouchers, yes, so that for me the bread on Sunday was the word of God and then also the bread that we need to survive, that is, that was the voucher to be able to go shopping at Esselunga or somewhere else, yes. (...) [...] (Int. Elisabeth. My translation)

Former pastor Elizabeth makes a strong connection between the theological value of the bread of God's word on Sunday and the bread of everyday life, which is intended not only for living, but for basic survival. This indicates the structure of the community as made up of people who are not only considered, or who consider themselves, different but occupy different spheres socially, economically, and financially. Each is faced with limits that are not just constructed but also exist in everyday life. The existence of such structural differences means food may be lacking in times of crisis for a portion of the people in the congregation. The food that is lacking and that can be given, the ways in which this happens, and the relationships that are established: All of this has a communal dimension that the pastor embeds in a strong religious narrative. Through this project, which

25 Even more interesting, the community is located in a neighborhood (formerly working-class) where there are now many restaurants of different traditions.

26 Moreover, it also allows for encounters with possible unexpected guests.

the community requested money for from the Waldensian *Otto per Mille,*[27] the community gave people and/or families about 70 spending vouchers. Because:

> [W]e are quite a community / [...]. Eh. Socially enough, also varied, however there were people really struggling (.). (Int. Ilaria. My translation)

With Waldensian diaconal aid then:

> S.O.S. bulletin, which is used to help situations that are found, of people who are struggling to pay bills, rents, or things like that, and it's not for repayment, they do not need to repay money that is given to them, of course it is capped annually in well-known situations, etc. [...] (Int. Ilaria. My translation)

And:

> Then we have for example other projects, but more internal to the community, which are for example a scholarship fund that we give to students in our community who need it or who are deserving anyway, so scholarships for university rather than for (.) for high school, that's it. They are tied to bequests that church members have made and therefore they are able to cover, they are a small aid of course, however they have really helped those who needed it. And then we have a fund that is called "fraternal loan" (.) which is again the result of an offer of one, of a family for a person who was dead[28] and as the word says it is a loan, in the sense that in theory it should he/ help people who want to or start or enhance certain work activities in Italy and who need help (..). (Int. Ilaria. My translation)

> Not only, not only foreigners, eh (...). No (..), no no no, people in need, not necessarily only foreigners, the majority but not necessarily (..) [...]. (Int. Carlotta 3. My translation)

Being a community also means acknowledging real, concrete differences and looking for ways to live with them. From this point of view, we see a structure of diaconal help within the congregation: It is a fairly complex system for a community of about 300 people. It ensures, however, a way to give and receive help and to manage economic –and financial differences that goes beyond the financial help a richer family can give to a poorer one. It creates a clarity in the aid, which avoids forms of mutual dependence. A very strong form of privacy is also required. Though this does not prevent more direct forms of help from being present as well:

> It's tiring, eh (..), I mean I did an hour and a half yesterday with social services on the phone (.), an hour and a half, [...]. (Int. Carlotta 2. My translation)

27 Money the church receives from taxpayers based on Italy's typical religious community funding system.

28 A bequest in memory of a deceased person.

There is also aid that is given by specific people to other people: not only of a financial nature, but also practical help such as translation, accompanying people to offices or health facilities, providing beds, etc.

Another diaconal form of aid is present, this one for the homeless: breakfast time. This activity of the community goes beyond the congregation: people from diverse denominations participate, even agnostics. The "community" that serves those in need is not only from the congregation but comprises a broader group of interested people. At the same time, it is made clear, through symbols, that this is an activity of the congregation (through the wearing of vests or polo shirts with the name of the activity and of the congregation during the breakfast service). It is a "small" project that grew from the inspiration of one person but was endorsed by the congregation. Each Sunday, 50 breakfast packets are distributed for homeless people who live around the train station. The kind of people that receive the packets are very different: though the stories told about them characterize a variety of people in need. The program was run, up until recently (the person in charge recently changed), by the person who initiated it and is led by so-called group leaders, who are responsible for the Sunday group (the outreach is done every Sunday before worship). Groups change from Sunday to Sunday (people sign up: four to six people per Sunday). The shared preparation of the food that is given to the homeless, as well as the gathering following the outreach for coffee, allows for moments of mutual acquaintance and storytelling. It is a twofold dynamic: On the one hand, intentional contact with people who are in need causes a bond to form due to the encounters with them and characterizing narratives about them. On the other hand, opportunities to talk and get to know each other are created for people who participate in the outreach and who come from different backgrounds. Sometimes these are even intimate conversations and deep stories are shared. Even here, however, the dynamic of service cannot be idealized, because questions remain: What relationship exists between those who serve and those who are served? What kind of intrusion is produced into the lives of those in need? What kind of authority is embedded in a service that "labels" some people as "needy"? What is the relationship between the breakfast packets and the breakfast made at the end of the service by those who serve? These and other questions need careful consideration.

2.4 Eating Together and Conflict Resolution

> We had this very lunch where we could deal with this issue at the "family" level, sitting at the table. And this thing did not immediately solve the problem, two just left the church for a period of time but after some time they came back (…) So we all suffered a lot, however this thing made us grow up here (5). It made us take a leap in understanding that we were no longer two different groups, which then actually/ so led one by one pastor and one by another, we were one church. (Int. Rossella. My translation)

Here is an attempt to resolve problems within the congregation. The differences are mainly between the so-called Italian group (in the Italian language) and the so-called English-speaking group (which has its activities in the English language), which until then were led by different pastors. The decision was made to use an informal lunch

to discuss the problems because of its familial dimension. A discussion could begin that, with difficulty, could lead to clarity and then produce a solution. The "convivial" epistemology Boisvert speaks of is (un)consciously pursued here. A context of *in-between* is sought in order to provide a dynamic setting for the I to attempt to understand the reasons of the You. To do this as merely a rational engagement with the situation is not sufficient, instead the relationship of the body and mind needs to be considered and this occurs by centering the discussion around sharing food. All of this is placed in a narrative that also has religious and political connotations: that of family and of informal relationships among siblings. It is about a cultural encounter: an interactional process. There are limits, however, to what can occur due to power relations. For example, for Ewan, an interviewee, the community is facing a Machiavellian dynamic of the "Italian component" (Int. Ewan). This component wants to remain ethnocentric, does not want to lose control, and accepts only those who assimilate in some way. From this perspective, there is a critique of the hegemonic-institutional management of power that formally opens itself to diversity, by declaring its welcome, but in practice works to assimilate it. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, the mere fact that diversity is declared as welcome by one group over another generates a distinction in terms of power between the groups. It creates a conditional hospitality that institutionalizes diversity by requiring that the hospitable act be somehow repaid through the integration of those who are different into a common organizational culture that allows the (here, congregational) institution to celebrate its diversity (Ahmed 2012: 42–43). The concept of hospitality can become a heuristic of power.

2.5 Synthesis of a Complex Phenomenon

Forms of sharing food, even in the form of the potluck meal, are a fundamental tradition in the history of the Christian church from its earliest times. Indeed, for Paul (1 Corinthians 11:17-34), what reminds us of Jesus' holy supper with the disciples is precisely a kind of potluck meal to which the apostle tries to give some order (Warmind 2015: 197–198). Luise Schottroff gives a very interesting interpretation of the theological reasons behind Paul's intervention:

> The aim of the community is to prevent individual members from landing in economic distress, and to even out economic disparities. The community is to be a fellowship in holiness, and justice is an essential dimension of this. […] [The better off in Corinth] have treated common property, consecrated to God, as if it were private property. More precisely, they have treated it as private property at a time when it was already common property, consecrated to God. […] Sharing in the meal signifies sharing in justice, holiness and fellowship (κοινωνία) both among themselves and with Christ. (Schottroff 2000: 54)

Andrea Bieler und Luise Schottroff draw a parallel with the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts of the Apostles where we are confronted with the same problem of the misuse of common goods consecrated to God (because of their unequal use) and add: "To the modern mind, the death of Ananias and Sapphira is as offensive as 1 Cor. 11:30. But it also

happens today that people throw away their lives or put them at risk when they destroy their right relationship to other people and to God." (Bieler/Schottroff 2007: 120)

The analysis of the five dimensions of sharing food in this chapter reflects a dynamic of interrelatedness. We can see it symbolically[29] as well. While it is true, as Pastors Jana and Elliott say in an interview, that "Essere Chiesa Insieme" is a plate filled with different foods that would not normally go together, another observation is also true:

> Okay (5). Conversations at the table (..). The pasta must not touch the other (.) the other foods on the plate. (Int. Jana and Elliott. My translation)

This, among other factors, makes it evident that practices of commensality are strongly embedded in culture and national contexts continue to play a role in socialization around eating practices (Danesi 2018: 115). It must, however, also be observed that young people, in certain contexts that enable it, may learn new forms of eating that can, then, continue into adulthood and be passed on (ibid: 117):

> Nadia, my daughter (.), if you don't sta/ – Nadia and XXX, my nephew who used to live with us, if I didn't stop (.), it would get crazy (..). I mean it was, it was the moment, moment because then they were still playing, ping pong (.), table football (..), two chats (.), you still eat well (.), because they really make (..) – both of them are the ones who make pasta (.) or noodles, rice noodles, soy noodles, etc., they are cooks (.), so you eat well, you stay (.). (Int. Carlotta 1. My translation)

There is being together and mixing together, but not completely: Limits remain with regard to both taste and structure. Or taste is a symbol for structure because there are processes that are difficult to understand and merge in both taste and structure. It is a special way of being together:

> But (...) slightly together. With a gentleness. Okay, we are together (.) in a very gentle way, very with fragility, however it is a/is Christian love (6.). (Int. Jana and Elliott. My translation)

Agape, the practice of Christian love, is also the term used for eating together after worship in the Italian evangelical church. Here it is about an *agape* that is a fragile love that allows groups to remain interrelated. It is not a transforming love that creates a hybrid community or erases differences. It is transformative, however, in the broader sense of taking timely actions within the wider dynamics of transnational contexts in ways that cannot just be idealized (Werbner 2013: 107–120). This *agape* is a fragile and complex journey;[30] with greater fluidity in generations following the initial "arriving" generation:

---

29 In the sense that Paul Tillich ascribes to the symbol: "A symbol participates in the reality it symbolizes" (1951: 177); or: symbols stand "for a reality in the power of which they participate." (1955: 190)

30 This can also be understood as a description of the national process of "Essere Chiesa Insieme" from the initial, more hopeful moment (which tended to mix cultures with the goal of reviv-

> At one point the group of teenagers stand in a circle on chairs. They are Edwin, Faraji, and Nadia. Regula and David take turns sitting with them. (Prayer meeting for the death of Nelly 5.1.2023. Protocol. My translation)

> [A]nd then the Sunday school (..). Sunday school absolutely mixed (...), colorful (..), is what like how to say, somehow represents us (..), represents us the most. (Int. Carlotta 1. My translation)

In his discussion of the secularization of Johannine love, Peirce posits *agape* (the Christian love) as a central evolutionary force (Campos 2019: 125). In this evolutionary dynamic, "the agapistic lover recognizes the independent life-trajectory of the beloved persons toward their own growing and evolving aims. [...] In interpersonal relations between friends – and between 'neighbors' in Peirce's sense of the word – *agape* [original emphasis] can function symmetrically – friends can love each other" (ibid). On the other hand, if we look at the divine nature of this kind of love, we notice that it can never be fully achieved (Cherry 2019: 157). By secularizing this divine nature, it becomes a form of love that has no conditions but is also not idealized: It is to love a person not only because some conditions have been achieved (ibid: 158). This kind of love includes the possibility of moral anger as part of demonstrating and communicating *agape* (ibid: 164). This happens because "truly moral anger in fact shows concern for the moral improvement of others, respects those others, and aims to reform and repair the moral community" (ibid: 167). *Agape* also has a social and psychological function, "because the practice of such love: (a) focuses more on assisting others than just the self, (b) enhances respect for persons and thus possibly would lessen injustices, and (c) thus may lessen the deep resentments that could possibly turn into revenge" (Enright et al. 2022: 234). Ethically this indicates an attempt to identify with the other person's point of view. It imagines oneself in the other person's life, in the other person's position, without having to fully adopt their point of view. It does not mean adopting the other person's perspective as one's own. It means considering the other person's standpoint and honoring the other person (Outka 1972: 311). An additional note: *Agape* is an important notion in the Waldensian church. In fact, *Agape* is the name of the Waldensian church's international ecumenical center in Prali, in the province of Turin. The idea for the center came from Pastor Tullio Vinay. Its founding values are reconciliation and reconstruction in an ecumenical spirit (it was founded in 1947, after the end of World War II).

Here again, parallels can be drawn between the philosophy of *agape* as eating together and the philosophy of *Langar*, which prioritizes openness and receptiveness and embraces a democratization of thoughts and gestures (Singh/Southcott/Lyons 2021: 5). As we have seen, however, this always occurs with some ambivalence.

---

ing the small evangelical church) to its encounter with various problems arising from living together at the grassroots level among communities.

3 Ecclesiological and Biblical-Theological Framing

The symbol of family is a weighty one. In the congregation we see the fictional language of kinship linked to sharing food. And: "Indeed, fictive kin are significant people who populate and enhance respondents' daily lives. Yet, even as they speak inclusively, the language of 'like family' is simultaneously a way of drawing in *and* [original emphasis] pushing out." (Nelson 2020: 134) The same goes for the commensality of eating together: It can be comforting to eat among kin, though it depends on the type of family bond. On the other hand, the same practice becomes perilous when those eating together are distant or strange to each other (Fischler 2011: 538–539).

Not surprisingly, in a zoom meeting of the church council I observed the following:

> Ida takes the word – the tone between serious and affectionate – and says, "Delia… we do what we can, but also: first come our loved ones… the loved ones to whom we are tied by strong bonds of affection… everything else comes later!" (Zoom Church Council, 11.26.2021. Protocol. My translation)

In relationships that are "like family" we are faced with relations that carry a different weight than those of family bound by blood or by right; nevertheless, there may be situations in which the fictive kinship acquires particular significance (Nelson 2020: 136). This is a condition of interrelatedness with more or less thick moments placed in an almost mantra. The concept of family as fellowship has a long history in Christianity: "The Christian fellowship as a family consisting of brothers and sisters was articulated and incarnated in dialogue with the cultural forces of a patriarchal society." (Sandnes 2003: 163) Different iterations of family as fellowship can be observed in the history of the church. What kind of familial relationship does this formula indicate in the context of this congregation? An initial attempt at an answer is seen in a Zoom lecture and discussion given for the *Evangelischer Bund Hessen*, presented by a prominent figure in the "Essere Chiesa Insieme" process (also at the national level) (January 13, 2022).[31] She indicated that she had been trying for a long time to become, as Paul says, like people of other traditions, but has realized that this is not possible. The great challenge for her, however, is to stay together with others without melding, because changing identity is not possible: It is a matter of balance. And indeed, we find an "us-them" perspective in the "family" congregation in Milan as well:

> All right, I'll be a decrepit old man in 30 years (..), though, I mean I'd like it to be gone, because every now and then there's still the we and the you (..), you know, I just wish there was we (.) and that's it (..). (Int. Davide. My translation)

The issue of balance remains. Here "bridging" people play a very important role, as we saw in the earlier examples. Not surprisingly, the structure visible in the practice of sharing food mirrors (often with the same people) that of shared community leadership. At the

31 Anne Zell: January 13, 2022.

institutional level, though, the language and the formal (rigid) structure creates barriers to this cooperation and hinders efforts to place everyone on the same level. The "important positions" in parishes, committees, and the national church belong mostly to the "Italian" members. This structure is dictated by power relations within the church and the inflexibility of church systems. This is a discussion that has been present at the national level since the early years (unfortunately, with few results). Giorgio Giradet raised an undoubtedly important issue when he said, already at the 2002 synod, that "we need to involve immigrants in the decision-making process; […] we should consider forms of self-certification to include immigrants in our lists; perhaps, he concludes, we have ´bureaucratized´ ourselves" (2002: 28. My translation). Valdo Vinay's insight is helpful when considering this aspect. Looking at the movement and diasporic nature of the Waldensians before the Chanforan synod of 1532, he proposed a congregationally oriented Presbyterianism for the Italian evangelical movement. This was to avoid small local oligarchies on the one hand, but on the other hand, to promote ecumenical bonding between different communities (1958: 45–46). The author had in mind a trans-denominational evangelical movement that would be united ecumenically, but these observations can also be applied to a trans-cultural evangelical movement.

As Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka remarks:

> [B]elonging as an emotionally charged social location combines (1) perceptions and performance of *commonality*; (2) a sense of *mutuality* and more or less formalized modalities of collective *allegiance*, and (3) material and immaterial *attachments* that often result in a sense of *entitlement*. (2011: 2; original emphasis)

In a complex, multidimensional society there are different levels of belonging including at the local, national, and transnational levels, as well as shared values, experiences, practices, and relationships that exist through contexts of allegiance. These connections and commitments generate affective forms of belonging and fluid, but persistent, forms of exclusion (Linkenbach/Mulsow 2019: 335). In a world where people navigate multiple contexts and these contexts affect their behaviors and practices, the following is observed: "The person presents her/himself as partible, as dividual, and this may allow a pluralisation or even a hybridisation of commitment and action." (ibid: 336) This happens here in the ethical-aesthetic dimension of conviviality. In the previous examples the individual and dividual dimensions of the subjects involved can be seen. Subjects, on the one hand, find themselves in the dynamic, foundational context of an irreducible and open relationality in space and time. On the other hand, they find themselves experiencing this relational context in a defined social reality and in certain practices and contexts, not always with an epistemologically clear concept of their dividuality (the ability to navigate different contexts with different forms of self-representation) (ibid: 339). This dynamic is not without forms of boundary and occurs in a context that must be analyzed carefully and without idealization. In a relaxed atmosphere, people experience, more or less consciously, their multiple ways of belonging through small moments within the communal practice of cooking and eating.

It should also be said here that *agape*, as seen in sharing food practices, produces "an environment of mutual understanding or, one might say, of sociability and personal

friendship" (Gräb 2019: 114).[32] But it also produces moments when the opposite is experienced: misunderstanding (see the clash of different cultures and related norms starting with what can and cannot be put on the plate) and boundary making. This leads to a fragile balance between belonging and boundary making. Indeed, as Nagel analyzes well in this volume, praxiologically, several forms of boundary making are observable, ranging from communicative to material (Nagel in this volume). Here we see dynamics ranging from *semanting positioning* ("us-them" perspective in the community as "family"), to *speech-acts of transgression* (whenever the family nature of the community is stressed, or speaking about the colorful Sunday school), or *demarcation* (for example through the characterizing narratives of people in need of the breakfast time, or when the narrative of the community as "family" is broken by the awareness that "first come the loved ones"), to *boundary interventions* (judgment about the food, which as we have seen is also a judgment of value and therefore an expression of authority), to *temporal, material manifestations of boundaries* (presence of groups, albeit porous, but still existing) that affect the ritual nature of this basic form of relatedness. The role (of mediation and translation), then, that the pastor plays in this dynamic of balancing encounters, cannot be stressed enough: Where identities do not dissolve, but instead, not without difficulties, "fraternal bonds" are created:

> In addition to the Methodist congregation, it was also important for me to see myself as a deaconess, so that I always had an eye on the social concerns of the people, that I did not only see them from the point of view of the soul or the psyche, but that I saw them holistically [...]. (Int. Elisabeth. My translation)

> [T]he mediating figure (..), the figure who tries to make sure that (..) there remains a space however of of of of non-collision, is the the pastor. If the pastor is not able to have this balance or it is not in his or her intentions to have this balance, and maybe he or she wants to let's say put a stronger stamp on it, or he or she just is not able to be a mediator, which can also happen, there in my opinion problems arise [...]. (Int. Rossella. My translation)

It is important to look at the biblical foundation of the church as a community of friends, found in John 15: 12–17. This precept is established by the relationship between Jesus and his disciples and, as Shin Sookgoo points out: "[T]he friendship between Jesus and his disciples is formed and sustained by personal intimacy and mutual trust (affection) which enable both parties to engage one another in frankness (15:15) and self-denying love (15:13)[.]" (2019: 187) This friendship is about a faithfulness that can go to the extreme (Zumstein 2016: 572). It means being part of a mutual dynamic of love that is based on being loved by Jesus (ibid: 573). From a theological point of view, these Johannine reflections are of some importance when considering commensality. The practice of sharing food is an example of how John's words can be differentiated. John speaks of an *agape* feast and the main point is that disciples are no longer servants, but friends. In an atmosphere of (structural and/or more or less constructed) friendship, the practice of eating together allows those who share in it to gain physical and practical knowledge. Different

32 For Wilhelm Gräb, this is Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher's vision of the church.

lifestyles meet (or clash) on the physical level through tastes and celebrations. It is precisely in learning to eat different foods, that would not usually be served together and that are unfamiliar, that one acquires increased bodily, physical, and technical knowledge. In this process, one acquires complex trans-cultural skills, evidenced in the challenge of balancing the different foods on a plate. Eating together is not primarily about theoretical knowledge, but about physical knowledge: It is a training of the animal nature; a training through taste, smell, and touch. After this training, we (both mind *and* body) are no longer the same. This fact situates the gatherings where food is shared in the congregation in direct correlation with the Holy Supper (also as referred to by Paul in 1. Corinthians 11:17-34). The community is thus participating in the Body of Christ. And: "The Body includes bodies that are complicated templates of power, oppression, healing, and brokenness themselves." (Fulkerson McClintock/Mount Shoop 2015: 41) After all, as Michael Nausner points out, echoing the *Orthopathie* (Orthopathy) that Theodore Runyon sees as a defining element of Methodist theology, experience is sacramental because it is based on feelings that convey God's action (2020: 167). In addition, Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff make us aware that the concept of the body of Christ in Paul's writing is three-dimensional: We have Christ's body, the people of God, and individual human beings or bodies. These three dimensions are so interconnected that it is not always possible to separate them. Yet these dimensions enable the community of believers in Jesus, the Christ, and each of its members, to experience transformation here and now (2007: 140–141). This occurs not only on the mental level, but also (perhaps mainly) on the physical level. At such gatherings, one can decide to attend, but also to self-exclude.[33]

4 Conclusions

What can be observed here is a process of being connected with different people through the practices of a semi-permeable congregation that is structured by groups. In this context, the dominant role of conviviality as interrelatedness consists of concrete practices of community "making". These practices try to stabilize a precarious balance between groups that oscillates between understanding and misunderstanding. The conscious choice to participate in a community of people with different backgrounds does not necessarily mean a conscious choice to mix, but to form "fraternal bonds". For these bonds to be possible, two elements are important: a narrative and people who act as bridges between different groups. These are people who have a practical and recognized authority in those groups and who have a capacity for mediation and translation (symbolically at the cultural level too). The interplay of key figures, conscious choice, and thick narratives support an ideal ("family-like") community in their search for balance, which, nonetheless, remains precarious (consider how COVID-19 affected this process).

Conviviality as interrelatedness cannot and should not be read in an idealized way, because structural differences remain at both the financial and economic levels and in

33 From a biblical perspective, reference is made to this topic in Luke 14:15-24. This text confronts us with a dynamic of inclusion that happens progressively: a gradual process of evangelization. It is also a rebuke to separatist behaviors in table fellowship (Adamczewski 2016: 163).

terms of power inside and outside the church. Moreover, the "family-like" relationship is indeed constructed and does not eliminate comparison with other dimensions of belonging: the "us-them" dynamic. At the level of atmosphere, then, a certain informality is helpful. This facilitates forms of friendship in the moment that, if placed within ritual forms and practices, can grow through interaction and bonding. With enough strength, these forms of interrelatedness can help solve problems that might be difficult to address in more formal settings. Sympathy and direct emotional forms of connecting, such as with hugs and smiles or with irony or through interpreting situations informally on the spot, can acquire much greater importance than might initially be thought. Shared stewardship of the community and the role of the pastor (as mediator, cultural translator, and holistic caregiver) are pivotal in strengthening these connections. Setting aside dreams of merging, the youth group, catechism group, and Sunday school produce institutional encounters from which more or less strong friendships and shared interests arise for the young people (who, however, are fewer and fewer).

Sharing food, as well as the narrative in which these practices are embedded and contextualized, show us concretely how conviviality as interrelatedness occurs. Finally, there is an implicit critique that a rigid European-style ecclesiology hinders forms of mutual understanding that can only arise from the grassroots up.

References

Abbots, Emma-Jane (2016): "Approaches to Food and Migration: Rootedness, Being and Belonging", in: Klein/Watson (eds.), The Handbook of Food and Anthropology, pp. 115–132.

Adamczewski, Bartosz (2016): The Gospel of Luke: A Hypertextual Commentary, Frankfurt am Main, Bern, Bruxelles, Belgien, New York, Oxford, Warszawa, Wien: Peter Lang Edition.

Ahmed, Sara (2012): On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life, Durham, London: Duke University Press.

Badiou, Alain (2019): "Che cosa deve significare 'rapporto sessuale' per poter affermare che non c'è?", in: Federico Leoni/Lippi Silvia (eds.), Alain Badiou. Il sesso, l'amore, Milano, Udine: Mimesis / Studi di Psicoanalisi, pp. 9–19.

Bernardini, Eugenio (2013): "Essere chiesa insieme: Appunti del Moderatore.", April 28, 2023 (Chiesa Valdese Unione delle chiese metodiste e valdesi, https://www.chiesavaldese.org/aria_articles.php?ref=30#).

Bieler, Andrea/Kunz, Katherine (2019): "Responding to the Loss of Home: Perspectives and Practices of Refugees in the Context of Projekt DA-SEIN in Basel (Switzerland)", in: Andrea Bieler/Isolde Karle/HyeRan Kim-Cragg et al. (eds.), Religion and Migration: Negotiating Hospitality, Agency and Vulnerability, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, pp. 133–146.

Bieler, Andrea/Schottroff, Luise (2007): The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread, & Resurrection, Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Boisvert, Raymond D. (2014): I Eat, Therefore I Think: Food and Philosophy, London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre (2013): "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste", in: van Esterik/Counihan (eds.), Food and Culture, pp. 31–39.

Burkhardt, Friedemann (2018): "Interkulturelle Kirchen- und Gemeindeentwicklung: Überlegungen zur Aufnahme des Aspekts der Interkulturalität in die Debatte um eine Zukuftsfähige Kirchentheorie.", In: Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche (ZThK) 2, pp. 209–227.

Campos, Daniel G. (2019): "Eros and Agape in Interpersonal Relationships: Plato, Emerson, and Pierce", in: Martin (ed.), The Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy, pp. 116–127.

Cherry, Myisha (2019): "Love, Anger, and Racial Injustice", in: Martin (ed.), The Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy, pp. 157–168.

Danesi, Giada (2018): "A Cross-Cultural Approach to Eating Together: Practices of Commensality among French, German and Spanish Young Adults.", In: Social Science Information 57, pp. 99–120.

Diaconu, Mădălina (2006): "Reflections on an Aesthetics of Touch, Smell and Taste." In: Contemporary Aesthetics, pp. 1–14.

Enright, Robert D./Wang Xu, Jahe/Rapp, Hannah et al. (2022): "The Philosophy and Social Science of Agape Love." In: Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology 42, pp. 220–237.

Fischler, Claude (2011): "Commensality, Society and Culture." In: Social Science Information 50, pp. 528–548.

Fulkerson McClintock, Mary/Mount Shoop, Marcia W. (2015): A Body Broken, a Body Betrayed. Race, Memory, and Eucharist in White-Dominant Churches, Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1975): Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Girardet, Giorgio (2002): "Minute Transcribed Speech." In: Chiesa Valdese Unione delle chiese metodiste e valdesi (ed.), Relazione al Sinodo delle chiese metodiste e valdesi sedente in Torre Pellice dal 25 al 30 Agosto 2002, p. 28.

Gräb, Wilhelm (2019): "Individuality and Sociability in Schleiermacher's Concept of the Christian Church." In: Matthew Ryan Robinson/Kevin M. Vander Schel (eds.), Beyond Tolerance: Schleiermacher on Friendship, Sociability, and Lived Religion, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, pp. 105–118.

Heldke, Lisa (2013): "Let's Cook Thai: Recipes for Colonialism." In: Van Esterik/Counihan (eds.), Food and Culture, pp. 394–408.

Herzfeld, Michael (2016): "Culinary Stereotypes: The Gustatory Politics of Gastro-Essentialism." In: Klein/Watson (eds.), The Handbook of Food and Anthropology, pp. 31–47.

Kaplan, David M. (2020): Food Philosophy: An Introduction, New York, Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press.

Kaur Singh, Nikky-Guninder (2023): "Sikh Langar. Tasting the Transcendent." In: Yudit Kornberg Greenberg/George Pati (eds.), The Routledge Handbook of Religion and the Body, New York, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, pp. 345–359.

Klein, Jacob A./Watson, James L. (eds.) (2016): The Handbook of Food and Anthropology, London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi, Sidney: Bloomsbury.

Lederach, John P. (2014): Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians, Harrisonburg, Virginia: Herald Press.

Leinhäupl-Wilke, Andreas (2007): "Zu Gast bei Lukas: Einblicke in lukanische Mahlkonzeption am Beispiel von Lk 7, 36–50." In: Martin Ebner (ed.), Herrenmahl und Gruppenidentität, Freiburg in Breisgau: Herder, pp. 91–120.

Linkenbach, Antje/Mulsow, Martin (2019): "Introduction: The Dividual Self." In: Martin Fuchs/Antje Linkenbach/Martin Mulsow et al. (eds.), Religious Individualisation, Boston, Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 323–344.

Martin, Adrienne M. (ed.) (2019): The Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy, New York, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Naso, Paolo/Passarelli, Alessia (2018): I giovani evangelici e l'immigrazione. Una generazione interculturale (= Biblioteca di testi e studi, Vol. 1225), Roma: Carocci editore.

Naso, Paolo/Passarelli, Alessia/Pispisa, Tamara (eds.) (2014): Fratelli e sorelle di Jerry Masslo: l'immigrazione evangelica in Italia, Torino: Claudiana.

Nausner, Michael (2020): Eine Theologie der Teilhabe, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt.

Nelson, Margaret K. (2020): Like Family: Narratives of Fictive Kinship, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Outka, Gene (1972): Agape: An Ethical Analysis, New Haven, London: Yale University Press.

Pfaff-Czarnecka, Joanna (2011): From "Identity" to "Belonging" in Social Research: Plurality, Social Boundaries, and the Politics of the Self. Working Papers in Development Sociology and Social Anthropology 368. Bielefeld: Universität Bielefeld, pp. 1–18.

Pries, Ludger (2010): Transnationalisierung: Theorie und Empirie grenzüberschreitender Vergesellschaftung, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Rana, Navreet K. (2022): "Exploring Commensality in Sikh Foodways." In: Sikh Formations. Religion, Culture, Theory, pp. 1–10.

Reimers, Inga (2014): "Ess-Settings als Versammlungen der Sinne: Zum Problem der Greifbarkeit sinnlicher Wahrnehmung." In: Lydia M. Arantes/Elisa Rieger (eds.), Ethnographien der Sinne: Wahrnehmung und Methode in empirisch-kulturwissenschaftlichen Forschungen, Bielefeld: transcript, pp. 75–90.

Russell, Letty M. (2009): Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference, Westminster: John Knox Press.

Sandnes, Karl O. (2003): "Equality within Patriarchal Structure: Some New Testament Perspectives on the Christian Fellowship as a Brother- or Sisterhood and Family." In: Halvor Moxnes (ed.), Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor, London, New York: Routledge, pp. 150–165.

Schaefer, Donovan O. (2015): Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power, Durham, London: Duke University Press.

Schottroff, Luise (2000): "Holiness and Justice: Exegetical Comments on 1 Corinthians 11.17-34." In: Journal for the Study of the New Testament 23, pp. 51–60.

Singh Kanwarjeet/Southcott Jane/Lyons Damien (2021): "From Our Post Qualitative Kitchen: A Langar Meal of Knowledge." In: International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, pp. 1–16.

Sookgoo, Shin (2019): Ethics in the Gospel of John: Discipleship as Moral Progress, Leiden, Boston: Brill.

Tillich, Paul (1951): Systematic Theology: Volume 1, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tillich, Paul (1955): "Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God." In: The Christian Scholar 38, pp. 189–197.

Van Esterik, Penny/Counihan, Carole (eds.) (2013): Food and Culture: A Reader, New York, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Vinay, Valdo (1958): "Ecclesiologia Valdese ed Evangelizzazione." In: Protestantesimo 1, pp. 35–47.

Warmind, Morten (2015): "The Role of Food in the Life of Christians in the Roman Empire." In: Susanne Kerner/Cynthia Chou/Morten Warmind (eds.), Commensality: From Everyday Food to Feast, London, New Delhi, New York, Sidney: Bloomsbury Academic.

Werbner, Pnina. (2013): "Migration and Transnational Studies: Between Simultaneity and Rupture." In: Ato Quayson/Girish Daswani (eds.), A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism, Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 106–124.

Wimmer, Andreas (2013): Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Zumstein, Jean (2016): Das Johannesevangelium übersetzt und erklärt von Jean Zumstein, Göttingen, Bristol: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.