

The Value of Pearls: Biblical Reflections on the Eucharist

By Fr. Edward Owens, O.S.S.T.

Pearls have always been an expression of wealth, beauty, and love. Part of the human fascination with pearls is the fact that they rarely develop into the perfectly spherical gems of calcite or aragonite created by an irritant particle of sand in a mollusk. The scriptures offer several allusions to pearls. Job states that the price of wisdom is beyond pearls (28:18), and Matthew's gospel recounts the parable of the pearl of great price: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it" (13:45-46). The final book of Revelation describes the New Jerusalem as having twelve gates that are twelve pearls (21:21). The most enigmatic allusion is Matthew's saying about not throwing pearls to swine (7:6). To this particular teaching of Jesus at the Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:28) I now turn. Later I will reflect on the "pearl" as a motif for the Eucharist, particularly as white crumbs of bread broken and shared, and then offer some biblical-theological observations to inform our appreciation of this Year of the Eucharist.

"Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls (Gk., *margaritas*) before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you" (Mt 7:6). What do these paired admonitions mean in the gospel? As metaphorical language, they offer various levels of meaning that, when put together, become like facets of a diamond. We can appreciate each "facet" in its uniqueness, while also stepping back and marveling at the beauty of the collective "gem." In our stepping back to see richer meanings, I suggest that the biblical-theological meaning of "pearls" (*margari-*

tas) in the teaching includes an allusion to the Eucharist.

The first and simplest level of meaning comes across in the synonymous parallelism: do not *give* what is *holy* to dogs; do not *throw* your *pearls* before *swine*. We see parallels in give/throw, holy/pearls, and dogs/swine. This level reminds us that animals do not identify with things precious but simply anticipate food for their bellies or perhaps toys

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for play. Further, animals may trample and destroy things that only humans can appreciate and maybe even turn against the provider with dire consequences. In sum, no person with common sense would go against this teaching. One thinks as well of familiar aphorisms such as, "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth" (accept a present graciously), or "Don't kick a sleeping dog" (leave well enough alone).

On a still closer reading, dogs and

swine represent disassociating oneself with whatever is base, detestable, and not part of the accepted community. In the socio-cultural world of the Bible, dogs are mongrels that roam in packs, tear into unsealed garbage, and interbreed indiscriminately. Hence, the Philistine Goliath gnarls to David, "Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks?" (1 Sm 17:43). The Canaanite woman humbly presses Jesus to heal her possessed daughter because "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" (Mt 15:27). Swine were also the creatures into which demons fled at the exorcism by Jesus (Mk 5:1-20; Mt 8:28-34). Swine were indiscriminate scavengers, eating whatever slop is thrown in the sty. For Jews, and later Muslims, pork is unclean. In sum, such animals symbolize what is unclean, unholy, and, by extension, sinful and sometimes heretical.

Our metaphorical reflections now move to a more theological level. This level comes across by examining the combined motifs of holy things and pearls. The holy is intrinsically spiritual, cultic, and set apart; pearls are not so. Though a "mixed metaphor" in terms of logic and association, these twinned images still bespeak what is unique by its nature and deserving of undivided attention (cf. Mt 13:45-46, the pearl of great price as metaphor for the Kingdom of God). Thus, those who follow Jesus' teaching enjoy the spiritual wisdom to know what is holy, precious, and necessary to salvation. They protect and serve all that is holy, even with their life as seen in holy martyrdom. They do not desecrate it by imperfect worship or sharing it with outsiders, whether immoral persons or those yet not in communion with them.



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Still further, the motif of pearls relates more closely to the holiness parallel when these motifs are allowed to remain living expressions, i.e., arousing new and more immediate images in the mind of the thoughtful reader. Consider, for example, this quote from the *Didache* 9:5, "But let none eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptized in the Lord's Name. For concerning this also did the Lord say, 'Give not that which is holy to dogs.'" This Christian document from the late first or early second century alludes specifically to Mt 7:6a with respect to the holy. By extension, the Christian can readily associate pearls in Mt 7:6b with the Eucharistic crumbs of fractioned bread. These Eucharistic "pearls" (gathered thoughtfully and treated with reverence; cf. Mt 15:37, feeding the four thousand) belong to the baptized who share the one bread and cup. Those invited to participate must be brothers and sisters in good standing with the church community.

A Eucharistic understanding of pearls in Mt 7:6 needs still further nuances. How should the admonition be understood in light of the broader con-

text of Matthew's gospel? To begin, it is important to note that Matthew's special contribution to the fledgling Eucharistic theology is the intrinsic relationship between the Eucharist and forgiveness of sins: "For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28). The background for this emphasis on forgiveness in Matthew is the Suffering Servant in Isaiah: "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities" (53:5; see all of 52:13-53:12). Jesus fulfills the Suffering Servant's passion and also inaugurates the eschatological banquet: "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters . . . come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isa 55:1-2). Hence, casting pearls to swine, when read with Eucharistic meaning, must keep these perspectives in mind. The warning not to cast pearls to swine is not all about being exclusive of those undeserving, but also speaks to becoming inclusive of those who need to be taught about Christ or reunited with the fold after sinning. Forgiveness opens doors for the sinner (the metaphorical dog and pig) to come to the banquet. In Matthew's gospel Jesus says not at the Last Supper that his

blood is poured out for those forgiven but rather for the forgiveness of sins. This nuance is important to understanding Matthew's Eucharistic theology and our understanding of the Matthean warning not to cast pearls to swine. Again, as noted above, the Canaanite woman reminds Jesus that even dogs enjoy the scraps that fall from the master's table!

In this Year of the Eucharist, we are called to embrace the teaching of Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Ecclesia de eucharistia* that the Eucharist must be experienced and lived with integrity. Christian integrity includes attention to admonishing the sinner, while also being attentive to our own need of forgiveness. It also includes not simply focusing on those ineligible to share in the sacramental Eucharist but also looking into opportunities for inclusion and embrace. This inviting and inclusive "facet" of the metaphorical "diamond" of the Eucharist takes seriously the end of Matthew's gospel: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit (28:19).

The next time we receive communion and thoughtfully gather the tiny pearls of the host from the palm of our hand, the paten, or the ciborium, let us recall our forgiveness in Christ and pray that we will always be worthy to share in the Eucharistic sacrifice and the meal. May we be worthy of the New Jerusalem: "And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass" (Rv 21:21).



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