

St. Thomas' Spirituality: Thirteenth Talk: Poetry: O Esca Viatorum

Thomas wrote this hymn for Holy Communion itself, or for the receiving of the Eucharist, as people went up, knelt down, received, and gave thanks. People have continued this tradition to the present.

O esca viatorum	O Food of Life Eternal	Literal translation
O esca viatorum!	O food of life eternal!	O food of life!
O panis angelorum!	O bread of choirs supernal!	O bread of angels!
O manna coelitum!	O manna from on high!	O manna of heaven!
Esurientes ciba,	Fill all that hunger for thee;	Feed all the hungry,
Dulcedine non priva,	To seekers, who adore thee,	Don't deprive the sweetness
Concorda quarerentium.	Thy sweetness ne'er deny.	From hearts that seek you.
O lympha, fons amoris!	We seek thy holy dwelling,	O clear spring, font of love!
Qui puro Salvatoris	O fount of love, outwelling	Which of the pure Savior
E corde profluis:	From Jesus' tender heart;	From heart gushes;
Te sitientes pota!	Lord, bring thy cup of healing	The thirsty drink you!
Haec sola nostra vota,	To all before thee kneeling;	This one, our vow,
His una sufficis!	Our hope, our life thou art.	This one suffices!
O Iesu, tuum vultum,	O Jesus, Savior tender,	O Jesus, your countenance,
Quem colimus occultum	To thee, the Bread, we render	Which dwells for us hidden
Sub panis specie,	All reverence and all love;	Under form of bread,
Fac, ut, remoto velo,	Lord, lead our lives before thee,	Make as removing from cover
Aperta nos in coelo	To see thee and adore thee	Open us into heaven
Cernamus acie!	In vision clear above.	So we distinguish clearly.

Thomas shows us again that Jesus reveals Himself veiled, under bread. But our love for Him shows Him hiding so that we can receive Him fearlessly. Related to bread of heaven, nourishing the Israelites in the desert, Jesus Himself supports us. He feeds the hungry with sweet food. Since we long for God above all, and Jesus is God, He is the sweetest of all food. He sustains us with His own life. "I am the way, the truth, and the life." In the second stanza, Thomas relates the springs of everlasting life to the flow of Christ's blood as He died on the cross for us. Such poetry unites many themes, and synthesizes our main concerns. Christ's tender heart expresses His love. "Greater love than this no man has, than that he give his life for his beloved." All this exists for our union with God. We strive to see through the veil, and faith penetrates to see Him Who loves us. He attracts us with His love, having become like us, a man, so that we can get to union with Him in heaven.

Thomas wrote the following hymn for Matins of Corpus Christi.

Sacris Solemniis	Morning Hymn for Corpus Christi	Literal Translation
Sacris solemniis iuncta sint gaudia, et ex praecordiis sonent praeconia recendant vetera, nova sint omni Concorda, voces et opera	Let joy abound with us on every side, The sacred feast proclaiming far and wide; Come, let our souls, renewed in love, arise, In thought, word, action, purged and purified	Sacred solemnity joined are joys, & from diaphragm sound cries they renew again, all are new Heart, voice and work.
Noctis recolitur coena novissima	We celebrate the supper of that night,	Night resumes the newest supper

Qua christus creditur agnum et azyma When Christ himself, the Lord of love and light, When Christ entrusted as lamb &
 Dedit fratribus; iuxta legitima Lamb and unleavened bread, gave to the twelve sacred bread
 Priscis indulta patribus. His body, and fulfilled the ancient rite. Gave his friends; legally joined
 Ancient rite of the father.

Post agnum typicum expletis epulis Our souls in joy receive his solemn word, After lamb satisfying banquet
 Corpus Dominicum datum discipulis The Lamb of God, Bread of Life, the Lord, Lord's body given to disciples
 Sic totum omnibus, quod totum singulis, His body broke and gave to each and all, Thus all for all, as all for one
 Eius fatemur minibus God's flesh by God's hand given at the Board. He was made small

Dedit fragilibus corporis ferculum, Thus breaking to the sorrowing ones the bread, He gave fragile body on dish
 Dedit et tristibus sanguinis poculum He took & blessed the chalice, & he said: He gave blood-chalice to sorrowful
 Dicens: Accipite quod trado vasculum "Take ye the cup and drink; this is my blood, Saying take the cup I give
 Omnes ex eo bibite. That unto man's redemption shall be shed." To all and drink it.

Sic sacrificium istud instituit, So did the Christ the sacrifice ordain, Thus he instituted this sacrifice
 Cuius officium committi voluit And gave his priests the duty to maintain Whose office he willed to unite
 Solis presbyteris, quibus sic congruit, The rite; 'tis theirs alone to take and give Only priests, who thus meet
 Ut sumant et dent ceteris. That love that ever shall with man remain. So that they can give to others.

Panis angelicus fit panis hominum; The bread of angels is to man restored; Bread of angels made bread of man;
 Dat panis coelicus figuris terminum; All figures end in heaven's sublime reward; He gives heavenly bread as end form
 O res mirabilis, manducat Dominum O wondrous thought the poor, the weak, the low O wonderful thing, he eats the Lord
 Pauper, servus et humilis. Feast on the body of the living Lord. Who is poor, servant & humble.

Te, trina Deitas unaque, poscimus, Thou triune Deity, to thee we pray, You triune and one God, we pray
 Sic nos tu vista, sicut te colimus Honored upon the altar day by day, Thus we see you, as we honor you
 Per tuas semitas duc nos, quo tendimus, Visit our souls, and by thy holy light By your narrow path lead us who stretch
 Ad lucem, quam inhabitas. Amen. Lead us to heaven, and be thy paths our way. To the light where you live.

Each poem has its original themes, and repeats many familiar references. Pope Urban IV ordered Thomas to prepare the liturgy, as a tribute to the Miracle of Bolsena. It occurred in 1263, when a German priest who doubted the reality of transubstantiation, saw blood flowing from the host unto the corporal. The host and the corporal still exist. The blood type has been determined from the stains, and the host has turned to human heart cells. This striking bit of evidence was not clarified until hundreds of years later. The flow of blood was enough to convert the doubting priest, and to inspire thousands of faithful.

In this hymn, Thomas celebrates the joy of union with Christ through the Eucharist. In this visible bread we receive the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Himself. This experience purges and purifies us so that we can advance further toward God. There is no better reason to rejoice in this feast. When Jesus gave Himself as the greatest gift, He fulfilled all the Old Testament shadowy previews: the abundant food in Eden, the covenant with Abraham, feeding the Jews with manna in the desert, the covenant with Moses, the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey, and the paschal lamb. All these symbols become real in Jesus at the Last Supper when He fulfills the rituals of the past, and establishes the new ritual. He is the promised Messiah, renewing His people with divine nourishment. This expression of God's love transforms us into Him by lifting us up.

So we rejoice in the third stanza because infinite God has made Himself small to be a human, so that we can relate to Him intimately. More intimately than we could ever conceive, since we eat His flesh. This personal union fortifies us to struggle on to complete union with Him in heaven. The next stanza celebrates drinking His blood. His disciples are sorrowful because he predicted His death. As St. John shows us in the Last Supper dis-

course, He tried to teach them that suffering is required for redemption. No other act will repair for sin. Blood must be shed. But Jesus gives His last drop generously, so great is His love.

Jesus invites others to follow Him by giving their lives for their beloved, and carrying on this sacrifice by becoming priests. These chosen, like the original 12, offer themselves to serve unto death. They consecrate bread, which by Christ's power becomes His body. They consecrate wine, which by Christ's power becomes His blood. This company of faithful priests keeps Jesus going, first, in the Mass, then in service to the Church.

This Church is not a group of powerful men, but the poor, servants, and weak. It encompasses all who work their way back to God together. This scraggly bunch receives the bread of angels, through God's overwhelming love, and grows into the body of Christ. Jesus taught us that God is one being, but a community of three persons. Thomas ends this hymn with praise for this Trinity of Persons, revealed by Christ, so that we can worship God as He is. Gone are images devised by men, and revelation sent by God takes their place.

As you ponder these hymns, remember that they lead us on into depths of mystery which we shall never finish. But every step that we take toward the ultimate mystery of God nourishes us. In the strength of this food, we progress ever deeper into God Himself. That advance is what Thomas provides us, reaching across 750 years to be our friend, teacher and guide.