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Denying Eucharist deepens our deprivation of God's presence

Jamie Manson | Mar. 5, 2012 Grace on the Margins

As painful as it has been to hear the story of Barbara Johnson, an openly lesbian woman who was denied Communion at her mother's funeral last week [1], I have been heartened by the national attention the story has received.

Those who read *NCR* are sadly aware that many Catholics, whether gay, lesbian, transgendered, divorced, cohabitating or pro-choice, have been either denied the Eucharist [2] or threatened with denial of the Eucharist [3].

But this story hit a nerve. Perhaps it is further evidence that the bishops' recent attacks on women's health or Rick Santorum's continued vitriol towards LGBT persons have left many of us raw.

Whatever the reason, the reaction to the Barbara Johnson story also suggests that lay Catholics have a deeper understanding of the power of the sacrament than clergy who claim to control it.

The story of Barbara Johnson reminds me of another powerful account of a lesbian named Sara Miles who came forward to receive Communion several years ago.

I read the story in Sara's 2007 memoir, *Take this Bread*.

Sara was raised in New York City by parents who were strictly atheist but also extremely cultured and well-read. After a formational stint as a chef in a Manhattan restaurant, Sara pursued her love of journalism and foreign travel, living for years in Central America and writing about wars that ripped through the land in the late '70s and early '80s.

In time, she formed a friendship with Jesuit Fr. Ignacio Mart'n-Baró, who, as many *NCR* readers know, was among the six Jesuits and two women murdered in El Salvador in 1989. Although Mart'n-Baró touched Sara's life deeply, she remained an atheist.

A year before Mart'n-Baró's murder, Sara became pregnant. She and the baby's father, Bob, made the painful decision to leave Central America and move to San Francisco to raise the baby, whom they named Katie. Eventually, Bob came out as a gay man and, a little later, Sara fell in love with a woman. Both couples settled in the Mission District of the city and shared the responsibilities of raising Katie.

About five years after Katie' birth, Sara -- still very much an atheist and completely unchurched -- wandered into St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church. The congregation was known for its commitment to reclaiming the Middle Eastern roots of the Christian liturgy. Massive neo-Byzantine icons adorned the rotunda, and the music was sung *a capella*. But they also practiced open Communion.

Not even knowing what "Episcopal" meant, Sara took a seat, listened and sang, feeling at turns peaceful, intrigued and ridiculous. Then, a woman minister announced, "Jesus welcomes everyone to his table." Sara

found herself moving along with the Communion line. Someone put crumbly bread into her hand and said, "The body of Christ." Then they gave her a goblet of sweet wine and said, "The blood of Christ."

"And then," Sara writes, "something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me."

"I still can't explain my first communion," she continues. "It made no sense. I was in tears and physically unbalanced: I felt as if I had just stepped off a curb or been knocked over, painlessly, from behind."

Much as Sara tried to explain away her experience as an emotional response to years of pent-up sadness or to the power of the music, she still could not shake the irresistible pull that Eucharist suddenly had over her.

But rather than following the typical path of becoming a church minister, Sara's role in the congregation took a different turn. Hearkening back to her early life as a chef, Sara felt God calling her to feed people. She began the endeavor of setting up a food pantry in the parish, which was met with much resistance from her otherwise cutting-edge community.

Sara's memoir details her work in setting up the pantries, but its greatest moments come in her expanding, deepening understanding of Jesus' teachings, especially about the holiness of sharing meals.

"The sharing of food was an actual sacrament -- one that resonated beyond the church and its regulations and into a real experience of the divine," she writes. "If I wanted to see God, all I had to do was feed people."

Today, Sara is responsible for the creation of more than six pantries throughout the Bay Area, and she is the founder of an extraordinary outreach program to the poor and sick at the very parish that first fed her.

Not surprisingly, the majority of her volunteers are not from the parish but are self-described "misfits": the poor, the drug-addicted, the mentally ill and the ex-cons who first came to the pantry to be fed. They are now the ones who feed the poor and marginalized.

Sara's book not only deepened my understanding of sacrament and church, but left me some terrifying questions: How many people would have gone hungry if someone had told Sara she was not worthy to come to Jesus' table when she first stepped into that church?

If Sara had not been shown the mercy and acceptance of being fed by the church, how many people now would live in deprivation?

How many of those "misfits" who were fed by Sara would have been deprived of the opportunity to experience God through the action of feeding others?

If Sara had been denied the Eucharist, how much more deprived would our world be of God's presence?

In the Gospel stories, Jesus never required that people repent or make a profession of faith before he would dine with them. He understood that God's transformative power works through an invitation to the table, not exclusion from it.

Jesus spent his ministry trying to convince religious leaders that they did not have the power to codify or control the encounter between God and God's beloved children. He lived and died trying to convince all people they were worthy to come to his table.

Yet the church hierarchy continues to treat the sacraments as a reward for conformity to doctrine, rather than as God's extraordinary invitation to a transformative encounter with love and mercy.

By turning away those who long to come to Jesus' table, the clergy denies the truth of the Gospel, which teaches us that no one can be estranged from or unworthy of the love of God. By denying the hungry the Eucharist, church leaders only thwart one of the most powerful ways that God becomes present to us.

But, thankfully, God is not subject to these vain, human attempts at controlling power that belongs to God alone. Perhaps no one knows this better these days than Barbara Johnson. She may have been denied the bread and wine at her mother's funeral Mass, but the outpouring of love, support and compassion that she has received has given her another powerful form of Communion.

Once again, the hierarchy is learning that any attempts to break the body of Christ only makes God's sacramental power stronger.

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