

“PLENTY OF FOOD FOR EVERYONE”: A BALTHASARIAN LOOK AT *BABETTE’S FEAST*

JACQUES SERVAIS

“Grace is not external to created being as love.”



“Like at the wedding at Cana,” affirms an old man at the extravagant French dinner in *Babette’s Feast*, “the food is not important.”¹ Yes, surely something more than drinking and eating is at stake in John 2:1–11. The same holds for the film itself, which, though it revolves around a seven-course meal offered to poor villagers, “is not a film about cooking,” nor is the dinner whatsoever “an end in itself,” as the Danish director Gabriel Axel makes clear in an interview.² But does all this make food and wine irrelevant?

1. Hereafter, where quotations in this essay are not footnoted, they are taken from the English subtitles of *Babette’s Feast*, directed by Gabriel Axel (2007, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment), DVD. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations in this essay are to works by Hans Urs von Balthasar (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln), published in English by Ignatius Press (San Francisco). All citations to Balthasar’s books from Johannes Verlag are from the most recent editions.

2. Gabriel Axel, interview by Jill Forbes, “Axel’s Feast,” *Sight and Sound* 57, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 106–07.

If they point beyond themselves, do they therefore disappear? At Cana, the Lord uses them as “signs” to reveal “his glory” (Jn 2:11), but this glory appears less as a scalding light, as it were, than a flickering candle, almost hidden. The Son of God settles in mystery among the festgoers, changing reality subtly from within: “the headwaiter tasted the water that had become wine, *without knowing where it came from*” (Jn 2:9). The spirit of love and forgiveness that blows suddenly among the guests at Babette’s banquet comes in a similar quietness, and indeed, the film itself demands to be viewed with an eye for mystery rather than analysis. “It’s a fairy tale,” Axel warns, “and if you try to over-explain it, you destroy it.”³ Based on Danish writer Karen Blixen’s 1950 story of the same name, *Babette’s Feast* is neither “about religion” nor “about cooking,” but rather “a series of portraits,” centered on one woman’s leaven-like effect on a rural Protestant community.

Instead of offering a schematic interpretation, this essay will take an extended *look* at the film, supported by Hans Urs von Balthasar, who shared Axel’s confidence in the unity between the spirit and the senses: “It is with both body and soul that the living human being experiences the world and, consequently, also God.”⁴

THE SEA AND THE VILLAGE

Babette’s Feast opens with vastness: a wide-open stretch of gray-blue sea, topped with pillars of cloud. We hear waves, small birds. There is neither land nor boat in sight. The horizon at the center cuts the image into two vertical planes: earth below, skies above. Then the camera gradually pans out, granting a first glimpse of the shoreline—mellow browns, yellows, greens against the blue: the colors of dunes and dried grass. Sea and dry land, too, are now divided. Then, slowly, with the shot still fixed on the horizon, a little cluster of stone houses comes into view, black and gray, with smoke wisping up from their chimneys. Here,

3. *Ibid.*, 106.

4. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, vol. 1, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 406.

a third separation occurs. And here, a rill of dissonant piano enters the soundtrack.

In this opening minute, we see the contours of various boundary lines woven into the fabric of the landscape itself: the horizon, the shore, the crisp outline of cottage roofs. Yet if the dissonant minor-key music is any indication, this separation also means *disharmony*. From the beginning of time, an unbreakable line has been drawn in the universe, a line between heaven and earth, between God and his creation. A dome of sky divides the waters above from the waters below (Gn 1:6), a strip of coast separates the “single basin” of sea from the land (Gn 1:9). “Heaven and earth have been created as distinct realms with a view to a drama in which each pole has *its own, proper, positive role* to play.”⁵ The creature cannot help but be at a certain distance from its Creator, but the relation in itself is symphonic. However, in this subdued prologue to *Babette’s Feast*, there is a hint of human sadness in the air—the sadness, perhaps, of man in his sin, cast out of Eden’s harmony.

Descending into the village, we see cod swaying in the breeze on a wooden rack, lit from behind by the sun. In the background, simple thatched roofs. In this nineteenth-century fishing village on the Jutland coast, tucked into a “remote corner of Denmark,” live the two middle-aged sisters Martina and Filippa. They walk together along a path between the cottages, smiling. Their white hair glows in the sunlight. Each knocks on a door—the plain houses of poor old men—and carries in a basket of food: bread and vegetable soup. Having taken their meal, the men smile and thank the sisters: “Tak.” These women, the narrator tells us, spend “all their time and almost all their small income on charity.” Their father had been a “priest and prophet, the founder of a religious sect,” naming the two girls after Martin Luther and Philipp Melancthon. “Respected and perhaps a little feared”—with a gravitas made clear by an austere portrait in the sisters’ dining room—this pastor has by now been dead for many years, and his flock, once great, has dwindled. A small group still meets for Bible study at the daughters’ home, gather-

5. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, vol. 2, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 187 (emphasis added).

ing together around a big unfinished wooden table, framed by undecorated walls. Like all fallen mankind, they know a certain “pressure in procuring the necessities of life.”⁶ Each one of the congregants is gray-headed by now, though their faces, despite the pale washed-out light, are warm with red and orange hues.

They sing a hymn together: “Jerusalem, my heart’s true home / Your name is forever dear to me. / Your kindness is second to none. / You keep us clothed and fed. / Never would you give a stone / To the child who begs for bread.” Shorn of luxuries, this remote Christian community looks beyond this world to the “Jerusalem above . . . our mother” (Gal 4:26), our “homeland” (Phil 3:20). They understand this celestial city to be “the height on which Christians live,” whose way of life must guide our own.⁷ Though the flock struggles with its life in the here and now—its pastor gone, its ranks falling away—they live in hope, but a hope that jumps readily over the present. It is hard for us to fathom, Balthasar notes, how realistically the claim that heaven is our homeland is meant, because “nothing seems more tangible to us than the contrast between an existence on earth and the existence in heaven that we hope for after our death. . . . [T]he appearance of our earthliness, better yet, of our sorrowful and guilt-laden existence, is so obvious that heaven fades into the future.”⁸

As the group sings around the table, a younger woman prepares tea in the kitchen and waits at the door until the song ends. At the last line—“the child who begs for bread”—she brings in the kettle, cups, and biscuits: rich reddish browns that, like the woman’s curly reddish hair, complement the room’s wood furniture, bringing out a new robustness in the shot’s calm blue color palette.⁹ The woman smiles and serves, going around the table. The group smiles. In this moment, they have received

6. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, trans. Sister Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 104.

7. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *You Have Words of Eternal Life*, trans. Dennis Martin (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 261.

8. *Ibid.*, 85.

9. Axel took visual inspiration from the paintings of Danish masters such as Vilhelm Hammershoi. See Mary Elizabeth Podles, “*Babette’s Feast*: Feasting with Lutherans,” *Antioch Review* 50, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 551.

their bread, in however small a way. This woman is *Babette*, the sisters’ “French servant,” discreetly present in this “remote, desolate place.”

THE SUITORS

To introduce *Babette*, the film descends into “the hidden regions” of these two “Puritan” sisters’ hearts. We see Martina and Filippa in years past: two radiant blonde-headed young women, dressed in coarse brown shawls. They walk through the hills with their father, headed toward the church. A few paces behind them, two young men stroll along in their Sunday best, hoping to catch a glimpse at church of the girls, who were “never to be seen at balls or parties.” When one of the men pays a visit that afternoon to the family home, he finds himself rejected outright by the pastor: “In this calling of mine, my two daughters are my right hand and my left. Would you rob me of them?” Martina and Filippa have been consecrated, as it were, to the service of their father’s supernatural mission and, following Paul’s advice radically, are to be spared the distractions of married life (1 Cor 7). There is no space for matrimony for women so occupied with things above.

Indeed, as the narrator explains, the entire congregation looks on courtship with a scoff, holding conjugal love as “an empty illusion.” They are not without precedent—“those who shall be accounted worthy . . . of the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor take wives” since they will not “be able to die any more” (Lk 20:35–36)¹⁰—but the community ignores an essential fact: man, still in this world, necessarily “lives under the law of the old aeon, for the state is not the Church, and the Church is not the heavenly Jerusalem.” Man cannot yet be “under the exclusive law of grace”¹¹ outside a special call. But this quiet little seaside village—so quiet, in fact, that we easily hear

10. Balthasar notes, “The causative ‘for’ of the preceding verse once again emphasizes the fact that man in his original state in paradise, where he was not subject to death, would not have married in the same way as ‘the children of this world marry’” (*The Christian State of Life*, 124–25).

11. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Tragedy Under Grace: Reinhold Schneider on the Experience of the West*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 131.

the setting of dishes on a table, the scraping of a spoon against a bowl—has its own ways, its own rules, quite set apart from the world outside. Such retirement from the mess of everyday life is no real solution: “The subject does not lead a private, withdrawn, aristocratic life in the world, nor is it at liberty to enter into contact with things at its own discretion.” “Its doors have always already been beaten down, and it itself has always already been dragged out into the work of giving form to the world.”¹²

Despite their modesty, Martina and Filippa’s beauty generates some turbulence, “upset[ting] the peace of heart and the destinies of two young gentlemen from the great world outside.” The first is introduced with the blow of a trumpet, a splash of military blues and yellows: Lorens Löwenhielm, a lieutenant in the Danish army. A smoking, gambling cut-up, he falls into debt, and his father sends him into reformatory exile at his aunt’s house in rural Jutland. There, galloping on horseback through the bright, hilly countryside, he catches sight of Martina with a pail of milk, sunlit and Vermeer-like there in the grassy landscape, and sees in her a “higher and purer” life. He pursues her, making his way into some Bible studies at the family home. But he does not quite find himself in paradise. When, for example, a girl drops a tray of water and biscuits, the group glares, and Filippa yanks away the tray, hissing at her. Then when Lorens himself almost chokes on a (presumably overdry) biscuit, the disturbance prompts an icy stare from Martina’s father. Indeed, “with each visit [Lorens felt] ever more insignificant” in the midst of this close-knit flock, unable to charm, unable to find a path in. He leaves one evening and, in a corridor out of sight, kisses Martina’s hand, with a stormy whisper: “I am going away for ever. . . . For I have learned here that life is hard and cruel and that in this world there are things that are impossible.” Here, as in Paul Claudel’s plays, love manifests itself at first as a dark force of nature, and Martina’s high radiance turns out to be a promise that cannot be kept.¹³ Going home, Lorens barrels decisively down the track of

12. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Truth of the World*, vol. 1, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 68.

13. On Claudel’s *The Satin Slipper* (*Le soulier de satin*), see Hans Urs von Balthasar, afterword [Nachwort zur deutschen Übertragung] to *Der seidene*

his military career, amid courtly glory. While he is dancing in the Queen of Sweden’s splendid royal ballroom, the two sisters prepare for bed one evening back in unluxurious Jutland. “Do you remember,” asks Filippa, “that silent young man who appeared so suddenly and vanished just as suddenly?” After a long pause, Martina, turning over on her mattress, replies simply, “Ja.”

After Lorens, there is another gentleman “from the great world outside”: Achille Papin, acclaimed French opera tenor and top-hat-wearing dandy. On a trip to the Jutland coast, he stumbles one Sunday morning into the little Lutheran chapel and finds himself dumbstruck by the voice of Filippa, singing a hymn. Seasoned in the music business, he instantly recognizes an extraordinary gift, a potential “diva” who could easily “have Paris at her feet.” Papin visits the pastor and offers music lessons to his young daughter Filippa, who—after a little hesitation over the Frenchman’s “Papis[m]”—takes to the music like a fish in water. With her clear, agile voice, she fulfills all of the tenor’s hopes, and already during the first lesson he cannot contain himself: “No one ever sang as well as you sing. You will be the only star.” Her face is expressionless. Later, when the dancing Papin kisses her during a duet from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*—whose lyrics deal with the misery of seduction (“‘Come then with me. . . . I’ll make you a great lady.’ ‘My soul weakens already’”)—Filippa asks her father neatly to terminate the lessons. Crushed, the singer departs for France by boat, and a blank-faced Filippa gazes at the living room floor, backed by wild violin. When she notices Martina watching her, she blushes, and quickly takes up her knitting.

The sisters never marry. Martina might have wed a temperamental young soldier, and Filippa might have fled Denmark for the scandals of the Paris opera, but instead, they live together in their father’s house, having taken it over after his death. These “two gentlemen from the great world outside”—Löwenhielm with his quest for courtly splendor, Papin with his sensualism, both in some way followers of “the flesh” whose wisdom is hostile to God (Rom 8:6–7)¹⁴—could find no place in the simple

Schuh oder das Schlimmste trifft nicht immer, by Paul Claudel (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1983), 342.

14. Cf. Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 455.

village. Seventeen years later, though, a stranger arrives at the sisters' doorstep, carrying a letter from Monsieur Papin, and she finds herself welcomed.

THE REFUGEE

A cloaked figure wanders through the village street at night, blasted by wind and rain. Reading around a table by candlelight, Filippa and Martina—gray-headed by now—hear a knock at the door. There across the threshold stoops a woman, bleary-eyed and drenched, her face sunken. They take her in, dry her forehead, and serve her tea, with a ceramic statue of Christ crucified behind them in plain view.¹⁵ The woman hands Martina a letter. “Madames”: it is in French; it is from Papin. With an antiquated elegance, he pays tribute to the long-lost “saint[ly]” sisters he had known two decades ago. Now a “lonely old man,” his adoring crowds have departed (“What is fame? The grave awaits us all.”), and he confesses that the sisters may “have chosen the better path in life.” With a flourish of hope, he addresses his once-pupil Filippa: “I feel the grave is not the end. . . . [In paradise] you will forever be the great artist God intended you to be.” In his humiliation, his gaze has by now shifted “from the apparent glory of the earth to the glory of the kingdom of God,” to take a phrase from the novelist Reinhold Schneider.¹⁶ A little spark of the New Jerusalem shines forth—though still in the future tense.

Papin introduces Madame Babette Hersant of Paris, whose husband and son have been murdered under General Galliffet during the 1871 siege (*la semaine sanglante*, as it would come to be known). She herself has only narrowly escaped with her own life and, having smuggled herself into Denmark on her nephew's trade ship, has nowhere else to turn. Powerless, stripped of her loved ones, Babette's suffering is, not unlike Mary of Nazareth's, one of “*letting happen*,”¹⁷ of accepting things trust-

15. Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 137–45, at 144.

16. Reinhold Schneider, quoted in Balthasar, *Tragedy Under Grace*, 74.

17. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Threefold Garland*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 97.

ingly as they come, radical though they may be. But “Babette can cook,” assures Papin, and if Martina and Filippa will receive this poor woman, she will serve them as housekeeper. Although they resist at first, unable to pay, they cannot bear to see Babette weep. They welcome her.

Immediately the housekeeper takes up her new post. Martina takes a codfish from the rack outside and teaches Babette how to cook the plain—very plain—village fare: boiled fish and ale-bread soup. When the Dane tells her to soak the stale bread in water, without any mention of herbs, spices, or even salt, Babette’s French countenance goes slack. (We will later learn just how seriously Papin meant that “Babette can cook.”) Yet she gives herself over to the lesson, reciting the Danish words along with Martina: “brød,” “brød suppe.” Starting from scratch, she submits herself with fallen humanity to “the painful duties of a servant.”¹⁸ However, Babette, in her sorrows, is not without joy. That evening, she eats her dinner (brown as mud) beside the window, watching the dusk fall over hills and wheat fields. It is as though the food, sober as it is, takes part in this strange serene landscape.

Signs of fruitfulness bud in the village: as Babette cleans the windows vigorously with a sponge, the sisters marvel inside at how much money they have begun to save since their guest’s arrival.¹⁹ In the next shot, Babette is out among the Jutland hills gathering herbs at sunset, sky streaked with violet and orange. Twelve years have gone by. In the kitchen, she tastes a soup on the boil and throws in a pinch—just a pinch—of spices. Babette walks down to the fish merchant, where she haggles out an excellent deal on cod. Later at the market, she chats with the grocer in Danish, and he speaks back to her, and even sings with her, in French: “*Au revoir, Madame Babette!*” There in the village on the North Sea, not only does Babette have authority in the marketplace (“She’s a clever one,” remarks one of the older women), but,

18. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, vol. 4, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, trans. Brian McNeil et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 102 (in reference to Gn 3:17ff.); see also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Light of the Word: Brief Reflections on the Sunday Readings*, trans. Dennis D. Martin (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 211.

19. Cf. Mt 25:22: “Master, you gave me two talents. See, I have made two more.”

hidden in her coarse dark Scandinavian cloak, she has steeped herself in the town's culture in such a way that little glimmers of her past and her colorful personality still shine through, visibly cheering the faces in the grocery. Is not this kind of assimilation the Christian's task in the world, analogous to bread making: "The yeast must be plunged into the dough; it must sink into it and disappear, in order that its power may be released and the dough transformed into bread."²⁰

With the arrival of Babette, sunsets make their first appearance in the film, and the village often takes on a new light. Lloyd Baugh describes this effect: "When Babette is outside, the grass is a rich green, the water deep blue, the sky, either bright blue or the warm orange and red of sunrises or sunsets."²¹ While a poor villager prays in his bed, thanking God for Babette and the almsgiving she has made possible, the sun bathes him in vivid orange light. While Martina and Filippa give calm spiritual counsel to a few friends, the window affords a view at the magnificent purpling sky. Still, there is a contrast between these glowing heavens and the hard reality below. Gathered around the dining room table for tea, the prayer group makes a ruckus. The salt has begun to lose its savor. The camera moves in close to sour, shouting faces accusing one another: jealousy, usury, adultery. "Little schisms," the narrator explains, have begun to arise. Without the unifying presence of the pastor, the flock has begun to scatter. The sisters try to keep order with a hymn—the standard "Jerusalem, Jerusalem"—but the noise only grows more intense. Finally, after Babette sets the crowd briefly aright, the sisters announce that the one-hundredth anniversary of their father's birthday is approaching; they want to celebrate it as though the pastor himself were among them, that is, in peace and unity. Would this be, then, a strictly heavenly event, afloat above the ugliness of the world? In another shot, while the villagers are marveling at the sky, Babette sits alone beside a candle, crying, as rain beads up on the window. Like perfume vapors rising up from a cracked jar, this celestial beauty that

20. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Engagement with God*, trans. R. John Halliburton (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 11 (translation revised).

21. Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 144.

the others experience takes form over Babette’s wordless suffering, a suffering that *hides* and, thereby, consoles.²²

THE FEAST ANNOUNCED

A letter comes from France. Babette, whose only connection with the homeland has been a lottery ticket, has won a prize: 10,000 francs. “Seigneur tout-puissant,” she gasps. The sisters congratulate her tensely, but immediately begin fretting over their servant’s presumed departure: “The Lord gave, and the Lord took away.” During a walk at the shoreline, Babette watches a gull soar over the waves, and she suddenly marches back to the house to make a request. Will Martina and Filippa let her prepare a feast—a French feast, “un vrai dîner français”—for the community, in honor of the pastor’s centenary? After a moment of surprise, they agree, but when she asks whether they will let her pay for the meal herself, they refuse. Babette rises from her seat: “Ladies, I have never asked you for anything. Hear my prayer today. It comes from my heart.” In her eyes, to let her serve would be a gift on *their* part, a gesture of love, and to this, they agree. Critic Alain Finkielkraut relishes the force of Babette’s humility here: “Thus placed in the position of givers instead of recipients, [the sisters] could not be so cruel as to disappoint [Babette]. Babette does not address them as *gourmets* but as generous souls. . . . They would have said No to any kind of benefit [but] they could not refuse a gift expected from them.”²³ In offering this meal, Babette will not count it as a sacrifice—a debt owed to her, as it were—but rather count it as a gift received, something that *she* owes. To really receive a gift, one must “bend the knee” before it.²⁴ As for the sisters, their generosity here remains one-sidedly active; later on, through their housekeeper’s meekness, they will learn that true generosity “requires an equally true receptivity.”²⁵

22. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, trans. Robert Nowell (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 72.

23. Alain Finkielkraut, “Le scandale de l’art. Lecture du *Festin de Babette*, de Karen Blixen,” in *Un cœur intelligent* (Paris: Folio, 2010), 235–51, at 243.

24. Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 214.

25. *Ibid.*, 46.

Beaming, Babette requests some time off to visit her nephew, the sailor in Frederiksberg, and not long after her return, a shipment comes in by sea: the all-French supplies for the French dinner.²⁶ It takes a team of village men, and a boy, to haul it all down to the house: several wooden crates, a plank-sized block of ice, a cage full of twittering quails, and—yes—a tortoise, dark, massive, and still quite alive. Half of the village watches this surreal procession as it passes between the houses. Excess, prodigality, waste, like Mary of Bethany with her jar of nard oil²⁷; a slice of the richness of being. When it all arrives in the kitchen, the sisters tremble. “Is that wine?” asks a nervous Filipa. Babette retorts: “It’s Clos de Vougeot 1845!” Martina backsteps cautiously out of the kitchen and that evening sweats her way through a nightmare in which blood-like wine, a serpent-like tortoise, and the decapitated head of a calf all burn together in hellfire, with Babette herself offering a poisoned chalice.

This threat of a “witches’ Sabbath” drives Martina to call an emergency meeting in the community. Firm, they assure her that they will set their faces like flint against this banquet, with its temptation to gluttony. At the meal, they will say nothing whatsoever about the food. Rather, declares one stolid woman, “[w]e shall use our tongues for prayer,” not for tasting. Indeed, “[i]t will be as though we never had the sense of taste,” another adds. They thus take Paul’s admonition quite literally: “Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food, but God will do away with both the one and the other” (1 Cor 6:13). Indifference for them at this point means utter neutrality, a disincarnate detachment, a dulling oneself, rather than a trusting readiness to plunge into creation.²⁸

The shot cuts to a wheelbarrow full of slaughtered chickens. In Babette’s kitchen, the colors are robust and varied. Carrots, tomatoes, jars of cherries and spices, wine bottles, bundles

26. Like the “capable wife” in Proverbs 31, who resembles “merchant ships,” Babette “secures her provisions from afar.”

27. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theology: The New Covenant*, vol. 7, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 425.

28. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Epilogue*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 36–37.

of greens, violin-brown baskets, spotted quail feathers. Director Axel lays emphasis on the cooking process and the materials, with particular attention to the animals. The camera moves in close to the slimy tortoise wheezing on the counter. Quails are plucked and sliced open. Pots boil, ovens smoke, stovetops flare, knives slice. Later, during the meal, Erik, a redheaded boy who serves as prep cook and waiter, will haul bottles, dishes, and cups, and Babette's face will squint in concentration over the delicate *cailles en sarcophage*, her hands carefully nesting stuffed quail into a pastry bed. With such heat and hard labor, this is clearly no otherworldly feast. Rather, it takes part in the *work* of giving form to the world, a proletarian toil that clears man's path to freedom in a universe jampacked with things, places, and people.²⁹

The sisters, in the meantime, quietly hang juniper wreaths over their father's portrait, lighting candles. A messenger arrives by coach and tells Filippa that a twelfth guest plans to come to dinner, General Lorens Löwenhielm of the Swedish Court, who happens to be on visit to his aunt, a devotee of the late pastor. Martina, at the news, merely sniffs a juniper branch. Trying on a monocle in the mirror, preparing himself for the dinner, the general meanwhile addresses his brash young self: "I satisfied all your desires. And where did it bring me? To vanity. You must prove to me that I made the right decision twenty-seven years ago."

THE BANQUET

The guests begin to arrive. In the living room, all dressed in black, they sing the usual hymn to dear Jerusalem. Indeed, in the film, the flock has not attempted any other song together since the pastor's death. Once the Löwenhielms reach the house, with the general kissing Martina's hand, the crowd moves to the table, which has been set splendidly: candelabras, napkins folded up like peacocks, fine porcelain plates with sea-blue borders, a set of crystal glasses of varying sizes, and, as table garnish, dried bunches of wheat over a snowy white tablecloth. The color palette is, in fact, quite restrained, corresponding less with Pari-

29. See Balthasar, *The Truth of the World*, 68.

sian splendor than with the hushed scenery of Jutland. Only the general's bright gold-trimmed uniform offers splashes of red and blue. The community prays together in the late pastor's words: "May the bread nourish my body. May my body do my soul's bidding. May my soul rise up to serve God eternally." As they take their first spoonfuls of turtle soup, they remember their oath of indifference and encourage each other, "[T]he food is not important." Eating out of concession to their earthly bodies and to Babette, whom they love, they worry that these riches will steal away their view of the true Jerusalem beyond. Yet they all eat.

Babette adjusts Erik's hair and sends him out to pour the wine. The guests—all—raise their glasses together and take a sip. General Löwenhielm immediately recognizes the excellence, blurting: "Amazing! An *amontillado*! And the finest *amontillado* I have ever tasted." In his connoisseurship, he is not unlike the "headwaiter" at Cana, who, "without knowing where it came from," wonders at the "good wine" served to the guests. Nor can the general help but comment on the unmistakable *Veuve Clicquot 1860* champagne, which foams up and settles in the cup like a sea wave crashing on the beach. Knowing that the general had spent time in Paris, Babette gives Erik precise instructions: fill each glass only one time per course, except the general's, which is to be filled as soon as it is emptied.³⁰ Echoing Mary, she notes what might be lacking, and she makes it a point that all have enough to drink. And to be sure, her intuitions are correct: Lorens empties his glasses quickly.

Little by little, the meal "mysteriously, miraculously" stirs up a new spirit in the community.³¹ Everyone eats, albeit wordlessly, and the atmosphere gradually relaxes. A soft melodic version of "Jerusalem, Jerusalem" drifts into the soundtrack. Like the disciples at Cana, the guests recognize in this "incompre-

30. Adrienne von Speyr notes such attentiveness in Mary, who, at Cana "as bride of Christ," shows a particularly womanly "eye for housekeeping and sees at once what is lacking. Without having to pay special attention, she instinctively feels the flow of events. And this occurs, not by virtue of a higher prompting, but because of her natural human femininity" (Adrienne von Speyr, *Handmaid of the Lord*, trans. E. A. Nelson [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985], 104).

31. Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 140.

hensible much-too-much” of a feast, this “foolish prodigality,”³² a sign of glory: the New Jerusalem that has begun to “descend upon us here,” as a hymn had petitioned earlier in the film. Over the *blinis Demidof*, they finally begin to talk—though not about the food; instead, they broaden the horizon. “I shall never forget my first meeting with the pastor,” one man says, “and the sermon he preached. I was a quarrelsome, depraved person. I have tried to become a good Christian.”³³ A bit later, a woman tells of an impassable fjord that inexplicably froze over one December day, allowing the pastor to fulfill his promise of a Christmas sermon in a chapel across the way. Another woman—an ex-adulteress, in fact—cites the first letter of John: “Let us remember what he taught us: ‘Little children, love one another.’” The whole table repeats together: “Little children, love one another.” Two old fest-goers, who had growled at one another not long ago, now laugh together and confess their mutual wrongdoings. Something new moves in the guests’ hearts: a kind of *confessional attitude*, a fundamental openness to truth.³⁴ Martina and Filippa glance around the table continually, smiling at their friends, eyes wide.

Martina and Lorens lock eyes and raise their glasses. “All we can take from this earthly life,” as one guest puts it, “is that which we have given away.” Three decades ago, after Lorens’s abrupt departure, Martina felt the bite of radical evangelical poverty, with its call to renounce not only earthly goods, but any exclusive human ties outside of those demanded by Christian witness.³⁵ The general, for his part, had “given away” the prospect of marriage, as did Martina, who took up instead a life of service to the poor. But here, as the two look at one another from across the table, something of the given-away love sprouts

32. Balthasar, *Theology: The New Covenant*, 424–25 [*Herrlichkeit* III/2/2, 398–39]. Cf. Balthasar, *Light of the Word*, 223.

33. Cf. “Adrienne’s Charisma,” in *Adrienne von Speyr und ihre Kirchliche Sendung*, ed. Hans Urs von Balthasar et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 173–82.

34. For more on this, see von Speyr’s statements in Balthasar’s *First Glimpse at Adrienne von Speyr*, trans. Antje Lawry and Sergia Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 176ff.

35. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, trans. Richard Beckley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 46.

up ever so slightly, like a grain that has died in the soil and begun bearing fruit (Jn 12:24).

Hidden behind the scenes lies another sacrifice. The scene regularly jumps to the kitchen, where the chef is continually at work among pots, baking sheets, and cutting boards. Babette unveils the culinary skills that she had kept hidden for so many years, and she does so not for politicians or generals (though a general is incidentally present), but for simple folk, who after the death of their pastor had, like those at Cana, so often felt a lack of “wine.”³⁶ As Alain Finkielkraut remarks, the culinary arts, “supremely useless,” can carry grace into the mundane act of eating, bringing together a wide array of guests and overcoming the contradiction between the material and the spiritual.³⁷ Like Cana’s “woman,” Babette, a servant—and a poor one—lets herself become the instrument of a wonder, leading the others to a mysterious Presence (“Do whatever he tells you”) rather than to her own goodness. As if signaling this “mission she has . . . undertaken,” notes Baugh, she wears a tiny gold crucifix that she did not have on when she first arrived.³⁸ Although her work is utterly meticulous—as we see in the moat of amber truffle sauce that she lays beside the *cailles en sarcophage*—in all this she, in a Marian attitude, “does not adorn or embellish herself.”³⁹ Seeking no appreciation, she will not appear in the dining room even once throughout the whole meal. True glory is adorned by God alone (Rv 21:2). Like at “the beginning of [Jesus’] signs,” the meal affords a glimpse not of the cook, but of God’s resplendent kingdom, made present on earth.

The festgoers continue to eat, and to look around at one another softly between bites. A magnificent swirl cake arrives, filled with rum sauce and surrounded by cherries. Then an overflowing tray of ripe fruit: grapes, red figs, papaya. Throughout the meal, Axel presents “an explosion of rich, deep and varied

36. Cf. Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, 62: “What is to be noted [at Cana] is Mary’s awareness of the need of the poor and her instinctive feeling that her son must know about it and can somehow provide help.”

37. Cf. Finkielkraut, *Un cœur intelligent*, 247.

38. Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 143.

39. Balthasar, *You Have Words of Eternal Life*, 139–40.

colors, of food, the wine, the candles, the crystal, and the striking red and gold colors of the dress-uniform of Löwenhielm.”⁴⁰ No one in the flock utters a word on the food—perhaps there is no need to—but their faces nevertheless glow. When the general tastes his *cailles en sarcophage*, he launches into a story. Years ago he had eaten at the Café Anglais in Paris, one of the city’s finest restaurants, with one General Galliffet. At the helm there was a renowned chef, a woman, who had invented the very entrée before them, the *cailles en sarcophage*, and who with her sublime cooking was able to transform a meal into “a kind of love affair” that left “no distinction between bodily appetite and spiritual appetite.”⁴¹ This masterful art corresponds with what Balthasar saw as man’s central task on earth: “[H]e is called to order and fashion the world according to his own nature with its unity of body and soul”; but this is no mere sensualism: “[A]t the same time he must look up to the God who is beyond the world, . . . whose transcendence he is to reproduce in himself as lord of creation.”⁴²

The general, like Cana’s headwaiter, does not ask the origins of this uncannily excellent meal. The opportunity does not arrive: Babette is entirely *effacée*⁴³; she waits hidden in the wings, Marian.⁴⁴ Lorens rises and offers a word to the table: “Man, in his weakness and shortsightedness, believes he must make choices in this life. He trembles at the risks he takes.” Shuddering in the background here is Lorens’s radical choice to leave Jutland and throw himself into his career. But he goes on: “No. Our choice is of no importance. There comes a time when . . . we come

40. Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 144.

41. Cf. Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, 187: “[Ephraim the Syrian] portrays a perfect existence that is simultaneously entirely sensual (earthly) and entirely spiritual (heavenly), the existence of Adam prior to the Fall; yet the latter is at the same time the eschatological Adam dependent on Christ’s saving act. This is a life in perfect freedom, of which we who are redeemed by Christ already have an anticipatory taste and smell on earth, through the Holy Spirit and the Church.”

42. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 265.

43. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 111.

44. See Adrienne von Speyr, *Handmaid of the Lord*, 104–05. Cf. Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 140: “She is open, discreet and respectful of all.”

to realize that mercy is infinite. . . . Everything we have chosen has been granted to us. And everything we rejected has also been granted. . . . For mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another.” A paradox: precisely where Lorens has made his gravest mistakes, *there* indeed do God’s peace and reconciliation flow forth like a spring. Goodness piles up in fulfillment—if not superfulfillment—of all that has been promised.⁴⁵ Here at Babette’s feast, there are signs of this overabundance and over-giving even on the material level: when the general asks for a second glass of red wine, he receives the entire bottle of the Clos de Vougeot. But more importantly, he has, in the subtlest way, gained back the love of Martina, who looks into his eyes from afar. As he departs that evening, he encounters her once again in the dim front corridor, just as he did twenty-seven years before. He takes her hand. “You must . . . know that I shall be with you every day that is granted to me from now on. Every evening I shall sit down to dine with you. Not with my body, which is of no importance, but with my soul. Because this evening I have learned, my dear, that in this beautiful world of ours, all things are possible.” If Martina played the part of an “unkeepable promise” (C Claudel) in Lorens’s youth, making life seem “hard and cruel,” here nearly three decades later the frustration transforms into an “eternal longing,” an “unquenchable thirst which, beyond the world, pushes him towards God.”⁴⁶

After eating the final course of fruit, the group moves to the living room for coffee. Filippa, at the piano, plays a new hymn, “See, hvor sig Dagen atter skynder” [See how the day rushes by again]—a song about the fast-approaching afterlife. They all listen, engrossed. It is as though this afterlife-to-come were, in a way, already here. The camera pans around the room slowly. Some call out to one another, “The Lord bless you.” An elderly couple kisses. By now, they have been taken in by a “spirit of humble, uncalculating devotion,” something beyond the merely “humanitarian.”⁴⁷ As

45. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Action*, vol. 4, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, 470.

46. Balthasar, afterword to *The Satin Slipper*, 362, 364.

47. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Who Is a Christian?*, trans. Frank Davidson (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 125.

the Löwenhielms’ coachman marches out of the kitchen, he thanks Babette for a great evening.

The party disperses. In the kitchen, Babette finally takes a seat and tastes her wine, dreaming. “We have seen his glory” (Jn 1:14); “he revealed his glory” (Jn 2:11). And here, as at Cana, this glory gathers people together like family (“After this, he and his mother, [his] brothers, and his disciples went down to Capernaum” [Jn 2:12]). The guests bless one another as they walk out the door, with some men laying arms on one another’s shoulders. “They leave the feast fully satisfied,” observes Baugh, “reconciled, united, and no longer fearful.”⁴⁸ They have found a new way of being with one another and of praising God. Outside, in the clear moonlight, they skip like schoolchildren and hold hands in a circle around the well, singing a carol—another new one—with full voice, before drifting home. If God’s *δόξα* is indeed among them, this glory nevertheless remains eschatological and will, as the villagers return to their boiled cod, be present only in the lowliness and hiddenness of everyday life. The song finished, Filippa watches the sky and observes that “The stars have moved closer,” with Martina prophesying: “Perhaps they move closer every night. Perhaps there will be no snow this year.”

EPILOGUE

Joining Babette in the kitchen, Filippa and Martina break their silence to thank her for a wonderful meal, one that will live on in the village’s memory long after she has left for France. But Babette has news: she will not leave. Moving to the dining room to clean up, she elaborates: “I have nothing to go back to. They’re all dead.” As for the money, it, too, is all gone, all 10,000 francs having been lavished on the feast. Babette makes a confession: she was once head chef at the *Café Anglais* in Paris, the very same restaurant, we know, where General Löwenhielm had eaten in rapture years before. Now it is clear just how much Babette has renounced in her years as the sisters’ cook: not only land and family, but world-class talents. This is true evangelical poverty, which manifests itself not only in relation to food, dress, and

48. Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 140.

other material aspects of existence, but in relation to cultural, professional, and spiritual goods.⁴⁹ In the unfocused background, through a small window, snowflakes fall.⁵⁰

However, this elaborate gift that Babette has made to her friends was not, she admits, solely “for love of them”—not altruism, but real gain. What has she gained? When Martina worries over Babette’s poverty, the chef steps forward and declares boldly, “An artist is never poor.” “A poet, like a king,” George Bernanos writes, “is at home everywhere. [He belongs] at the heart of things.”⁵¹ The artist opens himself to reality in all its richness, receptive to whatever comes offered. Poverty makes such receptivity all the more possible: “The poor are those who, lacking possessions, still have room to welcome God and his message joyfully.”⁵² Like Bernanos’s “poorly” built house left open to passers-by, Babette in her lack leaves space for the goodness of providence and thus, in great trust, “has everything and nothing all at once”: similar to the widow in Mark’s gospel who gave away her last pennies, Babette makes it clear that only the poor in spirit truly know how to squander.

Almost in tears, Filippa—an artist herself—rises from her seat to deliver the film’s final lines, taken from the letter of a fellow musician, Achille Papin: “This is not the end. In paradise, you will be the great artist God meant you to be.” Embracing Babette, she cries out, “Ah, how you will delight the angels!” But perhaps they are already delighted; perhaps Babette, in her hiddenness, is already great. With a piano and violin flourish, we turn to the window and see the snow falling just beyond. The barrier has fallen: “From earth to heaven, there is a distance (secretly already overcome); [but] from heaven to earth, there is

49. Ein Jesuit, “Arm um zu bereichern,” in *Adrienne von Speyr und ihre kirchliche Sendung*, 36–39, at 38–39.

50. Compare Adrienne von Speyr’s contemplation of the snowfall at her grandmother’s house: “[O]ne could see how night was very slowly approaching . . . and, like the snow, the night came down from heaven” (Adrienne von Speyr, *My Early Years*, trans. Mary Emily Hamilton and Dennis D. Martin [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995], 405–07).

51. Georges Bernanos, quoted in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Bernanos: An Ecclesial Existence*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 202, cf. 214.

52. Balthasar, *You Have Words of Eternal Life*, 170.

none.”⁵³ There before the snow-frosted window, a candle, lit on the sill, blows out. A little trail of smoke rises up, as if in answer.



“SEEING, WEIGHING, AND RECOGNIZING THE WHOLE”⁵⁴

Always fragmentary, film as an art form uses particular images—faces, places—to clear a path into broader spheres.⁵⁵ Films are always bound to be interpreted in various ways, being made up of images which, in their very nature, are open, pointing to the variegated totality depicted in them.⁵⁶ *Babette’s* gorgeous cinematography, with its at times stunning musical accompaniment—even if, as recordings, they necessarily break up the flow of movement—registers a rich and unbroken whole. Yet given the inherent incompleteness of the medium of film, with its limited frame rates and sound quality, this totality can be approached only through a certain trust on the part of the viewer, inaccessible by reason alone. More so than words, which are defined, images establish a subjective relation with the viewer by always requiring his participation, his involvement. Beyond any intellectual tradition, a Christian critic will recognize that he himself is rooted in a more basic experience, common to all mankind: finite reality that appears to the senses.⁵⁷ Abstraction only works

53. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Life out of Death: Meditations on the Paschal Mystery*, trans. Martina Stockl (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012).

54. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 17.

55. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele*, Bd. 1, 3rd ed. (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1998), 16–17.

56. “The image is not a concept abstracted from reality, for it is not possible to deduce anything eternal from what is contradictory and declining; nor is it without any relationship to reality (in the sense of the symbolism of ‘art for art’s sake’), since it comes from the power of the imagination, the fundamental power of the soul, which suffers because of its existence in time and history” (Balthasar, *Tragedy Under Grace*, 45).

57. “Ultimate knowledge cannot, for him, lie in turning away from that which is concretely finite (a movement which seems so natural!), but in turning towards the phenomenal existent (*conversio ad phantasma*) as the only place where the mystery of Being will shine forth for him who himself exists bodily and spiritually” (Balthasar, *The Truth of the World*, 146).

insofar as it aids this more elementary *appearing*. “What the *idea* of an apple is, that knows best the eye that sees it, the tongue that tastes it.”⁵⁸ Seen through the eyes of faith, these fragments of experience give access to the whole (*The Whole in the Fragment*⁵⁹).

“Images by themselves are nothing,” Balthasar contends, “and they inevitably need interpretation.”⁶⁰ The Word always wants to lead beyond himself to the Spirit, the One lying beyond the Word. This transcendence, though, does not mean apophasis. The Spirit, for his part, binds himself to the Incarnation. We understand him through images. Hans-Georg Gadamer asserts that we come to understand a subject only by approaching it through a series of “forecasts” or presuppositions,⁶¹ often anchored by our roots in a certain tradition, much as we ourselves are clearly approaching from a Christian tradition. However, this does not, as Axel remarks, make a purely “symbolic” reading acceptable.⁶²

It is natural that critical readings of books and films operate on assumptions. Several Christian critics, in offering a spiritual interpretation of *Babette’s Feast*, have read the film as a kind of allegorical drama representing the Eucharist, not unlike the sacramental plays of the Middle Ages.⁶³ We have not followed such a precise line of interpretation, which seems somewhat forced. Although Karen Blixen’s original 1950 short story makes

58. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Das Weltbild Hans Stockers,” in Hans Stocker, *Sakrale Kunst*, Bd. 3 (Zürich: NZN Buchverlag, 1957), 129–36, at 132.

59. This is the English title of a work by Hans Urs von Balthasar: *Das Ganze im Fragment: Aspekte der Geschichtstheologie* (1990).

60. Balthasar, *Tragedy Under Grace*, 174 (translation revised).

61. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004).

62. Forbes, “Axel’s Feast,” 106.

63. Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 137–45. The emphasis in this interpretation is on Babette as Christ-figure, particularly as a *woman* Christ-figure (part 2, chap. 2), but Baugh stresses here her “eucharistic role,” with the feast itself as a kind of climactic kenotic act. Along the same lines, Bishop Robert Barron, interpreting Blixen’s 1950 short story, writes that “the exiled cook is a figure of Christ” (*Eucharist* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008], 22). On the theatre as a self-actualizing eucharistic analogy between creation and redemption, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prologomena*, vol. 1, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 115–17.

Babette’s Catholic identity more explicit,⁶⁴ opening the way to a spiritual interpretation, director Axel understandably resists any dissection and does not offer any final, univocal answers on the film.⁶⁵ For our part, viewing the film with Christian eyes, we have tried to avoid the trap of taking Christianity as “an unclouded harmony of God, the world, and man.”⁶⁶



A LAST GLANCE

What moves Babette to pour out her fortune and her artistic energies on one single meal—a meal, moreover, for a poor, backwoods sect that could never fully recognize the technical mastery of her cooking? Is it affection? “It was not only for love of you,” she remarks. Is it honor? She hides from General Löwenhielm, the connoisseur. Is it “art for art’s sake”? She has not only created a masterpiece, but, spending all of her money, given away the possibility of a return to her motherland. If not these, then what? Her life, we have suggested, hinges on a Christian *mission*, one that awakes in her suddenly when a white gull soars over her at the beach. Babette throws all her being into this calling, for, in Balthasar’s words, mission is neither “devotion” nor “character” but a reality, and the Christian is meant to enter into this reality and become absorbed in it. In Babette, with her suffering in Paris and hidden tears in Denmark, the mission is rooted in abnegation and love (see 1 Cor 13), a love that stretches out beyond the flesh and overflows the banks of her affection for the village, made “world-embracing and universal” by grace.⁶⁷ Babette’s task does not consist merely in preparing world-class food for twelve guests, but in generating an atmosphere of light and warmth (“Come inside where it’s warm,” she says to the coachman) in which anyone might arrive and feel welcomed. “Don’t worry, Madame,” she assures

64. Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), *Babette’s Feast* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

65. Forbes, “Axel’s Feast,” 106.

66. Balthasar, *Prologomena*, 428 (quoting D. Mack).

67. *Ibid.*

Martina when an extra guest is announced, “there will be plenty of food for everyone.”

Babette, in reality, gives only what she herself has received. She builds with the materials given her. In preparing the snowy white table, decorated with dried plants, she taps into a tranquil beauty already present in the Jutland landscape—the neat stone cottages, the sun fading over golden wheat. In cooking the food, she uses supplies bought with money she has been gratuitously given, not money she has earned. In all this taking and giving, Babette exhibits a reverence for *creation*, which for her takes living form in the land and people she has more and more harmonized with these past twelve years. The miracle worked through her is worked on the basis of a nature already present, as is God’s wont. Grace is not external to created being as love, although it is not immediately identical with it. Grace presupposes nature. It does not perfect itself but perfects nature in which the revelation takes place. Grace, Ferdinand Ulrich explains, makes the light of created, over-substantial being appear in all its richness and sets it free. Babette has happened upon a *treasure* in “remote, desolate” Jutland and has sold everything for the sake of the blessed place where she found it (Mt 13:44).

Axel, an artist like Babette, shares the housekeeper/chef’s loving attention to the land and people, carefully composing and balancing every shot, including those of Papin and Lorens. Essential for him, indeed, is the human face: “In a film what I look for is the actor’s face. Nothing should detract from the actor’s eyes.”⁶⁸ The artist is called to let the glory of God shine forth through all the work’s inevitable imperfection. This glory, though, is not a formless wash of light, but has a *figure* [*Gestalt*], limited in space and time.⁶⁹ Axel seems to intuit this. Although the frame overabounds at times with food and courtly regalia, the director’s aesthetic in *Babette* takes a page from Dutch master Johannes Vermeer: “Nothing extraneous, only the essential.”⁷⁰ Yet a tension remains. In its finitude, film, like all

68. Forbes, “Axel’s Feast,” 107.

69. “Christliche Kunst und Verkündigung,” in *Mysterium Salutis: Grundriss Heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*, Bd. 1, ed. Johannes Feiner and Magnus Löhner (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1965), 704–25.

70. Forbes, “Axel’s Feast,” 107.

art, must give out unto a beauty greater than itself or else cease to be beautiful. “Either art is more than art,” stresses Balthasar, “or it is nothing.”⁷¹ And with Babette as our example, perhaps we can add: either art is *total gift* or it is nothing.

The spirit of joy and reconciliation breathed into the Jutland village is not Babette’s own doing; her small work takes part in something beyond her. To carry out a genuine Christian mission is to participate mysteriously in Christ’s own mission in the world. Babette witnessed the murder of her family in the Siege of Paris and, leaving the rubble behind her, arrived in Denmark utterly despoiled. The village that welcomed her was by no means ideal. She had to adapt to a new environment, an unknown language, integrating herself into a culture and religious practice fully foreign to her. In time, she discovered that this community was not without its own interior rifts and wounds. In the gritty, earthy process of fulfilling a real mission, there necessarily arose an “unlimited richness of dramatic tensions, conflicts, and collisions,”⁷² and the radical decision to lavish all her means on the feast, handing herself over to a broken community, brought upon Babette’s shoulders a full measure of the “light” burden that a Christian mission entails. In this way, sharing in Christ, Babette’s tiny, utterly finite task of orchestrating a good feast—and encountering plenty of petty resistance along the way—opens out into a tremendous prospect, vaster and more beautiful than the North Sea itself.



Is Babette, then, an allegory of Christ, a symbol? As J. R. R. Tolkien says of his character Gandalf, who rises from the dead: “[T]hough one may be in this reminded of the gospels, it is not really the same thing at all. The Incarnation of God is an infinitely greater thing than anything I would dare to write.”⁷³ Now that Jesus has dwelt among us, nothing can represent him, as could the prefigurations of Moses or Prometheus. Christ himself has fulfilled this role. Now

71. Balthasar, *Bernanos*, 196.

72. Balthasar, *Prologomena*, 68.

73. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Letter 181.

only *postfiguration* is possible.⁷⁴ The world's small dramas—whether on the scale of persons or nations, whether real or fictive, whether explicitly Christian or not—play a real part in the primal drama between God and his creation, whose chief actor is always Christ. After her epiphany at the beach, Babette lets herself be inserted into this drama, much, much larger than herself, for which God assumes final responsibility but in which she nonetheless has to take up her own role, under the mantle of the hidden “woman” at Cana.* □

JACQUES SERVAIS, SJ, is rector of the Casa Balthasar in Rome.

74. Balthasar, *Prologomena*, 321. “The connection with the primal image [of Christ] does not need to be made explicit, nor need the dramatist himself be aware of it: it is simply there, to the extent that the play is written from within a particular horizon of faith and consciousness. . . . [Through worldly drama,] we discern the primal Christian drama that is played between God and the world in the central figure of Jesus Christ. We have . . . termed this a *postfiguration*” (ibid., 117–18).

* This article is the fruit of various conversations with students of the Casa Balthasar (www.casabalthasar.org) after a group viewing of the film.