

Food fight

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 17, 2001](#) issue

Things seemed to be going smoothly on the ecumenical front at the beginning of the new millennium. Among many church-unity and church-amity signs was the year-ago burying of the hatchet by Catholics and Lutherans over the once-divisive subject of justification by grace through faith. True, the parties left the hatchet-handle partly exposed, since there still is some work ahead. But we had made real progress.

Then came countersigns like *Domine Iesus*, the Vatican's put-down of some Catholic theologians, all world religions and Orthodox and Protestant "sister churches," now to be downgraded to "daughter ecclesial communities."

If any of us thought that that would be the major setback to ecumenical endeavors, we had another think coming. *Domine Iesus* is for theologians to fight about. But the priesthood of all believers—which Vatican II makes clear Catholicism also affirms—is getting exercised about something in everyone's field of expertise: food. We suddenly have a cosmic food fight going on.

It started when a Tuscan priest, patristics expert Father Massimo Salani, blasted Americans of many sorts and Protestants of all sorts by stating, "The individualistic relation between man and God, started by Luther, is also reflected in the world of eating. Lacking the community aspect of sharing, fast food is certainly not a Catholic model." It is "the complete forgetting of the sacred nature of food," and it "reflects the individualistic relation between man and God introduced by . . . [you guessed it] Luther."

That great representative of Lutheranism in food, McDonald's, fired back in defense by noting that people can eat its products slowly and communally—that is, Catholicly. But McDonald's has a vested interest in defending fast food, so we move on.

The next volley in the food fight was the reminder by Barbara Crossette (*New York Times*, November 26) that the most globalized, fastest-growing fast-food product is not the Lutheran hamburger but Catholic pizza. "However American, [pizza] has

roots in Italy—Naples, to be exact.” So there, Father Salani, go gobble your salami-pizza in your lonely study, while we Protestants eat hamburgers in community.

Protestants, in community? Here is salvo number three in the fast-food fight: Vanderbilt professor Dan Sacks, a comer in the field of American religious history, especially in what is called material history studies, has just published *Whitebread Protestantism: Food and Religion in American Culture* (St. Martin’s).

Sacks has to note that grape-juice-in-individual-cups versus the “common communion cup” with wine, à la Jesus’ Last Supper, has troubled Protestantism and might make it sound as if Salani has a point to score against Luther and Protestants. But Sacks goes on to say, “For a lot of Americans, the reason they come to church probably is more for what happens in the social hall rather than in worship. They come for community, and very often community centers around food.”

Gotcha, Father Salani, you Counter-Reformationist food-flinging defamer! Sacks, remembering his childhood United Church of Christ “fried chicken, potato salad and Jell-O” church suppers, has, metaphorically, flung a pizza pie toward Tuscany in round three of the ecumenical food fight.

I’d comment more, but I have to hurry off to get my individual French fries to tide me over until the communal church supper tonight. That’s being ecumenical!