

On The Host in the Modern World

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Shortly after their arrival in the United States in the middle of the twentieth century, a community of Poor Clare Sisters from Cuba took up a practice that was by then common among many communities of women religious in the United States: baking altar bread for nearby parishes. At first providing their hosts to their local Diocese of Corpus Christi, they soon counted most of the parishes in nearby Austin among their customers as well. But just two decades after launching and expanding their altar bread ministry, the Poor Clares were struggling to stay afloat. A rapid increase in demand for eucharistic bread, intensifying calls from liturgical reformers for new kinds of bread, and growing competition from private business all put pressure on the sisters at a time when vocations to their community were already beginning to decline. Exasperated by the growing dominance of their largest competitor—Cavanagh Company of Greenville, Rhode Island—the sisters grieved their inability to compete in the rapidly changing market for hosts:

The Cavanagh Company, that big monstrous secular competition, began changing their breads. They made whole wheat breads. We learned to make whole wheat breads. They made theirs a fraction larger. We had a machine built that would cut them larger. They made theirs a little thicker, with a cross incised in the middle. We couldn't copy that. And they had the audacity to send samples and a price list to every parish in the United States! We were doomed. Priests started calling to say they preferred the "other" breads. Orders dropped. Our spirits drooped. . . . Obviously, *our* breads were no longer wanted.¹

Uncertain about the future of their labors, the community held a meeting to pray for guidance, a meeting that would ultimately lead to their decision to stop producing altar breads altogether. We

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“shook hands with the enemy,” they would later write, “and began buying Cavanagh’s breads, repackaging them as necessary to fill our church’s needs.”²

The fate of the Poor Clares testifies to a dramatic shift that took place in both the form and the fabrication of altar bread in the United States in the twentieth century. At the beginning of the century, host making was largely the domain of small communities of women religious who made small, paper-thin, white hosts that had been in use in the global West since at least the thirteenth century. By the end of the twentieth century, altar bread production had become the near-exclusive domain of a single private business that made and marketed an array of hosts to suit a wide range of theological convictions about the Eucharist.

Debates about the meaning and legacy of the Second Vatican Council have largely centered on close readings of its authoritative documents structured by a range of binary interpretative lenses.³ But recent scholarship has stressed the need for lived histories of the Council that take seriously the social, political, and religious circumstances that inevitably shaped its reception at the local level.⁴ The significance of Vatican II, argue Kathleen Sprows Cummings, Timothy Matovina, and Robert Orsi, is best examined “at the combustive points where the Council’s messages, aspirations, and fears, explicit and implied, intended and unintended met up most explosively with the particular circumstances of the modern world.”⁵ Among the many insights close-grained histories of the Council have the potential to disclose is the way in which lived practices—in all their ironies, contradictions, unpredictability, and contingencies—complicate tidy binaries about the relationship between the pre- and postconciliar church.

One of the most enduring binary interpretations of the pre- and postconciliar church is found in appraisals of the church’s relationship to the modern world. What precisely the Catholic Church has meant when it has evoked the “modern world” and “modernity” is far from univocal. Before Vatican II, as the church was increasingly forced to contend with challenges to its authority throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, “modernity” in ecclesiastical documents seemed to serve as a signpost for almost anything in the world that did not match an idealized vision of medieval Christendom: the secular state, religious pluralism, the privatization of religion, social fragmentation, totalitarianism, the individualism associated with capitalist economies, free scientific inquiry, materialism, modern markets, and more.⁶ The modern world was, in a sense, simply the world outside the church, and the church increasingly defined itself as a counter-society to that world. The documents of Vatican II represent a dramatic reappraisal of

the church's relationship with that same modern world. Adopting an attitude of solidarity and dialogue toward the world, *Gaudium et spes*—Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*—acknowledged with appreciation a wide range of modern achievements the church had previously rejected. In light of this dramatic shift in tone toward the modern world, an enduring interpretation of the shift from the pre- to postconciliar church is one that sees a church radically opposed to the modern world before the Council and newly open to engagement with it in its wake. Such an interpretation endures in part because of the nebulous understandings of modernity on which both ecclesiastical condemnations and embraces of modernity have relied. But even more, it endures because it fails to attend to the messy materiality of religious practice that has the potential to yield more complicated understandings of the church's relationship to the world both before and after the Council.

This article traces the contemporary history of the eucharistic host to argue that the materiality of Catholicism offers a distinct set of insights into the complex and even contradictory ways in which the church negotiated, resisted, and accommodated the modern world. Relative to accounts of the nature and substance of the host after its eucharistic transformation into the Body of Christ, scholars have paid little attention to the significance of the materiality and material processes on which that transformation depends.⁷ Drawing on archival work, writings from a range of early twentieth-century Catholic journals, and advertising campaigns for altar bread, I show how shifting theological convictions about the Eucharist transformed both the form of altar bread as well as how and by whom it was made. Long before the Second Vatican Council, efforts to increase lay reception of communion as a strategy to mobilize Catholics against the modern world had the effect of increasing demand for the bread on which it depended. After the Council, new convictions about the need for more intelligible liturgical symbols resulted in demands for a new kind of bread. But both before and after the Council, the practice at the heart of Catholic identity—the Eucharist—was deeply enmeshed in and dependent upon the structures of the modern world to achieve its ends, unwittingly contributing to the decimation of convent bread making and strengthening eucharistic dependence on a modern market.

Supply and Demand

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Pope Pius X reversed hundreds of years of eucharistic practice by increasing dramatically

the regular reception of communion among Catholic laity. While lay reception of communion was exceedingly rare from the thirteenth century forward,⁸ Pius unequivocally encouraged not merely frequent but even daily practice of receiving the Eucharist at Mass: “[T]he faithful should be invited to the sacred banquet as often as possible, even daily, and should benefit by its most abundant fruits,”⁹ exhorted the Pope in his 1905 decree *Sacra Tridentina Synodus*. “Frequent and daily Communion, as a practice most earnestly desired by Christ our Lord and by the Catholic Church, should be open to all the faithful. . . so that no one who is in the state of grace, and who approaches the Holy Table with a right and devout intention. . . can be prohibited therefrom.”¹⁰ Pius followed this decree in quick succession with a range of others intended to support and even reward the practice of frequent communion.¹¹ The increase in communion frequency among lay Catholics effected by Pius’s efforts is perhaps the most significant and enduring liturgical reform of the twentieth century prior to Vatican II.¹²

While Pius’s drive for more frequent communion reflected his own eucharistic piety as well as developments in eucharistic theology over the course of the nineteenth century,¹³ it also served as a vital strategy in accomplishing one of the central aims of his papacy: to mobilize the faithful in a rapidly changing world to oppose modernity aggressively. “[T]his practice, so salutary and so pleasing to God,” exhorted the pope, should “everywhere be promoted, especially in these days when religion and the Catholic faith are attacked on all sides, and the true love of God and piety are so frequently lacking.”¹⁴ Indeed, the rhetoric both of Pius’s campaign for frequent communion and of those who embraced it in the decades that followed was often deeply antiseccular.¹⁵ “Today we are surrounded by. . . enemies, bitterly opposed to our faith and eager to destroy not our bodies but our immortal souls,” wrote an American priest in support of Pius’s efforts to increase communion. “If the present century surpasses in many respects the godless and immoral age in which the first Christians lived, we ought to seek strength and protection where they did, at the Lord’s Table.”¹⁶ In a time when the very plausibility of the church was being called into question, the movement to intensify eucharistic reception served as an essential “defensive offensive” against modernity.¹⁷

In the United States, clergy responded enthusiastically to Pius’s efforts.¹⁸ The pages of U.S. ecclesiastical, pastoral, and scholarly journals in the early twentieth century are saturated with practical strategies to “multiply the number of Communion.”¹⁹ Reflecting on the challenges of ministry in the rural areas of his state, for example, a Michigan priest laid out a “Mission Plan” that offered

concrete suggestions for increasing reception that included everything from offering more convenient daily Masses to issuing personal appeals directly to individual parishioners.²⁰ An Indiana priest argued that celebrants could increase reception by being more scrupulous about the cleanliness of the vessels from which the Eucharist was distributed and the tidiness of the sacristy in which they were prepared: "How can [the people] avoid observing that the paten, which the server holds for them at Holy Communion, has not been washed for days and days?"²¹ Another cleric's suggestions included increasing reception by the priest being punctual: "How many communions are lost because Father so-and-so was late?"²² Pragmatic advice like this only begins the list of suggestions large and small from priests across the country dedicated to obtaining the "maximum number of Communions."²³

Catholic laity, too, mobilized to support these efforts. From the "Knights of the Blessed Sacrament"²⁴ to "Communion Gangs,"²⁵ a series of organizations emerged that turned their efforts toward increasing reception.²⁶ The "Frequent Communion Guild" in Chicago, for example, offered a three-tiered membership: the first for those who received once a week, the second for those who received twice a week, and the third for those who received daily.²⁷ The "Apostleship of Prayer" incorporated communion breakfasts as a means to draw more men to the table.²⁸ Even individual Catholic leaders played a central role in fostering increased reception. John O'Hara, the prefect and later president of the University of Notre Dame, for example, was the originating force in a tradition of daily communion at the university that endures to this day.²⁹ "By receiving Communion frequently you will be better men, better students, better athletes," exhorted the prefect.³⁰ For O'Hara as for many eucharistic organizations founded throughout the early twentieth century, reception of the Eucharist was a key strategy in helping young people—and especially young men—resist the dangers of the modern world.³¹

Yet despite such confident assertions, a frequent lack of clarity on what precisely in the modern world needed resisting lived in tension with the fact that an increase in demand for eucharistic bread stimulated by these efforts increasingly found Catholics turning to a modern, private, secular market to procure it.³² Eucharistic bread making had long been the work of communities of women religious that baked bread for nearby parishes.³³ But already by 1919, outside entities began to emerge in greater numbers to supply altar breads in the face of growing demand for hosts. "The inconvenience which many pastors find in having the hosts baked," said an article at the time, "has led to a new species of traffic by which the making of

altar breads is commercialized."³⁴ No longer solely baked within the confines of the diocese, hosts are now "baked in large quantities by religious or *others*, and distributed to vicars forane, deans, and pastors, who in turn distribute them to priests."³⁵ Within two decades of the launch of a decidedly antimodern campaign for more frequent communion, the baking of altar breads was on its way to becoming a modern commercial enterprise.

The commercialization of altar bread began to raise old questions about the purity of communion hosts in new ways. Concern about the adulteration of bread flour in Europe had preoccupied clerics since the late nineteenth century.³⁶ The Tridentine Missal of 1570 decreed that if altar bread was not made of wheat flour or if it was adulterated in any way, the sacrament was invalid.³⁷ Any adulteration, in other words, risked invisibly jeopardizing the Eucharist. Growing alarm about the theological implications of adulterated flour became so widespread that the Vatican's Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments was forced to issue a statement in response to them. The Vatican's statement chastised the "perversity of some dishonest merchants" who adulterated the flour used for the fabrication of eucharistic hosts with extraneous ingredients.³⁸ The preoccupations of the myriad articles that appeared in U.S. clerical journals throughout the first half of the twentieth century in response to these concerns can be summed up in the words of the Bishop Camillus P. Maes of Covington, Kentucky: "The very existence of the Blessed Sacrament is at stake."³⁹ As the "danger of commercial enterprise" in altar bread making continued to grow in the United States, such concerns only intensified, prompting calls for greater ecclesiastical supervision and regulation in the fabrication of hosts to safeguard the sacredness of the Eucharist.⁴⁰

Equally troubling to American clerics was whether or not commercialized bread was sufficiently fresh. Canon Law stated that the bread for the Eucharist be "recently made" and "frequently renewed. . . so that there is no danger of corruption."⁴¹ Since the sixteenth century, "recently made" had been interpreted as "weekly" and hosts were to be consecrated within twenty days of manufacture.⁴² But the emerging practice of purchasing bulk quantities of altar bread from an outside vendor once every two or three months risked leading to invalid bread:

In thus saving the individual priest the trouble of having his supply of altar breads made, there is danger of irreverence and invalid consecration, and, besides the rubrics of the Ritual and the prescriptions of Canon Law are violated. The

latter ordain that the particles to be consecrated be fresh . . . ; that is to say, they should be not older than a week or at most two. In like manner the Sacred Hosts are to be renewed frequently; that is to say, every week or at most two.⁴³

In a statement, the Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments explicitly rejected the practice. Priests procuring their hosts from vendors every few months, argued the Congregation, was a violation of Canon Law because the bread could not be considered to be “recently” made.⁴⁴

But demand and convenience ultimately eclipsed even the starkest statements from the Vatican on the matter; by the middle of the twentieth century, a burgeoning “altar bread industry” was already expanding. The pages of *The Ecclesiastical Review*—one of the most widely read journals for Catholic clergy in the early twentieth century—had long been filled with articles rejecting the bulk purchase of altar bread.⁴⁵ But already in the first decade of the second half of the century, the journal showed clear signs of softening to the practice. “We now have a process whereby altar bread can be kept fresh and incorrupt for months or even for years,”⁴⁶ wrote the editor in response to a question about the increasing purchase of hermetically sealed, mass-produced hosts. While he acknowledged a difficulty “from the standpoint of canon law,” he nevertheless argued that “by a reasonable interpretation of . . . Church laws, which supposed that the hosts were kept without any scientific measures for preserving them for corruption, we can hold that it is lawful to use hosts that have been preserved in the way described by the questioner.”⁴⁷ Indeed, the editor of the *Review* was giving cautious affirmation of a practice that was becoming the primary method by which American parishes procured their altar bread.

It is in this milieu that the seeds of the first large-scale private producer of altar bread in the United States were planted.⁴⁸ Worried about the toll the production of altar bread was taking on convents and concerned about the disrepair of their equipment, a priest turned to businessman, inventor, and liturgical artist John F. Cavanagh for help. Cavanagh agreed to assist and soon began servicing a wide range of altar bread-making equipment from across the country. Requests for everything from the sharpening and adjusting of hand cutters to the replating of baking plates testify to the urgent need for the new service Cavanagh was providing.⁴⁹ By the early 1950s, the Cavanagh warehouses were “crammed with mixing and baking machines from all over the country.”⁵⁰ Within a few years, he was not only repairing, but also adapting and

inventing new equipment of his own, converting waffle irons, humidifiers, mixers, and cutters into appliances specifically for baking communion hosts. Early requests for repairs of antiquated equipment soon turned to orders for new automated equipment that helped convents streamline production.

Seeing increased demand for altar bread throughout the 1950s and the inability of many convents to keep up with that demand,⁵¹ Cavanagh sought ecclesiastical permission to sell altar bread of his own. His bishop enthusiastically supported the request, delighted that “private business would be willing to take over this time-consuming task.”⁵² First selling bread to convents, Cavanagh Company was soon selling to church supply shops and parishes across the country. While many convents continued to make bread in the middle of the twentieth century, on the eve of Vatican II, altar bread was well on its way to becoming the primary domain of private industry. Even as the Catholic Church cultivated a eucharistic identity to better resist the modern world, the material at the heart of that identity had quietly become enmeshed in that world. Indeed, the bread on which the Body of Christ depended was now a product of it.

The Need for New Bread

Efforts to increase the regular reception of communion among Roman Catholic laity over the first half of the twentieth century were most fully realized in the years following the Second Vatican Council. The Council’s liturgical constitution, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), emphasized the fully conscious and active participation of the liturgical assembly as the “aim to be considered before all else” in the celebration of the Eucharist. And that full participation included especially the reception of communion: “That more perfect form of participation in the Mass whereby the faithful . . . receive the Lord’s body . . . is strongly commended.”⁵³ In the decades that followed the promulgation of the liturgical constitution, the Vatican consistently underscored the importance of frequent reception through a range of decrees to support the practice.⁵⁴ Frequent communion became one of the most successful and lasting reforms of the Council in the United States.⁵⁵

Yet, while the dramatic increase in reception of communion after Vatican II continued to fuel demand for altar bread,⁵⁶ it was demand for a new *kind* of host that would have an even more substantial impact on its fabrication in the United States. The gradual emergence of the host in the Middle Ages as the bread *par excellence*

for the confection of the Eucharist was accompanied by a drive toward an ever whiter, thinner, and smaller host to distinguish between the breads of everyday life and the bread that would become the real presence of Christ.⁵⁷ A short refrain echoed by a bishop in the middle of the fourteenth century condenses the clerical consensus around the ideal medieval wafer: "Christ's host should be white, wheaten, thin, not large, round, unleavened, not mixed."⁵⁸ Shiny, small, white, paper-thin hosts intended to melt immediately on the tongue that, by Vatican II, had been in use for hundreds of years, embodied that medieval ideal. But the liturgical reforms of Vatican II newly emphasized the importance of robust liturgical signs and symbols. The more intelligible the signs used for the celebration of the Eucharist, exhorted the Holy See, "the more surely and effectively will it penetrate the minds and lives of the faithful."⁵⁹ Reflecting this conviction, the first edition of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*—the ritual instructions for the celebration of the Mass that emerged out of Vatican II—emphasized that "the nature of the sign demands that the material for the eucharistic celebration appear as actual food."⁶⁰ Further directives from the Sacred Congregation of Divine Worship underscored the need for "greater authenticity" in regard to the "color, taste, and thickness" of eucharistic bread.⁶¹ If medieval hosts were meant to emphasize the otherness of the bread used for the eucharistic transformation, conciliar liturgists wanted just the opposite: a more *breadlike* bread that might better emphasize the connection between the bread of the Eucharist and breads of daily life.⁶²

Already well-established as a host maker in its own right by Vatican II, Cavanagh Company was uniquely poised to meet growing demand for new kinds of hosts. Mounting what was likely the first national marketing campaign for altar bread in ecclesiastical history, just two days after the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, in a letter to its customers Cavanagh announced that it was ready and eager to respond to the Council's call for a new bread:

You have undoubtedly noticed a new interest in the use of whole wheat altar breads. We believe that the growing interest in the liturgy has naturally brought into focus questions of the appropriateness of the altar bread in general use today.

Some question the propriety of a "bread" that is thin, unnaturally shiny and white—the inevitable result of a weakening over-refinement of most of today's bread flours, combined with false standards of perfection not associable with either the nature of bread or its baking process. Many agree that a strengthening of the sign is desirable.

Whole wheat altar bread is one approach toward an increase and more substantial matter. It is in effect the complete use of nature's product. Some consider this reactionary or extreme. Another approach that is not without traditional roots is the production of a thicker and larger size bread from a more substantial bread flour, a dull, less white bread—in fact, a more breadlike bread.⁶³

In the very same month in which the liturgical reforms promulgated the year prior were scheduled to take effect, Cavanagh Company placed its first advertisement in *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, echoing the language of liturgical reform:

For those who want a STRONGER SIGN we offer WHOLE WHEAT ALTAR BREADS or WHITE BREADS, thicker, larger with mat finish, made from a strong unbleached bread flour.⁶⁴

Marketing their breads with “ecclesiastical approval,” even prior to Vatican II, Cavanagh Company enthusiastically embraced the new signs of the times with the promise of “thicker, denser, more bread-like bread.”⁶⁵

Convents, however, were slower to respond, occasionally provoking demands from longtime customers for the same kinds of bread as those that Cavanagh was by then regularly marketing. In a 1965 letter to the Carmelite Sisters of Indianapolis, for example, a pastor pressured the sisters to make different hosts not only for him, but for all their customers:

We have tried the larger hosts for the people and they are far superior to the smaller ones. They are more suitable because they do get away from the fish-food-wafer character of the smaller host. They are much easier for the priest to handle. With no forewarning the people opened their mouths wide enough to receive the larger hosts. Now why don't you just get a larger cutter and supply us with these larger hosts? I am confident that if you would change to this larger size and even charge more for the hosts, both whole wheat and plain, the priests would be very [grateful] to you. It would not be necessary to ask them: they would be pleasantly surprised and commend you for your aliveness in the new spirit of the Church today. . . . We are going to change to the larger host. I do hope you will be able to supply them.⁶⁶

In a document about bread making in their community from the following year, the Carmelites dedicated an entire section to the

postconciliar demand for whole wheat altar breads. While the sisters acknowledged a “trend toward thicker and [larger] hosts for the peoples’ communion as well as for whole wheat hosts,” they nevertheless indicated that they were not convinced that the trend had caught on. But even more, they said, such hosts were more difficult and more expensive to produce.⁶⁷

Indeed, not everyone was enthusiastic about the “new-fangled” altar bread.⁶⁸ In a letter to the editor of a clerical journal about changes to the Mass, a lay Catholic expressed frustration about the emerging use of breads made from whole wheat flour. “I don’t think old associations should be uprooted,” wrote the questioner. “Communion tastes like graham crackers. It used to taste like God.”⁶⁹ In a similar inquiry to another journal, a priest noted that he had been increasingly encountering “brown-colored” hosts that seemed to him “very different” from the ones to which he was accustomed. “[T]hey are rather heavy and coarse, but the flavor is nice,” he wrote. “I’m wondering if this kind is entirely acceptable. The thinner white kind are much more customary.”⁷⁰ In response to the priest’s concern, the editor affirmed the validity of hosts made of whole wheat flour, noting both that they were growing in popularity and that they were more theologically appropriate than the “thin and ethereal white ones that just melt away in the mouth.”⁷¹ At first, he said, he did not care for the new bread; but ultimately he came to like the “solid, manly make-up of the heavier breads.” Reporting on his own anecdotal experiences as a chaplain, the editor noted that the young men he served “overwhelmingly prefer whole wheat” wafers.⁷²

A decade later, the slowness with which women religious were responding to such preferences became a source of growing frustration for reform-minded liturgists. A 1974 report from the Liturgical Commission of the Diocese of Providence, Rhode Island, lamented the fact that they believed the vast majority of U.S. parishes were still using “stark white, paper thin, often shiny and plasticlike” hosts.⁷³ Some of the blame for the continued use of the customary hosts, they argued, was the passivity of pastors who were too reluctant to make a change.⁷⁴ But they saved their harshest criticism for women religious. The reason most pastors accepted the conventional form, they argued, was “because that is what is being made or bought for them by the sisters,” who “exercise a general control of standards and quality.”⁷⁵ The problem, they claimed, is that the sisters were too reluctant to change:

Most of the sisters distributing breads feel obliged to maintain the pre-Vatican II pattern of “perfect” or “flawless” bread, a

situation which does not help in promoting a more foodlike form. . . . Many associate a more foodlike texture and color with “imperfection.” From habit they prefer the pure white, smooth, shiny form that will suggest the “bread of angels,” which some continue to think should be swallowed without chewing.⁷⁶

The solution, they concluded, was for diocesan liturgical commissions to offer specific instruction encouraging those who make breads to develop a more foodlike form: if a “haphazard and unregulated renewal is to be avoided,” it is only through “their *strong efforts that any implementation can be effected*”⁷⁷ Most sisters, they asserted, “prefer to await instruction to change rather than initiate a change themselves.”⁷⁸

While women religious struggled to keep up with both increased demand and intensifying pressure for new hosts, Cavanagh Company continued to innovate, automate, and advertise in ways that dramatically increased its share in a rapidly changing market. They created a custom wafer oven, a special mechanical stapler and roofing hammer, a unique dampening technique, and a proprietary blend of flour—all of which allowed them to make a thicker unleavened wafer with a sealed edge that prevented crumbling. The growing amount of wheat needed to produce such bread began to be sourced from one of the largest agribusiness corporations in the world: Archer-Daniel-Midlands Company, the same company that made mass-produced cookies, ramen noodles, tortillas, donuts, and bagels with the same wheat.⁷⁹ Cavanagh soon needed to expand, building a new, highly automated plant resembling a cookie factory that enabled them to double production in response to increasing demand.

The ecclesiastical approval for reception of communion in the hand in the United States in 1977 only further increased demand for the larger, whole wheat breads Cavanagh had been making and marketing for over a decade.⁸⁰ “When the option of Communion in the hand is allowed,” said Cavanagh just before the change, “many of our accounts have instructed us to change their order to whole wheat bread for the very sound reason that since people will now hold the host, it should have the appearance of simple, human food.”⁸¹ With a paradoxical brand promise of bread “untouched by human hands,” and resources that far exceeded the reach of small religious communities, Cavanagh Company developed a reputation for delivering a consistent product in a timely manner that reliably conformed to ecclesiastical standards. A decade after the close of the Council, the company was the largest baker of altar breads in the

world, selling over four hundred million pieces of bread a year. Vatican II, said the CEO of the company, “really changed everything” for them.⁸²

As business for Cavanagh Company boomed, bread making in religious communities began to decline. Even before Vatican II, many religious communities were struggling to keep up with increased demand in a time when vocations to their communities were slowing.⁸³ As bread making diminished in convents, Cavanagh made its bread available for them to sell to parishes, allowing such communities to serve as a kind of “clearinghouse for altar breads.”⁸⁴ A range of correspondences from the Indianapolis Carmelites reveals a near-constant consideration of whether or not to stop producing altar bread and simply distribute Cavanagh bread.⁸⁵ For some communities, distributing Cavanagh bread supplemented their own bread making; for others, it replaced it. According to one report, there were as many as five hundred religious communities making altar bread in the 1950s.⁸⁶ By the late 1970s, that number had dwindled to fewer than forty.⁸⁷ While the rise of Cavanagh Company was not the sole cause of the decimation of convent bread baking after Vatican II, the story of the Poor Clare Sisters of the diocese of Corpus Christi with which this article began testifies to the way in which Cavanagh’s ascendance made competition from most small communities who did try to stay in business virtually impossible. Indeed, as the president of Cavanagh Company once remarked about the company’s unique process of bread making, “We patented the process and kept out competitors to maintain a lion’s share of the business.”⁸⁸

The few religious communities that were still making their own altar bread in the decades after Vatican II were forced to do something they had never done before: compete for customers on an open market. By the end of the twentieth century, the largest religious supplier of altar bread was the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Clyde, Missouri.⁸⁹ Like Cavanagh, the Benedictines launched a toll-free number and a thoughtfully designed website, and began to offer an increasing variety of hosts from which to choose. They rejected the Cavanagh brand promise of bread *untouched by human hands*: “That gets my dander up,” said one sister of the Cavanagh slogan.⁹⁰ For the Benedictines, it is precisely the touch of their hands and their prayers that sets their bread apart from the Cavanagh bread: “For us, it’s the privileged work of our hands and a labor of love. . . . We welcome the opportunity to supply new customers with breads that are always accompanied by our prayers.”⁹¹

The Benedictines in Clyde have also been highly innovative in ways that helped serve emerging pastoral needs while also increasing

their own market share. For several years, the Benedictines received requests from Catholics suffering from celiac disease for a gluten-free host. Because Canon Law states that the eucharistic bread must be wheaten, celiac sufferers were in effect prohibited from receiving the eucharistic host.⁹² After experimenting with hundreds of batches of bread over the course of a decade, two sisters—one with a degree in biomedical science—created an altar bread made of water and wheat starch that became the first and, at the time of its creation, the only low-gluten altar bread approved for use in the United States.⁹³ The invention of celiac-friendly wafers boosted their business and forced Cavanagh to compete on their terms.⁹⁴ For several decades, the Benedictines at Clyde remained Cavanagh's largest competitor. But in the wake of the dramatic decrease in celebrations of the Eucharist during the COVID-19 pandemic, after 110 years of host making, the sisters have stopped the vast majority of their host production, now making only small quantities of their signature low-gluten host.

Over the years, marketing materials from Cavanagh Company have shown a keen ability to absorb ecclesiastical anxieties and respond to competitors. In response to longstanding fears about the adulteration of altar bread, Cavanagh assures customers that their hosts are "baked of only whole wheat flour and water, and are made strictly without additives."⁹⁵ Addressing concerns about the freshness of the bulk purchase of eucharistic bread, Cavanaugh began offering bread "now packed in VACUUM SEALED CANS" to ensure "absolute freshness even after many months in any climate."⁹⁶ In light of the desires of liturgical reformers for more intelligible sacramental signs, Cavanaugh guarantees that their breads are "superior in substance and sign value."⁹⁷ Concerning worries that thicker altar bread might crumble and therefore jeopardize the sacredness of the consecrated host, Cavanagh promises that the "carefully molded and sealed" edges of its hosts will "prevent crumbs" and that the packaging will prevent damage because it too has "superior strength."⁹⁸ Addressing the emergence of competition from Eastern Europe, Cavanagh warns its customers about potential imitations: "TO FEEL SECURE we suggest you determine the origin of your altar breads."⁹⁹ And in an implicit response to the Benedictine sisters' critique of Cavanagh's promise of bread "untouched by human hands," Cavanagh insists that "To Produce The Finest Altar Bread and Best Package, Technology, And Automation Are Important. . . BUT HUMAN HANDS REMAIN ESSENTIAL."¹⁰⁰ Indeed, nearly every debate about the communion host in the United States in the twentieth century can be read in Cavanagh Company's advertisements.

Cavanagh Company now holds an 80 percent share of the market in altar bread in the United States, selling breads of countless sizes and designs to suit virtually any denominational piety, liturgical preference, or theological conviction about the Eucharist. With a similar market share in Canada, England, and Australia, the company was once dubbed the “Microsoft of altar bread” and its owners considered to be in possession of a rare “recession proof business.”¹⁰¹ Whether or not Cavanagh’s profits are completely immune to wider market forces, swings in its profits are determined by a decidedly ecclesial economy. After September 11, 2001, as people returned to churches in large numbers, host sales spiked 10 percent. In the wake of the first widespread revelations of the cover-up of sexual abuse of minors in the Catholic Church, sales dropped by an equal amount.¹⁰² When Pope Benedict XVI celebrated Mass at Yankee Stadium in 2008, he offered sixty thousand Cavanagh wafers.¹⁰³ Within just a few decades of its foundation, Cavanagh Company became the largest supplier of communion hosts in history, with wafer sales in the hundreds of millions each year. Even the Benedictines in Clyde now distribute Cavanagh bread.

Conclusion

The relationship between the church and the modern world is one of the most enduring tensions in modern Catholicism in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. “It is not an overstatement,” writes Massimo Faggioli, “to affirm that this issue was the origin of a major rift in the interpretations of the council.”¹⁰⁴ In the first half of the twentieth century, papal writings consistently condemned the modern world in hostile terms, insisting that the “immutable doctrines” of the church could not be “reconciled with modern progress.”¹⁰⁵ In stark contrast, Vatican II articulated an openness in rhetoric, style, and tone that affirmed the ways in which the church learns and even profits from the world.¹⁰⁶ “The Second Vatican Council,” writes Joseph Komonchak, “can be read as the event in which the Catholic Church significantly reassessed modern society and culture and the attitudes and strategies it had adopted toward them in the previous century and a half.”¹⁰⁷ For some interpreters of Vatican II, the more positive attitude toward modernity found in its documents demonstrated an excessive and naive optimism that has resulted in a church that is overly accommodating to the world. For others, that openness has been a necessary affirmation of the living relationship between the church and the world.¹⁰⁸ Both those who reject that openness and those who affirm it have each in their own

way sought to transform the brokenness of that world.¹⁰⁹ And as the central source of Catholic identity, the Eucharist—both before and after Vatican II—has been a privileged practice in which Catholics seek to embody alternatives to the world as it is.

But however the church has articulated its relationship to the modern world theoretically or theologically, a lived history of the host shows the subtle yet persistent ways in which the church has been bound to that world. Before Vatican II, efforts to increase lay reception of communion as a strategy to mobilize Catholics against modernity had the effect of dramatically increasing demand for the material on which it depended—hosts—in a way that gradually decimated their production in small convents and strengthened the church's reliance on a modern market. After the Council, intensifying demand coupled with emerging theological convictions about the need for a new kind of bread that might better enable the Eucharist to penetrate the lives of the faithful contributed to the ultimate dominance of that market. In other words, both when twentieth-century Catholicism wanted to barricade itself against the world and when it wanted to lift those barricades, the material on which the practice at the heart of Roman Catholicism depended was subject to the pervasive logics, strategies, and processes of the modern market. Indeed, while contemporary reflection on the relationship between U.S. Christianity and the market has tended to focus on its more exceptional expressions in American Protestantism—from the creation and commercialization of Christian holiday celebrations to the rise of a lucrative evangelical book trade¹¹⁰—the contemporary history of the host reveals the ways in which Catholic eucharistic practices in both their “conservative” and their “progressive” manifestations are inevitably enmeshed in the material of the world in ways that outrun even the fiercest theological objections to it. Even more, the history of the host in the modern world suggests the ways in which tending not only to the texts but also to the materials of modern Catholicism might yield more complicated interpretations of the legacy and meanings of the Second Vatican Council.

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Notes

¹From an internet archive of the Poor Clares website, which is no longer active: Franciscan Poor Clare Nuns, “Altar Breads,”

April 5, 2001, <https://web.archive.org/web/20010414131715/http://franciscanpoorclares.org/altarreads.htm>.

²Franciscan Poor Clare Nuns, "Altar Breads."

³The twin impulses of the words used during the Council to describe its work—*ressourcement* (a return to the sources) and *aggiornamento* (bringing up to date)—implicitly and explicitly structured many of the early debates about its meaning. These interpretative lenses live on in a range of debates structured by a series of related categories: letter/spirit, center/periphery, particular/universal, tradition/reform, continuity/rupture.

⁴See, for example, Kathleen Sprows Cummings, Timothy Matovina, and Robert A. Orsi, eds., *Catholics in the Vatican II Era: Local Histories of a Global Event* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), ix–xxiii.

⁵Cummings, Matovina, and Orsi, *Catholics in the Vatican II Era*, xii.

⁶For background on the Catholic Church's nineteenth-century encounter with liberal modernity, see Peter Steinfels, "The Failed Encounter: The Catholic Church and Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century," in *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Policy*, ed. R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 19–21. For more on the Catholic Church's shifting relationship with modernity before and after Vatican II, see Joseph A. Komonchak, "Vatican II and the Encounter Between Catholicism and Liberalism," in *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Policy*, ed. R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 76–99; Joseph A. Komonchak, "Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism," *Cristianesimo nella storia* 18, no. 2 (1997): 353–85; James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); and John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2010), 54–55. On the distinctively American shape of this relationship, see Steven M. Avella, "The Immigrant Church, 1820–1908," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Catholicism*, ed. Margaret M. McGuinness and Thomas F. Rzeznik (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 44–46.

⁷This essay joins the wide body of literature from scholars in the study of religion that has emphasized the need for greater attentiveness to materiality in the study of religion. See, for example, Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); David Morgan, *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London: Routledge,

2010); Robert A. Orsi, "Everyday Miracles," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward A History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3–21; Sally M. Promey, *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014). However, relative to material reflection on Catholic devotional objects (like rosaries, scapulars, holy cards, statues, and holy water), scholars have paid comparatively little attention to the significance of the small and seemingly timeless objects—like communion hosts—that are at the very heart of Roman Catholic identity, many of which underwent significant shifts in the postconciliar church.

⁸Lay reception of communion was so rare by the thirteenth century that the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) required Christians to communicate at least once a year. While the first edition of the Roman Catechism following the Council of Trent encouraged the faithful to receive communion at every Mass they attended, an emphasis on spiritual perfection as a precondition for the reception of communion, a lack of clear allowance for the regular reception of communion in Roman liturgical books, and the later influence of Jansenism all contributed to the practice of lay reception of communion. For more on the history of the frequency of reception of communion, see Andreas Heinz, "Liturgical Rules and Popular Religious Customs Surrounding Holy Communion between the Council of Trent and the Catholic Restoration in the 19th Century," in *Bread of Heaven: Customs and Practices Surrounding Holy Communion, Essays in the History of Liturgy and Culture*, ed. Charles Caspers, Gerard Lukken, and Gerard Rouwhorst, trans. M. Schneiders (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1995), 119–43.

⁹*Sacrosancta Tridentina Synodus* (December 20, 1905), in Joseph B. Collins, *Catechetical Documents of Pope Pius X* (Paterson, NJ: Saint Anthony Guild Press, 1946), 46 (translation)/151 (original).

¹⁰*Sacrosancta Tridentina Synodus*, 47/151.

¹¹For a catalog of the many decrees that followed *Sacra Trientina Synodus*, see Roger Schoenbechler, "Pius X and Frequent Communion," *Orate Fratres* 10, no. 2 (December 1935): 62–63. Some of the incentives for more frequent communion included granting a plenary indulgence to those who received communion five times a week, relaxing the eucharistic fast for people who were ill, exhorting parishes to hold a yearly eucharistic Triduum to foster more frequent reception, and offering permission to distribute communion in private chapels to all in attendance. Perhaps most significant among these efforts was Pius's dramatic lowering of the age for reception of First Communion by declaring that children should receive the Eucharist as soon as they have reached the age of reason. See *Quam*

Singulari (August 8, 1910), in Collins, *Catechetical Documents of Pope Pius X*, 54–62 (translation)/158–165 (original). For several of the crucial texts as well as pastoral advice in support of frequent reception, see Jules Lintelo, *The Eucharistic Triduum: An Aid to Priests in Preaching Frequent and Daily Communion According to the Decrees of H. H. Pius X*, trans. F. M. Zulueta (London: R&T Washbourne, 1909).

¹²See, for example, Schoenbechler, “Pius X and Frequent Communion,” 59; Patrick O’Connor, “The Silver Jubilee of Frequent Communion,” *Ecclesiastical Review* 3, no. 6 (December 1930): 562–69; and James F. White, *Roman Catholic Worship: Trent to Today* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 84.

¹³Arguments for more frequent reception began to emerge in the middle of the nineteenth century. The most significant and influential advocate for more frequent communion was the French priest Louis Gaston Adrien de Ségur. See especially Louis-Gaston de Ségur, *La Très-Sainte Communion* (Saint-Sébastien: Éditions Saint-Sébastien, 2016), originally published in 1860. Papal encouragement for more frequent reception began to appear in papal teaching even prior to Pius’s decree and laid the foundation for it. See, for example, Leo XIII, *Mirae Caritatis* (May 28, 1902), 19, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_28051902_mirae-caritatis.html. The lack of specificity in Leo’s desire for “frequent” reception is likely one of the reasons why his call led to little widespread change.

¹⁴*Sacrosancta Tridentina Synodus*, 46/151.

¹⁵Joseph Dougherty, *From Altar-Throne to Table: The Campaign for Frequent Holy Communion in the Catholic Church* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2010), 86.

¹⁶Lawrence Lovasik, *Communion Crusade* (Saint Paul, MN: Radio Replies Press, 1949), 92.

¹⁷Peter J. A. Nissen, “Mobilizing the Catholic Masses through the Eucharist: The Practice of Communion from the Mid-19th Century to the Second Vatican Council,” in *Bread of Heaven*, 146. See also Dougherty, *From Altar-Throne to Table*, especially chapter 3: 81–110.

¹⁸For a thorough overview of the efforts to increase communions in the United States, see, crucially, Margaret M. McGuinness, “Let Us to the Altar: American Catholics and the Eucharist, 1926–1976,” in *Habits of Devotion: Catholic Religious Practice in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. James O’Toole (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 187–235.

¹⁹The phrase “multiply the number of communions” is from L. Lintelo, “The Preacher’s and Confessor’s Influence in Promoting Frequent Communion,” *Emmanuel* 13 (1907): 200.

²⁰Rupert Dakoske, "The Blessed Sacrament in Rural Missions," *Emmanuel* 33 (January 1927): 10–15.

²¹A. J. Rawlinson, "The Means of Promoting Eucharistic Devotion among the People," *Emmanuel* 33 (November 1926): 268.

²²Frederick A Houck, "Practical Ways of Promoting Frequent Communion Particularly among Young People," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 61, no. 4 (October 1919): 371–82.

²³"The Preacher's and Confessor's Influence in Promoting Frequent Communion," 200.

²⁴"The Knights of the Blessed Sacrament," *Emmanuel* 23 (1917): 38–39.

²⁵John C. Vismara, "Holy Communion Clubs," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 107, no. 5 (November 1942): 382–87.

²⁶Dougherty, *From Altar-Throne to Table*, 148–58.

²⁷Francis Cassilly, "The Frequent Communion Guild," *Emmanuel* 18, no. 2 (February 1912): 43–48.

²⁸McGuinness, "Let Us to the Altar," 195.

²⁹See Chapter 31 in Arthur J. Hope, *The Story of Notre Dame* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1948), <http://www.archives.nd.edu/hope/hope.htm>.

³⁰Quoted in Mark S. Massa, *Catholics and American Culture: Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day, and the Notre Dame Football Team* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 204. For more on O'Hara's "masculine" view of frequent reception, see Thomas Stritch, *My Notre Dame: Memories and Reflections of Sixty Years* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 23.

³¹See, for example, J. R. Newell, "Need of Holy Name Society," *Emmanuel* 24, no. 2 (February 1918): 41–49; and Lovasik, *Communion Crusade*, 92.

³²For statistics on increases on reception in the twentieth century, see McGuinness, "Let Us to the Altar," 197–98, 209–10, and 221; Joseph P. Chinnici, *Living Stones: The History and Structure of Catholic Spiritual Life in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 147–48; and Nissen, "Mobilizing the Catholic Masses," 150–53.

³³Some parishes also baked their own bread, a practice that gradually became untenable as reception increased. Advertisements for altar bread ovens and cutters were regularly marketed toward parishes and schools alongside organs, vestments, and other liturgical supplies. See, for example, P. H. Horan & Co., advertisement, *The Official Catholic Directory*, P. J. Kennedy & Sons (1916): 177; F. H. Bercker, advertisement, *The Catholic School Journal*, 17, no. 8 (January 1918): 374; and M. H. Dalediden, advertisement, *Tabernacle and Purgatory*, 29, no. 6 (October 1933): inside front cover.

³⁴"Renewal of Altar Breads," *The Ecclesiastical Review* 60, no. 5 (May 1919): 576.

³⁵"Renewal of Altar Breads," 576. Emphasis added.

³⁶A mid-nineteenth century pamphlet by a French Benedictine monk testifies to the emerging anxieties about the theological implications of adulterated bread flour. Subjecting hosts to a range of chemical analyses, the author warns of the risks of the adulteration of bread flour with alum, zinc, copper, potassium, magnesium, chalk, plaster, alabaster, pipe clay, bean, rye, barley, corn, potato starch, and more. Some of these elements, he writes, are used to improve the appearance of the bread, others to add weight to the dough, others to enhance its taste, and still others to save money. Worried that such adulterations risk imperceptibly invalidating the sacrament altogether, he offers a series of strategies for identifying them that range from immersing hosts in water to setting them on fire. See Pie Marie Rouard de Card, *De La Falsification Des Substances Sacramentelles* (Paris: Poussielgue-Rusand, 1856). Echoing these worries in a report on the altar bread used for the 1899 Eucharistic Congress in Lourdes, a concerned cleric calls such adulterations a "heresy even more radical than that of Luther." See M. Mermillod, "L'Œuvre Du Pain eucharistique," in *Congrès eucharistique International Tenu a Lourdes* (Paris: Secrétariat Général des Congrès eucharistiques, 1889), no. 57: 616.

³⁷"De Defectibus in Celebratione Missæ Occurrentibus," in *Ordo Missæ Ritus Servandus in Celebratione Missæ et De Defectibus in Celebratione Missæ Occurrentibus* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), 59–60.

³⁸"De Sanctissimæ eucharistiae specierum genuinitate et conservatione curanda ad Revmos DD. Locorum Ordinarios" (1901), in *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record Vol. XI: January to June, 1902* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1902), 77.

³⁹Camillus P. Maes, "Altar Breads and Wheat Flour," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 35, no. 6 (December 1906): 580. See also "Adulteration of Wheat Flour," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 73, no. 4 (October 1925): 397–410; "Pure Wheat for the Holy Sacrifice," *The Ecclesiastical Review* 58, no. 1 (1918): 70–74; "Proper Wheat for Altar Bread," *The Ecclesiastical Review* 97, no. 5 (November 1937): 496–97; "Flour for Altar Breads," *The Ecclesiastical Review* 110, no. 2 (February 1944): 145–46; and Francis J. Connell, "Theologian Points Out That '80% Flour' Is 100% Wheat, Suitable for Making Hosts," *National Catholic Welfare Council*, June 10, 1946, 1871–72.

⁴⁰"Adulteration of Wheat Flour," 398–99.

⁴¹Code of Canon Law, c. 1272, in Edward N. Peters, ed., *The 1917 or Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2001), 431.

⁴²See, for example, “Buying Their Altar Breads,” *The Ecclesiastical Review* 39, no. 4 (October, 1908): 441; and “The Question of Altar Breads,” *The Ecclesiastical Review* 40, no. 6 (June, 1909): 762–64.

⁴³“Renewal of Altar Breads,” 576.

⁴⁴*Acta Apostolica Sedis* (December 7, 1918), 8, <https://www.vatican.va/archive/aas/documents/AAS-11-1919-ocr.pdf>.

⁴⁵A point of clarification about the title of this journal: *The American Ecclesiastical Review* was first published in 1889. In 1906, it was renamed *The Ecclesiastical Review*. However, it resumed its original name in 1944. Throughout this article, I have used the name by which it was called at the time of publication.

⁴⁶Francis J. Connell, “The Preservation of Altar Breads,” *The Ecclesiastical Review* 135, no. 5 (November 1956): 344.

⁴⁷Connell, “The Preservation of Altar Breads,” 344.

⁴⁸Information about the Cavanagh Company throughout this article is informed by the following sources: Cavanagh Company website, <https://www.cavanaghco.com>; “Communion in Hand: New Altar Breads for New Times,” *National Catholic News Service Report*, July 7, 1977, 3–4; Citizens Bank, advertisement, *New England Business* 4, no. 1 (January 4, 1982): 4; John Kostrzewa, “Small Business Making It Work: Keeping It in the Family,” *Providence Journal*, February 9, 1995; Bob Jagolizner, “Cavanagh Co. Rises to the Top,” *The Providence Journal Bulletin*, August 22, 1996; Marja Mills, “Losing Touch,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 23, 1999, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1999-12-23-9912230051-story.html>; Mark Arsenaault, “Breaded Bliss,” *Boston Globe*, November 30, 2008, https://archive.boston.com/news/local/rhode_island/articles/2008/11/30/breaded_bliss/; Katie Zezima, “A U.S. Bakery in a Recession-Proof Business,” *New York Times*, December 25, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/25/business/worldbusiness/25iht-wafer.1.18918087.html>; Rowan Moore Gerety, “Buying the Body of Christ,” *Killing the Buddha*, January 3, 2012, <http://killingthebuddha.com/mag/dogma/buying-the-body-of-christ/>; Mark Hay, “The Surprisingly Cutthroat Business of Communion Crackers,” *Vice*, April 14, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/vvayeb/the-surprisingly-cutthroat-business-of-communion-crackers. Direct quotes from these sources are cited throughout the article.

⁴⁹See, for example, the following in Indianapolis Carmelites Records (CRM), Folder 38/27, Altar Breads—Correspondence—1959–1968, University of Notre Dame Archives (UNDA), Notre Dame, Indiana (Hereafter cited as CRM Folder 38/27): correspondence from the Prioress of the Indianapolis Carmelites to John F. Cavanagh Jr., May 30, 1959; correspondence from the Prioress of the Indianapolis Carmelites to John F. Cavanagh Jr., June

2, 1959; correspondence from the Prioress of the Indianapolis Carmelites to John F. Cavanagh Jr., 1962; correspondence from John F. Cavanagh Jr. to the Prioress of the Indianapolis Carmelites, February 9, 1962; correspondence from John F. Cavanagh Jr. to the Prioress of the Indianapolis Carmelites, March 30, 1962; correspondence from the Prioress of the Indianapolis Carmelites to John F. Cavanagh Jr., September 18, 1963; correspondence from John F. Cavanagh Jr. to the Prioress of the Indianapolis Carmelites, September 24, 1963.

⁵⁰"Communion in Hand," 3.

⁵¹The increase in reception of communion in the 1950s was driven by the rapid growth in the U.S. population following World War II alongside continued papal support for frequent communion—including especially Pope Pius XII's relaxation of the eucharistic fast in his 1953 decree *Christus Dominus*. According to logs from the Indianapolis Carmelites, the demand for hosts more than doubled between 1950 and 1960. See draft of a correspondence from the Prioress of the Carmelite Monastery in Indianapolis, Indiana, to Paul G. Fox, news editor at *The Criterion*, undated, CRM Folder 38/27. In 1950, they had twenty-eight orders and sold 1,5351,240 hosts; by 1961, they had fifty-three orders totaling 3,850,000. A hand-written note and a typed memo in the same folder both confirm these numbers.

⁵²"Communion in Hand," 3.

⁵³*Sacrosanctum Concilium* (December 4, 1963), 55, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

⁵⁴See, for example, Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei* (September 3, 1965), 66, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_03091965_mysterium.html; and Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Eucharisticum mysterium* (May 25, 1967), 37, in *International Committee on English in the Liturgy, Documents on the Liturgy 1963–1979: Conciliar, Papal, and Curial Texts* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982), DOL 179, no. 1266, 398. Perhaps the most practical step to support increased reception of communion was Pope Paul VI's reduction of the eucharistic fast to just one hour before reception which had the effect of essentially abolishing the eucharistic fast altogether, removing the last concrete obstacle to frequent reception. See Paul VI, "Concession, on the eucharistic fast," (November 21, 1964) in *Documents on the Liturgy*, DOL 272, no. 2117, 668. This teaching was affirmed in the Catechism of St. Pius X the next year. See *Documents on the Liturgy*, DOL 273, no. 2118, 668–69.

⁵⁵"The most notable positive change," wrote Andrew Greeley of Vatican II in 1977, "is an increase in the proportion receiving

weekly communion." Andrew M. Greeley, *The American Catholic: A Social Portrait* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 127.

⁵⁶According to the records of the Indianapolis Carmelites, for example, between November 21, 1964, and January 30, 1965, orders increased by almost twenty-five thousand per week. Document, "Altar Breads," October, 1966, 1, CRM Folder 38/27.

⁵⁷For the first several Christian centuries, a wide range of breads were used for the eucharistic offering. But by the thirteenth century, nearly all Western Christians received Eucharist in the same form: an unleavened host. For more on the history of altar bread, see Reginald Maxwell Woolley, *The Bread of the Eucharist* (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1913); Josef A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, vol. 2 (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1955), 31–37. For more on the emergence of the host as the particular form of bread ultimately embraced in the global West, see Aden Kumler, "The Multiplication of the Species: Eucharistic Morphology in the Middle Ages," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 59–60 (March 1, 2011): 179–91, <https://doi.org/10.1086/RESvn1ms23647789>; Aden Kumler, "Manufacturing the Sacred in the Middle Ages: The Eucharist and Other Medieval Works of Ars," *English Language Notes* no. 53 (Fall/Winter 2015): 9–44, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-53.2.9>; Martha Bayless, "The Long Life of Tiny Bread," *Folklore* 130, no. 4 (October 2, 2019): 352–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.2019.1632035>; Aden Kumler, "The 'Genealogy of Jean Le Blanc': Accounting for the Materiality of the Medieval Eucharist," in *The Matter of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logics, c. 1250–1750*, ed. Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2015), 119–40; and Gerald Ellard, "Bread in the Form of a Penny," *Theological Studies* 4, no. 3 (September 1943): 319–46.

⁵⁸D. Wilkins, *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae AD 446–1718*, vol. 3 (London: Sumptibus R. Gosling, 1737), 11. Translation from Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 39.

⁵⁹*Eucharisticum Mysterium*, 4 in *Documents on the Liturgy*, DOL 179, no. 1233 p. 398.

⁶⁰International Committee on English in the Liturgy, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, (Hales Corners, WI: Priests of the Sacred Heart, 1969), no. 283, 46.

⁶¹Sacred of Divine Worship, *Liturgicae instaurationes*, 5 (September 5, 1970) in *Documents on the Liturgy*, DOL 52, no. 523, 163.

⁶²See, for example, Diocese of Rhode Island, "Altar Bread Today: Statement of the Liturgical Commission of the Diocese of Providence, Rhode Island," *Worship* 49, no. 6 (June 1975): 360–65;

Frederick R. McManus, "The New Order of Mass: Part II," *The Ecclesiastical Review* 161, no. 6 (December 1969): 369–409. Some theologians emphasized the need for local bread bakers, a practice that never received widespread acceptance. See, for example, Joseph M. Champlin, "Breaking Real Bread," *National Catholic News Service*, Adult Religious Education Series, January 19, 1970, 3–4; and Joseph M. Champlin, "On Breaking Real Bread: Hosts to Loaves," *The Catholic Advocate*, October 7, 1971.

⁶³Correspondence from the Cavanagh Company, December 5, 1963, CRM Folder 38/27.

⁶⁴Cavanagh Company, advertisement, *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 150, no. 1 (January 1964): inside back cover.

⁶⁵Cavanagh Company, advertisement, *The Living Church* (June 4, 1967): inside back cover.

⁶⁶Correspondence from the Reverend Robert M. J. Minton, Pastor of Church of the Holy Family in Richmond, Indiana, to the Reverend Mother Superior, December 9, 1965, CRM Folder 38/27.

⁶⁷Document, "Altar Breads," October, 1966, p. 2–3, CRM Folder 38/27.

⁶⁸Aidan M. Carr, "Questions Answered: Whole Wheat Altar Breads," *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 64 (January 1964): 345.

⁶⁹"What Would You Like to Know about the Church?" *Catholic Digest* 32 (October 1968): 118. The quotation, says the questioner, is of their eight-year-old child.

⁷⁰Aidan M. Carr, "Questions Answered," 344.

⁷¹Carr, "Questions Answered," 344.

⁷²Carr, "Questions Answered," 345.

⁷³Diocese of Rhode Island, "Altar Bread Today," 362.

⁷⁴Diocese of Rhode Island, "Altar Bread Today," 362.

⁷⁵Diocese of Rhode Island, "Altar Bread Today," 363.

⁷⁶Diocese of Rhode Island, "Altar Bread Today," 363.

⁷⁷Diocese of Rhode Island, "Altar Bread Today," 365, emphasis in original.

⁷⁸Diocese of Rhode Island, "Altar Bread Today," 363.

⁷⁹Gerety, "Buying the Body of Christ," *Killing the Buddha*.

⁸⁰Until 1977, U.S. Catholics were only permitted to receive communion on the tongue. In practice, however, many Catholic parishes had been offering communion in the hand for several years.

⁸¹"Communion in Hand," 3.

⁸²Cavanagh Company, "About Us."

⁸³"See, for example, June Dwyer, "The Blessed Sacrament Is Their Life, Altar Breads Are Their Livelihood," *Catholic Advocate* 32, no. 4 (August 1960): 9.

⁸⁴Zezipa, "A U.S. Bakery in a Recession-Proof Business." See also Adelle M. Banks, "Bread of Life Is Way of Life for Communion-Host Bakers," *Orlando Sentinel*, April 15, 1990; Claire Taylor, "Sisters Share Old Tools for Altar Bread," *The Daily Advertiser*, April 8, 2012; and Arsenault, "Breaded Bliss."

⁸⁵See, for example, the following in CRM Folder 38/27: Correspondence from the Prioress of the Indianapolis Carmelites to John F. Cavanagh Jr., May 30, 1959; correspondence from the Prioress of the Indianapolis Carmelites to the Prioress of the Carmelite Monastery in Louisville, Kentucky, May 19, 1946; correspondence from the Sub-Prioress of the Indianapolis Carmelites to the Discalced Carmelites of Savannah, April 26, 1968.

⁸⁶"Communion in Hand," 3. See also Dirk Van Susteren, "World of Flavor: The Story behind a Communion Host," *Catholic Digest*, November 23, 2009.

⁸⁷Some of the women's religious communities once dedicated to altar bread baking in the United States and published accounts of their labors include Benedictine Sisters of St. Scholastica Convent in Mundelein, Illinois: Genevieve Flavin, "Nuns Continue Tradition of Altar Breads: St. Scholastica Sisters Bake Hosts," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 6, 1950; Good Shepherd Sisters of Fox Chase Convent in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania: "The Story of the Making of Altar Breads," *The Catholic Standard and Times*, 58, no. 46 (August 14, 1953): 8; Passionist Nuns of Kirkwood, Missouri: "Making Bread of Angels," *The Catholic World in Pictures*, National Catholic Welfare Conference News Service (March 20, 1961): 1; Sisters of the Cross of the Good Shepherd in Peekskill, New York: Betsy Brown, "Peekskill Center of Altar Wafer Industry," *New York Times*, February 13, 1983; Franciscan Sisters in Little Falls, Minnesota: Mary Donnelly, "Franciscan Sisters Continue Altar Bread Tradition," *Clarion-Ledger*, August 31, 1985; Poor Clare Nuns of Christ the King Monastery in Del Rey Beach, Florida: Adelle M. Banks, "Altar-Bread Bakers a Devoted Group," *Orlando Sentinel*, April 15, 1990; Poor Clares of the Franciscan Monastery of St. Clare in Langhorne, Pennsylvania: Kimberlee Crawford, "They Bake Hosts and Praise God," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 28, 1991; Sisters of the Most Holy Sacrament in Lafayette, Louisiana: Claire Taylor, "Sisters Share Old Tools for Altar Bread," *The Daily Advertiser*, April 8, 2012; Monastery of the Sacred Passion in Erlanger, Kentucky: Joseph Pronechen, "The Bread of Heaven: Where Do Communion Hosts Come From?" *National Catholic Register*, October 20, 2019.

⁸⁸Kostrzewa, "Small Business Making It Work."

⁸⁹For more on the history of the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Clyde, see "History," Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual

Adoration, <https://www.benedictinesisters.org/subsectioncontent.php?secid=6&subsecid=20>; Altar Breads BSPA, "Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration," <https://altarbreadsbspa.com/>; Mills, "Losing Touch"; "The Story behind a Communion Host"; and Jena Sauber, "Breaking Bread," *The Philadelphia Tribune*, December 5, 2014, https://www.phillytrib.com/breaking-bread/article_41c4fa5c-a377-5b89-8629-e8f9f2c409d5.html.

⁹⁰Mills, "Losing Touch."

⁹¹"Altar Breads BSPA," Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.

⁹²The Catholic Church does not allow gluten-free hosts to be used for the celebration of the Eucharist, but makes an allowance for low-gluten hosts. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Circular Letter to All Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences Concerning the Use of Low-Gluten Altar Breads and Mustum as Matter for the Celebration of the Eucharist* (July 24, 2003), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20030724_pane-senza-glutine_en.html.

⁹³United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Divine Worship, "The Use of Mustum and Low-Gluten Hosts at Mass," *Newsletter* 39 (November 2003), in *Ten Years of the Newsletter: 2001–2010* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011): 153–58: "The Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Clyde, Missouri, have developed a true low gluten host. . . . This product is the only true, low-gluten altar bread known to the Secretariat and approved by use at Mass in the United States." United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Divine Worship, "The Use of Mustum and Low-Gluten Hosts at Mass," 157.

⁹⁴For more on the development of low-gluten hosts, see Margaret Ramirez, "Low-Gluten Wafers a Godsend," *Chicago Tribune*, August 25, 2006; "Low-Gluten Altar Bread from Clyde, Missouri," *Flatland*, August 7, 2017, <https://youtu.be/nh2X-GkHPyM>; "Baking Nuns," PBS Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly, March 30, 2007, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2007/03/30/march-30-2007-baking-nuns/289/>; and John Libonati, "Benedictine Nuns Discover Way to Produce Low-Gluten Communion Hosts," *Gluten Free Works*, July 13, 2012, <https://glutenfreeworks.com/blog/2008/01/08/benedictine-nuns-discover-way-to-produce-low-gluten-communion-hosts/s>.

⁹⁵Cavanagh Company home page, <https://www.cavanaghco.com/>.

⁹⁶Cavanagh Company, advertisement, *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 150, no. 2 (February 1964): inside front cover.

⁹⁷ Cavanagh Company home page, <https://www.cavanaghco.com/>.

⁹⁸ Cavanagh Company, advertisement, *The Priest* 50, no. 10 (October 1994): inside front cover.

⁹⁹ Cavanagh Company, advertisement, *The Priest* 55, no. 9 (September 1999): inside front cover.

¹⁰⁰ Cavanagh Company, advertisement, *The Priest* 51, no. 12 (December 1995): inside front cover.

¹⁰¹ Arsenault, "Breaded Bliss"; Zezima, "A U.S. Bakery in a Recession-Proof Business."

¹⁰² Zezima, "A U.S. Bakery in a Recession-Proof Business."

¹⁰³ Sewell Chan, "Candles, Clergy and Communion for 57,000," *New York Times*, April 12, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/12/nyregion/12pope.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 66.

¹⁰⁵ Pope Pius X, *Lamentabili Sane, Syllabus Condemning the Errors of the Modernists* (1907): 63. See also Pope Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, September 8, 1907, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis.html. For more on the relationship between modernity and Catholicism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Chapter 2 in O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 53–92; Komonchak, "Vatican II and the Encounter between Catholicism and Liberalism," 76–78.

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), esp. 40–45, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. For more on the church's shift in tone toward the modern world at the Second Vatican Council, see Ormond Rush, "Principle 24: Church/World," in *The Vision of Vatican II: Its Fundamental Principles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 480–532; and Komonchak, "Vatican II and the Encounter between Catholicism and Liberalism," 78–95.

¹⁰⁷ Komonchak, "Vatican II and the Encounter between Catholicism and Liberalism," 76.

¹⁰⁸ For more on these dominant interpretations, see Komonchak, "Vatican II and the Encounter between Catholicism and Liberalism," 86–88; Faggioli, *Vatican II*, 66–90; Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 17–20.

¹⁰⁹ Indeed, even Vatican II offered important criticisms of the imbalances and injustices of the modern world, especially of its

economic structures. See, for example, *Gaudium et Spes*, 9–10, 63, 65, 66, 68, 67, and 71.

¹¹⁰Many accounts have emerged in recent decades to show the ways in which Christianity strategically negotiated the market for its own ends. Leigh Eric Schmidt, for example, has shown the ways that Christianity and commerce have been deeply intertwined in the commercialization of modern Christian holidays. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995). A series of studies testify to the ways in which a theological commitment to *sola scriptura* shaped the rise of early American Christian publishing. See, for example, Paul Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777–1880* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); and David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007). In a series of essays on everything from the Kardashians to Herman Miller office furniture, Kathryn Lofton shows the porous relationship between religion and contemporary consumption. Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). And in his study of the development of the contemporary Christian publishing industry, Daniel Vaca has shown the ways that a strategic relationship between evangelicalism and the market both shapes and expresses evangelical theologies, identities, ideas, and alliances. See Daniel Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated: Books and the Business of Religion in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

ABSTRACT *This article traces the contemporary history of the eucharistic host, arguing that the materiality of modern Catholicism offers a distinct set of insights into the ways in which the Catholic Church has negotiated, resisted, and accommodated the modern world. Drawing on archival work, writings from a range of early twentieth-century Catholic journals, and advertising campaigns for altar bread, I show how shifting theological convictions about the Eucharist transformed both the form of altar bread as well as how and by whom it was made. Long before the Second Vatican Council, efforts to increase lay reception of communion as a strategy to mobilize Catholics against modernity had the effect of increasing demand for the bread on which it depended. After the Council, new convictions about the need for more intelligible liturgical symbols were accompanied by demands for a new kind of bread. Taken together, I argue that these factors unwittingly contributed to the creation of a new economy of host production. While the relationship between the church and the modern*

world remains one of the most enduring tensions in modern Catholicism in the wake of Vatican II, I show how both before and after the Council, the Catholic Church was deeply enmeshed in and dependent upon that world to achieve its ends.