

Article

On Refusing the Eucharist: Simone Weil, Antoine Arnauld, and the Philosophy of Grace

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Abstract

This article examines the differing reasons behind why the French philosopher Simone Weil (1909–1943) and the Jansenist polemicist Antoine Arnauld (1612–1694) recommended abstaining from the Eucharist, illustrating the continuities and ruptures of Catholic sacramental theology from Augustine to the modern era.

Keywords: Simone Weil; Antoine Arnauld; Eucharist; sacramental theology; early modern thought; Catholicism; Pelagianism; Augustine; Aquinas; Jansenism; grace

1. Introduction

“At the center of the Catholic religion a little formless matter is found, a little piece of bread. The love directed toward this particle of matter is necessarily impersonal. . . it is outwardly only a fragment of matter, yet it is at the center of the Catholic religion. Herein lies the great scandal and yet the most wonderful virtue of this religion”. (Weil 2009, pp. 130–31)

—Simone Weil

While the French philosopher Simone Weil (1909–1943) never formally converted, her writings bear the mark of a deep intellectual and spiritual engagement with the Catholic Church. While Weil’s attraction to the sacraments would remain unrealized in her life, the Eucharist is nevertheless present in her thought, albeit in paradoxical and implicit forms. Drawing out its subtle presence in Weil’s thought, however, is not a straightforward task, in part because Weil’s ideas on the Eucharist cannot be separated from both her attraction to and prevarication around personally partaking of the sacrament. However, what may at first appear to be a purely idiosyncratic relationship to the Eucharist is clarified through an unlikely source. In this essay, I contend that Weil’s ideas around the Eucharist come into especially stark relief when examined alongside the views expressed on the same matter by a distant intellectual forebear, the Jansenist Antoine Arnauld (1612–1694).

2. Simone Weil and the Catholic Church

To begin, the importance of taking a thinker like Weil on her own terms must be underscored at the outset, as one who, after a period of attraction and discernment, ultimately chose to remain outside of the Catholic Church. In spite of a mystical encounter with Christ that she documented in her “Spiritual Autobiography” (Weil 2009, pp. 21–38), and which initiated a period of spiritual investigation that is partially captured by her posthumously published work *Letter to a Priest* (Weil 2014), Weil never formally joined the Catholic Church. For this reason, it is not, strictly speaking, appropriate to refer to her as a Catholic thinker. Indeed, Weil would have herself resisted being referred to as such.



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At the same time, however, it is to miss something crucial about Weil to fail to consider her thought for what it is—that is, deeply concerned with Catholic ideas, especially over questions having to do with the interaction of divine grace with humanity. If at certain times Weil’s writings present a more heterodox conception of Catholic theology, at other moments her writings about God and the soul seem to pierce into the very heart of the faith, rendering her thoughts on such matters worthy of theological consideration, even as Weil would remain, by choice, a perpetual outsider to the institution.

In this essay, I am proposing a nuanced way of understanding Weil’s “religious philosophy,” to borrow Lissa McCullough’s well-chosen description of her thought (McCullough 2014). While Weil, who died at the age of 34, was trained in philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure, she was relatively under-read with respect to the traditionally accepted canon of Catholic orthodoxy. In an essay from *Simone Weil for the Twentieth Century* (2021), which discusses the extent of Weil’s engagement with Augustine of Hippo, Eric Springsted makes the case that, barring a few mixed citations of the fourth century saint, bishop, and Doctor of the Church, “she does not seem to have delved very deeply into him” (Springsted 2021, p. 57). The same may be said of her treatment of the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas, whom she does not seem to have read extensively and yet from whom she both strongly and instinctively differed in the few places in her writings where he is mentioned (see Weil 1970, p. 355).¹ Finally, with respect to the mystics, with whom she shared a few striking similarities, Weil writes that God “in his mercy” had prevented her from reading them until after she writes of being “possessed” by Christ, lest, as her reasoning went, her encounter with them have unduly influenced her own mystical experience (Weil 2009, p. 27).

While there are certainly elements of Catholicism that Weil appears to have embraced without qualms, such as the gospels and the writings of John of the Cross, it seems that each case of Weil embracing an authoritative source is counterbalanced by another where she makes marked efforts to distance herself from the tradition—as if she were self-conscious about finding an intellectual or spiritual resonance in such a place as the Church (Weil 2014, p. 1).² There are several explanations for why this might have been the case, ranging from more incidental, even biographical, details to legitimate philosophical and theological differences that lie at the heart of her disagreements. To first address the former, it must be said that Weil’s religious explorations occurred at a time in both her life and the political life of interwar France at large when the disturbing allure of the collective—what Weil pejoratively called “the Great Beast” (Weil 1970, p. 304)³—would have potentially seemed especially suspect. One can similarly gesture toward her lack of exposure to robust expressions of Catholic theology in her early personal, social, and intellectual life, as one born into a (non-observant) Jewish household in turn-of-century France and educated at the highest levels of the radically secularist and post-revolutionary order of the Third Republic. As for the latter proposition, however, it may well be said that the final compatibility of Weil’s thought with institutional forms of Christianity presents a complex problem in its own right, which merits both further study and careful disambiguation.

Weil would eventually make concerted efforts to redress the religious lacunae in her thought through both intense self-study as well as the seeking out of religious counsel and the eventual blossoming of friendship with two Catholic personages, Gustave Thibon and Joseph-Marie Perrin. Both Thibon and Perrin would come to figure importantly in the events that transpired in the last years of her life, as well as play a shaping role in the transmission of Weil’s literary and philosophical legacy (Weil 2003; Thibon and Perrin 2003). However, in spite of their mutual friendship and dialogue on matters of faith, Weil remained agnostic on the question of religious affiliation. For this important reason, Weil is not typically treated as an expert or authority on the Christianity that so compelled her.

Indeed, the tensions that lie within her attraction to the Catholic Church have continued to inform a somewhat bifurcated reception in contemporary Weil scholarship, which may be said to be split roughly between two at times intersecting and at other moments conflicting camps that pit a more worldly interpretation of Weil against a more spiritual conception of her (as though the two are mutually exclusive).⁴ For now, however, it suffices to say that Weil was unmistakably drawn, if not always uncomplicatedly, to Catholic ideas and symbols as such, as well as to ideas and symbols that she felt resonated deeply with the Christian “inspiration.”⁵

In light of the eclectic mixture of intellectual and spiritual sources that appear in her writings, including several unedited and somewhat esoteric notebooks, scholarly efforts have been made to describe her thought as preeminently Kantian, Platonist, or even Spinozist.⁶ Into the crowded room of Weil’s influences, I propose to place her theological thinking alongside that of a somewhat unlikely source: the Jansenists. In her assessment of Weil’s intellectual genealogy, McCullough makes the case that Weil was influenced by a number of Jansenist and Jansenist-adjacent writers, such as Pascal and Racine.⁷ Beyond these two specific figures, McCullough makes the case, by now well-established, that the general French intellectual milieu in which Weil found herself had been indelibly shaped by the Jansenist legacy, in spite of that camp’s seemingly thorough defeat so many centuries prior (McCullough 2014).

3. The Influence of Jansenism

The Jansenists were a group of religious adepts in 17th century Europe. Their number included influential priests (such as Jean du Vergier de Hauranne, also known as Saint-Cyran), intellectuals (most famously, Blaise Pascal), the Bishop of Ypres, Cornelius Jansen (who posthumously lent his name to the movement), and a handful of powerful nuns (such as the Mères Angelique and Agnès Arnauld). As a loosely defined bloc of intellectuals (known as the *solitaires*), religious, and patrons centered around the convent of Port-Royal-des-Champs in Paris, the Jansenists’s activities would come to provoke the ire of several powerful enemies, including the Jesuit order, French monarchy, and papacy in Rome. The Jansenists would have preferred to be remembered not by the moniker by which they are commonly known today, but rather as early modern interpreters of Augustine. They sought to serve Catholic theological aims that consisted of an emphasis on the doctrine of efficacious grace, sacramental and moral rigorism, and primitivist reformism. More often than not, however, their ghost is invoked as a stand-in for an austere and otherworldly species of Catholicism that would be somewhat lost to time, as their movement was heavily chastised by the Church in spite of their scholarly and often ingenious *ressourcement* of the Church Fathers. The Jansenists’s religious opponents, the Jesuits, eventually prevailed in steering the Catholic reform that had by then been underway for more than a century. When their spiritual base was destroyed at the orders of the King in 1709, its luminaries, with the notable exception of Pascal, gradually drifted into obscurity. However, it is not too far-fetched to assume that the Jansenist legacy perdured, particularly in France, through a subtle, almost atmospheric, deposit in the intellectual life of Weil and her teachers, eventually coming to influence her philosophy of grace in ways I will illustrate in greater detail (Blanchard and Yoder 2024, pp. 60–61).

4. Antoine Arnauld on Frequent Communion

I am basing my comparison of Weil and the Jansenists on a particular issue—that of the Eucharist—by way of the writings of a particular, and prominent, Jansenist intellectual named Antoine Arnauld, whose 1643 treatise *De La Fréquente Communion* sought to limit the frequency with which the Eucharist was given by means of regulating the proper

“disposition” with which a baptized Catholic should receive it. Following the historic teaching of the Catholic Church on the Eucharist, namely, the doctrine of transubstantiation, Arnould held that the fragile Host, made of bread, is not just a commemorative symbol, as a Protestant might conceive of it, but rather “the Holy of Holies, and God Himself enclosed invisibly under the visible species” (Blanchard and Yoder 2024, p. 123). Interestingly, however, Arnould’s critical purview was not primarily aimed at or engaged with Protestant opponents, but his own Catholic co-religionists, specifically in this instance the Jesuit Pierre de Sesmaisons, whose *Instruction sur la fréquente communion* served as the occasion for Arnould’s scathing response.

Arnould was scandalized by the prospect that the Eucharist was being given too liberally in his time, including within his critique even those who had followed the requisite formulae of being baptized, confirmed, reconciled, and absolved by a priest before partaking of the sacrament. In his work, Arnould raises the standard required in order to receive the sacrament to a higher level by seeking to restrict its access to only those who display the “true disposition that Saint Augustine requires” for the sacred rite, namely one that is purely contrite and “proportionate to the eminence that we encounter there” (Blanchard and Yoder 2024, p. 131). Arnould is keen to remind his readers that the one who does not achieve this disposition before receiving the Eucharist incurs a mortal sin. To underscore this point, Arnould cites none other than Augustine, who writes in Tractate 26 on the Gospel of John that the one “who does not remain in Jesus Christ, and in whom Jesus Christ does not remain, does not eat this flesh spiritually, but he receives the Sacrament to his condemnation” (Blanchard and Yoder 2024, p. 124). To be sure, Arnould’s position on the Eucharist harkens back to even deeper and more authoritative sources than Augustine. As early as Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, the Church has taught that receiving the sacrament while improperly prepared may incur both divine judgment and bodily harm.⁸ Yet, while Arnould’s emphasis on the spiritual gravity of taking communion in an unworthy state does not strictly depart from the orthodox position, his sacramental rigorism and penchant for polemics get him carried away at times, lending the impression that his position is motivated by his own concerns independently of the official position of the Church.

One such moment occurs when Arnould further develops upon the Pauline insight that the one who communes inappropriately will be held to account by writing that “[The Devil] often bears the wicked to Holy Communion to cause them to commit sacrilege” (Blanchard and Yoder 2024, p. 139). Within his claim is the suggestion that the Host—or more specifically, attraction to the Host—is just another tool amid the backdrop of spiritual warfare, which, in spite of its essentially sacramental and medicinal nature, can nevertheless be manipulated by demonic actors to bring the ruin of souls. In an extended metaphor comparing the Eucharist, “the bread of heaven,” to earthly bread, Arnould writes:

“As bodies fall into languor if they are not sustained by the bread of earth, souls fall into weakness if they are not sustained by this bread of heaven. But even though the bread which we use every day is useful to us, we can nevertheless equally injure our health, whether we use it or not. If we eat it when we are in a state of extreme weakness, we thereby render ourselves still weaker, and it hurts us greatly in place of helping us. And if, being sick, we keep ourselves voluntarily in our ill humors, without intending to put ourselves in a state in which we can eat, we make our illness not only greater, but incurable”. (Blanchard and Yoder 2024, pp. 126–27)

Arnould’s metaphor, however, illustrates a grounding position vis-à-vis the Eucharist that invites deeper questioning, particularly with regards to the aptness of the analogy. It is noteworthy that Thomas Aquinas employs a similar metaphor in the *Summa Theologiae*,

analogizing the sacrament to a “medicine” that “does not suit every stage of sickness; because the tonic given to those who are recovering from fever would be hurtful to them if given while yet in their feverish condition” (Aquinas 1911–1925, ST III, q. 80, a. 4, ad. 2). While the metaphors of bread or medicine may seem arbitrary in light of how the Eucharist is traditionally conceived of as, miraculously, both, the specific valence of Arnauld’s metaphor of the Eucharist as bread bears important implications—especially for a case such as that presented by Simone Weil, whose death by self-imposed malnutrition is of tragic relevance to the analogy. Arnauld holds that just as food can further sicken or even kill someone in a state of advanced illness, the Eucharist can act as a fatal poison (“mak[ing] our illness not only greater, but incurable”), if taken by one who is improperly prepared. From this point there emerges the implicit idea that whereas the healthy are further nourished by the Eucharist, the sick, by contrast, are further weakened by it. Their remedy, by Arnauld’s lights, is therefore not to take, but to defer Communion—to “retire therefrom to dispose ourselves by the fruits of a veritable penance” (Blanchard and Yoder 2024, pp. 126–27).

However, to stay with Arnauld’s analogy of spiritual and earthly bread for a moment, with each element’s relationship to spiritual and physical health and sickness, I find that Arnauld does not adequately consider the category of starvation in his comparison. Instead, the two poles of possibilities within the metaphor are of bread as either sustenance or poison for the healthy and sick, respectively. The double quality of the Eucharist, incidentally, evokes the logic of the *pharmakon*—the idea, popularized by Jacques Derrida, that an object can simultaneously serve as both a remedy and poison (Derrida 1981). To go through the categories Arnauld sketches, one gathers that one can either be in a state of (1) spiritual or physical health in which case both heavenly or earthly bread sustains, or (2) spiritual or physical sickness in which case both heavenly or earthly bread poisons.⁹ However, it is clear at least in the earthly case that for the physically ill, bread of some form is still required in order to keep living, lest one die by starvation. While the conception of bread as sustenance for the healthy or harmful for the sick is straightforward enough, Arnauld’s airless schematic seems to elide a third possibility, namely that, for the starving, bread of some kind is still required. Indeed, the lack of bread constitutes the disease, so to speak; it is what is killing the starving person.

5. Contrition and Attrition

Here another word for starvation, taken from the lexicon of both war and early modern theological debate surrounding the sacraments, is instructive. The term “attrition,” which in its plain sense is understood as the process of reducing strength through repeated attack or pressure as in siege warfare, also in this case refers to a technical, theological term that describes a penitent’s spiritual state before receiving absolution. Attrition, or “imperfect contrition” for one’s sins, falls short of perfection because it is primarily motivated not by sincere regret and divine charity, but by the fear of punishment. Yet, while Arnauld insists upon the attainment of true contrition as a precondition to receive the Eucharist, the Catholic Church determined in the Council of Trent that the attitude of attrition, if accompanied by “the hope of pardon” and the exclusion of the wish to sin, is sufficient to “obtain the grace of God in the sacrament” (Council of Trent 1848, Session 14). The Jansenists, with their characteristically Gallican critique of Ultramontanism, disagreed with the Jesuits on precisely this issue, requiring perfect contrition rather than mere attrition in order to be properly absolved during the sacrament of Confession. While Jansenists like Arnauld criticized such distinctions as merely another instance of Jesuit casuistry, true contrition has long proven to be an elusive state to both achieve and determine, with Thomas Aquinas remarking in the *Summa* that a man who “is not sufficiently contrite. . .

does not sin in receiving the body of Christ, because a man cannot know for certain whether he is truly contrite” (Aquinas 1911–1925, ST III, q. 80, a. 4, ad. 5).

In order to be fit to commune weekly, Arnauld writes “one must have a soul in great health” (Blanchard and Yoder 2024, p. 133). Yet, beyond abstaining from the Eucharist, what is to be done for those in possession of souls in poor health—for whom, Arnauld alleges, the Eucharist may act as a kind of poison? By describing the Holy Eucharist as potentially harmful, Arnauld portrays the nature of the sacrament in a misleading manner. While it is the case that for a starving person at a certain stage of extremis even life-saving bread, if introduced too quickly, may cause death, the bread is not, strictly speaking, a poison.¹⁰ It is not by any change in substance that life-saving bread is effectively poisonous to a starving person, but due instead to the severe effects wrought by the disease of malnutrition itself. Arnauld does not go so far as to state that the substance of the Holy Eucharist changes depending on the spiritual state of the person receiving it, since this would verge on a challenge to the doctrine of transubstantiation. However, Arnauld’s analogy does suggest that the Eucharist is radically unavailable, even invalid, for those unready to receive it—a characterization that goes against the prevailing spirit of the gratuitous nature of the Eucharistic gift.

6. Recollections of the Donatist Controversy

In an inverted way, Arnauld’s view and its implications recall the Donatist controversy of Augustine’s time, in which the legitimacy of the sacraments was rejected based on the perceived impurity of the priest administering it. According to Augustine, however, the Donatists’s position was deemed heretical, and the status of the sacraments (primarily in this historical case of baptism and ordination) maintained as valid, regardless of the moral failings of the priest who celebrates it. In Letter 105, Augustine advances the “sensible” view on the controversy:

“That is, that the grace is always God’s and the sacrament God’s, but the ministry alone belongs to a human being. If he is good, then he cleaves to God and co-operates with him; if, however, he is bad, then God effects the visible form of the sacrament through him, while he himself bestows the invisible grace”. (Atkins and Dodaro 2004, p. 169)

Conscious of the potentially schismatic quality of this debate, Augustine walks a careful line as he advances the nuanced position that the fallible human element interacts with “God’s sacrament” in such a way as to be fully efficacious, bestowing grace invisibly in spite of the less-than-ideal situation of receiving the Holy Eucharist from a disreputable priest.

To be sure, there is a distinction to be made between the validity of the Eucharist with respect to the priest consecrating it and the penitent receiving it, and Arnauld is not calling into question the validity of the Eucharist so much as casting aspersions on the work the sacrament accomplishes in a human being who receives it in a questionable state of grace. It is, of course, the latter point which primarily concerns Arnauld. His thinking on the matter also pitches his polemic directly into the vexed terrain of philosophical determinism, which finds theological expression in the doctrine of predestination. However, it is noteworthy in itself that Arnauld describes the Eucharist as having two modes—one which saves and heals, and another that damns and poisons. Although Arnauld supports this latter suggestion by way of a series of citations from Ambrose and Augustine, the idea that the Eucharist ought to be *primarily* conceived of as a fatal poison runs counter to the Church’s Eucharistic teaching in spirit.

Citing Augustine once more, Arnauld writes that it is only when the penitent fulfills the conditions of lacking mortal sin or any kind of affection for venial sin, as well as a showing a disposition towards a “great desire to commune” that he or she may partake

of the sacrament on a weekly basis (Blanchard and Yoder 2024, p. 132). Of note, however, in Arnauld's position is the introduction and emphasis of subjective and introspective elements of the sacramental rite—a "purity of conscience" that few might be expected to attain, and which may itself be suggestive of a questionable self-evaluative tendency (Blanchard and Yoder 2024, p. 131).¹¹ While the forgiveness of mortal sin remains firmly within the privacy of the confessional, in which the priest absolves the penitent under the seal of Confession, Arnauld's latter two requirements—a lack of affection for venial sin and a great desire to commune—are states that are potentially subject to infinite scrutiny, depending on the personality of the self-examiner.

7. The Catholic Church on the Eucharist

It is here worth mentioning the difference in both tone and content that is presented by the Catechism on the topic, which cites the Council of Trent on the same theme:

"As bodily nourishment restores lost strength, so the Eucharist strengthens our charity, which tends to be weakened in daily life; and this living charity *wipes away venial sins*. By giving himself to us Christ revives our love and enables us to break our disordered attachments to creatures and root ourselves in him". (Catholic Church 1997, par. 1394)

Here, although it is likened to bodily nourishment, the Eucharist is not analogized to a poison. Rather, the overall characterization of the Eucharist by the Catechism is that of a kind of supernatural medicine—even as a "viaticum," given to those at the moment of death during last rites. Far from being an irrelevant, internecine issue, debates surrounding the Eucharist, its role and its proper reception, lie at the heart of the Catholic Church's ongoing negotiation with modernity. They have re-emerged as recently as the pontificate of Pope Francis, who referenced in two of his apostolic exhortations a controversial line: "The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak" (Pope Francis 2013, p. 47)¹². While this remark has been subject to some scrutiny, the very least that it demonstrates is that the issues surrounding the Eucharist are alive and gesture toward a long and storied history.

Arnauld's stringent views on the Eucharist lend a window into the radical nature of the Jansenist cause, as well as helping to explain the censure they elicited from both worldly and ecclesial authorities. Pope Clement XI would eventually declare the movement heretical in the papal bull *Unigenitus* (1713). Arnauld intended his statements on the Eucharist to purify and preserve Catholic doctrine by drawing it closer to its sources. Ironically, his position resembles other early modern retrievals of Augustine that would come to furnish rival religious interpretations, such as Calvinism—which the Jansenists were sometimes themselves accused of cryptically espousing. By increasing the stakes of the Eucharistic exchange and placing such a high value on purity—and not just purity of any species, but of arguably the most difficult and interior, that of disposition, what Augustine would have described as "the good will" (King 2010, p. 21)—Arnauld sets up a highly exacting, interior standard, which, while matching the tenor of the Church Fathers, threatened to divide the Church against itself once more.

8. Weil on the Eucharist

Resuscitating Antoine Arnauld's views on the Eucharist reveals a surprising similarity with Simone Weil's own thoughts on the sacrament. As Weil was increasingly drawn to Christianity, she was nevertheless held at bay by her disagreements with elements of the Church, as well as her sense, in her words, of "the distance which separates me from it because of my imperfections" (Thibon and Perrin 2003, p. 76). It could be said that in spite of their confessional differences, Weil shared a Jansenistic sense of moral rigorism

with Arnauld, the only difference being that she applied it most stringently not so much to others as to herself. Furthermore, Weil's sense of scrupulosity was not limited to her self-deprivation of the spiritual bread of the Eucharist, as her life was also marked by abstinence from food, even from a young age.¹³ Tragically, this tendency has long been speculated to have been a factor that contributed to her death by tuberculosis exacerbated by self-starvation. With this in mind, her words in one place about the Eucharist are striking as they both foreshadow her death and recall the claim of Arnauld that the devil tempts the "wicked" to communion. Referencing her growing attraction to the sacrament, Weil wrote in a letter to a priest with whom she was discussing conversion: "I may perhaps be in error, but in that case I must be the prey of a demon of an unheard of variety, a demon who drives one to seek nourishment in the spectacle of the Mass" (Thibon and Perrin 2003, p. 42).

The facility with which such disparate figures as Weil and Arnauld turn to demonic imagery in order to explain what could otherwise be legitimately considered in such alternative terms as, for instance, a quickening of the Holy Spirit, is striking. Though they hailed from such different circumstances, they shared a punishingly high conception and regard for the sacrament. It is worth asking what Weil and Arnauld's respective views reflect and enable through the vehicle of the Blessed Sacrament. It should first be admitted that both Arnauld and Weil are somewhat marginal thinkers with respect to the slow-moving apparatus of Catholic orthodoxy—with Weil, in particular, as an outsider. Beyond the somewhat blasphemous association of the Eucharist with a diabolical tool, Weil and Arnauld tend towards an interpretation of the Eucharist that recalls the Pelagian stance on grace polemicized by Augustine insofar as each figure implicitly places the determining factor within the Eucharistic exchange on the individual or penitent. It is his or her ability finally, and not God's, to arbitrate and act rightly in such a way that both befits and renders possible the precious gift of the sacrament. Yet, in this picture the necessity of and role played by the sacrament would appear to hardly be required at all for just the one who consistently feels adequately qualified to take it, since he would have presumably already found himself in a state of robust spiritual health to begin with. This picture leaves out more than a few conceivable possibilities for the human soul, particularly in cases wherein the starting point is not a state of spiritual equanimity, but of transformation, such as the cases presented by conversion and reconciliation.

A proper investigation of the terms of this debate is greatly illuminated by a consideration of a much earlier source: the anti-Pelagian writings of Augustine, whose conflict with the eponymous fourth century monk Pelagius dove straight into the logical paradoxes presented by the convergence of the complex and overlapping ideas at the core of Christian doctrine to do with grace, free will, and nature. However, while these challenging ideas, over which much ink has already been spilled, will not be fully resolved here, it is more within my purview to inquire what Arnauld and Weil's respective views on the Eucharist reflect and enable in theological terms. Heterodox though they may be at certain moments, both Arnauld and Weil illuminate compelling facets of Christian ideas about grace, as well as demonstrating the limits each encountered in their confrontation and negotiation with Catholic orthodoxy—for Arnauld by the papal bull, and Weil by her exchange with a Dominican priest. Although she almost certainly never read him, Weil's writings on simultaneously desiring and abstaining from the Eucharist are clarified in their stakes as they are compared to the Jansenist Arnauld's musings on the Eucharist.

9. Weilian *Hupomone* and Arnauldian Deferral

This is, however, not to suggest that Arnauld and Weil were on the same page with each other in all or even most respects. Their differences are many and telling. For

one, Arnauld and other Jansenists tended to cast themselves in the camp of the elect, a persecuted minority within the Church that was perhaps closer than the rest of them to the truth. By contrast, Weil occupied the position of a perpetual outsider to the institution. Their confessional differences notwithstanding, however, Weil and Arnauld share a closer attitude toward the Church than it would seem at first. Both sought to distance themselves from the main body of believers. Weil's mysticism, as well as her conviction that "looking is what saves us" (Weil 2009, p. 125), seem to render the institutional aspects of faith less necessary. Similarly, the Jansenists, with their famous distinction between *droit* and *fait*, believed they could access the truth in opposition to what they held to be a mostly corrupt institution. Disparate in so many other ways, Weil and Arnauld both nevertheless place such a strong emphasis on interiority that they are led to cut themselves off from the Body, understood in multiple senses of the word. Their similarities in this respect come to a head in the notable convergence between Weil and Arnauld that first inspired the comparison: namely, their mutual valorization of abstention with respect to the Eucharist. Both Arnauld and Weil agree on the basic principle that deferring, or, to use a more Weilian term, "waiting" to receive God is salutary for the soul. Arnauld writes:

"As there was once a manner of deferring baptism, which was approved by the Church, when one did it to prepare one's self by all sorts of good works. . . there is likewise a manner of deferring Communion that the Church approves, when we retire therefrom to dispose ourselves by the fruits of a veritable penance" (Blanchard and Yoder 2024, p. 126)

In a convoluted way that, it should be added, would have surely been difficult for Arnauld to foresee, Weil actually follows Arnauld's advice here to a tee by deferring her own baptism and communion—indefinitely.

Such a modern case study as the one presented by Simone Weil would have likely been outside the conceptual boundaries of what the seventeenth-century Arnauld could have imagined, as one who was active in a pre-revolutionary France where membership in the Church would have been taken for granted. Yet, given Arnauld's proposal to "advance toward [the Eucharist] in retreating from it," Weil's example of indefinite abstention from the sacraments could be considered as the logical apotheosis of Arnauld's extreme invitation to defer the sacraments until one is ready. After all, Arnauld's notion of deferring the sacrament until one is ready begs the question of when one is ever said to finally be ready for or worthy of the sacrament. Since the Eucharist is understood as to bestow grace, which is understood as a gift, framing the Eucharistic exchange in terms of readiness or worthiness seems to miss something fundamental about the nature of grace, namely, its gratuitousness, its ability to quicken the human soul, and, above all, its sacrificial condescension, meant in the theological sense, before a fallen humanity.

The slippage between readiness and worthiness before grace presents a theological dilemma that threatens to become irresolvable. How could one finally decide or know for certain that the right moment to receive the grace of God had arrived? One could theoretically remain suspended in such a state forever. At this juncture, Arnauldian deferral, with its extreme skepticism about the value of any human act, comes to resemble Weil's notion of waiting. She develops the concept in writings that were later grouped under the English title *Waiting for God* (2009). There Weil discusses the idea of waiting through the aid of the Greek word *ὑπομονή* (*hupomone*):

"The attitude that brings about salvation is not like any form of activity. The Greek word which expresses it is *ὑπομονή*, and *patientia* is rather an inadequate translation of it. It is the waiting or attentive and faithful immobility that lasts indefinitely and cannot be shaken". (Weil 2009, p. 128)

Weil's *hupomone* is similar if not identical to her notion of attention, which she defines in "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" as consisting of "suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object" (Weil 2009, p. 62). It might be conceived of as the achievement of perfect passivity—a state, which it almost goes without saying, would be immensely difficult for an individual to achieve and maintain, bearing perhaps more similarity to a form of stoicism than Catholicism. The translator Emma Craufurd uses the word "detached" in place of the original French word "disponible," which more faithfully reflects the meaning of *hupomone* as a kind of suspension, availability, and readiness to respond at the slightest indication. Later in the same passage, Weil contrasts *hupomone* with "active searching," which she negatively characterizes as "prejudicial" (Weil 2009, p. 128).

Typical of Weil with her consistent preference for Athens over Rome, she distinguishes and elevates the Greek word and idea of *hupomone* from the Latin, and therefore more ecclesial, concept of *patientia*, which is one of the seven virtues. In *hupomone*, Weil proposes a kind of theology—it rises to the status of an "attitude that brings about salvation." There is neither mediator, nor rite in Weil's theological vision: only the sharpening and intensification of waiting—a dark night, which ostensibly waits for something like the dawn. Weil leaves relatively unelaborated what the shape of a life or practice beyond this intense existential state of suspense might look like. It seems that *hupomone* consists of a constant purification of the will amid the backdrop of the total lack of a sign of God, who is only present, paradoxically, in absence. However, the act of waiting must imply something, or someone, that is awaited. The one waiting anticipates the inbreaking of a sign or event that brings an end to the waiting. Yet, the moment of arrival or epiphany is left relatively undescribed in Weil's *oeuvre*. By all accounts, the state of *hupomone* that she conceives of echoes the state or stance that she personally maintained in her own life and death with respect to the question of religious conversion. From a Catholic perspective, however, God is neither absent, nor is the world empty of forms of grace. On the contrary, the means of grace are held as revealed, waiting for human cooperation—rather than the inverse. By implication, it may be surmised that to refuse to cooperate with the objective means of grace that have been revealed by the Church leads to spiritual starvation.

10. A Theological Limit Case

It would be illuminating to untangle the various sources that would have influenced and informed Weil's notion of *hupomone*. The figures of Antigone and Job, whom she admired, each seem to typify this state. Each figure is afflicted with incomprehensible suffering. Each is brought to a point of abjection that Weil might have called *hupomone*. And each, interestingly, waits in a pre-Christian context. Although textual evidence points to the fact that *hupomone* may have for Weil found a particularly poignant expression in the crucifixion, God's waiting on a cross for mankind, Weil does not develop the idea robustly as such. Hence, it is worth asking whether Weil's mandate to wait in solitary desolation without searching is entirely compatible with the idea of Christian hope, or with notions of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ.

Reconciling Weil's spiritual intuition with Catholic dogma was neither her primary task, nor strictly that of this essay. However, to bring the focus back to the original point of comparison, that is, the Eucharist, I find Weil's idea of *hupomone* illustrative of an extraordinary theological limit case that bears unwitting similarity to the state proposed by Arnould in his treatise on the Eucharist and later to the *hupomone* which Weil discusses in her spiritual writings. Arnould's focus on the correct disposition to the Eucharist implicitly recommends something like Weil's *hupomone*. That Arnould and Weil arrive at the conclusion that the most important action with respect to Eucharist is to wait reflects a

similar philosophy of grace—one that places a punishingly high emphasis on abstinence and says relatively little about the subtext of the feast.

At this point, it does behoove me to place these views, Weil's and Arnauld's, alongside the "orthodox" perspective that Weil both sought and ultimately forwent. Weil's would-be confessor, the Dominican priest in whom she confided and with whom she exchanged letters that are now published, Joseph-Marie Perrin, differed from both Arnauld and Weil on the question of the proper disposition required for the Eucharist. This disposition he discusses in *Simone Weil As We Knew Her* (2003) was neither the quasi-perfect disposition that Arnauld believes is required, nor the state of waiting to which Weil, by all accounts, appeared to have consigned herself. Rather, Perrin advocated for "an abandonment to the Spirit's influence irrespective of any human consideration" (Thibon and Perrin 2003, p. 45). On this account, it is divine agency that takes center stage, with the human action—or reaction—being one of surrender, "abandonment." The frame Perrin suggests is different in emphasis from that proposed by both Weil and Arnauld on the Eucharist because he foregrounds another perspective, that not of the priest or penitent, but of the second Person of the Trinity:

"The purely objective requirements of the sacramental order oblige a child of the Church to rise above his personal point of view and to see everything from the point of view of Christ. Moreover, as the value of the sacraments comes from Christ's institution of them and action through them, it does not depend upon our personal appreciation but requires the opening of our souls to God and obedience to him". (Thibon and Perrin 2003, p. 45)

Centering the perspective and institution of Christ via the Eucharist, Perrin rebalances the poles of the Eucharistic exchange in a way that affirms the "objective" elements of the rite, over more contingent and subjective elements.

Ever pastoral (though sometimes noticeably frustrated) in their exchanges, Perrin urged Weil to look at the question of conversion from a perspective other than that of a cerebral, solitary, or self-punishing perspective. For one who left a legacy centered around self-abnegation, Weil did not easily part from the principled individualism that forms a great part of her genius. While it served her particularly well with respect to the critique of oppressive social forms, it takes on a more awkward form in its interaction with Christianity. In Perrin's words, Weil was afflicted by an "interior problem." Elaborating on this, Perrin recounts that in spite of her kind and merciful nature to other people and circumstances, with respect to herself "[Weil] would sometimes tend to make the exacting demands of a merciless logician," to which he would respond to her: "'It is a good thing that you are not God'" (Thibon and Perrin 2003, p. 30). One might make a similar remark about Antoine Arnauld! While Perrin confirms that from their conversations, Weil seemed, to him, to have a theologically sound grasp of the major dogmas of the Church, although her expression of them took the form of "imperfect," if ingenious, formulae" (Thibon and Perrin 2003, p. 38). For Perrin, Weil's spiritual genius coexisted with a problem that would neither become fully resolved in their exchange, nor in the course of her life. Weil's theology will always be accompanied with a caveat with respect to Catholic orthodoxy. Yet, it is also, for the same reason, theologically rich, as it opens the door to a more paradoxical frame.

11. Xavier Tilliette on Weil's Eucharistic Hunger

In *The Eucharist and Modern Philosophy* (2023), Xavier Tilliette makes the case that Simone Weil's writings present a powerful expression of Eucharistic hunger (Tilliette 2023). Tilliette writes that Weil accessed the Eucharist through absence, through spiritual and physical deprivation. As Tilliette puts it, Weil was "nourished by being excluded from this living Bread" (Tilliette 2023, p. 125). Weil's death from self-starvation is tragically in

keeping with the “inverted Eucharistic mystery” that she discussed in her writings and embodied through her life. In this light, Weil’s remark that “The great trouble in human life is that looking and eating are two different operations” (Weil 2009, p. 105), as well as the special relationship she had with George Herbert’s Eucharistic poem “Love,” take on an added level of poignancy. Tilliette’s framing suits Weil’s own tendency for conceiving of God in negative terms. If Weil sought to love God through absence, it seems plausible that her relationship to the Eucharist would take a similarly convoluted path. However, Tilliette’s essay on Weil and the Eucharist takes the form of a poetic musing, rather than a systematic theology. Although there is some historical precedent for similar versions of Eucharistic hunger to be found in the lives of medieval saints like Catherine of Siena, their comparison with Weil takes on a theologically speculative quality (Bynum 1987).

12. A Philosophy of Grace

Weil both greatly admired and dwelt on at length in her writings the Eucharistic sacrament she never partook. She describes it in her essay on “Forms of the Implicit Love of God” as the fragment of matter wherein the Catholic faith’s “most wonderful virtue” resides (Weil 2009, pp. 131–32). However, in light of her final refusal to participate in this sacrament, Weil’s appreciation of the Eucharist remained unrealized in her life and thought, except in other implicit and more conceptual forms. My contention is that, as important as the Eucharist seems to have been for her, it is present in her thought—not merely as absence or deprivation along the lines of an interpretation like Tilliette’s, but as something positive, even if it is barely discernible, forming a part of an implicit philosophy of grace within Weil’s thought.

By showing the significance of this concept to her philosophy of grace, I connect Weil to the wider context of Augustinian thought, most prominently associated with the French Jansenists, whose devotion to the Eucharist is more than a historical curiosity or holdover. At stake in my own theory about Weil and the Eucharist is an intuition that the nature of grace as Weil conceived of it is in deeper conversation with Catholic theology than first appears, although their differences are not ultimately to be elided. Ultimately, I hope to show that Weil’s life and philosophy bear the echoes of the debates and concerns surrounding the Eucharist in seventeenth century France, as well as continuing to carry a theology, explicit and implicit, of the Eucharist into the modern age.

Both Antoine Arnauld and Simone Weil shared the paradoxical notion that movement towards and away from the Eucharist is not always what it seems. There is a kind of approach that reflects a distance, misunderstanding, and unreadiness—as well as a kind of retreat that reflects closeness, seeking, and penitence. While both Weil and Arnauld left unarticulated the limits of the approach of advancing towards the grace offered by the Eucharist by retreating from it (and thereby vulnerable to valid critique from more authoritative sources), their accomplishment, provocation, and invitation lay in raising the Eucharist to the highest level of philosophical and theological importance and, therefore, of re-consideration in their respective époques. In spite of Arnauld’s insistence that his recommendations are closer to the Church’s original stance on the Eucharist, both he and Weil are in an important sense theological reinterpreters, whose ideas about the sacraments and grace merit scholarly consideration.

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Notes

- ¹ In a response to a quote from Aquinas on friendship, Weil wrote “This is absolutely contrary to Christianity. How can these people think themselves Christians? . . . The whole of Christianity is absolutely contrary to this thought” (Weil 1970, p. 355).
- ² “When I read the catechism of the Council of Trent, it seems as though I had nothing in common with the religion there set forth. When I read the New Testament, the mystics, the liturgy, when I watch the celebration of the mass, I feel with a sort of conviction that this faith is mine or, to be more precise, would be mine without the distance placed between it and me by my imperfection” (Weil 2014, p. 1).
- ³ “The Devil is the collective. (Which in Durkheim is the divinity.) This is clearly indicated in the Apocalypse by that beast which is so obviously the Great Beast of Plato” (Weil 1970, p. 304).
- ⁴ One could look at the history of calls for papers at scholarly societies devoted to Weil’s thought to get an idea of the tendency towards bifurcation.
- ⁵ For a case study in this pattern in Weil’s thought, particularly how she categorized philosophical ideas in relation to Christianity, one need look no further than *La Source Grecque*, whose title in English—*Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks* (Weil 1957)—is illustrative of the theme of Weil’s tendency to discover implicit forms of the love of God in disparate forms of life and study.
- ⁶ See (Doering and Springsted 2004; Goldschläger 1982), and, as for her affinity for Kant, one of Weil’s nicknames was “the categorical imperative in skirts.”
- ⁷ It should be noted, however, that Weil’s references to Pascal are predominantly critical in nature. In *The Need for Roots*, Weil charges him “guilty of lack of probity in his search for God,” and speculating that “[Pascal] never did receive the gift of faith, and that is because he had tried to take possession of it” (Weil 1952, p. 247).
- ⁸ See 1 Corinthians 11:17–34.
- ⁹ I am interpreting Arnauld’s suggestion that the “bread of heaven,” when given to someone in a state of weakness, harms greatly to the point of rendering him greatly ill, to the point of incurability, should be understood to be acting effectively as a poison (Blanchard and Yoder 2024, pp. 126–27).
- ¹⁰ This condition is recognized medically as Refeeding Syndrome (Mehanna et al. 2008).
- ¹¹ This was exactly the concern of the Jesuits, for which the Jansenists criticized them.
- ¹² Pope Francis. *Evangelii gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*). Apostolic exhortation. Holy See. The line is also found in Footnote 351 of *Amoris Laetitia*: “I would also point out that the Eucharist ‘is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.’
- ¹³ Weil’s biographer traces her tendency to refuse food to her early childhood (Pétrement 1973, p. 34).

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