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**‘Metabolism’ as Metaphor of Appropriation in  
Nicholas of Cusa’s *Sermones***

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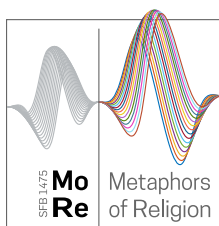
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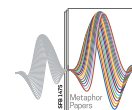


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# ‘Metabolism’ as Metaphor of Appropriation in Nicholas of Cusa’s *Sermones*

Phoenix Savapakarn

**ABSTRACT** In his sermons, Cusanus provides a variety of metaphors encouraging the audience to pursue their relation to God and to become aware of God’s recognizability in everyday life. Besides the employment of metaphors of genealogical relations (family), matrimony, education (master-disciple-relation), *artes mechanicae* (everyday-life professions concerning craftsmanship), Cusanus offers a wide-ranging repertoire of metaphors that include several steps of digestion. The focus of this paper will be on selected metaphors that appear to be linked to metabolism.

**KEYWORDS** sermon, metabolism, digestion, appropriation, nourishment

## Nicholas of Cusa on Christ Using Metaphors

And thus, Christ often uses meals or foods for the body as symbols of the nourishment of the Spirit, in that he himself, the Word of God, invites to the meal, prepares it, serves it, etc. (Joh 1:1–3, I Joh 1:1, Lk 22:27) Therefore I believe that a preacher is like a baker or a cook of a dish, who receives a Word of God from the abundance of the Scriptures and bakes or cooks it for a meal.<sup>1</sup>

[1]

In stating “Christus dat figuras,”<sup>2</sup> or by depicting Christ as ‘sower of the Word’ (*seminator verbi*<sup>3</sup>), Cusanus points out that Christ himself uses figurative speech to spread the Word of God in an illustrative manner. By identifying Christ with the Word of God (*logos Dei*<sup>4</sup>),

[2]

1 cf. h (= Nicolai de Cusa 1932–2002) XVII/2, p. 140, *Sermo* XLI, 1, translated by the author. Original: “Et hinc saepe de refectione spiritus Christus dat figuras cenae et refectionis corporis, quo modo ipse, qui est ‘logos’ (Joh 1:1-3; I Joh 1:1) Dei, vocat ad cenam, parat, ‘ministrat’ (Lk 22:27) etc.”

2 Ibid.

3 cf. h XVII/1, p. 73, *Sermo* XXXVII, 2; I would like to thank Knut Martin Stünkel for pointing out the reference to Acts 17:18: “quidam autem epicurei et stoici philosophi disserebant cum eo et quidam dicebant quid vult seminiverbius hic dicere alii vero novorum daemoniorum videtur adnuntiator esse quia Iesum et resurrectionem adnuntiabat eis.”

4 cf. h XVII/2, p. 140, *Sermo* XLI, 1.

the Word of God itself has agency of ‘inviting to the meal’ (meaning: offering inspiration or Truth), ‘preparing itself’ (meaning: the Word of God as mediator personally prepares the Scriptures which are called the Word of God) and ‘serving it’ (meaning: ‘Word of God’ as subject presents itself as object to the supposed ‘guest’ or believers). Therefore, by being aware of the identification of the Word of God with Christ, the auto-reflexivity of the Word of God itself in person as messenger as well as being content, i.e. being the message, accumulates multilayers of metaphoric meaning, and thus, accelerates implications of being one and the very same all along (Oneness, Truth).

Cusanus seems to take that argument (“Christus dat figuras,” *Sermo XLI*, 1) as a justification for himself as a preacher to follow the example of Christ by using figurative speech or employing metaphors. Even more parallels can be seen concerning auto-reflexivity when the preacher reflects on the preacher’s activity of composing sermons in the genre of the sermon in *Sermo XLI*. For the readers of his sermons to better understand the employed metaphors, Cusanus takes many domains of everyday life to serve as sources to provoke similarities to their target of the divine or to imply familiar structures to the unknown.<sup>5</sup> In the very same manner, Christ, being both the son of man and the Son of God, mediates between humankind and their creator by offering nourishment for the body as well as for the spirit.<sup>6</sup> [3]

## Metabolic Processes of Digestion as Metaphors of Appropriation

Cusanus’ approach to illustrate the process of internalizing the teachings of Christ is that of metaphorical food to be digested: [4]

Sit igitur exercitium nostrum hodiernum in hiis punctis versari aliquantulum gradatim quamlibet doctrinam masticantes, ut comperta dulcedine cuiuslibet spiritus noster avidius reficiatur.<sup>7</sup> [5]

Therefore, let us now focus on these points, chewing over each teaching bit by bit, so that our mind may be more eagerly refreshed by the sweetness of each teaching.<sup>8</sup> [6]

The very first step of digestion takes place in the oral cavity by taking food from the external into our internal processing system. The mechanical process of mastication allows us to prepare digestible compounds for chemical digestion in the further digestive tracts.<sup>9</sup> The example given in *Sermo XLI*, 7 shows Cusanus’ approach to engaging with [7]

5 The process of familiarization was also discerned by Hans Blumenberg ([1979] 1990, 11–12), concerning mythmaking as strategy, i.e. mythmaking as human ability (born out of necessity) to sustain in life-threatening environments and perform some kind of self-empowerment by familiarizing the unknown.

6 cf. h XVII/2, p. 140, *Sermo XLI*, 1.

7 h XVII/2, p. 145, *Sermo XLI*, 6.

8 Ibid., translated and underlined by the author.

9 cf. Art. “Digestion,” in *Wikipedia*. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digestion> (accessed March 14, 2025).

spiritual teaching as if it were food to be internally processed, or from an abstract point of view: incorporating, i.e., taking something from the outside of oneself into the inside. So far, appropriation in the form of digestion may literally be the source domain for familiarizing the unknown, like incorporating an external object that is believed to be nutritional or energizing into our own living system, as Cusanus states in *Sermo XLI*, 15:

Dicit sanctus Paulus Ad Romanos 1° ‘iustum ex fide vivere’<sup>10</sup>. Unde videtur fidem cibum esse spiritus nostri, ac quod operetur in spiritu effectum cibationis, prout cibus materialis in stomacho. [8]

Nam homo non movetur ad capiendum cibum nisi fide refectiois. Nam si credit ipsum cibum habere cibandi virtutem, ipsum sumit; si non, etiamsi bonus foret, non sumit. [9]

St. Paul says in Romans 1:17 that “the righteous lives by faith”. So, faith seems to be a nourishment of our spirit, which causes nourishment in the spirit, as bodily food does in the stomach. [10]

For man is moved to eat food only by faith in a refreshment. If he believes the food to have nourishing value, he takes it; if not, he does not take it, even if it were good. [11]

Speaking of refreshment or nourishment, in *Sermo XLI*, 2–3, the preacher compares himself to a baker providing bread to the church: the bakery craftsman by making and delivering bread as food in the literal sense, the ecclesiastic orator by composing and delivering a sermon as food in an allegorical sense. Like dishes that need to be prepared, ‘bread’ also has to undergo a (chain of) process of a skillful preparation: from separating the grain of wheat from the outer bran parts to grinding<sup>11</sup> the grain in order to ‘get to marrow’ (*pervenire ad medullam*<sup>12</sup>) and hence unfold the nutritional part and its flavorful gustatory quality.<sup>13</sup> These processing steps can be seen as an anticipated catabolic process, a breaking down of compounds to release energy. The grinding process, due to pursuing the unfolding of the nourishing compound, ultimately aims to ease the reception, i.e. the digestion of the nutritional parts for they are uncovered through former processing. In the context of bread-making then, the ground flour needs to be mixed with other ingredients for a digestible and enjoyable bread to be produced. This [12]

10 *Rom* 1:17.

11 If interested in the topic of grinding, the mill or the miller, Viki Ranff has contributed a chapter on this subject in this special issue (2025).

12 Cusanus seems to refer to Augustine’s treatise *In Ioannis Evangelium Tractatus CXXIV*, in this case on *Joh* 6:9. Thanks to Reinhold F. Glei for pointing out this reference to be considered from Augustine’s *Tractatus XXIV*, 5 of *Expositio super Johannem evangelista* about the Five Books of Moses and how hard it is to get to their understanding (*pervenire ad medullam*): “Breviter ut curramus, quinque panes intelliguntur quinque libri Moysi: merito non triticei, sed hordeacei; quia ad Vetus Testamentum pertinent. Nostis autem hordeum ita creatum, ut ad medullam eius vix perveniatur: vestitur enim eadem medulla tegmine paleae, et ipsa palea tenax et inhaerens, ut cum labore exuatur. Talis est littera Veteris Testamenti, vestita tegminibus carnalium sacramentorum: sed si ad eius medullam perveniatur, pascit et satiat.”

13 Cf. h XVII/2, p. 140–141, *Sermo XLI*, 2–3.

building-up production step can be seen as an anabolic process,<sup>14</sup> which precedes the physiological internal catabolism.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, the quality of sweetness (*suavitas*) is frequently mentioned as a gustatory quality to metaphorically express *spiritual delight* or *stimulating inspiration*, e.g. in *Sermo XXXVII*, 16: “Deinde ‘donum sapientiae’, ut gustet, quam ‘suavis est Dominus’<sup>16</sup> etc.” In several sermons, the connection between mental processing and degustation is made, e.g. in *Sermo XXXVII*, 6:

Nos autem homines participamus hunc motum universitatis non tantum, ut simus, non tantum, ut vivamus, sed ut simus et vivamus et intellectualiter ipsum esse omnipotentiae et ipsam vitam sapientiae aeternae ac ipsam bonitatem in fonte degustemus. [14]

But we humans participate in this movement of the world not only to be, not only to live, but to be and to live and to spiritually taste the true being of omnipotence, the true life of eternal wisdom and true goodness in its origin.<sup>17</sup> [15]

In addition, the polysemy of “sapor”—meaning both *to know* as well as *to taste*—converges in the metaphorical meaning-use of digestion for mental processing. [16]

In *Sermo XLI*, 29 Cusanus explicitly situates digestion within the internal organs: [17]

Et natura ad finem, ut hoc conservaretur diutius, fecit corpus cum membris. Et quoniam non reperit conformitatem in loco uno—‘ex hiis enim nutrimur, ex quibus sumus’—, fecit ‘animal gressibile’, ut pro nutrimento quaerat conformia: Dedit [sibi] manus, ut extrahat de alio loco; dedit oculos, ut videat, si est; aures, ut audiat, ubi quaerat; dentes, ut molat; stomachum, ut coquat; hepar, ut convertat; et ita de aliis. [18]

And so that it continues to be preserved, nature has created the body with its limbs. And since it did not find equality in one place—for we are nourished by what we are—it [nature] created a living being that can walk so that it can seek the food that corresponds to it. It [nature] gave it hands to fetch something from another place, eyes to see if something is there, ears to hear where to look, teeth to chew, the stomach to digest, the liver to process [the food]; The same can also be said of the other [organs].<sup>18</sup> [19]

14 “Anabolism is the set of constructive metabolic processes where the energy released by catabolism is used to synthesize complex molecules. In general, the complex molecules that make up cellular structures are constructed step-by-step from smaller and simpler precursors,” Art. “Metabolism,” in *Wikipedia*. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metabolism> (accessed March 14, 2025). For further information, see Judge and Dodd (2020).

15 Preceding anabolic process in the body, when the digested bread is being broken down to its compounds for the molecules to build up organic structures and provide energy for the physiological system, cf. Art. “Metabolism,” in *Wikipedia*. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metabolism> (accessed March 14, 2025). For further information, see Judge and Dodd (2020).

16 *Ps* 33:9: “gustate et videte quoniam bonus Dominus beatus vir qui sperat in eo,” <https://www.die-bibel.de/bibel/VUL/PSA.33> (accessed February 24, 2025).

17 English translation by the author.

18 Translated and underlined by the author.

With that physiological understanding, Nicholas of Cusa uses the digestive process of metabolism to convey transubstantiation, e.g. in *Sermo XXVII*, 6: [20]

Secundo, quo modo se dedit in cibum et potum vitae, qui “vita”<sup>19</sup> erat, ut sciremus vitale alimentum, etiam in unitate cum ceteris hominibus sumptum, non praestare nobis vitam spiritus nisi in ipso. Hoc trahitur ex eo, quia etsi calicem vini apostoli inter se divisissent, in unitate et caritate nihilominus pro perfecta vita assequenda alimenta in suum corpus transsubstantiavit et tradidit, ut scirent, quo modo alimentum vitae est caritas, qua ecclesia unitur Christo, capiti suo, et per ipsum Deo.<sup>20</sup> [21]

Secondly, how he, who was “life”,<sup>21</sup> gave himself as food and drink unto life, that we might know that the life-giving food, though we received it in union with others, grants us spiritual life only in him. This is seen in the fact that, although the apostles had shared the cup of wine in unity and love with one another, for the attainment of perfect life he changed the bread into his body and hand it over to <them>, so that they might recognize that the bread of life is love, through which the Church is united with Christ, its head, and through him with God.<sup>22</sup> [22]

Figuratively illustrating the converting process of transubstantiation in *Sermo CLXXVIII*, 6, the following passage in Chapter 7 of the very same sermon the digestive process is parallelized with spiritual conversion: [23]

Anima sic complexionata est aptus cibus, ut Deus Pater mediante caritate, quae est Spiritus Sanctus, digerat calore fidei, sublimet calore spei et convertat calore caritatis in membra verbi seu Christi. Christus enim est corpus Dei, in quo Deus ‘habitat corporaliter’,<sup>23</sup> ut dicit Paulus. Fides igitur est ut calor stomachi in corpore Christi, spes ut calor hepatis, et caritas ut calor spiritus membris inhaerentis. [24]

Deus est cibus spiritus nostri. Nam spiritus noster cibum vitae suae mediante calore amoris digerit fide, sublimat spe, et unit dilectione. [25]

A soul composed in this way is suitable food for God the Father to digest by means of love, which is the Holy Spirit, through the warmth of faith, to purify and sublimate through the warmth of hope, and to transform through the warmth of love into members of the Word or Christ. For Christ is the body of God, in whom God ‘dwells bodily’, as Paul says (Co 2:9). So faith is, as it were, the warmth of the stomach in the body of Christ, hope the warmth of [26]

19 *Joh* 14:6: “dicit ei Iesus ego sum via et veritas et vita nemo venit ad Patrem nisi per me”, <https://www.die-bibel.de/bibel/VUL/JHN.14.6> (accessed February 24, 2025).

20 *h* XVII/2, p. 8, underlined by the author.

21 *Joh* 14:6: “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”

22 Translated and underlined by the author.

23 *Co* 2:9: “quia in ipso inhabitat omnis plenitudo divinitatis corporaliter”, <https://www.die-bibel.de/bibel/VUL/COL.2.9> (accessed February 24, 2025).

the liver, and love the warmth of the Spirit who is in the members. God is the food of our spirit. For our spirit digests the food of its life by means of the warmth of love in faith, purifies it in hope, and unites it in love.

It is remarkable how Cusanus pairs ‘faith’, ‘hope’, and ‘love’ with the gastro-internal organs in correspondence to their specific digestive function. ‘Faith’ as trust or strong belief can be understood as ‘affection’ or in a directional sense as ‘moving towards something’; ‘hope’ as putting aside all doubts or disbelief; finally, love as the unification of purified essence that is one and the same. Comparing these processes with the chemical digestion, one may assume parallels between the physical and the spiritual: the stomach as a digestive tract to retain food and further process the extraction of nutrients,<sup>24</sup> the liver filters the blood by separating the useful nutrients from toxins or waste;<sup>25</sup> the spirit now as being that is of the essence of the Divine can, being purified, unite with the same divine essence that is God.<sup>26</sup> Like food being cleansed in the preparation process, Cusanus points at purifying and maintenance instructions made by God in *Sermo XXX*, 5.<sup>27</sup> [27]

One more component that has to be highlighted is the ‘warmth’ (*calor*) that Cusanus states to be needed in all steps: *calor fidei, calor spei, calor caritatis: calor stomachi, calor hepatis, calor spiritus*. It seems like Cusanus follows the Galenical teaching that heat acts as some kind of catalyst for metabolic processes like digestion to take place.<sup>28</sup> Thus, for Cusanus *calor amoris* seems to be the driving force, i.e. the catalyst for digestion or appropriation to begin with. [28]

## Conclusion

Considering the metaphors used and the parallels made by Nicholas of Cusa, the digestive process, whether physiological or intellectual, has to undergo several steps: Preparation (selection, cleansing, processing or cooking, serving; applied on preaching: compiling Scriptures of the Bible for a sermon, elaborate on subject/truth, writing and delivering the sermon); catabolism (breaking down complex structures to further process, whether in regards to food to be portion by mastication or teachings to be taken step by step); anabolism (building up molecular compounds to implement them into the body or, metaphorically speaking, belief system). The catalyst or the driving force for digestion or internalization to take place is love, the attraction to another in accordance. The integration of an external object is accomplished by appropriation, meaning adopt it, [29]

24 cf. Art. “Stomach,” in *Wikipedia*. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stomach> (accessed March 14, 2025).

25 cf. Art. “Liver,” in *Wikipedia*. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liver> (accessed March 14, 2025).

26 See h XVIII/4, pp. 285–288, *Sermo CLXXVIII*, 7.

27 h XVII/2, pp. 43–44, *Sermo XXX*, 5: “Et adverte hic causam, quare Deus dedit leges multas purgatorias et conservatorias; ac quo modo Deus non solum dedit leges, per quas anima ad maiorem curvitatē non rueret, sed se ipsam ad rectitudinem, quantum humaniter posset, reduceret, ut sic capax fieret gratiæ altioris, sed etiam, ut sic anima in aequalitate et pietate virtutum corpus etiam minus inficeret. Nam passiones animæ corpori influunt impressiones, sicut videmus ex ira frequenti cholera augeri etc.”

28 See Lewis (2023, 275).



assimilate it, transform it into the body or living system. One could possibly argue that the metaphors may stem from alchemical teaching and understanding.<sup>29</sup> Yet, being considered to take on a physiological point of view like in modern times sciences does not categorically contradict the mystical tradition of alchemy. The processes of energy being transformed in metabolic pathways still conform with the meaning behind the alchemical formula ‘solve et coagula,’ for those metabolic processes do exactly dissolve compounds in order to be (re)build into a new structure and essentially become something else. Cusanus seems, e.g. by the employment of metaphors of everyday life, to raise awareness that the Divine is not exclusively transcendent and unreachable but beyond the distinction between immanence and transcendence being recognizable in every aspect of life. The question to be raised is if Cusanus employs more specific knowledge about digestion that is in accordance with modern day sciences on the one hand, and on the other hand provides insight how to approximate the Divine.

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29 As argued in the presentation of Witalij Morosow “Venturing with Cusanus: On Alchemical Metaphorics in the Writings of Nicholas of Cusa” during the conference “Exploring the Cosmos: Unraveling Cusanus’ Metaphors”, 15–16 June 2023, organized by Linda Simonis and Knut Martin Stünkel from CRC 1475 at the Department of CERES, Ruhr-University Bochum.