

MARCH/APRIL  
2004

# RITE

Foundations of the Liturgical Movement,  
Part III 4

Contemporary Eucharistic Experiences 9

Giving Due Notice 14



# Eat, Drink—Contemporary Eucharistic Experiences

Eating is one of our most basic needs and something that we may take for granted. For some time now I have been musing about the eucharist—specifically about our experience of eucharist as meal. In our society, that experience has very different connotations for us than for the 12 people who gathered in the upper room or for the early church communities gathered in their house churches.

## ■ Appetizers (Introduction)

Recently I went to lunch with a friend. She picked the place: Space Alien's Grill.<sup>1</sup> As one might imagine, the decor followed an outer space theme: green space men, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and so forth. The lights were purple, green, and silver. Moons and stars glowed all around the room. Kids loved it! Some sort of outer space reference had been added to the name of every dish on the menu and a couple of extra bucks had been added to each price. Even our waitress was kind of spacey. While the restaurant was noted for its barbecued ribs, I found myself so distracted by the loud noises and all the special effects that it was hard to enjoy the meal or talk with my friend. Afterward, I walked away feeling disappointed, as if an opportunity had been missed, yet I heard other folks saying, "Wow, that was neat! We'll have to come back here soon."

The whole experience made me think about the different types of meals we eat, and our different expectations. In America people seem to be eating at home less and less. And if they do, the family is seldom gathered around the table. Even our contemporary architecture reflects this, often trading a formal dining room for a breakfast bar. According to the *Restaurants U.S.A.* November 2000 issue, the "average annual consumption of commercially prepared meals has increased by roughly 15 billion meals since 1981, when an average of 3.7 meals per person, per week were consumed—an annual total of 38.4 billion meals."<sup>2</sup> A couple of years ago I heard about a mother calling to her family that it was time for dinner. She waited and waited for her smallest child to arrive at the table. Eventually, she found the child in the family minivan, ready to go eat!

What does this have to do with our celebration of the eucharist? Everything.

---

JILL MARIA MURDY



I think our experiences and expectations about meals affect our experiences and expectations about eucharist. This article will walk you through several examples of meals and Masses, offering some questions and reflections about each in the hopes they will whet your appetite to further explore this topic in your own parish.

## ■ Fast Food

We are a fast food society, whether it means stopping in Starbucks to get coffee for a morning commute or dragging the kids through a drive-up window between soccer and piano lessons. The dollar menu is our friend. As a single person, I find this approach is often easier than cooking a meal at the end of a long day with strange working hours. Working at a fast food joint is almost a rite of passage for teenagers, and many senior citizens pick up supplementary income there as well. Fast food offers the following:

1. Speed. We are usually waiting impatiently to rush off somewhere else.
2. Familiarity. We order “the number three combo” or a tall nonfat latte, no foam. We know the ritual. We know the drill. We don’t expect any surprises.
3. Value. We know almost exactly how much it will cost before we order. Quality, taste, and presentation matter little since we’re just wolfing it down.

There is a slightly irreverent joke floating around on the Internet about the young priest putting in a modern, drive-through confessional with a sign saying, “toot and tell or go to hell.” The problem is that many folks *want* the sacraments to be that easy. The quicker Mass can be done,

the better. Don’t throw in any of that extra stuff like a sprinkling rite or a baptism or even the Gloria, because it takes too long. In my parish, if things run late during football season, it means folks will get home late for a Green Bay Packers kickoff, and then you

really hear about it. We’ve all heard people say, “Now Father Jim, he knew how to do Mass—25 minutes tops!”

If people are constantly looking at their watches instead of picking up the hymnal or reflecting on the eucharist they have just received, what *have* they received? We do not savor fast food—we gulp it down. This lack of thought can affect our reception of the eucharist. The new GIRM again emphasizes the place of silent reflection after the eucharist, providing for a time of meditation for priest and assembly after all have received.<sup>3</sup>

## ■ Formal Dining

Perhaps the extreme opposite of this is the concept of formal dining. We get all gussied up, make reservations, and go out to a meal. Here, atmosphere and service are important. The wine sommelier comes with his suggestions, the dinner is brought out in courses, and one may have an aperitif and appetizers. We expect to spend a long time. In general, these meals:

- are for special occasions;
- are seldom eaten alone, but involve family, friends, or business dealings;
- are more costly, and money is not an object;
- invite people to overindulge;
- foster high expectations.

Formal meals may be compared to what we call the “bells and smells” Masses, when every ounce of solemnity is displayed. It is wonderful to bring out all the extra trimmings for special liturgical occasions like the Triduum and Christmas, or when the bishop comes. There is an air of excitement and dignity in the worship. All the senses are stimulated. Because of this, it may seem that this eucharistic celebration is holier than another, when in reality it is simply another flavor. For some folks who are still smarting from Vatican II, it brings a longing for the good old days, and for others it makes them cringe, wondering if we are returning to a pre-Vatican II church. Ron Rolheiser drew some wonderful insights about this in his weekly columns last Lent.

He wrote the following:

Prayer is like eating. There needs to be a good rhythm between big banquets (high celebrations, high aesthetics, lots of time, proper formality) and the everyday family supper (simple, no frills, short, predictable). A family that tries to eat every meal as if it were a banquet soon finds that most of its members are looking for an excuse to be absent.<sup>4</sup>

We need balance in liturgy. The sheer abundance of opportunities for meal, symbol, and celebration should remind us how fortunate we are. In his essay “The Frequency of the Eucharist throughout History,” Robert Taft writes that “the greatest and most successful reform in Catholic history is surely the movement for the restoration of frequent communion.”<sup>5</sup> As we eat so bountifully, we should recall those who are less fortunate than us in both physical and spiritual nourishment.

## ■ Ethnic Meals

We are a multicultural and diverse world. On any given night, when a group of friends is trying to decide where to go for dinner, one will hear the following: “Do you feel like Chinese? Mexican? Italian? Indian? Japanese?” We are exposed to all of these. Any trip to the grocery store will allow you to mix and match these items, picking up tacos, hummus, pita bread, ziti, couscous, and fresh sushi. We do not even blink an eye any more. America has long been considered a melting pot of cultures. Now we are interacting with more non-European cultures.

Yet liturgically, some areas of the country are miles ahead of others at enculturation and incorporating others. In the twentieth century, parishes were often formed by ethnic groups as well as geographical boundaries. There was the Polish Catholic church, the Irish Catholic church, the German Catholic church, and never did they meet. The lack of ordained priests as well as cultural changes within neighborhoods has forced the closure and combining of some of those churches.

Saint Benedict the African parish in Chicago is a wonderful example of blended parishes that has frequently been used as a model for other churches. On the old cornerstone, it quotes the spiritual “There is a sweet, sweet, spirit here.”<sup>6</sup> I also take special delight in the name created when

Milwaukee merged three older, lower eastside parishes—Saint Hedwig; Saint Rita of Cascia; and Mary, Queen of the Holy Rosary—to become Three Holy Women.

But how do we welcome immigrant groups that are arriving now? Providing services in their languages is one way. In the archdiocese of Los Angeles, liturgy is celebrated in 33 different languages. Currently, my parish has a separate Mass in Spanish, but we are just taking baby steps toward a bilingual Mass. The archdiocese of Milwaukee is modeling this well, as many services combine English, Spanish, and Hmong.

Many congregations I have observed appear to be afraid of blending and enculturation. They don’t want their comfort disturbed. I have heard people say, “Well, there aren’t any Masses in German, and I’m of German ancestry, so why should there be a Mass in Spanish.” Many seem to forget that in the days of the European immigrant parishes, even when the Mass was recited in Latin, a priest often gave the homily in the native tongue of the parish.

As long as people think of “us” and “them,” there is work to do. When I think of the motley and varied crew that Christ gathered around him, with whom he broke bread, I think we still have much to learn.

How powerful could this bread, this shared eucharist, be in helping us overcome our barriers and differences! The bread and wine provide us with the gifts of unity to heal and reconcile.

## ■ Entertainment and Theme Restaurants

I started out by talking about my experience at Space Alien’s Grill, but that is only one of many “theme” restaurants. Think of the Hard Rock Café, the Rain Forest Café, Outback Steakhouse, Comedy Café, and a zillion other such chains. The common element in many of these restaurants is the diner’s desire to be *entertained*. Imagine how that might shape our expectations about eucharist.

Each week I am amazed at the people I see in church chomping their gum, sitting back in a passive mode as if they were at a ballgame, never picking up a hymnal. Yet people are flocking to contemporary mega-church worship services because, among other reasons, the music and style of presentation resembles what they experience in the entertainment media. One such church in Chicago draws over 15,000 people with its high-energy music, dramatics, and scripted productions. In this community the high-tech soundboard and lights (that would make any roadie drool) overshadow the altar in importance. Many newer churches of every denomination give in to pressure to join this genre.

Some contemporary liturgical music is written well, both musically and theologically, and engages the congregation in active participation. Unfortunately, the theology behind some of it is trite at best, and some pieces are arranged so that a rock and roll band does most of the work, and folks simply tap along as at a concert.

John Paul II wrote of the importance of good liturgical music in his 1999 *Letter To Artists*:



The church also needs musicians. How many sacred works have been composed through the centuries by people deeply imbued with the sense of the mystery! The faith of countless believers has been nourished by melodies flowing from the hearts of other believers, either introduced into the liturgy or used as an aid to dignified worship. In song, faith is experienced as vibrant joy, love, and confident expectation of the saving intervention of God.<sup>7</sup>

Another fine document to read and reflect on is *The Milwaukee Symposia for Church Composers*.<sup>8</sup> Good ritual should awaken us artistically and musically, just as the human story of the texts touches us deeply. Strong liturgical music is anything but passive. This document cautions those involved in liturgical and music ministry to watch the fine line between prayer and performance.

It is no coincidence that we use the expression “celebrate the eucharist,” or that one must come forward to receive communion. One cannot be passive and receive. One must at least stand and walk in procession.

Have you heard people say, “Well, I don’t sing because I don’t have a good voice?” Nonsense! People croak out “Take Me out to the Ballgame” no matter what they sound like. Similarly, one should not be ashamed to sing at Mass.

Lately I have taken a couple of interesting steps to encourage more participation. Sometimes I assign women or men to sing a specific verse of a hymn. The contrast is lovely, and I see a lot more men picking up their hymnals. On a very familiar communion hymn such as “We Are Many Parts,” I sometimes drop the accompaniment, and all

of a sudden the congregation hears itself singing loudly. There is something about a capella after instrumentation that seems to amplify the sound of voices.

There is no way to force people to participate. But we can provide opportunity and continual catechesis. We can invite and encourage. We can provide examples and make wise choices in our own liturgical planning that may make participation seem natural, not optional.

## ■ Family Dining

Gathering around a table, sharing a meal, sharing stories, sharing the highlights of a day—this would be the ideal model for both eucharist and the family meal. Unfortunately, that does not reflect our current cultural realities. A few restaurants like Cracker Barrel and Country Kitchen have tried to recreate that home style, and others have added to their menu comfort foods, such as macaroni and cheese, garlic mashed potatoes, and so forth. But how might a parish liturgy evoke the qualities of family dining? Most are too large to remind us of the small gatherings of the apostles, or of the early Christian house churches.

Jesus explained his coming death to the apostles over a meal in the upper room. He took something as ordinary as the sharing of bread and wine and forever changed the world. He said, “Do this in memory of me.” That moment of *anamnesis*, of *zikkaron*, of remembering, is memorialized as we respond, “Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus, come in glory.”

Every family has its home rituals. At times they mirror the rituals of the eucharist. The year my mother was dying of cancer, she turned our entire thanksgiving meal into an *anamnetic* experience for me, as she said, “Remember, we always put the cranberries in this bowl.” And “Remember, your father likes the stuffing like this.” It is when we can come in touch with this sense of worship, this sense of ritual in our daily life, that we can recognize the eucharist,

the Christ, in those around us. In the age of blended and nontraditional families, new rituals are often developed in order to meld varying worlds together. As a church, we need to explore this more, too.

Kevin Irwin describes this aptly in "The Critical Task of Liturgical Theology":

The issue is not sumptuous banquets over simple foods or feasting over modest food intake. The issue is to sacramentalize and ritualize whatever the domestic church shares as daily food and drink at table. This rit-



ualizing would include blessing the God of creation and redemption, the honor we show to each other when we are at table with them, and the conversations we have to show support for, and real interest in, others. In a culture of "meals on wheels" and "fast food" for quick consumption, do we not have to examine the bad habits of quick ingestion of food that forsake family unity, social interchange, and family ties? At a time when American culture prizes "prayer breakfasts" as evidence of religious sensibility and "power lunches" as evidence of how to influence people, a strong Catholic suit would be to probe the profoundly spiritual reality of dining together and the power of communion derived from meals taken in common, as well as the eucharistic communion of meals through, with, and in Christ.<sup>9</sup>

I have a dear friend who divides much of life into "big e's and little e's." Big e's are the moments that eucharist is shared within the context of the liturgy. Little e's are those Emmaus moments of grace, of agape, when we recognize Christ among us over a meal, or a moment of shared blessing and conversation. In a way it is simplistic, but I love the concept. It keeps one always open and hopeful, and thankful for the awareness of such an experience.

The basic elements of home should be a part of our worship, a part of our eucharist. By these I mean, hospitality

to our family and neighbors, everyone taking some part in the preparations for the meal, and giving thanks for that which we have received. John Westerhoff, in "Celebrating and Living the Eucharist: A Cultural Analysis," makes a similar assertion: "The church, we contend, can be such an intentional community, a human association of a particular kind that exists between and bridges life in our family/household and life in the society."<sup>10</sup>

## ■ Just Desserts (Conclusion)

I have made several observations about contemporary culture and dining and have related them to contemporary experiences of the eucharist. I have suggested how the pace of society, diversity of ethnic culture, and seeking of entertainment may be affecting our worship. I have asserted the value of the family meal as a rich, basic experience for families and society that could enhance our appreciation of eucharist as meal. What type of fare is your parish dishing out?

### NOTES

1. <http://www.spacealiens.cc/>
2. <http://www.restaurant.org/research/magarticle.cfm?ArticleID=138>
3. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 88.
4. <http://www.ronrolheiser.com>
5. Robert Taft, "The Frequency of Eucharist throughout History," in M. Collins and D. Powers, eds., *Can We Always Celebrate the Eucharist?* New York: Seabury Press, 1982, p. 19.
6. Saint Benedict, the African Church: <http://www.passionist.org/prc/sacredplace/benedict.htm>; <http://stbenedictwest-chicago.e-paluch.com/>
7. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_23041999\\_artists\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists_en.html), p. 13; see also Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, Liturgy Training Publications, 1999, p. 15.
8. Edward Foley, editor. *Liturgy Training Publications*, 1992.
9. Kevin Irwin, "The Critical Task of Liturgical Theology," in *Eucharist: Toward the New Millennium*. Liturgy Training Publications, 1997, p. 77.
10. John Westerhoff, in "Celebrating and Living the Eucharist: A Cultural Analysis," in *Alternative Futures for Worship: The Eucharist*, Bernard J. Lee, ed. Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 1987, p. 29.

**Jill Maria Murdy**  
is Director of  
Liturgy and Music at  
Saint Frances Cabrini  
Parish in West Bend,  
Wisconsin. She holds a  
Master of Arts in Liturgical  
Theology from the University  
of Notre Dame and has been  
involved in liturgical and pastoral  
ministry for over 20 years. She is also a wonderful  
cook! Her website is [jillmaria.com](http://jillmaria.com). Left and right  
photos on page 10 © Digital Stock 1996. Middle photo on  
page 10 and photos on page 12 © 2004 [www.clipart.com](http://www.clipart.com).  
Photo on page 13 © The Crosiers/Gene Plaisted, OSC.