

THE EUCHARIST AND MEALS

Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC

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Ideas for homilies don't always come easily. The Holy Spirit gives us priests a lot of help but ready-made homilies don't just drop out of heaven. God expects us to use our intellects and do our part to help develop a homily. And in the course of that process, the Holy Spirit inspires us, guides us and helps us. Sometimes, inspiration from the Holy Spirit for a homily comes from some of the most unlikely places.

This past week, nothing quite seemed to fall in place in my mind. Then, one day, as I was driving back from the store listening to program on NPR about the important role that meals play in movies, I realized that today's readings are essentially about food and about meals. For, if you remember, we heard from the first Book of Kings about the meals that the angel told Elijah to eat before undertaking the journey to Mount Horeb.¹ And then, in the Gospel Jesus spoke about the manna, which God gave the Israelites in the desert for their meals, as well as about the food of His own Body, that He gives us so that we may attain eternal life. He said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven ... and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."²

Meals are everywhere a part of our daily life, but few people today realize how important they are for us. Families used to eat together regularly every day but now our lives are full of so many things to do and places to go that there are many families where eating together is a rarity. But a growing body of scientific research is beginning to show us that the lack of this seemingly simple activity in the lives of families is perhaps one of the greatest factors contributing to the breakdown of families, as well as other problems in our society.

Here are some of the statistics. A survey conducted in 2006 by The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse discovered that “the more often children eat dinner with their families, the less likely they are to smoke, drink, or use drugs.” Findings from research conducted during the last fifty years show that family routines and rituals are significantly associated with a sense of identity, health, academic achievement and stronger family bonds for children. Family meals are one of those important routines and rituals. Scientific studies tell us that common family meals strengthen us physically, psychologically and spiritually.³ In fact, sitting down together with others for a meal is one of the practices that makes us distinctly human because animals don’t eat meals together. Meals have played such an important role in cultures throughout history that perhaps, our culture is so dysfunctional at least in part because so few families today gather for common meals.

“Eating together is a ritual, and rituals are powerful. Rituals are actions and habits that give shape, form, and meaning to our lives. Their habitual nature makes them an anchor for us and for our children in a fast-changing world.”⁴ Meals have played a large role in all traditional cultures. And perhaps this is why meals played such an important role in the life of Jesus Himself. All that one has to do is take a cursory look at the gospels and it easy to see that they are filled with meals.

When Jesus said to Levi, “Follow me,” the first thing this tax collector, whom we know as the apostle Matthew, did was to invite Jesus to his home for a meal. Jesus worked His first public miracle at a wedding feast. He showed that He had come to save everyone by eating at the homes of both Pharisees and public sinners. He gave some of His most profound teachings at meals, such as the time when Simon, a leading Pharisee, invited Him to dine at his house and a sinful woman from the city came in, bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. In watching this incident Simon had been harboring ill thoughts in

his heart, so Jesus turned to him and said: “Therefore I tell you, her sins which are many, are forgiven, for she loves much; but who is forgiven little, loves little.”⁵ He was talking about his host. One of Jesus’ greatest miracles, the multiplication of loaves was a grand meal on a hillside that prefigured the Eucharist. After walking all the way to Emmaus with two of His disciples the day after the Resurrection, it wasn’t until they had sat down with Jesus for a meal that they finally recognized Him. And as the Resurrected Christ stood on the shore of the Sea of Galilee as His apostles were out on the water fishing, what was the first thing He did when they had come ashore? He offered them a meal of roasted fish.

Meals are such a vital part of human culture, that it was only natural that Jesus would use them as vehicles in His mission to redeem mankind. And this is where I suddenly saw the connection between meals in the movies and today’s readings as I listened to that program. The commentator mentioned the movie “Babette’s Feast,” a movie in which a meal not only played a prominent role, but which was in its entirety all about one particular meal. Babette, one of the finest chefs in nineteenth-century Europe, who was accustomed to mingling with the high society of Paris, had lost her husband and son in an uprising and had to flee France, only to find herself seeking asylum with two unmarried sisters in a small Norwegian fishing village that was suffering internal discord. Although they knew nothing of her background, they took her in and then many years later, reluctantly agreed to let her prepare a grand meal for the anniversary of their father’s death. This meal was, for her, was a total self-emptying sacrifice, which in turn helped to heal divisions and return order among the people of the village, very much as God’s healing power of grace in the Eucharist. And the full extent of her sacrifice and the change it evoked in the people can only be seen in reference to a meal. The only way that one can understand the full impact of this movie is if it is seen as a symbolic representation of both the Last Supper and the Mass.

We can say that at the beginning of time, Adam and Eve brought sin and disorder into the world through a meal of sorts, by eating together of the forbidden fruit. But then, in the fullness of time, Jesus healed that rift between God and man through yet another meal, for His saving act of redemption began at a sacred meal the evening before He was to die on the Cross. And it was through the sacred ritual of this meal that He wished to perpetuate His sacrifice on Calvary and to remain with us until the end of time.

Meals have played an exceptionally important role in the culture of mankind. They are such an integral ritual in human culture that it is hard to imagine important moments of our lives without meals. Imagine a wedding, a Baptism, a funeral, an anniversary without a meal. Thus, it should be no surprise that “it is a biblical commonplace that God desires to express his intimacy with his people through a festive meal. In the prophet Isaiah, we find wonderful images of a great feast that God will host on the summit of the holy mountain”⁶ where He “will provide for all peoples a feast of rich food and choice wines, juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines.”⁷

“A meal at which the good things of this world become evocative of the divine presence and at which brothers and sisters sit down in intimacy with God and one another is a consistent biblical symbol of what God wants for us. It is absolutely no accident that Jesus takes up this theme [Himself].”⁸ It was by means of a meal that He desired to transmit the grace and benefits of His saving act of redemption on the Cross. By instituting the Eucharistic banquet at the Last Supper, Jesus turned a ritual meal of the Old Covenant into a memorial of His Passion and Death in the New Covenant, as well as a foretaste of the wedding feast of heaven. He chose to perpetuate His presence among us for all time by means of a ritualistic meal in which the food that we eat is His own life-giving flesh.

Twice, Elijah ate a simple meal of bread and water in order to sustain him on his journey of forty days and forty nights to Mount Horeb. Jesus gave us a sacred meal of bread and wine transformed into His own Body and Blood to sustain us on the journey through this life to the heavenly Mount Zion. He gave us Himself as the Bread of Life come down from heaven so that we might live forever with Him at the eternal wedding feast in heaven. He did this at a meal and told us: “Do this in remembrance of me.”⁹ “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.”¹⁰

Meals are important for families. The ritual of meals is important for a healthy culture. And meals have been important throughout salvation history. But one special meal in particular, that took place as the Old Covenant was coming to a close, assumed a particularly special significance and became the central ritual around which our entire faith revolves. Christ could have asked us to worship him by burning sacrifices to Him on an altar in a temple. But He didn't. Instead, he joined His oblation on the Cross to a sacred meal in which bread and wine, which help sustain our bodies as earthly food, become His Sacred Body and Blood to sustain us as heavenly food.

Just think! All of this from a little radio program! How mysterious the working of the Holy Spirit.

¹ 1 Kings 19:4-8.

² John 6:51.

³ McGrath, Tom, “Mealtime Matters,” pamphlet published by Loyola Press.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Luke 7:47.

⁶ Barron, Fr. Robert, *Eucharist*, (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York, 2008), 23.

⁷ Isaiah 26:6.

⁸ Barron, *Eucharist*, 23.

⁹ Luke 22:19.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:26.