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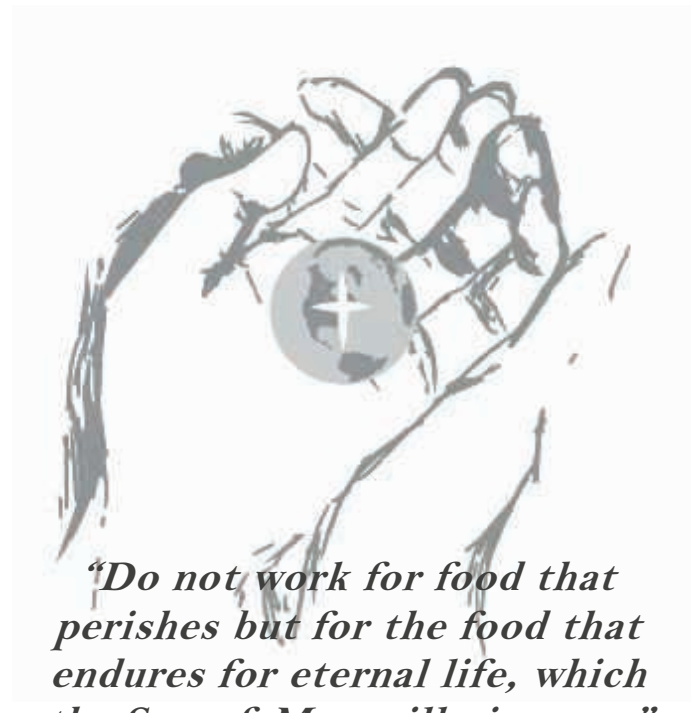
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# Food for the Journey: Holy Eucharist

BY TROY WOYTEK, CAMPUS MINISTER

**W**hen you think of Christmas dinner what comes to mind? Let me paint a picture of Christmas dinners I have experienced. It is both a picture that represents the current reality and the cosmic reality. By current I mean what is happening in the here and now and by cosmic I mean the reality that contains both the past & present and points to the future. There is a caste of characters at this meal, brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, children, in-laws, strangers, cousins, and you. Each brings their own story and each adds to the collective story of the group gathered. Whether it be grandma who says the oddest things or the



*“Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”*

*-John 6:27*

cousin who always has some new crises in her life or the quiet uncle who humbly attends the meal despite the many struggles he has faced in life, all who are gathered make the meal what it is and don't at the same time. Then of course there is the setting of the meal: nice linens, familiar space, candles, a large table, and the length of time everyone commits to being there. Every family has their traditions around Christmas, and often times specifically at dinner, whether it be certain prayers, songs, or blessings, and once the meal has begun the conversation can cover everything from catching up to bringing up old tensions. Finally, there is the food and drink—wine, bread, turkey, potatoes, stuffing, pie. This is a meal of both who we are and who we hope to be. So what does this all have to do with the Eucharist?

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## Source & Summit

The Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith. There are two main types of symbols in the Eucharist, which was instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper when he said, “do this in remembrance of me”: symbols of meal and symbols of sacrifice. In this article we will look at the meal aspect of how the Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith.

Christmas dinner serves as a great example of how the meal aspect of Eucharist is both source and summit. Eucharist is source for us in that it tells us who we are—when we gather on Sunday we are reminded of where we came from and where our spiritual home is—just as we are reminded of where we came from and who we are when we gather with those we love at Christmas dinner. It is also summit in that it tells us who we are called to be because our Eucharistic gathering is a taste of heaven on earth in that we see and experience Christ, whom we are to model our life after.

It is important to note though that just like our Christmas gatherings, how we are disposed to experience it effects how we receive it. Often times people go into holiday gatherings with lots of expectations about the people they gather with and the quality of time they spend with them. We may hope for a good time but expect it will be like it always has been: stressful, disappointing, boring, emotional, etc. If we go into meal expecting connection and nourishment then we are more likely to receive those and the same is for Eucharist, our disposition going into Mass effects our ability to receive Christ. So what can help our disposition to receive Christ in the Eucharist?

## Who is invited?

Jesus seems to be eating all the time in the Gospels and so we can learn a lot from his meal experiences, just as we can learn a lot from our own meal experiences, and how they predispose us toward receiving the love of Christ in the Eucharist.

### INCLUSIVE

Jesus ate inclusively in a variety of settings. If you look at all the meals he participates in everyone is represented, tax collectors, prostitutes, Pharisees, family, friends, strangers, young and old, male and female. And the Last Supper was no exception to that. Much like our own experiences of Christmas dinner, there was quite the caste of characters there. Every time we exclude someone from our meals, every time we exclude someone from Eucharist we must do so with caution.

### COMMUNAL

No one likes attending a meal with people they do not like or have grievances with. We see how awkward that makes our own Christmas dinners feel sometimes. But that is what Christ challenges us to do—to attend meal with friend and foe alike.

One year, when I was in high school, at the annual Christmas Eve dinner my parents hosted my cousin

brought her new boyfriend. There were two things that made this particular situation awkward for my family. Her fiancé did not speak English and he had two children from a previous relationship. I can recall the anxiety of many of my relatives leading up to that dinner and the disposition we were all in. It makes me think of what it must have been like for the Pharisees when the sinful woman washed Jesus’ feet with perfume. I think we missed the boat that evening about what meal can be. If we cannot accept the person next to us then we dare not step forward to receive Christ because we already denied him. When we swallow the body and blood of Christ, we swallow the community along with it.

### MEMORIAL

We come to meal with all our sufferings and joys; in a real way our history is part of the current reality of that meal. The same is true of the Eucharist. We are not simply recalling a past event, but we are living the reality of the Lord’s Supper, Christ throughout all of history in our lives now, nourishing our lives now. And we are not alone in that meal, the experience of past love ones lives on in us through meal experiences. I know in my Christmas meal tradition we take time to remember loved ones who used to physically sit at the table with us. The Eucharist does the same for us, we are gathered with the communion of saints in this everlasting meal of cosmic proportions, making the reality both in the here and now and beyond the here and now.



## Meaningful Food

Meaningful things happened when Jesus ate: miracles, healings, conversions, provocation. Do we come to Mass, the Eucharistic meal, expecting something to happen?

### DIVINE PRESENCE

This meal we experience is not about something but about encountering someone, Christ; and not only on the table through transformed bread and wine into his holy body and blood but he is also at the table through the community of believers dining together in a real way at the beginning of each week. **How do we experience him?** The divine is mediated through created matter (i.e. bread and wine, humans, etc.) and the participation in ritual, which uses created matter to create meaning, affirms our

identity as created beings. Or as author Andre DuBus put it, *“For ritual allows those who cannot will themselves out of the secular to perform the spiritual, as dancing allows the tongue-tied man a ceremony of love.”* Simply stated, the tangible is the language of God. Similarly, important meals in our lives involve rituals and traditions to help us capture the meaning of the event.

**ACTIVE PARTICIPATION**

Divine presence also demands our presence otherwise the transformation of the tangible into sacred does not take place. Finding meaning in this world, which is to say finding God in this world, demands our active cooperation—participation in the ritual, in meal, in relationships. When we gather around table at Christmas the significance of that meal isn’t simply the presence of food, people, plates, and glasses. The meaning happens once we *Take, Break, Give, and Eat* or when we begin to converse with each other. In order for us to encounter meaningfulness at Mass we have to actively participate. Just like Christmas dinner, Mass is half fancy dinner—in that we invest ourselves in the process, but it is also half potluck—in that we have to bring something to it.

**NOURISHMENT**

Have you ever attended a meal when people you love are missing? It is just not as satisfying as the meal when all are gathered. When God’s people assemble they nourish each other. Meal gives us physical nourishment in food and personal nourishment in communal presence. What makes Eucharist so unique is what we read in the Gospel of John, *“Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”*

Eucharist nourishes us so that we may go out into the world to live the Gospel of Christ. Often we read of Jesus combining service with meal experiences. We can’t be taking, eating, adoring if we are not acting on the life of Christ. We have already denied Christ’s presence if we are not serving our neighbor. And isn’t that so true in our own meal experiences. If we simply take when at meal with others by simply eating and not contributing, whether through food we bring or conversation, then the experience becomes empty for us.

**Commitment = Significance**

Jesus ate regularly with those around him and with those whom he wanted to affect. He was committed to meal, to eating with people he loved. What holds us back from commitment to our faith? To our community? To Christ?

**IT AIN’T FAST FOOD!**

There is nothing special about fast food. No community experience, no time for significant conversation, no intentional presence, and certainly no commitment. Simply getting food into our bellies, on the run, so that our lives will not be interrupted. If there is anything more frequent than meal in Jesus’ life it is his occurrences of interruption in people’s lives. But interruption requires commitment, commitment to the time it takes to be with people in the interruption of life. That is what meal is—an interruption of everything else so that we can sit down with others to enjoy presence, food, conversation and

reflect on life. Studies show that the more often families eat together, the less likely kids are to smoke, drink, do drugs, get depressed, develop eating disorders and consider suicide, and the more likely they are to do well in school, delay having sex, eat their vegetables, learn big words and know which fork to use. However, in our fast food culture the communal meal has become less common, which could probably be tied to decreased Mass attendance. If you are used to eating on the run, who has time for an hour long meal on Sunday morning? Yet it is the regular meal that produces the most significance in our lives. Eucharist challenges us to unplug from the digital world, take time to reflect, and be present to those around us in meal.

**RELATIONSHIP**

If we gather for meal we are committing to relationship with those whom we gather. This is why Christmas dinner can be so difficult sometimes, we don’t want to be in relationship with some of the people gathered at the table with us or it takes a lot of work to be in relationship with some people. Yet we see time and time again Jesus’ willingness to put in the work necessary to create and sustain relationships through meal. It would have been way easier to dismiss the Pharisees when they judged the woman with perfume or it would have been easier to turn that woman away, but as our first section indicated Jesus welcomed all to the table. It would also be easier for us to turn away the crazy uncle who comes to Christmas dinner or to ignore the needy grandfather, but meal demands a commitment to community and those who gather, otherwise it would simply be a party of one. The beauty of the Eucharistic meal is that it both requires the participation of individuals and yet at the same time transcends the qualities of each individual. Coming together regularly, even with those whom we prefer not to, as Jesus teaches us, deepens the bond of the Body of Christ and challenges us then to go deeper in our personal relationship with Christ.

**“If we can’t accept the person next to us then we dare not step forward to receive Christ because we already denied him.”**

**Question Box**

- 1) What is the most nourishing part of the Eucharist to you?**
- 2) How does Jesus’ way of doing meal challenge our celebration of Eucharist? And to our celebration of meal outside the Eucharist?**
- 3) What predispositions get in the way of you experiencing the meaningfulness of Eucharist?**



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