
One Hour of the Millenium

IT IS a singularly sensual experience. Sometimes an assault upon, at other times a caress of, the senses. A graceful curve or the play of candlelight upon one's companion's face attracts one's vision. Heady and intoxicating fragrances. Tastes — sweet or salty, bitter or sour, hot or delicate — delight the tongue. Moisture, the rough or smooth texture of skin, warmth or coolness, all are found by touching fingers. And sounds! Music, perhaps, and the accents of pleasure from one's companion. It is a singularly sensual experience, and it can and does have significant spiritual implications.

Eric is a priest in the Episcopal Church of the USA, and bravely volunteered this article in response to an invitation to members of the ANGLICAN Internet mailing list.

It is, of course, the sharing of a meal, of good food and fine wine with a good friend, family members or intimate associates. Any who doubt either its sensuality or its spirituality clearly have never seen the eating scene in the movie *Tom Jones*, nor the dinner sequence in the movie *Babette's Feast*! That former, in which Mrs. Waters and Tom dine together in an inn and end up sharing other sensual pleasures later in the evening, though a minor incident in Henry Fielding's novel, is the epitome of sensual dining, while the latter is a deeply moving portrayal of the spirituality of communal dining.

Babette's Feast, based on Isak Dinesen's short story, is about more than the eating of food. It is also a story of the sacrificial giving of the cook. There is an almost Zen quality to the intensity of Babette's preparation of the banquet which consumes, first, her French lottery winnings of 10,000 francs and, second, the petty antagonisms of the minister's flock. She puts her entire attention into the construction of the meal in precisely the way Abbess Koei Hoshino of Sanko-in, a Zen convent in Tokyo, Japan, recommends: "As the process of preparing food takes over, there is *mu* (nothingness), as we say in Zen. ... When you are doing your best, you get to the point where you are just doing your best, not thinking of it."¹

And the minister's flock — torn by trivial bickering and petty strife — derive the spiritual benefit of a lovingly prepared meal. "When we eat food prepared in this careful way," says Abbess Koei, "with the six flavors, then we receive three graces from the food. First, we become healthy in mind and body; second, we have the ability to be thankful for all things, and to maintain that state of mind; third, we are able to work for others with our mind and body. We will be able to give to others. Those are the virtues we receive."²

The meals in *Tom Jones* and *Babette's Feast* are fictional, but every meal partaken with others shares, to a greater or lesser extent, the sensuality and the spirituality of the dinners depicted therein. "Every meal," writes Brother Peter Reinhart of Christ our Savior Brotherhood, "whether we are conscious of it or not, is a form of communion."³ As Jack Goody has written, "Those who eat and drink together are by this very act tied to one another by a bond of friendship and mutual obligation."⁴

For the Christian, and especially for the Anglican Christian who lives and moves and has her being within the Eucharistic community of a God made known in the breaking of bread, this is intuitively obvious. Our tradition is steeped in Biblical images of the meal as the mark and crown of friendship and fraternity, of common union and mutual obligation.



King David showed kindness to Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, promising him, "You yourself shall eat at my table always" (2 Sam 9.6), which the Second Book of Samuel reports he always did (2 Sam 9.13). David charged his son Solomon to "deal loyally ... with the sons of Barzillai the Gileadite, and let them be among those who eat at your table" (1 Kings 2.7). Both the Second Book of Kings and the prophet Jeremiah report that the exiled King of Judah, Jehoiachin, enjoyed the favor of King Evil-merodach of Babylon and that "every day of his life he dined regularly at the king's table" (Jer 52.33).

Numerous other examples of the Hebrew Scriptures' understanding of the spiritual bond of the table could be cited. The Psalmist frequently used the feast as an image of the goodness of God and as a depiction of spiritual health: "They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights" (Ps 36.8); "My soul is satisfied with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips" (Ps 63.5).

Jesus and the Pharisees both knew well the sacred nature of table fellowship. In each of the synoptic gospels the Pharisees are reported to have criticised Jesus for sitting at table with tax collectors and sinners (Matt 11.18-19; Mark 2.16; Luke 5.32; 7.33-34). And Jesus did so quite intentionally, answering his critics, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2.17). So, for Jesus and for those who call him Lord, table fellowship is a cause and a sign of spiritual wholeness.

Thomas Moore, an American Roman Catholic and former Servite seminarian, writes of the table fellowship of the monks:

As monks, we didn't dine, we refected. We never used the word, but the room in which we ate, the long hall with tables set on the outer sides only, we called the refectory. The word refers to being remade or refreshed at a meal. Nonmonks use a similar word, restaurant, which means to be restored.

Still, the refectory had its own style of dining and its own method of restoration. Most days we ate in silence. I wonder if the silence that sometimes descends upon people at a restaurant is due to a passing monkish spirit and not to a failure of communication.

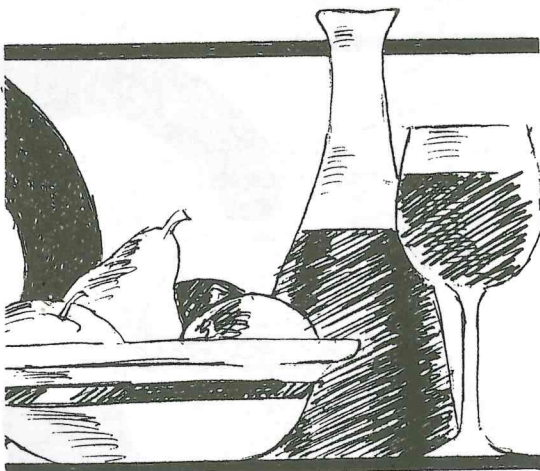
Often a brother would read a thoughtful book aloud while the rest of us ate — being restored in mind as well as body. Certain restaurants — delis, coffee shops, bakeries — seem suited for reading while eating, thus keeping refecation alive. Thought for food.⁵

Brother Peter Reinhart echoes Moore when he suggests that "restaurants are like secular churches, home of both eros and agape, in which the latent possibility of sacramental magic always exists."⁶

The spiritual nature of table fellowship irrupts into even the most secular of meals. Dumitru Prunariu, a Romanian cosmonaut, hinted at this intrusive holiness when he wrote about eating on board a space craft: "A cosmonaut, should he eat bread somewhere near Mars baked from wheat raised in a space laboratory, will, believe me, think of the grain and flowers gathered on Earth!"⁷ Perhaps Prunariu sensed the spiritual truth that "with our bodies we are bound to the earth and food is our umbilical cord."⁸

That this is so should be of little surprise to an Anglican. After all, ours is a tradition with a "sacramental view of the universe, both of its material and of its spiritual elements."⁹ Many writers in the American Church have followed Archbishop Temple in expounding such a view as characteristic of Anglican spirituality.

Frank E. Wilson, sometime Bishop of Eau Claire, for example, wrote:



We live in a sacramental world. ... Man himself is a sacrament. His bodily activities are outward expressions of the will and purpose by which he is animated. ... Food is a sacrament of nourishment.¹⁰

Louis Weil, an eminent American liturgist, has commented that Anglicanism is characterized by "a sacramental view in which ordinary things — ordinary bread, ordinary people — can be instruments of grace," a view which "faces us with God's immediacy to our lives."¹¹

Anglicans, then, should nod vigorously in agreement when Brother Peter Reinhart writes, "Food is not only a basic human need, it is also a sacred symbol: God in a multitude of forms and bodies. It is a focal point of fellowship and celebration."¹² For us, it comes as no surprise that "when people come together who have not previously met they are a bit reserved; but when food is introduced there is an immediate change in the atmosphere. The power of the festive table begins to operate, bringing a feeling of gentleness and warmth."¹³

Grounded in a catholic centering on the Eucharist as the principal act of worship, we know that the table fellowship of an ordinary meal is the basis of that sacrament. An Anglican protests when the Eucharistic celebration is separated from its common heritage in the shared feast: "We do not make the sacraments more sacred by dehumanizing them, by deemphasizing their obvious relation to and grounding in actions basic to our human nature, actions as basic as bathing and eating and drinking."¹⁴

We know that such separation, such deemphasis robs the common meal of its spiritual core and renders liturgical worship incomprehensible. It is such separation and deemphasis that leads Brother Reinhart to refer to the *'hidden unrealized potential'* of every meal "to recreate the mystery of the Last Supper, Paschal Feast, the entry of the Uncreated into creation."¹⁵ It is such separation and deemphasis that leads Roman Catholic liturgist Joseph Gelineau to write:

People who are not accustomed to poetic, artistic or musical language or symbolic acts among their means of expression and communication find the liturgy like a foreign country whose customs and language are strange to them.¹⁶

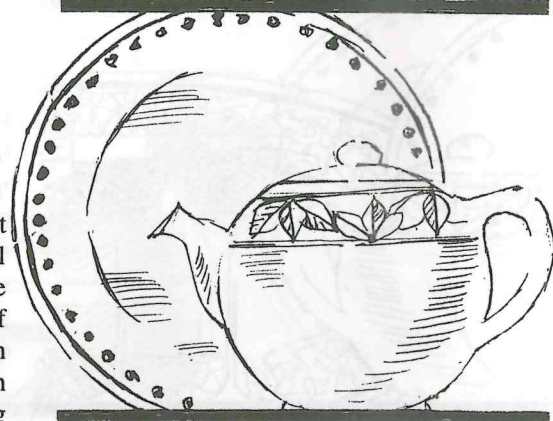
In the Anglican spiritual tradition,

The world is sacramental. The sacraments of the church lie at one end of a continuum of varying possibility of the physical world employed symbolically as being an instrument for our coming into the presence of the God who is there in his creation all along.¹⁷

The table fellowship of a shared meal also lies on that continuum. Anglican recognition of the shared spiritual heritage of everyday communal dining and the Eucharistic banquet is the corrective for the complaints of both Reinhart and Gelineau. Writing in *Ministry Development Journal*, a periodical formerly published by the American Episcopal Church, Judith March Carlson made this clear in her discussion of "Children at the Table:"

Special meals are part of family life. The occasions differ the world over, but every adult can remember the excitement of such days. Thanksgiving, Christmas, and birthdays are such occasions for your children. They remember such times with good feelings. Here is a link to the liturgy as a special meal and a time of remembering that sacred time when God in Christ walked among human beings.¹⁸

For an Anglican, then, the table fellowship of any meal, whether the Eucharist or a family dinner, is a foretaste of the Heavenly Banquet, when "many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 8.11). Although we are accustomed to thinking of that time when Jesus has promised to come in to us and eat with us, and we with him (Rev 3.20) in terms of the Eucharist, I find this image, from a poetic sermon by Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig entitled "God Is a Woman and She Is Growing Older," equally moving:



I imagine that God would usher us into her kitchen,
seat us at the table, pour two cups of tea.¹⁹

The simple *koinonia* of a shared cup of tea is as good an image of the Heavenly Banquet as any feast at King David's royal table.

It is not the substance of the meal, although "there have to be enough textures, flavors, colors, and shapes to please the palate, the eye, and the sense of smell,"²⁰ which make a shared meal memorable. It is, rather, the company in which it is eaten, those with whom it is shared. "We should be," as Abbess Koei says, "surprised by the food and moved in our heart."²¹ However, it is not the food which causes the surprise and the movement; it is the spirit of the moment which leads the poet to exclaim, "My Lord, Thou art in every breath I take, And every bite and sup taste firm of Thee."²²

It is in the moment of table fellowship that this spirit makes itself known. What Thomas Moore, the former Servite, writes of plainsong, is equally applicable to the sharing of a feast, whether simple or sumptuous:

Sometimes in their chanting monks will land upon a note and sing it in florid fashion, one syllable of text for fifty notes of chant. Melisma, they call it.

Living a melismatic life in imitation of plainchant, we may stop on an experience, a place, a person or a memory and rhapsodize in imagination. Some like to meditate or contemplate melismatically, while others prefer to draw, build, paint, or dance whatever their eye has fallen upon.

Living one point after another is one form of experience, and it can be emphatically productive. But stopping for melisma gives the soul its reason for being.²³

A meal lovingly prepared, shared with family, with intimate companions and good friends, can be such a stopping for melisma.

The little Lutheran church community in Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast* actually tried *not* to experience such a moment. Frightened by the luxury of the feast, which they fear will corrupt them in some way, Babette's employers and the other church members attend out of "Christian charity," but vow not to taste or even speak of what they eat or drink. They try their best, but soon the "power of the festive table begins to operate"²⁴ and petty divisions, old feuds and long-standing grudges are overcome. In sharing the feast lovingly prepared by the French master chef, they live melismatically and, as can happen in any shared meal, they experience the grace and spirit of "one hour of the millenium."²⁵

May all of our meals be such, for the God of Heaven and Earth, the Sovereign of the Universe, who has promised to kill the fatted calf that we may eat and celebrate when we return to him (Luke 15.23), has given us food to sustain our lives and wine to make our hearts glad!



Notes

¹Theresa King, "Food and Spirituality: An Interview with Abbess Koei Hoshino," in T. King, ed., *The Spiral Path* (Yes International Publishers, 1992), p. 161.

²*Ibid.*

³Brother Peter Reinhart, *Sacramental Magic in a Small-Town Cafe* (Addison-Wesley Publishing Co, 1994), p. xxii.

⁴Jack Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 12.

⁵Thomas Moore, *Meditations: On the Monk Who Dwells in Daily Life* (HarperCollins, 1994), p. 47.

⁶Reinhart, *op. cit.*, p. xxiii.



⁷Dumitru Prunariu, Romanian cosmonaut, in Kevin W. Kelley, ed., *The Home Planet* (Addison-Wesley Publishing Co. 1988), p. 69.

⁸Carl and LaVonne Braaten, "The Living Temple," quoted in E. Boulding, *From a Monastery Kitchen* (Harper & Row Publishers 1976), p. 116.

⁹William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1956), p. 486.

¹⁰Frank E. Wilson, *Faith and Practice* (Morehouse-Barlow Co, 1941), p. 140.

¹¹Louis Weil, "The Structure of Christian Community," in A. Vogel, ed., *Theology in Anglicanism* (Morehouse Barlow, 1984), p. 139.

¹²Reinhart, *op. cit.*, p. xxii.

¹³Alan Hooker, "Vegetarian Gourmet Cookery," quoted in E. Boulding, *From a Monastery Kitchen* (Harper & Row Publishers 1976), p. 48.

¹⁴Weil, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹⁵Reinhart, *op. cit.*, p. xxii.

¹⁶Joseph Gelineau, *The Liturgy Today and Tomorrow* (Paulist Press 1978), p. 99.

¹⁷Urban T. Holmes, *What Is Anglicanism?* (Morehouse Publishing, 1982), p. 39.

¹⁸Judith Marsh Carlson, "Children at the Table," in *Ministry Development Journal* 7 (1985) p. 22, 26.

¹⁹Margaret Moers Wenig, "God Is a Woman and She Is Growing Older," in *Pulpit Digest* (March/April 1992), p. 36, 38. Wenig, at the time this piece was published, was Rabbi Instructor in Homiletics at Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, New York.

²⁰Joe Famularo, *Celebrations: Sumptuous Meals for Festive Occasions* (Barron's Educational Series, 1993), p. 1.

²¹Theresa King, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

²²Kenneth Boulding, "There Is a Spirit," quoted in E. Boulding, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

²³Thomas Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

²⁴Alan Hooker, *op. cit.* (note 13, *supra*).

²⁵Isak Dinesen, *Babette's Feast*.

More about Eric Funston:

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