

by Thomas Fleming

Eating With Sinners

*And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying,
This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.
Likewise also the cup after supper, saying,
This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.*

—Luke 22:19-20

These familiar sentences from Luke's description of the Last Supper (which occur in parallel passages of Matthew and Mark) are quoted within the central act of Christian worship, when the mystery of He who was both God and Man is revealed in the bread and wine that is also the Body and Blood of our Lord. The Incarnation of God experienced by the faithful in the Sacrament is, at least from our human standpoint, the greatest of mysteries.

There is also, however, a more everyday dimension to the sacred scene. Jesus is dining with His friends, and it is a very special meal: the Passover. Like other observant Jews, they eat the paschal lamb and the unleavened bread; they drink the wine, and, although it is not mentioned, they doubtless consumed the bitter herbs to remind them of their anguish as slaves in Egypt.

Pagan cults also included sacred meals that united the worshipers and brought them closer to the divine beings. Walter Burkert describes "the sacred act" of the Greeks as

the slaughter and consumption of a domestic animal for a god. The sacrifice is a festive occasion for the community. The contrast with everyday life is marked with washing, dressing in clean garments, and adornment, in particular, wearing a garland woven from twigs on the head . . .

After a procession and the slaughter, the animal is butchered, and the entrails are roasted for the god and a select group of participants, while the inedible parts are put upon the fire. Libations are poured (and later drunk), and the meat is distributed to the crowd. Barbecues and feasting of every kind were a prominent fea-

ture of the festivals that determined the calendars of a Greek city, and, "the order of life, a social order, constituted in the sacrifice."

To Americans, who treat eating as either a shameful necessity—the worse food tastes, presumably, the more moral the consumer—or as an opportunity for displaying a lifestyle choice, the sacred meal is a notion even more alien than the good meal. Americans eat worse than any other wealthy nation in the history of the world. By "worse," I do not mean simply the synthetic starch-and-tallow meals warmed up in chain restaurants.

American restaurants are only a symbol of what is wrong with American eating habits. People who ate well at home simply would not put up with the poor service, worse food, and false pretensions of the average "fine" restaurant. American women do not, by and large, know how to cook—they have more important things to do, they say, like clerking in a store or minding other people's children or teaching sociology. And, once Mom or Dad has heated up the frozen food in the microwave or dumped the Chinese take-out on the table, members of the "family" either go off to separate entertainment centers or sit (dressed in their shorts and T-shirts, jeans, sweats, stretch-pants) just long enough to bolt down the food and argue over sports, politics, the weather, or anything else they have only experienced through television.

Catholics and Protestants retain only a dim memory of the sacred meal, but my Serbian Orthodox friends turn every holiday and saint's day into a festival. Serbs also have a unique religious custom known as the *krсна slava*, the celebration of the family saint. In preparation for the day, the family has the priest bless the house with prayers, holy water, and incense, or, if that is not possible, they bring

zito and wine to the church to be blessed. The *zito*, made of boiled wheat, sugar, walnuts, and nutmeg, is offered to each guest, who first crosses himself then takes a spoonful of the dish, which commemorates the Death and Resurrection of Christ. On the day of the *slava*, the vigil lamp is lit before the icon of the family saint.

The guests (traditionally uninvited, though that custom has changed) gather around the table, and the host cuts a cross into the bottom of the *slavski kolac*, a tall bread, often braided and with a cross impressed into the top. This *kolac*, which has been made with holy water, is broken and shared by the guests, as members of the family contemplate whether they have lived a Christian life. After a prayer—often the family and guests stand and recite the Lord's Prayer—the participants get down to the serious eating: an endless round of antipasto—salamis, cheese, pickled peppers; a special *sarma* made with liver, heart, rice wrapped in a membrane—a sort of Serbian haggis; roast pork and, perhaps, lamb (unless it is the feast of Saint Nicholas or of another saint whose day falls within a fasting period). Red wine is drunk to commemorate the Blood of Christ that washes away our sins. And although variety and plenty is the normal rule, even the poorest family may celebrate a *slava* so long as there is the wheat, red wine, the icon, and so long as, in their hearts, they are determined to lead a Christian life.

For human beings, eating is a social act. Of course, we must occasionally dine alone, but a normal person will rarely enjoy a solitary meal. (How dismal must be the condemned man's final steak, fries, and ice cream, since he cannot share it with his mates on death row!) In my travels, if I am alone, I often return to the same restaurant, because a familiar place takes some of the sting out of eating

alone. Eating is one of the three necessities of human life, and all three—eating to sustain life, having sex to continue life, and fighting to defend life—require other people. A rich gourmet who likes to dine alone might as well make love to himself.

I first began to appreciate the problem presented by American individualism when I had Thanksgiving dinner with a family of eccentrics. They had little or no connection to the small community where their house was located—they had picked the town, decades earlier, by throwing a dart at a map, and most of them had long since scattered across the country. They had picked their religions with almost the same insouciance: one was a Buddhist; another, an atheist humanist; another (the only apparently sane member of the tribe), an Episcopalian; and another (a girl I had known in school), a Jew, and not merely a Jew but a rabbi.

The turkey had no sooner hit the table than the atheist uncle seized a plate and, grunting “This for me?” and filling it with turkey and trimmings, walked over to the television set where he proceeded to engage in a quarrel with Walter Cronkite (too conservative) throughout the entire dinner, which, after this rocky start, went rapidly downhill.

To restore the meal to its proper place, we need not convert to Serbian Orthodoxy. The Christian West has its own traditions, though most of us have forgotten them: the Twelfth Night cake with the lucky coin that makes the finder the master of the revels; the skeleton-shaped cookies that Mexicans bring to the graves of their ancestors on All Souls’ Day; the St. Joseph’s altar of foods that is still popular among Southern Italians, who used to visit each other’s homes in a daylong progressive dinner. It is still a day commemorated with special doughnuts (and closed museums), even in modern Rome.

Anglicans, Lutherans, and Catholics all have rich traditions to draw upon, and if churches were to quit poisoning parishioners with pancake-mix breakfasts, commercial pre-sliced corned beef, and supermarket sheet cakes confected of soybean oil and library paste, they might recover the real foods (to say nothing of the actual doctrines) of their religious traditions.

“He ate like a Christian” is ancient shorthand for being civilized, and eating like a Christian—like charity—should begin at home. Paul refers repeatedly to Christian homes that are actually

churches, and the Serbian tradition of *krsna slava* is a direct outgrowth of this early custom. If every home is a church, blessed or prayed over by priest or preacher, then every family dinner becomes a sacred meal. If your neopagan friends are embarrassed by the grace you say before meat, perhaps they may reflect on what they have lost. Living and eating with non-Christians is, alas, a part of everyday life. Ordinary Christians are not called upon to be monks or to separate themselves into settlements and fortified compounds into which no alien influence can penetrate. Christ is the Light of the World, not a tiny candle whose feeble rays are hoarded by a tinier band of followers. When Clement of Alexandria advised against eating with pagans, he went well beyond Saints Peter and Paul.

Early Christian apologists were understandably drawn to asceticism and to separating themselves from their pagan neighbors. Clement (in his *Paedagogus*) makes the best case he can against eating well, but all he can cite are proof texts against gluttony and wastefulness—he is not so quick to recall the fatted calf slain for the Prodigal Son or the barbecued kids and lambs and oxen offered up so often in the Old Testament, which offers scant comfort to vegetarians and puritans. Food is, admittedly, only a means to an end—“Better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a stalled ox and hatred therewith”—but a good feast is not to be despised, even as a metaphor: “All the days of the afflicted are evil: but he that is of a merry heart hath a continual feast.”

When our Lord was rebuked by the scribes and Pharisees for eating with publicans and sinners, He told them, “I came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance,” and when the same legalists and kill-joys complained that His disciples did not fast, He did not deny that fasting was a good thing but told them that, “so long as the bridegroom is with them, they cannot fast.” Christians, therefore, commemorate the suffering and Death of Jesus by fasting, but to recall His life among us, we keep the feast.

Saint Peter, as an observant Jew, was understandably reluctant to eat with Cornelius, the God-fearing but uncircumcised centurion, but he had been given a vision of a great sheet on which were depicted all the beasts of the earth and fowls of the air.

And there came a voice to him,
Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter

said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.

We fast, not because we are forbidden to eat meat or because meat is bad, but as a discipline, to deprive ourselves, temporarily, of one good thing that we may come to know a better one. Eating lamb (or ham, if you are German or Polish) at Easter is a great joy, because we have longed for it throughout the long weeks of Lent and also because, in commemorating the reality of the Lord who is always with us, we can taste of the mundane joys that foreshadow the spiritual joys that are prepared for the faithful.

John the Baptist, in calling for repentance, ate wild locust and honey, but Jesus, the Bread of Life, is seen eating bread, helping fishermen to a good haul (both in His earthly life and after His Resurrection), feeding the multitudes on bread and fish, feasting on the paschal lamb. His first recorded miracle takes place at the wedding feast in Cana, where he transformed water into *excellent* wine. Some modern Pharisees reverse the miracle by turning the wine into grape juice.

Perhaps to make sure that we did not become too spiritual in our religion, the risen Christ appeared to His disciples in human flesh, and, in the village of Emmaus, “he took bread and blessed it, and brake and gave to them,” and after “he was known in breaking of bread,” He appeared to them in Jerusalem, and, to reassure them, He ate “a piece of a broiled fish and of a honeycomb.”

Though there is many a gourmet who might long for a fresh grilled fish and a taste of honey, Clement of Alexandria twists this passage into a condemnation of boiled meat and elaborate sweets, as if nothing in Scripture is literally true. In the sensate pagan world, it made good sense to warn Christians against the temptations of the flesh, but we must also be on guard against the greater temptations of the spirit. Gnostics, Arians, Jansenists, and Puritans tell us to despise the good life that has been given us and to pretend that we can be angels or, in some cases, even gods. We know that it was for us poor mortals that Christ our Lord was sacrificed. “Therefore let us keep the feast . . .”

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Listening to the New Apartment House

Richard Moore

A voice above the derricks and the diggers
had words for me about their rules and rigors:
"To use our new machines, gentlemen, we
ideally shall become machinery.
Earth shall be redefined, benumbed reposer,
to that which can be moved: by a bulldozer.
Everything else earth might have been or meant
is hereby now proclaimed irrelevant
and all those stupid ways we'd meditate it
gathered in one magnificent *I hate it!*"

Tornado

Richard Moore

There is an emptiness that drives
us through our lives
like the black funnel that came down,
tore through the town,

and put a value on our gambles,
left them a shambles.
O Lord, must we not let them sound us,
whirling around us?

The day my Tanta Minna died
she put aside
her coffee cup, in her heart holding
springtime unfolding,

forgot what everything was for,
and was no more.