

Thanksgiving 2018  
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA  
Fr. Michael Renninger

Some people do not like to eat alone. For some of us, eating by ourselves, especially in a restaurant, feels isolating and odd.

But for those of us who are introverts by nature, or who spend a good deal of time each day with many people, a meal by ourselves can be relaxing.

I recall a Wednesday evening several years ago. I finished teaching RCIA here at the parish, and at 9:15 PM, I sat down at an Italian restaurant to enjoy a wonderful meal. And as often happens at meals like this, I sat by myself, I was eating delicious food, and reading a magazine about *more* food!

As I ate and read, I ran across an article about food in Ireland. The article made suggestions about where to eat if you ever go to Ireland:

“Go to this place for the best salmon... go to that place for the best soda bread.”

And for the best Irish stew, they suggested that you go to a pub in Dublin named ‘Oliver St. John Gogarty.’

I read that, then I put down my fork and started to cry.

I cried because I have been to that pub . And I ate that Irish Stew. Frankly, I cannot remember how good it was.

But what I do remember is this: I was there, at that pub, eating that food... with my mother. Mom died six years ago. And one of the other people at the pub that night was my friend Ken. Ken died two years ago.

I sat in the corner of that Italian restaurant, reading an American magazine, tearfully remembering a meal in Ireland... a meal with people I have loved, and who are no longer here.

It is good to remember such meals. Meals like that help us to remember.

In fact, in our first reading and our Gospel reading today, we hear about a meal which helps us to remember. For thousands of years, this meal has helped Jewish people remember the God who freed them from slavery.

Every year, the Jewish people gather for their most important meal. It is called *Passover*.

The first Passover meal happened on a night which changed the world, forever. The

Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt. But God acted decisively, and Pharaoh decided to free these slaves.

And since God knows how quickly we human beings forget, God asked the Jewish people to do something so that they would always remember, and always be grateful.

Did you hear God's instructions in the Book of Exodus?

First, the people are instructed to eat the meal, the menu, which God has decided on – Lamb, herbs, wine, unleavened bread. God set the menu.

Second, God tells them to gather together. Notice, no one is supposed to eat the Passover *alone*. Gather together for this meal. Remembering requires gathering together.

Third – tell the story of what God has done for you. Remember. Give thanks. Tell the story.

All of this is crucial, because at the end of today's reading, God says that this is the way that the people will remember. This is the Jewish way of 'memorial,' i.e. remembering.

Today, when we think about memory or remembering, we think that it's something we do with our *brain*. We *think* about the past and recall it. For us, remembering is something individuals do with their brains.

But according to God, remembering is something you do with your *whole self*: Gather with others, eat God's menu, tell the story of what God has done for us. Sing his praise. Remember, *together*. Our Jewish friends believe that when they do that, the God who was with them in the past, is with them now, at the table.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus gathers with his disciples for the Passover meal.

And in the midst of the meal, as Jesus takes the wine and bread in his hands, he commands that whenever WE have this meal, we *remember* him. The bread and wine of the Passover are no longer simply reminders of what God did in Egypt, freeing the slaves. The bread and wine are now the gift which brings to us the presence of Jesus, who saves us from death.

He asks us to do this... to remember... him.

The Eucharist is a Passover meal, transformed by the command of Jesus. But at its heart, it is still much the same. Because here, we eat the meal that Jesus told us to eat – unleavened bread, wine. We tell his story. We gather as his people. And we remember.

But our remembering is not just a mental exercise – we gather with gratitude, we celebrate, and we experience how Jesus is present here.

We are sent forth to serve.

This meal helps us to remember. To remember all that he has done for us.

And we call this meal “Eucharist,” which means, “thanksgiving.”

Millions of Americans will sit down at a special meal today. Sadly, some will eat alone, even though they’d love to be with family or friends. Some will eat a meal provided by someone else, because they themselves cannot afford to purchase such a feast.

We eat a meal with a fairly set menu – turkey, veggies, pie. And, if we are true to the roots of Thanksgiving, we will take time to remember, to say to God, “Thank you.”

For many Americans, this is the once-a-year meal of remembering and thanking.

But for Catholic Christians, we gather for a gratitude meal *every day*. In the city of Richmond, this sacred meal of gratitude, the Eucharist, is literally celebrated every day.

This meal helps us to remember – we are called to say ‘thank you’ to God every day.

Some days, gratitude comes naturally -

- + you bring your child to be baptized. You are so grateful for this child. You come to church, celebrate Eucharist, and you say ‘thank you’
- + you are getting married. You can’t believe that your spouse loves you so much. So you come to church, celebrate Eucharist and say thank you
- + the surgery went well. You come to Eucharist and say thanks
- + you got the job. You fell in love. You were forgiven. You come to Eucharist and say thank you

But other days, we have to *remember* to be grateful...

- + on Sept. 11, 2001, I presided at Eucharist at the Cathedral, and the Eucharist called us to say ‘thank you,’ even on that day...
- + on the day of funeral, we bring our broken hearts to the Eucharist, and we are called to say thank you.
- + your doctor says you have cancer...
- + the injustice of the world breaks your heart...

On those days, this meal demands that we find a way to say thank you. It teaches us that we can look for God and see God’s presence even on the hardest days, even in the darkest times. God is always here. Saying ‘thank you’ will help us see that. It will help us see Him.

Gratitude makes us humble.

Gratitude lifts our minds from whatever our struggle is, to the heights of where God is.

Gratitude reminds us that what we have in life is an amazing gift, which means that gratitude makes us generous and just, willing to share, willing to work so that others can experience blessings and have what they need.

Gratitude is so important. That is why we need to remember. To remember to be grateful. To remember the God who gives us everything.

Meals help us to remember... meals like the ones we will share later today. Meals like the Passover, first eaten in Egypt. Meals like this Eucharist, this gratitude gathering, this feast of bread and wine, where we remember Christ, and discover that he's here.

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