

**My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

**I've been pondering whether there might be a correlation between the drop in Mass participation and the demise of the family dinner? Many of you may remember, as I do, when the family dinner took on a certain sacredness that was central to the life of the family. Nothing took precedence over being home for dinner—not a sport, a dance lesson, a meeting, even a job. Each member of the family was expected to plan his or her activities around dinner.**

**The Bible is full of stories and parables where God's activity among His people is revealed in meals. Today's readings tell two very different meal stories. Abraham, in our first reading, is portrayed as the host who spares absolutely nothing in welcoming strangers to his home. Surprised, though he is, by the appearance of three unknown travelers, Abraham immediately welcomes them to his home, inviting them to bathe their feet, which was the Middle Eastern way of saying, "Please, stay! Mi casa es su casa". He then gets everyone involved in preparing a sumptuous banquet for these strangers who have now become his honored guests. His hospitality was richly rewarded when one of the strangers assured him with the message that God sent, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah will then have a son". God's long-ago promise to Abraham was about to be fulfilled because he had been so welcoming of the strangers.**

**This reminded me that my Dad always asked my Mom to be sure to prepare a little bit extra for what he called "the uninvited guest". I wonder now if he was inspired by the example of Abraham. And, truth be told, more often than not, "the uninvited guest" often showed up at our house at dinner time. It could be a relative, neighbors, friends, even, on occasion, the parish priest. It didn't matter. He or she or they were always welcomed. When our friends would come and want one or the other of us to come out to play, while we were eating, Dad would always ask, "Did you eat yet?" If the answer was "Yes!" he would say, "Well, wait on the porch until we're done." If the answer was "No!" he would say, "Well, come on in. We have plenty!" Quite a few learned quickly to say "No!" when asked if they had eaten.**

**In today's other table tale, St. Luke takes us to the home of Martha and Mary. Martha is in charge. She does it all. She extends the invitation, prepares the meal, serves everyone, cleans up, does the dishes, serves the dessert. She is worn out and doing a slow burn. Mary's just sitting there, enjoying the company of Jesus and his disciples.**

**Martha makes two big mistakes. Her major error was allowing the meal to overshadow the company. With the very best of intentions, I am sure, she demonstrates her respect by preparing a beautiful meal on the best china, but allowed all of her fussing over the meal to keep her from engaging the guests. For all her generosity and hard work, it really didn't matter who was there because she was focused on her own efforts at being the perfect**

hostess. All the while, Mary, apparently quite adept at tuning out her sister's fussing, simply sat, listening to Jesus, enjoying his company.

Martha's second big mistake was asking Jesus to side with her against her sister. She should have known better. If she knew anything about Jesus, she should have known that no one who ever appealed to Jesus with self-justification, came out unscathed. He basically says, "Martha, you're missing the point. You're worrying about a lot of stuff that's not all that important. I'm here with you. Don't you know who I am? I'm really present to you, but you're not present to me. Mary got it! She recognizes Me for who I am. I can't and won't change that." Unlike Abraham, who remained with his guests as they ate, or Mary, who chose listening to Jesus instead of fussing over the meal, Martha allowed agitation about the kitchen cancel out the nourishment that comes from being in Jesus' presence and he did not hesitate to tell her so.

Again, I'm reminded of what took place at our family table back home. Each person at the table, both family members and "uninvited guests" was expected to share something of what went on during his or her day. Then everyone else could ask questions or make comments. But the cardinal rule was there was to be no fighting or snide or unkind remarks. My Mom was the enforcer. Since Dad worked two jobs, construction during the day and movie projectionist at night, his only time with us was during dinner, and God help anybody who made the meal in any way unpleasant. The point was that each of us was being encouraged to be really present to each other and accepting of each other. But most of all we were glad that Daddy was home. He was there to rejoice in us. Listen to us. Counsel us or comfort us, whatever we needed on a given day.

Our family meals were truly sacramental—signs and experiences of God with us—when we give our whole selves to each other and openly receive each other. This attentive care for each other is what makes encounter with another an encounter with God.

What followed so naturally, in our home, from the daily meal together, was going to Church together as a family. We always went to the 8:30 A.M. Mass because my Dad was an usher. When I became an altar server and my sister started playing the organ, even when we were assigned to other Masses, we still went as a family to the 8:30 Mass. Afterwards Dad would cook a massive breakfast which would last until Noon, then he had to go to work for the Sunday afternoon matinee and stay until the last feature at 11:00 that night. So, no family dinner on Sunday, but, oh my, what a breakfast!

I do wonder. I can't help but wonder. Has the loss of the sacredness of the daily liturgy at the family table contributed to a loss of the need for the sacred to be found in communion with others in the Family of the Church? H'mmm! I wonder!