

The Interdependence of Dinner Table and Lord's Table

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The ritual of the Eucharist had its origins in the ritual of the dinner table; the Last Supper was an evening gathering at table. When the earliest followers of the risen Christ gathered, it was normally for an evening meal together, but for them it was also 'the table of the Lord' at which the Lord's death was proclaimed in anticipation of his coming in glory.¹ It was 'the breaking of bread', the banquet of the people of God.² The meal ended in the sharing of the cup³, after which there would be conversation, singing, instruction, and prayer⁴, following the common cultural pattern of banquets for groups bound together by kinship, or professional, religious, or social ties.⁵

The evolution of a free-standing eucharistic ritual outside the context of a communal meal was a complex transition over a couple of centuries. It has left us with

- a ritual more sharply focussed on thanksgiving (*eucharistia*) and the paschal mystery;
- a token meal consisting of a mere taste of bread and wine;
- a reordered sequence of the ritual actions;
- a lectionary;
- a dependance on an ordained presider.

The benefits of this transformation are numerous:

- through many different cultures and eras in which the Church has played very different roles, the utter centrality of the paschal mystery unfailingly confronts us in our liturgy;
- in times of both plenty and famine, we are sustained "not by bread alone" but by "the Word made flesh";
- our systematic immersion in scripture provides the narrative context in which the death and rising of the Lord finds its true significance;
- in prayers of intercession we learn how to commit ourselves to God's will for the world before we offer our thanksgiving and share the tokens of the new covenant;
- the ordained presider provides a flesh and blood bond with a wider communion across space and time.

All these gifts of the Spirit serve to sustain us in the truth of the gospel.

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

² Acts 2:42.

³ 1 Corinthians 11:25; Luke 22:20.

⁴ Acts 20:7-12.

⁵ Andrew McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*, (Baker Academic, 2014), 19-47.

However, this eucharistic abandonment of the dinner table has not left that table bereft of God's grace. The dinner table is the place where the members of a household meet. It is the place of belonging, the place of physical and spiritual nourishment through sharing the fruits of the earth, the place of gratitude and celebration. It is a dedicated space for conversation, and an occasion for ritual performance guided by traditions of table-etiquette and lifelong customs. At the dinner table we honour all 'five graces': sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. Thus, the dinner table is the preferred venue for so many important celebratory occasions. "From a mother, we were born into isolation; it is the table that begins now to lift us into Jerusalem the mother of us all."⁶ Thus we may say that the dinner table prefigures the Eucharist, just as the holy table prefigures the Eschatological Banquet.

So what are the consequences of neglecting the relationship between dinner table and holy table? of discounting the graces that the dinner table bestows? of forgetting the very foundations of the holy table?

We are well aware of the contemporary pressures of both the economic order and the organized sports teams which have eroded the patterns of family life. 'Dinner time' is becoming a thing of the past in many households; a 'table grace' is uncommon; and the nourishment of family conversation is easily squeezed out when we are grazing at the refrigerator door. And urban life has undermined our awareness of the sources of our food and the blessings of the created order.

Much of this is concomitant with the decline of the 'Domestic Church' (the 'Little Church', as it is known in the East). Christian formation through household ritual, socialization, and story-telling has largely been replaced by 'Christian Education' which tends to support a private and individualistic piety, unrelated to the ritual pattern of our common life. The eucharistic character of the dinner table has largely been forgotten.

But the shape of our eucharistic liturgies has also suffered by a centuries-long disconnect from the dinner table.⁷ So many of our places of worship were designed not as banquet halls but as theatre spaces — places not for gathering at table but for viewing a stage performance. The multifaceted joys of the banquet have been forgotten in our narrow focus on receiving communion, and this reception has become a narrowly individual and private thing. We either wait for a space at the communion rail and then kneel just long enough to receive before escaping back to the pew; or we join a cafeteria line to pick up our serving, and then retreat.⁸ At any proper banquet, leaving the table

⁶ Robert Farrar Capon, *Bed and Board*, (Simon and Schuster, 1965), chapter VI.

⁷ The 'Dinner Church' movement addresses the issue directly, but this proposal attempts to address the issue in a way that supports our inherited liturgical tradition.

⁸ Most of the ills described here are perpetuated by the dominating influence of our worship spaces. The rites of the BCP ('79) and the BAS ('85) do not presuppose a clericalist stage performance.

before all have eaten is considered insolent or anti-social. Yet there is little danger that anyone will confuse this eating with a banquet, since it is more like snacking than dining.

However, in the midst of a pandemic, no renewal of the ritual of the holy table is possible anyway: Christians cannot safely gather, and we find ourselves conflicted over what we should do instead. People ask, is there not some way they can share in the body and blood of Christ in their homes? spiritual communion while watching the consecration and consumption of bread and wine on screen? virtual consecration of bread and wine they themselves bring to the screen?

A better option by far would be to start with a renewal of the ritual of the dinner table. It would still not be the Eucharist⁹, but it could nevertheless be a 'Meal of Remembrance'. Imagine a family in the parish community describing how they remember Jesus at dinner every evening with bread and wine, as he told us to. Should they be warned about doing this because it isn't really the Eucharist? Or should they be encouraged to recognize the essential relationship of interdependence between the domestic church and the parish church? between the dinner table and the holy table? Would not encouraging this kind of practice within The Domestic Church help to lay stronger foundations for the renewal of The Parish Communion, when it returns?

One of the ways to encourage such a development would be to provide a variety of forms of table grace, including some that echo (without replicating) the eucharistic prayer itself. If there were ever a time when our people might be willing to attempt something so revolutionary, this might be that time. For an example of such prayer, see the following 'Table Prayer for the Domestic Church'.

⁹ 'The Eucharist' is universally understood to be the rite recognized by the acknowledged authorities of the Church.

A Table Prayer for the Domestic Church¹⁰

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

We give you thanks, Creator God,
that you have made your home among us.

When we wander away and realize we are lost,
you love us still and bring us home.

[And so we sing the hymn of heaven:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might.

Heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest!]

We thank you for sending Jesus your Son
to show us how much you love us;
he lived and died and rose for us,
and is coming in glory to reign.

We remember how he took bread,
blessed it, broke it, and shared it
as we do now.

We remember how he took the cup,
gave thanks to you, and shared it
as a sign of your enduring covenant with us.

Rejoicing in his presence here among us,
we offer ourselves to you, O God.

May your Spirit fill this feast with love
and strengthen us in your service,
until we feast with you in glory.

Amen.

Then bread may be broken and shared, and all may raise a toast to Jesus.

¹⁰ Based in part on the Brief Eucharistic Prayer of the Presbyterian Church (USA).