

Pastor's Notes: How Do You Approach the Holy Sacrifice? - Part 2 of 2

June 21, 2020

Last week I began a two-part series on the way that we view the "Sacrum Convivium" - the Sacred Banquet - and how that influences our approach to the Mass.

The Last Supper, which forms the basis for the New Testament liturgy, was a formal dining experience that followed the ritual tradition of the Jewish Passover. It should be noted that the "meal" analogy of the Mass is secondary in the Church's theological understanding. The Mass is first and primarily a sacrifice. It is a sacrifice that takes as its paradigm and form the ritual meal of the Passover experience of the Israelites. The slaughtering of the lamb was followed by a ritual meal in which the sacrificed lamb was consumed. The arguments that were made in the last century, building up to the Second Vatican Council, were that we had over-emphasized the sacrificial nature of the Mass, and now it was time for us to emphasize the meal aspect. While I understand where the Fathers of the Council were going with that, I do not think that in practice we kept the "sacred" part of the Sacred Banquet in mind when it was emphasized. Very quickly, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Sacred Banquet idea devolved into the backyard barbecue, and we went to the opposite extreme of over-emphasizing the meal aspect and excluding the sacrificial character and nature of the Mass.

It seems to me that there are plenty of places that offer the less casual dining experience expression of liturgy, which does not have all the formalities of a state banquet. The direction I have chosen in the liturgy here at the Basilica tends more towards the "formal dining experience". I have very explicitly chosen the Extraordinary Form as the **template** for what the liturgy ought to look like in the Ordinary Form. There is so much about civilization, culture, dignity, respect and reverence that we give to one another and to the meal we are sharing at a formal state dinner that can inform our understanding of what we are doing at Mass. I recall very often my mother telling us to "set the table" for our family evening meals. And by "set the table" she meant do it in the way she had been taught: put the fork on the left; the knife on the right, facing inward; the spoon outside the knife; the glass above the knife and spoon; with napkin folded on the plate, etc. These are vestiges of the reverence given to a formal dining experience, but it was the way we expected every family meal to be served when mom said, "set the table."

What do we expect when we come to the Saving Sacrifice of Christ offered as the Sacred Banquet? I think it's a question we all need to ask. What are we doing here? Why did you come here? What are you expecting from this experience?

Many people in our community have expressed a very explicit desire for the more regal and formal form of the Sacred Banquet, which we would call the Extraordinary Form. It has a legitimate place for us. In the same vein, many who are not as comfortable with all the formalities of fine dining have still asked for a more reverent and transcendent expression of the Ordinary Form. While the Extraordinary Form might ask you if you're interested in the *Châteauneuf-du-Pape*, the Ordinary Form can still put on a good Sonoma Valley wine that has a more familiar ring to it, even if it is still elevated in nature. What I find myself unable to do is to offer soft drinks and sweet tea at the Wedding Banquet of the Lamb. This gets me in trouble from time to time, and I know that there are other opinions out there. I appreciate that and know that less formal expressions of Mass speak to and feed so many people, but I fear that the more we drift towards the casual, we will lose something very important concerning the nature of what we are celebrating.

Not everyone appreciates a fine dining experience at every meal. But this should not be mistaken as a reason to exclude oneself from experiencing the Extraordinary Form, even if only from time to time. The fine dining experience should inform even our daily family meals, because they express to us principles and ideals of civilization and culture. No one should expect that all of his or her meals should be served on silver platters, as there is a time for less formal expressions. But that doesn't mean that everyone cannot have a connection with the heights of culture in this central human activity. The trouble is that most people have not been exposed to, taught, or formed in the benefits of the fine dining experience, especially in our American experience of fast food and convenience. I would suggest that when it comes to religion, we need to break this mold.

The Mass has been called the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. Think of the many different wedding feasts you've been to, and how they are arranged, choreographed, and executed. You've probably been to a wedding that had paper plates. But they are few and far between. Most people break out the fine china. What does that mean for us? How then do we approach the Wedding Feast of the Lamb? The Church has taught us that this is a Holy Banquet. This is our inheritance. It's for us to recover and preserve and pass on to future generations. Don't be afraid of the hard work it takes to set the table.

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