

Traveling Companion: Let's Dine

Fr. Michael Tracey

On school mornings, I serve as a traffic cop, directing lines of cars and trucks dropping off their children for school. I notice all the parting hugs and kisses. I notice the parents advice, "Get a smiley face today," or "Have a wonderful day," or "Do well on your test today."

Of late, I have noticed a more disturbing trend. I notice so many children finishing off breakfast on the run before they exit the car. Some swallow the last vestiges of a power drink; others finish munching some potato chips; others huddle in the back seat with a paper plate of food as they scramble to finish it before they have to go into the school.

The family meal seems to be an exception rather than the rule. Maybe, we don't feel as guilty if we overdo it with a family meal at Thanksgiving. Somehow, we think it will make up for our lack of such family encounters for the rest of the year. It is sad to see the family meal being relegated to the archives rather than becoming a regular experience.

It saddens me to see an "eat and run" mentality creeping into our lifestyle. Eating becomes something we fit in wherever or whenever we can. Eating become a "grab and eat" while we can, when we can, while we are on our way to some place.

After school, children have extra-curricular activities. Some go to band; others to Scouts; others to sports practice. Mothers and fathers become a taxi service, ferrying children to and from places and activities which takes them away from home and any possibility of family time together. On the way home, after such activities, it is too late to start preparing a family meal. Instead, a quick stop at a fast food drive in suffices as the travelers eat on the way home. I notice a tell-tale sign of this when I open car doors to allow children out for school in the morning. Wrappers and other remembrances of some fast food experience litter the car's floor.

In many cases, individuals dine alone, not as a family. Due to schedules and commitments outside the home, it is necessary to dine alone.

It is no wonder that we have lost the sense of the Eucharist as a shared sacred meal. We eat, instead of dining. We eat out of paper plates with plastic utensils, while displaying our finest china in museum display styled cupboards. I wonder if we used the same approach to celebrate the Eucharist.

There is a difference between eating and dining. When we eat, speed and convenience is of paramount importance. When we dine, we sit down together to share, share ideas, struggles, values, life-experiences. Eating is a human experience and necessity. Dining is a sacramental experience.

It is a sad reflection when people come to Communion, receive and then continue on, out the church doors in order to get a head start on the mad rush that ensues following the end of Mass. Does it not seem an insult to the Host we visited and partook of to rush off once we have eaten, or, in more sacramental terms, dined?

I always ask our choir and song leaders to let me know the number of verses they will sing of the recessional song. I delay my exit until the final verse starts. As I do, I notice people at the starting gates of the pews ready to follow me into an emptying parking lot where they will be much wailing and lamenting because other people are blocking their immediate exit.

In the end, eating can be a robotic, mass produced, fast food stuffing exercise. At the same time, dining can be a relaxed, creative encounter with food, fellowship and family where we celebrate the creative work of human hands. The "bread we offer which earth has given and human hands have made will become for us the bread of life." Likewise, the "wine we offer fruit of the vine and work of human hands will become our spiritual drink."

So, maybe instead of eating and running, we can dine, embrace and enjoy.