

Traveling Companion: Lunchtime bonanza

Fr. Michael Tracey

Some time ago, our cook and housekeeper informed us that she was taking a two week vacation. We wished her well and began to ask ourselves: What will an office staff of three do for lunch for two weeks? Even though the community had several restaurants, we didn't envision eating out for lunch every day. After all, one can only tolerate so much of red beans and rice, shrimp or roast beef po-boys, crab cakes, chicken strips or Chinese buffet with fortune cookies that remind us to be good to ourselves. One also had to think about some leftovers each day for supper.

I realized it was time to enlist the culinary skills of our parishioners and call them forth into action. So, at the weekend Masses, I offered them a challenge. Allow us to be test cases for your best recipe. We will be the judges and certainly will offer an unbiased opinion.

In offering the challenge, I added two caveats for them to keep in mind. First of all, I did not eat any corn, in particular corn-on-the-cob. I informed them that, in Ireland, we fed such to cattle. Secondly, I informed them that any dish that contained crayfish would not be accepted or tolerated. After all, my philosophy for such is that I had discovered that "never did so many labor so long and so hard for so little."

Following my sales pitch, I received several offers to my challenge. Gradually, the two week calendar filled with offers of help. In the meantime, someone brought me some containers of trifle. They assured me that there was no fat or sugar in it, as if I cared, given my excellent metabolism. Others brought homemade chocolate chip cookies for my predictable tea breaks during the day.

One lady arrived with calendar and pen wanting to know if any of us had food allergies or aversions to certain foods or vegetables.

One morning, a couple arrived in their truck with our lunch – salad, ranch dressing, chicken spaghetti, garlic bread, string bean casserole and peach cobbler.

Later that afternoon, a fellow priest came bearing a gift in a paper bag. On opening it, I found a can of corn. A fellow parishioner collaborated with him in making sure that someone heard my plea at church, albeit in a selective way.

The next day, we feasted on brisket and risotto. The following day, making sure that diversity transformed our cook-less days, we feasted on spare ribs, barbecued chicken, roasted potatoes, cold slaw and desserted with potent bread pudding and ice-cream – all served on the best china.

Of course, I couldn't forget the lasagna day and all its trimmings – a special treat and full marks given by all the indulgers.

Another day, it was pork chops smothered in a delightful sauce; couscous and stewed tomatoes. The next day, it was red beans and rice along with pasta salad, even though it was a Monday-less day. It also included an apple and cinnamon dump cake which tantalized our taste buds. The final day – a Friday saw fried catfish.

Through my whole lunchtime bonanza, I learned lots of things. I learned to be adventuresome with dishes and food I never heard of before and could not even spell. I learned to trust other people's specialties and their gifts as well as their willingness to share such gifts with a lowly pastor. I learned that I need to watch more TV celebrity chefs programs so that I can develop my culinary vocabulary more. Most of all, I am humbled and more appreciative of the love, care, generosity and commitment of parishioners to their priests.

Oh! Yes! If anyone would like an unopened can of corn, I still have one.