

# HOLY THURSDAY 2011

## THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF A MEAL

Both the Jewish and Christian traditions view eating and feasting as more than simply an opportunity to refuel the body, enjoy certain delicacies, or celebrate a particular occasion. Eating and feasting became for both traditions, encounters with transcendent realities and even union with the divine. In the New Testament, so much of Jesus' own ministry took place during meals at table. Some say that you can eat your way through the Gospels with Jesus

Jesus attends many meals throughout the four Gospels: with Levi and his business colleagues, with Simon the Pharisee; with Lazarus and his sister in Bethany; with Zacchaeus and the crowd in Jericho; with outcasts and centurions; with crowds on Galilean hillsides; and with

disciples in their homes. It is ultimately during the final meal that Jesus leaves us with his most precious gift: *the Eucharist*.

On this holy night of institution, as Jesus drank from the cup of his blood and stooped to wash feet, a new, dynamic, common bond was created with his disciples and with us. It is as though the whole history of salvation ends tonight just as it begins -- with bare feet and the voice of God speaking to us through his own flesh and blood: *As I have done for you, so you must also do*. The washing of the feet is integral to the Last Supper. It is John's way of saying to us throughout the ages: *You must remember his sacrifice in the Mass, but you must also remember his admonition to go out and serve the world*. Washing their feet was a concrete way of exclaiming the primacy of his love, a love that serves even to the point of giving oneself, anticipating as well the supreme

sacrifice of giving his life, which he was to do the following day on Calvary.

At the Last Supper, Jesus teaches us that true authority in the Church comes from being a servant, from laying down our lives for our friends. His life is a feast for the poor and for sinners. It must be the same for those who receive the Lord's body and blood. We become what we receive in this meal and we imitate Jesus in his saving works, his healing words, and his gestures of humble service. From the Eucharist must flow a certain style of communitarian life, a genuine care for our neighbors, and for strangers.

There is a Eucharistic movie entitled **Babette's Feast**. It has been called *a cinematic icon of the Eucharist* because it explores love and generosity in the context of a meal and the meal's ability to transform lives. Here is the plot of the story. Two adult sisters live in an isolated

village with their father, who is the honored pastor of a small Protestant church that is practically a sect unto itself. After some years, a French woman refugee, **Babette**, arrives at their door, begs them to take her in, and commits herself to work for them as maid/housekeeper/cook. During the intervening dozen years, **Babette** cooks very plain and simple meals to which the sisters are accustomed.

In the 12th year of her service to this family, **Babette** wins the French lottery, a prize of 10,000 francs. At the same time, the sisters are planning a simple celebration of the 100th anniversary of their father, the founder of their small Christian sect. They expect **Babette** to leave with her winnings, but instead, she surprises them by offering to cook a meal for the anniversary. Although the sisters are secretly concerned about what **Babette**, a Catholic and a foreigner, might

do, the sisters allow her to go ahead. **Babette** uses just the tiniest opening, a modest celebration, to cook up a storm and wreak havoc in the lives of the sisters, and with their community, by such outrageous generosity.

God is ever ready, looking for the smallest opening, in a sense praying that we will grant him the joy of accepting his offer! Life in Christ begins with the tiniest move on our part, just the hint of an opening, and then God steps in and overwhelms us in response. When we accept, God takes over in the kitchen, raining down upon us grace upon grace. The finest French delicacies are nothing compared to the gifts God has to bestow upon us, especially in the ultimate gift of himself in the Eucharist.

In the end, **Babette's** feast produced some amazing effects. The community had become reconciled with each other. The

dinner guests at **Babette's** feast encountered the divine and received fulfillment through the experience of the physical act of eating. **Babette's** Feast is a masterpiece that can help us to explore divine generosity with the image of a meal, its transforming quality, its gestures of humble, loving service, and its fruits of reconciliation and forgiveness that take place around the table.