

The Family Table, Redux

Redux—adjective: that which has been brought back, revived, restored, etc. Used postpositively.

Remember that article I did last year? The one about the importance of eating together as a family? The one that talked about how eating together is an indicator of so many other important things? That the family table is the foundation of catechesis at home? Remember that one? Anyone? Hello?

(Silence. The sound of crickets is deafening)

I thought as much. So, I want to bring back, revive, and restore the family table conversation, because since I have written it, I have honed my thinking and want to reframe it a bit. So, here goes...

Protect the Family Table

What is the “family table”? It is the gathering place of the family around a meal. It is a shared time together, set apart from the busyness of the day. It is a place of conversation. The family table does not include screens, or phones, or TVs. It is the family, as it’s currently constituted, sitting around a table, eating, talking, laughing, listening, and loving one another with their shared presence. This used to be called “supper” or “dinner time.” The main meal of the day. It was fairly common for everyone to eat at the same time, at the close of the work day. Now, hardly anyone has the time.

The family table is predicated on whether a) everyone is at home and b) there is something cooked to eat. Can “pizza night” count for “supper”? Of course...though pizza is most likely a special occurrence. But in the not-too-distant past, this was most people’s lived-out experience. But no more. I took an informal poll of those families under my care and almost no one is eating their main meal of the day together, at a prescribed time. Why is that?

Everyone is too busy. People work irregular schedules. Youth sports runs the collective American show. Families have “opted-in” to every single thing. Both parents (if there are two) work, making it difficult to shop, cook, and serve dinner. People are greatly pre-occupied by their leisure pursuits. I could go on. The point is—*there are many root causes for that fact that no one eats together anymore.* The question is: does it matter?

I believe it does. Greatly.

But before everyone gets their dander up, I want you to know a couple of things. One, I grew up in a divorced household, and ate most of my meals alone in front of the television. Two, I have personally gone through many of the challenges listed above. So, I know the struggle, the temptations, and the pitfalls. I am aware. But I am here to tell you that if your family is not eating dinner together at least four nights a week, *you are making poor choices.* Did I just say

that? Yes I did. Aren't I being a bit judgmental? I guess. However, I write this out of love and to encourage you to aspire to something better...for you and your family.

For the sake of this discussion, a "family" is a husband and wife. A husband and wife with a child. A husband and wife with multiple children. It is a single mom with children. It is grandma and grandpa helping out with the kids. But however your family is constituted, it is crucial that we are eating together. Crucial. But let's take a step back. We know what a family is. The important thing is what happens at the family table. Several things.

1. Conversations Happen; Relationships Form

"Pastor Heaton, my family is close and we talk all the time! I don't see what eating together has to do with anything!" Fair enough. No one is suggesting that you don't love your children. I am certain that all my people want what's best for their families. What I am saying is that families that eat together without the distraction of the ballgame on, or everyone's phones out, or people grazing and leaving...families that eat together, **talk**. You could eat in silence. But that doesn't happen. Families at the table at the same time, talk. About their day. About their next day. About their schedules. About their frustrations. But they talk, and they share. As a parent, that is golden. Golden. As a couple, that is golden. Face-to-face conversation. And the more THAT happens, the more conversations will happen everywhere else. Relationships grow stronger...and then that difficult conversation that has to occur becomes easier when families are used to talking daily.

2. Sharing→Order→Self-Control→Manners and Etiquette

The family table is the breeding ground for many virtues and fruit of the Spirit. In a mundane way, the family table is where manners and etiquette is learned and practiced. When you eat together, you must sit down. On chairs. Not on bean bags or recliners. Usually, people have their usual places they sit. This leads to learning to pass food around the table in an orderly way. This leads to learning to wait one's turn. To not reaching across someone else. It trains people to ask for things politely. The family table teaches patience. Self-control. Restraint of the personal desires. All of this, done week after week, month after month, year after year trains a human creature to be...a better human creature. One that serves others, society, the Church, etc.

3. Catechesis/Faith Formation

What is the thing most Christian families do before they eat? They pray. So, already, by eating together, prayer happens more often. But while you've got the family together...*what a great opportunity to build in more prayer time*. How about learning a prayer of thanksgiving for *after* the meal? Let me suggest one to you:

Give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good. His mercy endures forever. He gives to the beast their food, and to the young ravens that cry. His pleasure is not in the strength of the

horse, nor in the legs of a man. The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him; in those who hope in His steadfast love.

The Lord's Prayer is said here.

We thank you Lord God, heavenly Father for all Your benefits, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit.

Those prayers take about *one minute* to pray. Every age can do it. But what else?

While gathered around, being trained to share, and talk, and wait patiently, why not train the family in the fear and knowledge of the Lord? Yes...*I am talking about family devotion.* The objections abound. “We don’t have time; we don’t know how; the kids are too young; the kids are too old; it’s just me and my wife now—the kids are gone.” I’ve heard them all. But consider that it is important we continue to grow in the faith...at every stage of life. It is important that our children and grandchildren learn the faith from us. Where and when might this happen...if not at the family table?

This is what *The Congregation at Prayer* is designed to help you accomplish. If you look at the back of the weekly printed sheet, you will find a basic format for family devotion, one that includes Scripture, prayer, and the Small Catechism. A family (ideally the head of the household) can use this resource to form the faith of the family, right at the place where the family gathers most every evening. If you used just the bare minimum parts of this resource, it would add another ten minutes to the meal. Is that too much to ask?

4. The Inculcation of Beauty

This one might not seem as obvious, so bear with me. True beauty is predicated on order and design. It mirrors harmony and coordination. Beauty is NOT subjective, but a reflection of what truly IS. It is a window into the transcendent goodness of God, and His steadfast love. *The family table is the place in the home where this transcendent goodness and order is inculcated, meal after meal.*

Perhaps we might consider the “opposite” to see my point. What is the opposite of the family table? What is its inverse? Well...it is every person for themselves. It’s separate schedules. It is choosing activities over togetherness. It is stretching thin the only thing in this world that can’t be reproduced—*time*. To not make the family table the center of the day, and the recurring pattern of the week, is to say, “We all do our own things and go our own ways.” That is chaos. That is confusion. And our God is not a God of those things. He is the opposite, in fact. What He desires is that we live as families, centered around the gifts He gives us. We are to be stewards of those gifts. But to live in the opposite is to worship the creature (ourselves, our wants, and interests) above the very thing God has given us to be—a family who loves the Lord and serves the nearest ones. And that is beautiful.

Final Word

You might feel that this article is picking on you. You might think that I don't understand your own situation. You might even resent that I would dare comment on the home lives of my people. But this is (in part) what pastors do—they get into people's business in order to help them live more faithfully as disciples. Pastors are to do two things—proclaim the Word of God and administer the sacraments. Both of those things happen (most frequently) at worship. But flowing from a life of worship is an active engagement with God's Word and a living out of our baptismal identity. So, pastors are very interested in the lives of people outside of worship. For that is where the bulk of faith formation happens. Stronger families who are daily together in the word, together in conversation, are the seed bed of the future of the congregational church.

Let me put it this way. Families who eat together THRIVE. They talk, and laugh, and learn, and grow together. Am I saying that families who don't eat together aren't families? Of course not. But I am saying that the family table *can do nothing but strengthen families*. The family table is the place where so many good things happen. It is the place where children are taught so many things. But we have to *make this happen*. We have to make better decisions with our time and what we give our energy to. I frequently hear the complaint that families are "so busy." Well...if the busyness is self-inflicted, then who should we direct our complaints to? I write this as an encouragement. What if...every family ate most of their meals together as a society? What if...every Christian family at dinner together most every night? What if. This is not hard to imagine. It's just difficult to make the kind of changes necessary to make it happen. But I believe the family table is the key to so many things. Maybe we can start now, and if you don't like it, you can go back to chaos.