

There is no McDonald's in Kajo Keji, but they eat the same food

By Bishop Paul V. Marshall

[Bishop Paul preached this sermon at the celebration of Corpus Christi at Holy Cross Church, Wilkes-Barre, June 7, 2007.]

When Diana and I made our 13 Kajo-Keji presentations around the diocese in 2005, there was a question period after we talked and showed our pictures. One of the questions we did not expect arose often enough that we finally just worked it into the presentation. That question about our Sudanese sisters and brothers was, "What do they eat?" In later presentations, we stressed that the food is radically different, and the hospitality is sincere and joyful.

The wisdom of the people who asked that question of us so often is striking. You don't really know people until you know what and how they eat, and that truth helps us understand from yet another perspective the gift Christ gives us in the Holy Eucharist.

I'll start a little closer to home, with my son Nick's favorite restaurant.

Dominick's Restaurant in Quakertown is always crowded on the nights that Dominick has made his Brooklyn bakery run: if you are not there by six, the cannoli are gone. There are lots of good cannoli around – but to people from the old neighborhood, or to people whose *parents* were from the old neighborhood – there is only one kind of cannoli that tastes like home. Each cannolo (did you know there even is a word for just one?) is treated as a precious object, and you can't just get them any day.

Same for me: my grandmother made kruschiki, those sugary bow ties, a certain way (I think the secret was in using real lard), and thirty years after her death and ten years after my aunt stopped cooking, the only ones I can find that taste right are the ones my sister makes once a year from grandma's recipe. On the other side, only my mother (and now Diana) makes a certain kind of German apple cake that I've never even seen anywhere else, and I get that about twice a year. And there is one thing above all others for me: special bread – and what a night to mention special bread! Those of you who read Bethlehem of PA know of my recent quest for the perfect Kaiser rolls and rye bread, so I won't go on about that.

But when I shared the rye bread and Kaiser roll issue online, I got a lot of email from people who read our listserve who also don't live where they were born, and who consider it a special treat to have a taste of home every now and then. First prize goes to a senior warden in the western part of the diocese who misses sandwiches of limburger cheese and onion. Second prize goes to student at Virginia seminary who misses Ugandan tea.

There is a point to this. The first thing I'd like to say as we contemplate the mysteries of the Lord's Body and Blood this Corpus Christi night is that for people who sense themselves being away from home, who are in *any sense* "pilgrims wayfaring," this heavenly food is the prime connection with our great home in God.

There is more than one way to feel as though we are away from home. We yearn for God and yet sense the distance from heaven that our work here imposes. We sense our distance in time and space from those who have gone before us in faith, and our distance from the Lord we follow and would wish to see more clearly. We can grieve emotional distance from other people. On a more day-to-day level, life itself remains difficult, and sometimes any of us can feel what the old spiritual feels, like “a motherless child, a long way from home.”

To us when we feel disconnected, lonely, yearning for God, or just generally “a long way from home,” the Body and Blood of Christ are always that precious taste of food from home. They are the promise, the presence, the power of the Lord who eternally gives himself for us and to us. They are always the gift from the hand of the great High Priest who makes the eternal offering for all of humanity.

Eating kruschiki reconnects me instantly with a large part of my experience, including a tough little woman’s journey from Bremerhaven to a new life in a new country. Receiving Christ’s Body and Blood reconnects me instantly with the meaning of my entire life, with the carpenter whose journey through death to new life gives me life now and forever. And when we sing those words about “all the company of heaven” joining in the angels’ song, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts,” I am connected with my tough grandmother and all those who have gone before. Holy Communion is sharing Heaven’s Food with all those in this room right now, and also with all who have been to Christ’s table at all times and in all places.

I had my very first experience of the South Pacific Ocean last year. Along with the many wonderful things I saw and learned, I discovered that you cannot get cannoli or kielbasa in Pago-Pago and there are no pierogi in Fiji. But 500 yards from the dock in Pago-Pago and at the town center in Lautoka, there are churches. I had not seen my wife for six weeks and had no word from my children; I didn’t understand a word of the language, but when the priest held up the bread and the bells rang ... there was food from home.

The fact that the eucharist is with us wherever we go is a great thing. It is the prodigal son story in reverse. Perhaps each of us should write a spiritual autobiography entitled “Pursued by a fatted calf.”

It would get on my nerves when I was an adolescent that when I went to see my grandmother almost the first thing out of her mouth was the affectionate command: “Eat.” Just the one word, not even the familiar “eat something” from the movies. Eat. Food has always been tricky business for me, and it is getting worse with age. But I also know now what I didn’t know then, that sharing food is how people connect, how they establish and reinforce relationships. Eat something. To share just a morsel, or even a glass of water, is to share in somebody’s life and to receive the grace of hospitality, the sharing of life.

Sometimes how we make up with people is to have a meal with them. Sometimes we solidify or renew relationships by having dinner when old friends are passing through town. Eating together is not a casual thing.

Think of Jesus' wisdom in commanding his disciples to have at the center of their practices a simple meal. In Luke's gospel account, the Last Supper takes place in the middle of a fight between the disciples! Whatever is going on with us, Jesus calls us to the table, where we are reconnected with each other as we share heavenly Food.

I can easily recall that the Body and Blood of my Lord are really present at the altar; sometimes I need God's help to remember that this really is a meal, and that you do not eat with enemies. It really is like a good family. God has put us, his children, at table together so the daily disagreements, the impatience, the frustrations, and the challenges of living together may be transcended. We already know that families that do not eat at least one meal together each day are vulnerable – God has made us creatures who connect when they share food. Jesus wants to be that food.

In medicine, science, and religion all great new truths begin as blasphemies of a sort. Imagine the look on the disciples' faces when Jesus took that cup and said this is my blood, for you. They weren't permitted to drink blood, and now he required it of them. What did they think as they passed that cup around? That's my final thought tonight, openness to the menu. I am a less adventurous eater than I should be because I wasn't challenged to try much new food. So I've never tasted Shoo Fly Pie, Sushi, or a host of other things because I did not develop a taste for adventure in my early years.

To those who thought he had gone too far with the Body and Blood talk at the Last Supper, the Lord Jesus says: *Go ahead. Take it. Eat it. Drink it.*

St. Paul pushes that much further as he wrestles with the Corinthians to encounter each other at the point where they are the same despite their differences in background, economic status, and talents – to share the Body is to enact the Body.

To us who would sometimes like to remain a bit disconnected from or incurious about each other, going to each eucharist is a kind of adventure – you don't know who you will be next to, you don't know who Christ is reconnecting you with – but even as surprise looms, we always know that it's food from home and that things are indeed going to be just fine. Thus we experience the Body of Christ in the sacrament within that ever-elastic and exciting context of the Body of Christ which is the church.

Motherless children, people far from home, folks feeling like outsiders, people who need to escape being insiders: *Eat.*