

The Lord's Supper

Can it be that long ago? Today's commemoration of Christ's institution of our Holy Eucharist (otherwise known as our Mass) brings back memories of our using the Danish author Isak Dinesen's film *Babette's Feast* (the author's real name was Karen Blixen) to somehow illustrate the sacramental nature of our central act of worship. Must have been around 1987 when the feature came out – thirty years ago! Enough time to replay parts of an essay we used so long ago to encourage people to experience so powerful a story.

I mean we all know there is nothing like a dinner party to draw people together. After a glass of wine and a bit of mingling, the laughter begins amid intense conversation at this or that end of the table. People begin to tell stories out of their past or reveal silly things they've done they're no longer shy about. People become frankly affectionate. They let down their guard.

Isak Dinesen's story reveals the same phenomenon. Perhaps you've seen the film version. Babette is a French refugee, a celebrated chef escaping from the rebellion of Paris of 1870, who finds shelter in a cold Norwegian town working as cook for two aging sisters who belong to an austere religious sect. Whenever its members get together it's truly somber. They all dress in gray and black; they speak little; they've renounced all the pleasures of this world. It's no wonder that behind their facade of piety they have their quarrels, backbiting, festering resentments.

And then Babette, having won a lottery, offers to make them a French dinner. As the old couple see the dinner's ingredients arriving including a huge turtle, live quail, cognac, they are appalled and as a group they vow to discipline their sense of taste. To no avail! When the dinner is served in precisely seven phases, after a bit of wine and Blinis Demidoff and Cailles en Sarcophage, Veuve Cliquot champagne and assorted cheeses with Sauterne, two women who held a long grudge remember how as girls they filled their village roads with song. Two men, one of whom had long ago cheated the other, laugh over the incident as if it had been a practical joke. Another old couple, burdened with guilt over an affair of their youth, give each other a long overdue kiss.

Of what happened that evening nothing definitely can be stated. None of the guests later on had any clear remembrance of it. They only knew that the rooms had been filled with a heavenly light, as if a number of small halos had blended into one glorious radiance. Taciturn old people received the gift of tongues; ears that for years had been almost deaf were opened to it. Time itself had merged into eternity. Long after midnight the windows of the house shone like gold, and golden song flowed out into the winter air.

No wonder Jesus chose a supper as his sacramental way of passing on his legacy to the world, a supper that we perpetuate at every Mass. What better ambiance in which to promulgate his one commandment: "Love one another. Nurture one another. By this will all know you are my disciples, by your constantly candid and convivial love."

Incidentally this 1987 film is Pope Francis' favorite movie (as he said in a 2016 interview) and he refers to it in his early 2016 Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love). He especially likes Babette because of her going out of her way to make repressed people joyful.