

## Sunday Lunch

*By Cynthia Reynolds, Tending the Holy Graduate*

There is something about meal preparation, especially when company is coming – especially a lot of company - that gets us all revved up and anxious. There is a lot of work to do and a lot of planning. It's easy to over think hospitality at that point, turning it into a Martha experience and missing God's presence in the holy act of serving others in such a direct and simple way.

For several years I worked in a ministry where hospitality played a key role. There were people living with us in our home and 6 days a week I prepared two meals a day to feed them and others in the community. There were usually 10-12 at my table for breakfast every day and 16-20 for either lunch or dinner. Except on Sundays, Sundays there were guests from outside the community visiting for the day and I prepared all three meals and the numbers for the midday meal rose to 24 plus. Sunday was not a day of rest in one sense of the word. Neither was Saturday for that matter as much of the preparation took place then. I was often exhausted or just on “autopilot”, going through the motions by rote. Sitting in church one morning (between meals) my mind wandered to what needed to be done next: how will I add another place setting to accommodate a couple who just arrived for the day. Can I stretch the meal? Yes, there is extra rice, I'll pick some lettuce for more salad from the garden on the way home, cut the cake a little bit smaller, but add a few raspberries I was saving for the family – it will work. The voice of the preacher provides a nice cadence in the background as I work out the logistics. And miss God's voice. Miss His precious words to me. Skip right past His gift of love.

Later in the throes of baking chicken and chopping tomatoes for the salad, I hear a child's cry. I have put the children down for a nap after having fed them quickly ahead of time. But one child is restless and I lay down my knife and climb the stairs to see him red-faced, moist hair clinging to his tired frustrated forehead. I quickly pick him up and sit down in the rocking chair: the chair that I rocked his sister in, and now him, night and day, back and forth, gently soothing and lulling. It works today on me too – that, and the sweet smell of my son nestling into my neck. His wet head mixes with the clean sweet scent of baby soap and it pulls me in. I recognize that he is tense and so am I. I begin to take deep breaths and let the calming back and forth of the rocker regulate us both into a soothing pattern of breathing. Soon, I feel his heart beat slower. I feel his muscles relax as he gives in to sleep.

I linger a few more minutes because there is Holiness all around me and I see it for the first time today, maybe in several days. Just like my infant son let go and gave in to sleep, I feel myself let go of trying to control every detail and outcome and yield to His presence. He is so close I can smell Him mixed with the sweat and baby soap; I can hear Him in the steady rhythm of breathing and in the slight breeze as the rocker moves back and forth. My mind is quiet and my heart accepts the joy.

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Eventually, the clatter downstairs penetrates this moment and I stand and lay my son in his crib. The meal is served, everyone is satisfied and I begin to think about the evening meal and what needs to be done that afternoon. But (at least for today) it all takes on a different tone. Today there is that peace beyond understanding in my heart, from yielding to a moment, letting go of control and yielding.

When I recently saw the film, *Mid-August Lunch* I recognized a similar yielding in the main character Gianni. In the month of August, Italian cities empty out for the most part. Anyone who can remotely afford it heads for the coast to avoid the oppressive heat. In mid-August falls the holiday, *Pranzo di Ferragosto* which means Feast of the Assumption and celebrates the assumption of Mary into Heaven. In this delightful film by Gianni di Gregorio, the main character (played by di Gregorio) is a middle aged man taking care of his 93-year-old sun-baked mother (who one reviewer described as a raisin in a Marilyn Monroe wig!). They are having trouble meeting their condo fees and Gianni spends a lot of time sipping wine with shop owners and worrying about their low funds.

As the *Ferragosto* holiday rolls around, the condo owner pressures him into 'babysitting' his own mother and aunt in exchange for the current condo fee payment. Soon another aging woman is squeezed into the already small condo when the doctor, who is treating Gianni's mother for free, pressures him into caring for his mother as well. Gianni relents because of the financial pressure, but tries to control the situation tightly, doing as little as possible until they all leave. As he prepares meal after meal, negotiates the moving of the one and only TV from room to room and generally attempts to keep everyone quiet, he is just holding on until they all leave. But his mother is bonding with the guests and everyone is having a good time. The aging women have been isolated and are relishing the social interaction that circumstances have pushed them into. Gianni tries to control the situation further by giving them all sleeping pills in their evening wine. But he underestimates their energy and desire to thrive. Slowly he realizes his own resistance to what is happening. He lets go of controlling first one thing and then the other. As he does so his heart softens and he begins to appreciate the feistiness and lively beauty of each of the ladies.

Their last meal together is a mid-day feast to celebrate the holiday and with all the shops closed, Gianni needs to find food to feed his guests. Instead of grudgingly slapping things together, he spends the morning creatively seeking out ingredients for a special lunch. At the end of meal, the guests are reluctant to leave. They know something sacred on this holy day has taken place among them. ■