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Incarnation on Rochambeau Avenue

Eileen Markey | Feb. 8, 2008

Bronx, N.Y. -- Every week, we bump into God at a crowded table with friends

I can hear their laughter before I push open the unlocked door and slip off my shoes. Three or four people are crowded in the galley kitchen of my friends Sandra and Greg?s Bronx apartment. Someone is stirring the pot on the stove -- likely rice, lentils or vegetable stew. The wine that Sandra?s Portuguese father makes in his basement is already flowing. The laughter is warm and familiar. We?ve been stepping into each others? kitchens for years now and the jokes are often as easy as ribbing a sibling. Before long the rest of the crowd is here and we are on folding chairs, gathered around Sandra and Greg?s table for our weekly meal.

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In the course of dinner, conversation will flow as freely as the homemade wine. It ranges from the mundane goings on at jobs, to which presidential candidate deserves our vote, to the effects of the subprime mortgage meltdown on our working-class neighborhood. We are equally likely to talk about our parents, our kids, 1980s pop culture, Vatican pronouncements or laugh-till-you-get-the-hiccups self-deprecating anecdotes. In other words: the stuff of life.

This is community dinner on Rochambeau Avenue: a continuous meal among friends, a place where you are known. While not overtly religious, the ritual is infused with undeniable eucharistic meaning (undeniable at least to us Catholics, former Catholics and people who spend a lot of time with Catholics). If Peter and Paul met the resurrected Christ on the road to Emmaus and recognized him in the breaking of the bread, we recognize him here, with friends circled around our tables sharing the exhilarating and the boring bits of life.

As Christmas approaches and I attempt to instruct my 4-year-old on the meaning of God made flesh, I?ve been thinking a lot of the baby Jesus. The Divine came into the world and was born and became a person like us. I have a handcrafted, fair-traded, ethnically not at all accurate nativity set to commemorate it. But despite the eloquence of the Christmas story and the beauty of its imagery, this is where I keep bumping into the Incarnate

God: at a crowded table with friends.

Community dinner started five years ago when my husband and I moved into an apartment building where friends from college lived -- people we liked a lot, but didn?t actually know very well. After months of visiting each other sporadically but never frequently enough to get traction on a relationship, Kristen suggested we pick one night each week to share dinner. Now community dinner runs like a well-trod path through our months. After five years during which the group has supported each other through two babies, a bout with cancer, unemployment, graduate degrees, career reorganizations, subtractions and additions to the crowd, young marriages finding their tune and endless conversation, it has become something of a prayer in action. Community dinner is where we recharge, share ideas, hash out theological, political and social concerns and lay our burdens down to enjoy the nourishment of being known.

Dinner circulates from home to home, one week in our apartment, the next at Nick and Michelle?s, the next at Sandra and Greg?s. The hosts do all the cooking -- one of the beauties of community dinner is the night off from cooking if you are not hosting. Meals are supposed to be simple, with an emphasis on the people, not culinary acrobatics, but we eat well. The food is vegetarian with the occasional fish. There is a lot of Indian, a lot of rice and beans, a fair number of hearty soups, vegetable casseroles and eggplant dishes. We?ve jokingly discussed writing a cookbook: No Meat, Not Too Much Cheese Meals for Ten That Can Be Prepared After Work. While the focus isn?t on stylish dinner party fare, there is a certain Betty Crocker-esque pride in hosting. We get to use all those elaborate wedding gift dishes and tablecloths, test new recipes and have the pleasure of feeding friends. The continuity of community dinner has led to other relationships. The two couples with children jointly hired a part-time nanny when parents returned to work. We helped start a Community Supported Agriculture project. I was with Michelle as she tried on wedding dresses and we all prepared favors for the guests. When the other couples go home to their families for Thanksgiving my parents and my husband?s parents stay in their apartments. Most of us share a fire escape, so when I need an egg or a cup of flour I climb over to Sandra?s window. It began with dinner, but as the relationships deepen our lives are a web of interdependence.

Kristen and Rick, the instigators of community dinner, were teachers at a Jesuit boys? school in the South Bronx before they left last year to work as Franciscan lay missionaries in Bolivia. During the months they were discerning which community of believers to travel with they considered the Camboni Brothers. ?What about Rochamboni?? We?d tease, twisting the name of our street. We may not follow the Benedictine rule or have an organized structure and international missions, but this too is a community of faith, albeit loosely defined. Most of us are graduates of nearby Fordham University who settled here because we felt a vocation to work for justice in the Bronx.

Sandra directs Fordham?s community service program. Greg works at a neighborhood group that advocates and maintains affordable housing. My husband and I are journalists. Nick writes grants for a social service agency. Michelle works for Human Rights Watch. Caitlin helps run the community service program with Sandra. Katie is in school for a master?s in social work. Emily and Sarah are public school teachers. Brian is a gardener in a city park and practices radical simplicity. Owen was earning a master?s degree in political economy before he left to work for Catholic Relief Services in Brazil. It?s not an intentional community on the order of the Catholic Worker or Agape, but we are definitely animated by purpose and committed to living lives of justice. Community dinner helps bolster and maintain that. It provides continuity and a set of people who know what you are about, support your struggle and share your joy.

Even on nights when I?m worn out and would rather not go, community dinner rewards me. A foul mood or stress -- that feeling of being run ragged by adult obligations -- dissipates in the raucous conversation. I think all of us are so committed to dinner (we?ve missed only a handful of weeks in five years) because it is an antidote to the isolation of modern life. So many of our peers work long hours, commute long distances, watch TV in silence and fall asleep. People need company. After the closeness of college dorms where all your friends were

only steps away, and in an age when so many people live far from their families, being a grownup can seem terribly solitary. Community dinner is a constant at a stage in our lives of monumental changes. We?re still establishing ourselves professionally, beginning marriages, embarking on parenthood, but week to week we return to the table.

From that little huddle of Kristen, Rick, Jarrett and I, we now have 10 regular attendees. Friends of friends keep moving into the building, drawn in some part by this unique ritual. There is a half-joking insistence that if we kind of know you and you live in the building, you have to come to dinner. The constancy of dinner, and the three or four hours spent at the table means it won?t be long before you are an old friend.

Katie and Caitlin, both 25, moved in just a few months ago. Both former Jesuit Volunteers and new to New York, they said they craved the sense of purpose and mutual support they had during their volunteer year. Brian, also new to New York, said it feels reassuring to be known in a city of strangers, to create history with the same people week to week. Others find community dinner reminds them of their ideals, challenges them to think and keeps them focused on working for justice. Finally, community dinner is where you let your guard down. We know you and we like you. Interpretations and opinions frequently differ, some relish argument and some shrink from it. But week to week, month into month and year into year we build the familiar.

This is what is meant by the Incarnation, God made flesh. God knows us because God was one of us. So it?s not surprising that we find Christ in the ordinary, on the road to Emmaus, on the prosaic journeys of a group of young adults. That?s where Christ resides.

I?ve been teaching my son to sing ?O Come, O Come Emmanuel? as we light the Advent wreath at our house. The third line, about Israel ?that mourns in lonely exile? has always haunted me. We don?t need to be lonely. Maybe that is what the Incarnation is all about. Emmanuel means God with us. God came to us and became flesh, which meant he needed a good dinner now and again. This is where Christ lives, in shared meals and shared stories. So pull up a chair.

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