



## Carmelite Spiritual Center

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### Life is Worth Giving

DINNER TIME MAY TRULY BE A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE FOR FAMILIES

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

In the not-so-long-ago days in our nation, dinner time was a gathering place where families prayed together, shared together, and grew in love and understanding of each other. It was a time of sharing the events of the day — things that happened at work, at school, at home, and in the neighborhood. Ideally each family member was given an opportunity to share his or her thoughts, ideas and experiences in the process of growth within the family circle. Correction and criticism were usually relegated to another time. Dinner was for sharing, loving and growing.

Sunday dinner was often a special time for gathering, and after dinner for visiting grandparents, other relatives, or simply friends. There seemed to be such an abundance of time simply to be with each other.

### A Great Change

In more recent times, it is seldom that families are able to share meals together. Conflict of schedules for work, social or school activities preclude to a large extent the sharing of meals and time with each other, and this is unfortunate indeed.

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Fr. Kevin/ Connection (FAMILY DINNER)/ 2

But rather than lamenting the current situation or waxing eloquently and nostalgically about "the good old days" (which may not have been as good as people would like to remember), it might well be better to offer some helpful suggestions relating to current dinner time in an effort to make the occasion both spiritually and humanly a rewarding experience. Please consider the following:

1) Begin and end each meal together with a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the many blessings the family has received — especially each other. These prayers need not be elaborate but offered by each family member in turn. Jesus taught his disciples to pray simply and directly to God.

2) Look upon the meal together not as a duty but a joy of sharing with people who are loving and loved. Reclaim family time, especially meals, as a special encounter and encourage all family members to make it a priority.

3) Make each family member feel important by assigning various aspects of the meal to each so that all feel as though they are contributing to the joy of the occasion. Even small children <sup>(CAN)</sup> help and feel useful by setting the table or doing other simple tasks. They need to feel wanted and included.

4) All family members should strive to create a pleasant dining experience with enjoyable and stimulating ambience.

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All can contribute to make holidays, birthdays and other special occasions more enjoyable with decorations or even special desserts.

5) Even before the meal begins, parents should think of the family kitchen as a type of classroom to encourage the intellectual and motor skill development of each child in the family. Even young children can learn how to measure ingredients for recipes, and how to use kitchen appliances safely, according to their age and experience.

6) Parents would do well to ban criticism and arguments among siblings during the meal, and not use the occasion themselves for disciplinary discussions of improper behaviour which occurred prior to the meal. To the contrary, parents should use the meal time to praise their children, especially for their efforts in getting the food ready and doing the dishes afterwards. Children grow much more from praise and affirmation than they do from criticism and punishment.

7) Parents and children would do well to focus the meal time on the family itself. Adult interest in the world of their children is an excellent way to express loving concern and increase bonding. It is also helpful to reduce outside distractions such as TV, radio, and the phone. These things may be attended to after the meal is concluded.

8) If possible, parents would do well to plan menus in advance making sure to provide balanced and nutritious foods for all to share and enjoy. It is also helpful to consider letting family members have some say in the selection and planning of the food for meals. In this way even children feel as though their individual needs and desires are at least taken into consideration. This may even encourage young eaters to try new and different types of food.

9) Cook in a way that is beneficial in preparation time, especially for the cook, by developing an agreed collection of meals that are both enjoyable and relatively simple. Avoid difficult and complicated meals that limit the time of the cook or anyone else to be with the family.

10) It is very important that all family members start and finish their meals at approximately the same time. People who arrive late or leave early are not only disrupting the other family members but deprive them of the joy of their presence.

Scripture records many meals that Jesus Christ shared with his followers, especially the Last Supper when He gave us the marvellous gift of the Eucharist.

Jesus often used meals as a setting for teaching the great truths of our Faith. Christ's meals were also occasions of love and joy to which so many were truly welcomed. Perhaps family meals may imitate Scripture by attempting to become occasions of loving and sharing for families.