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Mealtime shared with family can be sacred event

The local diocese hosted a presentation on parenting recently which was called, "Morals, Manners and Children." It drew a large crowd.

The main point of our presenter, Dr. Mark Lowery from Dallas, was that parents should be proactive and discuss their expectations with children in advance of some activity, rather than react to unacceptable behavior during the middle of the activity.

Parents are more likely to get through to their children in a quiet gathering than in the heat of the moment.

In Dr. Lowery's own family, he and his wife put their expectations for their children on index cards. They periodically review these expectations with their children. There's a card for going to church, one for the mall, one for bedtime. They don't call these expectations "rules." They're called "procedures." This makes them easier for the children to accept.

Now, as you might expect, they have "procedures" for the family meal. First of all, they try to eat as a family every night. At least twice a week they like for the meal to last at least 45 minutes, for reasons I will explain.

Here are some of their procedures for the dinner table: 1) Before dinner, ask "What can I do to help?" 2) Don't start eating until prayers are said. 3) Always tell the cook, "Thanks for making this." 4) Always say "please" when you need something. No reaching. 5) No aggravating (kicking under the table, unkind comments, etc.) 6) Older children: say



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at least one intelligent thing during the meal. 7) When the meal is over, ask "May I please be excused?" 8) Remove your plate to the appropriate place.

You might have guessed correctly that the television is not on during meals in the Lowery home. They try to introduce new vocabulary words and passages from literary works into their dinner time. Dr. Lowery quotes Aristotle's notion that "Inferior minds discuss things, mediocre minds discuss people, superior minds discuss ideas." So the family meal is a place where ideas are discussed. As the children get older, they become responsible for leading the discussion.

Dr. Leon Kass, who is Jewish, wrote a book a few years ago called "The Hungry Soul." He says that, "All kinds of things are inadvertently taught at the table without having to moralize about them. One learns self-restraint, sharing, consideration, taking turns, and the art of friendly conversation. One sees that someone else has worked hard for one's

sustenance." So table manners promote character traits that can be very important.

Our oldest son, now a junior in college, wrote recently that he is now glad that we put so much emphasis on the family being together at dinner, even though he resisted this when he was in high school. His moment of enlightenment came when a group of his college friends cooked a big meal together and then had meaningful conversation as they shared the meal. It was so enjoyable that they wondered why so many people ate dinner alone in front of a television. The word he uses now to refer to family meals is "sacred."

That's how Dr. Kass concludes his thoughts on meals, by referring to their sacred character. He sees food as being sanctified through ritual. He points out that Jewish dietary laws help people see their indebtedness to other creatures and express reverence for the divine. As he puts it, "Food is ours not because we merit it. Religious rituals celebrate the mysterious source of the splendid world and its hospitality in providing food, both for life and for thought." Eating without a spirit of gratitude and reverence leads to thoughtlessness.

Our closing verse is from Psalm 128: "Happy are all who fear the Lord, who walk in the ways of God... Like olive plants your children around your table. Just so they will be blessed who fear the Lord."