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Table Fellowship: A Religious Experience?  
Some Reflections on the Maltese Context

Introduction

Theological research in the last fifty years has constantly become more aware of the importance of the socio-anthropological dimension in the exercise of its academic task. My contribution to this volume seeks to investigate whether table fellowship possesses a religious dimension. We have just read the paper by René Gothóni on 'Religious Experience in Hermeneutic Perspectives', wherein the pivotal concepts of *Erlebnis* ('experience'), *Einfühlung* ('aesthetic contemplation') and *Erfahrung* were presented. He argued that with *Erfahrung*, subjectivity is overcome and one is drawn into an 'event' of meaning. Experience invites us to reconsider and to rediscover our own experience of being-in-the-world, and subsequently to communicate our experience to others.

The experience of table fellowship – which importantly includes both *encounter* and *dialogue* (two themes mentioned by Gothóni in his contribution) – entails being drawn into an 'event' of meaning where the individual 'loses him-/herself' in dialogue. The same happens when we 'lose ourselves' in a book or in an icon. The author and the painter have captured the hermeneutic truth of an *Erfahrung* common to many others. This also occurs, in a remarkable way, while sitting at the same table in fellowship and sharing food, personal existence and experience. The second part of my study will then proceed to focus upon three typical meal traditions in the Mediterranean island of Malta and to explore them as events of meaning within a particular context.

The renowned cultural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss incisively affirmed that 'if there is no society without a language, nor is there any which does not cook in some manner at least some of its food'.<sup>1</sup> Sidney Mintz states that 'food and eating as subjects of serious inquiry have engaged anthropology from its very beginnings',<sup>2</sup> although he also says that this attention-grabbing field ought still to have room for speculative inquiry.<sup>3</sup> Joanne Finkelstein insists that researchers are to take into account 'the wealth of anthropological data that have repeatedly demonstrated the centrality of the gathering, preparation and distribution of food to a society's moral order'.<sup>4</sup> The renowned expert on the anthropological study of food, Mary Douglas, formerly of Cambridge University, in her extensive works on the subject insists on the symbolic language of dining and sharing meals across all civilizations and human cultures.<sup>5</sup> In fact, 'thinking about food has much to reveal about how we understand our personal and collective identities'.<sup>6</sup>

From what has been said thus far, it is evident that food is not only a necessity for survival, but possesses an important social dimension because it serves to bind together the members of a given group, family, community or society. Keith Bradley reminds us that 'the consumption of food is essential to human survival. But the *manner* in which food is consumed and shared is a matter of cultural construction. It is often the result of what a particular society judges most important in its general understanding

- 1 Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The Culinary Triange', in *Food and Culture. A Reader*, ed. by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 28-35. See Jean Soler, 'The Semiotics of Food in the Bible', in *Food and Culture*, 55-66.
- 2 Sidney W. Mintz, 'Time, Sugar, and Sweetness', in *Food and Culture*, 357-69.
- 3 See Mintz, 'Time, Sugar, and Sweetness', 358.
- 4 Joanne Finkelstein, *Dining Out. A Sociology of Modern Manners* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1989), 34-5.
- 5 See Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (London: Pelican Books, 1973), especially 59-77.
- 6 U. Narayan, 'Eating Cultures: Incorporation, Identity and Indian Food', *Social Identities* 1 (1995), 63-86.

and patterning of human and social relationships.’<sup>7</sup> This is also affirmed by David Bell and Gill Valentine in the introduction of their insightful book *Consuming Geographies: We are where we eat*, when they assert that ‘for most inhabitants of (post)modern Western societies, food has long ceased to be merely about sustenance and nutrition. It is packed with social, cultural and symbolic meanings. Every mouthful, every meal, can tell us something about ourselves and about our place in the world.’<sup>8</sup> It is indeed increasingly fascinating that several branches of theology and religious studies have been explored from the point of view of other human sciences, particularly anthropology.

### Gathering data from the grass roots: an inductive approach

For many years, I have been closely following the well-known journal on current affairs, *The Economist*. It has been both surprising and revealing to encounter, from time to time, articles useful to the groundwork to the theme of sacramental theology. While embracing the inductive approach to theology, it may be surprising to you that I commence the study-unit on the Eucharist with a series of excerpts from articles featuring in *The Economist*. I am referring to articles on food, the beauty and the richness of table fellowship or commensality.

In a supplement, ‘A survey of food’, appearing in *The Economist* issue of 13 December 2003, I encountered the following observations in one of the articles which dealt with the social implications of fast foods:

- 7 Keith Bradley, ‘The Roman Family at Dinner’, in *Meals in a Social Context*, ed. by Inge Nielsen and Hanne Sigismund Nielsen (Aarhus, Oxford and Oakville, CT: Aarhus University Press, 2001), 36–55.
- 8 David Bell and Gill Valentine, *Consuming Geographies: We are where we eat* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 3.

Convenience food helps companies by creating growth; but what is its effect on people? Disastrous, according to Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, a historian at Queen Mary, University of London. 'For people who think cooking was the foundation of civilization, the microwave [...] is the last enemy [...]. The communion of eating together is easily broken by a device that liberates household denizens from waiting for mealtimes [...]. The first great revolution in the history of food is in danger of being undone. The companionship of the camp fire, cooking pot and common table, which have helped to bond humans in collaborative living for at least 150,000 years, could be shattered.'<sup>9</sup>

Another interesting insight carried in the same article also serves to introduce the theme of this paper. Being together for meals is brought up once again in the same issue of *The Economist*. The reference is to the situation in Britain:

Meals have certainly suffered from the rise of convenience food. The only meals regularly taken together in Britain these days are at the weekend, among rich families struggling to retain something of the old symbol of togetherness. Indeed, the day's first meal has all but disappeared. In the twentieth century the leisurely carnivorous British breakfast was undermined by the cornflake; in the twenty-first, breakfast is vanishing altogether, a victim of the quick cup of coffee in Starbucks and the cereal bar.<sup>10</sup>

The same article takes up other issues, such as the sharp drop in the time people spend cooking in Britain, the fact that cooking is seen more as a hobby than as a duty, and, of course, the question regarding the adverse effects of fast foods on health. Unfortunately, these interesting topics fall outside the scope of this discussion paper.

More interesting information is to be found in another article in *The Economist*, of 21 February 2009, in the weekly section on Science and Technology. The feature refers to the revealing findings in the first of five reports from the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). This document looks at the evolutionary role of cookery over the ages. Richard Wrangham affirms that the specificity

9 'A survey of food', Supplement, *The Economist* (13 December 2003), 10.

10 'A survey of food', 10.

of *Homo sapiens* is that most of our food is often cooked. In fact, he explains that cooking is a human universal and is a determining characteristic of every society. Light is also shed upon the communitarian dimension: 'The consumption of a cooked meal in the evening, usually in the company of family and friends, is normal in every known society'.<sup>11</sup>

So, although the main thrust of the article (and the study by the AAAS) I am referring to is centred on the gastronomic advantages of cooking with regard to human metabolism, reading between the lines offers also some eye-openers to the social dimension of eating in human beings. There are indirect references to cooking as a communitarian activity. The consumption of that cooked meal is qualified as something eaten 'in the company of family and friends'. This is a clear and sure pointer to table fellowship. Jean Soler, formerly a member of the French diplomatic service, a cultural attaché and the author of influential anthropological studies, succinctly states that 'cooking is a language through which a society expresses itself'.<sup>12</sup> Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, in the introduction to a book which they co-edited in 1997, *Food and Culture*, affirm that 'food touches everything. Food is the foundation of every economy. It is a central pawn in political strategies of states and households. Food marks social differences, boundaries, bonds and contradictions. Eating is an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family and community relationships'.<sup>13</sup> In other words, food is not simply an amount of edible material useful for nutrition, but, as asserted by Roland Barthes, food 'is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, and a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour'.<sup>14</sup>

An article, appearing in 2004, in a magazine distributed with a Maltese Sunday newspaper sheds more light on the arguments I am seeking to formulate. The author states that

11 'What's cooking?' *The Economist* (21 February 2009), 76.

12 Soler, 'The Semiotics of Food in the Bible', 55.

13 Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, 'Introduction', in *Food and Culture*, 1.

14 Roland Barthes, 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption', in *Food and Culture*, 20-7.

eating marks the shape of our days and the pattern of our lives: from breakfast, lunch and dinner, parties, weddings and even funerals. When I was born my parents marked my arrival by raising their champagne flutes; before I left for Canada for four years my friends threw a farewell party; and when I got married we had a feast. Food and alcohol are essential requisites for any celebration. Eating has been a ritual for centuries and we all have a relationship with food – some love it, others battle its effect on their expanding waistlines.<sup>15</sup>

The same author goes on to say that ‘the older I get the more my social life seems to revolve around food, [especially when this] is plentiful, eating and drinking is an indulgence, an elaborate and ritualised activity, a joy we relish several times a day’.<sup>16</sup> Note the words used – ‘ritual’, ‘indulgence’ and ‘ritualised’ – terminology associated with the sacred. Indeed, the table can be seen as sacred.<sup>17</sup>

Mary Douglas explains that ‘meals require a table, a seating order, restriction on movement and on alternative occupations. There is no question of knitting during a meal [...]. The meal puts its frame on the gathering’.<sup>18</sup> In fact, she insists on the importance of the social dimension of food and eating, a dimension which from the point of view of anthropology prevails over the nutritive and the physiological aspects of food.<sup>19</sup> She rightly insists that ‘unlike livestock, humans make some choices that are not governed by physiological processes. They choose what to eat, when and how often to eat, in what order and with whom’.<sup>20</sup> Eating together acquires a special significance. It is a meaningful event. It has a shape and purpose. It is not the case of eating a different meal, but rather of eating the same old meal in a very different light and in a very different shape.

15 Ariadne Massa, ‘The Joy of Food’, *Tune In Magazine: The Sunday Times* (February 2004).

16 Massa, ‘The Joy of Food’.

17 Jerusalem Community Rule of Life, *A City not Forsaken* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 32, para. 44.

18 Mary Douglas, ‘Deciphering a Meal’, in *Food and Culture*, 36–54.

19 Anna Meigs, ‘Food as a Cultural Construction’, in *Food and Culture*, 95–106; 100.

20 Mary Douglas, *Food in the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984), 3.

Flora Thompson asks: 'What greater restoratives have in poor mortals than a good meal taken in the company of loving friends?'<sup>21</sup> Many centuries earlier, Plutarch affirmed the benefit of eating and drinking with close friends. He states that

dinner (*tou deipnou*) always requires fellowship and friendly affections (*koinonian kai philophrosynen*) for seasoning [...]. But the most truly godlike seasoning at the dining-table is the presence of a friend, an intimate and well-known companion – not merely because he eats and drinks with us, but because he participates in the give and take of conversation, at least if there is something profitable and reasonable in what is said.<sup>22</sup>

We are eating at the table as theological man and woman, with one's complete nature, body as well as mind, communitarian as well as personal, infused with the Spirit.

Obviously, I am not referring to meals in fast-food restaurants, where the person sitting next to me is probably a complete stranger. I am referring, rather, to meals where the table is shared in the fullest sense of the word. It is not only a physical sharing. I am pointing to the context when the physical dimension – which remains important – is transcended to become *a spiritual sharing*, what is being described as table fellowship.<sup>23</sup> Such a meal 'bears witness and fosters a sense of community and interdependence among people, and from this insight a meal can become pastoral, evangelistic, social and ecumenical. For an invitation to be authentic, both individually and collectively, we should remember that the invitation is not just something which flows in one direction. There is the value of being graced and enriched by the qualities that guests bring to the table. Actions

21 Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (London and Jaffrey, NH: David R. Godine and Penguin Books, 2009), 506 [first published in 1945].

22 Plutarch, *Quaestiones convivales*, Book VII, 697C–E, as quoted in L. Michael White, 'Regulating Fellowship in the Communal Meal: Early Jewish and Christian Evidence', in *Meals in a Social Context*, 177.

23 See Hector Scerri, *Koinonia, Diakonia and Martyria. Interrelated Themes in Patristic Sacramental Theology as expounded by Adalbert-G. Hamman O.F.M.* Melita Theologica Supplementary Series 4 (Malta: Foundation for Theological Studies, 1999), 121–9.

‘speak louder than words.’<sup>24</sup> Mary Douglas distinguishes quite appropriately between meals and drinks. She states that ‘drinks are for strangers, acquaintances, workmen, and family. Meals are for family, close friends, honoured guests. The grand operator of the system is the line between intimacy and distance [...]. The meal expresses close friendship. Those we know only at drinks we know less intimately.’<sup>25</sup>

### The significance of meals in various contexts

In Semitic culture, meals have always had a religious significance, even those which do not take place in the context of religious sacrifice. Shared food and drink are a powerful expression of the daily providence of God. The human response to this benevolence is one of thanksgiving. Furthermore, the religious meaning at the basis of the sharing of a common table has its consequences on daily life. We have already seen that table fellowship entails a lesson of shared fraternal love.

Sociologists and ethnologists underline the role of meals within the religious and cultic framework of various peoples.<sup>26</sup> Participation in a sacred meal possesses various characteristics contributing both to the moral unity as well as to the social cohesion of the believing community which meets for that meal. In sacred meals, there is communion with the Deity who is recognized as the source of sustenance and protector of earthly life.

In his *Etnologia religiosa*, Boccasino explains that in the sacrifice of the first fruits, the one who offers, rather than giving something, wants to say

24 Steven Mulholland, ‘Food and Christian Fellowship’, *The Scots College Magazine* (1994), 23. See Kenneth Gambin and Noel Buttigieg, *Storja tal-Kultura ta’ l-Ikel f’Malta*. Kullana Kulturali 51 (Malta: Pubblikazzjonijiet Indipendenza, 2003), 7; 10–11.

25 Douglas, ‘Deciphering a Meal’, 41.

26 See Philip Rosato, *Introduzione alla teologia dei sacramenti* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1992), 82–3.



something: 'I am subject to the Deity and I am dependent on the Deity'. A stronger bond with the Deity is thus forged.<sup>27</sup> But what interests us are, rather, the implications of table fellowship.<sup>28</sup> I will mention three implications.

- (1) *The communitarian dimension.* The fact that members of a family or a group share food from the same pots and dishes, and consume this food indicates a shared life, a social dimension. The members are knit together and their communion is strengthened at table.
- (2) *The ethical dimension.* The sharing and distribution of food enhances a sense of responsibility, especially vis-à-vis the weakest members of the family or group. These are usually the youngest members, as well as the sick and the elderly. Those who are strong enough to hunt game or to harvest the fruits of the earth or in modern terminology, the breadwinner or the provider, as well as the individual who has cooked and prepared the food, grow in solidarity with the other members, and instil this value in the group – hence the third dimension.
- (3) *The pedagogic dimension.* The younger members, seated at table, learn that it will one day be their duty to strive to acquire food, either directly (by hunting, fishing and working the land) or indirectly (by engaging themselves in other tasks through which they can earn a living). The pedagogic dimension also entails learning to appreciate the efforts and the dedication of the older members, and to imitate them in their selfless dedication.

One is struck by the plethora of meal scenes in the Bible. We have no time here to enter into any great depth on this topic,<sup>29</sup> except to say that in the Semitic context, as José de Mesa explains:

27 See Renato Boccasino, *Etnologia religiosa* (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1958), 183–4.

28 See Rosato, *Introduzione alla teologia dei sacramenti*, 82–3.

29 A classical work which delves into Semitic meal practices is that by William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites. Fundamental Institutions* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1889).

[E]ating and drinking together were activities with weighty relational-social import. They indicated to whom people wanted to relate, who [those] were to be included or excluded in the community, who belonged and who did not. In the Near East, to admit a person to table fellowship was always a sign of welcome and friendship. Psalm 23 graphically describes this gesture when it says of Yahweh, 'You have prepared a banquet for me in the sight of my foes' (Ps. 23: 5). The picture is that of a person fleeing across the desert with his enemies hot on his heels. He arrives at an encampment where the family is at a meal. He stands before the open tent in hesitation and in mute appeal. If the man in the tent stretches out his hand and offers him food, bread and salt, he is safe, for he will be accepted into the encampment and, if need be, defended to the last. But if the man in the tent turns away and refuses, the fugitive is left to face his enemies alone. The giving and sharing of the meal is the mark of committed friendship. Those who sit at a meal are committed to each other and committed to their host, and their host is committed to them. But we need to bear in mind that what was extended to the stranger was what was already presupposed and practiced within the family. It was treating the person as though he were a member of the family.<sup>30</sup>

## Introducing the Maltese context

In the second part of this paper I will refer to some examples of table fellowship from the Maltese context. Until its independence from Great Britain in 1964, Malta was essentially a military and naval base in British hands, especially on account of its strategic place in the Mediterranean Sea. Before that, it had been the seat of the Knights of the Order of St John. Lying at the crossroads of peoples, cultures and religions, Malta was a bulwark between Christianity and Islam, and was influenced by both. Although the Maltese tongue is Semitic – the only Semitic language among those of the European Union member states – the principal features of Maltese culture are southern European.

30 José M. de Mesa, "Let the Little Children Come to Me": A Theological and Historical-Cultural Review of the Catholic Practice of Children's First Communion, *East Asian Pastoral Review* 39 (2002), 10.

The oldest identifiable stratum of Maltese traditions and culture is Semitic. The seafaring Phoenicians, c. 1500 BC, made Malta one of their ports of call in the Mediterranean. Following a Roman, and later, a Byzantine period, Malta was dominated by the Arabs from the late ninth century to the twelfth century AD, roughly at the same time as the latter's presence in the nearby island of Sicily and in Spain. Certain traditions, especially religious-cultural ones, which developed over the ages, are similar to those in Sicily and Calabria, as well as to those emanating from the Iberian Peninsula. For many centuries, practically from the fourteenth to the late eighteenth century, Malta was under the sphere of influence of Aragon, Castille and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Obviously, this has had its effect on the eating habits, table fellowship and other customs of the people of the Maltese Islands.

I will not dwell upon icons of table fellowship which are shared with other European peoples, as for example, the Christmas and the New Year's Day meals, the wedding feast,<sup>31</sup> birthday celebrations and rites of passage (*guccija*,<sup>32</sup> First Communion and Confirmation among Roman Catholics, Graduation), and perhaps Father's Day and Mother's Day, which are relatively recent twentieth-century celebrations. I will focus instead on other examples of table fellowship, which are typically Maltese. We will therefore concentrate on three different snapshots from Maltese life, which are connected to the sharing of food, while bearing in mind – as stated by Counihan and Van Esterik – that 'food is life, and life can be studied and understood through food'.<sup>33</sup> We will also take into consideration an

31 An interesting work on this theme is that by Vassos Argyrou, *Tradition and Modernity in the Mediterranean: The Wedding as Symbolic Struggle*, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Argyrou investigates the effects of modernization on the changing nature of wedding celebrations in the Mediterranean island of Cyprus over the span of two generations.

32 A traditional Maltese family gathering on a child's first birthday, accompanied with a characteristic 'rite' when the child selects an object from a tray, as a prediction of what the child would do as a grown-up.

33 Counihan and Van Esterik, 'Introduction', 1.

important principle enunciated by L. Michael White of the Department of Classics and Religious Studies at the University of Texas: 'Each cultural context has its own grammar of symbols and etiquette, oftentimes lurking as an implicit template of values and behaviour, that govern communal dining.'<sup>34</sup>

### The family *festa* meal

One of the examples of Maltese table fellowship is the customary meal on the day when the village religious *festa* is celebrated. The leading authority on the study of Maltese folklore, Joseph Cassar Pullicino, explains that

the Maltese *festa* in its present form emerged in the course of the nineteenth century as the result of the fusion of various currents of existing tradition. In the sixteenth century the *festa* was only a small affair. Its rustic character, more often than not through the generosity of some local benefactor, took the shape generally of the distribution of bread, almonds, wine and fruit among the people attending the religious ceremonies or of food and money to the poor of the village.<sup>35</sup>

So, the sharing of food on this festive celebration already takes pride of place in this concise description. The Maltese sociologist Mario Vassallo has described the social customs intertwined with religious feasts as a form of *non-ceremonial pageantry*. He qualifies the latter as a 'type of pageantry

34 White, 'Regulating Fellowship in the Communal Meal', 177–205.

35 Joseph Cassar Pullicino, *Studies in Maltese Folklore* (Malta: Malta University Press, 1992), 63–4. In 1575, the rector of a small fifteenth-century countryside chapel dedicated to St Mary, and known as *tal-ftajjar*, informed the Apostolic Visitor Mgr Duzina that it was his custom to distribute unleavened bread (Maltese: *fiira*, plural *ftajjar*) to the needy on the occasion of the annual *festa* to Our Lady. This explains the rather unusual name of the chapel, *Santa Marija tal-Ftajjar*. See Joseph Cassar Pullicino, 'Malta in 1575: Social Aspects of an Apostolic Visit', *Melita Historica* 2/1 (1956), 41.

[which] is more associated with social custom and tradition rather than with specific rubrics.<sup>36</sup> He explains that the outdoor *fiesta* celebrations – what Vassallo calls *fiesta pageantry* – are not unrelated to the liturgy, and in fact are more of an extension of what takes place in the church building, though they are governed by a different set of rules – social rules and norms.<sup>37</sup>

The masterly monograph on the Maltese religious and political environment by Jeremy Boissevain, *Saints and Fireworks: Religion and Politics in Rural Malta*, published in 1965, remains the classical work on the subject.<sup>38</sup> In another work, a case study in cultural anthropology with regard to a village in Malta, Boissevain correctly explains that

the *fiesta* is an occasion [in] which group values are reaffirmed and strengthened, as individuals and groups express their loyalty to their patron saint and unite to defend and enhance the reputation of their party and village. At the same time, the central position that the Church, and, in particular, the cult of saints, occupies in the social structure is strongly reinforced. The parish church and the patron saint form the hub around which this festive occasion turns.<sup>39</sup>

The extended family normally gathers in the patriarchal or the matriarchal home for a sumptuous meal on the day when the *fiesta* is held, usually on a Sunday between May and September. The holding, in summer, of the outdoor festivities in association with the patronal feast of the town or village conveniently ensures 'that the weather will not undo the work and preparations of a whole year.'<sup>40</sup> Just as the social dimension of the *fiesta* is central to the village ethos, this same dimension with regard to the *fiesta*

36 Mario Vassallo, 'Pageantry and Secularization – the Malta case', *Melita Theologica* 32 (1981), 50.

37 Vassallo, 'Pageantry and Secularization – the Malta case', 50.

38 Jeremy Boissevain, *Saints and Fireworks: Religion and Politics in Rural Malta*. London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology 30 (London: Athlone Press, 1965), 74–96.

39 Jeremy F. Boissevain, *Hal Farrug: A Village in Malta* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 69.

40 Cassar Pullicino, *Studies in Maltese Folklore*, 66.

meal within the family home is crucial. Mary Douglas points out that 'if food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries'.<sup>41</sup>

More often than not, as detailed below, the *fešta* meal includes typical local dishes, and is probably the highest point of table fellowship for the extended family in Malta. Hortense Powdermaker, a cultural anthropologist with fascinating field studies in the Pacific region, the Mississippi and Zambia, explains that 'the family meal remains one of the few times when the family is united and drawn together'.<sup>42</sup> Although she is here referring to normal family meals, what she is stating can be applied to the special family meal on the annual recurrence of the Maltese *fešta*. The *fešta* meal, therefore, contributes to the strengthening of family bonds. This feature is part and parcel of the Maltese *fešta*, which as Boissevain affirms, is

an occasion in which the bonds of kinship are reinforced, for each family opens its doors to its relations, especially to those who live in other villages. Grown sons and daughters return to their parental home, married brothers and sisters meet, nephews and nieces call on uncles and aunts. Younger children learn to recognize more distant relatives whom they might not see at any other time of the year. In this way they become aware of the network of kin relations that stretches out from their home [...]. The *fešta* is also a favourite meeting time for courting couples and a traditional occasion in which marriageable boys and girls are introduced to each other.<sup>43</sup>

Besides nourishing bodies, food possesses that peculiar ability to be a conveyor of meaning. In the snapshot I have just offered, there are the few individuals, usually one or two, who do the cooking, and the many that eat. The main message which is conveyed is a spiritual one, namely that 'we have gathered together because we mean well to each other and that despite differences, we will seek to strengthen ties in our extended family'.

41 Mary Douglas, 'Deciphering a Meal', *Daedalus* 101/1 (1972), 61-81.

42 Hortense Powdermaker, 'An Anthropological Approach to the Problem of Obesity', in *Food and Culture*, 203-10.

43 Boissevain, *Hal Farrug: A Village in Malta*, 69.

The purpose of such a celebration at table is, as Keith Bradley explains, 'to bring together around a common table all the family's members, with the emphasis falling on the all-embracing rather than the opposite.'<sup>44</sup>

This shared family meal on the day of the Maltese *fešta* offers an important focal point in the yearly calendar. This meal gives members of the extended family 'a rare chance to come together and catch up on each others' lives. Eating together is a particularly important way of incorporating new household members and fostering a sense of cohesion.'<sup>45</sup> It is worth pointing out that although many people today eat in the kitchen on a daily basis (usually for practical reasons), 'the dining-table still retains its value as a symbol of familial unity and cohesion.'<sup>46</sup> This statement can be applied to describe the Maltese *fešta* meal. Such a common meal is also an expression of solidarity, as several anthropologists have pointed out, such as Michael Young and Miriam Kahn.<sup>47</sup>

Earlier I mentioned those who do the cooking. In the majority of cases, and particularly in Malta, this is done by the women in that household. Very often, one woman would be practically in charge, although she would generally appreciate the assistance of others. The commitment to share in the hassle and the toil of preparing the meal *together* is just as significant as the shared consumption of that special meal. Two feminist sociologists, Charles and Kerr, while writing on the importance of the daily common meal for the family in contemporary Western society, explore the role of women who traditionally prepare these meals. What they say about the

44 Keith Bradley, 'The Roman Family at Dinner', 36–55.

45 Bell and Valentine, *Consuming Geographies*, 64. See J. Brannen, K. Dodd, A. Oakley and P. Storey, *Young People, Health and Family Life* (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1994).

46 Bradley, 'The Roman Family at Dinner', 48.

47 Michael W. Young, *Fighting with Food: Leadership, Values and Social Control in a Massim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971). Michael W. Young, "'The Worst Disease": The Cultural Definition of Hunger in Kalauna', in *Shared Wealth and Symbol: Food, Culture and Society in Oceania and Southeast Asia*, ed. by Lenore Mandelson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Miriam Kahn, *Always Hungry, Never Greedy: Food and the Expression of Gender in a Melanesian Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

daily meal can be applied to the role of the Maltese woman in the preparation of important meals, in this case the *festa* meal. They write:

The most important meal she cooks in the day is the main meal which ideally should be eaten by the family *as a family*; i.e. they should eat it together sitting round a table, talking to each other and enjoying each other's company. This is seen as an important part of family life and something for which women are responsible.<sup>48</sup>

As I pointed out at the beginning of this paper, the most ordinary meal around the same table is a social act which is impregnated with human experiences, emotions, values and significance. Arjun Appadurai asserts that food is both 'a highly condensed social fact [... and] a marvellously plastic kind of collective representation [... with the] capacity to mobilize strong emotions'.<sup>49</sup> In turn, Per Bilde, explains this aspect in very clear terms. He says, as we have been seeing, that

a meal is more than just eating and drinking. Obviously, it matters *what* you eat and drink, but a meal is also *how* you eat, *where* you eat, *with whom* you eat, and under *which circumstances*. In other words: *a meal is eating and drinking plus something else*. We might paraphrase the 'something else' as the admittedly vague – and today often misused – notion 'culture' in the sense of (a) *material culture*; (b) *tradition and history*; (c) *social context and function*; (d) *feelings, values and expectations* invested in the actual meal.<sup>50</sup>

The *festa* meal we are probing is to be studied in the light of these dimensions proposed by Bilde.

The *festa* meal which I have referred to is invariably a sumptuous meal where all those at table take their fill. This normally leads to a state of euphoria, also because of the quantity of wine which is drunk on that occasion. Powdermaker explains that

48 Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr, *Women, Food and Families* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1988), 18.

49 Arjun Appadurai, 'Gastro-politics in Hindu south Asia', *American Ethnologist* 8 (1981), 494–511.

50 Per Bilde, 'The Common Meal in the Qumran-Essene Communities', in *Meals in a Social Context*, 145–66.



eating well, a full stomach, is still one of our main ways of achieving a state of euphoria [...]. This is probably connected with the fact that one of the earliest forms of security and of sensory pleasure is connected with the intake of food and that about it are centred the first human relations. The eating of food and the giving of it remains a symbol of love, affection, and friendliness, as well a source of pleasure in itself.<sup>51</sup>

I have described the *fešta* meal as a sumptuous table. Boissevain, in his case study on a village in Malta, states that in the late morning, the villagers return to their homes with their kith and kin; he aptly describes these meals as 'huge luncheons with their close relatives'.<sup>52</sup> Allusion has also been made to 'a full stomach'. Referring to similar *festi* in the Mediterranean island of Sardinia, Carole Counihan states that 'in the past the collective *fešta* (feast-day) was the only legitimate locus of excessive and conspicuous consumption'.<sup>53</sup> This is often the case in particular in southern Europe and in the Mediterranean islands. In fact, Clara Gallini, too, affirms that an exaggerated consumption of food took place on that exceptional and grandiose day – the village patronal *fešta*.<sup>54</sup> The *fešta* meal, as we have seen, is still an important event in the Maltese family's annual calendar. Besides (implicitly) celebrating together the heroic witness and the Christian values of the village patron saint, the family members envisage this meal as an instrument of cohesion and the strengthening of blood ties.

## Two outdoor meals associated with folk-festivals

Two very particular examples of Maltese table fellowship, which unfortunately are on the wane, are the celebration on the 28 and 29 June of the feast of St Peter and St Paul (*Immarja*), and that of St Gregory (*San Girgor*)

51 Powdermaker, 'An Anthropological Approach to the Problem of Obesity', 208.

52 Boissevain, *Hal Farrug: A Village in Malta*, 71.

53 Carole Counihan, 'Bread as World. Food Habits and Social Relations in Modernizing Sardinia', in *Food and Culture*, 283–95.

54 See Clara Gallini, *Il consumo del sacro: feste lunghe in Sardegna* (Bari: Laterza, 1971), 11.

on the Wednesday following Easter Sunday, on the occasion of an annual penitential pilgrimage dating back to the first half of the sixteenth century.<sup>55</sup> These are outdoor events, the first normally taking place in the large open gardens of a summer residence of the Grand Masters of the Order of St John (Verdala Palace), while the second one occurs at the seaside, in particular, at the main fishing village in Malta (Marsaxlokk). These two very typical examples of Maltese table fellowship – though without a formal table setting! – usually transcend the family and would customarily include friends and neighbours.

Writing on the basis of sociological observations and data gathered thirty years ago, Vassallo affirms that these non-ceremonial religious pageants were, then, already on the decline, while they were steadily losing their religious significance. Very intuitively, he states that both *Imnarja* and *San Ġirgor* had become 'more of a district tradition and devoid of any social significance beyond a popular day off work spent on the beach'.<sup>56</sup> In the mid-1990s, local government was introduced in Malta. The newly-established local councils have subsequently sought to publicize the mentioned folkloristic events and to encourage people to participate in the social aspect of these feasts.

The feast of the martyrdom of St Peter and St Paul, popularly referred to by the name of *Imnarja*, was an important date in the annual calendar of local folk customs.<sup>57</sup> It dates back to the period prior to the arrival of the Knights of St John in Malta in 1530, although scholars over the years have debated on two points: (a) on how old the traditions associated with this

55 See Guido Lanfranco, *Drawwiet u Tradizzjonijiet Maltin*. Kullana Kulturali 24 (Malta: Pubblikazzjonijiet Indipendenza, 2001), 176–7; 225–6.

56 Vassallo, 'Pageantry and Secularization – the Malta case', 54.

57 A most precious work on *Imnarja* is that compiled by Joseph Cassar Pullicino, 'Documentary Material Relating to *l-Imnarja*', *Littérature Orale Arabo-Berbère*, Bulletin 14 (Paris: Association pour l'Étude des Civilisations et des Littératures de l'Afrique Septentrionale, 1983), 1–97. The whole issue of this Bulletin is dedicated to *L-Imnarja. Fête des Lumières à Malte*, and abounds in learned articles and studies on this theme.

feast actually are; and (b) on the actual place or places where the people actually assembled to celebrate.<sup>58</sup> Interesting, though conflicting sets of data, can be found in texts by Giampietro Francesco Agius de Soldanis (1733), Giovanni Antonio Ciantar (1772), F. E. de Guignard, Comte de Saint Priest (1791), Louis de Boisgelin (1805), George Percy Badger (1860) and Vincenzo Busuttill (1894).<sup>59</sup>

Cassar Pullicino describes *Imnarja* as 'essentially a folk-festival. Following as it does, close upon the hard toils of the harvest, it forms a pleasant break in the dull routine of existence that makes up the peasant's life – a few crowded hours of merrymaking and rustic song in a year of sweat and toil'.<sup>60</sup> The *Imnarja* celebration, today, commences after sunset and goes on late into the night. It is often accompanied by local folkloristic singing called *ghana*.

The other celebration of *San Girgor* is held in spring and consists of an outing to the seaside from the morning to late afternoon. The feast of St Gregory in the old Latin Rite liturgical calendar was held on 12 March which invariably coincided with a Lenten weekday. This meant that the celebration 'could not be freely celebrated on account of the strict fasting rules enforced in those days, and [was] therefore transferred to the first Wednesday [...] after Easter' in the late eighteenth century.<sup>61</sup>

In the case of each of the two festive celebrations, the sharing and the consumption of food in excessive quantities are to be underlined. Vassallo, who puts these two typically Maltese celebrations in the already described category of *festival pageantry*, states that this kind of non-ceremonial pageantry 'is generally associated with folk jollification and outdoor celebra-

58 See Cassar Pullicino, 'Documentary Material Relating to *l-Imnarja*', 5–10; 14–16.

59 Cassar Pullicino, 'Documentary Material Relating to *l-Imnarja*', 14–15.

60 Cassar Pullicino, *Studies in Maltese Folklore*, 58–9.

61 Cassar Pullicino, *Studies in Maltese Folklore*, 66. It was Bishop Vincenzo Labini who authorized, in 1781, that the popular festivity and the penitential pilgrimage of *San Girgor* should be held on the Wednesday after Easter Sunday. See G. Cassar Pullicino, 'Is-Sehem tal-Folklor fl-Identita' Kulturali Maltija', in *L-Identita' Kulturali ta' Malta*, ed. by Toni Cortis (Malta: Dipartiment tal-Infommazzjoni, 1989), 59–79.

tions'.<sup>62</sup> Referring to such festivals in a Mediterranean context, Counihan explains that 'excess consumption in the *fiesta* served to bring the community together, temporarily to obliterate social and economic differences, and to satiate hunger collectively, madly and equally, at least for this one day'.<sup>63</sup> Counihan evocatively calls these traditional festive celebrations 'theatres of excess consumption',<sup>64</sup> which, in the long run, contribute to the cohesion of the social community.<sup>65</sup>

I earlier affirmed that the folkloristic meal aspect of the festivities of *Imnarja* and *San Girgor* is on the wane. This is confirmed by the study undertaken by Counihan in Sardinia. From what she discovers, I can say that there are many similarities between the Sardinian and the Maltese festivities, even when it comes to assessing the impact of modernization. Indeed, she states that the fact that such agrarian *festi* of the type described 'persist today only in the less modernized areas of Sardinia [...] is an indication that their demise accompanies modernization'.<sup>66</sup>

## The cultural aspects of the meals described

Referring to the four aspects of culture proposed by Per Bilde mentioned earlier one can contextualize them by applying them to the three Maltese festive celebrations, which are being considered in this paper. He affirms that a meal entails a substantial amount of *material culture*. By this he means kinds of food and drink, recipes and cookery, as well as the furniture and

62 Vassallo, 'Pageantry and Secularization – the Malta case', 50.

63 Counihan, 'Bread as World', 291. See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: Norton, 1967). Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

64 Counihan, 'Bread as World', 292.

65 See Giulio Angioni, *Rapporti di produzione e cultura subalterna: contadini in Sardegna* (Cagliari: EDES, 1974), 232–79.

66 Counihan, 'Bread as World', 292.

tableware which are utilized.<sup>67</sup> In the Maltese *fešta* meal, the courses at the meal invariably include pasta, rabbit (or chicken or roast leg of pork or lamb) and dessert. Wine flows freely at table. The same can be said of the *Imnarja* celebration, which takes place outdoors.<sup>68</sup> On this occasion, again, fried rabbit seasoned with garlic and pepper is the norm. Another option is rabbit marinated in wine, and then fried.

Cassar Pullicino provides us with a particularly colourful description of the scene:

From all parts of Malta people make their way to Buskett, where there is everything ready for a feast of song and plenty under the greenwood tree. The appetising smell of fried rabbit invites the merry-makers to indulge in a good feed washed down with wine from the local vats. The night [of the 28 June] is spent in good-humoured mirth and fun. There are singing bouts to the strains of Spanish guitars, and the popular bards from the various villages [...] engage in keen rivalry.<sup>69</sup>

67 See Bilde, 'The Common Meal in the Qumran-Essene Communities', 145.

68 An unpublished eighteenth-century dictionary, compiled in Malta by a Maltese historian and linguist includes the word *Imnarja*. Among the precious information compiled, one finds a reference to the eating and drinking habits of the people (many of whom got drunk) on that occasion: 'Propria vale [the word *Imnarja* actually means] Illuminazione, poichè nella vigilia di detta solennità non si vede che illuminazione alla chiesa e Città Notabile, Sakkaja. Ivi concorre il popolo intero di Malta, sì dalle città che da' villaggi per la funzione della Chiesa, nel giardino del Boschetto, *vi mangiano allegramente, e molti si ubbriacono*' [my italics]. See Gio Pier Francesco Agius de Soldanis, *Damma tal Kliem Kartaginis mscerred fel fom tal Maltin u Ghaucin*, c. 1759 (National Library, Valletta, Malta, Ms. 143°, ff. 379v–380r). Reproduced in Joseph Cassar Pullicino, 'Documentary Material Relating to *l-Imnarja*', 51–2.

69 Cassar Pullicino, *Studies in Maltese Folklore*, 61. The same vivid text is also found in Joseph Cassar Pullicino, 'Documentary Material Relating to *l-Imnarja*', 68. The text of an unpublished 1733 manuscript describing ecclesiastical practices and celebrations in eighteenth-century Malta refers in detail to the feast of *Imnarja*. With reference to the *Imnarja* meal, the text states: 'il Popolo plebeo si porta d'un subito al Giardino del Boschetto a mangiare e bere [...]'. The text is reproduced in Giuseppe Cassar Pullicino, *Studi di tradizioni popolari maltesi* (Malta: University of Malta, 1989), 7–8.

The particular food items mentioned sum up and transmit a very particular situation – the typical outdoor *Imnarja* meal; Barthes states that a meal ‘is a real sign, perhaps the functional unit of a system of communication [...]. All food serves a sign among the members of a given society.’<sup>70</sup>

A detailed description of the *Imnarja* festivities dating back to 1894 contributes some supplementary information on the consumption of food on the morning of 29 June. This data is found in the work by Vincenzo Busuttil with the title *Holiday Customs in Malta*:

Careless of the excessive heat of a broiling sun, [the country people] divide into companies and under the shades of the leafy orange trees in the beautiful garden, they seem quite happy in eating their sumptuous dinners, consisting chiefly of stewed rabbit, ham, pies, cheese and an allowance of common wine, which they keep in large dark bottles, or in tin cans where the indispensable liquid is less liable to being spilt.<sup>71</sup>

The food consumed at the third celebration, the feast of *San Girgor*, is normally simpler. It invariably includes generous portions of Maltese bread and tomatoes, garlic and pepper, and sprinkled with olive oil. Sliced olives, beans and tuna may be added to enhance the flavour.

Bilde states that ‘with these material elements of the meal we have already moved far into *tradition and history*’.<sup>72</sup> This is very true with reference to the Maltese meals I am referring to. The particular items mentioned earlier and consumed during the respective meals have long been embedded in the local traditions of a population which relied heavily on agricultural produce, animal husbandry and fishing, on account of its geographical position and its Mediterranean climate with hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters.

70 Barthes, ‘Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption’, 21.

71 Vincenzo Busuttil, *Holiday Customs in Malta* (Malta 1894, sixth edition, 1922), 67. The same text is reproduced in Cassar Pullicino, ‘Documentary Material Relating to *l-Imnarja*’, 62–3. With regard to the merrymaking in Buskett Gardens, see Cassar Pullicino, ‘Documentary Material Relating to *l-Imnarja*’, 16–17.

72 Bilde, ‘The Common Meal in the Qumran-Essene Communities’, 145.

We have also seen that the meal is a *social phenomenon*. Bilde asks: 'Who are [those] invited, and who take[s] part? How are the participants dressed? How are they placed at table? Which table manners and rituals are followed?'<sup>73</sup> With reference to the traditional Maltese meals described above, the context is normally a family setting, especially in the *festa* meal on the day of the village annual religious festivity. In the case of the latter two meals, namely, that on the *Imnarja* and *San Girgor* celebrations, the family setting may be combined with the presence of friends and other acquaintances. One must always bear in mind that groups are about exclusion as well as inclusion. The consumption of food on the occasion of these two traditional meals invariably delineates the 'way in which boundaries get drawn, and insiders and outsiders distinguished'.<sup>74</sup>

Having considered the social aspect, finally, Bilde explains that this dimension inevitably leads to the *symbolic meaning* of the meals. In other words, it is not only a question of satisfying one's hunger or thirst, or of being together, but of celebrating the *togetherness* of the group. The socio-religious dimension is highly significant. The village saint is not only a model to imitate in the way the saint embraced and practised Christian values, but also enjoys the role of a village totem.

## Conclusion

I have given three snapshots of typical examples of table fellowship in Malta. Although a relatively high percentage of the people of Malta (53 per cent in 2005) are churchgoers and popular religiosity remains strong in the country, the *real* connection between the meal and the religious

73 Bilde, 'The Common Meal in the Qumran-Essene Communities', 145.

74 Bell and Valentine, *Consuming Geographies*, 91. See Douglas, 'Deciphering a Meal', 61–81.

celebration in question, whether it is the village *festa* or *Imnarja* (St Peter and St Paul) or *San Girgor* (St Gregory), has fallen much into the background.<sup>75</sup> Yet, as I have sought to explain, the meal retains its spiritual undertones and connotations.

It is significant to note one of the conclusions of the 1999–2000 *European Values Study*: ‘The high scores on apparently divergent value-orientations suggest that it is not uncommon for people in Malta to mix-and-match the traditional and post-traditional, materialist and post-materialist aspirations, new and old values for the society of the future.’<sup>76</sup>

I hold that it is within this picture that we can say that the meals we have studied retain an underlying, often implicit, imperceptible spiritual dimension, with their own particular ‘rituals’ and ‘traditions’. These meals continue to contribute silently to the reinforcement of the social fabric and the strengthening of the bonds of communion among a significant section of Maltese society. Partaking of a common meal in the contexts illustrated in this paper fosters a sense of interdependence. Eating and

75 See Cassar Pullicino, ‘Is-Schem tal-Folklor fl-Identita’ Kulturali Maltija’, 66.

76 Anthony M. Abela, *Values 2000: European Values Study (Malta 1984–1999)*. Summary of preliminary report submitted to the Government of Malta 13 September 1999. Quoted in Mario Farrugia, ‘Reaching Out [...] to the Dance of Life. Malta’s Culture: An Epochal Change?’, in *Hide and Seek. Reflections on Faith and Culture in Dialogue*, ed. by Mark Farrugia (Malta: MKSU, 2009), 23. The results of the most recent *European Values Study* wave of 2008 were published in 2010. The data gathered in 2008 from forty-six European nations focused on a broad range of values. This large-scale, cross-national and longitudinal survey research programme (carried out in 1981, 1990, 1999/2000 and 2008) has released a quantity of data for European countries on the sampling procedure, the characteristic of the sample, the mode of data collection, the fieldwork procedure, the country-specific variables and the country-specific documentation. What I can state with regard to Malta is that in the fourth wave (2008), the data gathered from ‘the questions with respect to family, work, religious, political and societal values are highly comparable with those in [the three] earlier waves’. See EVS Foundation, and Tilburg University, *European Values Study 2008: Method Report* fourth wave, Malta [ZA 4778] (Cologne: Gesis, and Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, 2010). In the case of Malta, the fieldwork was carried out between 16 June and 23 September 2008.



drinking at the same table entails a participation in the very life of others.<sup>77</sup> This is a pivotal dimension of these meals, a dimension which is also deeply spiritual because it touches the very core of the individual and of Maltese society in a profound way.

77 See Scerri, *Koinonia, Diakonia and Martyria*, 121. Adalbert-G. Hamman, 'Agape', in *Dictionnaire encyclopédique du christianisme ancien* 1, ed. by A. Di Berardino and F. Vial (Tournai: Cerf, 1990), 48. Adalbert-G. Hamman, 'Liturgie et action sociale. Le diaconat aux premiers siècles', *La Maison-Dieu* 36 (1953), 163–6. Adalbert G. Hamman, *Vie liturgique et vie sociale* (Paris: Desclée, 1968), 41.