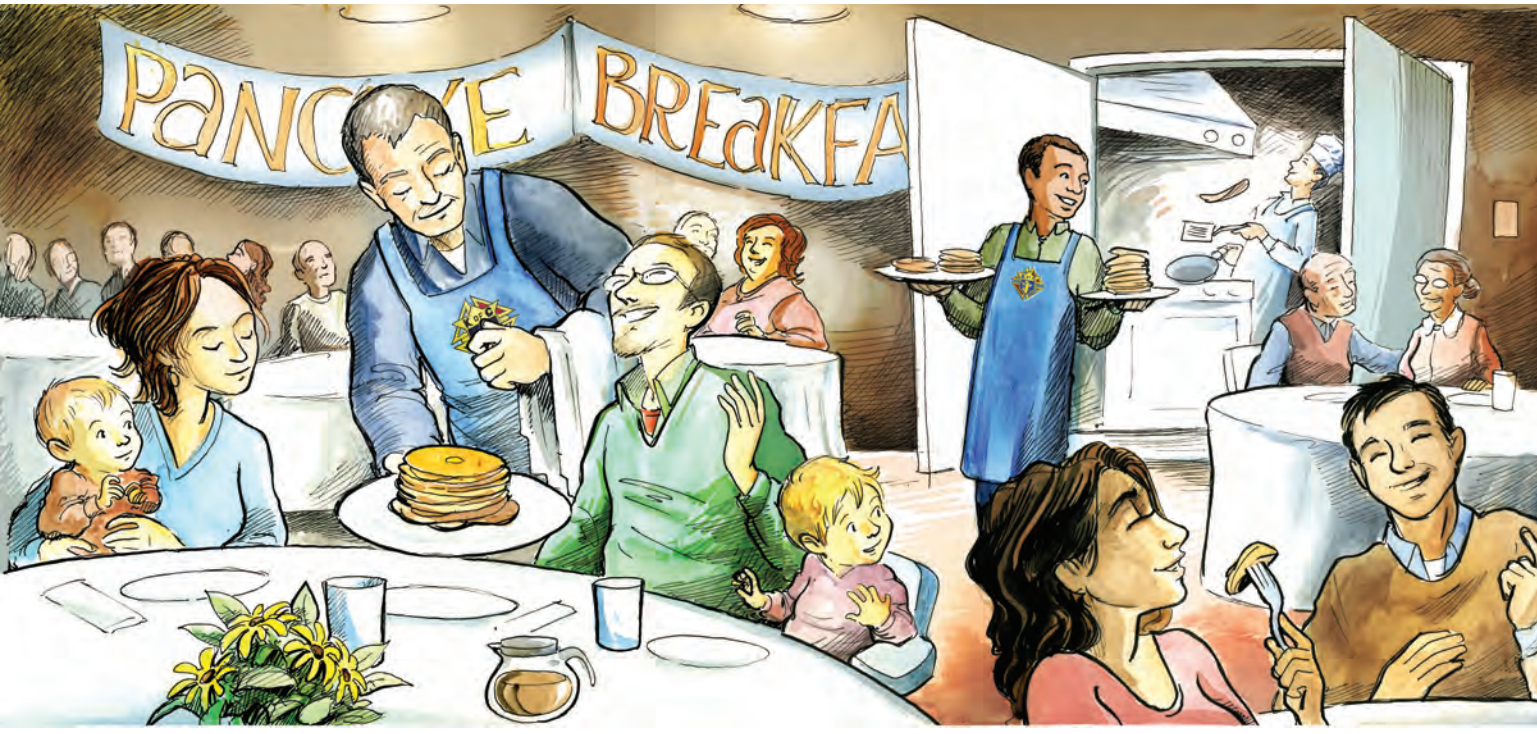

Full Stomachs, Full Hearts

In a spirit of charity and fraternity, Knights prepare food that supports their communities and brings people together

by Patrick Scalisi
Illustrations by Ben Hatke

Food is not only an essential part of life, but it is also integral to the Christian faith. Jesus fed the masses with multiplied fish and bread during his ministry; foods and plants figured into the parables that Christ handed down to his disciples; and the Eucharist — the source and summit of the Christian life — was instituted during the most famous meal in human history: the Last Supper.

It is little wonder, then, that food continues to play a central role in Catholic culture today, both in worship and in the ways that sharing a meal can bring people together. Sometimes these gatherings result in material or monetary donations for charitable causes. At other times, the simple act of coming to table produces an invaluable sense of togetherness.

For the Knights of Columbus, food is a visible part of the Order's presence in communities around the world. In the Philippines, Knights feed the needy and vulnerable through communal food programs. In Poland, K of C members hand out bread on certain feast days. And in North America, Knights are almost as famous for their breakfasts and fish frys as they are for their charitable outreach.

But pancakes and tilapia are only the first courses of a feast that includes many unique K of C recipes, each with its own story of charity, unity, fraternity and patriotism.

FRYING FISH — EVEN IN THE SNOW

During Lent, many K of C units dust off deep fryers and skillets to prepare meatless Friday dinners for their Catholic communities. Glenville Council 10013 in Schenectady, N.Y., is no exception. For the past six years, the council has hosted fish fry dinners every Friday during Lent to supplement charitable income that had previously come from a Knights-sponsored golf tournament.

"They were running into problems with the golf tournaments — no one wanted to join them anymore, they were losing money," said James W. Martin, who initiated the fish

frys when he served as grand knight from 2006 to 2008.

At first, Martin met resistance when trying to implement the program. When some people expressed concerns about the odor that cooking fish would leave in the kitchen, Martin offered to cook the fish outside. When others pointed out that Lent usually falls during winter in New York, Martin's solution was to buy a tent.

"In the great Northeast here, it snows a lot. We went through many snow storms doing these outside," said Martin.

Despite a rocky start, the fish frys have taken off in recent years. The events draw involvement from the parish youth group and the wives of council members, who often prepare and donate dessert dishes. The dinners generate about half of the council's charitable funds — about $3,500.

"It just brings so much unity to the Knights and all their wives," said Martin. "The work of many hands makes little work for all. And it works out so well."

A 'WILD' NIGHT

Banquet dinners always involve plenty of food, but it isn't often that the menu includes bear, beaver, moose and buffalo. That is, unless you happen to stop by the annual wild game dinner hosted by St. John de Brébeuf Council 8233 in Kingsville, Ontario.

Started in 1986, the dinner has grown from a modest affair serving about 100 people to a sold-out capacity event with 600 attendees ready to sample entrées, hors d'oeuvres, side dishes and desserts that range from caribou and venison to turtle and trout.

"When we first started, it was kind of a seat-of-our pants type of thing," said Stanley E. Balakowski, who was grand knight when the program launched. "Whatever we had, we served."

From those simple roots, the dinner has become wildly popular, generating on average $13,000 for a variety of charitable causes that include the Leamington District Memorial Hospital, Birthright of Greater Windsor and the Kingsville Public Library, among others. The dinner, whose menu varies from year to year, has also strengthened the council and become a town tradition.

"Some years ago, we used to rely on bingo games a lot," said Balakowski. "But that didn't do much for the council other than supply funds, because five or six men — usually the same ones — were the ones who ran the games. If five or six people are working on that, it doesn't bring many of us together. But when you have 75 or 80 people out of 150 that work on this, then you get the integration between members. There's a bond that's established. You have a greater love for your brother Knight."

Even the mayor of Kingsville has weighed in on the dinner. In a 2010 letter to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the event, Mayor Nelson Santos wrote, "As your event has grown over the years from its humble beginnings, it has truly become a part of our heritage, culture and great tradition of Kingsville."

PANCAKES SO LIGHT, THEY FLOAT

When Richard L. Wagner transferred to St. Francis of Assisi Council 12484 in Lancaster, Texas, in January 2009, he brought with him a culinary technique that transformed the parish breakfasts hosted by his new council: "Angel-Lite Pancakes."

"Our secret recipe contains no water or milk," Wagner wrote in a 2009 letter to *Columbia* magazine. "These 'Angel Lites' are so lite, they tend to float off the griddles and have to be plucked out of the air to serve them."

In no time at all, Wagner's recipe became the centerpiece of breakfasts held after Sunday Mass, and Wagner would take to the pulpit before each event to pitch his creation to parishioners.

"He always had a colorful expression to go with them. He said, 'They're so light, you'll just fly away with them,'" said Thomas P. Germino Jr., who was grand knight when Wagner joined the council.

Besides the funds generated from the sale of the "Angel-Lite Pancakes" — which support the council's charitable causes — the breakfasts have also brought parishioners closer together.

"That's pretty much what the whole objective was: to have a place where the community could get to known one another," said Germino. "We think that's had a positive effect, because you get to know more people in the parish and grow into more of a family."

Wagner passed away July 15, 2010, of complications from kidney failure, but his legacy lives on in the special pancakes that are still served by the council each month.

TACOS UNITE

At first glance, western Oklahoma may not seem like the cultural melting pot of cities like New York or Los Angeles. But St. Mary's Church in Clinton encompasses a diversity rivaling most urban centers, for it is here that a community

of European, Hispanic, Japanese and Vietnamese Catholics come together to celebrate their faith. Tying them together is a meal program launched three years ago by Western Council 3101 in Clinton called "tacos al pastor."

Introduced by District Warden Hector Hernandez of Oklahoma District #8, tacos al pastor has crossed cultural lines better than even the most seasoned international ambassador.

"We have a very successful attendance," said District Deputy Michael Harris. "It's a good time for all the cultures to get together and socialize."

Hernandez learned how to make tacos al pastor, which denotes the preparation method for the dish using pork and pineapple, while working at a food stand in his native Mexico. When he brought the dish to his council, there was some concern that it might not translate well among parishioners from so many different backgrounds. Thankfully, tacos al pastor sparked curiosity among the parish family.

"Once they tasted it, it just really took off," said Harris. "It helped bring the council and the parishioners together in that way, in being unique."

So far, the program's greatest contribution has been to help build a new parish hall at St. Mary's Church, which has, in turn, allowed the parish to become even closer. St. Joseph Hall houses the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the parish nursing program and, less visibly, the goodwill of a diverse family joined together for a common purpose.

A TRADITION HANDED DOWN

Booya may not be a familiar dish to people living outside of Middle America, but Thomas Pexa of New Prague (Minn.) Council 2023 has been making it for most of his life. The soup, which may have its origins in a similar Czech recipe, was passed down by his father, Joseph S. Pexa Sr., who made booya as child.

"When [my father] was young, he always shot rabbit and squirrels, so they made a lot of that type of soup," said Thomas. "He lived on a farm, and they had enough cream and vegetables, so they started to make it when he was a kid."

For decades, members of Council 2023 have enjoyed booya once a year as part of their meetings. Each month, Knights gather for a meal after conducting council business and rotate through a number of recipes. Ever since Joseph introduced booya to the council many years ago, it has always been a hit.

Thomas estimates that the recipe is at least 80 years old and added that his father made booya almost until the time of his death in mid-2011 at the age of 101. "He made it probably a month before he passed away," said Thomas. "Sometimes he said it didn't taste good because his taste buds were so bad. I said, 'Dad, you always make good soup.'"

Joseph's fellow council members would likely agree.

"Men — it seems like they're always ready to eat!" said Thomas, who explained that booya has encouraged fraternal brotherhood and that more members show up to participate when the soup is being served.

BETTER THAN RATIONS

For families living on a military base, the normal pressures of home life are coupled with the anxieties of having a loved one deployed overseas. Sometimes, a task as simple as making dinner can seem like a stressful chore.

Enter Archbishop Seghers Council 5011 in Fairbanks, Alaska. In 2006, the council decided to start giving back to the military families living at Fort Wainwright, and Feeding Our Outstanding Dependents was born.

In the six years since its launch, the program has united Catholics at Fort Wainwright in supporting military families The parish at the base provides funding for the food itself, while council members organize and cook the meals, which are often home-style recipes like "tangy and sweet baked chicken."

For District Deputy Billy A. Chrisman Jr. of Alaska District #2, it is important that "the people who are there — the women, the children, the families — have a relaxing time where they don't have to worry about what's going on." Military spouses, he added, show up alone or with several children in tow; sometimes, soldiers who are on leave accompany their families.

Besides the togetherness it fosters, the program has also had a positive impact on evangelization. Chrisman explained that some people have actually returned to the Church after learning that the Knights and the Catholic community cosponsor the program.

"They'll say, 'Well, my mom would really be happy if I got my child baptized,'" Chrisman said. "We're not really evangelizing doing this, but we are in a way."♦

PATRICK SCALISI is *Columbia* magazine's associate editor.

Your Turn

In addition to recounting the stories from each of these K of C food initiatives, we also have available the recipes for *Columbia* readers to try at home or at their council functions. Visit kofc.org/columbia to view six recipes featured in this article.