

# FEASTS OF LIFE

RECIPES FROM NANA'S WOODEN SPOON

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## Introduction

My first book, *Life, Love, and Laughter* was a book about the Consciousness Examen of St. Ignatius. I basically put his great work into my own words. Now, I am stealing the great work of almost a hundred people and sharing it with you—with their permission, of course!

Did you ever notice that Jesus does a lot of eating in the Scriptures? Many of his teachings occur around the table. He eats with sinners, Pharisees, tax collectors, the multitude, widows, wedding guests, his family, and his disciples. As a remembrance of him, he asks us to gather as a community, break open his word and share a simple meal of bread and wine. The promise is simple but profound; when we do this in memory of him, he is there among us in his word, in his people, and most profoundly in the simple meal of bread and wine.

This simplified theology has haunted me for years. It is a constant reminder to me that the meals of our lives are holy events. They are moments when Jesus breaks into the ordinary to teach us and to share his love. No meal is really just a meal. It is an opportunity to grow closer to God and one another. It is an opportunity to “do this in memory of me” in our small church, the church of our homes.

I was never a big fan of fast food; it seems impersonal and non-relational. To go through a drive-up window was not in my experience as a young boy. My parents would sometimes take my sister and me to A&W, which was an old fashioned place where they hung the tray on your window and brought the burgers to the car. A&W was different; it was an event of sorts. The other fast food places are a place to “get it done.” It has less to do with the meal and more to do with filling up, like opening the can of dog chow in the kitchen and pouring it into the bowl. Fido eats it because he is hungry, not because he wants to break bread.

To share a meal is to change one’s heart. After going to someone’s home for dinner, I feel connected in a different way. I am no longer a stranger; I have been welcomed at the table. Think about the meals you have shared in people’s homes. You feel welcome; you become connected. That is the Last Supper being repeated again and again. I believe these experiences feed our spiritual lives, too. If we are accustomed to feasting well, we will be able to celebrate well. If we struggle with feasting, we will struggle with celebrating. Let me explain.

There are people who still long for the “quiet Mass.” They like to sit alone, to say their prayers privately, and are not looking to sing or even hear a choir. Then there are the “bells and smells” crowd who love all the hoopla of worship; give them music, prayers, community and they are totally at home. Somehow, we need to strike a balance. Both groups are called to celebrate, in their own way, according to their own experience. The beauty of what I am talking about is that we don’t have to change; it is a call to recognition. Recognize how you celebrate at home, and you can recognize how you celebrate in church.

No matter how we do it, celebrating, feasting, and God are very close. They are so close in fact that they are somewhat interconnected. We can compare it to the relationship of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Spirit); all three entities dancing together. I believe that celebrating and feasting are part of the God-dance and whenever we gather to feast and celebrate in our homes, we are very close to God.

That is my hope for this book. Not one recipe in this book is mine. They were all given to me by friends and family who danced with me around the table. Their recipes have done much more than teach me about wonderful food; they have shown me how to live life by sharing a good meal in times of sorrow and times of joy. I have met God in their homes or in their restaurants. Their giving hearts have refreshed my sometimes drooping spirit.

Each contributor has personalized his/her recipe because each has a story to tell. You will soon see that this is not so much a book for those who want to be good cooks. This is a book for those who want to dance with God. Let the dance begin!



Me with “The Golden Girls” who cook over 300 pounds of chicken cutlets for our Italian Feast.

# I

## The BIG Feasts

*There are days in the year that are marked with wonderful meals. Often these days are linked to the life of Jesus. They are days we come together with people we love to celebrate life. We go to church and celebrate around the Table, and then we continue the feasting at our own tables.*

*After I was ordained, Christmas Eve took on new meaning. It used to be the night of seven fish dishes, sitting around my grandmother's table and eating until we got sleepy. Later on in life, it was around my aunt's table, with all the wonderful fish dishes and the house smelling of fried shrimp. Now my Christmas Eves are filled with people and activity. There is no longer a chance to sit around the table and celebrate, as I am celebrating with God's people around the parish table, the altar. There have actually been Christmas Eves when I have had dinner at the local diner with a friend or two before the midnight Mass. I told this story (albeit a sob story of sorts) to a couple of my adopted Italian grandmothers. One, Marie Ricigliano, prepared an entire Christmas Eve feast for me and some of my friends in July! The following recipes are cherished memories of that day and many Christmas Eve feasts.*

## CHRISTMAS

*Perhaps the greatest day of all for most of us is the feast of Christmas. It is a wonderful blending of family tradition and faith that is celebrated around the table. Some of my earliest childhood memories center around Christmas. I can still smell the zeppoli dough rising in our boiler room, and the great smells of lasagna, roast turkey, stuffed artichokes, imported provolone, and all the rest that filled my grandmother's little kitchen.*

*The media places so much attention on Christmas that we can almost get lost in the hustle and bustle of the season. A true story from a homily I gave as a younger priest keeps me rooted in the deeper meaning.*

*A rather rambunctious third grader was trying out for the Christmas pageant in his school. The Sister who was in charge had a deep admiration for this impish little guy and decided to give him the part of the innkeeper, thinking, "How can he cause me trouble in that small part?" As you remember, the innkeeper has just one line, "There is no room in the inn." Well, Johnny went home and practiced the line time and time again with his mother, father, grandparents, and sisters, and finally, the big night came. Everyone gathered in the gymnasium on folding chairs to watch the Christ story unfold. They sang carols, began their story, and the moment finally came, the youngsters playing Joseph and Mary knocked on the door of the inn. Johnny was nervous on the other side of the door, he was waiting for the knock, which was his cue to swing open the door. The moment came, he flung the door open, and stood staring at Mary and Joseph. Silence. Sister was cringing. More silence. Finally, St. Joseph, an eighth grader, figured that Johnny forgot his line, so again he said, "Please, may we stay at your inn tonight?" Another pause. Then all of a sudden Johnny blurted out, "OK, OK, come on in; we'll make room!"*

*He couldn't refuse them! He had to take them in! Johnny made the story his own, and forever changed the outcome. He offers us an important reality check: can we make the story our own; can we allow the people of the Christ story to live in our hearts and our homes each day? Is there room at our table for them?*

*The following are some of the great recipes of Christmas. They remind me of people who welcome Jesus to their table and only serve the best with love!*



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*Fr. Jim*

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*This recipe is from one of my adopted grandmothers who cooks at our Italian Feast each year. She and the other “golden girls” cook over 300 pounds of chicken cutlets and 175 pounds of meatballs and never slow down.*

## **AUNT JO’S BACCALA**

Submitted by Jo Brogan

*☞ This dish was always served on Christmas Eve at our home. Now I serve it to my family. My grandchildren look forward to this tradition. Enjoy! Buon Natale!*

Ingredients:


<b>3 pounds baccala</b>	<b>3 or 4 stalks of celery, chopped</b>
<b>1/4 cup olive oil</b>	<b>red pepper flakes</b>
<b>1 bunch of scallions</b>	<b>3 or 4 potatoes, peeled and</b>
<b>1 large can crushed tomatoes</b>	<b>quartered</b>
<b>salt and pepper to taste</b>	<b>1 can black pitted olives</b>

Chop scallions and sauté in oil. Add tomatoes, salt and pepper, celery, red pepper flakes. Add potatoes and cook until fork tender. Add olives and baccala. Cook until fish flakes - about one hour. Serve with spaghetti and good Italian bread.

**Important note:** Baccala must soak for 3 to 4 days before use.

## CHRISTMAS CRAB SAUCE

Submitted by Joanne Aloisi

 *This is my mother-in-law's recipe. Some say it is close to the original. If so, it's because I make the sauce in her pots!*

Ingredients:

<b>2 tablespoons olive oil</b>	<b>salt and pepper to taste</b>
<b>1 dozen blue claw crabs, cleaned</b>	<b>4 (15 oz.) cans whole tomatoes,</b>
<b>8 baby lobster tails (slit up the back</b>	<b>crushed with your hands</b>
<b>for easy removal later)</b>	<b>3 fresh basil leaves</b>
<b>2 whole garlic cloves</b>	<b>1 pound large shrimp, cleaned</b>

In a large pot cook oil at medium heat. Sauté crabs and lobster tails till they turn orange. Add garlic and remove when brown. Place sautéed crabs and lobster tails in a bowl. Lightly salt and cover.

In the same pot, add the tomatoes, which you have crushed, (or canned crushed tomatoes) and stir up the sediment from the bottom of the pan. After  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour on medium low heat, add crabs and lobsters. Reduce heat to simmer. Partially cover pot, cook for 1 hour, stirring occasionally. If sauce appears thin, add 1 - 4 oz. can of tomato paste. Cook for 20 minutes more. Add shrimp for the last 5 to 10 minutes.

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*Fr. Jim*

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*Mama Aloisi is a wonderful traditional cook who never seems to tire! I remember speaking with her at her mom's wake and asking if she was able to cook Thanksgiving dinner for all the relatives who were visiting. She nodded and responded with words that still ring in my head, "Fr. Jim, you gotta eat!" It's true, you gotta eat, and it helps mend broken hearts, too!*