

AGAPE MEALS IN EARLY CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The Agape feast (also called Love feast) was a loosely structured early Christian service that typically included a social meal. Because food was often eaten, it is often presumed to have a connection with the liturgical Eucharist. If indeed connected, it was separated from the Eucharist by the early second century, when Pliny the Younger reported that the Christians regularly met "on a stated day" in the early morning to "address a form of prayer to Christ, as to a divinity", and later in the day would "reassemble, to eat in common a harmless meal". Neither Scripture nor any documents of the early church ever equate the Agape with the Eucharist and any putative relationship between them had virtually ceased by the time of Cyprian (died 258). Early canons of the church restricted the social meals of Agapes from being given in church sanctuaries. The prominence of the Agape in the church Fathers suggests that this informal service was second in church life only to the devotional Lord's Supper. The liturgy below draws on the Didache, which includes a description of an early form of service, and is dated between 50 and 120 A.D.

A LITURGY FOR AN AGAPE MEAL

INTRODUCTON

You are all people of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Galatians 3: 26 -29 (New International Version)

There are two ways, one of life, the other of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways.

Now the way of life is this:

First, you shall love the God who made you; second, your neighbour as yourself, and everything that you would not have done to you, do not do to another.

Bless those that curse you and pray for your enemies, fast for those that persecute you. For what merit is there if you love those that love you? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? But love those who hate you and you will not have any enemy. You shall not abandon the commandments of the Lord but shall keep what you have received without adding or subtracting anything.

This is the way of life.

Let us confess our faults together, and do not approach prayer with an evil conscience.

Didache 1:1-3, 4:13-14 and 8:2

Silence is kept

Let us pray:

**Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our bread for the morrow,
And forgive us our sin,
As we forgive those who sin against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For the power and glory are yours forever.**

Jesus Said: "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

Matthew 18:20 (New International Version)

A Cross is Brought to the Table

**Forgive us Lord when life in this world
causes us to forget the life and love we find in You;
When we isolate ourselves and others,
and when we let our brokenness have the last word.
Forgive us Lord for all our faults
Which You have atoned for us upon the Cross
And let us find new life in you.**

Jesus Said: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

John 8:12 (New International Version)

A Lighted Candle is brought to the Table

**We give you thanks, O God,
For in the face of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord;
We see the light of the knowledge of your glory;
In him you have called us out of darkness;
into your marvellous light.**

**Let us shine with that light
So that through our true selves
And with all we are and all we do
Bring love and care and understanding
To share with all new life in you.**

Jesus Said: Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."

John 6:27 (New International Version)

Samples of the food and drink which has been prepared for the meal are brought to the table

**Bless us Lord and give us food for our journey;
where each of us;
in fellowship with one and other;
and in fellowship with You,
may bring to others;
of all races and creeds,
of all sexual and gender identities,
of all talents and abilities,
The Love of Christ**

A Hymn, Song, Poem or Reading may be inserted here

Let us Praise the Lord

**Glory to God in the highest
and peace to his people on earth.
Lord God, heavenly King,
Almighty God and Father,
we worship you, we give you thanks,
we praise you for your glory.
Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,
Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world:
have mercy on us;
You are seated at the right hand of the Father:
receive our prayer.
For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High,
Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.**

Let us give thanks for the meal:

First, concerning the cup:

With the leader holding the cup, say together

We give thanks to you, our Father, for the holy vine of David your servant which you have revealed to us through Jesus your servant. To you be glory for ever.

Now, concerning the food:

With the leader holding the dish, say together

We give thanks to you, our Father, for the life and knowledge, which you have revealed to us through Jesus your servant. And for the food we eat. To you be glory for ever.

Return the cup and dish to the table

As these fragments lay scattered upon the mountains and have been gathered to become one, so gather Your Church from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. For the glory and power are yours, through Jesus Christ, forever.

Didache 9:1-4

Let us share our meal and our conversations together in the fellowship and love of Christ

The candle cross and food are brought to the meal table. The food and drink is returned to the vessels from which it is taken.

After all have had their fill, give thanks thus:

This part of the service may take place at any time after the meal but before anyone needs to depart.

We give thanks to you Holy Father for your holy Name which you have made to dwell in our hearts and for the knowledge, faith and immortality which you have revealed to us through Jesus your servant.

To You be glory for ever.

You Lord Almighty have created everything for the sake of your Name; you have given human beings food and drink to partake with enjoyment so that they might give thanks; but to us you have given the grace of spiritual food and drink and of eternal life through Jesus your servant.

Above all we give you thanks because you are mighty.

To You be Glory for ever.

Didache 10: 1-4

On the Road to Emmaus

That same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him

He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

"What things?" he asked.

"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.

Luke 24:13-31 (New International Version)

Christ has Died
Christ is Risen

And as we share Christ's Risen Life
We live in communion with Christ

Hymns, Songs, Poems, Readings and/or a Talk may be inserted here

Let us pray:

Lord:
We give you thanks for our fellowship together;
Help us to share it with others too:
For we know that on earth and in heaven
Your Table is open to all.

And as You bring to your Table

The woman by the well in Samaria: **So also bring us**
The leper who Jesus healed: **So also bring us**
The eunuch on the road to Gaza: **So also bring us**
The Outcasts and the Unclean: **So also bring us**

**That, together with all those who come
You may nourish us Lord.
Help us to grow in faith
And by Your Grace give us strength
So that in all parts of our lives
We live true to Your love.**

Lord:
You are the God of Love
Help us:

To love our own selves: **As You love us**
To love each other: **As You love us**
To love our neighbours and enemies: **As You love us**
To love all Your creation: **As You love us**

**So through Your Love and Forgiveness
We may become true to the people we are
Help us to accept our inner fears and feelings
Help us to use them as we are best able
To impart our full richness to life**

Lord:
You are the shepherd who cares for his sheep
Help us:

To care for our own lives: **As You care for us**
To care for all those closest to us: **As You care for us**
To care for those who are fearful and afraid: **As You care for us**
To care for all trapped by blame and guilt: **As You care for us**

**Help us Lord to do what is right,
For others, as well as for ourselves
Guide our minds in the ways of peace
And show through us to all of the world
The reconciling Love of Jesus Christ.
Through lives we together share.**

Amen

THE PEACE

Lord we thank you
That through Your Death and Resurrection
Mercy and Truth have met together
Justice and Peace have kissed Each Other
So we may live together in Love

(Psalm 85 v10)

Jesus said: "My Peace I Give You"

Let us offer each other a sign of peace

The Peace is shared

A Hymn, Song, Poem or Reading may be inserted here

INTERCESSIONS

Let us pray for:

The Church and the World:
Ourselves and for others we know:
Those who are anxious or in distress:
Those who are sick:
Those who mourn:

*People may pray silently or aloud
End each spoken prayer with:*

Lord in Your Mercy
Hear our Prayer

End the intercessions with

Merciful Father
**Accept these prayers
For the sake of Your Son
Our Saviour Jesus Christ**

Amen

A Hymn, Song, Poem or Reading may be inserted here

SENDING OUT

**Almighty God
we thank you for the gifts
that You have brought us
And the fellowship we share.
Take us and use us
to love and serve all people
in the power of the Holy Spirit
and in the name of your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.**

Amen

Epilogue

Sister Margaret Basso, a spiritual retreat leader, once said, "When the bread is broken open for us, that is Eucharist. When we break ourselves open to each other, that is also Eucharist."

"Perhaps that is why something remarkable happens when people sit down to eat together. We share food and conversation. We become a part of each other's lives. We break ourselves open to one another".

May this be true for all of us.

Susan Gilchrist: June 2009.