

Isak Dinesen was the pen name of Karen Blixen, a great Danish author of the late 19th-- early 20th century. She wrote "Out of Africa," if you saw that 1985 movie. She also wrote a story entitled, "Babette's Feast." Again, you may be more familiar with the film made in 1987. (Blixen had a real moment in the 80s). She was not a Catholic, but I would like to use "Babette's Feast" to illustrate the meaning of what we celebrate on Holy Thursday.

First the story. It's set in 19th century Norway where there was a charismatic Pastor who starts his own Christian sect. It consists of just his own small congregation, including his two beautiful daughters, Martine and Philippa. The Pastor teaches a very austere and serious theology -- very Puritanical. He is kind and good, but everything seems grey and brown, black and white -- in his world and church. The Pastor eventually dies, but the two daughters, who never marry, try to carry on their beloved Father's teaching and a dwindling, aging congregation

continues to meet year after year, decade after decade in this tiny, windswept town on the North Sea.

One day a French woman appears on their doorstep in desperate need of refuge. Babette is a political exile. Her life is in danger. She offers her services as a cook, if Martine and Philippa take her in, and Babette slowly shows them a slightly more colorful, less austere way of life, filled with small joys and better food, as good food as the women will allow themselves to eat.

As the years roll on the ever-smaller congregation that gathers to re-read the Pastor's old theology books and sermons develops cracks and divisions. There are tensions, suspicions, and anger among these old friends as they grow older. Some are no longer speaking to one another. The little church is split. The two women, now grown old, are saddened. Their lives seem to be collapsing.

Then one day Babette receives news from France. She has won a lottery worth the princely sum of 10,000 francs from a ticket that a

friend of hers continued to buy for her every year. Now, the daughters fear, Babette, too, will leave them. The political situation in France has grown more peaceful. She will want to return home in style.

But Babette tells them that she wants to put on a feast for the small congregation for the 100th anniversary of the Pastor's birth. Suddenly the strangest boxes begin to arrive. Food, drink, China plates, wine glasses appear. And for days Babette is busy in the kitchen. When the anniversary finally comes the Norwegian Puritans sit down to the most sumptuous meal of gourmet wines, caviar, turtle soup, quail, etc. Babette serves them with exquisite style and manners. And over the course of this great feast the old bitterness, anger and divisions among the congregation slowly evaporate. In their place forgiveness and love return. The company ends the night by dancing together.

On Holy Thursday Jesus instituted the Mass and the Priesthood. Tonight is the birthday, the anniversary, of these great sacraments. What is the Mass? We can think of it as the greatest feast in the

universe. It is as far above human meals as Babette's Feast was above the ordinary gruel that Martine and Philippa usually ate. Set beside the Eucharist where we receive the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ all earthly banquets are nothing.

We can understand this meaning of the Mass relatively easily. We have all had experiences, I hope, of great family meals where good cheer and communion flow. And the Mass looks like a meal. Food and drink are brought. They are blessed. We consume them. With faith we can readily discern that the mass is this great feast – The Last Supper.

But the Mass is also a sacrifice. That is less easily seen. When Babette's Feast is over Martine and Philippa are sad because they assume that, now that she has given them this great gift, Babette will go. But Babette tells them the next morning that she has no more money. The Feast cost 10,000 francs. Rather than return to Paris, she has sacrificed all her riches for their sake and that of their friends' reconciliation and communion together.

At the Last Supper Christ anticipated what would happen the next day when He would give everything for us. He sacrificed Himself on the Cross on Good Friday to reestablish love, forgiveness, and communion between God and us, and between ourselves. That is also what happens at every Mass. In the liturgy we return to that moment of Jesus' sacrifice of everything on Calvary when He offered Himself for our sins. Love, the communion between people, always takes sacrifice. It is never free. It costs everything.

And the priesthood? The great Feast requires a great cook. It turns out that Babette had a secret. Before the revolution she was the greatest chef in Paris, running the best restaurant in the city. This was the woman who served them humbly and beautifully that night. Think of Jesus washing the feet of His Apostles. He gave us this great example of service. This night is also the birthday of the priesthood. Jesus, in His act of washing the feet of the Twelve, gives us priests a

lesson in what it is to celebrate and provide this great Feast of the Mass. It is humble service.

Babette would never leave the small congregation. She had given everything. She will stay and serve them. So it is with Jesus. So it is with the Mass. Jesus has given us everything on the Cross. But even after that He will not leave us. Jesus, the humble servant and great artist and High Priest, remains with us on earth for all time in the Real Presence in the Eucharist. That is the meaning of Holy Thursday. What a gift! We should dance for joy.