

Faith and food mix at Baltimore's first Olive Mass

The first "Olive Mass" held in Baltimore drew those who serve in the food industry Oct. 29 for a liturgy, panel discussion, networking and – of course – food.

The Mass, celebrated at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, was hosted by The Table Foundation, an organization founded by Father Leo Patalinghug to "harvest the power of food to do good" by focusing on people in the food service industry and those coming out of prison looking to find a place in society.

In his homily, Father Patalinghug focused on the dedication those in the food industry have to those they serve.

"While everyone else is celebrating, you are doing a type of liturgy," he said, explaining that the origin of the word "liturgy" stems from the Greek for "public service."

Father Patalinghug referenced the Red, White and Blue Masses, held for those in the fields of law, health care and public safety, respectively. When he felt the need for a Mass for those in the hospitality industry, olive was chosen as a symbol of the olive oil used in sacraments.

"When (olives are) pressed, the color is gold, which is exactly what you (in the food industry) produce for us," he said. "You produce beauty and goodness."

Steven Allbright, culinary director and administrator of The Table Foundation, is an ex-offender who has benefitted from the foundation's mission as its first employee. He led the preparations for Baltimore's Olive Mass.

"I'm really proud of (the Olive Mass)," Allbright said. "If you're not in the hospitality ministry, you know someone in the hospitality ministry."

Bishop Adam J. Parker celebrated the Mass, with at least 10 concelebrants that

included Bishop Gregory L. Parkes, head of the Diocese of St. Petersburg, Fla.

Father Patalinghug is also founder of Grace Before Meals, a “movement to strengthen families and communities around the dinner table,” according to The Table Foundation’s website. He hosts the television cooking program “Savoring Our Faith.”

In an interview with the Catholic Review after the Mass, Father Patalinghug, who lives in Baltimore, said he wants to make the Baltimore Olive Mass an annual event.

“When you eat with someone and love them like Jesus did with Zacchaeus (the tax collector, Luke 19:1-10), then it is a moment of conversion – not just for the people eating, but for the people serving,” Father Patalinghug said, referencing the Gospel reading used in the Mass. “Everybody always wants me to feed them, but my job as a priest is to really feed their souls.”

The first two Olive Masses were held in New Orleans, La., a place, Father Patalinghug said, where faith and food is expressly celebrated despite the challenges it faces, among them hurricanes and devastating flooding. He sees Baltimore as a similar city – one that has strong faithful and “foodie” cultures facing its own struggles.

Attendees – among them cooks, chefs, waiters, waitresses, hostesses, bakers, restaurant owners and bartenders – included Daniel Judge, executive chef at a senior living facility in Wilmington, Del., who drove from south New Jersey to Charm City for the Mass.

“I love Mass, first of all,” he said. “There’s no other place I’d rather be.”

Judge, a parishioner of Our Lady of Peace in Williamstown, N.J., said he came “to be in union with the rest of the hospitality industry,” and would love to see the Olive Mass come to Philadelphia, a city closer to home.

At least 150 gathered for the Mass and the following reception and panel discussion at the Catholic Center. Many, including Catina Smith, a chef at Magdalena, a fine-dining bistro in Baltimore, were not Catholic. It was her first time in a Catholic church.

“They keep driving home the fact that all are welcome,” Smith said. “Food is the thing that brings us together – we all have to eat.”

“Chef Cat” spearheads numerous personal projects, including “Just Call Me Chef,” an initiative to highlight black women chefs; the “Taste Charm City” podcast; and Taste Baltimore, a food expo which allows local chefs, restaurants and caterers to gain exposure.

She was invited by Allbright to sit on the panel, which also included Brandon E. Chrostowski, founder of EDWINS Leadership and Restaurant Institute; Jeffrey Griffin, executive director of the Franciscan Center of Baltimore; Raimund Hofmeister, a champion chef and Stratford University’s director for culinary arts and hospitality management; Linah Maya Mathabane-Pool, sommelier at Charleston Restaurant; and Dominic Nell, a photographer, activist, urban farmer and chef.

Attendees questioned the panelists on topics related to balancing family and a career in the hospitality industry, how faith and food are connected, the historical role food played in spirituality and on addressing food waste in commercial kitchens.

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