

What is an Agape Meal?

The word, "agape," is the Greek word used in the New Testament for the highest and broadest kind of self-giving Love, the kind of Love that is our source, our true life in this life and our eternal reality. We have no word capable of describing the God who is Love in any language, but agape calls attention to the limitless and overflowing fullness of Divine Love—Love Incarnate, who suffered death on a cross.

An Agape Meal, or "Love Feast" as it is also called, is an ancient tradition of table fellowship. The practice of holy hospitality precedes the Church, going back to the hospitality Abraham showed to his three unknown visitors (*Genesis 18*). In the early Church, agape meals were a time of fellowship for "People of the Way," as the early Christians were called. The Eucharist, our Christian sacramental celebration instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper, was often a part of these meals, BUT THEY ARE NOT THE SAME THING. Probably between the late 1st century and the mid-3rd century AD, the two feasts became separate. Its use has waxed and waned over the centuries, but "Love Feasts" enjoyed a revival in the 18th century in the Methodist Church with the Wesley brothers, particularly in America, and partly because of a lack of ordained ministers to celebrate Holy Communion in the New World.

An Agape Meal is a ritual meal that does not require an ordained person and yet acknowledges our *koinonia*, which in Greek refers to the *fellowship* of Christ's Body. Such meals seek to strengthen communal bonds and foster a spirit of harmony, goodwill and congeniality. They usually include an opportunity to acknowledge our need for forgiveness, especially if some sort of reconciliation among members of the community is warranted. The meal is another way of living out Jesus' *mandatum* (as in Maundy Thursday) or commandment that we love one another with the same self-emptying love, mercy and forgiveness with which he has loved and still loves us. Washing feet, therefore, can be part of this meal when it is celebrated.

This liturgy can be used at any time.

Note: The designated leader or presider should assign parts before the meal. It is important that those who pray over the bread and wine are NOT clergy members, so as not to mistake this meal for a celebration of Holy Eucharist. An agape meal bears witness to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist calls us to gather for love feasts as the Body of Christ, but they are not the same thing. Additionally, remember that these are living words and feel free to make them your own by adding your own prayers and scripture

choices. Agape meals include bread—"I am the bread of life" (*John 6:35*)—in some form and water—"The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (*John 4:13-14*)—and wine to symbolize the pouring out of Jesus' blood of the New Covenant (*Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:17-20*). A candle is usually lit to remind us that we walk in the Way of the One who said, "I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life..." (*John 8:12*).

Items Needed

- A bell for signaling different parts of the service
- A small or full tablecloth for all tables to be used
- One or more candles for each table
- Unopened bottle of wine
- A loaf or roll of bread that is easy to break
- Other foods that will be shared together, prepared in advance or together
- Service orders printed for everyone to follow along
- Hymnals and/or music sheets as needed

Important things to remember

- While clergy may certainly be involved in an agape meal, it is intended to be led by lay persons, especially the prayers over the bread, wine and other foods.
- The service may be amended or adapted as a group sees fit, though the structure should remain largely the same.
- *Lectio Divina* can be replaced with a reflection, a discussion, a homily, etc. The question prompts for Lectio may also be altered.
- Preparing the table should NOT be done ahead of time.
 - Each person has a role to play at an agape meal.
 - Someone is to be responsible for each part.
 - Visitors/Newcomers should be invited to participate in leading.
- Cleaning up afterward should be a communal affair.
 - REMEMBER, it is the preparation, the sharing, AND the cleanup that are the fellowship. All should participate in each as much as possible.

Order for an Agape Meal

A bell is rung to begin the meal.

A Hymn of Thanksgiving may be Sung

Antiphon

—The antiphon can be any verse of scripture, preferably one corresponding to the meal, occasion, or Gospel chosen for lectio.—

Leader The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

People God's mercies never come to an end. (*Lamentations 3:22*)

The Welcome

Leader Welcome to this meal, in the Name of Christ.

People We come as different people, united in Christ as family.

Leader We come to share in God's love for the whole world.

People We come to receive the gifts of God's abundance, not only in food and drink, but also in the gifts God desires to give us in each other and in the reading of holy scripture.

A Call to the Feast

Leader Let us proclaim the goodness of creation:

Out of darkness came light;

People And the power of God was revealed in the running wave and the flowing air, in the quiet earth and the shining stars.

Leader Out of the dust came life;

People And the image of God was revealed in the human face and the gentle heart, in the warmth of flesh and the depth of soul.

Leader Out of justice came freedom;

People And the wisdom of God revealed in the need to grow and the will to love, in the power to know and receive all as gifts of God.

Leader And God looked upon creation,

People And behold, it was very good.

A Gloria. This, or another gloria, is led by a leader. The people repeat in response. This may be omitted, especially if the meal is not occurring in lieu of the Sunday service of worship.

Leader Glory to God, glory to God, glory to the Father. *(The people repeat)*

 *To God be glory, forever. *(The people repeat)*

 *Alleulia. Amen. *(The people repeat)*

 ...Glory to God, glory to God, glory to Christ Jesus. *(The people repeat)**

 ...Glory to God, glory to God, glory to the Spirit. *(The people repeat)**

Antiphon

Leader The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

People God's mercies never come to an end. (*Lamentations 3:22*)

Lectio Divina (Another form of reflection may replace lectio divina)

A Gospel Passage is Selected, read aloud, from three different translations. The people are invited to hear the scriptures read, not to read along with their own bible.

First Reading: How do you hear God speaking in this passage?

A brief time of sharing is made, each person responding to the question.

Second Reading: What invitation to prayer do you receive in this passage?

A brief time of sharing is made, each person responding to the question.

Third Reading: What is God asking of you in this passage?

A brief time of REFLECTION is made, each person sitting with what God make be asking.

A bell is rung at this time.

The Confession (The confession may be omitted if being celebrated on Easter or a weekday)

Leader Giving God, you blessed us with saltiness,

People But we became bland.

Leader You trusted us with your Word,

People But we did not keep it.

Leader You lit a flame in our midst,

People But we smothered it with tears.

Leader God, in your mercy:

People Forgive us.

A brief silence is observed

Leader Giving and forgiving God,

People Thank you for restoring us in Christ. Amen.

The Prayers

Leader I invite the prayers and thanksgivings of the people.

The people name silently or aloud all those for whom they wish to pray or offer thanks.

The Leader offers a concluding prayer.

The Peace

Leader Have salt in yourself.

People Let us be at peace with one another.

A Hymn of Thanksgiving may be Sung

Thanksgiving over the Food

Leader Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation. You create the fruit of the vine. Grant that we who share this wine, which gladdens our hearts, may share for ever the new life of the true Vine, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

People Glory to you for ever and ever. Amen.

The leader pours a small portion of wine into their glass. It is then passed to others.

Leader Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation. You bring forth bread from the earth and make the risen Lord to be for us the Bread of life: Grant that we who daily seek the bread which sustains our bodies may also hunger for the food that sustains to everlasting life, Jesus Christ our Lord.

People Glory to you for ever and ever. Amen.

The leader breaks off a small portion of bread from the loaf. It is then passed to others.

Leader Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation. You have given us the risen Savior to be the shepherd of your people: Lead us, by him, to springs of living waters, and feed us with the food that endures to eternal life.

People Glory to you for ever and ever. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Leader Let us pray.

People Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Antiphon

Leader The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

People God's mercies never come to an end. (*Lamentations 3:22*)

The people share in the blessed bread and wine together.

Invitation

Leader All are invited to share in this common table. We are all siblings in the Holy Family of God. How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in harmony. *(Psalm 133:1)*

People O taste and see that the Lord is good. Amen. *(Psalm 34:8)*

A bell is rung at this time.

The people feast together in the Spirit of Love, enjoying the gift of fellowship with God's people.

After a time of sharing food and fellowship together, a concluding prayer is offered. After which, the people may remain, but the time of feast is ended. It is fitting that the people clean up together and that these responsibilities are shared by all.

A bell is rung as a close to the meal and a call to prayer. People may remain, but it is best to have the closing prayer before people need to leave.

Concluding Prayer

Leader Let us pray.

People Loving God, bless all who have gathered at this meal. May we know the fullness of your presence in every meal that we share, and in every person with whom we break bread. Amen.

Antiphon

Leader The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

People God's mercies never come to an end. *(Lamentations 3:22)*

The Dismissal

Leader Go forth from this place in the peace of Christ.

People We are Christ's signs of peace. Amen.