

I Never Said Thanks for the Meal. Sister Agnes Taught Me How.

A Thanksgiving lesson about grace, and the many people who feed us.

By Rosie Schaap

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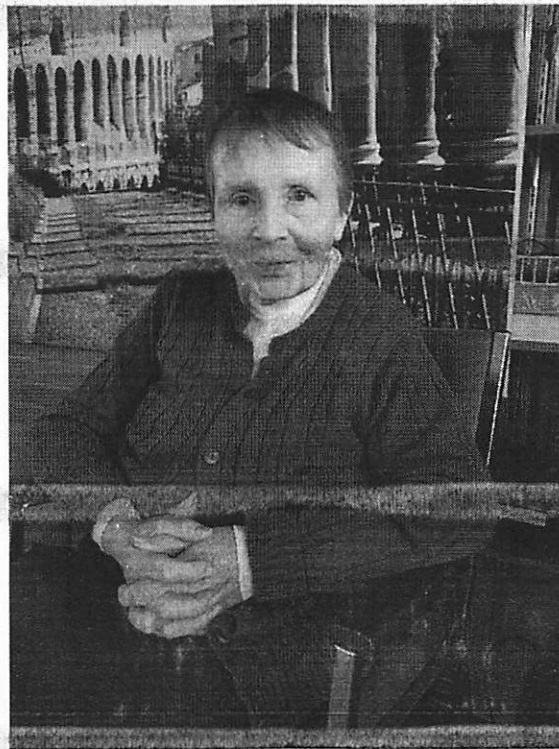
When I was growing up in New York City, my family didn't give thanks before we ate. Instead, our dinners sometimes began with a running gag.

My mother, the head of our secular Jewish household, would go unusually quiet and serious. "Let us say grace," she'd start in a low voice, and my brother and I would seize the cue. He might say, "Grace Kelly." I'd add, "Grace Jones" or "Grace Slick," depending on the kind of music I was into at the time.

"Gracie Allen," Ma would finish up. "Amen." And then we'd stuff our faces.

So I didn't know much about the whole business of preprandial blessings — until I met Sister Agnes Rooney.

Many years ago I visited St. Cecilia Church in East Harlem for the first time, to speak with members of its community about food stamps and other benefits that might help put meals on their tables. I was a 20-something who had recently started a job as an organizer for a grass-roots anti-hunger agency. Among other duties, I was charged with getting faith leaders in the city more involved.



Sister Agnes Rooney led the social service ministry at St. Cecilia Church in East Harlem. via The Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement

No matter how much Saul Alinsky I read, how many City Council hearings I sat in on and policy briefs I studied, I still felt out of my depth.

Sister Agnes, who led the church's social service ministry, had invited me to St. Cecilia's. Direct, soft-spoken Sister Agnes — with a little lilt of her native Ireland in her voice — put me at ease.

Her appearance was as mild as her voice: I guessed she was in her 60s, and instead of the nun's habit I expected, she was dressed in a gray skirt and beige cardigan over a white polo shirt. I don't think she was quite five feet tall. She wore her straight, salt-and-pepper hair short, with bangs.

All this softness was offset by a spark in her gray-green eyes. She welcomed me in a way that was somehow both friendly and businesslike, and introduced me to the small group who'd gathered in the church hall. She knew them all by name, and as I shook their hands, she told me a little about each person. Afterward, I thanked her for inviting me, and started to make my way to the door.

"Do you have to go back to the office right away?" she asked. "Let me treat you to lunch first."

We walked around the corner to a small, busy cafe. When the waiter set our plates down, the food smelled delicious, and I dug in right away.

Then I noticed Sister Agnes had not even lifted her fork, and I was duly mortified. Of course we would say grace before we ate. (In my defense, I'd never had lunch with a nun before.)

Sister Agnes saw my embarrassment, and went easy on me. "Rosie," she said, "let's give thanks." And then she said grace as I'd never heard it said before.

First she thanked the Lord, naturally. Then she thanked the farmers who planted the seeds and the farmworkers who harvested the food that had made our lunch together possible. Then the packers who prepared it for its journey. Then the truckers who delivered the food, the cook who turned it into our feast and the waiter who brought it to the table. I was moved to silence, and reflection, and then we ate.

I made many more visits to St. Cecilia's during my time at the nonprofit, and had many more lunches with Sister Agnes. She always said grace the same way — and it became my way of saying it, too.

Giving thanks had once seemed to me like an abstraction (or, at my family's table, a shtick); now it meant something.

Long before I'd heard the phrase "farm to table," Sister Agnes made me think about all it had taken to get food from the place where it was grown to the place where I sat down to eat it, about the many hands that had labored in the service of my meal. I could imagine every person linked by that long chain of production. And since then, I have appreciated everything I eat, and everything I cook, much more.

Over our lunches, I learned that after Sister Agnes professed her vows and left Ireland at age 20, she ministered to migrant farmworkers around the United States, to impoverished people in Brazil, to sick and older people in Pennsylvania and New York. The spark I saw in her eyes, and in her way of saying grace, was a fire for social justice, lighted by her faith.

We stayed in touch for a while after I left that job. In 2002, I learned that she had moved to Assisi, Italy. I lost track after that, but figured Assisi was a pretty good assignment for a Franciscan nun.

When I moved to Ireland in 2019, I found myself thinking of Sister Agnes again — usually when I'd met someone who reminded me of her in some way. I contacted her order, the Sisters of the Atonement, and found out that she was back in New York, at the order's motherhouse. She still had that spark, I was told, but her health and memory were in decline, and she could no longer talk on the phone. Last year, I heard from the order again: Sister Agnes had died, at the age of 88. I attended her funeral on Zoom.

I'll be thinking of her this Thanksgiving. And I'll give thanks, the way she showed me, to all those whose work made my feast possible.

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