

THE LAST SUPPER TABLE AT LIJA

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For Catholics the world over, Lent is a period of penance, a period of reflection on one's faults, a time of sacrifice and atonement. The Liturgy associated with Lent, commencing on Ash Wednesday and reaching a climax in Holy Week from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, is a wealthy source of traditions, which, in some instances, can be considered as having folkloristic tendencies.

Associated with these liturgical events one finds a number of customs which the members of the religious community are in the habit of performing during this period. On the material, non-religious side, we find, for example, the baking of the *Quaresimal* and the *Figolla*, typical sweets for this period; on the other hand, associated with the religious events of these days, the faithful are wont to visit the various churches in order to view the statues and other religious symbols carried in the Good Friday Processions; we find the habit or tradition of running with the statue of the Resurrected Christ on Easter Day; and we find also the visits to various places in Malta and Gozo where a commemoration of the Last Supper Table is made, also commonly called the "Apostles' Table".

One of the earliest Tables is that which is prepared in the Oratory of the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament in St. Dominic's church, Valletta, which dates back to 1784. This was made as a result of a tradition which was continued by the Knights of St. John when they came to Malta. The table is laid out in a very artistic way and appeals a lot to the senses as there is a variety of things to be seen and admired. A similar artistic Table is laid out in the Domus Pius IX of Cospicua; here one finds, amongst other things, a very striking display of pictures made of coloured salt depicting the faces of the Apostles and other scenes.

In stark contrast to these displays there is the replica of the Last Supper at Lija, commonly called *Ic-Cena*. This replica dates back to just over twenty-five years ago, but it follows on the old traditions with a difference: it seeks to give an idea, as faithfully as possible, of the way in which the table at Our Lord's last supper was laid out according to Jewish custom. This particular meal of Our Lord was nothing else but a remembrance of the Passover meal which the Jews had on the eve of their flight from Egypt; Jesus Christ gave it a new meaning when He instituted the Sacrament of the Eucharist on that eventful occasion.

The Table at Lija has very little which appeals to the senses; it is more of a religious-cultural display, and lacks the mass of colour and innumerable items of the other Tables. Its main aim is to educate those who visit it.

The table itself is U-shaped having three arms. At the head of the table reclined the guest of honour and here we find a solitary earthenware chalice or cup. This cup contains a mixture of two parts water and one part wine, and this was the Chalice which Our Lord Jesus Christ consecrated into His own Blood; this cup was passed round four times during the meal and all the guests drank from it. A striking feature in this replica is the real roasted lamb, also at the head of the table, which can here be seen complete with head and entrails and no bones broken.

There are other items of the official Jewish meal shown at Lija: such are the bitter herbs, consisting of endive and chicory cooked with dry figs and tomatoes to a solid consistency and cut up in the shape of bricks; the unleavened bread, flat and round, depicting the hasty departure of the Jews from Egypt; the *haroseth*, a sort of sauce made up of a mixture of dried fruits, wine and spices, used for dipping the bitter

herbs. We see also dates, eggs and pomegranates; these latter items must have been introduced in the Jewish meal over the ages.

In the space between the arms of the table one can see a big pitcher of water, a bowl and a linen towel; whilst on the table there is a smaller pitcher as well as a small basin. The latter are meant for the ritual washing of the hands before the meal began whilst the others were used for the washing of the guests' feet by the household slaves.

Other pottery-ware seen in this replica are the bowls in front of each guest to serve as a receptacle for crumbs or remains of food. Then there are the oil lamps, the only means of light at those times, and the obsconces resembling bottles with a small handle and a hole at the side, which gave protection to the lamps when used in the open.

The benches around the table, covered with thick, woven cloth, serve to give an idea of the couches on which the guests reclined. On the right side there is a reproduction of the Torah, the Jewish book of law, from which was read the story of the Jews' deliverance from bondage, whilst near it there is the menorah, a seven-branched candelabrum, symbolising the presence of God. Name plates seen on the table are meant only to help us picture the places occupied by Christ and the Apostles.

This replica of the Last Supper is held in the historic old parish church of Our Saviour, which dates back to the early sixteenth century. This church, which in itself is a gem of architecture, and merits visiting for its own sake, provides a splendid setting for the Table. The lighting is purposely kept dim; eventually the lights are switched off, leaving the eerie but spiritual illumination given by the oil lamps and the Menorah, whilst a spot of light is focused on the solitary earthenware Chalice. The silence is broken by a Gregorian chant which subtly fills the church, preparing the visitor for a commentary regarding the display. This commentary is not just an inventory of what can be seen, but it is more of an informal talk bringing to the attention of the people present, the historical and religious aspects of the Table. The atmosphere thus created, is really an experience, and the senses are moreover imbued with the scent of balsam, emanating from an earthenware pot placed on an old *kenur*, mixed with the smell of burning oil and candles.

Even the opening and blessing ceremony is given an unusual form. It is a prayer-vigil with the singing of hymns, reading of excerpts from, the Bible, and sharing of spiritual thoughts. This is intended to give greater meaning to the event, and to emphasise the spirituality of the commemoration. At the end, wine and bread are served to those present in memory of the real event, which took place so long ago.

When the idea of organising this replica occurred to Fr. (today Mgr.) Alfred Xuereb, then parish priest of Lija, it was welcomed by many. Some people, however, expressed the doubt that it would lose its appeal after two or three years. But the test of time has shown otherwise, and year after year, the people keep flocking to see it.

(With acknowledgement to Mgr. Alfred Xuereb)

Partial view of the Last Supper Table display at Lija
(**photo** by the **author**)