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Priest in the kitchen, whipping up togetherness

Clergyman stresses the importance of families reconnecting as they sit down to dine

By Liz F. Kay

Sun reporter

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A local Catholic priest is using his talents in the kitchen to evangelize about families growing stronger by eating together.

The Rev. Leo Patalinghug, 37, has many achievements on his resume, including earning awards in breakdancing and a black belt in tae kwon do. But it's his ability to whip up meals for groups that led to a cookbook and a cooking show called *Grace Before Meals*, now in production for the Public Broadcasting Service.

He describes the book as offering recipes for family life.

"We have bought into the fast-food mentality," the priest said. "Not that fast food is bad, but the mentality subliminally tells us we might be too busy to have a meal with our families."

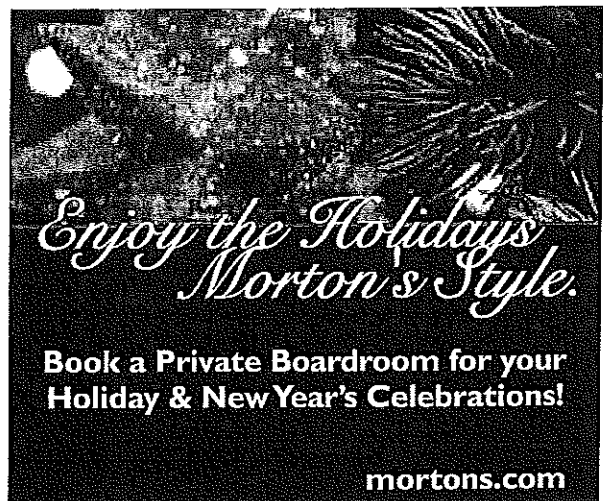
It's a belief that Patalinghug developed while learning to cook Filipino cuisine in his mother's kitchen and enjoying chicken dinners with his relatives after Sunday Mass at St. Rose of Lima in Brooklyn. The idea evolved further when he studied at a seminary in Rome, where he honed his skills by learning to make Italian specialties from other priests.

But Patalinghug, who now works with seminarians at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, put the concept into practice while at St. John Catholic Church in Westminster.

Parishioners would invite him over for dinner, and "I would show up 45 minutes early," he said, helping to prepare the meal.

"It would make them nervous," the priest said. "It would also be my way of saying, 'I want to help. I want to be a part of this.'"

It wasn't what Theresa Greene of Westminster was expecting when she and her husband, Tom, extended



a dinner invitation to the priest.

"I asked him the wrong question, which was, 'What would you like to have?' " said the mother of three. Patalinghug responded, "No, what would you like to have?" and insisted on coming over to help cook.

The priest managed to show Theresa Greene some tricks while teaching the couple how to make vodka sauce from scratch, even though she's a Pampered Chef consultant.

In 2002, Patalinghug met Tim Watkins, president and chief executive officer of Hunt Valley-based advertising agency and production studio Renegade Productions Inc., while he was attending daily Masses at St. John. Another priest jokingly suggested that Watkins consider a show about Patalinghug, and Patalinghug even came up with the name.

A week later, Watkins was e-mailing him about setting up a meeting about the show.

Now they have interest from Connecticut Public Broadcasting to air the show, but they are still raising money to finish the 13 half-hour episodes that make up a season.

Watkins said the show and book aim to "get families to reconnect at the kitchen table."

"Many nights we would wait for my father to get home" before having dinner, he said. "My parents weren't Ozzie and Harriet. ... But it was a point that we would have meals and we would say grace before meals."

The book is organized around holidays such as Easter, Grandparents' Day and the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi and family rites of passage, such as getting a new job or moving away from home. Each section includes a reflection, discussion questions, suggestions of relevant Bible readings and recipes. More than 3,000 people have signed up at the priest's Web site (gracebeforemeals.com) for e-mail "blasts" of bite-sized theology with recipes.

Other Catholic priests have written cookbooks, including the retired Rev. Giuseppe Orsini of New Jersey, who also publishes his lessons on Italian cooking as the Rev. Joseph Orsini.

The Rev. Dominic Garramone, a Benedictine monk and host of the cooking show *Breaking Bread With Father Dominic* that appeared on PBS, recently published *Tis the Season to Be Baking: Christmas Reflections and Bread Recipes*.

For a recent gathering of priests, Patalinghug put on chef's whites (a gag gift from other clergy) and threw a kitchen towel over his shoulder to whip up pork adobo cooked in coconut cream and a cucumber, apple, carrot and mango relish with a spicy honey vinaigrette in the rectory kitchen of St. Louis Church in Clarksville. The two dishes were served in half-moons around a molded scoop of garlic fried rice.

Patalinghug also served a primo piatto of fusilli topped with a sambuca-cream sauce, shrimp and broccoli florets.

The message of his cooking, which Patalinghug describes as a movement, is "an extension of my calling," he said. Research indicates that children of families who eat together are less likely to use

illegal drugs or alcohol as teenagers. If you want to prevent these issues, Patalinghug says, "the best thing to do is have a regular family meal."

Meatballs in Creamy Vodka Sauce

Serves 6

Meatballs:

2 pounds ground beef

1 onion, finely chopped

1/2 teaspoon garlic powder

1/2 teaspoon each: salt, pepper

2 eggs

1/4 cup Italian bread crumbs

2 tablespoons soy sauce

1 cup all-purpose flour

4 tablespoons olive oil

SAUCE:

1 tablespoon olive oil

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 medium-sized white onion, minced

3 pinches red-pepper flakes

2 tablespoons fresh parsley, chopped

32 ounces tomato sauce

one 6-ounce can tomato paste

1 cup heavy whipping cream

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon black pepper

1/2 cup vodka

Use your hands to combine ground beef, onions, garlic powder, salt, pepper, eggs, bread crumbs and soy sauce in a bowl.

When ingredients are thoroughly mixed, shape meatballs about the size of golf balls. Roll them in flour and shake off excess. Heat olive oil over medium heat in a skillet and add meatballs. Cook until brown on all sides. Set aside to cool.

To make the sauce: Heat olive oil in a large pot or pan over medium heat. Saute garlic, onions, red-pepper flakes and parsley until onions become translucent, approximately 2 to 3 minutes.

Add tomato sauce, tomato paste and whipping cream. Stir well. Add salt, pepper and vodka. Continue to stir and let simmer for about 2 to 3 minutes or until the smell of alcohol is not as strong.

Add meatballs, making sure they are covered by the sauce.

Continue to cook with lid slightly off to release some steam. Let simmer for at least 10 minutes, letting the sauce take in some of the flavors of the meatballs.

Serve with pita-bread wedges or slices of French baguette.

From "Grace Before Meals: Recipes for Family Life," by the Rev. Leo Patalinghug

Per serving: 682 calories, 33 grams protein, 44 grams fat, 17 grams saturated fat, 40 grams carbohydrate, 6 grams fiber, 203 milligrams cholesterol, 1,781 milligrams sodium

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