

Feast

[ˈfɛst]. **noun.** An elaborate and usually abundant meal often accompanied by a ceremony or entertainment.¹

by Simon Laraway (Editing and Publishing '23)

FOR MANY OF us, the word *feast* is inseparable from the food it denotes. For some, *feast* brings to mind memories of holiday meals—tables piled high with turkey, a smorgasbord of casserole dishes, plates of homemade sugar cookies. Others have different culinary associations with the word, but the meaning almost invariably ties back to food. Yet “elaborate and abundant meal” is just the beginning of what *feast* really means to us.

Though *feast* is related to the word *festival* and various romance languages’ words for *party* (e.g., *fiesta*), the ancestors of the word are a little more solemn. The word came into English from the Old French *feste*,² according to Assistant Professor Charles Oughton (Comparative Arts and Letters), the French form having developed from the Latin word *festum*, often defined more broadly as “holiday” or “festival.” *Festum* is related to the Proto-Italic root *fas-, meaning “sacred” or “holy.”

What does food have to do with sacredness and holiness? Such meanings seem like a far cry from our modern definition—semantic changes have caused us to shed most of our religious associations with *feast*, but shades of these past meanings persist in our modern usage.

Consider, for example, the feasts of the Bible, like the Feast of Passover and the Feast of Pentecost. These feasts, rather than being boisterous occasions to stuff oneself, were times to come together, to reflect, and to give thanks through

ritual. In literature, too, a religious connotation of the word sometimes survives. The poem “Tis the Feast of Corn” by nineteenth-century poet Paul Verlaine recontextualizes a feast as a sacramental event:

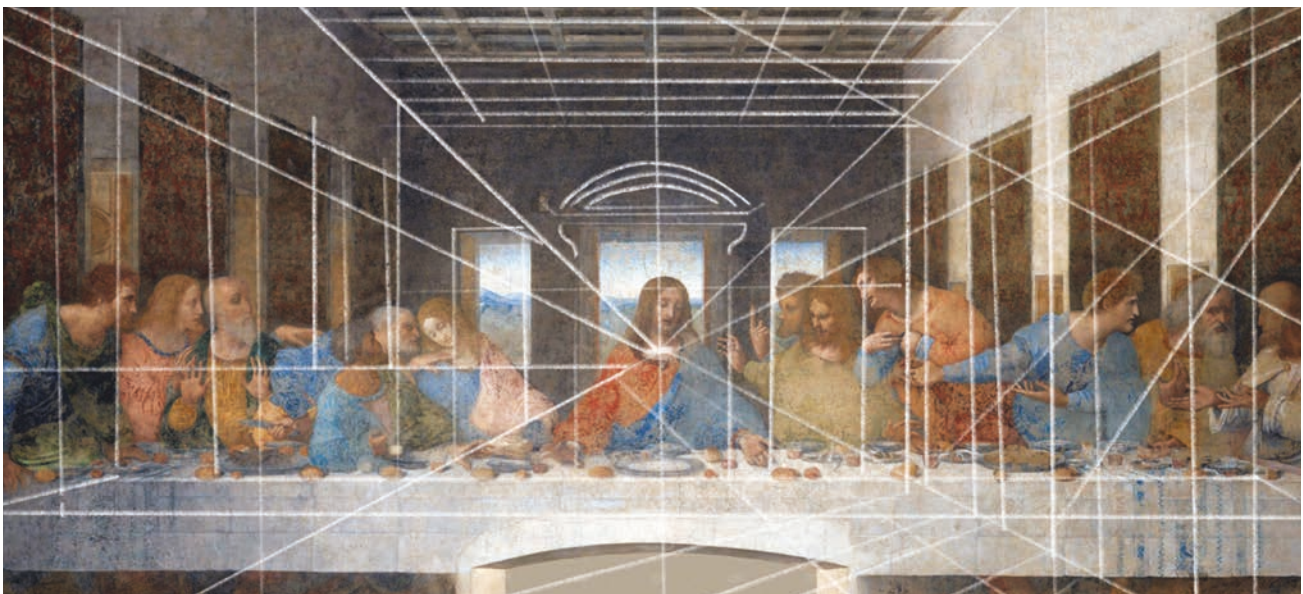
For from the flour’s fairest, and from the vine’s best,
Fruit of man’s strength spread to earth’s uttermost,
God gathers and reaps, to His purposes blest,
The Flesh and the Blood for the chalice and host!

Here Verlaine draws a parallel between the food of the feast (“flour’s fairest” and “vine’s best”) with the sacramental chalice and host. This correlation is further supported by uses of the word in the Book of Mormon, such as the imperative in 2 Nephi 32:3 to “feast upon the words of Christ.” A footnote in this verse links the word *feast* to the phrase “bread of life,” synonymous with *sacrament*. In the April 2022 general conference, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland implored us to “stay for the whole feast,” offering a message of hope, unity, and belonging.

Food is an essential part of a feast, but it is not all about food. *Feast* has rich connotations manifest in its usage; whether we are speaking literally or metaphorically, feasts serve to bring us together, in senses both social and spiritual. 📖

1. Merriam-Webster, s.v. “feast (n.),” accessed March 11, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feast>.

2. John Ayto, *Dictionary of Word Origins* (New York: Arcade, 1991), 222.



The Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci, 1495–1498