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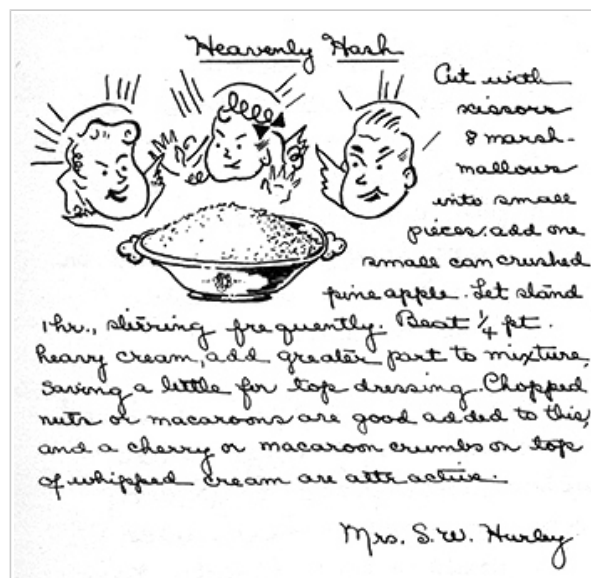
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Ruth Clark: The gift behind the recipes in church cookbooks

Church cookbooks are more than collections of recipes. They are collaborative acts of love.

by [Ruth Clark](#)



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Plain, solid-color and bound with staples or a simple spiral, your average church cookbook looks about as appealing as a brick.

There are no lush photographs of mouthwatering food, no gushing testimonials from famous chefs on the cover. The recipes are loosely grouped under headings such as “Meat” or “Cakes” or “Quantity Preserves.”

Some books do not even contain an index, which makes locating the right recipe difficult. And editions that lack page numbers can make finding a particular recipe downright impossible.

But, as the adage goes, you should never judge a book by its cover.

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GO

My husband's grandmother was a fabulous cook, and famous in her Polish Catholic church for her *pierogies* (little dumplings) and *golombki* (stuffed cabbage rolls), made frequently for church functions. She was also one of those effortless cooks who never used recipes; she measured with her fingers and judged a dish done by taste and feel.

Over the years she had countless requests to share her secrets, but the only time she wrote down a recipe was for her church's cookbook. As a housewife, she considered this her best gift for her church. This was her talent to share. Even if she didn't have time to volunteer, her precious recipe was a part of her life that she could give to the church to help raise money.

I collected vintage cookbooks for a long time before I fully appreciated what gems the seemingly ordinary church cookbook concealed. Behind the typed or handwritten recipes in each book isn't a test kitchen or a culinary degree but something much more basic.

Decades of experience cooking for a family. Long nights spent preparing for church potluck suppers or charity dinners. The comfort that comes to the sick or the bereaved in the form of a warm, rich casserole or in the layers of a tall, fluffy cake served with a cup of coffee and much-needed conversation.

Church cookbook recipes haven't been tested in a lab but tested on life. They are, quite literally, the best the congregation has to offer. Having a recipe included in the church cookbook is a point of pride. No one would contribute a recipe she thought was less than stellar.

The recipe titles reflect this, with names like "My Best Meatloaf" or "Edna Perkins' Famous Chocolate Cake." Edna Perkins would not think of sending in her second-best cake. She would send the recipe for her absolute best cake. The famous cake. The one that is going to sell cookbooks.

If you look even more closely at the recipes in any church cookbook, you will see that they are actually coded messages, telling us about the lives and times of the recipe authors and their congregations.

A book filled with recipes for gelatin molds, casseroles and orange drink scaled to quench the thirst of 500 reflects a congregation that loves a good potluck. Numerous recipes for cakes and cookies show a congregation with a talent for bake sales. Recipes "From the Parish Kitchen" reveal a pastor and spouse who invite others frequently to their home or give gifts of food. Ethnic recipes demonstrate congregants' pride in their heritage. Recipes that are "My Best" or "Famous" show the generosity of members like my husband's grandmother, giving gifts to the church that they wouldn't give to anyone else.

A recipe seems like a little thing. You can get a recipe from virtually anywhere, especially now with the enormous Web presence of cooking sites, each putting hundreds or thousands of recipes at your fingertips. And when you make a church recipe, don't you just end up with food?

It is almost always true that if you make a recipe from a church cookbook, you will end up with good food. But good, well-prepared food can also be found almost anywhere, whether you want a cupcake or a cheeseburger.

So why bother with a church cookbook? Because the uniqueness of the recipes in a church cookbook goes deeper than the quality of the food and deeper than the quality of the book itself. When you have a church cookbook, you literally have a piece of a congregation.

It may not have pictures, an index or even page numbers, but it offers you the love of the congregation. You get the talents and the pride of the parishioners in the titles. You will be a part of their lives when you open that plain cover and read the words they gave to their church.

Every Christmas my mother-in-law pulls out the familiar Polish Catholic church cookbook with its yellow cover and white plastic binding to cook her mother's foods -- her family's favorite foods -- for the holidays. These were her mother's gifts to her church that turned into a gift for all the generations of my husband's family. There are no other places where these recipes are recorded.

Tragically, my husband's grandmother developed early-onset Alzheimer's disease, leaving only the recipes in Visitation Parish's "Our Daily Bread" after a lifetime of fabulous cooking. And so, when we sit at Christmas to eat the little *pierogi* dumplings filled with mushrooms and peppery sauerkraut, or

the sweet-and-salty flavor of the *golombki*, we don't just taste the food created by the recipe.

We taste the power of generosity and the gift of her love for God and for her church. We taste her talent, her faith, her love for her family and all the things that are the gift behind the recipes in every church cookbook.