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Commentary on the Gospel: The Loaves and Fishes

Gospel for the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Cycle A), and commentary.

Gospel (*Mt* 14:13-21)

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick.

When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a lonely place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”

Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

They said to him, “We have only five loaves here and two fish.”

And he said, “Bring them here to me.”

Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass; and taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about

five thousand men, besides women and children.

Commentary

Saint Matthew's gospel tells us that when Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been imprisoned, "he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart" (v. 13). Jesus wants to be alone in order to pray, as on other occasions. But the people are so eager to listen to his words and find healing for their ills that they refuse to let him rest. Jesus doesn't become angry at their requests. Rather he is moved by their simple faith and spends the whole day with them. When evening comes he doesn't want to send the crowds away to buy food but tells his disciples to provide them with something to eat.

We are struck, first of all, by Jesus' patience and compassion. Pope Francis said: "In facing the crowd who follows him and—so to speak—'won't leave him alone,' Jesus does not react with irritation; he does not say: 'These people are bothering me.' No. He reacts with a feeling of compassion, because he knows they are not seeking him out of curiosity but out of need. But attention: compassion—which Jesus feels—is not simply feeling pity; it's more! It means to *suffer with*, in other words to empathize with the suffering of another, to the point of taking it upon oneself. Jesus is like this: he suffers together with us, he suffers with us, he suffers for us."[1]

As Saint Josemaria said when reflecting on this scene: "He needs a child, a boy, a few bits of bread and some fish. He needs you and me, my son—and he is God! This should move us to be generous in the way

we respond. He does not need any of us, and at the same time he needs us all. What a marvelous thing this is! He is asking us for the little we are, the little we are worth, for our few talents. We cannot hold back anything from him. The two fishes, the bread—everything."[2]

The disciples were generous and offered the little they had to our Lord to feed the people. The gospel tells us that, "taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds" (v. 19). These words remind us of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper: "When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them" (*Lk* 24:30). Thus the abundant multiplication of the loaves and fishes by our Lord to feed the multitude prefigures "the

superabundance of this unique bread of his Eucharist,"[3] as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches.

The generosity with which Jesus offers himself to us as nourishment in the Sacred Host shows us how great is his Love for us. "To correspond to such great love, we must give ourselves completely, in body and in soul. We hear God, we talk to him, we see him, we taste him. And when words are not enough, we sing, urging our tongue—*Pange, lingua!*—to proclaim to all mankind the greatness of the Lord."[4]

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[1] Pope Francis, *Angelus*, 3 August 2014.

[2] Saint Josemaria, *In Dialogue with the Lord*, "Let people see that it is You," no. 4 (cf. *The Forge*, no. 674).

[3] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1335.

[4] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 87.

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