

He Knew What He Would Do
17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Jn 6:1-15)

The miracle of multiplication is more important for us who hear the Gospel story, than it was for those who actually experienced it on the shores of Galilee. As we will discover in the upcoming Sundays (cf. Jn 6:26,66), and as we already heard today when they tried to make him king (cf. Jn 6:15), the people of the time missed the lesson Jesus was trying to teach. Jesus “knew what he would do” (Jn 6:6). He did not perform this miracle simply to satisfy the physical hunger of the crowd. Instead, he used the occasion of their hunger and no access to bodily food as an opportunity to prepare for the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is a great mystery and not easy to perceive, since when the bread and wine are changed into the very substance of Christ’s Body and Blood, they remain in all *appearance* and in every *sensible* way, just bread and wine. On the other hand, the miracle of multiplication was in every way *seen* and experienced. Jesus performs this miracle to reinforce tangibly what he will accomplish mysteriously in the Eucharist at the Last Supper.

This is the right time for the miracle. It is around Passover time (Jn 6:4), exactly a year before he will institute the Eucharist through his death and resurrection. Jesus is also at the height of his fame and popularity. This is truly an incredible crowd – around 5,000 men (Jn 6:10) – which as the Gospels make clear (cf. Mt 14:21) is not counting women and children. The total crowd would have been over 20,000.

Jesus needed the crowd to be large, because he wanted the apostles to learn how things would work in the future Church. And so he instructed his apostles and assistants to organize the people into smaller companies on the grass, in groups of fifties and hundreds (Mk 6:39-40).¹ The Church, a large crowd of over a billion today, is organized in the verdant pastures of the worldwide church into smaller diocesan and parish groups by the apostolic successors (the bishops) and their assistants (the priests). As Jesus performed the miracle of multiplication for the crowd through the assistance of his apostles, so Jesus governs and provides the Eucharist to his Church through the ministry of clergy.

The large size of the crowd serves the purpose of representing the Church. But the largeness of the crowd and its hunger, contrasted with the smallness of the boy’s lunch, also highlights the greatness of the miraculous nourishment provided by Jesus. As Philip accurately observes, 200 days wages² would not be enough to

¹ This, by the way, is how an exact count of the households was taken that day.

² 200 Dinarii = annual salary of a laborer = \$20,000 to \$30,000

cater even a simple meal for such a crowd. At this point, the normal thing would be to dismiss the crowd so they might go home and eat (cf. Mt 14:15 - villages are about 3-5 miles away). They have been with Jesus all day, he has taught them at great length, and whatever snacks they brought are consumed. But Jesus wanted the people and especially the apostles to see that from a small offering, by a great miracle, he would provide more than enough to satisfy the physical hunger of even a large crowd. The *change* which took place visibly in the boy's lunch is by a factor of over 20,000! This is not a fiction or exaggeration, it was a miracle recorded by multiple authors, and which would have been corroborated in its early retelling by thousands of people who witnessed it firsthand.

It is a key miracle, which Jesus will use to prepare and explain the Eucharist. In this miracle he would provide earthly food to satisfy physical hunger. In the Eucharist, by means of physical food which can actually be consumed physically, Jesus will provide *spiritual* nourishment; not food for the body, but food for the soul. And the *change* that will take place in that miracle is not on the order of 20,000-fold, but on the order of infinity.

The "food" which can nourish the soul is not any earthly bread, because the soul is spiritual. The soul is nourished by love, but not any kind of love. Earthly loves are not enough to nourish the soul, and just leave it empty as before, or emptier. The hunger of the soul can be satisfied only by the infinite love of God Himself, because the soul was created specifically to be "filled" with God. In the Eucharist Jesus will give this love of God in his own person; he will give himself, who is God.

Jesus "gave" himself in sacrifice on the Cross. It is that sacrifice, of his Body and Blood, which is given in the Eucharist. In the miracle of the Eucharist, Jesus will change the small offering into something infinite, and superabundantly sufficient to nourish the soul not just for a day but for eternity. He will change it into his love, into the sacrifice of his body and blood. More on that in the Sundays ahead as we listen to the "Bread of Life" discourse in John 6.

For now it is important to notice the details of this miracle by which Jesus prepares for the future miracle of the Eucharist in the Church. He takes/receives the offering of the young boy, and looking up to heaven says a prayer of blessing over the five loaves and two fish (cf. Mt 14:19). John says specifically that he "gave thanks" (Jn 6:11), for which the original Greek word is "*Eucharist*."³ He

³ St. Justin Martyr, when describing the Mass as it was celebrated in Rome around 150 A.D., spoke about the bread and wine mixed with water being changed into the Body and Blood of Christ through the thanksgiving prayer said by the presider. He called it "eucharistized" bread and wine. He continues, "*This food we call Eucharist, which no one is allowed to share except the one who believes that our teaching is true, and who has been washed [in Baptism]*" (First Apology, 65-66).

then broke the loaves and distributed them to the apostles, who distributed them to the people (Mt 14:19). This is the exact same action as the Last Supper, when Jesus instituted the Eucharist (cf. Mt 26:26 and parallel passages in Mark, Luke, and 1 Cor). It is also the exact same action as the Resurrection appearance in Emmaus on Easter Sunday (Lk 24:30), when Jesus celebrated the Eucharistic “Breaking of Bread” in the Church for the first time.

And it is of course the identical action of every Mass celebrated in the Church, whether East or West, from the time of the apostles to the present day. This is in fact where we get the Mass from, and why the Liturgy of the Eucharist has the four-fold structure it does:

Jesus took the bread	Priest receives the gifts	“Offertory”
Jesus gave thanks	Priest consecrates gifts	“Eucharistic Prayer”
Jesus broke the bread	Priest breaks/separates hosts	“Lamb of God”
Jesus gave it to them	People receive Eucharist	“Holy Communion”

The crowd was hungry, but Jesus didn’t have to perform this miracle. They could have waited a couple hours to eat once they arrived at home or a nearby village. It was gratuitous. But they misunderstood his purpose who thought he was trying to show himself as a benevolent earthly king (Jn 6:15). The full import of this miracle only emerges after the Last Supper, after the death and Resurrection. The full import of this miracle emerges only now in the Church, and in her celebration of the Eucharist.

Therefore, when we come to Mass, let us realize and understand, that we are participating in a miracle of unimaginable proportion. Every week as we go through the four-fold sequence outlined by Jesus in the Gospel – we who are one of the smaller organized groups that make up the whole worldwide (“catholic”) crowd of over a billion – let us keep in mind the vision of superabundance which the Gospel describes. Not superabundant food for the body, but infinite love to nourish the soul for eternity, Christ himself.