

1. Bread from Heaven
18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Ex 16; Ps 78; Jn 6:24-35)

The next four Sundays are devoted to the “Bread of Life” discourse delivered by Jesus in the synagogue at Capernaum, the day after he multiplied the loaves and fish for the crowd. In this discourse, given by Jesus at the height of his public ministry when the crowds were the greatest and his fame was most widespread, Jesus introduces his followers to the mystery of the Eucharist, which he will institute the next year at the Last Supper, when by his death and resurrection he will also establish the Church.

Already in the miracle of multiplication (cf. last Sunday), Jesus has introduced the “format” of the future Eucharistic celebration, by which through his apostles and assistants he will nourish a world-wide crowd of people grouped into manageable local units. In the discourse recorded in John 6, he explains exactly what that nourishment will be, and he does so step by step, because in the end it will be a hard teaching, difficult to accept (Jn 6:60).

The first point he makes – in today’s Gospel – is that the nourishment will not be for the body, but for the soul. In the end, the Eucharist will actually be real food and real drink that are consumed in the manner of all bodily food and drink (cf. Jn 6:55), but it will not be given by Christ for physical nourishment, but rather for spiritual nourishment, to bring the soul to eternal life. Jesus makes this clear at the outset when he confronts the crowd on their motive for seeking him: “*You are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled*” (Jn 6:26).¹

Many religious leaders, politicians, and prophets are followed because they promise to dole out gifts and free food, like Santa Claus at Christmas.² They tried to make Jesus their king when he actually performed the miracle every phony politician and false prophet claims to perform (Jn 6:14-15). This is not who Jesus is, and not why he came down from heaven. Jesus challenges the crowd: “*Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you*” (Jn 6:27). Thus the first lesson Jesus teaches about the Eucharist is that it is not from the earth, and it is distinguished from the earthly bread that sustains the body. It’s focus will be the soul, and in order to prepare well for the Eucharist, we must become aware of the soul’s need for nourishment.

¹ When King David inaugurated his kingdom and brought the Ark of the Covenant up to Jerusalem, to celebrate he gave every citizen a loaf of bread (2 Sm 6:18-19). In John 6, Jesus is not only fulfilling the OT sign of the Manna, but also the OT figure of King David. What Jesus did in the multiplication, like David and Moses, was provide a “sign” of something greater. The people, however, were not focusing on the sign, they just liked the free bread.

² For instance, Socialism promises that in exchange for your vote the government will “take care of you.” by providing free food, free college, free healthcare, etc.

This is not to exclude the importance of the body, quite the contrary. In fact, the Eucharist will be related to the flesh of the body not only because it will be given in a bodily, fleshly way (Jn 6:52-55), but also because it will be the source of the body's future resurrection (Jn 6:51,54). But it is to say that the Eucharist is primarily food for the soul or spirit (Jn 6:63); the Eucharist will help the body via the soul. This is important because so often man tries to solve his problems the other way around: he tries to solve the problems of the soul via the body. For example, he will overeat, or become addicted to drink, or use drugs, because these things make him feel better for a while. Unfortunately, the next day he is hungry again and needs to repeat the cycle, to his ultimate destruction. The needs of the soul cannot be satisfied by food or drink or any earthly drug. God alone can satisfy the soul.

Thus we come to Church, and to the Holy Eucharist, not to seek the various goods and bodily necessities our life requires (though we do not ignore these needs). This is not the primary reason for worship, even though as a sign of His goodness God often provides these things through a special grace and miracle. We look for Jesus in the Eucharist not because we ate our fill and are satisfied, but rather because he provides the true nourishment from heaven that our soul needs, beyond the needs of the body in this world. In fact, the proper way to prepare for the bread of the Eucharist is by fasting from earthly bread. By *refusing* to “eat our loaves and be filled”, by refusing to try satisfy the thirst of the soul with earthly bread, we expose our true spiritual hunger and bring that to Christ. Coming to him in this way, we are ready be nourished in the way that he came down from heaven to us.

Jesus is not here to give bodily food that only lasts a day and then we are hungry again. God knows we need such food and all the other basic necessities of life, and He will provide those and teach His children to share their bread so that no one goes physically hungry,³ but that is not at all the focus of what Jesus is talking about in the Bread of Life discourse. He is talking about a different bread that is quite distinct from what we harvest in the fields and buy at the store, a bread that only the Father provides, the true bread, which comes down from heaven in order to provide life to the world (Jn 6:32b-33).

To illustrate what he means, he begins a discussion of the Manna in the desert. The manna foreshadows the Eucharist. During the time of the Exodus, when the large crowd of the Israelites were living in the desert following deliverance from Egypt, God had to sustain them directly by a special miracle,

³ Especially by means of the intelligence and resourcefulness with which He blesses our nature. In cooperation with nature, man can work the ground, mill the wheat and bake the bread—providing abundant sustenance for himself and others.

because the desert of itself could not produce enough food for such a crowd. God performed a great miracle (sign), providing a mysterious white flaky substance which the people could gather up daily off the desert floor, which served as their “bread.” They didn’t know what it was, and thus called it “*Manna*,” (“*What is it?*”). Moses explained that it was Bread from God (Ex 16:15). The responsorial psalm calls it “Bread of Angels” (Ps 78:25), and “Bread from Heaven” (Ps 78:24).

By analogy, Jesus is teaching that after deliverance from the slavery to sin and the dominion of the evil one, by passing through the waters of baptism, his followers will be nourished during their earthly pilgrimage (a spiritual desert) by means of the Eucharist, their mysterious “Bread from Heaven,” until they reach the true Promised Land of heaven.

Jesus explains in John 6 that the Eucharist (the bread which he will provide) is both like the Manna, and unlike the old manna. It is like the Manna in that it is miraculous; in that it comes from heaven; in that God the Father provides it directly by means of a special miracle. But it is unlike the Manna in that it is not simply to sustain the body physically. “*Your fathers ate manna in the wilderness and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die*” (Jn 6:49-50).

When Jesus explains that he wants to provide a bread that if you eat it you will not be hungry again, the people were extremely excited: “*Give us this bread always!*” (6:34). But they were still thinking it would be something like they received yesterday, only “super-charged” and good not for a day but for ever. Jesus’ response was not what they anticipated: “I am this bread,” “I am the Bread of Life.” (Jn 6:35)

Jesus himself, in his person, is the true bread or nourishment for the soul, for man. No one ever said anything like this before, or since. This is the next important step in the discourse on the Eucharist, and the topic for next Sunday’s Gospel.