

Homily July 25, 2021 St Thomas Aquinas Church, 9am Mass

Fr. Jose Antonio Rubio

We are currently in year B of our three-year lectionary cycle. This year we read the gospel of Mark. But today's gospel reading was from John. This is because Mark is the shortest of the four gospels and there is not enough material to fill the thirty-four Sundays of Ordinary time. So, for five weeks during the summer we read the sixth chapter of John. We began today with the feeding of the 5,000 and we will continue for the next four Sundays with what we call the "Bread of Life" discourse.

The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle of Jesus to appear in all four gospels. In fact, it appears six times in the gospels, twice in Matthew and Mark and once in Luke and John. Three things in John's version stand out for me.

First, in John, the multiplication of the loaves and fish with the accompanying bread of life discourse functions as John's version of institution of the Eucharist since there is no institution narrative in John's account of the Last Supper, instead he has the washing of the feet. The reference to the institution of the Eucharist in this chapter is further strengthened by the phrase, "the feast of the Passover was near." Only John mentions this. You remember, the Last Supper took place at Passover. Thus, the whole context is eucharistic.

The second thing that stands out for me in this miracle story, is that Jesus requires cooperation. "How are we going to feed all these people?" he asks his disciples. This is typical in John. At the wedding at Cana, the servers are required to fill stone jars with water, and in the story of the man born blind, he has to cooperate in his healing by going to wash in pool at Siloam (John 9). Jesus does not just restore his sight; he makes some clay with spittle and anoints the man's eyes and then has him go and wash in the pool at Siloam. He needs to cooperate and do his part by going to wash. And, in today's gospel those present have to provide five loaves and two fish; he does all the rest but some cooperation is required.

Finally, as in all the multiplication stories in all the gospels, no one is excluded. Jesus never enquires about the worthiness of those he feeds or heals, and some might seem unworthy. For example, after healing the paralytic at the pool at Bethesda (Jn 5:14-16) we are told that Jesus later found him in the temple area and told him not to sin anymore. Then we are told that the man went and told the authorities that Jesus was the one who had made him well. And, as a result they began to persecute Jesus. But regardless of what they do, Jesus heals and feeds all who come to him without inquiring if they are worthy.

It is troubling for me, today, that some of our bishops are asking who is worthy to be fed and are trying to exclude people from the Eucharist for what seems to me to be political reasons, as they portray the most prominent American Catholic as not eligible to receive the eucharist—not because he does not believe what the Church teaches but because he holds a political position with which they disagree.

I remember when John F. Kennedy was elected president, the first Catholic ever. We were so excited, so happy. We had at last arrived. I see none of this with the second Catholic president. President Biden is a practicing Catholic. He is a good man who speaks readily about how his deep Catholic faith has been a source of comfort in facing the tragedies that have beset his life: the death of his first wife and one year old daughter in a car accident, and more recently a son from brain cancer. One might think that in a time when the church is being discredited by one scandal after another, first the sex-abuse scandal and now the Indian schools, that the election of a Catholic president who wears his Catholic faith on his sleeve would be a moment to celebrate in the American Catholic Church. But it's not happening.

To refuse the Eucharist to a believing Catholic, is in effect to excommunicate him, to brand him a grievous sinner who by virtue of his sin has alienated himself from the Church. In the judgment of some of the bishops, his sin seems to be that, as a Catholic politician, he has not taken a public, political stand against abortion. But he has stated many times that he considers abortion to be a moral evil. This is his Catholic belief. That does not seem enough.

There are many reasons why Catholics should not receive communion: living together without the benefit of the sacrament of marriage, being divorced and remarried, not fasting for one hour before receiving communion, having committed a serious sin and not having gone to confession. In addition, in certain circumstances, non-Catholic Christians are asked to abstain from receiving communion. These are norms for me to explain to others, but not for me to enforce. So, what if people in these circumstances receive communion? Is it a sacrilege? Do they offend Jesus? I recall the words of Fr. Gene Konkle, whom many of you know. "Let's face it gentlemen," he said to us when we were seminarians some forty-five years ago. "Let's face it gentlemen, you can't hurt Jesus. He is the great God of the universe whom myriads and myriads of angels worship and adore. It's the height of arrogance to think I can hurt him." At feeding of the five thousand they all had their fill, the good and the bad. Things will be sorted in the end.

In 1 Cor. 11, St. Paul writes, “27 Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. 28 A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.” These are harsh words, but it is up to the individual to make the decision: “a person should examine himself.”

I state the principle. I explain church teaching but I do not judge those who in conscience do not follow it, nor do I refuse them communion if they decide to receive communion after I have explained the principle. I do not know all the circumstances that went into their decision.

I want gun control; I am tired of so many shootings in our country. Although I want gun control, I would never refuse communion to someone who opposes gun control. I want an end to the death penalty; I believe it is a grave moral evil. I advocate for its abolition, but I would never refuse communion to someone who supports the death penalty. I do my best my best to advocate for change on these issues. That’s my five loaves and two fish. Then I trust God to change hearts.

The eucharist a sacred meal. It would seem that in this meal we try to live out what the author to the Ephesians asks in today’s second reading: we bear with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace.

Ultimately, we are all unworthy to receive communion. That is why we say, “O Lord I am not worthy.” Fortunately, the Eucharist is not a prize for those who are worthy, a prize we get for being good. It is nourishment, strength so that we can be good. It is the power of God working in me, transforming me, transforming others. But, how can it transform me if I am excluded from the table? How can it transform others if I try to exclude them from the table? The call is for me only to worry about putting my five loaves and two fish. I trust God to do the rest.