**Homily for the Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A**

**August 2, 2020**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Isaiah 55:1-3 (All you who are thirst, come to the water.)*

*Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 145 (The hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers all our needs.)*

*Second Reading: Romans 8:35, 37-39 (What will separate us from the love of Christ?)*

*Gospel: Matthew 14:13-21 (The miracle of the loaves and fishes.)*

I can understand why the crowds kept following Jesus everywhere he went. No matter how big the crowd or how much Jesus might have wanted just a little bit of time to himself, he always *nourished* the people who came to him. Jesus embodied today’s psalm refrain: “The hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers *all our needs*.” Jesus addressed the whole gamut of physical, emotional and spiritual needs that were presented to him. He taught the people at great length. He cured all of their diseases. He inspired them and gave them new hope. And, on at least this one occasion, which Matthew describes today, Jesus even provided an abundance of actual, physical *food*. He had already served up a veritable banquet of inspiring teaching and miraculous cures, and then he invited the people to sit down on the grass to share the *final* course of the evening – all the bread and fish that they could eat.

Jesus also fulfilled the prophecy that we heard in today’s First Reading. Through the Prophet Isaiah, the Lord had exhorted his people to “come to the water” to quench their spiritual thirst, and to “come, receive grain and eat” to satisfy their spiritual hunger. Jesus satisfied that hunger and thirst every time that he appeared in public. People came to him “without paying and without cost,” and they delighted in the “rich fare” that he provided. And yet, all of this “feeding” was only a *precursor* to the spiritual food that he would offer to all future generations of Christians in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood.

As Catholics, it’s virtually impossible for us *not* to think of Eucharist whenever we hear the story of the loaves and fishes. Just look at all the elements in the story that mirror what happens at every Mass. First, the meager gifts are brought forward by the community and presented to Jesus, just as we bring forth the bread and wine and place them on the altar. Then Jesus blesses them, breaks them, and gives them to his ministers (the Apostles) to distribute to the people. That sounds just like the Eucharistic Prayer, the fraction rite (when we say the Lamb of God and the priest breaks the bread), and Holy Communion. Even the leftovers are gathered up and saved, just as we reserve the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle. So, what we see in this event is not just *one* miraculous feeding, but a foreshadowing of the *countless* miraculous feedings that would take place at every Eucharistic celebration throughout history.

Our Catholic training has taught us to recognize the Eucharist as our greatest and most indispensable source of nourishment. That’s why we have a tradition of fasting for a time before receiving the Sacrament. Some of you might remember when the fast started at midnight on Saturday night. That was back in the days when Saturday vigil masses were prohibited. All the weekend masses were on Sunday morning, and everyone came with their stomachs growling. Once we revived the older Jewish custom of celebrating the Sabbath from sunset to sunset, rather than sunrise to sunrise, the options for Mass increased dramatically, and the obligatory fast was reduced to a more reasonable one hour before Mass. Yet, the purpose of the fast has never changed. It is to remind us that the physical nourishment from a good meal cannot satisfy our hunger in the same way as the spiritual nourishment that we receive from the Lord.

It’s important to realize, though, that Holy Communion is not the *only* form of nourishment that we receive at Mass, any more than the loaves and fishes were the only form of nourishment that Jesus offered to that crowd by the seashore. The *entire* Eucharistic celebration feeds us and satisfies our spiritual needs. From the Penitential Rite and the Gloria, to the readings and the homily, to the Creed and the Prayers of the Faithful, to the magnificent Eucharistic Prayer, to the Our Father and the whole Communion Rite… we are fed in so many ways by this one ritual! In fact, the scaled back version of Mass that we are forced to endure during this pandemic highlights some of the nourishing elements of Mass that we may have taken for granted.

For example, here at St. Bavo’s, we’re accustomed to meeting Christ in other people from the moment we arrive at church until the moment we leave. We are nourished by all of those warm human encounters, whether it’s a friendly greeting at the door, a little socializing after Mass, or a smile and a handshake at the Sign of Peace. Much of that has been lost for a time, but not all of it. We are still a welcoming and hospitable community, even as we try very hard to be a safe and healthy one, too. In fact, we have learned to honor Christ’s presence in one another in a whole new way – by wearing our masks, sanitizing our hands, and keeping our worship space safe for everyone.

Music and singing have also been a big part of our liturgies at St. Bavo’s. Nothing else can duplicate that wonderful feeling of raising our voices together to sing the praise and the glory of God. Although we can still profess our shared faith by the prayers and acclamations that we say together, those expressions don’t seem to nourish our soul in the same way. But, perhaps, if everyone could just make an effort to say all of the acclamations with a little more energy and enthusiasm, we could recapture some of that vibrancy of a typical St. Bavo liturgy.

It may seem that our Eucharistic celebrations have been reduced from a lavish seven-course meal with sumptuous food and fine wines to a more modest three-course meal with a choice of water or iced tea. But it’s still enough to feed us *abundantly* and “answer all our needs.” No matter how much we may need to simplify the ritual and pare back some of its customary elements, the Mass will always be the most nourishing banquet that we will ever attend. And the more fully we participate in it, the more our hunger and thirst *will be satisfied*.