

FR. PETER'S SUNDAY HOMILY  
SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY ORDINARY TIME

Today, and for the next four weeks, we will listen to the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to John known as "the Bread of Life Discourse."

We begin today with the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes - the only miracle that all four Gospels recount.

Matthew and Mark include a second instance of Jesus feeding the multitude, so that makes six times the story of this miracle is retold.

The multiplication of the loaves resonated strongly with the early Christian community because it was so obviously a foreshadowing of Christ's gift of the Eucharist.

One significant aspect of the Church's celebration of the Mass for many centuries was that the people themselves brought the bread and wine to be used for the Eucharist.

This echoed the scene in today's Gospel where the boy provides the five loaves and two fish that are brought to Jesus.

We recall this practice in our Offertory collection and in the Presentation of the Gifts by representatives of the assembly to the priest.

God provides us with the bread and wine that we in turn offer back to God.

God receives our gifts and, through the action of the Holy Spirit, transforms them so that they are given back to us as the Body and Blood of Jesus.

All of this is summed up beautifully in the prayer the priest says when he places the bread on the altar:

"Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for though your goodness we have received the bread we offer you: fruit of the earth and work of human hands, it will become for the bread of life."

A similar prayer is said with the wine.

Another important aspect of today's First reading and Gospel is the small amount of food that is provided by the man and the boy.

Twenty loaves were presented to Elisha; five loaves and two fish were presented to Jesus.

Both of these accounts reveal the amazing truth that God will use whatever we have to offer in order to work his miracles.

Even if it seems like we have only a little to give, God multiplies our gift through the abundance of his grace.

The abundance of God's generosity is the other marvelous truth revealed by these miracles.

God does not provide only what we need - he provides in abundance!

After the hundred were fed with the twenty loaves blessed by Elisha, there was some left over.

After Jesus fed the five thousand with the five loaves and two fish there were twelve baskets of pieces of fragments.

God always gives with over-flowing generosity.

All of this lavish giving on God's part points to God's ultimate, self-emptying: God shares with us his only Son who becomes flesh in Jesus Christ.

Then Jesus - the sacrament of God's abundant love - gives himself totally for the salvation of the world.

This is what the Eucharist celebrates: the gracious self-gift of Jesus who not only dies for us but feeds us with his very Body and Blood.

What should our response be to such unspeakable generosity?

St. Paul, in today's Second Reading, urges us to live in a manner worthy of the call we have received.

By our reception of the Eucharist we are called to imitate the gift we have been given.

"With all humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace ..."

This is what it means to live with a generous heart reflecting the abundant self-giving of Jesus himself.

I want to make one final observation:

In the Gospel according to John, the account of Jesus instituting the Eucharist at the Last Supper is omitted and the washing of the disciples' feet by Jesus is described.

Having presented Jesus' self-revelation here in the Bread of Life Discourse as the one who will give his flesh and blood for believers to eat and have eternal life ...

John recounts the washing of the feet to remind us that the Eucharist is given to us to nourish and strengthen us for service.

As Jesus gives himself to feed the hungry human soul, so he commands each of us at every celebration of the Mass: "Do this in memory of me."