

Homily Sunday 17B 29 July 2012 HT-W/XII-PC

One recurring disappointment in parochial ministry is the departure of parishioners from the parish upon the attainment of certain spiritual milestones. For example, some parents quit coming to Mass after they get their child baptized, some couples quit after they get married, some converts quit after they get the sacraments of initiation. There is this messed up idea possessing some people that says: it's sufficient to get these sacraments and then you don't have to go to church anymore. I wonder if they have some religious bucket list drawn up and they just go down the line checking these items off along with the trip to Hawaii. Practically every year it happens: some folks, once the sacrament is obtained, quit coming to Mass. And you most likely don't see them again until they show up at the parish office to get the next religious trophy. I'm not quite sure of the source of this confused way of thinking, but it definitely misunderstands what it really means to be a follower of Jesus. And so in our parishes we go to great lengths to impress upon people this lesson: being Catholic means active engagement in the life of the Church thru prayer, sacraments, upright daily living, all the way from the day of your Baptism until the day of your death.

This phenomenon of people withdrawing after a big event is frustrating because the people involved are really cheating themselves. Today's gospel selection helps a bit in understanding how. This passage is one of the accounts of the multiplication of the loaves and fish. This miracle is recounted in all four gospels; some gospels indicate the same type of miracle was performed twice. In every account, at the end of the meal there are leftovers. The people eat and eat until they can't take another bite. But there's still plenty of fragments lying around--twelve baskets full, to be exact. This surplus symbolizes that the human heart can never completely take in the riches of God's goodness.

The subsequent development of this story in John's Gospel reinforces the point. At the end of this episode, we're told the people are so excited they want to crown Jesus king, so he runs away. And next Sunday we hear that they run after him and catch him at the synagogue in Capernaum. Then this lengthy conversation unfolds, the Bread of Life discourse, in which Jesus talks about the Eucharist with these folks. And the upshot of this talk is that Jesus promises to give those who believe in him a share in God's life. The multitudes who pursued him and wanted to make him king were merely hoping that he was going to keep on filling their bellies and bandaging their wounds; they wanted to make him a kind of unfailing assistance agency. But the Son of God didn't come to earth to rule as king, much less to be a super duper social worker. Rather, the Lord came to give folks a share in the eternal life of God, to make human beings God's children, and this happens through the Eucharist. And so the Lord will teach the crowds that they will have to eat his flesh and drink his blood to have God's life within them. The difficulty with these folks is that they are thinking too small, that is, thinking in very earthly terms: they want Jesus to give them good food and good health in this passing life; but Jesus wants to give them

something infinitely more precious, that is, an eternal share in God's life, an everlasting participation in the peace and joy of the divinity himself.

My dear people, the problem many of us have, including the folks who just check into church for those magic liturgical moments, is the same type of problem that many of these original hearers had--we just want God to give us a good time in this brief earthly lifespan and not bother about eternity. The problem is that's not the God of the Christian faith, and a carefree life immune from suffering and pain was never ever promised us by our Redeemer. My dear friends, the reason we keep coming back to Mass, and keep praying every day, and keep studying God's Word, is because God always has something more to offer us. And that something more is much more than bread, fish, and bodily health. God made men and women for more than a few years worth of good times. Our Lord knows we need more than food, drink, and fun, and he wants to give us more. But we have to open our minds to understand this divine gift and our hearts to receive it. By the way, that's why we offer adult faith formation courses in our parishes: they help adults better understand and appropriate the rich treasures of grace contained in the Scriptures and Sacraments of the Church. We can never take it all in, but if we keep growing as disciples, we can appreciate better and receive more fully the riches our Savior offers us. We never exhaust the infinite goodness of our God. Whether we're just making our First Communion, or whether we've been a daily Communicant for decades, whether we're reading the Bible for the first time in our life, or re-reading it for the umpteenth time, some portion of the riches of God's grace remains leftover; if truth be told, there's always more leftover than we took in, so there's plenty to be enjoyed the next time.

At the close of the Communion Rite at Mass, the priest carefully collects the fragments of the consecrated hosts so that nothing goes to waste, somewhat as the apostles collected the fragments of loaves. And the sacrament is then placed back in tabernacle. It's an eloquent liturgical expression of a profound theological truth. The faithful have received the fullness of Christ's grace in Holy Communion, but there's always something leftover, a sacred surplus that we're invited to pray before in gratitude and adoration. May this holy celebration inspire us to become a people more appreciative of our generous God's good gifts and more dedicated in his service.