

## *Grace and the Hope of Future Glory*

**By The Most Reverend Robert Joseph McManus, S.T.D.**      July 25, 2021 – Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: 2 Kings 4.42-44; Ephesians 4.1-6; John 6.1-15

The COVID-19 virus pandemic for fourteen months altered in many dramatic ways our American way of life. As American Catholics, the daily practice of our faith was quickly and sadly upended with the closing of our parish churches and the suspension of public Masses. One might rightly say that Catholics throughout our country entered into a prolonged Eucharistic fast, deprived of celebrating Holy Mass in person with their fellow parishioners and of receiving Holy Communion sacramentally.

Now that we are able to return to Mass without restrictions, the Catholic Church, who is our Mother and Teacher, offers us on this Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time and for the next several weeks a “crash course” on the nature and purpose of the inestimable gift of the Most Holy Eucharist. As is usually the case for the Sunday liturgical readings, the first reading from the Old Testament and the Gospel text reflect the same theological theme. Today that theme is the Eucharist, God’s gift to His people to strengthen them on their journey home to their Father’s house in heaven. Our second reading from the *Letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians* highlights the virtues that should characterize the life of the Christian believer, virtues that find their basis and sustenance in and through a devout and worthy reception of Holy Communion. Allow me a few reflections on the theological relationship among today’s liturgical readings.

### The Bread of Life

The Old Testament narrates the role the people of Israel played in the history of salvation. Of all the people of the earth, God chose the Israelites to be his own beloved possession through the establishment of the Covenant with Moses on Mt. Sinai. Although Israel was “the Chosen People,” its relationship to the God of the Covenant was not without conditions. At the heart of the Mosaic Covenant was Yahweh’s promise to Israel, “You shall be my people and I shall be your God” (Jer 30.22). Yet, in the long and convoluted history of Israel, there were times when the Israelites were not faithful to their God. As a result, God sent his chosen representatives, his prophets, to challenge the Israelites to abandon their sinful apostasy in order to avoid punishment and political ruin that such religious infidelity might bring about.

One such prophet was Elisha, described in our first reading as “the man of God” (2 Kgs 4.42). Today’s story is situated historically at a time when a devastating famine had descended on Israel, bringing starvation and desperation. In such a dire situation, the sacred author narrates that a fellow Israelite brings to Elisha twenty barley loaves. Rather than keep such an extraordinarily generous gift of food, Elisha orders the bread to be distributed to the starving people, since Elisha clearly interprets the food as a gift from God and a sign of God’s love and care for his chosen people. All were fed, and food was left over, a further sign of God’s superabundant benevolence towards his chosen people.

For those of us who have been listening to Gospel stories read at Mass for years, this story of Elisha feeding his hungry countrymen reminds us of one of the best-known miracles of Jesus, the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fish, which is recounted in all four Gospels. Today we hear St. John describing the familiar Messianic miracle that comes at the very beginning of the sixth chapter of St. John’s Gospel, the chapter which includes what

Scripture scholars call “the Bread of Life Discourse.” In this theologically rich discourse, we discover the very essence of the Church’s understanding of the Holy Eucharist: “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst” (John 6.35). These words have echoed throughout the two thousand years of the Church’s history and have informed the Church’s Eucharistic doctrine to this day.

## Christ Feeds His People

But allow me to go back to our Gospel reading and point out the connection between what Jesus did two thousand years ago on a mountain side overlooking the Sea of Galilee and what happens during the celebration of the Holy Mass. St. John comments that when Jesus saw the large crowd that had been following him, he became concerned about the physical well-being of the people. And so, he asks the Apostle Philip where they might be able to buy enough bread for such a crowd. Philip blurts out an answer that Jesus apparently ignores when he sees the Apostle Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, who points out to Jesus that there is a young boy nearby who has “four barley loaves and a couple of dried fish” (John 6.9). Jesus tells Andrew to direct the people to sit down on the grass. At this point we reach the theological climax of the Gospel story. Jesus takes the loaves, gives thanks, passes out the blessed bread to the people, and then proceeds to do the same with the dried fish.

Clearly what Jesus did on the mountainside in Galilee to sustain the physical well-being of a hungry crowd was done in anticipation of what he would do at the Last Supper on the night before he died, when he instituted the gift of the Eucharist—the gift of his Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity—that would be renewed sacramentally and given to his faithful disciples at every celebration of the Mass until the end of time. Through the activity of the Holy Spirit and the sacramental ministry of the priest, the Risen and Glorified Christ performs this sacramental miracle for the sake of the spiritual well-being and growth in holiness of his brothers and sisters in the household of faith which is the Catholic Church.

And what is the reaction of the sated crowd to the multiplication of the loaves and fish? They claim that Jesus “must undeniably be the Prophet who is to come into the world” (John 6.14). But for us who have received the gift of our Catholic faith, Jesus is far more than a “Prophet.” He is the Word of God made flesh; he is the Savior of the world who continues his work of salvation through the sacramental ministry of the Church, especially through the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. In the celebration of Mass and in the worthy reception of Holy Communion, we not only receive Jesus as “the Prophet” but we receive the Holy One of God who sanctifies us through our sacramental encounter with him in the Eucharist. Yes, in feasting on the Lord’s Eucharistic Body and Blood, “our mind is filled with grace and the hope of future glory” as St. Thomas Aquinas so eloquently wrote in his famous Eucharistic hymn, *O Sacrum Convivium*.

## Living the Grace of the Eucharist

I offer one brief reflection on our second reading from the *Letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians*. St. Paul reminds those early Christians in Ephesus “to live a life worthy of their calling” (Eph 4.1). And what does this type of worthy life look like? It is a Christ-like life, a life of “perfect humility, meekness and patience” (Eph 4.2). Yet, how often have you and I failed in our attempts to live up to St. Paul’s challenge to be humble, patient and meek? As a matter of fact, some of our contemporaries would look upon such moral virtues as signs of weakness and timidity. After all, is not the key to success in life doing what we have to do to provide for ourselves and our family’s social and economic security?

To live the intellectual, spiritual and moral demands of the Christian life requires supernatural grace that comes to us in a powerful and singular way in the worthy reception of Holy Communion. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI often pointed out, “the Eucharist as the source and summit of the Church’s life and mission” must be translated into a life lived “according to the Spirit” (*Sacramentum caritatis*). And to live according to the Spirit is to live a life worthy of the calling to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

During the Holy Mass, let us be thankful for being physically present these days with our fellow parishioners to offer this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. And let us echo the words of St. Peter when he witnessed the Lord’s Transfiguration on the mountain top: “Lord, it is good for us to be here” (Matt 9.5). Amen.

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### *For Further Reading*

- Pope Benedict XVI, [\*Sacramentum caritatis\*](#)
- Catechism of the Catholic Church, [##1322-1419](#)
- Pope John Paul II, [\*Ecclesia de Eucharistia\*](#)
- Lumen Gentium, [#11](#)

### *In Short . . .*

- *God wanted to return man to a condition in which he could experience inner healing, so he promised the coming of the One who would restore justification to man.*
- *In the history of Israel, the prophets were chosen by God to remain faithful to the covenant that God established with the people of Israel through Moses on Mt. Sinai and to turn away from any religious apostasy.*
- *The prophet Elisha was the “man of God” who provided bread to his fellow countrymen in a time of famine as a sign of God’s providential care for his Chosen People.*
- *Jesus, the “God-made-man,” is far more than a prophet. He is the Holy One of God, the Savior of the world, providing for and sustaining the spiritual life of his faithful disciples through the supernatural gift of His Body and Blood.*
- *Jesus’ performance of the multiplication of the loaves and fish, a miracle that is recounted in all four gospels, is clearly a type of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper.*
- *St. Paul’s exhortation to the early Christians at Ephesus was “to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” As disciples of the Lord Jesus, we can only hope to respond successfully to this Pauline challenge to live a virtuous life in Christ through the grace that we receive in a most powerful and efficacious way through a worthy reception of the Eucharist at Mass.*