

## 17<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (July 25, 2021)

We begin today a series of readings from chapter six of John's gospel beginning with this miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes and that will develop into what is called Jesus' 'Bread of Life' discourse—a teaching that will become more explicitly about the Eucharist. But to begin with, it is important simply to affirm the reality of this miracle. The crowd was so blown away by what Jesus did that they wanted to 'carry him off to make him king' as John tells us. Some so-called 'scholars' in our time try to explain away the miraculous by saying that many in that crowd actually brought along their own food and were so inspired by Jesus' teaching that they were moved to share what they had with others. The only problem with this explanation: there is not one shred of evidence anywhere else to support it. Fr. Benedict Groeschel is one of my favorite spiritual writers/speakers in our time (he died a few years ago). He had no time at all for this kind of thinking which he called the 'soggy fish sandwich' theory: people bringing their own bread and fish must have resulted in a lot of soggy fish sandwiches!

No—Jesus performed a miracle here; there is no other way to read this episode that makes any sense at all. Throughout his gospel John was careful to record accurately the details of what he saw and heard, and there is no reason whatsoever to think that he all of a sudden wanted to make up a nice story at this point. What do we mean by 'miracle'? Webster's defines it as 'an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs'. Our Catechism echoes that idea in describing 'miracle' as 'a sign or wonder, such a healing or the control of nature, which can only be attributed to divine power'. Of course, today the concept of miracles is dismissed out of hand as nothing more than a useless holdover from pre-scientific times. And the miracles described in the Bible? Nothing more than myths and made-up fantasies, we are told. There's a bit of a problem with these rejections of the miraculous, however, what we might call an inconvenient truth: they do indeed occur, and even in our own time.

First, the Church herself has declared formally and firmly that miracles are real. The Second Vatican Council reaffirmed the Church's constant belief that the gospels are in fact historical—they faithfully hand on what Jesus really did and taught, including the miracles he worked. The Catechism confirms that belief in saying that "Jesus accompanies his words with many 'mighty works and wonders and signs,' which...attest that he was the promised Messiah" (n. 547). That word 'sign' is very important: John uses that word throughout his gospel to refer to Jesus' miracles—for example, multiplying those loaves and fishes and changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana. The New Testament Greek word for 'miracle' actually means 'sign'—something that points beyond itself; in this case, pointing to God.

Actually, miracles are an irreplaceable element of our Catholic faith and of Christianity in general. Consider our very existence and that of the universe around us—all of which is the result of the creative power and action of God who brought it all into existence out of nothing. That's not a miracle?? Consider the Incarnation--God the Son taking on our human condition in the womb of Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit and not by a human father. That's not a miracle?? Consider Jesus' resurrection—his very beaten, crucified, and dead body brought back to new, glorious, and eternal life, a risen Body that could be seen, heard, touched, and that could eat a piece of fish. That's not a miracle??

But the skeptics remain unconvinced: ‘whatever did or did not happen in the past, there are no miracles today; we are too intelligent for such childish ideas’. Again, the problem is...they do indeed happen, and yes—in our own time. Let me share just one example. As you know, Pope John Paul II died 16 years ago, back in April of 2005. Six years later, in 2011, a 50-year-old woman from Costa Rica, Floribeth Mora Diaz, suffered a brain aneurysm. After many tests, brain scans and a three-hour operation, the doctors told her they couldn’t do anything more for her and that she had only a month to live. Floribeth returned home to her husband and children who simply tried to keep her comfortable. But she wanted to live and so she began to ask the prayers of John Paul II. In fact, she was able to watch his beatification on TV in May of 2011.

She then went to sleep but had the strong sense of John Paul waking her, saying “Get up—don’t be afraid!” You may remember that he constantly urged us during his papacy “Do not be afraid!” Anyway, Floribeth got out of bed on her own and told her very surprised husband that she felt well; she also told him about her sense of John Paul’s presence to her. More tests and brain scans were done, and her neurologists and other doctors could not ignore or dismiss the evidence right in front of their eyes: Floribeth was completely cured. They were stunned, they had no natural explanation whatsoever for what they saw, but the instantaneous cure was undeniable. Later, the Vatican brought together a commission of medical experts to examine her case and perform further tests and scans. You also need to know that when the Vatican examines such situations, they don’t simply rubber-stamp a claim of ‘miracle’. They charge the experts (many of whom are not Catholic and even not Christian) with the task of searching for any possible natural explanation for what has happened. Only when there is no possible scientific explanation will the Church declare the healing to be a miracle. That is what happened here, and Floribeth’s healing was the second miracle that was needed for John Paul’s canonization which took place in 2014.

Miracles are real, they do happen and even in our own time—no matter how annoying or embarrassing that may be to those who think there is nothing beyond our knowledge of science. We also have to acknowledge, of course, that miracles don’t always happen as we might wish or pray for. We can and certainly should pray for God’s help and healing in seemingly hopeless cases, but we also have to remember that God’s providential love and power is not always apparent to our limited awareness. In any event, miracles remind us that God indeed exists and is intimately, personally, and necessarily connected to every single one of us and to our eternal destiny. Jesus did many such signs and miracles to remind us of such things, and those signs are manifested to us now in the ways that God, in his infinite wisdom and love, knows are just what we need to know and be strengthened by his presence and love. Our responsorial psalm said it so well: “The hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers all our needs.” Thanks be to God for that saving truth!