

Homily based on the readings from August 7, 2023 (Numbers 11.4b-15; Matthew 14.13-21)

As some of you may know, I did not have the privilege of growing up Catholic. I spent my entire childhood, and much of my young adulthood, as a member of a Protestant denomination. Over the years, I have struggled to explain to lifelong Catholics what that experience was like. Perhaps the best explanation is that being Protestant gave me a hunger for the Eucharist, but without actually providing any nourishment. Most Protestant communities have a ritual that resembles our Eucharistic celebration, but sadly it is nothing more than a false copy. Nevertheless, God can use that empty facsimile to create a genuine longing for the real presence of his Body and Blood – to help draw our separated brethren back to the Sacrament of the Altar.

Today's readings illustrate a similar phenomenon – but as part of God's unfolding plan of salvation, rather than the consequence of human failure. At a basic level, both readings focus on the necessity of physical

sustenance. While it is easy to chastise the Children of Israel for not trusting in the Lord, keep in mind that they were journeying for many years through the midst of a vast desert. According to the Book of Exodus, there were “about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children.” One can see why they might be getting a bit nervous. In contrast, Jesus’ feeding of “five thousand men, not counting women and children” seems like a much more manageable task.

God, of course, never fails to provide for the physical needs of his children. As the Psalmist reminds us:

... Israel I would feed with the best of wheat,
and with honey from the rock I would fill them.

Nevertheless, God gives us what we actually need, not just what we think we need. The Israelites – and anyone else in their situation – would have been perfectly content to receive an abundant, never-failing source of sustenance. God gave them that, but also something more: the original bread of heaven, the prototype of the Holy Eucharist.

The Book of Deuteronomy points out that manna was far more than just material food:

[He] fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.

God was creating a hunger in their souls that could only be satisfied by the True Bread of Heaven. In the words of St. John Chrysostom, “Moses raised his hands to heaven and brought down manna, the bread of angels; [Jesus] the new Moses raises his hands to heaven and gives us the food of eternal life.”

Throughout human history, from Moses to the present day, God has created a hunger that only he can satisfy. As Catholics, our task is to invite all people – boldly but charitably – to share in the authentic nourishment he has provided.