

Homily based on the readings from August 4, 2023 (Numbers 11.4b-15; Matthew 14.13-21)

As some of you may know, I did not have the good fortune to grow up Catholic. I spent the entirety of my 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 – particularly here in New England – what that experience was like. The best explanation I can give is that being Protestant created a *hunger* for the Holy Eucharist, but without providing any of the nourishment. Most Protestant communities have a ritual that resembles our Eucharistic celebration, but which *sadly* is nothing more than a false copy. Nevertheless, Christ can use this 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 within the context of God's broader plan of salvation. At a basic level, both readings focus

on the need for physical sustenance. While it would be easy to criticize 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.

The Lord, of course, never fails to provide for the material 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 virtually anyone else in their position – would have been perfectly happy 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 ordinary food:

[He] fed you with manna, a food unknown to you and your ancestors, so you might know that it is not by bread alone that people live, but by all that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord.

In the words of Saint 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.” God has created a *hunger* in the souls of human beings that can only be satisfied by his own Body and Blood. As disciples of Christ, it is *our* responsibility to invite all people – boldly but charitably – to partake in the authentic nourishment he has provided.