



## **Loaves and Fishes**

### **Feeding the Multitude**

### **(Unless It's Illegal)**

We all know the story of the loaves and fishes found in the Gospel of Mark. And we all know that the Gospel holds a timeless message for each of us. Certainly many commentaries have been written on this passage, but I invite you to consider the parallels we find in today's Church.

As the story opens, the Apostles return to Jesus, tired and hungry, to report on the results of their just-completed mission. You'll recall that He sent them out in pairs to teach, to cure the sick, to cast out demons - all in His Name. Oh, one more thing. He told them to go empty handed with just a staff. Don't take any bread or money. Don't even bring along a bag or extra clothes. Just go and do these things in My Name.

We don't know if they followed Our Lord's instructions exactly. Jesus was always giving instructions that were ignored. "Stay awake!" They fell asleep. "Don't tell anyone I cured you." They ran off and shouted from the rooftops. So when Jesus tells them to go out on their mission in simplicity, empty-handed - just as He instructs our clergy and religious to do the same today - did they? We don't know. Maybe He thought that all that extra "stuff" would be a distraction from the heart of the mission.

Empty-handed or not, that first group went out and from the account Mark provides, they were successful. Successful enough that the government of the day - King Herod - got all riled up over it. And that didn't end too well. At least not for John the Baptist. The King genuinely liked John because he spoke the truth, but surrounded by dignitaries and his military at a sumptuous dinner, he caved in to special interests and his own desires and lopped off the Baptist's head. Sound familiar?

Back to the Apostles. They've returned from their trip. They're tired and hungry. Jesus invited them to come away by boat to a secluded place to rest and have something to eat. I'm sure they were grateful for the promise of relaxation. They were probably looking forward to the privilege of "alone time" with Jesus, afforded to the elite inner circle. But things didn't work out that way. I'm betting Jesus knew what would happen next.

There would be no rest for this bunch. Jesus wanted them to know that this was their lot in life. For those who choose to follow Him, there is no rest until they reach their rest in heaven.

The crowds recognized Jesus and the Apostles and ran along to shore to follow. They were starved for the Truth. Jesus took pity on them and told them to sit on the hillside. He began to teach them. The hour grew late and the people had not eaten. His disciples thought Jesus should send them away so they could go into the surrounding towns to buy themselves something to eat. They probably wanted that period of private relaxation that Jesus invited them to earlier.

Instead Jesus said, "You give them something to eat.'

Of course, He was God and could have snapped his fingers and enough food would appear, as Father Cantalmessa, the Papal preacher suggests. He didn't. The challenge Jesus put to the Apostles was no different than the challenge He puts to the Church today.

Not surprisingly, the objections raised by the Disciples are echoed almost exactly in the modern Church. They complained that they had no money to go buy enough food. It would cost too much. Their solution to the problem hinged on cash. I guess they forgot about their recent success when they went out to perform great works with empty pockets.

Jesus told them to take a look around to see what they had on hand. There were five loaves and two fish. He gave thanks to His Father, blessed the food, broke it up and told his disciples to feed the 5,000 gathered there. When everyone had eaten their fill, there were twelve baskets full of bits of bread and fish.

If Jesus walked among us today, He would risk fines and perhaps imprisonment for giving out broken bread and fish of any sort. He didn't have a permit from the government. He didn't wear latex gloves while He handled the food. As for the left overs, He would be forced to throw them away. It would be OK if those who were hungry rummaged around in the trash for those leftovers, but He would be prohibited from giving it to them directly.

Today, works of charity in food pantries all over the nation are shackled by government regulations while millions go hungry. Certainly, the rationale behind these rulings makes sense in some regard, but by tying charity to government, there is great waste in the face of very real suffering - not to mention a new class of worker as good works become paid and professionalized.

Here are some examples:

**Bulk Food:** You might decide to purchase a 100 lb sack of rice to donate to a food pantry. Of course you get a better price because of the bulk size. You think that this huge sack can be divided and shared with 50 or 100 people. Think again. The pantry is required to give the entire sack to one person. If the bag is opened, even for the purpose of dividing it into smaller amounts, it must be thrown out.

What would Jesus do?

**Outdated Food:** Auctions for outdated or almost outdated food are sky rocketing in popularity as a way to combat the rising cost of food. If you think you can pick up some bargains to share with your local pantry, think again. They won't take it. Chances are if you leave it there, they'll throw it out. It's safe for you to feed to your family, but don't even think about giving it away.

Most of us think that the dates stamped on food are expiration dates. They're not. One agricultural extension worker reports that she hears from consumers who react to the date stamped on their granola bars and are ready to throw away the whole box. "Anything with a date on it, people automatically think safety," she said. "But the food is still perfectly good."

The government requires dates on only a few types of food including infant formula, meat and dairy. Yet sell-by, use-by and best-if-used-before dates are found on thousands of other foods. Most of the time, the manufacturers determine these dates for themselves. The USDA website states "There is no uniform or universally accepted system used for food

dating in the United States." These dates serve a variety of purposes; they are used to track products in the event of a food safety issue and to help stores determine how long they can be displayed. They are also the manufacturers' recommendations for maximum quality. Basically, they are the food industry's way of saying, time to toss it and buy some more. Even bottled water is dated.

I have a neighbor who worked for a pharmaceutical company that distributed infant formula. She had crates of the stuff in her garage. Mountains. She was going to throw it out. "Stop!" I pleaded. I'll bring it to the food pantry. The expiration date was a month away. I loaded it into my van. Guess what? They wouldn't take it. It went into the trash. And it came back out of the trash into the hands of grateful, poor mothers who found it there.

Does this make any sense?

**Meat and Fish** - Maybe you go hunting or know someone who does. A single deer yields a lot of meat. Guess what? You can't give it away. Our local seminary has large grounds with a super abundance of deer roaming around. They cause accidents, but no one is permitted to shoot them to share the meat with the poor. The animal activists have seen to that. It's church land. But the church can't serve the virtue of charity with what they rightfully own.

Did you buy meat in bulk and freeze individual packages? Good for you. Too bad you can't share it.

Is your neighborhood plagued by copiously pooping Canadian geese? Recently my neighbor and I surveyed a school field that was covered in hundreds and hundreds of geese. We wondered how many pounds of food those geese represented. The school district went to great expense hiring special dogs to try to get rid of them. It didn't work, but it never occurred to them don't try to catch and kill them for food. It's against the law.

We live on the ocean and fishing is one of my favorite activities. There comes a point when my freezer is full - and that's usually when a neighbor turns up at my door with some monsters he caught off shore. Can I give away extra fish? Nope. No one will take it. Not if it's cleaned and filleted. Not if it's cooked. No fish.

Sorry, Jesus, but you'd be out of luck and so would those hungry 5,000.

Don't think about cooking up a pot of soup or chili or stew. Do you grow your own fruits and vegetables and can them? Keep them to yourself.

The need at food pantries has grown. Many of the people who were once generous donors are now patrons themselves. Nearly every Church bulletin has announcements asking for donations of non-perishable food. More urgently, they ask for money. Clearly they haven't really read the Gospel of Mark.

**So what is the answer?**

**Jesus told the twelve, "You feed them."**

He didn't say go give money to the pantry in town so they can buy pre-packaged food that has King Herod's stamp of approval on it -- and then tell everyone to go to there to get food. But only during the hours they're open.

He said, "You feed them."

You heard Him. Go feed them.

Grab a friend and load up your mini-van and head out to your local food pantry. Stop at a restaurant supply house for plastic containers-- or better yet, just raid your own pantry for those take out tubs that you might otherwise toss out.

Fill them with hot food, frozen food, food that has been divided from bulk packages. Beans, rice, macaroni.

Have you made extra squares of lasagna? Give them away maybe with heating instructions.

Do you have deer meat, fish, chicken? Fill a cooler and give it away.

Make sandwiches. Make cookies. Make brownies. Give them away!

Make salads. Slice up fresh tomato from your garden. Give it away!

Bake bread and share it with others. Bake a big loaf and break it!

Do it with your bare hands.

Do it in the Name of the Lord.

I don't know how it happened, but little by little the Church has been shackled by the laws of the land, by the drive for cash, by fear of litigation. Rather than being bound by Our Lord's commission to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, the business of helping others has become professionalized. It is no longer possible for the Bride of Christ to just do good in His Name.

But it is possible for you to do it.

It might make you a little uncomfortable.

But He has commanded it.

"You feed them."

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