

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME  
Year B: 2Kgs 4:42-44; Ps 145; Eph 4:1-6; Jn 6:1-15  
July 25, 2021  
Fr. David Pignato

The miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes is probably one of the most popular and well-known miracles performed by Christ, probably second only to the changing of water into wine at the wedding at Cana. But even if the miracle is very familiar to us, we should not lose sight of the significance of some of its details.

One of the important details of this familiar miracle is that Christ started with what seemed insignificant and useless – only five loaves of bread and two fish. This is why St. Andrew said, “*There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what good are these for so many?*” It seemed useless and pointless even to find the boy’s food, since the crowd of hungry people was so large. But Christ takes the small amount of food, nonetheless, for, He “*knew what he was going to do.*” And, when Christ miraculously multiplied the loaves and the fish, He made *more* than enough for the crowd of five thousand people to eat. The Gospel says that when the food was distributed to the people, they had “*as much of the fish as they wanted*” and that the five barley loaves became “*more than they could eat,*” and they all ate until they were full. (Eating until they were full was most likely a rare treat for many of the people, especially if they were poor. They were probably not accustomed to having an abundance of food.)

There is an important spiritual lesson here for us. The lesson is that God can take what seems to be small and insignificant and multiply it into something that is excessive and abundant. He can take our small efforts and gestures, which might look and seem to be useless, and convert them into major spiritual benefits.

We see this especially in the sacraments – what seem to be just small, simple gestures are used by God to produce major spiritual effects. For example, in baptism, when we pour water over a baby’s head and invoke the name of the Blessed Trinity, the virtues of faith, hope and charity are poured into the baby’s soul, and that soul is set on the path to eternal life. When we hear the simple words of absolution in confession, sins that separate us from God are washed away forever. When bread and wine are offered to God at Mass by the priest who repeats the words of Christ from the Last Supper, Christ Himself becomes present on the altar to nourish the faithful and strengthen us to resist sin and live a life of grace. And, when the dying are anointed with oil on the forehead and hands, their

souls are reconciled with God and prepared to meet Christ to give an account of their lives. Such small gestures on our part – water, bread and wine, and oil – are converted by God into very substantial, significant effects that can have eternal consequences.

But, God *does* ask us to do our meager part. As one spiritual author observes, “[Christ] gave the loaves and fishes to the disciples to distribute; it was in their hands, it seems, that the multiplication took place. It is part of his courtesy that he should associate human agents with himself, [even] when most he manifests his superhuman powers” (Ronald Knox, *Pastoral and Occasional Sermons*, 397).

So, if we ever start to think like St. Andrew, for example that our poor prayers will be useless, or that our small ability to make a difference in the world will have no effect, we should remember the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes. God can take what is seemingly small and insignificant on our part and turn it into something that makes a major difference. For example, it could be just one *Hail Mary* prayer that you offer for a soul at the hour of death that wins the grace for a deathbed conversion, and eternal salvation. It could be just one word of encouragement and compassion that you offer to someone who is downcast that God uses to save that person from despair. Or, it could be just one small gesture of charity on your part that God uses to signal to a person in desperate need that God hears his prayers and has not abandoned him. In other words, God can multiply and magnify our meager efforts and convert them into excessive spiritual goods.

And there’s one more important detail of this famous miracle that we should not overlook. After the miracle was over, Christ told the disciples, “*Gather the fragments left over, so that nothing will be wasted.*” Even though there was plenty of food and more than the people could eat, Jesus was still careful that none of the excess should be wasted. The lesson for us: although God’s blessings are excessive and abundant, they should never be taken for granted or wasted. When Christ acts in our lives, He gives us *more* than we need, but He also tells us not to take it for granted or waste it. For example, it’s wrong to think that because God’s mercy is infinite, we can always put off asking for it. It’s wrong to think that, because God will always forgive us, we can postpone our conversion until later in life. The abundance of God’s spiritual goods should never be taken for granted or wasted. We should treasure and take advantage of every grace God gives us, always ready and eager to benefit from God’s blessings. Although God’s blessings are abundant and excessive, we should always be careful to gather them up and make sure that none of them are wasted or given in vain.