

17th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME “B” - July 25, 2021

You may have seen on Friday the spectacular official opening ceremonies of the year-delayed Summer Olympics in Japan. Like so many things in life during this pandemic experience the impact of the virus has dramatically changed so much of what we used to consider “normal” about this special gathering of the best athletes in the world.

And, perhaps, the most glaring difference from past Olympic Games will be the absence of fans in the stands! It will feel very different for the competitors *and* for those watching on TV. Where are the cheers at great performances? Where are the groans of heart-breaking disappointments? Where are the voices singing with pride their national anthems during the awarding of medals? Without fans, it will probably feel a bit weird, spooky, incomplete, like something big is missing!

These “Olympic reflections” come to my mind this weekend as we enter into a series of 4 weekends – interrupted with the Feast of the Assumption - where we hear from the 6th Chapter of the Gospel of John. This section of John’s gospel is known as the “Bread of Life” discourse, because the gospel-writer presents an extended reflection by Jesus on the nature of his identity and mission – with notions that deliberately “connect” with the Church’s celebration of the Eucharist.

And, as you probably know by now, the Archdiocese of Baltimore is in the early portion of a special “Year of the Eucharist” – designed to help us renew and deepen our understanding and appreciation of the great gift of the 4-fold manner in which Jesus really and truly is present to us in the Eucharist:

1. in the gathered Assembly of the faithful
2. In the proclaimed Word of God in the Scriptures
3. In the elements of bread and wine that are transformed into the very Body & Blood of Jesus
4. In the ministry of the priest serving in the person of Christ.

The Year of the Eucharist is also designed to encourage even greater expression of that “full, conscious and active participation” envisioned by the reform and renewal of the liturgy inspired by the Second Vatican Council - seeking to grow both the spirit of those participating and expand the number of those who gather together in this highest form of Christian worship!

So, during these coming weeks, we will see how the gospel readings encourage us to give some real, prayerful attention to each one of those 4 modes of Jesus’ real presence among us – beginning with today’s passage which speaks to us of the power of being gathered together as an Assembly of the faithful in the name of the Lord!

Because we have become so familiar with this feeding miracle, we might overlook a rather obvious but important detail: the people! Even though this passage may sometimes be referred to as the “multiplication of the loaves” – it does not really say that Jesus “multiplied” them – what it does say is that, somehow, a lot of people were miraculously fed with only 5 loaves and 2 fish.

And knowing that Jesus does not do much of anything “by accident”, we see here that he does not go to each person “one-by-one”, but he engages them as “a group”. Notice:

- ◆ it was a large crowd that followed him and was coming toward him
- ◆ it was 5,000 men who reclined on the grass
- ◆ it was near the feast of Passover – the dramatic and powerful freeing of a people from slavery in Egypt
- ◆ it was the group of disciples – Philip, Andrew, Simon-Peter, others who ministered to the crowd as a team
- ◆ it was only when Jesus realized that the crowd was going to carry him off to make him king that he withdrew to the mountain alone!

Take all of that together – and what we see is that this is clearly not just a collection of individual private moments happening at the same time, but a common, shared experience of a group of people actively engaged with Jesus together in such a way that each of their personal needs is cared for! It was a moment of profound communion together with Jesus!

And that is the same experience that we share when two or three gather together in Jesus’ name in the celebration of the Eucharist – he is really, truly present among us in our gathered assembly! And so, the vision, the goal, the hope of our Eucharistic liturgies is to express and manifest that real presence powerfully through our full, conscious, active participation that grows our communion of one heart, one mind, one spirit around the one table of the Word of God and of the one Bread and one Cup at the table of the Eucharist! We are called to be an Assembly, something much more powerful than a congregation!

To congregate is to be passive (hanging around, watching something), to assemble is to be active (making something happen)! If the Olympic Games do not have quite the same powerful experience without enthusiastic and energized fans in the stands, our celebration of the Eucharist does not have quite the same powerful experience if the pews are not “buzzing” with strong responses, full-voiced and joyful singing ...

So, in this Year of the Eucharist, and on this first weekend of the Bread of Life discourse, the message seems pretty clear --- the call to be that powerful gathered Assembly of the faithful in whose midst the Lord Jesus becomes even more fully and really present!