



Homily by
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THE BLESSED SACRAMENT OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST
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“You give them food.”

Dear brothers and sisters in consecrated life,

The Word of God on this Sunday of the Feast of the Blessed Sacrament seems to have been chosen expressly for us, consecrated persons, gathered here in Montreal in this great assembly. When we celebrate the Eucharist, the Lord comes close and speaks to our hearts. In today’s Gospel, Jesus gives his apostles a pastoral course which could also benefit us, since we—like them—were chosen and sent on mission as members of the various spiritual families ministering in our immense country.

A large crowd has followed Jesus into a desert area where there is no food to eat. The apostles, aware of the situation, anxiously prompt Jesus to “*Dismiss these people! We have nothing to give them. Let them go away to find lodging and provisions!*” That would be the normal thing to do in the circumstances. That’s what we would call—as in the first part of our theme—*Taking stock of our challenges!* And so Jesus trains them for the mission in those terms. The faith community which we are experiencing, and which I would like to propose to you, is a community of receptivity, attentive listening and sharing. Together, we are called to meet the people’s needs. That is the first pastoral orientation—to open our hearts and our beings to welcome those who come to us, to understand their thirst and expectations, and to respond in kind. The first attitude of an apostle—one who is sent, a witness—is to welcome and to listen. Pope Francis constantly insists on those two dimensions whenever he speaks, and also demonstrates them in his own life.

Jesus then tells the apostles: *“You give them food.”* A daunting and impossible mission that brings the apostles up short, since they can find only five loaves of bread and two fishes! Seven—a figure symbolizing fullness. In every Christian community, the Holy Spirit provides for all the community’s needs. The Spirit abundantly pours out the gifts, charisms, ministries and pastors needed by the community. Jesus invites his apostles to discover the gifts of the Spirit and to discern the calls for service in the community. That is the source of all pastoral action. Jesus then asks his apostles to *“Have them sit down in groups of about fifty.”* Create communities! A crowd is always a crowd. The Church is not a crowd, but a community of persons gathered around Jesus Christ in communion, sharing and love. A crowd can never be a community.

After taking the five loaves and two fishes, which the apostles had found among the people, Jesus lifts his eyes to heaven and blesses this meager pittance. Now that’s another basic attitude for pastoral ministry: adjusting to God’s plan. The Church is not our own but the Father’s work. The basis of ecclesial action is prayer. This means knowing how to listen to what the Lord wants of us in our specific circumstances. We are currently going through a difficult situation in the Church. We need to hear what the Lord is trying to tell us, what he is calling us to, in order to adjust our pastoral action to the Father’s plan of communion. *“Discerning hope amid the challenges.”*

Jesus puts the loaves and fishes into the hands of the apostles to pass them around to the people. Jesus deposits in our hands—in the hands of all Christian men and women—food for his people, and asks us to open our hands to share. The bread and fish are multiplied in the hands of the apostles. If our brothers and sisters are hungry, could it be that we have forgotten to open our hands to share the gifts of God? Maybe we have forgotten that the multiplication occurs in and through our hands, as we go about sharing. So all the crowd had their fill, and there were even leftover fragments. We often hear that people are no longer interested in religion, don’t want to hear about it, feel that it’s always the same ones... that we are dying out and the end is near. Jesus invites us to open ourselves up to be receptive and to listen, then to open our hands to share and to discover the wealth of charisms and ministries deposited in our communities.

The feast of the Blessed Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ speaks to us of the great gift which the Father gives us in offering his Son Jesus as food, under the signs of bread and wine. This feast also places us before another great gift, the Body of Christ which we form: we are gathered in his Name, with Christ as our head! We must never forget this. During certain eras of Church history, the tendency was to put more emphasis on the sacramental presence of the Body and Blood of the Lord in the host, to the detriment of his presence in his Body the Church. The Word of God we have just heard is very clear on this matter. Even Saint Paul, when addressing the Christians in Corinth, did not hesitate to reproach them for their divisions at the very moment of celebrating Eucharist. Communion is two-fold: we commune with Christ and with his Body.

Our Church needs to rediscover that reality to live it more fully. Otherwise, we remain isolated Christians, standing next to one another without forming a body, without being community, without enjoying the communion and fraternal life to which we are called. Our parish communities are confronted with that risk. The same goes for our communities of consecrated life. To us as to his apostles, the Lord says:

- Open your heart and your being to welcome people, by welcoming one another and those you encounter.
- Form communities—not crowds, not anonymous groups, but communities where charity, love and fraternity reign.

- Discover the gifts of the Spirit, the charisms among your members, and put them in service to the community.
- Turn to the Lord and praise him. Learn to listen and discern, and become adjusted to God's plan.
- Give them food yourselves, share what you are and what you have, and let God do the multiplying.
- And there will be leftover fragments to feed others, trust him! God satisfies completely.

There are three basic expressions for all the baptized to remember, and especially us as consecrated persons, namely the following of Christ (*sequela Christi*), communion, and sharing. Allow me to conclude with a few words from Pope Francis, pronounced in Rome on Corpus Christ 2013, the year of his election:

*This evening, once again, the Lord distributes for us the bread that is his Body, he makes himself a gift; and we too experience "God's solidarity" with man, a solidarity that is never depleted, a solidarity that never ceases to amaze us: God makes himself close to us; in the sacrifice of the Cross he humbles himself, entering the darkness of death to give us his life which overcomes evil, selfishness and death. Jesus, this evening too, gives himself to us in the Eucharist, shares in our journey, indeed he makes himself food, the true food that sustains our life also in moments when the road becomes hard-going and obstacles slow our steps. And in the Eucharist the Lord makes us walk on his road, that of service, of sharing, of giving; and if it is shared, that little we have, that little we are, becomes riches; for the power of God—which is the power of love—comes down into our poverty to transform it.*¹

¹ Pope Francis, *Homily for Corpus Christi*, Basilica of St. John Latran, Vatican City, 30 May 2013.