

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2009

Robert VerEecke, S.J.

I don't know if you have had the opportunity yet to celebrate Mass with our Latino community. It's always an experience of great joy and enthusiasm but one of the distinctive aspects of the celebration is that there is sharing of food and drink after the Mass. The celebration of the Eucharist continues with the celebration of friendship around the table as people share what they have brought with their brothers and sisters in Christ.

What impresses me most is that the Mass becomes more than just a religious ritual as it spills into a time of fiesta. The Eucharist finds an even fuller expression in the human dynamic of gathering to celebrate with food and drink and friendship.

But this connection between the prayer of the Eucharist and the meal shared should not surprise us. The last supper in which Jesus offered himself as food and drink was, of course, a supper. The early church gathered in the homes of Christians to celebrate a special meal. In the course of the meal, they prayed and remembered what God had done for them in Jesus Christ. Even when the ritual was separated from the meal, early Christians still brought gifts of food and wine that were used for the Eucharist but also shared with those in need.

Today's gospel (and the gospel of the next few weeks) recount John's understanding of the mystery of the Eucharist. Remember that in his Gospel there is no commemoration of Jesus' taking bread and wine and identifying them with his body and blood. No John's gospel has a long theological discourse on the bread of life that takes the place of the few words of institution that Matthew, Mark and Luke offer us.

And where does it all begin? With the feeding of five thousand, the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Before the discourse on the bread of life, we are invited to see the context of feeding the hungry with an abundance of food. Here where there was thought to be very little, there is a superabundance of nourishment. Notice what Jesus does: he takes the bread and the fish, blesses them, giving thanks. In other words he does in the multiplication of

the loaves and fishes what we remember him doing at the last supper. We are not meant to hear this story without thinking of the Eucharist, God's feeding us with the bread from heaven and the wine of salvation. And with God there is always more than enough to go around. That is the amazing thing that we hear in the scriptures today. With God, there is always more than enough to go around. God has a habit of wanting all to be fed, nourished, blessed with all good gifts.

But, God needs something to work with. God does not create out of nothing. God needs human generosity to make this miracle happen. In this case, it's the boy with the few loaves and bread and a few fish. The skeptic, the realist says, "But what is that among so many?" Jesus, who knows the heart of God and the desire that all be fed will startle the skeptics. And so it was. There was more than enough to go around because one person was willing to share what he had.

And are we? Are we willing to give our own "few loaves and a few fish," the limited gifts that we have? We are to wonder what God can create with them, how God can feed and nourish with our very little.

I'm sure that each of us can attest to our own miracle of loaves and fishes, when God has used our gifts and talents, in ways that startle and surprise us. And that's reason for a fiesta.