

**DISTRIBUTED TO THOSE WHO WERE RECLINING AS MUCH AS THEY WANTED - Biblical  
Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM**

***Jn 6. 1-15***

***At that time Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee (of Tiberias). A large crowd followed him, because they saw the signs he was performing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. The Jewish feast of Passover was near. When Jesus raised his eyes and saw that a large crowd was coming to him, he said to Philip, "Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?"***

***He said this to test him, because he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Two hundred days' wages worth of food would not be enough for each of them to have a little (bit)." One of his disciples, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what good are these for so many?" Jesus said, "Have the people recline."***

***Now there was a great deal of grass in that place. So the men reclined, about five thousand in number. Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were reclining, and also as much of the fish as they wanted. When they had had their fill, he said to his disciples, "Gather the fragments left over, so that nothing will be wasted." So they collected them, and filled twelve wicker baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves that had been more than they could eat.***

***When the people saw the sign he had done, they said, "This is truly the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world." Since Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain alone.***

John is the only evangelist who doesn't report the Last Supper with common gestures and words of Jesus about bread and wine; but he's the one who, more than others, deepens their meaning and displays their richness. Particularly he does in this chapter 6. He writes that the fest of Passover, the Jewish feast, was near, but crowds, rather than going to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, feel

attracted by Jesus. They understood that Jesus embodies the true sanctuary of God from which his love radiates.

Well then, as Jesus sees the crowd, he takes care of its support. While in the desert during the Exodus it was the crowd that, through Moses, asked and implored God in order to get some bread, here Jesus anticipates people's needs. The evangelist highlights the divine action: God doesn't respond to people needs, he just anticipates them.

And the evangelist describes the action of sharing loaves and fishes by speaking of a boy *"who has five barley loaves"*. Why has he got five barley loaves? Because the evangelist wants to recall an episode of the Old Testament where Elisha, the prophet, fed hundred people with twenty loaves of barley.

*"And two fish"*. Let's see now, this is very important, because the evangelist is providing precise signs of the meaning of the Eucharist; let's see which is the indication that Jesus is providing. Jesus says *"Have the people recline"*; why including this particular? To eat fish and loaves, no matter if people were standing, or lying or whatever, but why did Jesus give this precise command, literally *"Make them lie down"*?

During solemn or holiday meals, particularly the one of Passover, the lords, that is those who had servants to serve them, used to eat while lying on couches. The first action Jesus performs is making people feel *"lord"* by acting himself as a servant in order to make others feel *"lord"*. This is the first indications provided by Jesus; he's urging disciples, who contribute to the Eucharist, to *"have the people recline"*.

The evangelist specifies that *"there was a great deal of grass in that place"*. He's recalling Psalm 72 in which the arrival of Messiah is foretold *"in the abundance of grain in the land and grass in the field"*. The evangelist means that the awaited Messiah arrived. He adds *"in that place"*. 'Place' is a technical expression that indicates the Temple of Jerusalem, the sanctuary where God reveals himself. Now God doesn't reveal himself in a sanctuary built by men, but through Jesus in person.

*"So the men reclined"* and the evangelist indicates the number of people present, five thousand Why using this number? Because it corresponds to the number of the first Christian community according to Acts, chapter 4, but primarily for all multiples of 50 indicate, in the Old Testament, the action of Spirit. 'Pentecost', a Greek term meaning 'the fiftieth day after Passover', is the day of Spirit's pouring out. The evangelist wants to make us understand that not only a physical food is being provided, but an intense communication of God's Spirit.

*"Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed"*, these are the same gestures that other evangelists report with regard to the Last Supper. *"Jesus takes the loaves, gave thanks"* – giving thanks means that what we have is not ours, but is a gift that has to be shared with others – *"and distributed them to those who were reclining"*.

Jesus doesn't ask the crowd that is participating to this sharing of loaves if people are clean or not, and even doesn't require them to be purified. **One has not to be purified in order to receive bread , that is Jesus, but same welcoming of Jesus bread makes one clean.** This is the precious indication the evangelist is providing. Well, they eat, and the evangelist specifies that they *"filled twelve wicker baskets with fragments left over"*. Numbers have figurative sense, a symbolic one. Number twelve represents Israel.

Unfortunately people doesn't catch this sign. Jesus is explaining that he, the Lord, is turning himself into a servant in order to let others feel free, but he was not understood. As a matter of fact *"When the people saw the sign he had done, they said 'This is truly the Prophet' "*. The Prophet was the one promised by Moses, they didn't understand the good news brought by Jesus and are ready to submit.

Actually *"since Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king"* – they want to submit, they prefer submission rather than freedom. Jesus called them to freedom, but they don't know what to do with it and prefer to be ruled; they want to make Jesus king.

And Jesus *"withdrew again to the mountain"*. As Moses withdrew again to the mountain after people's betrayal through the golden calf, the sin of idolatry, so does Jesus. The will of people to make him king is considered a sin of idolatry, a betrayal.

*"Alone"*. Why was he alone? Because disciples share the same mentality of the crowds.