

HE DISTRIBUTED THEM TO THOSE WHO WERE SEATED.....AS MUCH AS THEY WANTED – Biblical commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

John 6,1-15

After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. Philip answered him, "Two hundred denari worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"

Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

The episode of the division of the bread and fish is told by all four evangelists. Why is it important? In this narrative the meaning of the Eucharist is shown. In particular John in chapter 6 of his gospel, is the longest, a good 71 verses. The context in which the ambient is that of the book of Exodus and in fact we find the theme of the sea, of the mountain, of Easter, of temptation and that of the bread. And, while in the desert it was the people who asked God to feed them, here it is Jesus, who is God, that sees to the needs of the people, but the results are disappointing.

The evangelist writes that Andrew, brother of Simon Peter, tells him "*There is a boy here who has five barley loaves...*" the five loaves of barley recalls the miracle of Elisha, who with twenty loaves of barley fed a hundred people "*...and two fish, but what are they for so many?*" and here the evangelist gives a precious indication "*Jesus said, "Have the people sit down."*" It is important that these people are made to sit. In the important meals, the main meal at Easter, the rich people ate according to the Greek and Roman way lying down and who could eat that way? Only those that had servants to serve them. Here is the first meaning of the Eucharist: to make the people fully free to be served.

The evangelist notes "*..there was much grass..*" this comes from Psalm 72, the times of the Messiah, of the abundance "*..in the place.*" The word 'place', John has always used for the temple, here he indicates where Jesus resides. But while in the temple it is mankind that must offer to God here God offers to mankind "*So the men sat down, about five thousand in number.*" Why five thousand? Because it indicates the number of the first Christian communities according to the Acts,

but above all it is a multiple of fifty which indicates the action of the Spirit, fifty in Greek it is "Pentecost".

Here the evangelist does not use the word Greek 'antropous' for men but 'andres', which means mature men. The Eucharist makes man mature, fulfilled, and free. "*Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks,...*" the word Eucharist comes from the verb to give thanks "*...he distributed them to those who were seated.*" To be seated appears for the third time and Jesus omits a very important ritual: he does not ask for the ritual of washing of hands. There is no need to purify oneself to eat the Lord's food, but it is the Lord's food that purifies people. And they ate "*..as much as they wanted.*" While the manna in the desert was limited and measured, here there is plenty. When one is no longer selfish, but generously shares with others, there is abundance. In fact, the evangelist says "*..that they filled twelve baskets..*" because, like the twelve tribes of Israel, so the whole nation can be fed.

Unfortunately they had not understood. The evangelist in fact writes *When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet.."* that which according to Moses must be done to observe the law, "*...who is to come into the world!"* Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king.. they want obedience and submission, they do not want maturity or freedom, "*Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*" As Moses retired to the mountain after the betrayal of the people who worshiped a golden calf, so Jesus again goes alone on the mountain. Submission and obedience for Jesus are equal to idolatry because he is the God who makes people free

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