

Living by Faith

The faith our Lord expects of us "is not the confidence that things will always go well. It is the trust that, no matter how things are going, God will make use of them for my benefit, for the benefit of those around me and of the whole Church."

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Our Lord was deeply affected by the news of the circumstances of John the Baptist's death. He had come to free us from sin and from the deep rupture it had opened in human

nature, a nature he had deigned to make his own. But precisely because he had assumed that nature down to its last consequences, except for sin, he was not left indifferent by this new experience of the evil—and in this case, the foolish frivolity as well—that can exist in the human heart. Deeply moved, he felt the need to withdraw to a quiet place where he could pray and meditate in peace.[1]

However, *as he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them.*[2] He spent the rest of the day taking care of those people, of their souls and their bodies; he taught them many things and cured those who were sick. Our Lord did not provoke this situation. His intention was quite different: he wanted simply to meditate and rest, and to help the apostles do likewise. But his priestly heart did not allow him to pass up an unexpected opportunity to assist those around

him, even though it meant overcoming his own very understandable emotions.

As on other occasions, the evangelists don't tell us anything about what Jesus preached that day. Their main concern is to transmit to us, besides the example of his generosity, the events at the end of the day, which contain important teachings for all who want to acquire an interior life and spread our Lord's fire to others.

Magnanimity

Several hours went by. The people listened as the Master continued to teach them. The disciples began to get uneasy, concerned about what might happen when the large crowd realized it was too late to find something to eat. Perhaps their enthusiasm would turn into discouragement or even anger. So they went to tell Jesus: *This is a lonely place, and the day is now over; send*

the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves. [3] But our Lord's answer surprised them: *They need not go away; you give them something to eat.* [4] Their problem is your problem too: you take care of it.

The apostles weren't seeking to evade their own responsibility by going to Jesus. It was simply that the task seemed so far beyond their possibilities that it never entered their heads that they should do anything about it. They felt sympathy for the people, of course, but what more could they do? Our Lord's answer left them confused: you want *us* to give them something to eat? Even with two hundred days' wages, the amount of bread we could buy would be laughable for such a multitude! [5] What can *we* do?

But the Master did not back down; he wanted them to take the problem on

their own shoulders and to do what they could. *How many loaves have you? Go and see.*[6] The apostles returned with the meager report: we only have *five, and two fish.*[7] *Bring them here to me,* said Jesus.[8] Later on, during their years of apostolic work, perhaps they often thought about what Jesus had taught them that day: if these are the only means we have, it is with them that we need to tackle the problem. Good desires and compassion for the multitude are not sufficient. Neither can we be content with seeing that a point of struggle or an apostolic goal is beyond our capacities. We Christians need to have a big heart and a clear head: we need to consider calmly how many loaves of bread we have, what we can do, without letting ourselves become discouraged by what we can't do. Although it seems very little, we have to place at our Lord's feet all that we have.

The evangelists tell us that Jesus took those provisions, blessed them, broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to distribute among the people. There was enough for everyone, so much so that they needed twelve baskets for the leftovers: they had more left at the end than what they began with. Divine intervention brought it about that the means they personally had available grew through their generous effort to use them to help others.

St. John presents this scene as an introduction to our Lord's long discourse on the Bread of Life. The relationship between the two passages is clear: the multiplication of the loaves prefigures the great mystery of the Eucharist,^[9] in which our Lord offers us superabundant sustenance. The sacrament goes even further, since by the miracle of transubstantiation, mere humble

matter is changed into the Body and Blood of Christ: supernatural nourishment, the Bread of Angels, the new manna that restores the strength of the new People of God. But we can also draw other teachings from this event. If we meditate on the scene and try to apply it to our interior life, we may get the impression that our Lord is saying to us: consider the means that you have, examine yourself boldly. Then put at my feet whatever you have; and don't worry if you are lacking anything, because I have more than enough.

Daring

Let us reflect now on the situation of the Apostles. Having decided to employ all their possibilities, they confronted the task of distributing something so obviously inadequate among such a large number of people. It is not easy to see how this

miracle actually took place. Other types of miracles, while perhaps more surprising, are much easier to imagine: Jesus puts his hand on someone, or pronounces a few words, and the sick person recovers his health. But here it is not easy to know exactly what happened, since it could have come about in various ways.

It is possible that the small pile of pieces into which Jesus had divided the five loaves and two fishes suddenly grew in volume, and what before was a small amount became superabundant, before the marveling eyes of the apostles. But there is another less spectacular possibility, one that would help them to grasp more clearly a fundamental teaching that Christ may have wanted to transmit to his disciples down through the centuries.

Our Lord may have divided up the pieces among the Apostles, who began to distribute them to the multitude. It is easy to imagine them, perhaps with some embarrassment, starting to hand the closest people tiny pieces of bread and fish. It's even possible that our Lord had to encourage them not to be so stingy, to give each one all that he needed. Perhaps one of them thought that if he acted that way, very few would get anything to eat. And perhaps Jesus told him: have faith; we will confront each problem as it presents itself, but let's not do things by halves; be magnanimous.

They began to distribute the loaves generously. And little by little they realized that a miracle was taking place. If things happened in this second way, the amount of bread would never have increased very much in their basket. It was always very little; it always gave the

impression that it would only be enough for a few more. But it was enough and more than enough for everyone. The manna that fed the people of Israel in the desert also could not be accumulated.[10] God wanted his people to realize that it was a divine gift and to abandon themselves in him, forgoing mere human security. Perhaps Jesus wanted the Apostles to have a similar experience.

Those present who realized what had happened would have been amazed. For the apostles it was a clear lesson of faith. A few months later, our Lord was going to ask them to take upon their shoulders the need for formation of millions of souls: *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation.*[11] Who were they to undertake such an immense task? What could they do? Wouldn't it be better to set goals that were within their power? It may be

that they remembered then what they had just experienced. They may have recalled our Lord asking them to count up the means they had at hand. For him it was the same to feed the multitude with five loaves as to feed them with none, but he wanted to teach his Apostles to do whatever they could on their part. They may have pondered the fact that he did not permit the lack of means to lower the goal he had set them; he was not satisfied with providing merely symbolic help which would not have solved the problem. They may have remembered that their means had been scarce, but had ended up being sufficient. They had learned that when setting apostolic goals, the decisive factor was not their own capabilities (which they should also take stock of) but others' needs.

We want to set ambitious apostolic goals, impelled by the thirst God has for souls in all environments and

occupations.[12] We aspire “to put Christ at the summit of all human activities.”[13] We can’t wait until we have all the bread needed to feed the multitude. In setting high and generous goals, it is easy to realize the disproportion between our own capacities and what we see our Lord expects of us; we may even feel our head spinning, as we sense our own powerlessness and lack of strength. But we shouldn’t see this as evidence that we lack faith; on the contrary, it may show that God’s love is impelling us to transcend our own littleness. This feeling of uneasiness, far from blocking magnanimity, makes hope possible, since where there is absolute certainty, hope cannot exist.[14]

Optimism

Therefore the faith our Lord expects of us does not consist of having confidence that our own qualities

will be multiplied. Rather, it consists of putting our five loaves at God's service, in acting as if those loaves were sufficient, even if when doing so we continue to sense our own limitations very clearly. The life of faith is not a matter of feelings but of deeds, even when our feelings seem to contradict the fundamental certainties on which all our action is based.

“Christian optimism is not a sugary optimism; nor is it a mere human confidence that everything will turn out all right. It is an optimism that sinks its roots in an awareness of our freedom, and in the sure knowledge of the power of grace. It is an optimism that leads us to make demands on ourselves, to struggle to respond at every moment to God's calls.”[15]

A Christian's faith is not the ingenuousness of someone who is

blind to the difficulties and simply trusts that everything will always turn out well. On the contrary, faith generates an optimism “that sinks its roots in an awareness of our freedom”; it is an optimism that is sustained by the realization that things can go wrong and in fact at times do go wrong, because human freedom—ours and other people’s—does not always want what God wants. And therefore it is “an optimism that leads us...to struggle to respond at every moment to God’s calls,” knowing that not even then can we be certain that everything will always go well.

The faith our Lord expects of me, therefore, is not the confidence that things will always go well. It is the trust that, no matter how things are going, God will make use of them for my benefit, for the benefit of those around me and of the whole Church. To put it another way: God does not

expect of me that everything I do will turn out well, nor do I expect that, if I do what I should, God will ensure that everything turns out well. It would be naive to think that it is enough to be good for everything to be positive. God expects me to trust in him and therefore to do all I can to help things go well. And I have the certainty that, by doing what he wants, I am attaining the truly important objective in my life, even though this will not always lead to positive results. Some things will go badly, but I will follow the advice of St. Paul: "*noli vinci a malo, sed vince in bono malum*"; *do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* [16] And therefore, in spite of everything, the good will be victorious: *omnia in bonum!*

Our Lord has entrusted a great mission to the Church and to every Christian. It shouldn't surprise us when we see it as exceeding our

capacities or when, on considering it, we sometimes even feel overwhelmed. Nor when at times, faced by such an immense apostolic task, we might not know where to start and are tempted to let our limitations hold us back. Meditating on the scene we have just considered will remind us once again that our Lord expects us, like the Apostles, to take on the responsibility of forming many souls, employing all our abilities. And he expects us to begin by doing what we can, without worrying about whether we will be able to finish. We undoubtedly have to make plans and provisions for the future, but the scarcity of our loaves and fishes should never be an excuse for not doing whatever is within our possibilities at each moment. God will provide for what comes later. Thus, even though we are not certain what the future will bring, we will truly be living by faith.

[1] Cf. *Mt* 14:13.

[2] *Mt* 14:14.

[3] *Mt* 14:15.

[4] *Mt* 14:16.

[5] Cf. *Mk* 6:37; *Jn* 6:7.

[6] *Mk* 6:38.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Mt* 14:18.

[9] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1235.

[10] Cf. *Ex* 16:17-20.

[11] *Mk* 16:15.

[12] Cf. Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 301.

[13] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 685.

[14] Cf. *Rom* 8:24.

[15] *The Forge*, no. 659.

[16] *Rom* 12:21.

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