



THE MISSION OF SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

Father Alan's Blog

For the Seventh Sunday After Trinity - July 18, 2021

"Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for these people.'"

St. Mark 8:10 (NIV)

It was obvious that the parish priest was tired and badly in need of a vacation when one Sunday, as part of his sermon, he told the story of Jesus feeding:

- **seven men;**
- **with a few loaves of bread; and**
- **4,000 fish.**

The next Sunday - completely unaware of the erroneous information he had passed on to his congregation the week before - the priest, in his sermon, began to tell the story of Jesus feeding:

- **5,000 men;**
- **with five loaves of bread; and**
- **two fish.**

Whereupon one young boy excitedly jumped up from his seat and proudly proclaimed:

“That shouldn’t be a problem for Jesus – after all, He had more than enough fish left over from last week!”



At the 2001 World Championships for swimming held in Tokyo, Japan, the Australian women’s 4 X 200 metre freestyle relay team won a close, split-second race against the rival American women’s team. They started celebrating and eventually they all jumped into the pool. **Meanwhile, the last place team from Italy was still trying to finish the race.**

The Australian women’s team was subsequently disqualified for its unsportsmanlike actions and, as it turned out, the American women’s team was also disqualified for leaving the starting blocks early during the race. As a result, the team from Great Britain was awarded the gold medal. Furthermore, to their extreme disappointment, both the Australian and the American women’s teams lost their respective appeals. (Of note: **there was never any mention of how the last place Italian women’s team felt about the whole thing.** I guess when you finish last, history doesn’t care very much about how you felt about the way people treated you.)

Regardless, the 2001 Australian women’s 4 X 200 metre freestyle relay team has become synonymous among sports historians with poor sportsmanship and lack of judgement. In any event, whether one is speaking of either the 2001 Australian or Italian women’s 4 X 200 metre freestyle swimming relay team, it’s tough being **the target of derision, of contempt, and of disdain.** But isn’t this the sort of behaviour we have come to expect from **“The World”**?



There once was a man who was born a Bosnian Muslim; thus, he was:

- ☞ a non-Serbian;
- ☞ a non-Croatian; and
- ☞ a non-Christian.

He said he believed in God but didn't believe in organized religion because he had seen too much persecution, and hatred, and ethnic cleansing in the name of religion. While he admitted that he respected all people of faith, his one wish was that there was one world-wide religion – **then, he said, he'd belong to it.** In any event, whether one is speaking of either Bosnian (or any other nationality), or of Christian (or non-Christian), it's tough being **the target of derision, of contempt, and of disdain.** But I need to ask, is (or, perhaps, isn't) this the sort of behaviour we have come to expect from God's people – **"The Church"**?



In 1972, a prayer group routinely gathered at Our Lady's Youth Center in El Paso, Texas. In November of that year, the members of the prayer group happened to read St. Luke 14:12-14:

"When you hold a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends, or your brothers, or your relatives, or your wealthy neighbours, in case they may invite you back and you have repayment. Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. Blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

The prayer group members realized that none of them had ever actually followed that direct instruction from the Lord Jesus. And, to a person, they felt **emphatically** that God was calling them to share what they had with the poorest people of whom they were aware.

They had heard about some people living just across the Mexican border in Juarez – special people who managed to eke out a living (of sorts) abiding and scavenging in the town’s garbage dump.

“How could people possibly exist in this situation?”

was what the stunned El Paso prayer group members needed to know. And, as if the so-called “living conditions” were not enough of a burden already, the hundreds of scavengers living in the garbage dump in Juarez were also **the targets of derision, of contempt, and of disdain** from the more well-off people **on both sides of the border**. So, what sort of behaviour did God’s people in El Paso exhibit?

- ✝ First, the group prayed, and
- ✝ Second, they acted,

by deciding to celebrate Christmas dinner with the residents of the Juarez garbage dump. Accordingly, as Christmas Day approached, members of the El Paso prayer group prepared:

- ☞ tamales;
- ☞ tacos;
- ☞ burritos;
- ☞ sandwiches;
- ☞ snacks;
- ☞ cookies;
- ☞ cakes;
- ☞ pies;
- ☞ Christmas candies;
- ☞ drinks; and
- ☞ **one exceptionally large Christmas ham.**

Then, at 10:00 on a cold, and gray, and misty Christmas morning, about 25 people set out from the Youth Center in El Paso in a small caravan of vehicles. They crossed the Mexican border and headed

straight to the Juarez garbage dump to meet the people living there. And then they fed them.



Over the years that followed:

- † the Juarez dump was covered over;
- † mud-brick houses were built for all the people;
- † desperately needed medical care was provided; and
- † a church and, even, a school were built.

Today, the abandoned garbage dump on a blighted hill in Juarez is the site of the expansive campus of “Emmanuel Children’s Home” (or, in Spanish, the “Hogar de Niños de Emmanuel”) – a home:

- † of love;
- † of health;
- † of nurturing;
- † of education; and
- † of hope.

for the multitude of homeless children lost and alone on the streets of Juarez. As one writer commented:

“The campus cascades down that hill like a river of life running through the heart of a poverty-stricken and desolate Juarez. From the children’s hilltop living quarters, the campus descends to a generous playground. Continuing down the hill, past the Medical and Dental Clinic and Vocational Training Center, is the church which serves as a foundation of spiritual support.”

All because a few people **cared**.

All because a few people had **compassion**.



The same care and compassion that we, as followers of Jesus Christ, are called to have **for all others**. This is precisely the sort of care and compassion that our Lord Jesus had for the multitudes that had gathered for healing and for teaching in today's Gospel Lesson from St. Mark 8:1-9, "The Feeding of the 4,000". (That's 4,000 **men**, as the number of women and children were not included in the total; thus, perhaps, as many as ten to 15 thousand people were fed. Likewise, in the miraculous "Feeding of the 5,000", as told in St. Mark 6:34-44, as many as 12 to 20 thousand people might have been fed. While there are striking similarities between the reports of the feeding of the 4,000 and of the 5,000, **they are two separate and distinct incidents**, for Jesus Himself, in St. Mark 8:18b-20, refers to two separate feedings:

"... don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the 5,000, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" 'Twelve,' the disciples replied.

'And when I broke the seven loaves for the 4,000, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?' They answered, 'Seven.'")

The point in today's Gospel Lesson is this:

For three whole days the people had been without food, and Jesus could not send them on their long journeys home without feeding them first. Why? Because as it is written in verse 2a:

"He had COMPASSION on them."

But His disciples, lacking such compassion, think only of the logistics involved and, in verse 4b, ask Jesus:

“But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?”

Seemingly ignoring their pessimistic question, Jesus requests that the disciples ante up something – ANYTHING – by asking in verse 5:

“How many loaves do you have?”

(Please permit me a loose translation here:

*“Just do what you can, and I’ll do what you can’t. Don’t look with derision, or contempt, or disdain upon my people in need. Don’t see them as a problem. **JUST DO WHAT YOU CAN.**”*)

It’s interesting to note that the disciples came up with only seven loaves and a few small fish and yet 4,000 men (**plus thousands more women and children**) were fed, and SEVEN BASKETFULS were left over. Just like in the feeding of the 5,000, wherein St. Andrew finds a young boy with a lunch containing five barley loaves and two small fish – while the rest of the disciples **contribute nothing** – everyone is fed, and TWELVE BASKETFULS are left over.

Therefore (in case you missed it), here’s the not-so-subtle kicker:

In both instances, what was left over was MORE than originally offered.

And that’s the point.

(So please permit me another loose translation:

*“Just do what you can, and I’ll do what you can’t. **AND I’LL FILL YOU TO OVERFLOWING IN THE PROCESS.**”*)



And just in case we're thinking that these two accounts of miraculous feedings are fanciful tales with a nice, moral "punch line", we need to keep in mind that **miracles still do happen**. (Now, I'm not saying that, in the future, the Australian women's 4 X 200 metre freestyle relay swim team – or the American women's 4 X 200 metre freestyle relay swim team, for that matter – will actually show some respect to their fellow competitors. Or that ethnic cleansing, particularly along religious lines, won't take place. To be sure, that might be expecting way too much from those who show – or, even, know – little or no compassion.)

But I do know for a fact that the prayer group from El Paso, Texas received much more than they "bargained for" when they first started serving the dump people in Juarez. As I mentioned earlier, they wanted to take them Christmas dinner, but they had had little contact with the dump people up to that time. Therefore, they had made a "guesstimate" as to how many people to expect to feed and were in no way prepared **for the hundreds of dump residents that showed up**. And so, the El Paso prayer group "**just did what they could**" by feeding the people who came, and, as it turned out, they ended up feeding all the people. **And (get this) they had MORE food at the end of the meal than with which they had started!**

For example, one woman had the task of cutting and serving the lone Christmas ham they had prepared. Meanwhile, dump residents **by the score** stepped forward, and each received a very generous slice. Well, the woman who was cutting and serving the ham continued to slice and to slice until she grew weary. Whereupon she asked a young man to take over for her, and then he proceeded to slice and slice. **But the ham never got any smaller**. Awestruck, the young man later reported that he just:

"Praised the Lord and kept serving."

And as Christmas Day turned to evening, every one of the dump's Residents had been fed to **overflowing**. No one went away hungry, and some even took home small bags of food. At this point, the El Paso prayer group recognized that **they still had food left over** – enough food, in fact, to bring to **two orphanages**. It wasn't until the prayer group reassembled in El Paso later that evening that they realized what had occurred. During what became known as "The Christmas Miracle at the Juarez Garbage Dump", food prepared for 150 people had fed more than 300.



Similarly, can we – **will we** – who are gathered in this place at this time choose to "praise the Lord Jesus and keep serving" all those whom He graciously sends our way?

All we need do is to muster up a mustard seed of faith, and take His timeless words to heart:

"Just do what you can, and I'll do what you can't. AND I'LL FILL YOU TO OVERFLOWING IN THE PROCESS."

 **Because Jesus can.**

 **And Jesus does.**

 **And Jesus will.**



Dearest Reader in Christ:

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