

For the past two weeks their faces have stared hauntingly at us (and for me while I'm eating supper) during the major television networks early evening national newscast—the faces on the emaciated bodies of the children of the countries of the eastern part of the African continent: Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda commonly known as the “Horn of Africa.” Along with the haunting stares of starving children, are the equally haunting, pleading eyes and voices of parents (mothers especially) begging for food for their children. A combination of drought, as well as political unrest in which some food aid has fallen into the hands of powerful and military forces and is being used as a weapon to “starve out” unwanted groups, has caused people to flee their homelands and emigrate to what, they hope, will be a safe haven that will supply them the food, shelter and protection. Pope Benedict XVI on July 17th issued a plea to the international community to come to the immediate aid of the people of this region of Africa to try and avert massive deaths due to famine.

In some ways as Jesus looked out over the vast crowd in today's gospel, he too saw desperation written in the faces of the crowd that had heard about him--his message, his miracles, and had journeyed, perhaps some for days, to seek him out. St. Matthew tells us that as he looked out Jesus' “heart was moved with pity for them and he cured their sick.” But there was also another “crisis”; the crowd was hungry, they had no food. Seeing their plight, Jesus works a miracle of bread. In supplying bread Jesus' action recalls the miraculous feeding of the multitudes with manna in the desert at the time of the exodus of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. That event, and the feeding in today's gospel, foreshadows an even greater feeding—the gift of Jesus himself through his sacrificial death and resurrection in a new Passover and his perpetually making it present in the establishment of the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. In feeding the crowd, as in every celebration of the Mass, we have God's gift to us in Jesus fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah in today's first reading: “all you who are thirsty come to the water! You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat; Come without paying and without cost” (Isa. 55:1-3). Today's first reading and gospel story are proclamations of God's grace—the gift of relationship with him offered freely, generously, to all who open their hands and hearts to him. There is no question of

“worthiness”. Like the manna in the desert, Jesus in the gospel story and in the Eucharist does not have a “litmus” test before offering his gifts of healing and nourishment. A sincere and heartfelt desire, even as in the case of the people in the crowd in the gospel, at a moment of great distress is all that is necessary to prompt God to act. In giving, God holds nothing back. He gives everything of himself. This is the grace made present in every Mass, in every reception of Holy Communion. The effect of this giving by God through Jesus and its reception is proclaimed by St. Paul in today’s epistle: no power in heaven or earth (except a personal choice to reject God through sin) can now “separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rm. 8:39). In our moments of trial, distress, despair, hunger and thirst we need to remember that God is not far from us, that he sees and hears us that he can, and will, respond to our cry.

There is also another aspect to today’s gospel story. St. Matthew tells us that when confronted with the crowd and its hunger, Jesus instructed the disciples to “give them some food yourselves.” One commentary suggests that two miracles actually took place: the feeding of the crowd, and a miracle of the heart. This commentator notes that quite likely many in the crowd, like the disciples, had tucked some bit of food into the folds of their garments to “tide them over” until they returned home. In inviting the disciples to “give them some food yourselves” Jesus was challenging the disciples to imitate his own action of self-sacrificing love. Witnessing the disciples acceptance of Jesus’ invitation and their action of “breaking their bread” for others, others in the crowd began to do likewise, the result being no one went away hungry. Here is a miracle equal to, or greater, than that of bread—hearts changed from selfish pursuit now broken open sharing generously with those in need in imitation of God’s act of grace. Is there a lesson here for us, not only in regard to the humanitarian crisis in Africa, but also in our day to day life at home, in our parish, community, state and nation especially at this time of debate over national budget priorities?

Our prayer is that of the Entrance Antiphon in the Missal: “God, come to my help. Lord, quickly give me assistance. You are the one who helps me and sets me free: Lord, do not be long in coming” and the refrain of the Responsorial Psalm: “The hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers all our needs.” Amen.

