

For the next five Sundays the Gospel text will be taken from the sixth chapter of St. John's Gospel. Unlike the other three gospels that give us the account of the institution of the Holy Eucharist at the Last Supper, John situates Jesus' teaching about the Holy Eucharist in the context of the miracle of the loaves and fish we have just heard along with the discourse on the Bread of Life which follows. When John does describe the events of the Last Supper he gives us a parable of the Eucharist in action with his account of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples and then commanding them to go and do likewise. For John, as for the church, the Holy Eucharist is not something static exclusively to be adored, nor exclusively a means of private devotion and salvation; it is primarily a commitment to a way of life. As Father Edward Foley a Franciscan sacramental theologian states, Eucharist is not a noun, but a verb.

In our parish's Pastoral Council visioning process of charting a course for parish life for the next three to five years, one of the goals that has been established is for us as a parish is to be catechized and formed into a spirituality of stewardship. Unfortunately, "stewardship" for many people immediately connotes just another way for the church to talk about finances. While personal and community financial treasure are part of a spirituality of stewardship, they are not the primary focus, but rather a product of living a stewardship lifestyle. Over the next few weekends I will be devoting the homily to a spirituality of stewardship. This is in keeping with the scriptures we will be hearing regarding the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. The Eucharist is **the** sacrament of stewardship! From the Eucharist we are sent to live lives of stewardship. Jesus in today's gospel illustrates a spirituality and lifestyle of stewardship.

Given the five loaves and two fish the gospel story tells us that Jesus "took the loaves and gave thanks" and then proceeded to distribute them to the gathered crowd (Jn. 6: 11). By his action and words Jesus reveals the basis of all stewardship as expressed in these words prayed as the bread to be consecrated into the Body of Christ in the Mass is held above the altar at the Preparation of Gifts: "***Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you: fruit of the earth and work of human hands, it will become for us the bread of life.***" Our prayer at Mass takes its origin from the Jewish berakah prayer of

thanksgiving, a prayer Jesus would have known and used often. Both in this prayer from the Mass and Jesus unrecorded prayer in the gospel the fundamental basis of stewardship as grounded in thanksgiving is revealed. Stewardship is our response to divine gifts received. Another contemporary spiritual writer, Father Ronald Rohlheiser in his little book, *Our One Great Act of Fidelity: Waiting For Christ in the Eucharist* reflecting on this fundamental aspect of eucharistic spirituality writes that the **original sin** of Adam and Eve was **not** disobedience, **but a failure in receptivity and ingratitude**. God gave them life, each other, and the garden and asked them only to receive it properly, in gratitude—and then give thanks. Adam and Eve refused to do this. Instead they *took* the fruit, taking as though by right what could only be received gratefully as gift. Father Rohlheiser then notes that it is no coincidence that when giving us the Eucharist, Christ said, “Receive and give thanks.” Only after doing this do we go on to “break and share.” Stewardship, as the Holy Eucharist, is rooted in recognizing that all of life, is not something that is ours by right or gained by our efforts, but is given to us by God. When we begin here, miracles can happen for us and for others. Not only do we receive a sufficiency to supply our needs; we are able to feed others as well.

The fourth century Doctor of the Church, St. Hilary of Poitiers (ca. 315-368) writing on the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist not only expresses its spirituality, but also the spirituality of stewardship rooted in thanksgiving when he states: “Five loaves are then set before the multitude, and broken. While the apostles are dividing them, a succession of newly created portions passes—they cannot tell how—through their hands. The loaf which they are dividing does not grow smaller and yet their hands are continually full of the pieces. The speed of the process baffles the sight. You follow with the eye and a hand full of portions, and in the meantime you see that the contents of the other hand are not diminished. And all the while the heap of pieces grows. The carvers are busy at their task, the eaters at theirs. The hungry are satisfied and the fragments fill twelve baskets. Neither sight nor any of the other senses can discover how such an amazing miracle happened. What did not exist was created; what we see passes our understanding. It only remains for us to believe that God can do all things.” (*On the Trinity* 3.6)