

Two weeks ago I introduced the concept of stewardship spirituality. I spoke of stewardship as being grounded in an attitude of thanksgiving exemplified by Jesus when he received the loaves with which he was to feed the multitude. Before distributing them, Jesus first "gave thanks". In doing so, he models our appropriate response to all of God's gifts. The whole of Jesus' life, have been given to us by him in the Sacrament of the Most Holy Eucharist. The word "eucharist", of Greek origin, means "to give thanks." The Second Vatican Council in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy teaches us that while all prayer, all Scripture, and all of the other sacraments are means of God's self-communication to us, the celebration of the Holy Eucharist (we commonly say "the Mass") is the "source and summit" to which they all point and from which they all flow. At the heart of the church stands the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. The revisions in its celebration by the Second Vatican Council, drawing upon the history of the New Testament and post-New Testament church, call each of us as baptized members of the Body of Christ to exercise our rightful role in its celebration corresponding to our particular state of life in the church.

In today's first reading we once again see God's provident care for us in the story of providing food and drink for the prophet Elijah. The physical bread and drink are symbols of all the ways God supplies our need. They point to God's greatest gift of "bread", the gift of himself in Jesus. In today's gospel Jesus tells us that he is the "Bread of Life". To open ourselves in relationship to him through faith is to enter into his own life and relationship with the Father. "Eating this bread" Jesus tells us carries with it the promise that those who do so "shall live forever." Jesus' whole life, climaxed in his sacrificial death and resurrection in the mystery of the cross, is the means by which he gives his "flesh for the life of the world." This is the gift and mystery made present each time we gather together in celebrating the Holy Eucharist.

The author of Psalm 116 contemplating all that he has received from God asks: ***"How can I repay the Lord for all the good he has done for me?"*** (Ps. 116:12) This is also the first question the Christian steward asks. A few verses later the psalmist

answers his own question stating: *“I will offer a sacrifice of praise (eucharistia/thanksgiving) and call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people”* (Ps. 116:17,18).

Public liturgy and personal prayer—these are the primary response spirituality to the gifts we have all received from God. This has been so since the beginning of God’s creation. The Jewish Sabbath, the day of rest every seven days, was instituted by God for human beings not only as a day of rest from their labors of stewarding creation, but most importantly to open up space for human beings to see, contemplate and give thanks for all the gifts that God had entrusted to them and to rejoice with God in all their wonder. In light of God’s greatest gift, salvation and redemption in the mystery of Jesus’ cross, the first Christians amended and expanded the Jewish Sabbath. They began to meet every eighth day (also the first day of the new week, Sunday) to not only read and reflect on the Scriptures but also to celebrate the Eucharist as commanded by Jesus as the particular expression of their thanksgiving for all that God had done for them. For two thousand years the church has gathered each Sunday continuing this public expression of thanksgiving for God’s gifts to us in Christ. For the faithful Catholic Sunday Mass is more than a “law”. For the faithful Catholic, Sunday Mass is the primary and public way I join with all the members of the Body of Christ throughout the world in one great act of thanksgiving for the gift of faith entrusted to our stewardship by God.

Public prayer should lead us to daily expressions of thanksgiving. Next weekend all of us will be given some materials to take home, study, reflect, and pray about in terms of offering a tithe of personal prayer. In becoming a stewardship parish we need to begin first by offering a tithe, not only of public prayer but also a commitment to personal prayer. There is no one way to pray. What is most important is that each of us pray daily as an expression of gratitude for the “daily bread” in its many forms that we have been given by God. We are invited to make these words of the Mass our own: **Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. It is right and just.**