

Homily for the 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year  
WWME Convention July 27, 2003  
DeKalb, Illinois  
By  
Bishop William Skylstad

Some of the most memorable events of my ministry over the years have been visits to places where people have been physically poor and yet demonstrate great faith and joy in their lives. A little over ten years ago, I had the opportunity to visit our diocesan mission in Guatemala in a very remote area called Tsamyup. My visit there was on the occasion when children in the area could go to school for the first time. There were some 80 children who attended class in very basic, actually bare classrooms. As I took a picture of the group, a picture which hangs in my office at home, I noticed some of the children had an orange tinge to their hair which normally was very dark. I was told that was the condition of severe malnutrition. The children were delightful, eager for affection, recognition, and an opportunity to have their picture taken.

Physical hunger is one thing. Unfortunately, we have a lot of it in our world. There is also another condition of which we must be aware –the hunger of the human heart, the hunger of the soul. A common phrase we hear today is that there is a hunger for spirituality, not necessarily for community or Church. Very often it is a hunger for relationship, for recognition. Facelifts and breast implants are signs of a hunger for recognition. But do they satisfy the soul, the heart?

Today the readings from Ezekiel and the Gospel of St. John focus on physical hunger. Of course, there are much deeper implications of looking to the heart and what truly satisfies and nourishes. In the prophet Ezekiel, the man from Baal Shalishal has twenty barley loaves. He brings them to Elisha who feeds the crowd. In a similar vein in the Gospel of St. John, the crowd is enormous. Jesus uses the five barley loaves and two fish to feed the crowd. Their hunger is more than satisfied. Interesting I think something else happened. Somebody loved them enough to feed their hungry bodies, and in doing so, their hearts were nourished as well.

In both stories there are objections by the bystanders, “What can so little do with so many?” The command was to feed. Amazingly in both instances, there was food left over. A lavish and most generous God loves people into fuller life with abundance unimaginable. Our God is like that as we so well know.

We have gathered here for our national convention. Why did we come? I suggest we came because there was a hunger in our hearts that we felt could be filled by our experience with one another. And now, we celebrate Eucharist, the amazing gift of the sacrament that touches our lives profoundly. This is the sacrament that in a special manner nourishes our spiritual hunger not only with the Body of Christ so real under the appearance of bread and wine but also in the body we see in one another.

In 1976, I was at our national convention in Philadelphia. Some of you were there. That was also the year of the International Eucharistic congress which gave us the Eucharistic hymn we know so well: *Gift of Finest Wheat*. The refrain of this hymn shares the powerful message: “You satisfy the hungry heart...” As we gather today at the conclusion of our time together, we are mindful that Eucharist means thanksgiving,

the marvelous gift for which we are most grateful and also the marvelous gift which calls us together into the Body of Christ. This sacrament speaks to the message of a God who is magnificently generous with always lots left over. Like the hesitation of the folks both in the reading in Ezekiel and in the Gospel scene from John, we too can get caught in our own hesitation and lack of vision of what a good and gracious God can do beyond our wildest dreams.

For us, that's what it means to keep the dream alive, to have the vision, to offer generously what little we have like the little boy with the five loaves and two fish and the man from Baal Shalishal in Ezekiel with his twenty barley loaves. Remember the story of Jesus who tells the apostle to throw their net on the other side of the boat. "Launch out into the deep water." They made an amazing catch, a tremendous catch of abundance. It's the Lord who grants the increase, who makes things happen. May you and I never get trapped into thinking that we have too little to offer. May we never have a failure of imagination. We trust that God will grant the increase.

Not too long ago, the comic strip character, Hagar the Horrible, is speaking eloquently to his friends about marriage. He tells them: "Marriage takes hard work, commitment, dedication..." Helga, his wife is standing nearby. She sternly reminds him: "Hagar, why don't you talk about something you know about?" The great mystery of Eucharist touches our lives. The great sacrament of marriage continues to unfold in mystery and new discovery. Marriage also satisfies the hunger of the heart. As Helga forcefully reminded Hagar, the challenge isn't that easy. Jesus sharing His body and blood cost him tremendously, but what greater sign of love could there be? The mystery unfolds for us in priesthood. And we are nourished and fed.

In the recent encyclical, *The Eucharist of the Church*, our Holy Father reminds us that Eucharist builds community. We also know that as we partake of the bread of life, we are also called to share the presence of Jesus with the world. In the Letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians today, Paul reminds us of the qualities of relationships in our lives. "Live a life worthy of your calling..." You are called to be married. Some of us are called to be priests. Paul speaks of humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. These are qualities to be lived. In doing so, we also share. These are qualities that feed a hungry heart, that build up couple relationships, that nourish a community of faith.

Jesus at the Last Supper in the Gospel of John after he has taken the bread and wine and blessed them washes the apostles' feet. The message is clear. As our hungry hearts are nourished by Eucharist, we are also to go out to the world to serve. Jesus' words of "As I have done, so you must do" call us to be servants, to use our gifts in service to one another. Worldwide Marriage Encounter has done this in a remarkable way as you have literally reached out to the world. Too often people in the world get trapped in feasting on "quick bread", "bread" that does not satisfy, "bread" that does not nourish. We do know of the bread of life that truly satisfies, and we do know the kind of search that must go on to genuinely satisfy the hungry heart. The remarkable good news of Jesus' kingdom and all that it implies can and is lived out in our married lives and in our ordained priesthood.

Unexpectedly a year or so ago in visiting one of our parishes for the weekend, the pastor after the last Mass on Saturday evening invited me to go to a drive-in movie. The title of the film was "The Ice Age". It's an animated character movie with the big

mammoth, "Manny" and the little sloth fellow by the name of "Sig." They are friends. In one scene they decide that they would rescue this unsavory saber tooth tiger character by the name of "Diego." They rescue him from a very difficult situation. Diego is amazed. Why would they do this for him? And Manny's marvelous answer: "That's what the herd does for you." That's what relationships do for us. That's what the Body of Christ does for us. That's what we do for one another as we have gathered here these days together. Indeed, we are fed in our hunger, nourished in the malnourishment of fear and brokenness, and emboldened in our imagination and vision to continue the mission of sharing the presence of Jesus with the world. In our sacraments, we launch into the deep in dream and vision. We bring our symbolic barley loaves and dried fish to our sacrament.

How could we be so fortunate? We are so only through a good and gracious God who never fails us, who feeds our hearts, who asks of us to go forth into the world to remind everyone that no matter what form the hungry heart takes, the Lord satisfies and raises us up. We are most blessed

Again and again we gather around the table of sacrifice and banquet to celebrate the marvelous gift of Eucharist and the loving sacrifice to which we all are called to share with one another and the world. God will certainly take the little we have to offer and give it back in abundance. May God's love and peace be with all of you.