

Mercy as the instrument of Communion (cf *Mt 14:13-21*)

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today we wish to reflect upon the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves. At the beginning of the narrative given by Matthew (cf. 14:13-21), Jesus has just received word of the death of John the Baptist, and he crosses the lake by boat in search of a "lonely place apart" (v. 13). The people understand, however, and precede him on foot and thus, "as he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick" (v. 14). That's how Jesus is: always compassionate, always thinking of others. The determination of the people — who fear being left alone, as if abandoned — is striking. John the Baptist, the charismatic prophet, is dead; [the crowd] trusts in Jesus, about whom John had said: "he who is coming after me is mightier than I" (Mt 3:11). Thus the crowd follows him everywhere, to listen to him and to bring him the sick. And seeing this, Jesus is moved. Jesus is not cold, he does not have a cold heart. Jesus is capable of being moved. On the one hand, he feels a bond with this crowd and does not want them to leave; on the other, he needs a moment of solitude, of prayer, with the Father. Often he spends the night praying to his Father.

Thus, that day too, the Master attends to the people. His compassion is not a vague sentiment; instead he shows all the strength of his will to be close to us and to save us. Jesus loves us so much and wants to be close to us.

As evening falls, Jesus is concerned about feeding all those tired and hungry people, and looks after those who follow him. He wants his disciples to be involved in this. Indeed he says to them: "*you give them something to eat*" (Mt 14:16). He shows them that the few loaves and fish that they have, by the power of faith and of prayer, can be shared with all of those people. Jesus works a miracle, but it is the miracle of faith, of prayer, created by compassion and love. Thus, Jesus "*broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds*" (v. 19). The Lord meets the needs of mankind, but wants to render each one of us a concrete participant in his compassion.

Now let us pause on this, Jesus' gesture of blessing: "*taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves*" (v. 19). As you see, they are the same signs that Jesus performed at the Last Supper; and they are also the same gestures that each priest performs when he celebrates the Holy Eucharist. The Christian community is born and reborn continually from this Eucharistic communion. Living communion with Christ is therefore anything but being passive and detached from daily life; on the contrary, it includes us more and more in the relationship with the men and women of our time, in order to offer them the concrete sign of mercy and of the attention of Christ. While we are nourished by Christ, the Eucharist which we celebrate transforms us too, step by step, into the Body of Christ and spiritual food for our brothers and sisters. Jesus wants to reach everyone, in order to bring God's love to all. For this reason he makes every believer a servant of mercy. Jesus sees the crowd, feels compassion for them and multiplies the loaves; thus he does the same with the Eucharist. We believers who receive this Eucharistic bread are spurred by Jesus to take this service to others, with his same compassion. This is the way.

The narrative of the multiplication of the loaves and fish ends with the verification that everyone is satisfied and with the collection of the leftover pieces (cf. v. 20).

When Jesus, with his compassion and his love, gives us a grace, forgives us our sins, embraces us, loves us; he does nothing halfway but completely. As it happens here: all are satisfied. Jesus fills our heart and our life with his love, with his forgiveness, with his compassion. Thus, Jesus allows his disciples to carry out his command. In this way they know the path to follow: to feed the people and keep them united; that is, to be *at the service of life and of communion*. Therefore, let us invoke the Lord, that he always make his Church capable of this holy service, and that each one of us may be an instrument of communion in our own family, at work, in the parish and the groups we belong to, a visible sign of the mercy of God who does not want to leave anyone in loneliness and in need, so that communion and peace may descend among mankind and the communion of mankind with God, because this communion is life for all.

Mercy gives dignity (cf Mt 9:20-22)

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning! The Gospel passage we have heard presents us with a figure who stands out because of her faith and courage. This is the woman whom Jesus healed of a hemorrhage (cf. Mt 9:20-22). Passing through the crowd, she approaches Jesus from behind in order to touch the hem of his garment. "For she said to herself: 'If I only touch his garment, I shall be made well'" (v. 21). What great faith! What great faith this woman had! She reasons in such a way because she is enlivened by a great deal of faith and a great deal of hope and, with a bit of cleverness, she attains what is in her heart. The desire to be saved by Jesus is so great that it moves her to go beyond the rules laid down by the law of Moses. Indeed, this poor woman for many years is not simply ill, but is considered impure because she suffers from a hemorrhage (cf. Lev 15:19-30). For this reason she is excluded from the liturgy, from married life, and from normal relationships with others. The evangelist Mark adds that she has consulted many doctors, exhausted her financial means in paying them and endured painful treatments, but she only worsened. She was a woman rejected by society. It is important to consider this condition — of being rejected — in order to understand the state of her soul: she feels that Jesus can free her from disease and from the state of marginalization and indignity in which, for years, she has had to live. In one word: she knows, she feels that Jesus can *save her*.

This example causes one to reflect on how the woman is often perceived and represented. We, even Christian communities, are all alert to views of femininity invalidated by prejudice and harmful suspicions about her intangible dignity. The Gospels themselves restore the truth and bring a liberating perspective in this regard. Jesus admired the faith of this woman whom everyone shunned, and he transformed her hope into salvation. We do not know her name, but the few lines in the Gospels describing her encounter with Jesus outline a journey of faith that is capable of restoring the truth and greatness of the dignity of every person. In the encounter with Christ, the path of liberation and salvation is opened for all men and women in every place and of every time.

The Gospel of Matthew says that when the woman touched Jesus' cloak, he "turned" and, "seeing her" (v. 22), he spoke to her. As we said, because of her state of exclusion, the woman acted secretly, behind Jesus' back — she was a bit fearful — so as not to be seen, because she was an outcast. Jesus, however, sees her and his gaze is not one of reproach, he does not say: "Go away, you are an outcast!", as if to say: "You are a leper, go away!". No, he does not reproach her, but Jesus' gaze is one of mercy and tenderness. He knows what has happened and he seeks a personal encounter with her, which is essentially what the woman desired. This means that Jesus not only welcomes, but considers her worthy of this encounter, to the point of giving her his word and his attention.

In the central part of the story the word *salvation* is repeated *three times*. "If I but touch his cloak, I shall be *saved*. Jesus turned, saw her and said, 'Have courage, daughter, your faith has *saved* you'. And from that moment on the woman was *saved*" (cf. 21-22). This "courage, daughter" expresses all of God's mercy for that person. And for every rejected person. How often do we feel inwardly rejected because of our sins, we have committed many, we have committed many.... And the Lord tells us: "Have Courage! Come! To me you are not an outcast. Have courage, daughter. You are a son, a daughter". And this is the moment of grace, it is the moment of forgiveness, it is the moment of inclusion in the life of Jesus, in the life of the Church. It is the moment of mercy. Today, all of us, sinners, perhaps great sinners or small sinners, but we are all sinners, the Lord says to all of us: "Have courage, come! You are no longer rejected, you are no longer rejected: I forgive you, I embrace you". God's mercy is like this.

We must have courage and go to Him, to ask forgiveness for our sins and move forward, with courage, as this woman did. Then, "salvation" assumes multiple connotations: firstly it restores health to the woman; then it frees her from social and religious discrimination; moreover, it implements the hope that she carried in her heart, eliminating her fears and her despair; finally, it allows her to return to the community, freeing her from the necessity of acting secretly. And this last point is important: a person who is rejected always acts in secret, either sometimes or all through life: our thoughts turn to the lepers of that time, to the homeless of today...; we think of sinners, of ourselves, sinners: we always do something secretly, we need to do something in secret, because we are ashamed of what we are.... And he frees us from this, Jesus frees us and enables us to get up: "Get up, come, arise!". The way God created us: God created us standing, not humiliated. Standing. What Jesus gives is total salvation, which reintegrates the woman's life in the sphere of God's love and, at the same time, restores her to her full dignity.

In short, it is not the cloak that the woman touched which gave her salvation, but *the word of Jesus, received in faith*, able to comfort her, heal her and restore her in a relationship with God and with his people. Jesus is the only source of blessing from which salvation for all men flows, and faith is the fundamental disposition for receiving it. Jesus, once again, with his action that is full of mercy, indicates to the Church the path she must take in order to meet each person, so that everyone can be healed in body and spirit and recover the dignity of children of God. Thank you.