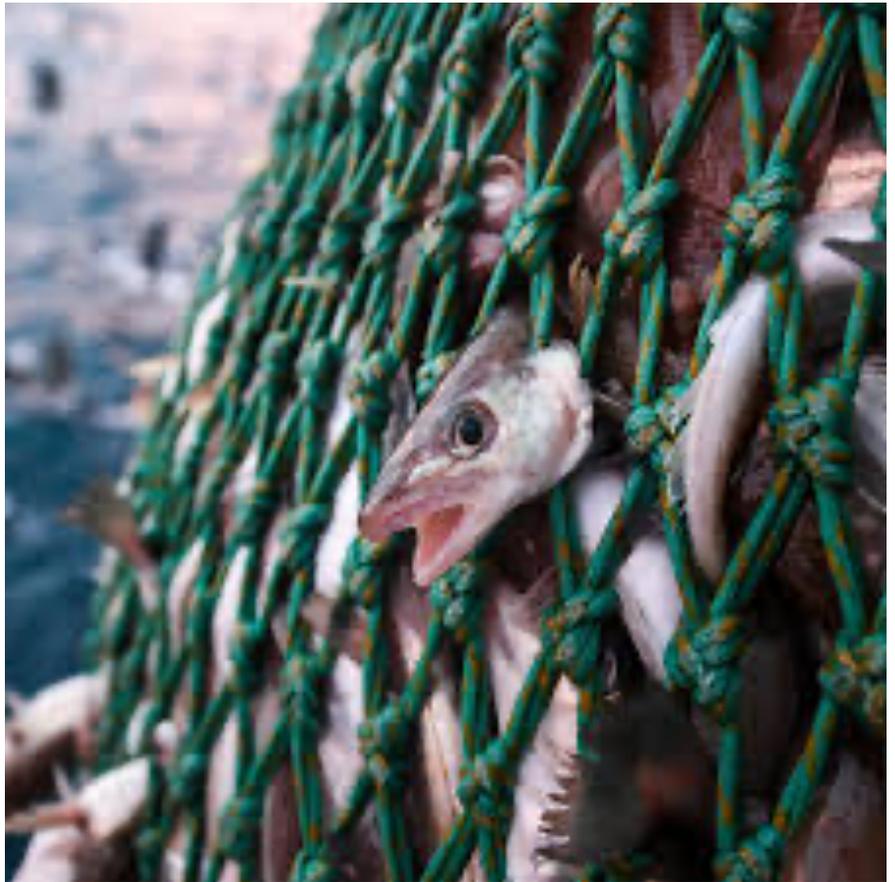


Homily posted by Cyprian on 4/11/21

a sign of unity and an instrument of peace

*(my final homily and remarks for
the seminarians at St. John's
Camarillo)*

There are many symbolic elements in this story of the breakfast by the sea (Jn 21:1-14) the bread and the fish, the boat and the net, and Peter himself. That being said, the other story it's helpful to remember when we read this story is the call of the disciples from Luke 5, when Jesus encouraged Peter, James and John to cast off into the other side and there was a miraculous catch, and they left their boats and followed him. Some scholars think that it is



actually that same story from the 5th chapter of Luke that made its way here to the end of John's Gospel, because Luke has some of the same details.

However, if you compare those two stories there is one detail in John's version that jumps out because it differs from Luke's. Luke 5 has it that when they had cast their nets where Jesus had told them to they caught so many fish that their nets were *beginning to break*. And when they filled their boats *the boats began to sink*. But the author of this story tells us emphatically that even though there were so many fish that they were not able to haul it into the boat but had to drag it to shore the net *did not break*.

Here we have to first consider this net as a symbol of the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God. Remember Jesus saying in the Gospel of Matthew that the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind.

What we think ties all the symbols together—the bread and the fish, the boat and the net, and Peter himself—is the *ecclesial* theme that runs through this story; even more specifically, the unity of the church, and not only that, but the unity in diversity. Of course the bread is a sign of unity as it always is in Eucharistic language: as the many grains that

have been scattered on the hillsides are now brought together and made one. And both Luke and John tell us explicitly in their version of the multiplication of the loaves that there were five loaves; but here only that there is bread, probably a loaf. And Jesus did not ask Peter to bring more bread, only to bring more fish.

And the fish: this translation only says that there was fish on the fire, but other translations say that there was *a* fish on it. And Jesus asks Peter to bring the many, the 153, to the one. St Jerome gives the explanation that I like the best, that Greek zoologists had recorded 153 different kinds of fish, and so by mentioning this number John was symbolizing the breadth of the Christian mission, that all types of people would be brought into the ship of the church. Like Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, the Gospel of John is trying to show that Peter too will not lose any of those entrusted to him.

And the net was un-torn. It's the same verb that was used earlier in the Gospel of John when referring to Jesus' tunic, which was woven from top to bottom and had no seam. *'Let's not tear it.'* That verb is *skizein*, the root of the word 'schism.' Despite the great numbers and different kinds of people in it, despite persecutions and differences of opinions and styles and ways, there was no schism. The church is not a monolithic culture. It's beauty lies in the richness of colors and sounds and forms that it takes. You probably know the famous description of the Church from James Joyce: "Here comes everybody!"

The Church Fathers loved to dwell on the mystical meaning of this episode—that the boat was the Church, whose unity is symbolized by the net which is not torn. Perhaps also the fact that John has only one boat in this story, whereas Luke had two, is a further attempt by John at conveying his longing for the unity of the Christian community. And the net is dragged ashore by Peter, who himself is undoubtedly a symbol of unity. Even non-Roman Catholics have to admit here that they see in this scriptural passage an example of the primacy of the Petrine office, even over the apostle John, and a commissioning of Peter to carry on this ministry of caring for Christ's sheep in his place. And though not all Christians take the primacy as far as we have, this is at the core of this Petrine ministry, even down to our present day, in spite of all the changes and battles it has been through: the unity of the church, even in its diversity. We Catholics believe that this primacy, this grace conferred upon Peter over the rest of the Apostles, which stands as one of the basic elements of the Church, is designed not for power but for service, above all to guard and protect and promote, the unity of the Church even in its diversity. And so St. Gregory the Great coins the phrase for the papacy *servus servorum Dei*—"the servant of the servants of God."

As much as anything this is what Jesus wanted for his followers after he left them—‘*That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*’^[i] The unity of the church, our unity, is itself a sacrament, a sign to the world that God loves the world. In a day and age that seems to regard negative polarization and demonization as the standard way of communicating—left against right, conservatives against liberals, traditionalists against progressives, when the world sees us united in our diversity, it sees the glory of the Risen One that he has given to us.

And this sacrament of the Eucharist not only *celebrates* that unity, but causes it to come about. There is a line in the Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation that I love; it prays the Church be “a sign of unity and an instrument of peace.” So, as we approach this one table, where we share the one loaf and drink from one cup, let us be, and pray to be, that: one body, united head and members as a living sacrifice of praise, like a city on the hill, as a sign to the world, but also like yeast in the dough, the salt of the earth, a sign of unity and an instrument of peace.

If I may end as I began, with these words of Hans Urs von Balthasar, let’s pray that we might be a Church willing to go “beyond its confines” and imitate “the movement of a self-emptying of God and Christ ... exposing itself as defenseless. A disinterested Church that seeks only the honor of its Lord and not its own, because the Lord too did not seek his own glory, but that of the Father,” a church that “seeks in the Scripture the words that teach it the most complete obedience,” that “seeks in the relations with separated Christians to observe the pressing commandment of its Master: union as love, that “seeks its mission in the profane world that surrounds it: to be yeast that acts while disappearing.^[ii] To be in a word, that the Church may be *Servus servorum Dei*—a servant of the servants, a sign of unity and an instrument of peace.

cyprian, 9 april 21

Friday in the Octave of Easter