

Historic Commentary

(Tenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on John 6:1-21 from Selected Church Fathers

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on John 6](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the Patristics and others.

[Chrysostom](#): Though favored with such teaching as Jesus had done, they were influenced less by this than by the miracles—a sign of the low level of faith they had. For miracles, it says, are not for believers but for unbelievers. Those described by Matthew did not act this way; rather, he says, they “were astonished at his doctrine because he taught as one having authority.”

[Chrysostom](#): He went up onto the mountain because of the miracle he was going to do. The disciples alone ascended with him which implies that the people who stayed behind were at fault for not following. He went up to the mountain too as a lesson to us to retire from the tumult and confusion of the world. For solitude is appropriate for the study of wisdom. Jesus often went up alone onto a mountain in order to pray, even spending the night there. He did this in order to teach us that the one who will come most near to God must be free from all disturbance and must seek times and places away from all the confusion.

[Cyril of Alexandria](#): Smallness of faith is the worst sickness and surpasses all evil. If God works or promises to do anything, then let it be believed in simple faith. Just because we are powerless to accomplish anything, we should not let God be accused by our inability to understand how he will accomplish things beyond our understanding...What is then beyond our comprehension is received by faith and not by investigation. Therefore, just as one who believes is admired, so also one who doubts is not free from blame. The Savior himself testifies about this when he says, “He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already.”

The five barley loaves signify the five books of Moses, that is, the whole law which gives as it were a coarser type of food...But the fish signify good food attained through the fishermen, that is, the more delicate books of Christ's disciples. Within the latter, there are two distinct types, the preaching of the apostles and the proclamation of the evangelists, which shine forth among us.

Augustine: To provide a brief explanation: the five loaves are understood as the five books of Moses; rightly they are not wheat but barley because they belong to the Old Testament. For you know that barley was created in such a way that one can scarcely get to its kernel. For this kernel is clothed with a covering of husk, and this husk is tenacious and adhering, so that it is stripped off with effort. Such is the letter of the Old Testament, clothed with the coverings of carnal mysteries; but if one gets to its kernel, it feeds and satisfies.

And so a boy was carrying five loaves and two fishes. If we should seek to know who this boy was, perhaps he was the people of Israel, carrying the loaves and fish with a childlike understanding and not eating of them itself. For those things that it was carrying, when kept shut, were a burden, but when opened, were food. Moreover, the two fish seem to us to signify those two sublime personages in the Old Testament who were anointed to make holy and rule the people, the priest and king.

Clement of Alexandria: So very mystically the five loaves are broken by the Savior, and fill the crowd of the listeners. For great is the crowd that keep to the things of the senses, as if they were the only things in existence. “Cast your eyes round, and see,” says Plato, “that none of the uninitiated listen.” Such are they who think that nothing else exists but what they can hold firmly with their hands; but do not admit as in the department of existence, actions and processes of generation, and the whole of the unseen. For such are those who keep by the five senses. But the knowledge of God is a thing inaccessible to the ears and other organs of the senses with this kind of people.

Augustine: He therefore created as God creates. For, just as he multiplies the produce of the fields from a few grains, from that same source of power he multiplied in his hands the five loaves. There was power, indeed, in the hands of Christ. And those five loaves were like seeds, not indeed committed to the earth, but multiplied by him who made the earth.

Augustine: And he who was signified through them [i.e., the loaves] in mystery now came at last. He came now at last who was shown by the kernel of the barley but was hidden by the husk of the barley. He came, himself, one person carrying both personages in himself, priest and king. He is priest through the victim which he offered for us to God—himself. He is king because we are ruled by him. And those things that were being carried concealed [i.e., barley husks] are opened. Thanks be to him. He fulfilled through himself what was promised in the Old Testament. And he ordered the loaves to be broken; by breaking they were multiplied. Nothing is truer. For those five books of Moses, how many books have they made when they are explained, as if by breaking [them], that is, by discussing [them]?

Ephrem the Syrian: But it was not because he had the ability to multiply it [the loaves of bread and the fish] that he did thus multiply them, but rather because there would then be enough food for those who would eat them. His miracle, therefore, was not in proportion to his own power, but rather in proportion to the hunger of those who were hungry. For if his miracle were to be proportional to his power, there would be no way to measure how much his power overcame. Rather, his miracle was in proportion to the

hunger of thousands, and it surpassed the number of the twelve baskets. In the case of all artisans, the desire of those who seek their services is greater than the ability of the artisans, for the artisans are unable to work in line with the desires of those who need them. For God, however, his activity surpasses [the desires of] those who need him. [He said], "Gather up the pieces so that absolutely nothing may be lost," so that it not seem concerning him that he had made use of an apparition; but when a remainder for a day or two was left, they might believe that he had truly acted, and that this was not some vacuous vision.

Tertullian: Such was the greatness of his miracle that he willed the slender supply of food not only to be enough but even to prove superabundant. Here he followed ancient precedent. For in the same way during the famine in Elijah's time, the scanty and final meal of the widow of Zarephath was multiplied by the blessing of the prophet through-out the period of the famine.... O Christ, even in your novelties you are old!

Cyril of Alexandria: Initially the disciples were reluctant to feed the hungry, but seeing this, the Savior gave to them in abundance from the fragments. This teaches us as well, that we, by expending a little for the glory of God, shall receive richer grace according to the saying of Christ, "a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap." Therefore, we must not be slothful regarding the communion of love toward our brothers and sisters but rather put away from us, as far as possible, the cowardice and fear that lead to inhospitality. Thus we might be confirmed in hope through steadfast faith in the power of God to multiply even our smallest acts of goodness.

Ephrem the Syrian: Thus, when they were satisfied, they saw that he had fed them in the wilderness, as Moses [had done] with prayer, and they cried out, saying, "This is the prophet about whom it was said that he is coming into the world." They were repeating the [prophecy] of Moses that "The Lord will raise up a prophet for you," not someone ordinary, but rather "like me," who will fill you with bread in the desert; "like me," he walked on the sea, and appeared in the cloud. He set his church free from circumcision, and he appointed John, the virgin, in place of Joshua son of Nun. He entrusted Mary, his church, to him, as Moses his flock to Joshua, so that this [prophecy] "like me" would be fulfilled.

Augustine: The divine substance is not visible to the eye, and the miracles of the divine government of the world and ordering of the whole creation are overlooked because of their constancy...Because of this, God has reserved for himself acts that are above and beyond the established course and order of nature that he does at suitable times. He does this so that those who overlooked the daily course of nature might be roused to wonder by the sight of what was different from—though not at all greater than—what they were used to. The government of the world is certainly a greater miracle than satisfying the hunger of five thousand with five loaves; and yet no one wonders at this. The miracle excited wonder, not from any real superiority in it but because it was rare... But it would be wrong to gather no more than this from Christ's miracles... Let us understand that the Lord on the mount is the Word on high... He saw the multitude and knew they were hungry, and so he mercifully fed them not only in virtue of his goodness but also of his

power. For what could mere goodness do when there was not even enough bread to feed the hungry crowd? If power had not accompanied goodness, the crowd would have remained fasting and hungry. In short, the disciples, hungry themselves, also wanted to feed the multitudes, but they did not have the wherewithal to feed them.

Chrysostom: Wonderful! How great is the tyranny of gluttony, how great the fickleness of people's minds! No longer do they vindicate the law, no longer do they care for the violation of the sabbath, and no longer are they zealous for God. All such considerations are thrown aside when their bellies have been filled. He was a prophet in their eyes, and they were about to choose him for a king. But Christ flees. Why? To teach us to despise worldly dignities and to show us that he needed nothing on earth. For the one who chose all the ordinary things of life, such as mother, house, city, nurture and clothing, would not afterwards be made illustrious by things on earth.

Augustine: Yet he who shrank from being made a king, was a king [already]; not made king by people but one who would bestow a kingdom on people...For he ever reigns with the Father, in that he is the Son of God, the Word of God, the Word by which all things were made. The prophets had foretold his kingdom. Christ, by being made man, made the believers in him Christians. There will consequently be a kingdom of Christians that at present is being gathered together, being prepared and purchased by the blood of Christ. And this kingdom will be made manifest after the judgment when the glory of his saints shall be revealed...The disciples, however, and the multitude who believed in him thought that he had come to reign immediately, and so they would have taken him by force to make him a king, seeking to anticipate his time, which he kept secret.

Cyril of Alexandria: When Christ flees from those who want to give him honor and refuses that highest earthly prize of a kingdom, ... he teaches us that it is unseemly for those who pursue divine grace and thirst for everlasting glory to seek after worldly greatness. We must then forego the love of glory, the sister and neighbor of arrogance, residing not far from its borders. Let us have nothing to do with illustrious honor in this present life which is hurtful. Let us rather seek after a holy humility giving preference to one another.

Ambrose: Under the Old Testament, imperial power was bestowed by priests, not despotically claimed, and it is commonly said that emperors aspired to the priesthood rather than priests to the imperial power. Christ fled lest he be made a king. We have a power of our own. The power of the priest is weakness. He [Paul] said, "When I am weak, then I am strong."

Cyril of Alexandria: The circumstances of their journey drive the disciples to a more intense search for the Savior. For the deep darkness of the night troubles them, hovering like smoke on the raging waves and taking away any ability for navigation. The fierce winds, riding on the waves with a rushing sound that raises the billows high above their heads, had to trouble them more than a little bit. Yes, and through all of this, John records, "Jesus was not yet with them." This was the real danger, and Christ's absence from these voyagers was making their fear grow more and more.

Those who are not with Jesus are in a fierce tempest of a storm. They are cut off from him or at least seem to be absent from him because they have departed from his holy laws. Because of their sin they are separated from the one who is able to save. If then it is overwhelming to be in such spiritual darkness, if it is oppressive to be swamped by the bitter sea of pleasures, let us then receive Jesus. For this is what will deliver us from dangers and from death in sin.

Augustine: He fled alone to the mountain—the first begotten from the dead—because he has ascended above all the heavens and is interceding for us. ... But while he was above what were the disciples enduring in the ship below? For that ship prefigured the church while he is on high....

While they were sailing to [Capernaum], John tells us what happened to them. It became dark and Jesus had not come to them. It was right that John said it was dark, because the light [Jesus] had not yet come to them. As the end of the world draws near, errors increase, terrors multiply, iniquity abounds and infidelity escalates. Light, again, is love according to John. Whoever hates his brother is in darkness. ... The waves and storms and winds then that agitate the ship, are the clamors of hurtful speech and love waxing cold.... Nevertheless the wind, and storm, and waves, and darkness were not able to stop and sink the vessel. For the one who endures to the end shall be saved...

And how does Jesus come to the disciples? He comes walking upon the waves, keeping all the swellings of the world under his feet, pressing down all of humanity's pride. And so it continues, so long as time endures, so long as the ages roll. Tribulations increase, all these swell and mount up: Jesus passes on treading upon the waves. And yet, so great are the tribulations that even those who have trusted in Jesus and who strive to persevere to the end greatly fear lest they fail... But they open the gospel, they open the Scriptures and find all these things there foretold; that this is the Lord's doing. He tramples down the heights of the world that he may be glorified by the humble.

Cyril of Alexandria: Christ does not appear to those in the boat immediately after they set sail or at the onset of danger but only when they are far away from the shore. For the grace of our Savior does not come to us when our tribulations begin but when our fear is at its height and the danger shows itself to be great—when we are found, so to say, in the midst of the waves of affliction. Then, Christ appears unexpectedly and removes our fear and frees us from all danger. By his ineffable power he changes horror into joy, and as it were, calms the storm.... When Christ appears and looks on us, we shall effortlessly succeed even against our hope. And we who are in danger because of our distance from Christ shall no longer have to labor to accomplish what is helpful for us when he is present. Christ is our deliverance from all danger and the accomplishment of achievements beyond hope to those who receive him.