

A Boy's Initiative

II Kings 4:42-44; Ephesians 4:1-6; John :1-15
July 30, 2006

In the Gospel story of the multiplication of the loaves, the “Eucharistic” event occurs thanks to one boy’s generous offer. With innocent sincerity the boy presents his loaves and fishes, and with those same humble elements Jesus brings the entire group of people assembled there to experience the extraordinariness of communion/community.

The story’s Eucharistic background is one thing. There is also a critical analysis to be made about the mistaken way in which the people in the Gospel account interpret Jesus’ leadership. They act as if they want to say: “We seek a leader who solves every problem and who doesn’t burden us with personal responsibility.”

We can follow both lines of interpretation, the Eucharistic and the ideological reading of Jesus’ style of leadership, when we look at the children of the migrant population.

For various reasons, sociological and cultural, the children of migrants tend to conserve their own language and culture of origin. I say this despite all the problems that in our time surround the use of the word “conserve/conservative.” In any case, an element that seems to me significant in the context of our Catholic faith is that these migrant children (born in the US) eventually succeed in inheriting their ancestors’ faith values and religious practices. These inherited elements extend their roots far beyond the confines of the institutional Church— and yet at the same time are genuinely “catholic.”

Perhaps someone who likes to see things more pragmatically could assert: “These children are speaking English, they are growing up in the culture of this country, and if their faith is Catholic, they will have to assimilate the US’s own Church dynamic and norms.”

But it’s as going against this vision of cultural dominance that I interpret today’s Gospel. For notice that Jesus himself does not overwhelm the boy’s initiative. He accepts it, he transforms it. He takes the boy’s loaves and the fishes and uses those same elements to realize, to make concrete the sign of multiplication.

How has the Church itself dealt with the initiatives of its youngest members? In fact the Church has postponed the challenge of attending to all her children and youth. But this postponement, this delay, can be seen even more concretely in the case of the population of Latino children and youth. And most concretely of all among the migrant boys and girls I’m familiar with.

Yet it is these same children who possess in their very lives valuable “signs” inherited from Latin American faith traditions. Those signs are the loaves and fishes offered to us. These children’s lives hold the potentiality for the formation of a multicultural church. But if local churches neglect or overlook this potentiality, and proceed with their usual faith formation programs, migrant children are going to believe that what their mothers and families have been teaching them about faith— that these inherited treasures have no value. If that happens, then the church, as a truly catholic (universal) church, will be diminished.

Our challenge is to value who these children are. And to welcome what they offer us. They are young people experiencing within themselves two cultural realities. They already possess, at their own level, a multicultural “synthesis.” Their loaves and fishes— their religious, their bi-cultural experience—could contribute significant energy to the

way of being church in this country. They could do so provided, of course, that their contributions are welcomed and nurtured.

But it will take creativity and boldness on our part for this multicultural miracle, this multiplication of loaves and fishes, to happen among us.