

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 16, 2015

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In the late 1930s the remains of an ancient synagogue were found in Capernaum. Discovering ancient ruins in the Holy Land was not news. But at Capernaum the site was in *a remarkable state of preservation*. That *was* news. Usually the discovered site was little more than a pile of debris beyond recognition. But there was something else. This synagogue had a bas-relief over the main doorpost unlike any other ancient synagogue. The usual subject matter was the seven-branch candlestick. But at Capernaum the art work appeared to be *a pot of manna*, the food of angels God gave the ancient Hebrews in the desert.

The discovery was put on the back shelf during World War Two but it eventually raised all sorts of exciting questions. Was this the synagogue where Jesus preached about the Bread of Life? Had the pot of manna over the synagogue door actually inspired Jesus to preach what he did? Had the doorpost and what Jesus preached been responsible for the crowd's murmuring?

The Jews were great murmurers! We could say it was murmuring of Biblical proportions! The ancient Hebrews had murmured against Moses more than once. Murmuring was connected with that mysterious food called *manna*. In fact it was called *manna* because the very word means, "**What is it?**" Murmuring goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden and down to our own day. And modern Jews like to say, "You know, in the wilderness of Sinai, if we'd turned right instead of left, *we'd* have all the oil!"

We now know there was a synagogue in Capernaum with its special doorpost. We know Our Lord preached at Capernaum about manna and the Bread of Life. It is tempting to connect this synagogue with the actual site of the Lord's sermon. And this isn't just interesting for archeology. Knowing about it is part of our desire to know everything we can about this Bread of Life, of which a man may eat and not die.

Listening to Jesus and seeing the *pot of manna* over the doorpost must have led the crowd to compare Jesus with Moses. Could this rabbi show the people as great a proof of His authority from God as the food Moses obtained from Heaven? The manna had fed 600,000 people six times a week for forty years. Could Jesus do

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that? The *manna* had a mysterious power of preservation for the people who ate it. Near the end of their journey Moses reminded them their clothing and shoes had not worn out during all that time.

This set the stage and gave Our Lord the opportunity to give His great sermon on the Blessed Sacrament. Not to disparage Moses, but Jesus set the record straight. It was not Moses but *your Father in Heaven* Who gave you the *manna*. And the Lord simply reminded the people, and rather bluntly, that “Your fathers did eat *manna* in the wilderness and they died.” Then the Son of God went on! “This is the Bread which cometh down from Heaven, that a man may eat thereof and not die.”

Now fast forward to the Church after the Gospels were written down, decades after the Resurrection and Pentecost. Christ’s people knew the story from the apostolic preaching and from participating in the liturgical events of Holy Week. This Bread is made possible by and connected to the death of Jesus. And it has power to save and preserve not for forty years but *eternally*. Connected to Jesus’ death, it is thereby connected *to the One Who rose from the dead*. And, like the *manna* in the wilderness, the Bread of Life has a mysterious nature. Almighty God shrouds the blessed Presence of Jesus under veils of bread and wine just as He did at Bethlehem, where the shepherds were directed to a Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. Here then is Almighty God gently bringing to our outward senses the inward Presence of His beloved Son.

When I am working, when I am sleeping, when I am forgetting about Jesus, somewhere the Church of which I am a member is nevertheless praying in Perpetual Adoration. And each time a flood of grace comes to the whole Church. Never mind this grace is only partly noted even by the greatest saints and mystics. By His Grace we can approach Almighty God in the means He has appointed. But we can never circumscribe Him, can never limit or bind Him. From what we know souls are healed through Holy Communion. How can it be otherwise when lips are pressed to Jesus? In this great Sacrament Christ Himself comes to adorn your soul and mine with flowers of holy virtues. *And it happens all the time*, and so simply, like the *manna* people scorned and said, “what is it?” and like Bethlehem which, most people, and the devil himself, missed altogether.

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It is a great and sobering comfort to you and me when we are at the end of our rope and when we have profaned Christ Jesus, having pressed our lives to His Body and then lived in self-assertion and arrogance, that somewhere the Church, in whose body I am a member and you are a member, that Church is offering Mass, and that somehow, we know not fully how, we are connected to and affected by that offering, and all the benefits which will save or convict us in the end.