

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A Sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity
August 19, 2018

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Just before the outbreak of World War One the remains of a synagogue were found in Capernaum. Ancient ruins in the Holy Land are nothing new! And most of what is found are piles of debris beyond recognition. What made *this* an unusual find was the site was in a remarkable state of preservation. Synagogues usually had a bas-relief over the main doorpost depicting a seven-branch candlestick. But over the door in the ancient Capernaum synagogue was what appeared to be a *pot of manna*, the food of angels God gave the ancient Hebrews in the desert.

The discovery raised all sorts of exciting questions, mostly after the end of the Great War. There *was* such a synagogue in Capernaum. And the Lord Jesus had once preached about *manna* and the Bread of Life in Capernaum. So it was tempting to speculate that this synagogue was the *actual site* of the Lord's sermon. Why is that important? Because you and I have a vested interest in knowing everything about this Bread of Life which a man may eat and not die.

Picture out Lord Jesus preaching in front of the Capernaum synagogue, where a pot of *manna* was etched in stone over the doorway. It was natural for the people to wonder if Jesus could show them 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 that? Furthermore, the *manna* had a mysterious power of preservation. Near the end of their journey Moses reminded the Hebrews their clothing and shoes had not worn out during those forty years.

Now fast forward to the time *after* the gospel accounts were recorded. This is decades after the Resurrection and Pentecost. Christ's people knew the story of salvation. They knew from the events of Holy Week this Bread from Heaven is made possible by, and connected to, the death of Jesus. Like the *manna*, this Bread also has a power to save and preserve. But it is an *eternal* saving. For, connected to Jesus's death, it is also 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. These are common and simple signs. But so was Bethlehem, where shepherds were directed to a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths. In both ways God is recognized as gently bringing to our outward senses the inward Presence of His Beloved Son.

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Now fast forward again. St John Chrysostom was writing three hundred years into the experience of the Church. And he reminded his congregation the *manna* fed one nation, in one place, but for a period of time. The Blessed Sacrament comes down continuously and feeds all the world. Somewhere in the world at every moment, this greatest gift is nourishing souls. Mass is offered; people are being fed. Some are first communions; some are last communions or consoling communions, or communions after reconciliation. Somewhere and someplace, when I am working, when I am sleeping, even when I am *forgetting Jesus*, the Church is nevertheless praying in Perpetual Adoration. And each time, a flood of grace comes to the whole Church. Do not be bothered this grace is only partly noted even by great saints and mystics. By His Grace we can approach Almighty God in the means He has appointed. But we can never circumscribe Him, 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* the Hebrew people scored saying “what is it?” and like Bethlehem, which most people missed altogether.

It is a great comfort, the *greatest*, to you and me, that when we are at the end of our rope, and when we have profaned Christ Jesus with our lives having been pressed 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 the Holy Mass. Somehow, we know not fully how, we are connected to and affected by that offering, and to all the benefits which will save our sin-sick souls.