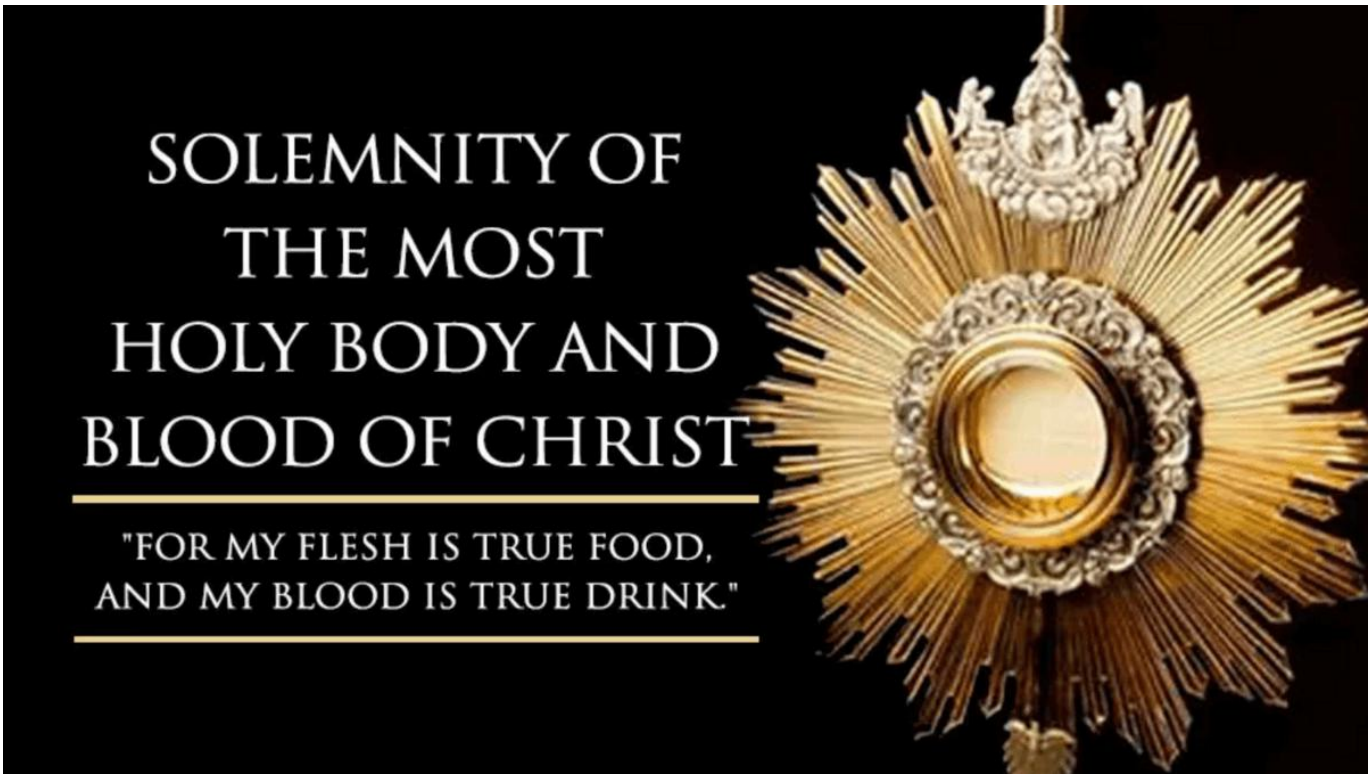

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[10] When the apostles returned, they explained to him what they had done. He took them and withdrew in private to a town called Bethsaida. [11] The crowds, meanwhile, learned of this and followed him. He received them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and he healed those who needed to be cured. [12] As the day was drawing to a close, the Twelve approached him and said, 'Dismiss the crowd so that they can go to the surrounding villages and farms and find lodging and provisions; for we are in a deserted place here.' [13] He said to them, 'Give them some food yourselves.' They replied, 'Five loaves and two fish are all we have, unless we ourselves go and buy food for all these people.' [14] Now the men there numbered about five thousand. Then he said to his disciples, 'Have them sit down in groups of (about) fifty.' [15] They did so and made them all sit down. [16] Then taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing over them, broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. [17] They all ate and were satisfied. And when the leftover fragments were picked up, they filled twelve wicker baskets. (Luke 9:10-17)

The Solemnity

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ – more popularly known as *Corpus Christi*, Latin for the "Body of Christ." – celebrates the gift of the Eucharist. From one perspective, every Sunday is a feast of the Eucharist, because by participating in the Mass, and in receiving Communion, we are honoring and celebrating the Eucharist. Still, the celebration of Corpus Christi has its own history.

In the Catholic Church in the West, since the liturgical reforms of Vatican II, *Corpus Christi* is celebrated as a solemnity on the Sunday following the Most Holy Trinity Sunday (the Sunday following Pentecost). At its core the solemnity is a celebration of the Tradition and belief in the Eucharist as the Real Presence of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. For millennia, such a theme was part of the celebration of Holy Thursday, but then there are other important themes that are part of that celebration (models of Christian service, priestly ordination, and more). And, all this occurs in the shadow of Good Friday. The multiplicity of themes and the shadow of Good Friday and the Passion do not lend the Eucharistic celebration of Holy Thursday a joyful patina.

Saint Juliana of Liège, O.Praem, (Premonstratensian Order; also known as the Norbertines) was the one who became the spark leading to a joyous celebration of *Corpus Christi*. For her devotion, life, and efforts, she is known as the "Apostle of the Blessed Sacrament." Juliana and her twin sister, Agnes, were born in a village near Liège. They were orphaned at age five and placed in a newly founded hospice at Mont-Cornillon, outside of Liège. The Norbertine canonry oversaw the care and rearing of the two girls, who were initially placed on a small farm next to the canonry. Juliana, after entering the Order at the age of 13, worked for many years in its leprosarium. Agnes seems to have died young.

Liège was already a center for devotion to the Eucharist. So from her early youth, Juliana had great veneration for the Eucharist and longed for a special feast day in its honor. In 1208 at age 16, she began having visions of a full moon having one dark spot. Her vision presented the moon in its full splendor, crossed diametrically by a dark stripe. In time she came to understand that the moon symbolized the life of the Church on earth, the opaque line, on the other hand, represented the absence of a liturgical feast in honor of Christ's Body and Blood. Not having any way to bring about such a feast, she kept her thoughts to herself, except for sharing them with Blessed Eve of Liège, who lived in a cell adjacent to the Basilica of St. Martin, and a few other trusted sisters in her monastery. The vision was repeated for the next 20 years, but she maintained it as a secret. When she eventually relayed it to her confessor, he relayed it to the Bishop of Liège, Robert de Thorete. Eventually the celebration of *Corpus Christi* became part of the annual celebrations in the diocese.

Becoming a Universal Celebration. The archdeacon of the diocese, Jacques Pantaléon of Troyes was also won over to the cause of the Feast of Corpus Christi during his time in the Diocese of Liège. He eventually became Pope Urban IV in 1264. He instituted the Solemnity of Corpus Christi on the Thursday after Pentecost as a feast for the entire Latin Rite, by the papal bull *Transiturus de hoc mundo*. While Juliana prepared prayers and music for the feast, Pope Urban also requested that St. Thomas Aquinas write an office (special prayers) and hymns for the feast. It is from these offices that we have the most well-known Eucharistic songs: *Tantum Ergo, Pange Lingua,* and *O Salutaris Hostia*.

Each year on this solemnity the gospel is taken from one of the miraculous feeding of the multitudes. This year the reading is from the Gospel of Luke 9:10-17 when five loaves and two fish become the starting point for feeding more than 5,000 people.

The Gospel Passage in Context. This Lukan passage comes at a "breaking point" in the narrative of the gospel. In Luke 8, we come to a "kind of ending" of the Galilean mission. Up to and through Luke 8 the accounts have focused on Jesus – the telling of parables (sower and the seed, 8:4-15; lamp, 8:16-18) and performance of miracles (calming of the sea, 8:22-25; healing of the demoniac, 8:26-39; healing of Jairus' daughter, 8:40-56). At the beginning of Luke 9, the Twelve are sent on mission, "*He summoned the Twelve and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal (the sick)*" (vv1-2). These were prophetic actions that Jesus had already given to the people and the leaders of the Jews. As the leaders began to reject Jesus, even while the outcasts began to accept him, there was a growing gap in religious leadership. And thus Jesus, already having taught his disciples the meaning of the Kingdom, now sends them to proclaim God's reign in word and deed. We are only told of the summary of their missionary endeavors: "*Then they set out and went from village to village proclaiming the good news and curing diseases everywhere*." (Luke 9:6)

Joel Green (352) provides us with additional context for the Lukan narrative: "The break between chs. 8 and 9 is not abrupt. In fact, the groundwork for the twin focus of 9:1–50, christology and discipleship, is laid in ch. 8, with its concerns with perceptiveness and active faith. This new section is distinguished from the previous one primarily by the explicitness of its portrayal of the disciples and by its heightened, even candid concern with Jesus' identity. Already in ch. 8, the presence of the disciples with Jesus had become more pointed than at any other time since their being called in chs. 5–6. Now, however, they are active agents involved in the mission of Jesus, and they begin to be developed less as companions and more as

characters in their own right within the larger narrative of Luke-Acts. The end of this new section is clearly marked, with Jesus departing from his divine mission in the region of Galilee (cf. 4:14–15; §10) in order to begin the meandering journey to Jerusalem (see 9:51, 53). Consequently, 9:1–50 should be regarded as a transitional unit, bringing the Galilean segment of Jesus' ministry to a close and setting the stage for the next major stage of his mission. With the closing of the Galilean section, the central issues of Jesus' identity and mission and the character of discipleship are on display in a way that renders necessary the more concentrated periods of discipleship instruction and formation that will characterize the journey."

Between the sending and the return of the disciples, there is a short episode: "*7 Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was greatly perplexed because some were saying, "John has been raised from the dead";8 others were saying, "Elijah has appeared"; still others, "One of the ancient prophets has arisen."9 But Herod said, "John I beheaded. Who then is this about whom I hear such things?" And he kept trying to see him*." (Luke 9:7-10) Clearly, Luke has raised the question of Jesus' identity – something that will continue to be revealed in what he does and what he calls others to do. By the same token, those who desire to see who Jesus is will see him only if they respond to his call to preach the gospel, heal the sick, and feed the hungry. There is still truth in Albert Schweitzer's immortal words at the conclusion of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus:*

> He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."

The Call to Ministry. *10 When the apostles returned, they explained to him what they had done. He took them and withdrew in private to a town called Bethsaida. 11 The crowds, meanwhile, learned of this and followed him. He received them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and he healed those who needed to be cured.*

As part of the instruction for his disciples, it seems likely that Jesus wants to affirm their experience of mission and healing, as well as extend and continue the instructions as a means to prepare them for the soon-coming work of the nascent church. And the passage makes clear it was meant to form a respite and break from the missionary endeavors and make space in their life for quiet communal time with Jesus. Having participated successfully as his fellow workers in ministry, do they understand fully who Jesus is? Has their faith matured? We will see.

As for a private moment (v.10), alas, it was not to be. At one level the crowd's relentless pursuit is intrusive, but nonetheless, hospitality is extended, and Jesus engages in a ministry of healing and of proclamation about the kingdom. This summary of his ministry is indistinguishable from the ministry in which the twelve had participated (vv.1–2, 6)—a reality that serves at least initially to blur even further any possible lines of distinction between their activity on God's behalf and his own.

Continued Lessons for Mission. *12 As the day was drawing to a close, the Twelve approached him and said, 'Dismiss the crowd so that they can go to the surrounding villages and farms and find lodging and provisions; for we are in a deserted place here.' 13 He said to them, 'Give them some food yourselves.' They replied, 'Five loaves and two fish are all we have, unless we ourselves go and buy food for all these people.' 14 Now the men there numbered about five thousand.*

There is some question as to how much of a "deserted place" they were actually in. The Greek *eremos* used by Luke definitely means "deserted or lonely place – even wilderness" but there is no transition from the geographical marker of Bethsaida. As Joel Green (363) points out:

> Only when viewed against the backdrop of Jesus' prior instructions to the twelve does their request to him seem odd. Their location in the rural environs of Bethsaida places them in close

proximity to the possibility of food and lodging; why not take advantage of it? Jesus, however, had earlier instructed his disciples to take no bread on the journey (v.3); thus, they were counseled to carry on the divine mission while trusting in divine benefaction and resources. Had they not trusted and been successful earlier? If one reaches further back into the Lukan narrative, one remembers Jesus' instructions on Simon's boat that had led to a miraculous catch of fish (5:1–11). If he was able to provide then, why not now? Even further back in the memory is Elisha's instructions to feed a hundred people with five barley loaves and fresh ears of grain (2 Kgs 4:42–44), the potential relevance of which is underscored by Luke's earlier use of Elisha-material to portray Jesus (e.g., 4:27). In light of their present location in the "wilderness," memories of God's provision of manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16; Numbers 11) might also be activated. In light of these narrative realities, could the twelve not continue to trust now, even if these fresh circumstances presented obstacles more severe than those they had yet faced? Against such a backdrop, the extraordinary nature of their request to send the crowd away is seen in their lack of any vocalized expectation that Jesus might be able to provide for their needs.

[13] He said to them, 'Give them some food yourselves.' They replied, 'Five loaves and two fish are all we have, unless we ourselves go and buy food for all these people.'

The disciples' response cannot have been pleasing to Jesus' ears. True, their resources are few unless they either (a) buy food for the multitudes or (b) await upon a miracle from Jesus. Their long experience of life before Jesus becomes operative enforced by the fact they have taken no money (v.3). It seems as though Luke is describing the continuous test that awaits all who would minister in the name of Jesus. The presence of the crowds and their needs is unveiled as a test to their faith, a test in the face of which the disciples struggle. If the disciples' faith is not adequate on this occasion, this is surely due to the enormity of the problem with which they are confronted. The narrator seems to underscore this in a narrative aside at the beginning of v.14: "*Now the men there numbered about five thousand.*" Against the meager resources represented by five loaves and two fish, the need is great indeed. The stage is thus set for a manifestation of miraculous benevolence of immense proportions.

Then he said to his disciples, 'Have them sit down in groups of (about) fifty.' [15] They did so and made them all sit down. [16] Then taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing over them, broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. [17] They all ate and were satisfied. And when the leftover fragments were picked up, they filled twelve wicker baskets.

The feeding of the people. The feeding of the five thousand had a meaning for the early church in the responsibility of the leaders to feed the flock, particularly with preaching and the Eucharist. This is the one miracle, apart from the resurrection, recounted in all four Gospels.

Luke shares the story with the other gospel writers, but his account connects the feeding to the sending of the Twelve. Luke does not include Mark's mention of the compassion of Jesus for the people or the messianic allusion (Mark 6:34), but the abundance of good stands as a two-fold lesion to the Twelve: abundance is found not in the power to purchase with money, but in the power of the Lord; and, those who give receive back even more extravagantly. Both lessons reinforce what they have learned on their own journey.

As the other gospel writers, this miraculous feeding points forward to the Last Supper (Luke 22:9). But this account has another element of anticipation. Jesus here appears as one who provides food for the people – in other words, his authority to preach and heal is symbolized by table service. This is made explicit at the Last Supper when he tells the Twelve, "Am I not among you as the one who serves?" (22:27)

Joel Green (365-66) points notes the taking, blessing, breaking, giving as easily pointing to the Last Supper, but cautions that these are also actions expected of a pious Jew is preparation for eating. In addition, it is noted by many scholars (Culpepper, et. al.) that the significance of the two fish is not as

easily explained as the symbolism of bread. Green holds that, in this context, there are more important meanings to be understood:

> First, in light of the aforementioned question concerning his identity, Jesus' involvement in a miraculous feeding ties him into the prophetic tradition (2 Kgs 4:42–44) and helps to portray him against the background of the story of Exodus (Exod 16:4–36). Second, the close association of Jesus' communication of the kingdom of God and healing with the miraculous feeding of the multitudes intimates that the latter is itself an expression of the saving activity of God. In fact, Mary had predicted that the hungry would be filled (1:53), and Jesus had interpreted the meaning of salvation, in part, as the filling of the hungry (6:21). In lifting his eyes to heaven, Jesus had recognized God as the source of this meal—that is, as the gracious Benefactor of these needy people. Jesus himself is presented, then, as the one through whom God's benefaction is present. In light of this, it is surely of significance that no repayment is demanded from those who have received: the mercy of God is extended to all without reference to predetermined boundaries and without incipient demands for reciprocity (cf. 6:32–36).
>
> Third, once the boundary-setting and boundary-maintaining function of meals is recalled, the failure of Jesus and his disciples either to observe this role or otherwise to encourage the crowds to observe practices affiliated with it is startling. Here are thousands of people, an undifferentiated mass of people, some undoubtedly unclean, others clean, some more faithful regarding the law, others less so. The food itself—is it clean? Has it been properly prepared? Have tithes been paid on it? Where is the water for washing in preparation for the table? Such concerns are so lacking from this scene that we might miss the extraordinary character of this meal, extraordinary precisely because these concerns are so completely absent. No attempt has been made by Jesus and the twelve, this representation of the renewal of Israel, to preserve the social boundaries that characterize first-century Jewish life. Again, Luke's narration underscores the degree to which God's benefaction is without limits.
>
> Finally, Luke observes not only that all ate and were filled, but also that twelve baskets of leftovers were collected. This underscores immediately the magnitude of the miracle, together with the superabundance of God's good gifts (cf. 6:38). That there were twelve baskets full, within a narrative co-text wherein the presence of twelve apostles has been so emphatic (vv 1, 10, 12), insinuates further that the message of divine provision embodied in the miraculous feeding of the multitudes is intended for the twelve. The outstanding question, then, is whether they will "hear" this message. Will their hearing be one of genuine perception that manifests itself in the fruit of faith and faithfulness (cf. 8:4–21)?

Catholic Scholarly Views and Interpretations

Fr. Raymond E. Brown, author of *The Birth of the Messiah* and *An Introduction to the New Testament* sees this passage not merely as a miracle but as a prefiguration of the Eucharist. Jesus feeds the multitude just as He later offers His body to the disciples at the Last Supper. "The language and structure of this account deliberately resemble the words used at the Last Supper. The verbs 'took,' 'blessed,' 'broke,' and 'gave' (v. 16) clearly echo the Eucharistic formula."

Luke Timothy Johnson, author of *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina Series, Vol. 3) draws parallels between Jesus and Moses, suggesting that this scene demonstrates Jesus as the New Moses, guiding and providing for a new people of God in the wilderness. "The setting of a 'deserted place' evokes the wilderness experience of Israel, and Jesus feeding the people mirrors God's provision of manna through Moses."

Joseph A. Fitzmyer, author of *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* (Anchor Yale Bible) emphasizes that Jesus invites the disciples into active ministry, not as bystanders but as those who will serve and distribute His blessings. When Jesus says, 'Give them some food yourselves,' he is inviting the apostles to participate in the mission—to care for and serve the people, not just to observe."

Daniel J. Harrington, author of *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina Series, Vol. 3) Harrington interprets the abundance and the number twelve as signs of God's providence to all of Israel, foreshadowing the Church's mission to the world. "The twelve baskets of leftovers (v. 17) likely symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel, indicating Jesus' sufficiency for the whole people of God."

As Green has indicated one should consider that this pericope involves fish rather than bread - in his mind weakening the connection between the miraculous feeding and the Last Supper institution. Yet an early Christian Symbol was ICHTHYS, the Greek word for fish (ΙΧΘΥΣ). It is an acronym: Iēsous Christos, Theou Yios, Sōtēr — Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. This made the fish a secret symbol of Christ in the early Church, especially during persecution. Daniel Harrington (Sacra Pagina) points out that fish likely represent the apostolic mission—as Jesus called the apostles to be "fishers of men" (Luke 5:10). In this context, the fish are not Eucharistic elements but supportive signs of the Church's evangelizing and feeding role.

In addition, Fitzmyer and others suggest that while the bread carries the Eucharistic typology, the fish enhances the miraculous nature of the event, showing God's provision using ordinary means.

The Eucharist as a Call to Justice (Ronald Rolheiser)

When the famous historian Christopher Dawson decided to become a Roman Catholic, his aristocratic mother was distressed, not because she had any aversion to Catholic dogma, but because now her son would, in her words, have to "worship with the help". His aristocratic background would no longer set him apart from others or above anyone. At church he would be just an equal among equals because the Eucharist would strip him of his higher social status.

The Eucharist, among other things, calls us to justice, to disregard the distinction between rich and poor, noble and peasant, aristocrat and servant, both around the Eucharist table itself and afterwards outside of the church. The Eucharist fulfills what Mary prophesized when she was pregnant with Jesus, namely, that, in Jesus, the mighty would be brought down and that lowly would be raised up. It was this very thing that first drew Dorothy Day to Christianity. She noticed that, at the Eucharist, the rich and the poor knelt side by side, all equal at that moment.

Sadly, we often don't take this dimension of the Eucharist seriously. The challenge to reach out to the poor and to level the distinction between rich and poor is an integral and non-negotiable part of being a Christian, commanded as strongly as any of the commandments. And this challenge is contained in the Eucharist itself.

First, at the Eucharist there are to be no rich and no poor, only one equal family praying together in a common humanity. In baptism we are all made equal and for that reason there are no separate worship services for the rich and the poor.

Secondly, because, among other things, the Eucharist commemorates Jesus' brokenness, his poverty, his body being broken and his blood being poured out. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin expresses this aptly when he suggests that the wine offered at the Eucharist symbolizes precisely the brokenness of the poor: "In a sense the true substance to be consecrated each day is the world's development during that day—the bread symbolizing appropriately what creation succeeds in producing, the wine (blood) what creation causes to

be lost in exhaustion and suffering in the course of that effort. The Eucharist offers up the tears and blood of the poor and invites us to help alleviate the conditions that produce tears and blood."

And we do that, as a famous church hymn says, by moving "from worship into service." We don't go to the Eucharist only to worship God by expressing our faith and devotion. The Eucharist is not a private devotional prayer, but is rather a communal act of worship which, among other things, calls us to go forth and live out in the world what we celebrate inside of a church, namely, the non-importance of social distinction, the special place that God gives to the tears and blood of the poor, and non-negotiable challenge from God to each of us to work at changing the conditions that cause tears and blood. The Eucharist calls us to love tenderly, but, just as strongly, it calls us to act in justice.

To say that Eucharist calls us to justice and to social justice is not a statement that takes its origin in political correctness. It takes its origin in Jesus who, drawing upon the great prophets of old, assures us that the validity of all worship will ultimately be judged by how it affects "widows, orphans, and strangers."

Notes

Luke 9:11 ***He received them***: *apodechomai* is a Greek verb akin to receiving someone in hospitality. This is a theme carried over from the mission of the apostles just completed.

Luke 9:13 ***Give them some food yourselves***: having just finished a mission is which they had accomplished great things in the name of the Lord, why is it that they suddenly lack the sense that all things are possible in God?

Luke 9:14 ***five thousand***: Two OT events are often noted as providing the proper framework in which to understand Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. First, the short account of Elisha's feeding of a hundred men in 2 Kings 4:42–44 provides a number of structural parallels the presentation of the bread to the prophet (9:13; 2 Kings 4:42), the prophet's order for the people to be fed (9:13; 2 Kings 4:42), the reaction of the prophet's followers (9:13; 2 Kings 4:43), the new order from the prophet (9:14; 2 Kings 4:43), the distribution and eating of the bread (9:16; 2 Kings 4:44), and the note concerning the leftovers (9:17; 2 Kings 4:44).

As the Elisha story builds on the feeding of the Israelites in the wilderness (Exod. 16–18), so may the setting in the account of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand evoke the same event (9:12; Exod. 16:1–3). Moreover, the connection between fish and quail is already made in Num. 11:22, 31, and thus the "five loaves and two fish" may be a reference to the manna and quail that God had provided for his people during the wilderness journey. Others have further traced this connection between birds and fish through Second Temple and rabbinic literature

Luke 9:16 ***Then taking . . .*** : the actions of Jesus recall the institution of the Eucharist in Luke 22:19

Luke 9:17 ***They all ate and were satisfied***: This is a narrative fulfillment of the Beatitude, "*blessed are those who are hungry now, for they shall be filled*" (6:21). Both verses use the root word *chortazō* (satisfy). The **twelve wicker baskets** is a clear reference to Israel now cast in the scene of eschatological wellness.

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