



Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice
 Salesiane di Don Bosco
 Visitatoria M. Madre della Chiesa - RMC
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Feast of Gratitude 2021

Reflections on Jn 21,1-14

Sr. Maria KO

It is very significant and beautiful to be able to network around the Word of God on the occasion of the Feast of Gratitude to Mother, which becomes at the same time, a celebration of the communion of all the FMA in the world. Listening to the Gospel account together we want to express the conviction that, as in the primitive Church, the Word of God together with the Eucharist (thanksgiving) and *koinonia* in the same charism, is at the roots of our union.

This year the feast has as its theme: "*Networked for a culture of life*". The Gospel passage, the center of our reflection, is also in tune with the liturgical period we are experiencing: the Easter season.

We invoke the presence of the Spirit and we place ourselves in a listening attitude.

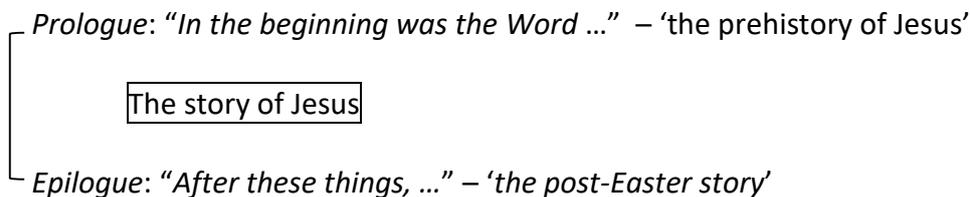
After this, Jesus revealed himself again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. He revealed himself in this way.
2 Together were Simon Peter, Thomas called Didymus, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee's sons, and two others of his disciples.
3 Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We also will come with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.
4 When it was already dawn, Jesus was standing on the shore; but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.
5 Jesus said to them, "Children, have you caught anything to eat?" They answered him, "No."
6 So he said to them, "Cast the net over the right side of the boat and you will find something." So they cast it, and were not able to pull it in because of the number of fish.
7 So the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he tucked in his garment, for he was lightly clad, and jumped into the sea.
8 The other disciples came in the boat, for they were not far from shore, only about a hundred yards, dragging the net with the fish.
9 When they climbed out on shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread.
10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you just caught."
11 So Simon Peter went over and dragged the net ashore full of one hundred fifty-three large fish. Even though there were so many, the net was not torn.
12 Jesus said to them, "Come, have breakfast." And none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they realized it was the Lord.
13 Jesus came over and took the bread and gave it to them, and in like manner the fish.
14 This was now the third time Jesus was revealed to his disciples after being raised from the dead.

1. General view of Jn 21

1.1. The location of Jn 21 within the Gospel

We are at the last chapter of the Gospel of John: a carefully composed *epilogue*, which highlights a reference to the poetic *prologue* (1: 1-18).

- The *Prologue* starts with “*In the beginning was the Word ...*” which presents to us the ‘*prehistory of Jesus*’, His being with the Father before the incarnation.
- The *Epilogue*, introduced by the words “*After this, Jesus revealed himself again to his disciples ...*” presents “*the story of Jesus after the Easter event*,” or the extension of the history of Jesus in the Church, formed by His disciples, who continue His work and testify to it in the world.
- Between the *prologue* and the *epilogue* ‘the earthly story of Jesus’ takes place.



Read as a whole with the Gospel, the *epilogue*, more than a conclusion, is an opening. It is a new wave that Jesus has set in motion and that extends to infinity, embracing the whole world and involving all of humanity.

Jesus “*revealed Himself again*”: Jesus is always present, but He ‘manifests’ Himself in different ways. Now it is a ‘new’ manifestation. This suggests the continuity of the epilogue with the whole Gospel. In fact, it is not difficult to ascertain the links between chapter 21 and many other episodes previously told, such as these:

- The following of the first disciples (chap. 1)
- Jesus encounter with the Samaritan woman (chap.4)
- The multiplication of bread and the discourse that follows (chap. 6)
- The Last Supper and the washing of the feet (chap. 13)
- The last discourse in the cenacle (chap. 13-17)
- The other two apparitions of the Risen One to Mary of Magdala in front of the tomb and to the disciples in the upper room behind closed doors (chap. 20)

1.2. The structure of Jn 21

The account can be sub-divided into three parts:

- 21: 1-8: the miraculous catch of fish
- 21: 9-14: the meal together
- 21: 15-23: Jesus’ dialogue with Peter

Each of the three parts recalls an essential element of the life of the Church:

fishing → the mission

meal → the Eucharist

dialogue → love and intra-ecclesial relationship

All these elements have their center in Jesus.

- The fish are abundant: the mission is fruitful only with the presence of Jesus and following His indications.
- The meal recalls the Eucharist: the celebration of communion with Jesus and with our brothers and sisters, source of the mission.
- Dialogue is centered on love. Jesus entrusts His flock to Peter after his triple confession of love. Pastoral service in the Church is rooted in love for Jesus and for the flock He loves.

2. Some reflections

After the general notes, our reflection unfolds, focused on the first two parts (vv. 1-14), underlining 4 aspects.

2.1. On the threshold

A careful reading of the episode reveals an interesting feature: the scene takes place on the threshold.

- Time: 'at dawn', between night and day, between darkness and light
- Place: 'on the shore', threshold between rough sea and solid ground
- The situation of Jesus: after the resurrection, between His earthly presence and His definitive return to the Father.
- The situation of the disciples:
 - between the shocking event of Easter and the return to ordinary life
 - between being fishermen of fish and being fishermen of people
 - between the time of physically following Jesus and the time of witness, of proclamation
 - between the time of listening, of acceptance and the time of mission
 - between the time of Christ and the time of the Church
 - between ignorance ("*the disciples did not realize it was Jesus*": v.4) and recognition of Jesus ("*They realized it was the Lord*": v. 12)
 - between unsuccessful work ("*that night they caught nothing*": v.3) and the abundant fish ("*the net was full of one hundred fifty-three large fish*": v. 11)

The threshold is emblematic, it portends a passage, a change. It has no rigid boundaries. It is a fluid area, open to surprise, to novelty, to the future, to the bursting in of the divine.

In our experience of human relationships and educational commitment we know how important the threshold area is. We know the moment after class, when everyone, teachers and pupils, close their books and are about to leave. Time, as if suspended, can give a moment of unpredictable grace for both the teacher and the student: a flash of understanding, an exchange of ideas on the sidelines of structured lessons, a spontaneous word coming out of the classroom together, a meeting of looks and smiles, an interest in the person, a word of encouragement, a humorous joke, something more than the classroom. How many friendships are born in this way on the threshold, how much fruitfulness of educational accompaniment springs up on the threshold! In this regard, we can take many examples from the life of Don Bosco, of Mother Mazzarello and of many of our past and present sisters. The magic of the threshold suggests the pedagogy of the courtyard, the Oratorian style of our youth ministry, the 'little word in the ear', etc.

Jesus is a teacher in grasping and valuing the situation of being on the threshold, of 'after school'. Here He does it with a simple approach and with a word as daily, as human and concrete as it is charged with intense affection: "*Children, have you caught anything to eat?*" (v.5).

2.2. Super-abundance

The story opens under the sign of unsuccessful, sterile, disappointing fishing. A dark gray color acts as a background. From it, however, the brightness of the surprise of the encounter with the Lord and the joy at the abundance of fish will emerge by contrast.

The disciples are professional fishermen, rich in experience. They have at their disposal the tools, the techniques, the tenacity to face fatigue, the knowledge of the wind direction and the movement of the water, the wisdom in judging the right moment, the right point to get the boat to arrive, the adequate depth to cast the net. And yet, despite all their expertise and all their efforts, the net pulled up is empty, like an old wet rag. To the question of Jesus "*Children, have you caught anything to eat?*" they respond with a curt "*No*", seasoned with a bit of bitterness.

One must recognize the emptiness of one's hands before spreading them out for the gift. It seems a constant of Jesus' educational style to lead people to the naked truth of themselves, without excuses and without escaping. The Samaritan woman, in dialogue with Jesus, is led to admit "*I have no husband*" (Jn 4:17). Before being healed by Jesus, the paralytic at the pool of Betzà acknowledges that he had waited in vain for 38 years and frankly confesses his own powerlessness and isolation: "*Lord, I have no one ...*" (Jn 5: 7). In the midst of the multitude, he does not find anyone to give him a hand at the right time. To the rich young man, Jesus expressly says: "*You lack one thing*" (Mk 10:21). At Cana, it is Mary who discovers the lack of wine and alerts Jesus: "*They have no wine*" (Jn 2: 3).

It is part of human and spiritual growth to sincerely recognize what is missing, to identify the weak points. In our scene, the fishing is fruitless because they have not included Jesus in their undertaking. Only the presence and the word of Jesus will transform their disappointment into hope, their discouragement into amazement. This fact vividly illustrates what Jesus says in His 'farewell discourse': "*Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself if it does not remain in the vine, so neither can you if you do not remain in me... Without me you can do nothing*" (Jn 15: 4-5).

From the gloomy background an astounding overabundance will emerge by contrast: 153 (50x3 + 3, sign of fullness) large fish. Abundance is one of the characteristics of the 'miracles of gift' worked by Jesus: the multiplication of the loaves satisfied a large crowd with baskets of leftovers; at Cana six jars are filled with the wine obtained from the water, each containing 80 and 120 liters, moreover, wine of excellent quality, much more than 'strictly necessary' to solve the emergency situation.

The overabundance is a sign of gratuitousness, of excess, of beauty, of creativity, of celebration, of exuberant vitality. The God of Jesus Christ is a God with a big, generous heart. John says in the prologue: "*From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace*" (1:16). He is a God who does "*great things*" (Lk 1:49), Mary confirms in the Magnificat, and Paul echoes her: God does "*much more than we can ask and think*" (Eph 3: 18-20). We can find many echoes in this regard in the Salesian tradition.

2.3. Tenderness of the Risen Jesus

Before asking Peter *"Do you love me?"* Jesus shows His disciples His tender, concrete, caring love, like that of a mother. He does not reproach them for their weakness, does not scold them for their denial or abandonment in the hour of His passion, but calls them with the affectionate appellation 'children' and makes sure they have something to eat after a night of empty fatigue. Then He tells them where to find fish. At the end, He Himself prepares breakfast for them. Just as He had done in the Cenacle with the washing of feet, Jesus expresses His love, not only with words, but also with gestures, with non-verbal communication that is highly significant. Here, as soon as they reach shore, the disciples see a charcoal fire with fish and bread on it and they find Jesus busy 'cooking'. *"Come, have breakfast."* How much warmth this invitation infuses and how much emotion it arouses! We all have the experience of returning home late and finding a loved one who awaits us and welcomes us saying: *"Have you eaten? Dinner is warm."* When people love they perform divine gestures, and when God loves, He acts with much humanity.

Everything is prepared, but Jesus also wants the disciples to give their contribution by bringing freshly caught fish. Gift of God and the fruit of human work come together in this open-air banquet of communion, under the immense sky, on the seashore, where the gaze is lost in a boundless horizon.

2.4. Universality – unity – synodality

Let us turn our gaze to the characters around Jesus: the disciples.

"They were together": they are not single people, but united together as if waiting for a meeting, for a new mission. Their number has a symbolic meaning. As the 'twelve' indicates the totality of Israel, the 'seven' is the symbolic figure of universality. It recalls the seven ecclesial communities of the Apocalypse (chap. 2-3) representing the whole universal Church. This group with the Risen Christ at the center is the first seed of the Church that spreads throughout the world, a universal, fruitful Church, a Church that generates other children of God throughout history.

Some well-known names are presented, a pair of brothers, plus "two other disciples". They are different people by origin, by character. They have different histories of vocation, but they were chosen and called by the same Lord. Among these seven stands Peter, whose name appears more than 40 times in the Gospel of John. An impulsive, impetuous man, he is more ready to speak and act than to reflect. He is impatient, but upright, straightforward, consistent, zealous, resourceful. Here, it is he who takes the initiative *"I am going fishing"*, to which everyone responds unanimously: *"We also will come with you"*. He throws himself into the water as soon as he recognizes Jesus on the shore, then getting back into the boat he starts to draw the net full of fish from the water. He is a dynamic man, solicitous, of decisive and fast action.

Unlike Peter, in whom the gift of leadership prevails, there is John, qualified as *"that disciple whom Jesus loved"*, who stands out more for his charism for the intuition of love. He is gifted with a great ability to grasp the signs, to reflect deeply, together with a sensitivity for the mystery. It is he who, first of all, recognizes Jesus and proclaims Him to the others: *"It is the Lord!"*. Authority and charism, intuition and prophecy, thought and action must go together in the communities constituted by Jesus: as yesterday so also today. Then there are *"the other disciples"* busy pulling the boat towards the shore, dragging the net full of large fish. This concrete and effective service is also indispensable.

Overall, there seems to be a tacit agreement, a coordinated action in the group, in which everyone brings their contribution according to their characteristics and skills. We could say that here there is a living icon of the synodal Church, which walks together (*syn - odos*) led by the Risen Lord, who illuminates it with His Word and nourishes it with the Bread of life.

In addition to the characters, the objects are also full of symbolism and accentuate the ecclesiological significance of this episode. Despite the large amount of fish, the boat does not sink and the net does not tear. Fruitfulness and universality, the multiplicity of charisms and services do not break the unity of the Church. *"The net was not torn"*: the verb to tear (*skizo*) recalls 'schism', internal division, which here, however, does not happen. It is the same used for the tunic of Jesus, woven in one piece, which the soldiers decided not to divide and on which they cast lots (Jn 19:24). Diversity does not harm unity, on the contrary, it embellishes it with colors; synodality does not compromise unity, it makes it more organic and consistent, more lively and dynamic.

Conclusion

Reading it on the occasion of the Institute's World Feast of Gratitude, this text appears particularly illuminating. The Institute lives the *"prophecy of together"* under the guidance of Mother, and participates in the mission of the Church and its characteristics of universality, unity, and synodality. On the way to GC24, we want to obey the word of Mary: *"Do whatever He tells you"* (Jn 2: 5). The passage we have meditated upon gives us proof of how true and effective this 'Marian commandment' is. The disciples cast the net doing what Jesus said and the catch was surprisingly abundant. With the presence of Jesus and following His Word, we can become *"generative communities"* as GC24 hopes; we can be *"networked for a culture of life"*, in the midst of the challenges of contemporaneity. The miracle of the 153 large fish can be repeated even today!