

A Letter from Fr. Jerry Gunderson

June 22, 2025

Dear Friends,

In late May 2013, a massive tornado hit Moore, Oklahoma. Afterward people began to sift through the heaps of what had once been their houses. They searched for wedding rings, retrieved lost pets, and pried apart the rubble to see what had survived and what had not. Mountains of debris littered the town. The local school looked as if it had been hit by a bomb. "All you can say is it's a complete disaster," said a longtime resident.

In the normal course of human thinking, when faced with overwhelming tragedy, when you think you do not have the resources necessary to meet the overwhelming need, you pull back into yourself. Facing such a situation, we might think and act like the disciples of Jesus in the gospel today. Darkness was approaching. The crowd was overwhelming. They found themselves in a desert. They lacked sufficient resources to provide shelter or nourishment. They divided 5000 by 5 and came up with not enough to replace what was lacking. Their human instinct was to push the crowd away. "Let everyone to fend for themselves," they said.

There is, however, another way. About the same time the Moore citizens began sifting through the rubble, groups of volunteers started a march toward Moore. The groups ranged from families of five to groups of fifty or more. Some came from towns nearby; others places further away. They came with shovels and spades, with food and blankets. They came to help. They came with their sleeves rolled up. They came to break their bodies and pour out their blood. They came to do things Jesus' way.

Today's second reading gives us the earliest New Testament account of the Last Supper. It gives the first indication of how Jesus acted characteristically. It states that Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to his disciples.

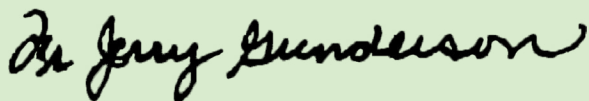
Next, we get Luke's account of the feeding of the 5,000. A very similar pattern of actions is described. Jesus takes the meager loaves and fishes in his hands. He looks up to heaven and blesses them. Next, he gives them to the disciples. Then the disciples give food to the crowd.

We hear this same series of characteristic gestures of Jesus at every mass. "He took bread in his hands, raised his eyes to heaven, gave thanks, said the blessing, broke the bread and gave it to them."

- "Taking life in his hands" can be translated as picking up a broom or a shovel to remove debris.
- "Looking up to heaven and blessing" suggests a recognition. We are not the source of our own lives; God is. Everything we need ultimately comes from what God provides. This is looking at life as gift, not as inadequacy. This is not counting and arriving at insufficiency, but it is noticing and being filled with gratitude.
- "Breaking the bread" has a very practical meaning too. Jesus once said "If you hold on to life you will lose it, but if you give it away you will gain life in abundance." I suspect that the people who marched toward Moore, Oklahoma received more than they gave and went home filled.

At mass, when the priest repeats Jesus words "Do this in memory of me," he means much more than attend mass every Sunday or go to communion. He means that breaking the body and pouring out the blood is an essential component of our being fully human. In church language this is called sacrifice.

Where did the helpers gain the spirit of sacrifice – the spirit of Jesus? The Catholic Mass has been promoting sacrifice for centuries. If the marchers were Catholic Christians, they likely gained the spirit of sacrifice through the mass.



Fr. Jerry Gunderson