

August 2, 2015 Bread and Circuses Homily

My dear brothers and sisters, There is little debate among Catholics that one of the most influential and remarkable figures of the last century was an Italian priest and disciple of St. Francis of Assisi, Padre Pio. A noted wonder worker whose knack for reading the souls of the faithful was well known, the Capuchin friar attracted an enormous following in his lifetime, and, indeed, for many years after his death in 1968.

A story: Sometime in the 1960's a celebrated Italian American composer Gian Carlo Menotti, and his girlfriend visited San Giovanni Rotondo, where Padre Pio lived. Menotti's girlfriend expressed a desire to speak privately with the holy man. Menotti promised he would wait for her. Hours later, the girlfriend returned and she was sobbing. "Why are you crying" asked the composer. "Padre Pio slapped me in the face". Menotti was startled. "Why did he slap you"? "Well, when I finally had a chance to meet him, he scolded me. He said that I did not present myself as a woman of faith nor did I come as a repentant sinner seeking God's mercy but only as one overcome with curiosity. So he slapped me. It was for the wrong reason that I came to him. He claimed that I wasted his time.

In today's gospel reading, we learn that some people were interested in Jesus simply because he performed miracles, rather than in what he taught. "You are looking for me not because you saw signs, but because you have eaten bread and are filled up" (Jn. 6:26). As one noted biblical scholar points out: "Jesus informs them that they look only at the surface of what he does and so they see only that he has power to provide earthly food". Earthly bread is perishable and eventually spoils. The bread Jesus was speaking about was the nourishing bread of God's word... And this bread does not perish. Only faith can satisfy the hunger of the soul! We recall the words of Jesus in Matthew's gospel: "One does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God" (Mt.4:4).

In the year 146 A.D. the Roman poet Juvenal coined a phrase "Bread and Circuses". Only two things the citizens of Rome desire, maintained the sage: cheap food and entertainment. By distributing free food and by staging huge spectacles, the government could keep the people contented, and, even more importantly, distracted. A wise pagan, Juvenal truly believed that material comforts alone were inadequate to satisfy an impoverished soul!

Let us ask ourselves: Do we look to Jesus only to satisfy our personal needs and make our lives more comfortable? Do we treat faith as a consumer might look upon a item of merchandise? Do we choose what appeals to us and reject what is too demanding and difficult? Does the person of Christ attract us if all our material needs and desires are fulfilled? Do we truly believe that Jesus is "the Living bread come down from heaven and gives life to the world"(Jn. 6:33)? Do we recognize his mysterious presence in Word and Sacrament? Is our natural life sustained by the supernatural teachings of our Savior?

Amen!