

Daughters of Charity

Provincial Archives

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Bread and “miracles”



Sketch of a soldier eating. Image courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

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The Sisters’ accounts of events before Gettysburg often echo each other but clearly the most retold incident involved Sr. Mary Jane Stokes and the Community’s bread. On a visit back to Emmitsburg in 1886, she was asked to retell what she had witnessed during the Union encampment in 1863. “Nearly in these words,” the Annals narrator notes, she told the story: “The soldiers made their appearance here, as well as I can remember about three in the afternoon. We were going down to the barn, Sr. Camilla, the Treasurer, and I, to see about them there, when we turned around, and here was a whole pack of them at the house behind us. The poor fellows looked half-starved, lank as herrings, and barefoot. They were on their way to the Gettysburg battle. Well, the Sisters were cutting bread, and giving them to eat as fast as they came for it, all the evening, and I was afraid there would be no bread left for the Sister’s supper. However, they had supper, and plenty. After supper, I belonged to the kitchen Sisters, I went to Mother Ann Simeon, and told her I didn’t know what the Sisters would do for breakfast next morning, for they would have no bread. ***Then I went to see, and the baking of the day was there. I did not see it multiplied, but I saw it there.***”

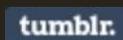
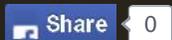
Two other Sisters also offered accounts of this episode. “And now occurred a singular fact,” recounted Sr. Marie Louise Caulfield, “worthy of record since it gives another instance of the sweet Providence of God even watching over, and supplying the wants of our Community when those wants grow out of the necessities of our Masters. This fact is related by Sister Stokes, the Sister then in charge of the farm. As squad after squad succeeded each other and

all going away liberally supplied, she knew that the ordinary quantity of bread baked for the Community could not suffice for such a disbursement and went to the bake house to see if anything was there for the Sisters' breakfast. To her surprise 'the baking of the day was yet untouched.' The Sisters had been feeding this vast concourse out of the ordinary portion prepared for themselves!"

Sr. Camilla O'Keefe noted: "An offering of refreshments to the men was very acceptable. Then the supper or a good lunch for the men was got ready by the Sisters, some set to cutting the bread, others making the coffee. Whilst the Sister in charge of the bread in serving out so much said to the others, I fear we will run short for the supper & breakfast for the house. So she ran over to the bake house to see what bread might be there and to her great surprise found they had all the baking of that day on hand. She could hardly believe her eyes and thought the bread must have multiplied." Both Sisters were present when Sr. Mary Jane first reported the event in 1863 and also would have been in Emmitsburg when she retold it in 1886.

Examining the event today, the temptation is obvious – this unexpected appearance of bread surely must be a reiteration of the multiplication of loaves. In fact, the story is often interpreted that way. Yet Sr. Marie Louise only proposes that the bread is "another instance of the sweet Providence of God . . . supplying the wants of our Community." Sr. Camilla merely states that Sr. Mary Jane thought the bread must have multiplied. The most cautious is Sr. Mary Jane herself who finishes her version with a carefully strong (underlined) disclaimer: "the baking of the day was there. I did not see it multiplied, but I saw it there." None of the Sisters ever comes close to implying that there was a "miracle" and neither should we. There are many mundane explanations for how the bread came to be there (and we'll suggest one in the next Bread blog). Insisting on a "miraculous" spin diminishes what actually happened during those days at St. Joseph's when Vincent's Daughters created an enveloping charity that fed certain bodies and souls on their way to an uncertain future.

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