

**JUNE 5, 2011: SEVENTH SUNDAY OF  
EASTER Acts 1:12-14 I Peter 4:13-16  
John:17-1-11a**

As the recent Easter Sunday 60 Minute segment on Mt. Athos pointed out, we Christians have an ancient tradition of monasticism. But it's not ancient enough to be traced back to Scripture. Jesus' earliest followers presumed they'd imitate his dying and rising within the context of a community of everyday people. None of our biblical authors seems to have imagined the possibility of living one's faith in a cloistered convent or monastery. This is the world God gave Jesus; this is also the world God gave Jesus' disciples. If it was good and painful enough for Jesus, it was also good and painful enough for them.

Luke, for instance, presumes when the Holy Spirit arrives on Pentecost that this divine force will animate not just individuals, but a whole community of people. That's why he methodically clicks off the names of those who will be in the upper room on that fateful morning. Besides the Eleven, he mentions there also were "some women (a species forever banned from Mt. Athos!), and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers." Though we, at times, would like to artificially manipulate the communities in which we live our faith, Luke's first Christian community was of the "natural" variety. Everyone who joined Jesus on his Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem was included.

This also seems to be the case with John's Last Supper community. We often visualize Jesus sitting at a table with 12 men. But no gospel conveys this image. John starts the meal in chapter 13 mentioning that Jesus "poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet." Scripture students know that "disciple" refers to all followers of Jesus, both male and female. (Considering John has Mary present at Golgotha the next day, we presume Jesus washed his own mother's feet that night!)

So when Jesus talks about "those who you gave me out of this world," we should think not just of the Twelve, but of a bunch of men and women reclining around the table. Besides Mary, John includes "his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala." Do you think these three women ate their meal in a separate room from their husbands and male friends on the night before Jesus' crucifixion? Once again, we're dealing with an "ordinary" group of people, not one artificially created for "religious" purposes.

Even more important, listen carefully to what John's Jesus intends for these special individuals. He passes on to them the same ministry the Father gave him. And where are they to carry out this ministry? "Now I will no longer be in the world, but they are in the world, while I am coming to you."

The "world," for John, is that place (or group) which most opposes Jesus and his ministry. He doesn't send his friends to convents or monasteries, but into the same world in which he himself lived, ministered and died.

Perhaps that's why the author of I Peter brings up suffering. "Let no one among you be made to suffer as a murderer, a thief, or an evildoer, or as an intriguer. But whoever is made to suffer as a Christian should not be ashamed but glorify God because of the name."

A significant part of Christian suffering springs from the communities in which we live. We have little choice in their makeup. Many times, as a child, I wished (sometimes out loud) that I could run away from my family and join our neighbor's family. It was evident those adults understood and appreciated their children much more than my father and mother understood and appreciated me. Fortunately neither I or my parents could engineer such a switch. We simply had to play the hand dealt us.

Long before monasteries came into existence, the Jesus we find in the gospels presumed each of his followers would have to do the same. They weren't to run away from the world; they were to change the world.

**JUNE 12, 2011: PENTECOST Acts 2:1-11  
I Corinthians 12:3b-7,12-13 John 20:19-23**

Something we take for granted today was still a hot, debated topic when Luke composed his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. We presume anyone can be a follower of Jesus. Race or social status make no difference. We need only have faith in Jesus. Christianity is its own religion, not a branch of any other faith.

There's just one problem. Christianity didn't start that way. In the beginning - immediately after Jesus' death and resurrection - all Jesus' followers were Jews. Unlike ourselves, they looked at Jesus as a reformer of Judaism, not as the founder of a system of faith distinct from Judaism. Being Jewish was essential to being Christian. That's where the Holy Spirit stepped in.

From Acts and Paul's letters, we know this Jewish requirement was eventually challenged by some liberal disciples of Jesus. This handful of radicals began teaching that anyone could be baptized into the faith of Jesus without first being required to convert to Judaism.

The historical Jesus had no other choice but to express his faith in the context of Judaism. Except on rare occasions, he remained in that context. That's why it was hard for some of his followers to step outside Judaism and begin to share his faith with people who didn't know the difference between a lox and a bagel. These non-Jews lived their lives in circumstances and traditions quite different from that of a Galilean carpenter. Why should they be required to accept Jesus' context before they accepted Jesus' faith?

The key element in changing peoples' minds about the context/faith issue seems to have been the insight that Christians followed the risen, not the historical Jesus. Everyone knew a free, Jewish man died on Golgotha at 3:00 o'clock on Good Friday afternoon. But, as Paul reminded his Galatian community, the "new creation" which rose on Easter Sunday morning was just as much a slave as free, just as much Jew as Gentile, and just as much woman as man. People from any culture, social status, or even gender can identify with him/her. Jesus left his historical context in the tomb and rose into ours.

Since the early church carried on the ministry of Jesus, it was guided by the same Spirit which had guided him. This Spirit eventually led them to take the humongous step of baptizing Gentiles as Gentiles.

That seems to be one of the reasons Luke mentions the native lands of the people gathered in front of the house in which the disturbing wind, noise and fire occurred on Pentecost Sunday. All were Jews, but most lived in non-Jewish places. "We are Parthians, Medes, Eleamites ... "They're amazed to hear these newly-Spirited Christians ". . . speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God." Luke employs this phenomenon as an introduction to his theology that the risen Jesus can eventually be proclaimed in all cultures. No longer does one have to speak Hebrew or Aramaic in order to be among Yahweh's chosen.

Though crucial parts of Paul's I Corinthians passage have been omitted from today's liturgical selection, one classic line has been included: "To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit." Jesus' Spirit enlivens all his followers. But this gift isn't just for the benefit of the person who possesses it. It somehow benefits the whole community. We're gifted in order to be a gift for others.

John's theology of the Spirit dovetails with Paul's. If Jesus didn't send us out as God sent him out, we wouldn't need the Spirit. It's an essential part of our carrying on his uncharted risen ministry.

Thankfully the early Church left some traditions behind and gave itself over to a Spirit who guided them down those uncharted roads. Had it insisted on maintaining its Jewish traditions, almost no Gentile would even have considered jumping through the cultural hoops demanded of Jesus' followers.

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