

NOVEMEBER 20, 2011: FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING
Ezekiel 34:11-12,15-17 I Corinthians 15:20-26,28 Matthew 15:31-46

Church historians and Scripture scholars always smiled when they heard Fr. Andy Greeley discuss present church structure with a representative of the institution. When the latter invariably threw out the statement, "The church isn't a democracy!" Greeley simply responded, "Well, it used to be. How come it isn't anymore?"

In defense of the famous author, historians remind us of the 5th century CE regulation of Pope Leo the Great: "The one who governs all must be chosen by all."

Among many other texts, Scripture scholars point to the obvious implications of today's gospel pericope. In an era in which people lived in tightly structured, hierarchical societies, a religious movement appeared which insisted on the equality and dignity of all its members. To say the least, early Christianity was counterculture. Those who study the first Christian communities tell us that one of the main reasons people converted to this new religion revolved around the importance each individual experienced when he or she committed themselves to imitating Jesus' dying and rising. They themselves became "other Christs," equal members of the communities to which they belonged.

Long before Jesus, the classic Hebrew prophets also condemned anyone - especially leaders - who treated others with disdain. In today's Ezekiel pericope, for instance, we hear the prophet promise those crushed down by unfeeling leaders that one day Yahweh will break into their oppressed lives and actually "shepherd" them. "I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest," says Yahweh God. 'The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy, shepherding them rightly.'

Paul carries God's promise to care for all one step further. He reminds his Corinthian community in chapter 15 that whatever happened to the risen Jesus will happen to them. If he died, they'll die; if he rose, they'll rise. The Apostle first takes he readers back to Genesis. "For just as in Adam all die . . ." But then he quickly moves to the present. ". . . So too in Christ shall all be brought to life, but each in proper order: Christ the first fruits; then at his coming, those who belong to Christ." The end result is that "God (will) be all in all!" One can't have more dignity than that!

In today's oft-read gospel passage, Mathew's Jesus is concerned that his followers recognize his presence in all those around them, especially in those most in need. It's precisely when we reach out to the needy that we're reaching out to the risen Jesus. "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me!"

Growing up Catholic, I was frequently reminded I should recognize the uniqueness of our parish priests. They were the other Christs among us. Only much later did I discover that I, as a priest, am another Christ not because of what happened to me on December 16, 1964 in Rome's St. Peter's basilica, but because of what happened to me on February 11, 1940 in St. Mary's church, Belleville, II when I was baptized.

We usually have little pity for the "goats" in today's gospel who "go off to eternal punishment" for refusing to surface the risen Jesus in the needy around them. But perhaps we should have a little more pity for some of us Christian leaders - other Christs - who, because of present church structures, find it difficult to find Jesus in those other Christs whom we're privileged to lead. Our inability to do what Jesus expects of all Christians might be the biggest "need" we Catholics have in this day and age. Why can't we again become what we once were?

Roger Vermalen Karban

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NOVEMBER 27, 2011: FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
Isaiah 63:16b-17,19b; 64:2-7a I Corinthians 1:3-9 Mark 13:33-37

It's easy for us to overlook one of the most important lines in today's three readings. Paul reminds his Corinthian community, "... You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The Apostle presumes his readers understand what he means by "spiritual gifts." But for those of us who aren't accustomed to his terminology, we might have to turn to chapter 12 to see some of them listed: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, mighty deeds, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues. A little later in the same chapter, he personifies those gifts in specific individuals and ministries: ". . . First, apostles; second, prophets; third, teachers; then, mighty deeds; then gifts of healing, assistance, administration, and varieties of tongues." Paul, here, as always, presumes each Christian community has been blessed with sufficient spiritual gifts to make it viable. Once its members commit themselves to imitate Jesus' dying and rising, the gifts come.

The problem Paul encounters isn't that his communities don't have sufficient gifts to carry on the risen Jesus' ministry, but that certain individuals either don't recognize those gifts or know how to integrate them into the life of the community. He spends lots of time addressing those two topics.

Our sacred authors frequently warn their readers always to do what God wants them to do. As Third-Isaiah says in today's first reading, it's easy to do "religious things" but still not to carry out God's will. Praying for Yahweh to come quickly and help the Chosen People, the prophet utters one basic fear. "Would that you might meet us doing right, that we were mindful of you in our ways! Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful; all of us have become like unclean people, all our good deeds are like polluted rags ... !" No matter what we do in the name of our religion, if it isn't God's will, it's totally wasted.

Perhaps that's one of the reasons Mark's Jesus warns his community, "Be watchful! Be alert!" Though the evangelist is specifically addressing the problem of Jesus' delayed Parousia, the alertness he encourages in Jesus' followers goes across the board. "What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'" Other Christs are known for their knack of constantly watching for the risen Jesus entering their lives. Though he/she is always present, only those who are alert to that presence will be able to surface it. In the same way, God's will usually isn't something which hits us over the head; it comes gently into our daily lives. Those who aren't anticipating that will never seem to notice it.

Paul has a parallel insight about the Spirit's gifts. Unless we're expecting them, we'll never notice them.

Years ago, while taking special courses in screening candidates for diaconal ministry, I asked my teacher about the gifts necessary for priestly ministry. She smiled and answered, "The number one gift a pastor is expected to have is the gift of surfacing and integrating the gifts of everyone else in the community." In other words, a pastor must be one of the most alert persons in the church. Someone exercising that ministry has an obligation to cut through all the prejudices and limitations which our culture and traditions impose on God's actions in our lives and point out how God is constantly blessing us with the gifts of the Spirit.

Knowing Paul's theology about spiritual gifts, I wonder what he would say about our practice of "praying for vocations." Perhaps the same thing my late friend and teacher Fr. Frank Cleary once said, "Sometimes we find ourselves praying for rain, standing in a downpour with an umbrella over our heads. Maybe we should simply pray for enough courage to fold up the umbrella."

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