

MAY 29, 2011: SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 8:5-8,14-17 1 Peter 3:15-18 John 14:15-21

Throughout his recent book, *The Social Mission of the U.S. Catholic Church*, Charles Curran marvels at the Catholic Worker movement. He not only points out that it is "the longest lasting lay social movement in the U. S. Church, he provides us with two characteristics which help explain its longevity. "First, the movement is based on the Sermon on the Mount: the radical call of the Gospel which emphasized corporal works of mercy Second, Dorothy Day (its founder) did not believe in structure or organization.... The movement was open to development and adaptation precisely because there was no rigid organizational structure."

In some ways the author of John's gospel agrees with Dorothy Day. Johannine scholars like Raymond Brown always emphasize the evangelist's opposition to lots of church structure. We see this tendency especially in the contrast he develops between the beloved disciple and Peter. (Of course, this same scholar reminds us that someone -either the original author, or one of his disciples - added the "Peter do you love me?" chapter 21 to the gospel as a way of saying, "Perhaps we do need some structure.")

For John, our faith revolves around two Christian phenomena: the love of Jesus and his gift of the Holy Spirit. That's why both surface so often in Jesus' Last Supper farewell discourse, as they do in today's pericope. "If you love me and obey the commands I give you, I will ask the Father and he will give you another Paraclete to be with you always: the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept, since it neither sees him nor recognizes him; but you can recognize him because he remains with you and will be within you." Without any rigid structure the followers of the risen Jesus are able to carry on Jesus' ministry of love by constantly falling back on the Holy Spirit who helps them develop and apply that love to people and situations the historical Jesus never encountered. John doesn't need a hierarchical organization or hierarchical statements. Jesus' disciples know what's expected of them because they have both the risen Jesus and the Holy Spirit pointing the way.

Even those authors of the Christian Scriptures, like Luke, who believe in some structure still emphasize the necessity of the Holy Spirit. In today's Acts passage, for instance, Peter and John are the church leaders who come down to Samaria from Jerusalem to complete Philip's evangelization. But even after the two "impose hands" and the new Christians receive the Holy Spirit, Luke still presumes the Holy Spirit, not the apostles, is the major force in these converts' life of faith.

Defining "mystery" as a tension in our faith which pulls us in at least two different directions at the same time, the Holy Spirit is at the top of Christian mysteries. The Spirit operates in those dimensions of our lives which humans rarely visit. The author of 1 Peter seems to be referring to this part of our existence when he talks about the pain often inflicted on Christians simply for doing good. Precisely during such undeserved pain we're expected to imitate Jesus' suffering and live a new life "in the Spirit."

History shows us that rigid structures eventually stifle its member's spirit. Even if these structures purport to profess Christianity, its members often are more faithful to the institution than to the spirit which should enliven the institution.

Along with Fr. Curran, we're grateful that that prophetic, determined anarchist Dorothy Day, carrying out John's theology, has given us an almost 80 year example of what people of real faith can accomplish by simply giving themselves over to Jesus and the Spirit he's given us.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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FOSIL, BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

**JUNE 2 or 5, 2011: THE ASCENSION OF
JESUS Acts 1:1-11 Ephesians 1:17-23
Matthew 28:16-20**

Considering today is the feast of the Ascension, it's ironic that Jesus doesn't ascend into heaven at the end of Matthew's gospel. Most Christians mistakenly combine our first reading with our third. Since we presume all the evangelists agree with Luke and teach that Jesus definitively ascended into heaven after his resurrection, we also presume Matthew's account of the disciples gathering at a "mountain in Galilee" is simply a pre-ascension narrative. Jesus says these things to his followers, then he leaves. (Many of us don't even realize that Galilee's at least 70 or 80 miles north of Jerusalem's Mount of Olives: the place from which Luke's Jesus departs this earth.)

Matthew's theology about the presence of the risen Jesus differs from Luke's. Matthew's Jesus doesn't go anywhere. On the contrary, he assures his disciples, "I am with you always, until the end of the age."

Scholars believe this great "commissioning" pericope took form rather late in early Christianity. Jesus, for instance, tells his followers to baptize with a Trinitarian formula (Father, Son, Spirit). We know from Paul's letters that first generation Christians probably baptized only in the name of Jesus. Yet though this well-known narrative dates only to the late 70s or early 80s, it conveys one of Christianity's most essential beliefs: those who follow Jesus are expected to carry on the work of Jesus. Long before Christians began to divide themselves into clergy and laity at the end of the second century, every disciple of Jesus was regarded as "another Christ." That's why our Christian sacred authors constantly remind us to fall back on the presence and support of Jesus for whatever we do in the name of Jesus.

It's also significant that Matthew's message is connected to a geographic place. Just as an earlier Chosen People was commissioned on a mountain top (Sinai) to carry out the will of Yahweh, so these new Chosen People also receive their commission on a mountain top to carry on the ministry of Jesus. (Actually today's gospel would better fit in the church-forming feast of Pentecost than it does in the Ascension.)

Yet even when we read Luke's ascension account in our Acts passage, we still surface the determination to carry on Jesus' work. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The historical Jesus ministered in the first three places; his disciples are now expected to expand his ministry far beyond those small geographical locations.

Who will drive and direct these other Christs into these unfamiliar areas? For Luke, it's always the Holy Spirit. "You will receive power," Jesus promises, "when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses" In contrast to Matthew's theology of the risen Jesus' constant presence in the community, Luke must "remove" Jesus so that the Spirit can come (on Pentecost) and take over where Jesus left off.

Against the background of such diverse theologies, it might be helpful to turn to our Ephesians reading. The Pauline disciple responsible for this letter deliberately echoes one of his mentor's basic beliefs. Whether we fall back on the power of the risen Jesus or on the power of the Holy Spirit, those who are determined to imitate Jesus of Nazareth eventually become the body of the risen Christ right here and now. "God put all things beneath Jesus' feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way."

No matter what theology we buy into, both the Holy Spirit and the risen Jesus agree with Luke's "two men dressed in white garments" who demand to know why we're standing here all day looking up at the sky instead of looking right and left to discover how we can daily carry on the work of Jesus.

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