

SEPTEMBER 30, 2012: TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Numbers 11:25-29 James 5:1-6 Mark 9:38-43,45,47-48

Today's first and third readings dovetail perfectly with our upcoming celebration of Vatican II's 50th anniversary.

Standing with thousands of others in St. Peter's Piazza that Thursday morning, watching the 2,500 bishops process into the basilica, I had no inkling of the changes the upcoming council was destined to bring about. At most, we liturgical "movers" would have been more than content if the bishops eventually permitted the two Eucharistic Scripture readings to be proclaimed in the vernacular. We weren't hoping for much more.

Of course, within just one week, everyone was surprised by what was happening. The council participants were deliberating in and with a spirit no one anticipated. Our church has never been the same since.

That's one of the reasons I'm surprised by the claims of some today that there never was a "Vatican II spirit." According to them, the council is just the 16 documents the council issued, nothing more.

When pressed, I remind these "spiritless" individuals of what happened during a September 1963 workshop given North American College students by the well-known social justice priest John Cronin. At that point, the first council documents were still three months down the road. Yet Fr. Cronin shocked all of us with a personal confession. "Because of what's happened at the council," he said, "I now regard as serious sins some of the things I did as a young priest working in the National Catholic Welfare Conference office - especially copying and forwarding Vatican letters to bishops and priests informing them they had been silenced and swearing them to secrecy about the silencing." No document changed the famed Sulpician's morality. His turnabout could only have come from the spirit the council was surfacing.

Notice in our Numbers pericope how Yahweh's spirit breaks through the rules and regulations Moses set up for the reception of the spirit. Eldad and Medad weren't even present, yet they still received Yahweh's spirit. No wonder Joshua wants them silenced. The pair is operating outside the accepted institutional envelope.

John must not have known about this event, else he wouldn't have tried to stop someone "who does not follow us" from driving out demons in Jesus' name. It's clear from Jesus' unexpected response that he has a broader concept of the spirit's presence and work than some of his followers. "Whoever is not against us is for us."

It doesn't seem to be an accident that Mark's Jesus immediately follows his Johannine encounter with a warning about causing "one of these little ones who believe in me to sin." Given the context, I presume at least one of our Christian leaders' sinful actions is trying to limit the work and recognition of Jesus' spirit. Because of our church's present hierarchical structure, it takes lots of faith and courage for those exercising authority to faithfully remind themselves and their "little ones" that they don't control that spirit. As the council documents emphasized, that spirit can be found not only in all Catholics and in our "separated Christian brothers and sisters," but even in non-Christians, and eventually in all people.

Though we can identify with James' irritation with those in his community refusing to relate to the poor and disadvantaged as the historical Jesus commanded us to relate, it's even more difficult to relate to them as the risen Jesus' spirit encourages us to relate. Frequently that spirit expects us to go beyond institutional limits.

It certainly was the risen Jesus' spirit, alive in Vatican II, which eventually forced Fr. Cronin to judge, from a completely different perspective, how he once carried out his institutional obligations. No written document prompted that honest, memorable confession.

OCTOBER 7, 2012: TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Genesis 2:18-24 Hebrews 2:9-11 Mark 10:2-16

It's evident to serious students of Scripture that politicians who promise to return our country to "biblical family values" have never read the Bible. Biblical morality is moving, not static. It constantly changes. What's permitted in one century can be forbidden in the next - even when it concerns sexuality and marriage.

Almost always, when it comes to the latter, our sacred authors are usually one moral step ahead of the cultures in which they live. This is certainly the case with today's Genesis passage.

Writing in the 10th century, BCE, the Yahwist author is concerned not only that "man" not exist alone, but also that the one who eventually becomes his partner is someone made of the same "stuff from which he's made. Unlike our narrative, many early creation myths taught that the gods created women out of inferior material, permitting men, who were made of superior stuff, to lord it over them.

We also know from prehistoric cave paintings that some primitive humans experimented with animal partnering. That seems to be why the writer emphatically mentions no animal "proved to be the suitable partner" for the man. If man is destined to have a helpmate, it's going to be another human, not an animal.

Because only the woman is made from man, the sacred author is provided with an opportunity to present an "etiological" reason for human intercourse. (An etiological explanation for a name or an action is rarely historical or scientific. It simply explains something in a way that applies to the everyday life of the reader. E.g. Why's grass green? Because dogs are brown. Why's the sky blue? Because baseballs are white.) In this case, the couple becomes one through intercourse because at one time, before Yahweh took part of the man to form a woman, they were one. Intercourse is a sign of that primal unity.

But even though "the two of them become one flesh," the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures permit that one flesh to be separated through divorce - something which Jesus forbids in our gospel pericope. Of course his disciples are confused. Jesus' morality goes far beyond accepted Jewish morality.

He assures his followers that no-divorce has always been Yahweh's plan, but, because of strong human opposition, God put that plan on a back-burner until Jesus' arrival. Only a rare Jew would have obeyed such a strict law. But like so many other things, Christian marriage is also affected by Jesus' dying and rising.

Perhaps that's why Mark immediately adds the well-known story of Jesus and the children, and especially zeroes in on Jesus' remark, "Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it." In this situation, the childlike quality Jesus seems to praise is an ability to learn and grow. No one can be his follower unless he or she is willing to evolve, to constantly change their value systems.

No wonder the Hebrews author makes the suffering which we both endure the connecting point between Jesus and us. If Jesus' ministry revolves around surfacing God's kingdom - God working effectively in our daily lives - he's got to be concerned with helping us change throughout those lives. Such change entails constant psychological suffering and death.

Only those who are committed to experiencing such changes in their lives will be able to surface God's kingdom in their midst. The "unchangeable" will probably get into heaven one day, but sadly, they'll never experience God's heaven existing around them right here and now.

Family values and morality have constantly evolved, even beyond the 1,200 years in which our biblical writings were composed and collected. Can we today die enough to be open to the changes we've yet to experience.

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