

JUNE 16TH, 2019: HOLY TRINITY SUNDAY

Proverbs 8:22-31 Romans 5:1-5 John 16:12-15

Ever guilty of going about things backward?

I presume this is the situation many of us Christians face every Trinity Sunday. Though our sacred authors describe and comment on God from one direction, we're usually approaching him/her from the opposite direction. While our writers create the biblical pictures they develop based on their personal experiences of that God, many of us shape our personal God-experiences just to fit into their pictures. Our definition of God is frequently more important than our experiences of God. First, we look for a theology, then search for experiences to reinforce it.

Our sacred authors weren't brought up on catechisms; they were formed by experiences. Though they later attempt to put their experiences into some form of logical patterns, it's clear from the many – often contradictory – biblical theologies we encounter that no one size fits all. Those willing to be involved with God are committing themselves to an adventure almost impossible to describe. Perhaps that's why, in God's wisdom, our Scriptures were composed by Semitic – not Greek – thinkers, people who refuse to analyze their exploits. Instead of coming up with either/or ways of looking at their God-adventures, they concentrate on synthesizing them. They're always on the lookout to add another dimension or surface an aspect they never before noticed. Their one goal is to zero in on the both/and of their experiences.

Not long ago I learned of an interesting custom among 19th century North American Plains Indians: “counting coup.” In battle, the tribe's most courageous warriors would simply touch an enemy - not kill or wound him - then ride off. After the conflict, the survivors would gather to count the touches and compare notes. Among other things, they were convinced such “coups” transferred some of their enemy's strength or spirit to them in ways that killing them couldn't achieve.

Could saving and collecting our sacred writings be another way of counting coup? In a sense, our biblical writers have touched God, and lived to tell us about it. They could have “killed” God by giving us a technical, catechism definition of divinity. But instead, they only touched her/him, leaving something for another day and another encounter. Best of all, they shared the spirit they gained from their contact, helping us uncover another dimension of someone who boasts unlimited dimensions.

Unlike our Semitic-thinking sacred authors, we Greek-thinkers are in the business of killing, not touching. When we get done with the subject we attack, there's nothing left but to bury the carcass in some theological manual.

Thankfully today's three sacred writers touch and don't kill.

The author of Proverbs could never have buried his or her coup in one of those manuals; it's simply too poetic. The writer actually “co-creates” with Yahweh, standing next to God during the creation process.

Paul and John, on the other hand, bring up things on which many of us rarely reflect. The Apostle zeros in on the failures and weakness that come to the fore when we reach out to God in our lives. Yet the instant we put our hands on the divine in our midst, we see the limits of those hands. In the same way, the Evangelist takes us beyond what we “cannot bear to hear now.” We can never look forward to retiring from the battle, no matter how often we engage with God. It's an essential part of who we are.

No matter how we've learned about God in the past, there's always time to rearrange our priorities. It might take a lot more courage, but what an experience we'll have to boast about? We'll not only leave God intact, but have a strength we've never had before.

Maybe those Indians knew what they were doing.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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JUNE 23RD, 2019: BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

Genesis 14:18-20 I Corinthians 11:23-26 Luke 9:11b-17

I grew up with images of “Corpus Christi” which completely contradict today’s readings.

We old-timers graphically remember those glorious processions in “days of yore.” The event was held outside if possible, but if necessary up and down the aisles of our parish church; thurifers swinging, incense rising, bells ringing, everyone’s eyes riveted on the small host in a golden monstrance, each straining to get at least a glimpse. One of the highlights of my seminary career was traveling over the Italian hills to attend the Orvieto procession in June, 1963 – just a few days before Pope John XXIII’s death - 700 years after the tradition originally began.

Back then everyone was expected just to watch and look. It involved almost no practical participation. Some unknown priest had already done all the work; we showed up only to admire the end product. Yet nothing could be further from the biblical concept of the Body and Blood of Christ.

Our sacred authors presume the community – not one individual – “confects” the Eucharist. Their actions lead to the risen Jesus actually being among us.

Both Paul and Luke pinpoint what their communities can (and must) do to pull off such a tremendous event.

The Apostle perfectly summarizes the situation: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.” Unless someone’s willing to die, we’re eating just a piece of bread and drinking just a sip of wine. If we refuse to give ourselves to one another, there’s nothing miraculous even to look at.

Though in this passage’s original context, Paul graphically hammers away at what his Corinthians should be sharing, in today’s liturgical readings it’s left up to Luke to be specific. Following the conviction of our gospel scholars that all six bread miracles are Eucharistic, it’s essential to note – contrary to popular belief – that the people, not Luke’s Jesus, feed the crowd. He simply starts the process, “Give them some food yourselves,” and ignores their complaints. He’s the distributor, not the multiplier of the food his community provides. The loaves and fish are miraculously increased in the giving. An action that normally would produce less, actually produces more!

Our present problem revolves around the “stuff” we’re to share today. When the Eucharist was celebrated in the context of a pot-luck meal, the actual food and drink that both Paul and Luke mention makes sense. (Even the pagan priest/king Melchizedek provides Abraham and his men with bread and wine.) But, except for occasionally helping feed the poor, we probably should look beyond just sharing our “victuals” with one another.

As a pastor and Eucharistic presider, I almost always engaged in “dialogue homilies.” I gave a brief homily on the readings, then opened the floor. It took a little while, but eventually many of the parishioners took advantage of the opportunity to reflect on the Scriptures. No one seemed to mind the homily’s added length, and most gained from the community’s insights. (I always did!)

On those rare occasions on which no one added, I usually reminded the people, “I presume some are leaving the Eucharist hungry today. Though the Spirit blessed you with the food they needed, for some reason you didn’t think you had enough to share. Always remember, there’s only enough when someone begins to give what she or he has. It’s how we die with the Christ.”

Considering today’s feast, it would be a shame if we revert to listening to the risen Jesus’ word instead of sharing Jesus’ word. Why would anyone reinvent the feast of Corpus Christ? We already have such a weekly “celebration” in most of our parishes.

Can’t you smell the incense burning and hear the bells ringing?

Roger Vermalen Karban

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