

MAY 10, 2020: FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 6:1-7 I Peter 2:4-9 John 14:1-11

Serious students of Luke/Acts realize how exceptional today's first reading is. Usually, in depicting the early Christian community, Luke assures us that everything is going along hunky-dory. Jesus' first followers are living an ideal existence: constantly loving one another, always sharing their belonging and property with the needy, and continually growing in number. That's why today's "bump in the road" demands some explanation.

It's logical that communities made up of different cultural groups, each with their own languages, will eventually develop snags in their relationships. In this case, Greek speaking Hellenists are having problems with Aramaic speaking Hebrews. The issue revolves around the daily distribution of food to the community's widows.

The Twelve's way of resolving the conflict is actually more important for today's church than the solution itself. "Select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task . . ." The seven chosen men are then listed. Except for providing a pronunciation obstacle for lectors, the names don't mean a lot to us. We might recognize Stephen and Philip, who will appear later in Acts, but the other five are easily forgotten.

I guarantee none of the seven would have been forgotten in the Jerusalem community. Each man is a Hellenist! If Greek speaking Christians are having a problem, then Greek speaking Christians are expected to solve their problem. Christian problems are solved from within, not from outside the community.

Growing up in a pre-Vatican II church, I presumed our revered pastor would have the answer to any parish crisis. I certainly wasn't alone in that belief. Remember the old story of the pastor who calls a parish meeting to discuss a pressing issue facing the parishioners? After announcing, "We have a problem," he's immediately challenged by a parishioner who reminds him, "The only way we could be having a problem, Father, is if you've got a mouse in your pocket."

The recent establishment of parish councils has given the "laity" some say in what happens in their faith community. But some priests (and bishops) are quick to remind the various council members that they're purely "advisory." The pastor (and bishop) still retain veto power over any of their suggestions. A far cry from the high esteem Luke, the author of I Peter and John's Jesus hold the Christian community.

"You are a chosen race," the writer of I Peter reminds his newly baptized catechumens, "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his (God's) own, so that you may announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into this wonderful light." How do one or two individuals wield veto power over such a prestigious group?

John's Jesus carries respect for the community even further. "'Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these . . .'" The risen Jesus trusts all of us not just to carry on his/her ministry, but to go beyond what the historical Jesus was able to do between 6 BCE and 30 CE.

Ignoring Jesus' teachings, we eventually divided Christians into clergy and laity. One group became superior, the other subservient. One group called the shots, the other took the blows. We 21<sup>st</sup> century Catholics are witnesses of this; still suffering moral consequences 50 years after the church's hierarchical decision on birth control and today being forced to deal with ever-dwindling Eucharistic celebrations due to the artificial shortage of male, celibate priests.

The early followers of Jesus believed he left them a way to deal with such problems. But unless we dare to be committed to that way, our problems will certainly remain and increase.

MAY 17, 2020: SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER  
Acts 8:5-8, 14-17 I Peter 3:15-18 John 14:15-21

Many of us have a built-in problem keeping us from correctly understanding today's three readings. Our catechism-oriented education assured us we'd always know we're doing what Jesus wanted us to do as long as we're following the teachings of the institutional church. The Galilean carpenter deliberately set up that organization during his earthly ministry to guarantee his message would always be presented the way he intended it to be presented.

There's just one problem with that reasoning: modern Scripture scholars – like the late Raymond Brown – are unanimously convinced the historical Jesus never intended to found a church as we know it today. More than anything, he was simply a reformer of Judaism, not the founder of a new religion.

So if he didn't create a formal institution to carry on his ministry, what did he do to guarantee it would always be done the right way? As we hear in today's liturgical passages, he gave his followers his Spirit.

John's Jesus couldn't have said it better. "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows him. But you know him, because he remains with you and will be in you." According to John, only those who give themselves over to Jesus' Spirit are authentic other Christs.

That's why Luke believes it's essential for Peter and John to travel from Jerusalem up to Samaria to make certain that community's newly baptized actually have received Jesus' Spirit. Philip – knowing nothing of our modern Trinitarian formula - had only baptized them "in the name of the Lord Jesus." By the laying on of the apostles' hands, Jesus' Spirit also comes upon them. Their conversion is complete.

We have no idea what formula the author of I Peter employed in baptizing those to whom this homily is directed. But he certainly takes for granted they've received the Spirit in whatever action preceded his speaking to them. Just as the historical Jesus could defend his ministry and message, so they should be able to follow suit. This is important since suffering is always an integral part of carrying out that ministry and conveying that message. In the author's mind, a person's defense of being another Christ doesn't come in a harmless school exam, but in the midst of suffering. No reason to defend it unless we're in pain because of it. Our unknown writer is convinced that just as Jesus was "put to death in the flesh and was brought to life in the Spirit," so his Spirit gives us life especially when our suffering is most severe.

In some sense, it's easy to understand why many Christians quickly traded the Spirit for an institution. The late Carroll Stuhlmueller always taught that there are two rules to know when the Spirit's actually talking to us. First, what suddenly comes into our mind is an insight, not a process of reasoning. Two and two equals four, for instance, probably isn't from the Spirit. Inspiration from the Spirit comes out of nowhere. One instant there's nothing, then suddenly . . . !

Second, actually following through on what pops into our mind will cost us big time. The Spirit always demands we leave where we're comfortably ensconced and move to a place where we'd rather not be, a place which makes new demands on us. The Spirit never tells us, "Stay right here! Don't move a muscle!"

According to our sacred authors, only when we're disturbed about what God expects us to do can we be certain the risen Jesus' Spirit is actually at work in our lives.