

Maintaining faith and fervor

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Mar. 4, 2012

We can sense a palpable enthusiasm in the sacred texts today. When God called Abraham, the great patriarch immediately responded, "Here I am." Then God asked the unthinkable! Immediately, Abraham's enthusiasm for doing God's will was put to the ultimate test. Nevertheless, when God called a second time, the answer was the same: "Here I am." Even though he knew what was being asked of him, Abraham was able to maintain his fervor, and he was willing to surrender to an action that appeared to quash his hopes for the future.

Peter, James and John were filled with similar enthusiasm when they experienced the glory of Jesus. "It is good that we are here! Let's pitch our tents and stay." Then God challenged them with the words, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." We can almost hear their thoughts: "Of course! We will dwell on every word; we will heed his every teaching!" And that was well and good there in the safe shelter of the mountain, where no controversy arose and no conflict threatened the intimacy of their union with Jesus.



Eventually, however, the disciples had to leave their mountaintop experience and

return to the world, where struggles awaited them. How would they retain their enthusiasm for Jesus and for the Gospel? How would they maintain the fervor of that experience through all their future challenges? Could they, like Abraham, continue to trust in God even when it made more (worldly) sense to be incredulous? How did these first followers of Jesus learn to carry something from the mountain of Jesus' transfiguration with them to the mountain of Calvary?

If we turn these same questions on ourselves, we realize that most of us are able to make an enthusiastic beginning at most things -- at life, at living our baptismal promises, at Lent and all its spiritual and physical challenges. But what sustains our fervor when things become difficult? What empowers us to keep saying, "Here I am?" and "It is good for us to be here?"

What else but faith?

By faith, said Søren Kierkegaard, Abraham went out from the land of his fathers and became a sojourner in the land of promise; by faith he set aside what he dreamed to be his foothold in the future. He left one thing behind and took one thing with him: He left his earthly understanding behind, and took faith with him. Otherwise, he would never have ventured forth (Provocations, The Plough Publishing House, 1999).

Abraham's trust in God enabled him to keep putting one foot in front of the other without the benefit of seeing or knowing where God might lead him. Through the centuries, Abraham's faith became the ideal against which his descendants measured their responsiveness to God. According to an ancient Jewish legend preserved and passed on by the rabbis, when Moses threw his staff into the Sea of Reeds, the waters did not divide immediately to leave a dry passage for the escapees from Egypt. The waters receded only when the first person jumped into the sea. Because they dared to believe in God's promises, as Abraham did, Moses and the Israelites were delivered.

Abraham's faith was also emulated by Paul, who traveled extensively in his efforts to preach the good news. Paul ventured forth without benefit of GPS or a mapped itinerary, without travel insurance or any other amenity. He was able to retain his fervor for his mission because he fueled his faith by prayer.

With Paul, with Abraham, with Peter, James and John, we plunge ahead into this holy season. We are enthusiastic and full of fervor for the sacred mysteries that we celebrate. In order to keep going with faith and fervor, our path to Easter must be punctuated by multiple stops for prayer.

Author Matthew Kelly once said that he took a cue for his prayer life from Henry David Thoreau, who wrote in *Walden*, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately ... and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. ... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life ... to put to rout all that was not life." Said Kelly, "I go to the woods of prayer each day for the same reason" (*Rediscover Catholicism*, Beacon, 2002).

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