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Real presence

Roger Karban | Jan. 26, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

It?s impossible to overemphasize the importance of today?s second reading. Paul?s insights give us the foundation for understanding the presence of the risen Jesus among us: an essential part of early Christian experience.

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-30

Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21

Many years ago, I was sitting in a doctoral class on Paul?s First Letter to the Corinthians, and I suddenly realized I?d consistently misinterpreted the passage ?For those who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment on themselves? (1 Corinthians 11:29).

I?d always presumed ?the body? as Jesus? body in the eucharistic bread. I simply presumed Paul was saying that if someone didn?t have faith that, after the priest?s consecration words, the bread had been transubstantiated into Jesus? body, she would be receiving Communion unworthily. No one in my prior four years of theology had even hinted at any other interpretation.

Yet after finally hearing Paul?s words in the context of the Lord?s supper in which he placed them, I suddenly realized that when the apostle spoke about recognizing the body, he wasn?t speaking about Jesus? body in the bread, he was referring to the body of Christ that comprises all Christians. In other words, those who refuse to recognize the body of the risen Christ present in the others standing around them during the Eucharist are not ready to receive the body of the risen Christ present in the bread.

Paul, of course, never read Pope Pius XII?s 1943 encyclical Mystici Corporis Christi. At no point in any of his letters does he mention the ?mystical? body of Christ. For the apostle, there was nothing mystical about our being Christ?s body; it was an essential part of the reality of our discipleship. It goes with the territory.

Today?s well-known passage on the body of Christ was triggered when some in the Corinthian community began to abuse the gifts the Spirit had given them, especially the gift of tongues. Paul has already stressed how each of the community?s spiritual gifts is geared for the good of the whole community; now he zeroes in on the makeup of the community itself, employing the image of a human body. ?As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ? (12:12).

Almost always, when the apostle uses the word ?Christ,? he?s talking about the risen Jesus, not the historical Jesus. Though knowledge of the Jesus who lived between 6 B.C. and 30 A.D. is the basis for all Christian faith, knowledge of the risen Jesus who is active in our lives right here and now is essential for us to live that faith every day. The Christian community mirrors the risen Jesus, not just the historical Jesus. As we know from Galatians 3, the risen Jesus is a ?new creation?: neither Jew or Gentile, slave or free, man or woman.

Recently some of our bishops shared their fear that many young Catholics don?t have proper faith in Jesus? presence in the eucharistic bread and wine. Though that may be true, should we not also be concerned that many older Catholics don?t have Paul?s faith in the risen Jesus? presence in the Christian community? Growing up Catholic, for instance, I only heard the term ?other Christ? applied to priests. The majority of Christians didn?t fit the category. Something Paul believed essential for our faith was relegated to the ?extra credit? department.

Listen carefully to what Luke?s Jesus says in today?s Gospel pericope. He quotes Third-Isaiah?s reflection about the spirit of Yahweh being on him. Knowing he?s God, we?d expect him to say, ?Today I am fulfilling this passage in your hearing.? Instead, he simply says, ?Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.?

The historical Jesus was deeply committed to surfacing the things God was already doing in people?s lives. That?s why he constantly stressed the kingdom of God -- God working effectively in the here and now -- and also insisted on the necessity of repentance. Only by changing our value systems could we perceive God?s presence. Jesus expected his followers to notice things and people in ways others never saw. We were to work with him and God to bring about the liberty and sight that the prophet believed would change people?s lives for the better.

We should never be ashamed to believe what the early church thought important to our faith, even though, through the centuries, some of those beliefs have been left by the way. We should simply rejoice over the rediscovery of what Jesus expects us to do, no matter at what point of our lives that discovery takes place. God is never going to blame us for what we didn?t know.

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