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An evolving church

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Apr. 6, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

A week has passed since our annual celebration of Jesus? resurrection, the central tenet that informs and inspires our worship together for the remainder of the Easter season -- and always. Although it may not be clearly evident at first glance, we have made our way from one period of our salvation history into another. We have turned the page from the time of Jesus of Nazareth, who came as one of us, who went about doing good, who suffered for his goodness and for the truth and justice of his teaching, who died innocently for the sake of sinners and who rose to live eternally in glory. We have now begun to enter the time of the church.

Second Sunday of Easter
(Diving Mercy Sunday)
Acts 5:12-16
Psalm 118
Revelation 1:9-11, 12-13, 17-19
John 20:19-31

In our worship together, we remember the people of that time, whose experiences, beliefs and convictions contributed to the process in which the proclaimer of the good news became the proclaimed. Each of today?s readings -- in fact, the entire New Testament -- has been prompted by the conviction that Jesus came and lived and died and rose to declare the irrupting reign of God in time and space. In the aftermath of Jesus? earthly ministry, the church appeared, and with it the Scriptures that are at once an expression of faith in the Christ-event and an attempt to bring the graced and redemptive consequences of that event to bear on every aspect of the human condition.

In today?s first reading from Acts, the second volume of Luke?s contribution to the Christian Scriptures, the evangelist has lent his considerable talents to illustrating the legitimacy of the church and its teachings, showing how the church?s mission is a continuation of the mission of Jesus. To that end, Luke portrays the apostles, the recognized and accepted leaders of the followers of the Way, doing as Jesus had done: working signs and wonders, meeting in Solomon?s Portico, healing the sick, casting out unclean spirits and welcoming into the community those who were being continually added to the Lord.

Sensitive to the challenges of believing the church to be the legitimate successor of Jesus, Luke was intent upon offering asphaleia (Luke 1:4), or the certainty that people would need to accept the church in that capacity and to become active and contributing participants in its mission. Throughout the coming weeks, Luke will keep us in close contact with the efforts of those who have gone before us, encouraging us to continue serving in the process of redemption.

Today?s second reading and Gospel come to us from the Johannine church that claimed the beloved disciple, John, as its leader and inspiration. By the time the Johannine literature appeared at the end of the first Christian century, John the evangelist may have already died, but his literary legacy lived on and continued to speak his insights regarding the Christ-event. In a similar way, John the Seer?s visions from the Lord (second reading, Revelation), fostered the faith of his contemporaries and encouraged their commitment to Christ in troubled times.

In his poem ?A Death in the Desert,? Robert Browning offers his literary assessment of the process of development through which the Johannine church had to grow in order to survive the passing into memory of those who had known the earthly Jesus: ?When [my ashes] scatter,? says John the Seer, ?there is left on earth no one alive who knew ... saw with his eyes and handled with his hands that which was from the first, the Word of Life. How will it be when none more saith, ?I saw???

Indeed. When there were none left who could claim to be eyewitnesses and therefore authoritative teachers about Jesus, the early believers had to be reminded, as we are reminded in today?s Gospel, that the living legacy of Jesus, the legacy of the Holy Spirit, continues to breathe life and purpose and legitimacy into the community he left behind. Through the presence and by the power of the Spirit, the message of the good news continues to speak its truth to the ever-evolving circumstances of the human community. Through the presence and power of the Spirit, we began to be -- and we continue to be -- ekkl?sia, church.

As Wes Howard-Brook has pointed out, literally, the Greek term *ekkl?sia* means ?called out? (*The Church Before Christianity*, Orbis Books, 2001). Therefore the church is a community of people called by the Spirit of Jesus to live as an alternative society in the midst of the world.

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