NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Reading the river

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | May. 11, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

From the time he was a young boy, Mark Twain (aka Samuel Clemens) wanted to pilot a steamboat up and down the mighty Mississippi river. In his book *Life on the Mississippi*, first published in 1883, Twain tells of his struggle to do so. After he ran away from his home in Hannibal, Mo., Twain boarded a steamboat in Cincinnati. On the New Orleans-bound Paul Jones, Twain promised the captain $500 (after he graduated from school) if only Mr. Bixby would mentor him. Twain later stated that if he had known how difficult it would be to learn and traverse the almost 1,300 miles of river, he would not have had the courage to begin.

The Ascension of the Lord

Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 47
Ephesians 1:17-23
Luke 24:46-53

Even though he painstakingly mapped the entire length of the river with all its bends, sandbars, islands and towns, he could not retain the knowledge. Frustrated, he decided to quit, claiming, ?I haven?t got brains enough to be a pilot and if I had, I wouldn?t have the strength to carry them around unless I went on crutches!? But the wise Mr. Bixby saw something in Twain, and with his help, the future boat captain and author was able to learn to ?read the river.?

Jeremy Langford has suggested that Twain?s apprenticeship under Mr. Bixby?s tutelage is not unlike the process of becoming Christian and, in becoming so, taking on the responsibility for continuing the ministry of Jesus (*God Moments*, Orbis, 2001). No doubt those first disciples who saw Jesus off, as it were, probably felt like they were up a creek without a paddle. As they surveyed the vastness of the journey before them and the enormity of the task of bringing the good news to all, they may have been tempted, as Twain was, to give up.

But just when it seemed that they were being called to do the impossible, Jesus? gift of the Holy Spirit enabled them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Just as Twain would learn to read the river, so would those first disciples and all subsequent followers of Jesus learn to read the signs of the times, to assess the needs of the human community and rely on the power and presence and passion of the Spirit to mentor them along the way. That Spirit, according to the author of Ephesians (second reading), will impart wisdom, clarify revelation, help us to know hope and enlighten the eyes of our hearts.

I am reminded of the line in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry?s *The Little Prince* (1943): ?It is only with the heart that one sees rightly, for what is essential is invisible to the eye.? To see with the eyes of the heart is to love and

know and value the other. This gift comes when we surrender ourselves to be mentored by the Spirit. If we see with the eyes of our heart, we will be able to wait for Jesus? return by living according to Gospel principles and by making the spiritual and corporal works of mercy our daily agenda. While the eyes of the mind might be boggled by the staggering burden of human need, the eyes of the heart see a brother and a sister, and we reach out to help.

Members of the praying assembly will notice that the sacred texts for today offer us two versions of Jesus? ascension: In the Gospel, Jesus? ascent to God concludes his earthly ministry; in Acts, his departure, 40 days after his resurrection, inaugurates the church?s mission. By presenting both accounts, the Lucan evangelist has affirmed that Jesus? mission continues in the church. In his Gospel, Luke has put us in touch with Jesus; in Acts he has given us a window through which to perceive and appreciate the church. Both of these sacred texts challenge contemporary believers to assume their rightful place and responsibility in the ongoing saga of salvation. With the help of Jesus? own Spirit, we will learn how to read the river: We will learn to respond to the needs of others.

[Patricia Sánchez holds a master?s degree in literature and religion of the Bible from a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.]

Source URL (retrieved on *09/03/2015 - 15:50*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/reading-river