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

A dynamic spirit

Roger Karban | May. 24, 2014 Spiritual Reflections

In 1971, a significant book for the study of the Christian Scriptures appeared. *Trajectories Through Early Christianity*, by James McConkey Robinson and Helmut Koester, explored the diverse and often contradictory theologies contained in those writings. The authors were convinced our sacred authors presented various ways of understanding the implications of imitating Jesus' death and resurrection in our everyday lives. These inspired writers offer us "trajectories" of diverse theologies, not the straight-line "catechism" theology employed by most Christian churches today.

Nowhere are such early Christian trajectories more evident than in our sacred authors' treatment of the Holy Spirit.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 8:5-8, 14-17
Psalm 66
1 Peter 3:15-18
John 14:15-21

Just a brief glance at Luke's Acts of the Apostles surfaces the orderly pattern of evangelization he employs. Under the constant guidance of the Holy Spirit, his Christian community progresses step by step from being a Jewish reform movement to eventually combining both Jews and Gentiles into one church whose non-Jewish members aren't obligated to keep the Law of Moses. Completely ignoring Paul's historical conflicts on the gentile issue that abound in his letter to the Galatians, Luke's Spirit-guided church develops down a straight, unwavering path.

In today's Acts pericope, he tells us this same systematic progression also carries over into the reception of the Holy Spirit. It's significant for Luke that the Spirit comes to these newly converted Samaritans only through the Jerusalem apostles' laying on of hands. Richard Dillon mentions in his commentary on Acts in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* that in this passage the evangelist demonstrates his belief that "new communities are bonded to the mother church by the visitation of her delegates. ... The Holy Spirit operates only where there is communion with the apostles." To receive Luke's ecclesiastic stamp of approval, one must always have some connection with the apostles, even when it comes to receiving the Holy Spirit.

That's certainly not the trajectory with which John lights up the biblical heavens when his Jesus talks about who can receive the Spirit. Though John agrees with Luke that the Spirit must be present and working effectively in the everyday life of the Christian community, he doesn't limit the Spirit's presence to a special individual or the

church's connection with the apostles.

On the contrary, as his Jesus promises in today's passage -- a small snippet from John's lengthy Last Supper discourse -- only one thing is necessary to receive the Spirit. "If you love me," Jesus states, "you will keep my commandments. And 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."

In John's theology, the only prerequisite for receiving Jesus' Spirit is to love him and those around us. We don't have to attend any required confirmation classes or have the local bishop impose hands on us. The Spirit comes automatically, once we, by loving Jesus, become one with him who is one with the Father.

The late Raymond Brown frequently pointed out that John appears to have had problems with Matthew, Mark and Luke's emphasis on Christian communities being connected to the apostles. Fortunately, the fourth evangelist eventually tempered his "no-apostles" trajectory in his added Chapter 21 -- in which Peter is "rehabilitated" -- yet it clearly comes through in the rest of his Gospel.

Though John's theology of a personal reception of the Spirit sounds good in theory, it eventually destroyed or deeply stressed many of the communities that professed it, including, according to most scholars, the community for which John originally wrote his Gospel. That's why there's a Chapter 21. John's community was blessed with the time and Spirit-inspired insight to re-evaluate the evangelist's Gospel theology. They found part of it lacking in its goal to build a lasting, loving community. So they corrected it for the common good, adding another chapter that changed the angle of John's original trajectory.

I presume, like our ancestors in the faith, we're still capable of creating Spirit-inspired theological trajectories today. Those insights that help build faithful, loving communities should be kept and developed; those that don't should either fall by the way or be rejected.

But before anything else, we must simply have the courage to surface those trajectories with which the Spirit constantly blesses us, reminding ourselves every weekend that our liturgical readings are from a collection of writings that thrive on a diversity that could only come from the Spirit who inspired them; the same Spirit is still inspiring us today.

[Roger Vermalen Karban is a priest of the Belleville, Ill., diocese and pastor of Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish in Renault, Ill.]

Source URL (retrieved on *02/13/2016 - 18:26*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/spiritual-reflections/dynamic-spirit