

Praying for the Spirit to renew the church

Thomas Gumbleton | Jun. 10, 2011 | The Peace Pulpit

As we listen to the readings today about the final event in the life of Jesus on earth -- His leaving the earth and going to heaven -- we get an impression, I think, that everything is now well organized and Jesus had given to the disciples instructions on how to go and proclaim the Good News everywhere and make the Church happen.

If we think that, we are sadly confused because Jesus did not give a blueprint to the disciples.

In fact, in this very final event, they are still confused. They don't really know what God wants them to do, what Jesus has told them to do -- except in those very vague terms: "Just go and proclaim the Good News everywhere."

Even at the end, you may have noticed in the Gospel, Matthew says that, while they went to Galilee like the women had told them Jesus wanted them to do, and they were ready to listen, even at that point, some doubted.

Sixth Sunday of Easter
They weren't all that sure. If you remember, just going back to the Last Supper, the night before Jesus died, after he had been with them two and a half years instructing them, at one point Jesus tells them: "You know where I'm going." And Thomas speaks up and says, "Jesus, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?"

At that point, Jesus tries to help by saying, "I am the Way." At the Last Supper, Phillip is saying, "Show us God and then we'll know and we'll believe."

Jesus says: "Phillip, you've been with me all this time and you don't know that I'm in the Father and the Father is in me? When you see me, you see God."

Phillip really doesn't realize that. So at the very end the disciples are confused and they have this one instruction: go out into the world; make the Good News happen -- but they really don't have any clue how to do it. There has been no design given to them on how to have a Church with a hierarchy, clergy, and laity and so on. None of that has been explained. Only two things did Jesus tell them, and these are really crucial. They are really important to us, too.

First of all, He says: "I will be with you."

At the Last Supper He had put it very poignantly when He said, "I won't leave you orphans. I'm not like a parent who would abandon his or her children. I will be with you."

Then the other thing Jesus promises is, "I will send the Holy Spirit, and that Spirit will be your paraclete, your guide, your protector, the one who will show you the way."

Those are the only two things that Jesus gave the disciples as He was departing from the world.

"I will be with you, so have confidence in that. I will live even within your hearts. I will be with you, and I will send the Holy Spirit to be your guide, your protector, your care taker."

Those are the two guarantees. Then as we watch what happens after Jesus departs, we can learn I think some very important things about what should be happening in our Church right now because we need the continued guidance of Jesus and the continued response to the Holy Spirit.

When the first disciples began to gather together as they did in that early community in Jerusalem, they immediately came upon some problems. You remember a couple weeks ago we had the passage from the Acts of the Apostles where some of the disciples were being discriminated against when the food was being distributed, and they were a community where everything was being shared, although it wasn't being shared fairly.

There was a crisis. So what did the disciples do? They listened to the Holy Spirit. They began to make some organization. They said, "Okay, we need some ministers to take care of these Greek-speaking disciples," because there was a language difference here.

So without ever having any previous instruction, they designate-- the whole community does this -- they call forth seven who will now be ministers to that Greek-speaking community to make sure that everything stays in harmony. There was a crisis: They listened to the Holy Spirit and they began to act.

This is what continues to go on. There was a time, and this happened very early in the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, where there is a persecution of the Church. So now the disciples are scattered. One of them, Phillip, is in Samaria. This is a part of the Holy Land where the Samaritans were the enemies of the Jews. A Jew wasn't even supposed to talk to a Samaritan.

Here is Phillip. He has that word from Jesus, "Proclaim the Good News," so he begins to teach the Samaritans. He draws together a whole crowd and baptizes them. He begins to take the Church out of Jerusalem into a whole new area where they weren't even supposed to go as Jews. He was listening to the Holy Spirit.

Peter and John then came and said, "Yes." They confirm what Phillip has done. So the Church in Jerusalem acknowledges that now we're spreading. There were other crises where Peter began to enter into the houses of pagans, something a Jew was never supposed to do.

That's in the tenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. He goes into the house of Cornelius, a Roman, and he shares a meal with him. Then he begins to teach and an extraordinary thing happens.

Peter begins to teach at the house of Cornelius and as he's teaching, suddenly there is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The whole house is shaken and Peter was still speaking when the Holy Spirit came upon all who listened to the word.

Believers of the Jewish origin who had come with Peter were amazed. Why? God gives and pours the Holy Spirit on these foreigners also.

That wasn't something that they ever expected, but it happens. The Spirit is active within the Church, and Peter and the others are wise enough to say, "Yes. New things are happening. We listened to the Holy Spirit and now

the Church is spreading even among the Pagans.?

That was a constant way that the disciples began to act. When they came to a very serious dispute about eating food that was sacrificed to Pagans -- are you joining in idolatry when you do that? -- there was a very major dispute within the whole community.

So what do they do? They know Jesus is with them. They know the Holy Spirit will guide them. So they call the whole Church together and they talk about the problem. They listen to one another. They listen to the Spirit speaking within their spirit, and they come up with a solution that brings peace to the Church.

I think it's clear what we need to reflect on now. What about our Church right now? There are so many things happening that are not good. We've had this horrendous sex abuse scandal that is almost incredible, the extent and the way it's been handled over the last 20 years or longer, but you know there are people, two groups that I know of.

One is a group called Voice of the Faithful. These are people like ourselves, and they're saying, "This is a crisis within the Church. We have to come together and we have to listen to the Spirit and determine if we can what brought about this crisis? What do we need to change?"

It's like that first Church in Jerusalem. Come together; talk about it; listen to the Spirit. We have the tragedy in the Church that now our leadership will not even talk to these people who are ordinary Catholics like everyone gathered in this Church today.

The bishops say, "No, the Spirit can't be speaking through them. We know." That wasn't the way it was in the beginning. All the Church gathered together. The whole Church listened to the Spirit, and there weren't those who said, "You must do this. You must do that." There was no hierarchy. It was a whole community.

That's what we need to do now is listen to the Church. There is also an organization of those who have been abused. They call themselves Survivors of Those Abused by Priests, SNAP. These are the very people who have suffered these horrendous evils, and again, there is not any bishop who will listen to them.

They say, "No, that can't be. We know," and they don't. So we need a Church that is going to be more like the early Church. We need a Church that is ready to listen to the Spirit, and be confident that Jesus is with us as He promised. Listen to Jesus speaking through the Spirit of Jesus, and then we can begin to resolve our problems.

I can think of other things. There is a bishop in Australia, Bishop William Morris who was just forced to resign his diocese. Do you know why? It was because he suggested we face a crisis. We don't have enough ministers. What he wanted to do was like in the early Church: look around. There might be other people, married people perhaps, and he even suggested women perhaps.

So he was forced to resign. Instead of the hierarchy, the Pope and the bishops saying, "Yes, let's listen to Bishop Morris. Let's do what he's doing and listen to the Church." I'm sure the Church would say, "Why can't we ordain married men? Why can't there be women priests if that is a way to resolve the problem?"

We're not doing that and so today, there is not a whole lot you and I can do about these huge problems except begin to be aware that we have to pray as a whole community for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on us once more.

Next week, we celebrate the feast of Pentecost when we remember how the Holy Spirit was poured upon the first Church at the very beginning. Pray that the Holy Spirit will come upon this community right here and that we will be enlivened, strengthened, guided and ready to go and proclaim the Good News, to be the Church.

Pray that that Spirit will come upon our whole Church, that we will become once more a Church that is ready to have confidence in the promise of Jesus: I will be with you.

Then we will be a Church that will be ready to listen to one another and the Spirit speaking through all of us. As we begin to pray for and try to make that kind of a Church come into being once more, we can be sure that Jesus will be with us.

And that Jesus will help to bring about the changes in our Church that will enable us to be once more the vibrant, living body of Jesus Christ out in the world, proclaiming the Good News, not only by our words but most of all by the witness of our lives.

That is the invitation that we receive today and I hope that we can accept it, pray for the outpouring of the Spirit, be open to the Spirit and live by the Holy Spirit.

[Bishop Gumbleton gave this homily at St. Hilary Parish in Redford, Mich.]

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