

May 19, 2002

Sunday of the Myrrh Bearers

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among the figures with whom Christians gather round the Empty Tomb in Paschal Season, there is a special prominence pertaining to the Myrrh Bearers, those women disciples who shouldered their newly purchased spices and came to anoint the body of Jesus. They formed the first "women's guild" of the Church, one might say, and they had just done duty a couple of days earlier at the foot of the Cross. Excluded from the public "official list" of the Resurrection eye-witnesses (preserved in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8), these women are nonetheless featured with distinction in the narratives of Pascha morning in all four canonical gospels. Only a few of them we know by name: Mary Magdalene, Salome (Zebedee's wife), Joanna, and "the other Mary" (Clopas's wife, who is identified both as a kinswoman of the Mother of Jesus [John 19:25] and "the mother of James and Joses" (Matthew 27:56; 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10)).

Now there is a special kind of "practical" person, an efficiency expert, who does not much appreciate what the Myrrh Bearers were up to. Had he encountered them on the road that morning, he may well have asked them, "Just what good do you think you are going to accomplish?" You see, anointing a dead body does not make good business sense. It achieves nothing very practical. It is the sort of activity that fails to contribute to the Gross National Product. Except for its very small influence on the myrrh market, spice trading, and nard futures, it barely shows up on the Dow Industrials. It has no measurable results. The corpses thus anointed cannot be interviewed to ascertain if they are satisfied with the product, or which brand they prefer, or whether they would recommend it to their neighbors. Anointing dead bodies has no measurable results. It resists a quantitative analysis. So an economist like Ludwig von Mises, were he to discuss it in his very long and unbelievably boring book Human Action (which I read all the way through for a Lenten penance one year) would call this activity of the Myrrh Bearers "autistic." That is to say, it is the kind of activity that produces only a subjective and emotional benefit to the one who does it. It involves no "transaction," which Von Mises and his sort think to be the truly valuable sort of human activity.

Another economist and efficiency expert, this one from an

earlier period, also adopted an emphatically negative perspective on a certain lady's pouring out of ointment. "To what purpose is this waste?" he objected, this ointment might have been sold for more than three hundred pence and given to the poor." (The final part of his analysis is interesting for its suggestion of altruism in his calculation. The evangelist, however, did not fall for the ruse -cf. John 12:5f.) Judas Iscariot, you see, was heavily engaged in quantitative thinking. He wanted measurable results. Judas was a practical man. He knew a good price when he saw one. Shrewdly he could size up any situation and calculate what it was worth on the basis of cost and output. Like Francis Bacon, Jeremy Bentham, Ludwig von Mises, Rudolph Carnap, and Ayn Rand, Judas Iscariot believed that objective, verifiable truth is invariably logical and quantitative. Only then does it have "significance." If you can measure it, these folks tell us, than you can know it. Everything else is just opinion, purely subjective and non-verifiable.

Over against this modern point of view is the completely non-productive, non-economical, non-efficient assessment of the ointment-pouring scene at Bethany: "She has done what she could" (Mark 14:8). In that assessment of the thing we arrive very near the heart of the Gospel. Quite simply. We do what we can. We do not attempt to measure what we do, certainly not by its perceived results. We act solely out of love, letting God alone determine if we have "loved much" (Luke 7:47). The final quality of our lives will not be assessed by what we have accomplished, but by our love (1 Corinthians 13:24). Only the God who reads the heart can put a value on that love. Prominent in the midst of the Church, then, are those Myrrh Bearers who came that morning loaded down with their spices and without the foggiest idea how they were going to enter a sealed tomb guarded by a massive stone. What an exercise in inefficiency, lack of cost analysis, and failure in planning. As it turned out, they could not even find a body to anoint. All that myrrh, just going to waste.

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