

April 4, 2004

Palm Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The description of the Lord's death in the Gospel of John shows every sign of conveying the word of an eyewitness. Indeed, the Sacred Text itself calls attention to the first-hand reliability of this testimony: "And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe" (John 19:35). Two details in John's testimony seem worthy of special examination.

First, in its description of the Lord's death, John's very suggestive wording is unique among the Four Evangelists: *paredoken to pnevma* (John 19:30). Generally, alas, that uniqueness is obscured in the standard English translations. They usually run something like this: "And bowing his head, he gave up his spirit" (NKJV). I confess that I have not found an English translation that substantially differs from this.

Leaving aside the tender detail about the bowing of the Lord's head in death, nonetheless, such a translation is seriously inadequate. *Paredoken to pnevma*, wrote John. To translate this as "he gave up His spirit" deprives the sentence of more than half of its meaning. Taken literally (which is surely the proper way to take him), John affirms that He "handed over the Spirit."

That is to say, the very breath, *pnevma*, with which the Lord expired on the Cross becomes for John the symbol and transmission of the Holy Spirit that the Lord confers on His Church gathered beneath. Support for this interpretation is found in the risen Lord's action and words to the apostles in the upper room in John 20:22, "He breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit (*labete pnevma hagion*).'"

Consequently, John's description of the death of Jesus—"He handed over the Spirit"—portrays the Holy Spirit as being transmitted from the body of the Lord hanging in sacrifice on the altar of the Cross. It is John's way of affirming that the

mission of the Holy Spirit is intimately and inseparably connected with the event the Cross.

This interpretation, besides being faithful to the verb's literal sense, is consonant with John's theology as a whole. It was the Cross and Resurrection of the Lord-what John calls His glorification-that permitted the Holy Spirit to be poured out on the Church. John told us earlier that "the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (7:39).

Second, John records another detail of the scene not mentioned by the other Evangelists: "But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out" (19:34 NKJV).

Taken together, then, John records three things as issuing forth from the immolated body of Jesus: the Spirit, the water, and the blood. These have to do with the gathering of the Church at the foot of the Cross, because this is the place where the Lord's identity is known: "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I AM" (8:28 my translation).

These components appear also in the covering letter for John's Gospel as the "three witnesses" of the Christian mystery: "And there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three are one" (1 John 5:8 my translation).

Speaking of the gathering of the Church, the Lord had declared, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." John went on to comment, "He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die" (John 12:32-33 ESV). It is the gathered Church, then, that receives the witness of the Spirit, the water, and the blood at the foot of the Cross, thereby knowing the Son of Man's identity as "I AM". This is the revelation given in the testimony.

This threefold "witness" to Jesus has particular reference to the Sacraments of Initiation, those mystic rites by which believers are gathered into the Church: the water of Baptism, the Holy Spirit conferred in the seal of Chrismation, and the blood consumed in the Holy Communion. These three things are theologically inseparable; that is to say, "these three are one."

In this threefold initiation into the mystery of the Cross believers are "once enlightened" in Baptism, become "partakers of the Holy Spirit" in Chrismation, and "taste the heavenly gift" in the Eucharist (Hebrews 6:4).

This threefold benediction is inseparable from its source, which is the Son of Man's body hanging in sacrifice. Each component of this grace derives from that same font.

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