

July 9, 2006

## Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When we confess our faith in the Church as "apostolic," we not only enunciate a point of ecclesiology but also reach down into the substance of Revelation itself. The apostolicity of Revelation may be considered in three steps.

First, it is fundamental to the Christian faith that we are not saved by an idea, not even a religious and moral idea, but by God's direct intrusion into our history. To borrow a formula from Leibniz, we were not redeemed by a truth of essence but by a truth of existence. Our redemption is the accomplishment, not of an eternal and necessary verity, but of a contingent fact, an event. Human history is eternally significant because of something that happened within history and under the contingent, limiting conditions of history.

This affirmation, we contend, pertains to the very essence of the Christian faith as expressed in its earliest formulation by St. Peter: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." This is the event by which human history acquires significance and every human life receives the offer of salvation.

Second, as a contingent, historical event, God's intrusion into human existence was open to limited observation. There were witnesses to it, and it is only through the testimony of those few witnesses that the rest of humanity has access to the event itself.

Again, it was St. Peter who drew attention to this essential feature of the Christian religion. He said in the house of Cornelius, "And *we are witnesses* of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but *to witnesses* chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people, and *to testify*."

This is the testimony of the apostles, on which depends the faith of everyone who has ever confessed that Jesus is Lord. This divine

revelation, therefore, the truth that God made both Lord and Christ the crucified Jesus, is mediated to the world through certain eyewitnesses chosen to testify thereto. Thus, the quality "revealed" pertains not only to the fact of the divine intrusion into history but also to the apostolic mediation of that fact. Apostolicity pertains to Revelation itself.

Third, these eyewitnesses themselves functioned very much like eyes, and perhaps this is why there were several of them. When objects are presented to our physical eyes, after all, they are not presented to both eyes from precisely the same angle. Our two eyes are sufficiently far apart to provide us with two perspectives. These perspectives are combined in a single vision, but that vision is rendered more complex by the combination. Viewed by two eyes simultaneously, the contemplated object takes on depth and nuanced contour. What is thus seen *emerges* from its background. It *comes towards* us. This is the blessing of seeing things with more than one eye.

Much the same is true of the apostolic witnesses, who serve as the eyes of the Church. They all gazed at the same object, certainly, but their lines of vision were set at slightly differing angles, creating a deeper, more complex, more delicately nuanced picture in the catholic vision enjoyed by the Church.

When we endeavor, for the sake of literary discipline, to look through only one of these eyes, to isolate a single writer--let us say Matthew, for example--we become aware that we are no longer looking at the whole picture available to the Church's catholic vision. It is certainly worth doing this as an exercise in exegesis (and Christians have always done it), but we must recognize that it affords us only a single line of interpretation.

To stick with our example, Matthew is certainly describing the same Jesus presented by Mark and Paul, but his unique perspective is set along a slightly different vector. We readers eventually follow the impulse to open up the other eyes in the Bible and bring back the entire catholic icon contemplated by the Church.

Indeed, it is arguable that some of the worst heresies to arise in the history of theology have come from the inordinate use of just one of the apostolic eyes, to the exclusion, or at least the partial suppression, of the others. Perhaps the clearest example of such a distortion was

Marcion, who attempted to look at Revelation solely through the eyes of St. Paul. Ironically, Marcion's misguided effort led to a distortion of Paul himself. Early in the last century this distortion was recognized by Franz Overbeck, who remarked that only one student of Paul understood Paul, namely Marcion, but Marcion misunderstood him: "*er habe nur einen Schüler gehabt, der ihn verstanden habe, Marcion-- und dieser habe ihn missverstanden!*" We all have our favorite biblical authors, I suppose, but it is a pretty safe bet that the theologian who insists on closing or slighting any of the apostolic eyes is going to end up in heresy.

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**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**  
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641  
Church Office: (773) 777-0749  
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**  
[phrii@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phrii@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)  
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