

May 18, 2008
Sunday of the Paralytic

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Acts of the Apostles, in addition to its importance to the theology and history of the Church, provides insights into the personal relations of the early Christians who lived and worked with one another in the common faith. Although these relations were expressed in many ways, I propose to limit the present considerations to just three: affection, humor, and friendship.

First, the Book of Acts gives several hints regarding the personal affections that bound those early believers together. These affections were expressed in both sadness and joy.

With respect to sadness, one thinks of the intense grief of Stephen's friends as they carry his dead and mangled body out of the city for burial (8:2). Again, one of the most touching scenes in the book portrays the bereaved friends of the dead Dorcas, those several widows who stand weeping with Peter, "showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them" (9:39). It is clear that their belief in the resurrection of the body did not deprive those Christians of the need to weep the loss of someone they loved in the Lord.

Nor did they forfeit the happiness inspired by that same affection. Thus, we learn of the "great joy to all the brethren," those who met Paul and Barnabas as "they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles" (15:3).

Who does not detect, I wonder, the multiple affections revealed when Peter showed up at a home one night, unannounced and unexpected? "And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her enthusiasm she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. But they said to her, 'You are beside yourself!' Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, 'It is his angel.' Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened up and saw him, they were astonished" (12:13-17).

In addition to affection, this story also introduces our second point: humor. Prior to its insertion in Acts, this warm and lovely incident was doubtless told among Christians hundreds of times for its sheer hilarity. It is one of several truly funny stories found in the Acts of the Apostles. Indeed, humor is introduced rather early in the book, when Peter on Pentecost morning responds to the crowds accusing the apostles of drunkenness: "For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day." That is to say, "How can we possibly be drunk at nine in the morning?"

Among examples of humor in Acts, one thinks of the irony that Paul and Barnabas--stern monotheists each of them----are taken for gods about to receive the homage of sacrifice (14:11-18).

One of the funniest scenes in this book portrays the citizens of Ephesus gathered in their famous theater: "Some therefore cried one thing and some another, for the assembly was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together." As soon as they recognized a Jew on the stage, however, "all with one voice cried out for about two hours, 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians!'" (19: 32,34). It was a memorable day!

In the Book of Acts even the devil appreciates a joke, as when he taunts certain would-be exorcists, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but just who are you?!" (19: 15)

In Acts this affection and cultivated humor are components of Christian friendship, the third point of our reflections. Arguably the clearest testimony to such friendship is supplied by that dear group gathered at the home of Cornelius to hear what Peter had to say. Those friends will form the core of the Church at Caesarea (10: 24). They are the same friends to whom Paul would say, when he visited them the last time: "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (21: 13).

Similar friendships were found among the Christians of Ephesus and Miletus, who said good-bye to Paul for the last time: "Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more" (20: 37-38).

These sentiments of affection, humor, and friendship testify to the Gospel's humanizing energy and power. This power should not surprise those convinced of the truth of the Incarnation. God's Son, in His assumption of our flesh, took on also the myriad relationships that tie human beings together in families and communities. In doing so, He passed the energy of His own life into His friends and loved ones, and they in turn communicated it to one another. This energy is what we perceive among the Christians in the Acts of the Apostles.

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