

April 5, 2009

Saint Mary of Egypt

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Even at a cursory reading of the Acts of the Apostles one notices the Lord's reluctance---if that is the word we want---to deal with people one-to-one, bypassing the normal forms of human mediation.

Oh, the Lord does speak directly to individuals, to be sure. For example, He gives Philip a special message to guarantee his encounter with the Ethiopian pilgrim (8:26-29). The Lord likewise speaks to Saul of Tarsus in a very direct and immediate way, both before his conversion (9:4; 22:7; 26:14) and afterwards (16:7-9; 18:9-10; 27:23-24). The Lord does the same with both Peter (10:13,19; 11:7) and Cornelius (10:3,22,30-31).

However, these examples, in which the Lord speaks directly to individuals, are not only exceptional in the Acts of the Apostles, they also appear in contexts that prove them to *be* exceptions.

Let us consider, for instance, the several "personal" revelations connected with Peter and Cornelius. These revelations are treated as preliminary and preparatory for the more significant meeting *between* these two men.

To perceive this to be the case, consider a substitute narrative. Instead of telling Cornelius, "Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter" (10:32), the angel who spoke to him could just as easily have said, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power" (10:38). In other words, Cornelius could have received the Gospel immediately and directly, instead of hearing it from Peter. The whole business could have been handled without further complication. Yet, The Lord chose to effect the conversion of Cornelius through human mediation, not by a direct revelation from on high.

Very much the same is true in the case of Philip and the Ethiopian: The angel who told Philip, "Arise and go toward the south," could just as easily have inquired of the Ethiopian, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

Clearest of all, I suppose, is the case of St. Paul's conversion. In view of the Apostle's claim to have been instructed by the Lord directly (Galatians 1:12), a close look at the recorded circumstances of that conversion is warranted. It will preserve us, I believe, from misinterpreting Paul's claim.

Consider the historical context: Saul the Pharisee was on his way to Damascus, "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (9:1; cf. 22:19; 26:11; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Philippians 3:6; 1 Timothy 1:13). All at once, Jesus addressed him, calling him by name and summoning him to repentance.

It was in this direct encounter that Saul requested specific directions for his life: "Lord, what do You want me to do?" (9:6; 22:10) But this request the Lord refused to grant. Instead, Saul was told, "Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do" (9:10; 22:10).

I mention the Lord's refusal here in connection with the "low ecclesiology"--- rather popular these days---in which the believer is related to Jesus first, and to the Church second. Let me say that this is not what we find in the Acts of the Apostles.

In this passage Jesus asserts, in effect, "I refuse to say another word to you, Saul of Tarsus. Get yourself into Damascus and consult those people you were on your way to persecute. You humble your soul to the authority of My Church, because your ill treatment of those Christians was inflicted on Me. I will not deal with you directly. Those people in Damascus speak for Me." The tone and message of this text in Acts indicates, I submit, a "high ecclesiology," in which the believer is normally related to Jesus within the institutional context of His Church, later described by Paul as "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15).

St. Augustine correctly perceived why the biblical God is "reluctant," as a general rule, to instruct men directly. It would betray, he said, man's corporate nature, which is also the condition of the Church. He wrote, "The state of our race would have been more seriously impaired, had God not chosen to use men as the ministers of His Word to other men." The very intent of that Word, he said, is to unite the hearers together in the one body of Jesus' Church, His temple. "Moreover," wrote Augustine, "love itself, which ties men together in the bond of unity, would have no means of pouring soul into soul, and, as it were, mingling them to one another, if men never learned anything from their fellow men" (*De Doctrina Christiana*, Preface, 6).

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