

August 9, 2009

The Sunday After the Transfiguration

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Few pastoral mistakes, over many centuries, have more seriously damaged the unity of the Church than the occasional attempt to make personal loyalty the basis of that unity.

The disposition to make this mistake lies, I suspect, in the nature of the pastoral office itself. In many---and probably most---cases, a person's conversion to Christ involves, as well, a lively relationship to some pastor or preacher of the Gospel. That is to say, the convert's familiarity with divine grace is closely associated with the ministry of someone other than Christ our Lord. Although the two relationships are logically separable---Christ and the pastor---they are tightly entwined in one's actual experience: In learning to trust Christ, the believer also develops a distinct and personal loyalty to the pastoral figure who facilitates his introduction to Christ.

There is nothing wrong with this in principle, of course, but heaven save the pastor who endeavors to exploit that arrangement for the sake of personal power or control over the congregation committed to his care.

Holy Scripture provides an early instance of the danger: Toward the end of the year 49 Paul began his mission at the city of Corinth, where he ministered for the next 18 months (Acts 18:11). Paul had started by teaching in the local synagogue each Sabbath, sharing the Gospel not only with the Jews, but also with the local Gentiles that were attracted to many features of Judaism (18:4). When the Jews at the synagogue opposed and cursed what Paul was saying, he finally broke off any further discussion with them. From that point on, along with a few Jews, the Gentiles gathered separately under Paul's tutelage (18:8-17). This was hardly the end of the strife, because the Christians met in a home that was right next door to the synagogue! (18:7)

When Paul left Corinth after eighteen months, the parish was pastored by a newcomer, a recent convert, named Apollos. Some of the older members wanted nothing to do with Apollos and the new people that he brought to the congregation. After all, Apollos had just been baptized right before he came to Corinth (Acts 18:24-28). Because he had *studied* his way into the Church, he was open to the charge of having only a book-knowledge of the faith. Most of these Corinthians had been Christian longer than their new pastor! So what would he know? It is not difficult to imagine them critical of the new pastor on the grounds that he did not yet have "the Corinthian ethos."

Because Apollos converted people that Paul himself had failed to reach, the parish at Corinth soon included yet another group, perhaps a better educated group. These groups were very different among themselves. We know that Paul deliberately preached to the dregs of society, people without education or secular advantage (1 Corinthians 1:26; 6:9-11). These people were added to the original core of the parish, the religious Gentiles and few Jews that had worshipped together in the synagogue. Already there was the possibility of conflict. To these were added the more intellectual and educated converts brought into the Church through the ministry of the learned Apollos.

Finally, yet another group was introduced into the congregation at Corinth by Simon Peter---"Kephas." Thus, within five or so years of its founding, the parish at Corinth was already torn by strife and conflicts based solely on misguided personal loyalties. This was the source of what we should call the schismatic spirit, an adjective derived from the Greek verb *schizo*, meaning "to tear."

We see this situation in Paul's comment: "Now I say this, that each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas.'" Here are the names of the first three pastors of the Corinthian congregation. Each of these men had brought into the Church a certain number of converts, and each of these groups developed a personal loyalty to the pastor who had converted them.

Things could have been worse: Suppose one of those pastors had attempted to exploit his relationship as an instrument of power over the congregation! Fortunately, they did not. Indeed, we know that Paul and Apollos were embarrassed by these blind, uncritical loyalties.

Heaven help those Christian leaders---bishops and pastors especially---who make loyalty to themselves the source of church unity, whether the diocese or the parish. Because this abuse is intrinsically schismatic and sinful, it will bring only further divisions, rivalries, and animosity. Believers must, rather, find their true and proper level only in Christ. It is the water level of the baptismal font.

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