

June 19, 2011
All Saints' Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

After his long panegyric on the heroes of faith, the author of the Epistle makes reference to Jesus as "the leader and perfecter of faith" (12:2). This expression requires closer inspection, if we want to understand Jesus' relationship to faith.

First, we should clear up the misunderstanding created by the incorrect insertion of "our" with respect to faith. There is no manuscript support for this insertion, and it fits ill with the large historical sweep of the author's view of faith. Hebrews is concerned about faith, or perhaps *the* faith, and not just *our* faith. Faith permeates the whole of salvation history. It does this as a principle of continuity, because "without faith it is impossible to please" God (Hebrews 11:6).

Second, we observe that Hebrews juxtaposes the two nouns---"leader and perfecter"---to form a polarity implied in their roots: *Archegos* ("leader") is based on the root *arche*, which means "beginning," and *teleotes* ("perfecter") is derived from *telos*, which means "end." "Beginning" and "end" are syntactical poles. Thus, as the two nouns are employed in this text---covered by a single article in Greek---they convey the tension of contrast.

This combination---"leader and perfecter"---is similar to Jesus' self-identifications in the Book of Revelation. For example, "I am the Alpha and Omega" (1:8) and "I am the first and the last"---*ego eimi ho protos kai ho eschatos* (1:17; cf. 2:8). Indeed, at the end of Revelation all these terms are combined into a triple polarity: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the *protos* and the *eschatos*, the *arche* and the *telos*" (22:13).

Third, in what sense does Hebrews call Jesus the "leader" of faith? As we observed above, "leader" translates the noun *archegos*, which conveys the sense, not of a manager or director, but of someone who actually "begins" something. In classical Greek it often conveys the sense of a "founder" or "originator."

Such a meaning of the noun is consistent with the other place where Hebrews uses it in reference to Jesus: "For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make perfect [*teleiosai*], through sufferings, the *archegos* of their salvation" (2:10).

The image of Jesus as *archegos* is apparently derived from the traditional apostolic preaching. St. Peter used the word twice in reference to Jesus, calling him the "leader of life"---*archegos tes zoes*---and declaring, "God exalted him to His right hand as *archegos* and Savior (*soter*)" (Acts 3:15; 5:31).

As Jesus inaugurates both "life" and "salvation," he also inaugurates faith. In the context of Hebrews, he does this by going out ahead of believers as the leader who shows them where and how to run: "With endurance let us run the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus." He modeled this faith chiefly in his Passion, inasmuch as he "endured the cross, despising the shame" (12:1-2).

Fourth, Jesus is the "perfecter of faith" in the sense that he brought to its proper completion the faith earlier exemplified in the lives of those champions of faith celebrated in the previous chapter of Hebrews. He brings to perfection those who preceded him.

It seems probable that the author of Hebrews coined the noun he uses here--- *teleotes*, "perfecter"---inasmuch as the expression is otherwise unknown in either the Greek Bible or other literature of the time. This suggestion is consistent with the emphasis on "perfection" all through Hebrews (cf. 2:10; 5:7-9; 7:28; 9:14; 10:5-10,14). Jesus is the "perfecter" of all the faith that preceded his coming, during the course of salvation history.

The Old Testament saints had faith, of course, but it was not perfect, "God having provided something better for us, that they should *not be made perfect* apart from us" (Hebrews 11:40).

The "perfection" accomplished by Jesus was not simply a supplement---a "more"---added to the faith of the ancients. After all, the relationship between "perfect" and "less than perfect" is not just quantitative. The perfect is qualitatively different from the "less than perfect." It is of a different order. Indeed, the Epistle to the Hebrews began with that qualitative distinction: The God who earlier spoke through the prophets has now spoken through a Son (1:1-2; cf. 3:5-6).

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