

September 7, 2014

The Sunday Before Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Spirit of Advantage

When our Lord spoke of his coming departure from this world, he described it as an advantage to us. "It is to your advantage (sympherei hymin)," he declared, "that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you" (John 16:7).

This declaration is given in response to the Apostles' sense of loss when they heard that Jesus was going away: "Because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart" (16:6). These men had clung to him; of course they were sorrowful on learning of his impending departure. Would he simply leave them desolate?

The Savior's promise of "another Advocate" addresses this very question. The Holy Spirit would be sent precisely in order that the disciples would never be without the presence of Christ.

Even as the physical form of that presence was taken away, he would come to the Church in a new and incomparable way—in the gift of the Holy Spirit: "I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Advocate, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you" (14:16).

The Acts of the Apostles testifies to the effects of this new presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit. In this respect it is instructive to compare the attitude and behavior of the Apostles after the descent of the Spirit to what we see of them before that event. In many places in the Gospel stories we find them timid, afraid, and unsure of themselves, even as they watch—with their own eyes—the lame healed, the paralyzed restored, and the dead raised. This insecurity especially marked the Apostles during the days leading up to the Lord's Passion.

After the descent of the "other Advocate," however, all this is changed. Now the Apostles are courageous and enterprising, fearless in the face of

adversity, utterly confident in the authority of the Holy Spirit: "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things" (Acts 15:28). The distraught fisherman who quailed before the maidservant of the high priest now boldly tells the high priest himself, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to be more attentive to you than to God, you judge. For we cannot but declare the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20).

What has happened to the Apostles here? The visible and "external" presence of Christ, the imposing figure around whom they had gathered, has now been replaced by a Spirit-given internal presence that transforms everything about these men. Christ now lives in them. Through the Holy Spirit these internally transformed men have "the mind of Christ." Christ becomes the source of an authority they know and feel within themselves. Could any of this have happened if Christ had remained on earth as a visible actor on the stage of history? Indeed—and here I speak of what I can barely guess at—would not an external, visible Christ, yet walking among men, have distracted from the powerful inner witness to Christ, gripping and guiding the minds and hearts of these men?

What the Holy Spirit says, then, has entirely to do with Christ. At no point does the Spirit speak except with respect to Christ. The Holy Spirit is not an independent witness, having an authority of His own. On the contrary, "when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own, but whatever He hears He will speak. . . He will take of what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:13-14). This is what we see, page after page, all through the Acts of the Apostles.

The new era of the Holy Spirit should not be thought of as a succession to Christ. The move from the "Christ without" to the "Christ within" does nothing to Christ himself, nor does the Holy Spirit take up, so to speak, where Christ left off. There is no historical discontinuity or separate *oikonomia* of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the Spirit really does not have much to say about Himself. What He enables believers to declare, they declare about the Father and the Son: "Abba, Father" (Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:15) and "Jesus is Lord" (1 Corinthians 12:3; Acts 2:36; Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11).

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