

May 29, 2005
Sunday of the Samaritan Woman

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In general the word “we” has two possible meanings. First, “we” may mean “us” as distinct from “you.” Second, it may signify “you and I.”

We find both senses of “we” in the first chapter of the First Epistle of John. Indeed, this chapter is divided exactly in half by these two uses of the word, which appears at least once in every single verse.

Let us begin by looking at the first half of 1 John 1, carefully noting “we” each time we find it: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life--the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us--that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have communion with us; and truly our communion is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full. This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all” (1:1-5).

The “we” in these verses does not mean “you and I.” Here the first person plural signifies, on the contrary, “we” as distinct from “you.” In fact, in each instance “we” refers to the authority of the apostolic witness, the genuine transmission of the divine revelation that took place in Jesus Christ. The “we” is the apostolic authority testifying to the rest of the Church—“you.”

According to John, this authoritative witness involves the various senses by which the Apostles discerned God’s manifestation in the flesh—hearing, seeing, even touching: “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled.” The identical use of this “we” is found also near the beginning of John’s Gospel: “. . . we beheld His glory . . .” (1:14).

In the second half of 1 John 1, however, the sense of John’s “we” changes significantly. It no longer means the apostolic witness but refers, rather, to “you and I.” It is no longer the “we” of authority, but the shared “we” of common experience. Indeed, the “we” of these five verses can even be called hypothetical, inasmuch as John’s whole argument consists of a series of “we” (“you and I”) suppositions. An “if” clause appears in every verse and always with a “we.”

Thus, [1] “*If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.* [2] But *if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have communion with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.* [3] *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.* [4] *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* [5] *If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.”*

Whereas the first half of 1 John 1 is about the authority of the apostolic witness, the second half is mainly concerned with the forgiveness of sins. The word “we” in this respect serves to place forgiveness in a social context. According to John, the forgiveness of sins is not set in an individual relationship between the believer and God. On the contrary, the forgiveness of sins involves a “we” in the shared sense of “you and I.” That is to say, it is situated in the context of the Church, that society formed by the authority of the apostolic witness

Communion with the Church, for John, is essential to forgiveness. Membership in the Church is how we have communion with God and His Son: “. . . and truly our communion is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.” This full communion with God and His Son, a reality inseparable from communion with the Church, is the framework of the forgiveness of sins: “we have *communion with one another*, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.” The sequence is important. It is in communion with one another that we are cleansed from our sins by the blood of Jesus. There is no such thing as the remission of sins apart from this communion of the Church.

Thus, John’s two senses of the word “we” are complementary, beginning with authority and ending with communion and forgiveness.

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