

May 6, 2007

## **Sunday of the Samaritan Woman**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Because the Holy Catholic Church is adorned in a robe of many colors (Psalms 44:190 LXX), it is appropriate that her various aspects are exemplified in the rich and diverse gifts of the saints, much as the whiteness of the sun's light is refracted in the range of the rainbows colors. Hence, it is no new idea that the sundry aspects of God's one people were represented among the close friends of Christ our Lord.

For instance, if we consider the Church as an institution, a building (1 Corinthians 3:9), it seems entirely proper to say she is represented by St. Peter, whose very name signifies the "rock" on which the Church was founded (Matthew 16:18). For this reason we regularly find this saint expressing in the Gospels the Church's foundational creed with respect to the identity of Jesus (16:16; John 6:69). It is not as though the other saints fail to exemplify the faith of the Church, of course; all of us must hold the identical faith in Jesus. Nonetheless, it is very clear in the Gospels that Peter seems habitually to act as the Church's spokesman in the enunciation of this foundational faith. When Peter speaks with respect to Christ, He speaks for the confessing Church as a whole. That is to say, Peter represents the institutional faith of the Church. When we think of the foundational stability of the Church, we think of Peter.

There are other essential aspects of the Church, however, besides that of an institution, and among these we should consider the Church as a missionary venture. When we think of the Church in terms of missionary endeavor, it is natural that the character of St. Paul comes to mind. This does not mean, obviously, that Paul has nothing to do with the institutional aspect of the Church. Inasmuch as Paul founded local churches all over the Mediterranean basin and established their ministries, this would be a rash conclusion. Neither do we mean that none of the other saints exemplify this same missionary aspect of the Church. It is simply a fact that Holy Scripture says so much more of this activity in Paul's life, so when we think of the Church in terms of mission, we think of Paul.

Another aspect of the Church, surely, is that of a school of theology, inner refuge where divine truth is nourished and studied. This is what we may call the Johannine dimension of the Church, inasmuch as Christians have traditionally thought of John's Gospel as representing the true high point in theology. Indeed, John is the earliest Christian to be called a "theologian." Needless to say, this does not mean that Peter, Paul, and the other saints knew nothing of theology and left that subject entirely to John. It was John, nonetheless, who began his Gospel by ascending directly into the inner life of God and writing about the eternal generation of the Word. This is the reason John is the evangelist commonly

identified with the eagle among Revelation's four living creatures. When we think of the great theological ministry of the Church, we think of John.

The Church is also a community of witness, and this aspect of ecclesiology we commonly associate with St. Stephen, the Church's first *martys*, or witness. Once again, this emphasis takes nothing away from the martyrdoms of Peter, Paul, and many others, nor does it mean that this is the only aspect we recall about Stephen. We mean only that Stephen was the first to confront the enmity of the world at the cost of his own life. When we think of the Church in terms of witnessing unto bloodshed, then, we think of Stephen.

The Church is also a home of kindness and devoted service, and in this respect she is represented in the Myrrhbearing Women, those unselfish handmaidens who came to anoint the body of the Lord and became the first to proclaim His resurrection. When we think of the Church in terms of loving service, it is natural that we remember the Myrrhbearers.

The Church is likewise a house of repentance, an aspect of ecclesiology readily recognized in St. Mary Magdalene, out of whom Jesus had cast seven devils (Luke 8:2). When we think of the Church as the place of repentance, it is not surprising that we think of Mary Magdalene.

The Church is, moreover, a house of contemplation, and perhaps we may call this the Church's preeminently Marian aspect. This does not mean that other Christians are deprived of the gift of divine contemplation, of course. It simply indicates that Mary of Nazareth became so full of God's eternal Word that He assumed flesh in her body. Her "yes" provided God's path into human existence. Consequently, when we think of the Church in terms of contemplation, we think of that Lady who "kept all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:51).

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**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**  
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641  
Church Office: (773) 777-0749  
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**  
[phri@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phri@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)  
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