

May 20, 2007

The Sunday after Ascension

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among the spiritual blessings conferred on the Apostle Paul in his experience of conversion, it is arguable that none was more significant than a strong and indelible sense of the union of Christ with His Church.

This union was expressed in the first words that Jesus spoke to him, the question that asked, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" To this question the persecutor answered with another, "Who are you, sir?" To this the Lord responded by repeating the same accusation: "I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting?" (Acts 22:8)

Even in the blindness that accompanied this stunning revelation, Saul immediately perceived at least three truths. First, this Jesus of Nazareth, whom he had thought to be dead, was very much alive. Second, this same Jesus took very personally the "threats and murder" that Saul was breathing against His followers (Acts 9:1). Indeed, Jesus regarded that activity as directed against Himself. "Why are you persecuting *Me*?" he asked. Third, this revelation was a warning of divine mercy to Saul himself, a grace-filled call and opportunity to repent.

Such was Saul's introduction to the mystery of the Church. Jesus of Nazareth showed him the infinite mercy of revealing to him, at his very conversion, the truth that would remain central to his mind for the rest of his life: "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for *Me*" (Matthew 25:40 NIV). Paul perceived immediately an intimate identity between Christ and His disciples. Beware, he learned, touch the Church, and you touch Jesus of Nazareth.

Paul's next question was a very practical one: "What do you want me to do?" By way of response to this inquiry our Lord gave him not a single line of instruction beyond telling him to go and put himself under the authority of the Church: "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (Acts 9:6).

This answer of the Lord to Saul was significant in two ways. First, it strengthened the substance of the original revelation itself, affirming once again the union between Church and Christ. It asserted that the Church had the authority to speak for Christ. This answer repeated, in specific reference to this Saul of Tarsus, what Jesus had earlier declared to the Church: "He who hears you hears *Me*" (Luke 10:16). This was the first lesson the soon-to-be apostle was to learn at depth--that he enjoyed no special, one-on-one access to Christ that did not involve the Church. Christ would give Saul no instruction beyond, "Do exactly what the Church tells you to do."

Second, in addition to conveying a truth important to all Christians, this answer of the Lord to Saul addressed the immediate context of his trip to Damascus. He was going there, after all, "so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:2). Now this same man must continue his journey into the city,

"trembling and astonished" (9:6), blind and fasting (9:8-9), to submit the welfare of his soul to the very people he had come to arrest.

Such was the new apostle's introduction to the Christian life. He did not find salvation and then look around for likeminded folks with whom to throw in his lot. The Church was not optional. It was of the very substance of the revelation that Saul received. He did not start with a personal theology about salvation and proceed to search for some group that agreed with that theology. No, the revelation of the risen Christ was also a revelation of the Church. In Paul's experience, there was no separation between these two realities.

The rest of Paul's ecclesiology over the years was a development of this perception. First, it was at Damascus that the Church told him exactly how to get rid of his sins: "Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (22:16). For Paul, forgiveness of sins was not something distinguishable from being baptized into the Church. That is to say, Paul learned that "by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13). Through this sacramental experience he came to know that there is "one body and one Spirit, . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:4-5). Then, sharing in the Lord's Supper, Paul learned the mystic source of the Church's union with Christ, discerning that "we many are one bread, one body, for we all partake of that one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17). The Church was Christ's own body because she partook of that body through the celebration of the Eucharistic Mystery.

In short, Paul's experience of grace in his conversion included the meaning of the Church, the union of those joined to Christ and to one another in the living, specific, and defined institution with which Christ so completely identified Himself.

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