

June 17, 2007

Third Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In the New Testament, Jesus' choice of the twelve apostles is described in ways that indicate the strictly theological nature of their ministry. The significance of those chosen men was first ontological, and only then "practical." It was symbolic before it was pastoral. Apostleship was a question of "being" before it was a matter of "doing." The vocation of these twelve men was not a kind of pragmatic provision in order to get a job done. It was not as though Jesus had worked out a personnel description of some sort and then picked the individuals best fitted to the format. Nor did He select His apostles the way an entrepreneur businessman might assemble his team. Everything in the ministry of the apostles was rooted, rather, in their theological relationship to Christ and His Father.

The Gospels are clear on this point. For example, St. Luke wrote, "Now it came to pass in those days that [Jesus] went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, He called His disciples to Himself; and from them He chose twelve whom He also named apostles" (6:12-13).

In this account of their calling, the choice of the apostles is portrayed as the fruit of Jesus' nightlong communion with God in prayer. Indeed, our Lord was careful to tell them later that they did not choose Him; He chose *them* (John 15:16). The Apostles did not apply for the job, so to speak. Their choice was a theological act, not a managerial arrangement. Jesus was not some sort of efficiency expert. The selection and calling of these twelve men came, rather, from His communion with the Father.

This theological aspect of the apostolic office bound the apostles personally to the Lord. Logically prior to their "sending out" (*apostello*), the apostles were chosen, first, to be "*with* Him" (Mark 3:14). They were His companions, in the literal sense of sharing the bread (*panis*) with Him. It was directly from His hands, in fact, that they received the bread that He identified as His body. The rest of the Church was to receive that bread from their hands. They were the appointed guardians of the Mystery.

Perhaps this ontological aspect of apostolicity is even more pronounced in the Gospel of John, where Jesus washes the feet of the apostles and explains the significance of this act (13:1-17). Having chosen these men from within His communion with the Father, He revealed the Father to them, and He did this by being "*with*" them: "Have I been *with* you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (14:9). Jesus' love for these men comes from God's love for Him (15:9). Indeed, the Father loves them

because they love Jesus (16:27). For this reason He has revealed to them whatever the Father has revealed to Him (15:15).

Before the apostles speak a single word to the world, then, their vocation is already freighted with theological significance. Indeed, this significance is partly found in their very number, "Twelve." It was the number of the Patriarchs, the forefathers of the Chosen People.

We recall that Jesus compared Himself to Jacob (John 1:51), the father of the twelve patriarchs. That number represented the fullness of God's people in a structural way. Those twelve men, called through Jesus' communion with the Father, became the new patriarchs through whom the revelation was transmitted. Their vocation was foundational for the Church. This is why, in John's famous vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, "the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb " (Revelation 41:14).

That is to say, the apostolic office is structural to the Church by way of theological symbolism. This symbolic structure, moreover, stands at both ends of the Church's history. It pertains not only to her past but also to her future, because the Twelve Apostles will judge the history of the world: "when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matthew 19:28).

Appearing at the beginning and the end, the twelve apostles stand as the bookends that hold in place the history of the Church. We confess as much, furthermore, in the recitation of that inherited creedal formula that expresses the dogmas of the faith. We confess that the Church is not only one, holy, and catholic, but also that she is apostolic.

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