

July 27, 2008

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In addition to being the gift of God, faith is also an act of man, taking its rise in attendance to the Word of God. Faith begins with "hearing" (*akoe*) that becomes "obedience" (*hypakoe*).

The Word of God was committed to the ministry of the Church. Although all Christians can and should proclaim the Gospel, the special care and general oversight of that ministry was especially entrusted to a select group of men, who were commissioned to make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them what Jesus ordained (Matthew 28: 19-20). These were the men, along with their historical successors, who founded the Christian churches, by proclaiming the Word of God: the story and message of Jesus. This is the Gospel.

According to the apostolic writings, faith is normally elicited through hearing this proclamation: "So then faith is through hearing [*pistis dia akoes*], and hearing through the message of Christ [*akoe dia hrematos Christou*]" (Romans 10:17). Indeed, it is called "the hearing of faith" (*akoe pisteos*--Galatians 3:2,5), just as the message itself is called "the word of hearing" (*logos akoes*--1 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 4:2).

Preaching, therefore, is the normal means by which the Word of God elicits faith. Thus, the New Testament asks, "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:14) What the preacher proclaims is variously called "the Word that I preached to you" (1 Corinthians 15:2), "the Word of truth" (Ephesians 1:13), "truth in Jesus" (4:21), or, simply, "the faith" (Galatians 1:23).

With the godly reception of that Word, hearing (*akoe*) becomes obedience (*hypakoe*). It is at this point that faith grows into a human act. Thus, we read of "the obedience of faith" (*hypakoe pisteos*--Romans 1:15; 16:26). It is imperative, Paul wrote, not to neglect obedience to the Gospel of Christ (2 Thessalonians 1:8).

This is a mental obedience, inasmuch as those who make the step are said to submit the processes of their thought "unto the obedience of Christ" (*eis ten hypakoen tou Christou*--2 Corinthians 10:5).

Such obedience is more than mental, however, because it involves the body as well as the mind. It is not enough to assent with the heart; the believer must also proclaim his faith vocally. It is a bodily act: "if you confess *with your mouth* the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and *with the mouth* confession is made unto salvation" (Romans 10:9-10, emphasis added).

Very important among the physical expressions of faith is obedience to the mandate of baptism. Thus, in Mark's version of the Great Commission, we read, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). Indeed, all through the Acts of the Apostles, we find that submission to baptism is a first step--a physical step--in the obedience of faith (2:38,41; 8:12,36; 10:48; 16:15,33; 18:8; 19:5). It is in the act of baptism, moreover, this ritual enactment of his faith, that the believer is relieved of his sins: "Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16).

Faith is more than a conscious psychological act. Inasmuch as it commits the believer, body and soul, to the lordship of Christ, the person who takes this step can barely do more than guess at the full content and implication of what he does. His faith (expressed in baptism and the other things that faith initially requires of him) unites him to Christ, which makes him a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17). This is an objectively new condition of being, which his cognitive faculties will only gradually perceive. Our consciousness of rebirth, at the time we are reborn, may not be much greater than our consciousness at birth. This is nothing to worry about, as long as we remain faithful to the requirements and implications of what God's grace has done for us.

Indeed, much of the exhortatory material in the New Testament is directed towards making the believer conscious of the moral and intellectual responsibilities which express that objective state of reconciliation, justification, and union with Christ. This is the work of the Christian life, the life in which Christ gradually takes over the thinking and emotive processes of the believer's soul.

Not all at once will the believer have the self-consciousness to say, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). This union with Christ is God's work, not ours; we cannot, of ourselves, unite ourselves with Christ. Our responsibility is, rather, to take full, personal possession of that union.

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