

FIFTH SUNDAY IN EASTER: MAY 10, 2020

The corona virus pandemic seems to color everything these days. I am intrigued by the speculation of what will follow when we get back to some form of normal. The pandemic has unveiled the effects of the significant economic inequality in our country and how the disease especially effects Blacks, Latinos and Native Americans. Will the return to normal mean the return to clogged highways, high pollution and unbridled consumerism?

There is likewise speculation on what post-pandemia will mean for the church. What kind of changes will this bring to us? Will virtual worship replace the pre-pandemic church? Some see the value of home centered religion becoming more normal, of people in small groups building a new church.

During this Easter season we are reading the Acts of the Apostles, the account of the early church and how it adapted, in listening to the Holy Spirit. The apostles listened, dialogued, and were open to new developments. In today's reading we hear of the decision to choose "seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and wisdom," to help the growing community, particularly in areas of service to the hungry and poor. Thus was instituted the ministry of deacons which would soon be recognized as one of the three levels of ordained ministry, along with bishops and presbyters.

What changes or developments are needed and will be needed in the future? For some Catholics, this is a provocative question. The post-Reformation church emphasized certainty and lack of change in the church's teachings and practices. The Second Vatican Council fifty years ago, recognized legitimate development, but some today continue to fight any such possibility. The openness to our Jewish neighbors and the very acceptance of democracy were such developments and some people continue to deny both.

Then what is essential and cannot change? The second reading from the first letter of Peter sets a high bar of what the church is about.

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of the One who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

But it is the gospel reading that brings us to the essential center of Christianity. Jesus tells his disciples, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." Christ, the Risen Lord, is the center of our way of life as Christians. Our acceptance as being the

Christ's disciples is what brings us into the community of the church which is the body of Christ. Loving and caring for one another is essential in following Christ but we also need the vertical relationship to God in Christ. For us, the Christ presents us with an authentic vision of human existence, that is a model of the way human life ought to be lived.

Some Catholics have become embarrassed by the centrality of Christ. How about Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and others who do not believe in Christ? A good question for theologians to struggle with. But, if you are a Christian, your center is the Christ. When some Christians started following the Dalai Lama and wanted to embrace Buddhism, he counseled them to go back to their roots and be good Christians. I don't think he meant that Christians could not learn from Buddhism and other faiths but they should do so to strengthen their own discipleship.

Centering on Christ means getting beyond being conservative or liberal. There is time for both at different times. Malcolm X once said something to this effect:

"I have strong allegiance to both Christ and Muhammad because we need them both. Right now, so many of the men to whom I am trying to minister need the discipline of Allah. Their lives are in such disrepair that they need clear, hard rules of discipline that are spelled out for them without ambiguity. Later on, once they have their lives more in order, they can turn to the liberal love of Jesus. First, we need the discipline of Allah, later the freedom of Jesus."

For us, Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He is the form of divine revelation in history. Jesus is the Word of God, the image, the expression, the explanation of God. Jesus is always the definitive embodiment of God. Only something that has such a form can ravish us with beauty. To be bowled over by such an appearance is just what happened at the beginning of Christianity. The apostles were captivated by what they saw, heard, and touched, by what was revealed to them in human form.

Perhaps in this new world and its uncertain future, we need to go back to the center. It is the Christ, present in our midst in scriptures, in the assembly, in the breaking of bread that we put our hopes and our courage. As the gospel began today, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me."

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