

Easter 5.09

Did you notice that in our first reading from Acts the Christians at Jerusalem would not accept Paul as a fellow Christian because they had known him as a man who had persecuted them. It is only after Barnabas, whom they knew and trusted, vouched for Paul that they were willing to accept him as one of themselves, as a fellow Christian. I think we can learn from this little episode that belonging to the community, the Church, was very important for the first Christians.

Most of us probably think that the earliest Christian community was so small that its members would have known each other personally. But, according to Acts 2, after Peter gave his first sermon on the first Pentecost some three thousand people were baptized. So this first Christian community was not that small and therefore its individual members would not have known each other personally. On the other hand, these three thousand Christians were probably divided into small groups because they had to meet in private homes since churches were still a thing of the future. Thus the members of these small house communities would have known each other personally. And here again the importance of community stands revealed. To be a Christian was to belong to a

community, whether large or small, and there was a clear distinction between community members and those outside the community.

This sense of group identity has continued in Christian faith. Thus those who claim to be Christians but do not belong to a community are off base. And that remains true even though we have to admit that we sometimes meet people who, though churchless, seem to be better disciples of Jesus than some church-goers.

What is happening to us today as a Christian community, and as a Catholic Christian community? Here I have no word from the Lord. I am just sharing my impressions with you. Therefore, if you do not see things as I see them, that is all well and good. But here is what I see happening.

The Catholic Church has been able to retain its identity as a community for two millennia because of its hierarchical structure. On the local level there is the bishop; on the international level there is the pope. If an individual or a community separate themselves from this structure, they are no longer part of the Catholic community. The two-thousand year continuity of this community is impressive but it is not unique. The Orthodox

Church can point to the same kind of unity and even to an equal longevity. The Protestant churches cannot rival the Catholic and Orthodox Churches in longevity, having begun in the 16th century, but they too have maintained their respective unities through their own hierarchical structures for these past four centuries.

Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians—they all have their own unique identity as Christian communities.

It is only in the past 100 years or so that the individual Christian churches have begun to take seriously the fact that they should all form one Christian community. Until then the bitterness of the break between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches in the eleventh century and between the Catholic and Protestant Churches in the sixteenth century was just too strong and deep even to allow these churches to see each other as sister churches in Christ. At Vatican II in the 1960s our church invited members of these other churches to attend the Council, and many came. It was a new beginning. But since then it seems the desire for reunion has quieted down, though it is still alive.

Perhaps two factors will increase this desire in the future. The first is the challenge of other religions. As we begin to live in closer contact with other religions, the differences among the Christian

churches will seem less important, less an obstacle to a future reunion. Thus the growth of Islam in the world and here in the West may be a force pushing us Christians closer together.

Secondly, as we associate more closely with Christians of other churches on an informal basis, we are going to appreciate what good Christians some of them are. And then we are going to say to ourselves: “Well, they may not recognize the Pope, and they may not understand the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist in terms of transubstantiation, and they may not believe there is a purgatory, but they are such generous and prayerful and charitable people. How can they not be our sisters and brothers in Christ? And their example will then push us to be better followers of Jesus. And then we will both read the Scriptures together and find that we are, literally, on the same page. Then we will discover that we and they both believe in the name of Jesus and try to love one another as he has commanded us to do. Then we will realize that we are both branches on the same vine, Christ, and that in him we can do everything and without him we can do nothing. In short, it will be our living of our lives as followers of Jesus, lives of prayer and good works, that will help us to recognize each other as branches of the same vine, as sisters and brothers in the Lord.

Brothers and Sisters, may our attempts to be good branches on the vine of Christ bring us and all our Christian sisters and brothers together in love.