Eucharist, Spirit, Dangerous Memory

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This reflection on the celebration of the Eucharist—hearing the Word, making memory of and offering the one sacrifice in which we have been baptized, and committing ourselves to it by eating and drinking—summons us to a discipleship sustained by the Spirit in service of the coming of the reign of God.

Since Vatican II, Catholic theologians have affirmed the christological basis of the church and its indispensable role in Catholic theology. They have also recognized that there is a real need to turn more and more toward the neglected pneumatological basis, that is, the role of the Spirit in the event of the Cross as origin of the church. Thus, in the context of the celebration of the Eucharist, the making memory of the Cross is dangerous because it calls the baptized to conversion and implies critique of oppressive political systems (Morrill, 104).

The Gospel of John 14:25-26 places these words on the lips of Jesus: “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (RSV). Later, in their first experience of the crucified and risen One, John records: “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he said this, he breathed on them, and said to them ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:19-22 [Emphasis mine]). And, in referring to St. Augustine’s commentary on Psalm 138, paragraph 5 of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy teaches: “For

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it was from the side of Christ as He slept the sleep of death upon the Cross that there came forth the wondrous sacrament which is the whole Church.” In short, it is the bestowal of the Spirit by the crucified and risen One upon his disciples, drawing them into his total response to the Father, that is the origin of the whole church. In the time of the church, it is this ongoing bestowal of the Spirit by Christ from the Father that enables the church—disciples—to make anamnesis, that is, to remember the total self-offering—the passion of Christ—in which it dwells. It is a “dangerous memory,” a de-racinating memory, uprooting us from all false securities.

In this time when the celebration of the Eucharist is the locus of struggle between images of the church (e.g., church as people of God, church as hierarchical), we do well to situate the liturgical reforms of Vatican II within the riches of our biblical tradition. Perhaps one of the richest results of biblical scholarship for contemporary theology has been the retrieval of the notion of discipleship, and so, of the ekklesia (church) as the calling together of disciples. The Greek word mathetes simply means “pupil, follower, one who is taught” (McDonagh, 36). The church, then, is the common-union of those who, being taught by the Christ, make “re-membrance” of him by the urging of the Spirit.

In the years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, it is clear that his disciples struggled with the implications of his life for them. Recall the Emmaus story in Luke 24 in which the disciples—and you and I—are walking away from Jerusalem, dejected because he is no longer with them and because matters have not turned out as they had planned. “While they were walking . . . Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (Luke 24:15-16), because of their preoccupation with disappointment and struggle with the absence of Jesus as they had known him. What follows is the first mystagogy of the Eucharist. In the light of the Scriptures, Jesus tells them to whom they belong, prays the blessing, they come to recognize the Christ in broken bread, and he disappears from their sight. With “burning hearts,” they return to Jerusalem.

Each of us, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, has been confused and has asked: What shall we do? How shall we know what is good? To whom shall we go to be taught?
the faith of the church: in hearing the Word and in eating and drinking, we come to know what is good, we come to know what to do, and we recognize the One who teaches us. Knowledge, as I use it here, is not information, but primarily that knowledge given to the whole church by the Holy Spirit who is the memory of the church. If disciples wish to know the mind of Christ, it is discerned in the Body of Christ, the church, especially in the liturgical assembly. Any attempt to have unmediated access to the Christ is an illusion (Chauvet, 28–34).

There may be times in which we would like to rush up alongside that young man in the gospels and ask: “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” (Matt 19:16-22 and parallels). There is the temptation to think that if we could see and touch and hear the Lord in the flesh, our problems would be solved. And yet, the story concludes with the departure of that young man because he had many possessions.

All this is to say that those who could physically see and touch and hear the Christ have no corner on access to him. For it is the consolation of our faith that this community of disciples, here, for all its weaknesses, has for its most intimate gift the Spirit who binds us together, who disposes our hearts to be taught, who teaches us all that we need to know, who enables us to remember what we must do.

It seems clear that specific action-guides are not the only glue of a community. Indeed, a community will not exist for long unless it is glued together around shared convictions that affect action and policies of behavior. Conviction that what has transpired in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth is the basis of your hope as well (Rom 6:5); conviction that the disciples can never be separated from the Teacher (Rom 8:31-39); that the disciples live and move and have their being in the Teacher (Eph 1:3-14); that if the Teacher is crucified, so are the disciples (John 15:18ff.). Discipleship involves far more than leafing through the Scriptures to find an ethical code. Discipleship primarily involves the acknowledgment that we are continually being taught by the Lord to whom we have been knit by the Spirit.

The Spirit—the living memory of the church—continually calls disciples to place themselves on the way of faith, that is, within the response of Christ crucified and risen to God.
anamnesis, “calling to mind the passion of Christ.” To be sure, we hold that the Spirit is active in all creation, present to every human being. But for the disciples of the Lord, the Spirit is concretely, personally revealed in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth. For those plunged into the death of the Lord (Rom 6), the Spirit not only hands on the tradition about Jesus but hands on the Lord himself. And so, when the Scriptures are proclaimed in the liturgical assembly, it is Christ who speaks to his Body; and when the eucharistic prayer proclaims, “Calling to mind the death your Son endured for our salvation,” we are not engaged in simple recollection of events, but in opening ourselves to the memory of our hearts, opening ourselves to the Spirit who has bound us to the Christ, opening ourselves to the future fulfillment of history (Morrill, 139–88). In the words of Aidan Kavanagh:

No ‘spirituality’ which runs counter to this [the cross of Christ] is worth a Christian’s time. No competency which does not master our natural fears over passing this way is worth cultivating. No faith which does not have this at its center is anything but vain. No liturgy which does not celebrate this is anything but corporate fantasy. No life without this is Christian. And without Christians living this, there is no life in the world. If anyone offers you something other than this as a contemporary, relevant, meaningful, and fulfilling Christian ‘spirituality’, thank him politely and pour it down the sink. (Kavanagh, 17–22)

References


