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Continuing the mission

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | May. 18, 2012

Whether your congregation is celebrating today the feast of Jesus? ascension into eternal glory or the Seventh Sunday of the Easter season, the essential message of either celebration is the same: It is the inherent responsibility of the disciples of Jesus to continue his mission. This responsibility has been clearly enunciated by the Marcan Jesus, who told his own, ?Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to all creation.? Further affirmation of the church?s mission is included in the Johannine Jesus? high priestly prayer, ?As you, Father, have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.?

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The church?s mission to be about the work of Jesus is also reflected in the question

of the two messengers dressed in white on the mount of Jesus? ascension (Acts): ?Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking up at the skies?? Instead of remaining in the relative safety of that mountaintop, searching the heavens for the final glimpse of the returning Jesus, the disciples went down the mountain and directly into the fray of the human experience. There and everywhere, they were (and we are) to speak God?s good news with our lips, with our lives.

The readings for this Sunday attest to the fact that the disciples of Jesus were not sent into the whole world with the good news of salvation without the support and equipment necessary to accomplish their purpose. The Johannine Jesus prayed that his disciples would be protected and guarded from evil while being consecrated in truth. The ascending Jesus promised the power of the Holy Spirit to guide and empower his own for mission.

Anglican pastor and missionary John R.W. Stott reminds us that ?before Christ sent the church into the world, he sent the Spirit into the church. The same order must continue to be observed today.?

The author of Ephesians assures disciples that God has endowed each of us with wisdom and insight, hope and strength. Over and above these gifts, insists the Johannine epistolary writer, disciples are continually renewed and strengthened by the very presence of God dwelling within us: ?God dwells in us and God?s love is brought to perfection in us. ... When anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwells in him and he in God.?

Steps were taken to maintain the integrity of the Twelve so that the disciples could grow more numerous and diverse to ensure that their message would be heard. As Luke tells us in Acts, the community nominated two to

John 10:11-18
Ephesians 1:17-23
Mark 16:15-20
John 17:11-19
Full text of the readings [1]

take the place of Judas. Then they prayed to God to indicate which of the two should join their ranks. Slowly but surely, and always under the auspices of the Holy Spirit, the numbers of Jesus? followers grew to include people of every race, of both genders, of all ages, of every culture and socioeconomic background. Maintaining the unity of such a diverse community continues to challenge the disciples of Jesus. Will we welcome all others as Jesus did, or will we pick and choose, and thereby render our professed belief in the universality of the church a lie?

For Jesus? first disciples, the scope of their missionary efforts was well delineated: They were instructed to be Jesus? witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, into Samaria and then onward to the ends of the whole world. The earliest disciples were itinerant preachers and teachers of the good news, and so others through the centuries have followed this lead, leaving behind their homelands to carry the message to faraway places.

Of his own experience, Alsatian native Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) once wrote, ?I gave up my position of professor in the University of Strasbourg, my literary work and my organ playing in order to be a medical doctor in Equatorial Africa. I had read about the physical miseries of the natives ... from missionaries and the more I thought about it the stranger it seemed to be that we ... trouble ourselves so little about the great humanitarian task which offers itself to us in far off lands.? Schweitzer funded and built a hospital at Lambaréné, western Gabon, where he worked for 40 years.

For most of us, however, the venue of our missionary efforts will probably be closer to home -- but no less vital. If each of us brought the energy, dedication and perseverance of Jesus, Peter, Paul, John, Luke or Albert Schweitzer to bear upon every aspect of our lives, how much more compelling might the good news of Jesus Christ become? Fed with that good news and with the bread of life at every eucharistic encounter, we are sent forth renewed, to continue the mission of the dying, rising and ascended, glorified Christ: ?Go in peace to love and serve the Lord and all others in Jesus? name.?

[Patricia Sánchez holds a master?s degree in literature and religion of the Bible from a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.]

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[1] http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/052012-seventh-sunday-of-easter.cfm