Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid” (John 14:28).

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29; Ps 67; Rev 21:10-14, 22-23; Jn 14:23-29

Before he was elected pope, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio was asked to say a few words about his hopes for the church during the consistory that would choose him. He reportedly said in effect, “A self-referential church becomes sick, only concerned with preserving itself. But Jesus is knocking at the door.” Someone then said, “Then we should let him in,” to which Bergoglio answered, “No, he is trying to get out.”

This image of an expansive, evangelizing church is what the church got by electing Pope Francis. If God is Mercy, then mercy gathers those who most need it, anyone living on the edges of hope. Go to margins, be a field hospital for the wounded, go like shepherds among the sheep to bring them safely to pasture, then home again. Everything Francis has said and done is about going out to gather in, expanding the circle, excluding no one, celebrating God’s inclusive, infinite love.

The decade of his papacy has been steadily devoted to bringing forth the vision of Pope John XXIII’s church *in* the world, *Mater et Magistra,* mother and teacher, dialoguing and reconciling, offering healing and peace, respect for the Earth, unity of purpose among the world’s nations and religions to bring the common good and justice for all. This was the breathtaking agenda of Vatican II (1962-65) that burst onto the world scene but was then resisted by those who feared the church would lose her unique identity and authority in an increasingly secular world if the doors and windows were flung open.

For the past 60 years, the question has been about either self-preservation or evangelization, order or openness, security or risk. How evident this has been in the liturgy wars(!), the struggle between mercy or moral meritocracy, and a juridical or a pastoral church. Many bishops have clearly understood the cost of Pope Francis’ call to become Vatican II’s “synodal” church, the People of God walking and talking their way into an uncertain future, every voice listened to, every spirit discerned. From the start, Francis has dreamed of turning the church upside down, making bishops servant leaders instead of robed dignitaries at the head table, simple shepherds who smell like the sheep instead of honored guests of Catholic oligarchs buying time for the old order.

If this motion outward feels familiar, it is the story of Exodus, of the prophets reminding us that suffering as the greatest sign of love, of the return from Exile, of the fidelity of the Servant who gives his life for his friends. It is the story of the first Council of Jerusalem, when our inspired ancestors chose the road to the ends of the earth to preach and baptize sinners without qualification. It is the many hard renewals and course corrections along the way to keep the Gospel foremost and an always outgoing Jesus at the heart of our faith. It is the song of all who have gone before us and now cheer us on to take our place in the Journey to Bountiful, whatever the cost.

How blessed we are to witness this drama of our church, even at loggerheads with itself in these turbulent times, the Earth asking for mercy, our frightened selves invited to the table of decision to point the way. Crisis is always opportunity for those who are not afraid. Pentecost will come just in time to give this generation its chance to take us to the next level, where the Beloved Community is already glimpsed in resolving our differences and going forward together, or not at all.

Stay in the city, pray for courage, and do not doubt that the Spirit is with us.

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