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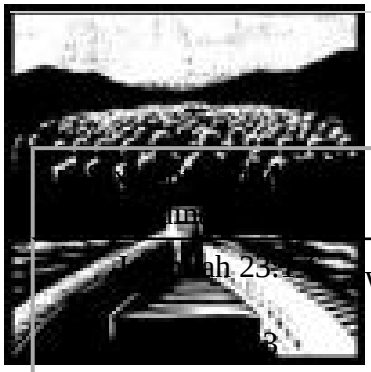
Eucharist as potluck

Roger Karban | Jul. 22, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

Every Sunday night in the minor seminary we were treated to a movie, usually a three-reel, 16-millimeter copy of one that had been in the theaters a year or two before. Since we had just one projector, we took two breaks while the student projectionists loaded the second and third reels. One memorable night, after our first break, we quickly realized we were watching the second reel of a different movie. Whoever packed and sent the movie had made a mistake. But being good seminarians, we dutifully sat through the second reel, took a break and came back to watch the third reel of the original movie.



We Catholics have the same experience every three years. But few people seem to notice. Though we?ve been having successive readings from Mark?s Gospel, following the point in which the evangelist introduces his first bread miracle -- today?s reading -- we suddenly shift from Mark to John. Then, after listening to John for five Sundays, we return to Mark.

Before the 1940s we might have gotten by without anybody -- except Mark -- complaining. But a new biblical discipline emerged that completely changed the way we read the Gospels: redaction criticism.

Scholars today presume our evangelists are more than just collectors of Jesus stories and sayings; they?re redactors -- writers who change and arrange their material to convey a particular point of view. Though they often employ the same narratives, they change the stories just enough to make them vehicles for their distinctive theologies. That?s why the late Avery Dulles, in an aside during his 1969 St. Louis University Bellarmine Lecture, stated, ?Had there been a Holy Office at the writing of the four Gospels, we Catholics would have just one Gospel (Mark) in our Bibles. But our history books would refer to three notorious early Christian heretics named Matthew, Luke and John.?

Mark and John have different interpretations of the miraculous feeding. Though both presume it has something to do with the Eucharist, each provides different implications of the event. Both would be uptight about our making one the middle reel of the other?s ?movie.?

Today?s Gospel pericope is the lead-up to Mark?s bread narrative. The key line is, ?When he [Jesus] disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a

shepherd.? Among other things, Mark?s bread miracle has something to do with leadership.

As Jesuit Fr. John McKenzie pointed out in his classic work *Authority in the Church*, leadership is always a problem for biblical communities.

Six hundred years before Jesus? birth, Jeremiah warned, ?Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture, says Yahweh? (Jeremiah 23:1). Though the prophet hoped for an ideal, future king who would relate to his people as Yahweh relates to them, most leaders continued to use their people, not help them.

Christians experienced an exception in Jesus.

The Pauline disciple who penned the Letter to the Ephesians surfaces a dimension of the risen Jesus that benefits all his followers: an ability and a passion to unite. ?In Christ Jesus you who once were far off [Gentiles] have become near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity through his flesh.? The writer believes non-Jewish Christians are on a par with Jewish Christians, both united in the one Body of Christ.

Biblical leaders are expected to unite, not divide.

Those who read Mark?s eucharistic bread miracle will discover that Mark?s Jesus doesn?t do the feeding; his disciples do, but only after commenting on their inability to feed such a large crowd. Jesus simply blesses their meager provisions, then tells them to share. When they do, they discover they even have leftovers.

Back in 1964, Fr. Frank Murphy, the future auxillary bishop of Baltimore, taught us how to say Mass. ?As presiders,? Frank insisted, ?your first job is to help form a community of believers -- the body of Christ -- among those who are participating.?

Frank?s insight dovetails perfectly with Mark?s definition of a good leader: someone who empowers and unites the flock, ignoring their claims of inadequacy, and showing that, with the blessing of the risen Jesus, they?re able to meet the needs of all in their community.

Obviously our modern Eucharists are structured in a way that makes this type of leadership difficult (if not impossible) to carry out. But if we don?t know what our ancestors in the faith called all of us to do, we?ll never have an ideal to aim for.

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