



From a Bishop's Journal (636)

“Trustworthy Witnesses”

Level IV of the family- and parish-based catechetics programme invites us not only to question trustworthy witnesses but also those communities that welcomed Jesus, his message of salvation, and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

A Strong, Driving Wind

In the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Luke relates that at the Ascension, Jesus had told his disciples that they would be given power when the Holy Spirit descended on them, making them witnesses, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Such news could not be kept secret: it was Good News for humankind. On Pentecost, there were more than three thousand people present, at the coming of the Holy Spirit. “Suddenly from up in the sky there came a noise like a strong, driving wind which was heard all through the house where they were seated.” To the gathering crowd Peter explained what was happening, that they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. They began talking in foreign tongues and to proclaim God’s great works. In the crowd there were Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Lybia around Cyrene, even visitors from Rome. Reading this list of places, we have a feeling that something new has occurred, that salvation is for all humankind. What happened to these new disciples of Christ? They were converted to the Gospel of Jesus and, in turn, received the Holy Spirit. What happened to these newly converted? They eagerly listened to the teaching that the apostles gave them, applied themselves to live in fraternal communion, to take part in the common meals and the prayers. Saint Luke then gives a grand description of the first Christian communities: “Those who believed shared all things in common, they would sell their property and goods, dividing everything on the basis of each one’s need... Through the hands of the apostles, many signs and wonders occurred among the people. It was with great power that the apostles witnessed to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God graced them with abundant blessings.”

Diverse Communities

From the witness given through the New Testament writings, we realise that diversity already existed within the Christian communities. For proof of this we need only look at Saint Paul’s communities,

whether in Cyprus, Philippi, Ephesus, Colossus, Thessalonica, or even Rome. These were not self-generated communities, but communities that were evangelised little by little and which, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, welcomed the Good News of salvation. In the Book of Revelation which we also call the Apocalypse, Saint John tells us what God's Spirit has to say to the seven Churches that also represent the then-existing Churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Joy, doubting, certainty, indifference, and even daring characterise one or the other of these Churches.

Gathering Communities

We should not think that all the communities were perfect all across the board. The first Christians knew that they were "forgiven sinners;" they were aware of their weaknesses, their resistance to God's grace, and the obstacles they put in the way of living God's commandment. Jesus had said: "It is by the love you show one another that others will know that you are my disciples." When we know of Saint Paul's description of love in his great hymn, we quickly realise the great distance we have to travel. "If I have no love, I am nothing... Love is patient, love is kind, it is not jealous, it does not put on airs, it is not snobbish. Love is never rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not prone to anger... There is no limit to love's forbearance, to its trust, its hope, its power to endure." We realise that love can be lived in different degrees by individuals and communities. That is how it was then, and such it is today. We only have to look at our own community to have a feeling of the different degrees of love; we only have to look at our own lives to understand that there are days when enthusiasm is not at its greatest.

"I Am with You"

Trustworthy witnesses and loving communities are "footprints" of the Resurrected One among humankind. A Christian who would not live according to the faith of his baptism would betray – consciously or not – the Good News of the Risen Christ. The more a Christian lives his faith fully, the more he is a gospel of Jesus. He becomes contagious with the very presence of the Living Jesus who continuously gives him his Spirit. Since through baptism Christians are members of Jesus Christ, we must strive to live like him all the directives he has left us as a way to Beatitude. On the road to Damascus Jesus made one of the greatest revelations of all: through the Christians he was persecuting, Paul was persecuting Jesus himself. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus said, "What you do to the least of these my brothers, you do to me." Through the hungry and the thirsty, the sick and the despised, the prisoners and the homeless, Jesus is present in a special way. This is one of the first acts of faith we are asked to make.

Our Religious Communities

If we need to look at the first Christian communities and our own parish communities, it is good to acknowledge the religious communities we have had among us through the years. Each one of them

has shown us a facet of the great mystery of Jesus: some have reminded us of his kindness and compassion for the sick and the poor, others reminded us of his praying and contemplation, others reminded us of the great love he had for his Mother, the Virgin Mary, and still others reminded and still remind us of Jesus forming his disciples and future apostles. May these parish communities and religious communities help us welcome the gift of the presence of the Risen One. "I am with you until the end of time."

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