

Sixth Week of Easter

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Sunday, May 14

THE PROMISE OF ANOTHER COUNSELOR

From a homily of St John Chrysostom

If you love me, said Christ, keep my commandments. I have commanded you to love one another and to treat one another as I have treated you. To love me is to obey these commands, to submit to me your beloved. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor. This promise shows once again Christ's consideration. Because his disciples did not yet know who he was, it was likely that they would greatly miss his companionship, his teaching, his actual physical presence, and be completely disconsolate when he had gone. Therefore he said, *I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor*, meaning another like himself.

They received the Spirit after Christ had purified them by his sacrifice. The Spirit did not come down on them whole Christ with still with them, because this sacrifice had not yet been offered. But then sin had been blotted out and the disciples, sent out to face danger, were preparing themselves for the battle, they needed the Holy Spirit's coming to encourage them. If you ask why the Spirit did not come immediately after the resurrection, this was in order to increase their gratitude for receiving him by increasing their desire. They were troubled by nothing as long as Christ was with them, but when his departure had left them desolate and very much afraid, they would be most eager to receive the Spirit.

He will remain with you, Christ said, meaning his presence with you will not be ended by death. But since there was danger that hearing of a Counselor might lead them to expect another incarnation and to think they would be able to see the Holy Spirit, he corrected this idea by saying: *The world cannot receive him because it does not see him.* For he will not with you in the same way as I am, but will dwell in your very souls. *He will be in you.*

Christ called him the Spirit of truth because the Spirit would help them to understand the types of the old law. By *He will be with you* he meant, *He will be with you as I am with you*, but he also hinted at the difference between them, namely that the spirit would not suffer as he had done, not would he ever depart.

The world cannot receive him because it does not see him. Does this imply that the Spirit is visible? By no means; Christ is speaking here of knowledge, for he adds: *or know him.* Sight being the sense by which we perceive things most distinctly, he habitually used this sense to signify knowledge. By *the world* he means here the wicked, thus giving his disciples the consolation of receiving a special gift. He said that the Spirit was another like himself, that he would not leave them, that he would come to them just as he himself had come, and that he would remain in them. Yet even this did not drive away their sadness, for they still wanted Christ himself and his companionship. So to satisfy them he said: *I will not leave you orphans; I will come back to you.* Do not be afraid, for when I promised to send you another counselor I did not mean that I was going to abandon you forever, not by saying that he would remain with you did I mean that I would not see you again. Of course I also will come to you; *I will not leave you orphans.*

Monday, May 15

ST PACHOMIUS: FOUNDER OF CENOBITIC MONASTICISM

From the *New World Encyclopedia*

Pachomius was born in 292 in Thebes (Luxor, Egypt) to pagan parents. According to his hagiography, he was swept up in a Roman army recruitment drive at the age of 20 against his will and held in captivity, a common occurrence during the turmoil and civil wars of the period. It was here that he first came into contact with Christianity, in the form of local Christians who visited each day to provide succor to the inmates. This made a lasting impression on the imprisoned Pachomius and he vowed to investigate this foreign tradition further when he was freed. As fate would have it, he was soon released (when Constantine took control of the Roman army in the area), and, remembering his vow, Pachomius was soon converted and baptized in 314. Hearing tales of the spiritual excellence of the Desert Fathers, he decided to follow them into the desert to pursue the ascetic path. In doing so, he sought out the hermit Palamon and came to be his follower in 317.

In his travels through the desert, Pachomius chanced upon an abandoned town called Tabennesi. There, he heard a message from the Heavens: "Pachomius, Pachomius, struggle, dwell in this place and build a monastery; for many will come to you and become monks with you, and they will profit their souls." After receiving this calling, he converted the town into a monastic community. The first to join him was his elder brother John, but soon more than 100 monks had taken up residence there. In the years to follow, he came to build an additional six or seven monasteries and a nunnery.

From his initial monastery, demand quickly grew and, by the time of his death in 346, one count estimates there were 3000 monasteries throughout Egypt from north to south. Within a generation after his death, this number grew to 7000 and then spread into Palestine, the Judean Desert, Syria, North Africa and eventually Western Europe.

Until the time of Pachomius, Christian asceticism had been solitary or eremitic. Male or female monastics lived in individual huts or caves and met only for occasional worship services. The Pachomian innovation was to create the community or cenobitic organization, in which male or female monastics lived together and had their possessions in common under the leadership of an abbot or abbess. Indeed, his genius was to transform the monastic fervor of the Desert Fathers into a socialized and sustainable religious lifestyle. Further, this approach enabled the monastics to interact with surrounding Christians, who settled around the monks as lay disciples

The Pachomian community was initially created using its founder's personal charisma to maintain structure and order. Pachomius himself was hailed as "Abba" (father), and his followers "considered him trustworthy" for "he was their father after God." However, in the years that followed (especially after the death of their founder), the Pachomian monks began to collect and codify his edicts, a process that eventually yielded the collected Rules of his order.

Pachomius strove to indoctrinate his brother monks into a righteous lifestyle. One of the innovative means that he used to achieve that end was an extensive use of moral exemplars in his pedagogy. Intriguingly, and unlike many earlier teachers, it is notable that he did not restrict this to the imitation of Christ. Pachomius demonstrates the importance of living an ascetic life, constantly striving for moral rectitude. He helps to make this difficult process more accessible by using exemplars from within the religious tradition of his listeners, showing that this ascetic devotion to God is, in fact, an achievable human reality.

Tuesday, May 16

FIRSTBORN OF MANY BROTHERS

From a sermon by Blessed Isaac of Stella, abbot

Just as the head and body of a man form one single man, so the Son of the Virgin and those he has chosen to be his members form a single man and the one Son of Man. *Christ is whole and entire, head and body*, say the Scriptures, since all the members form one body, which with its head is one Son of Man, and he with the Son of God is one Son of God, who himself with God is one God. Therefore the whole body with its head is Son of Man, Son of God, and God. This is the explanation of the Lord's words: *Father, I desire that as you and I are one, so they may be one with us.*

And so, according to this well-known reading of Scripture, neither the body without the head, nor the head without the body, nor the head and body without God make the whole Christ. When all are united with God they become one God. The Son of God is one with God by nature; the Son of Man is one with him in his person; we, his body, are one with him sacramentally. Consequently those who by faith are spiritual members of Christ can truly say that they are what he is: the Son of God and God himself. But what Christ is by his nature we are as his partners; what he is of himself in all fullness, we are as participants. Finally, what the Son of God is by generation, his members are by adoption, according to the text: *As sons you have received the Spirit of adoption, enabling you to cry, Abba, Father.*

Through his Spirit, he gave men the power to become sons of God, so that all those he has chosen might be taught by the firstborn among many brothers to say: *Our Father, who are in heaven.* Again he says elsewhere: *I ascend to my Father and to your Father.*

By the Spirit, from the womb of the Virgin, was born our head, the Son of Man; and by the same Spirit, in the waters of baptism, we are reborn as his body and as sons of God. And just as he was born without any sin, so we are reborn in the forgiveness of all our sins. As on the cross he bore the sum total of the whole body's sins in his own physical body, so he gave his members the grace of rebirth in order that no sin might be imputed to his mystical body. It is written: *Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no sin.* The blessed man of this text is undoubtedly Christ, who forgives sins insofar as God is his head. Insofar as this man is the head of the body, no sin is forgiven him. But insofar as the body that belongs to this head consists of many members, sin is not imputed to it.

Just in himself, it is he who justifies himself. He alone is both Savior and saved. In his own body on the cross he bore what he had washed from his body by the waters of baptism. Bringing salvation through wood and through water, he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world which he took upon himself. Himself a priest, he offers himself as sacrifice to God, and he himself is God. Thus, through his own self, the Son is reconciled to himself as God, as well as to the Father and to the Holy Spirit.

Wednesday, May 17

ALL THAT THE FATHER HAS IS MINE

From a homily of a monk of Pluscarden Abbey

Four times in his final discourse at the Last Supper, according to St. John, Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete. He will be with us forever. He will teach us everything. He will bear witness to Jesus. He will convict the world of sin. Now in Chapter 16 the discourse of Jesus circles back one last time to the Holy Spirit, giving him the title “Spirit of Truth”.

The Holy Spirit leads us to the complete Truth; that is, he leads us to God. The Spirit illuminates the mystery of Christ, who is the eternal Son of the Father. Speaking of his relationship with God the Father in today’s Gospel, Jesus says: All that the Father has is mine. That is: I share everything that the Father has, everything that he is, apart from this: that he is the Father and I am the Son. He is the origin; I am from him. As for the Holy Spirit, he too shares the divine nature. He too is God: perfectly one with, perfectly equal to the Father and the Son; yet also infinitely distinguished from each of them by the relationship of Person. Of him Jesus says in today’s Gospel: All he tells you will be taken from what is mine.

Of course the mystery of the Holy Trinity is beyond our understanding. We approach God with our shoes off, in profound humility; trembling, with the Angels, in both love and awe. Yet God who is infinitely “other” has chosen to reveal himself to us. He communicates with us; he gives himself to us; he invites us to share his own life. Specifically, he gives us the Spirit of Sonship, so that by the Holy Spirit we can boldly relate to God our Father with the very intimacy and joy of Christ.

The Spirit of Truth will lead you to the complete truth. Because of divine Revelation, we cannot regard God as an unknown “X”. If the mystery of the Holy Trinity is too great for our comprehension, it’s not incoherent, and not contrary to reason. We can and must use very precise language about it. This language has been worked out through the life of the Church, especially in response to heresies. We believe that it conveys the truth, so that deliberately to contradict what it says is to speak what is false. Of course the Church has never claimed the authority to invent new doctrines. Great dogmatic theologians like St. Athanasius or St. Augustine did not know more about the Trinity than the Apostles did. Their whole effort was precisely to preserve intact the authentic apostolic doctrine, to unfold what is already contained fully in Holy Scripture. They did this by exposing the errors of heretics, and also by exploring in new ways some of the implications of what has been revealed. By the light of the Holy Spirit the Catholic Church has recognized her own doctrine in the writings of these masters. We say that through them and through many others, until the end of time, her doctrine develops, or makes progress, towards an ever deeper, fuller understanding.

In principle the Spirit of Truth leads not just the whole Church, but also each individual member of the Church towards the complete truth. He illuminates the minds and hearts of each one of us, so that we understand in an ever-new way God’s greatness, his goodness, his presence, his love. The Spirit leads us to apprehend more deeply not only how God is Three in One, but also how each of the divine Persons directly relates to us, loves us, draws us, indwells us. The Spirit can give these insights in any way or at any time, though usually they will come from prayer and meditation on Holy Scripture. Such insights, or moments of grace, will always be for us a cause of joy, and new life, and new wonder, and new fidelity, and new holiness.

Thursday, May 18

THE GREAT COMMISSION IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

From Mathew Schmalz, professor at the College of the Holy Cross

A majority of church-going American Christians are unfamiliar with the term, the “Great Commission,” a 2019 survey found. Even among those familiar with it, 25 percent recognized the phrase but could not explain what it was. Only 17 percent were familiar with the phrase and its meaning.

So what exactly is the Great Commission? And why is it a controversial idea for some?

Briefly, the Great Commission is a concept that has been used to support the missionary activities of many Christian denominations. The Great Commission refers to several passages in the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus Christ urges his apostles to make “disciples of all the nations” and “baptize” them. The word “disciple,” which is “mathetes” in Greek, literally means “pupil” but also “follower,” as in “follower of Jesus.” “Baptize” refers to the Christian practice of using water to remove the “original sin,” an inherent fault that Christians believe marks all human beings at birth. Baptism is an important sign of entrance into the Christian faith. The Great Commission, therefore, is usually interpreted to mean spreading the Christian message and converting others to Christianity.

The Gospel of Matthew does not specifically use such a term. In fact, the phrase “Great Commission” does not appear until late in Christian history. Some scholars argue that it was coined by Baron Justinian von Welz, a 17th-century Lutheran nobleman, who argued that the words in Matthew 28 meant that all Christians were required to spread the faith, not just Jesus’ closest disciples. Von Welz proposed a missionary organization called the Jesus-Loving Society to spread Protestant Christianity throughout the world. It is thought that the term “Great Commission,” or certainly the basic concept, was central to von Welz’s argument for bringing Christianity to foreign lands.

Christian missionary activities predate the use of the term “Great Commission.” The Apostle Paul was influential in establishing Christian churches throughout the Mediterranean after the death of Jesus.

Much later, Catholic religious orders, such as the Society of Jesus, attempted to spread Christianity throughout the world, usually with the help of powerful nations such as Portugal and Spain.

The Great Commission certainly motivated Protestant efforts to convert nations and peoples in Africa and Asia in the 19th century. It also fueled more recent efforts by evangelical Christians to “missionize” Catholic Latin America. Indeed, Latin America would not have become so Catholic without indigenous peoples being dominated by European imperialism and colonialism.

Missionary efforts sometimes served economic interests relating to trade and resources as well religious ones. Additionally, converting conquered peoples was a powerful way of extending political control.

Converting others to Christianity raises a fundamental question about whether religious diversity is a reality to be celebrated or an obstacle to be overcome. Given the complex history of missionary activity, the meaning of the Great Commission will continue to be a subject of debate as Christianity confronts a rapidly changing world.

Friday, May 19

KARL RAHNER: OUR ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

From a Catholic Theological Society of America Convention address

Addressing the tension between the universal saving action of the Spirit and the necessity of supernatural revelation and faith, Karl Rahner concludes that such revelation and faith must occur in some way on a universal, transcendental level. His thesis is that God reveals Godself to every human person in the very experience of one's own finite, yet absolutely open-ended transcendence. God is the Holy Mystery who is the ground and horizon of human subjectivity.

According to Rahner, any real experience of human transcendence or subjectivity always involves a real, if only implicit experience and consciousness of God as the absolute Spirit who is the ground and horizon of my spirituality. In light of the Christ event, Christian faith proclaims that the God who is our horizon is not ever distant and unreachable but the One who has drawn intimately near. In Christ, our real humanity—Jesus' humanity—is revealed to be capable of and oriented toward real personal union with God in the Spirit, and in Jesus this union is historically and irrevocably achieved.

For Rahner, therefore, the human person is "the event of a free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-communication of God". By "self-communication" he means to say that God makes her very own self the innermost constitutive element of the human person. God's self-communication is at once God's gracious communication to me of my self. Thus, for Rahner, human existence is characterized by a supernatural existential, where, of course, "supernatural" is simply a way of referring to the utter gratuity of the grace which constitutes human nature in its very essence.

This, for Rahner, is precisely the mystery of the Spirit. "God . . . has already communicated himself in his Holy Spirit always and everywhere and to every person as the innermost center of his existence." Human spirit and the desire which is its dynamism are elicited into being and final fulfillment by the divine Spirit, who is at once wholly other and wholly within. The Spirit draws human spiritual transcendence into existence, opens it up toward the immediacy of God and brings it to fulfillment not simply from without but from within. Thus, for Rahner, experience of self and experience of God constitute an original and ultimate unity. And it is precisely the notion of spirit, which enables Rahner to make this connection.

Such experience, it should be noted, is not individualistic, inward-gazing reflection. To speak of spirit or transcendence is not to speak primarily of self- presence or possession, but of being in relation with others. One can only be a "self" and come to an experience of one's "self" in dialogue and loving encounter with other persons. The experience of subjectivity that Rahner is really talking about is not the intellectual curiosity of an isolated subject, but the experience of transcendence in love. "The act of personal love for another human being is therefore the all-embracing basic act . . . which gives meaning, direction and measure to everything else."

For this reason, Rahner insists that at its most basic level, our encounter with God takes place precisely in our encounters with other human beings. Experience of God, experience of neighbor, and experience of self constitute a fundamental unity. In fact, for Rahner, genuine human transcendence in love is only possible because of the gracious self-communication of God in the Spirit. Such an encounter in love is truly love of God, whether one realizes this explicitly or not, and not simply some kind of preparation for or effect of the love of God. Thus, the most basic mode of divine revelation is in the human experience of love.

Saturday, May 20

PRISCILLA AND AQUILA

From Lynn H Cohick, professor of New Testament

Priscilla and her husband Aquila met the apostle Paul when he came to Corinth in approximately 50 C.E. The three would prove to become steadfast friends, traveling companions, and ministry co-workers. But our story begins about a year earlier, when in 49 C.E., according to Suetonius, Emperor Claudius expelled from Rome all Jews who followed “Chrestus,” likely a misspelling of “Christ.” Included in that number were Aquila and Priscilla, who traveled to Corinth and opened a leather-works business.

When Paul met them, they were already followers of Jesus. They later traveled with Paul to Ephesus and remained there to support the young church. While in Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila instructed the gifted preacher Apollos more accurately about the gospel, particularly about baptism. Later, when Claudius’s edict was rescinded, they returned to Rome.

Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned by name six times in the New Testament, always together as a couple. They exercised leadership among the fledgling churches and were held in high esteem. Their partnership highlights one model of ministry in the early church. Paul calls them his “co-workers” in preaching the gospel, praises their willingness to risk their necks to help him, and twice notes that churches meet in their homes.

“Prisca” is a Latin name meaning “venerable”; the diminutive form of her name is “Priscilla.” She may have held a higher social status than her husband Aquila, for her name appears before his four times, in contrast to the usual custom of leading with the husband’s name. All named women in Acts are wealthy, with the exceptions of Mary (Jesus’ mother) and Rhoda, thus increasing the likelihood that Priscilla had some means, although we should not imagine her as a middle-class Westerner. The name order might also signal Priscilla’s superior teaching capabilities, for when Acts 18:26 notes that the couple taught Apollos, her name appears first. Some scholars argue she is the author of the New Testament book of Hebrews. Most ancient women were not identified by their occupation; however, Acts 18:3 states that they (Aquila and Priscilla) shared the same trade with Paul.

“Aquila” is a Latin name meaning “eagle.” At some point, he traveled from Pontus, his home in northern Asia Minor (modern Turkey) near the Black Sea, to Rome. He was a tentmaker and thus in the artisan class; often freed slaves held such jobs. But Paul was also a tentmaker, and he was a freeborn Roman citizen, indicating that both free men and former slaves worked as artisans. While most artisans were members of trade guilds, Jews usually did not join because guild members honored their guild’s patron deities at regularly held banquets.