

Mid-Atlantic Congress 2014

Introduction: Food for the Journey

As a kid growing up in the mid-West, I sometimes found myself on long car trips with my parents. In the days before the inter-state highway system, with service plazas featuring food and fuel, I used to sit in the back seat of mom and dad's 1958 Ford, wondering if we'd ever stop for food. It didn't help when I spied a billboard that read: "Stuckey's Restaurant - 108 miles".

In the middle of nowhere, this amply-fed, seven-year old kid thought he would starve for want of a pecan log. My parents also must have thought the journey would never end. Like countless other children, I pestered my poor parents with the question, "Are we there yet? I'm hungry!"

Journey with Christ in Worship

This evening we reflect on an important theme: "our journey with Christ in worship". It is an interior journey that leads us from sin to grace and from grace to glory. It is an exterior journey that leads us from our comfort zone as we go forth to make disciples of all nations. In a sense, we enter upon that journey with thoughts, fears, and needs not too dissimilar from those we all experienced as children when we grew tired and hungry on long car trips. We may even be tempted not to make the journey at all but rather to stay home, to remain in our "comfort zone".

Yet the liturgy itself and the readings which have been proclaimed beseech us not to adopt that attitude. The II Vatican Council and the Catechism of the Catholic Church famously teach us that "the Eucharist is the source and the summit of the Christian life." It goes on to say: "The other sacraments & indeed all ecclesiastical ministries & works of the apostolate are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely, Christ himself, our Pasch" (CCC, no. 1324).

What a wonderful lens through which to view our first reading from Isaiah the prophet. Isaiah bids Jerusalem "to rise up in splendor" and tells her that "nations will walk by her light." The prophet foretells a great ingathering of her sons and daughters and proclaims that she will be filled with untold riches, indeed 'the wealth

of the nations.’ When we hear these words, these prophecies, we must understand that they are addressed to the Church and to us who are members of the Church. For even in our sinfulness, even with our limited vision, we embrace the Church as “the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, adorned as a bride for her husband” (Rev. 21.2).

The splendor with which the Church is filled is the light of Christ, “the true light which enlightens everyone” (John 1:9). The riches which fill the Church is not the wealth of the nations but rather the pearl of greatest price, (cf. Mt. 13:45-46) namely, the Death and Resurrection of the Incarnate Son of God, whose Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity we receive as our spiritual nourishment, as food for the journey, as the source of all we are called to do in his Name.

‘Nations walk by this light’ as the Church throughout the world goes forth impelled by what Pope Francis calls ‘the missionary option’ - i.e., an intentional decision continually to make the interior journey to Christ and continually to make the exterior journey of bringing Christ to others. When we hear Isaiah’s words, “nations will walk by your light”, we should think of the Church in her diversity throughout the world going forth to bring the Gospel to every land, nation, and culture. When we hear these words of Isaiah, we should think of the local churches we represent, dioceses and communities made up of people from North & South, East & West, men and women redeemed, nourished, strengthened, and encouraged - going forth to proclaim afresh the Gospel of life and salvation in a world where, alas, far too many continue to walk in the darkness of unbelief.

Going Forth: The Missionary Option

Both the reading from Acts of the Apostles and from the Gospel of St. Mark speak about the missionary journeys of the earliest church communities. In the face of much opposition, Paul & Barnabas, spoke out boldly, embracing in the Lord the words of Isaiah: “I have made you a light to the Gentiles that you may be an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth.” And in the Gospel the Risen Lord Jesus, about to ascend into heaven, appeared to the Eleven and commanded them: “Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature...” The Risen Lord speaks in vivid terms of that newness of life that will accompany those who go forth and those are believe and are saved. The evangelist Mark tells us, “...they went

forth and preached everywhere while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.”

Paul and Barnabas did not go forth alone, on their own power, but only as Lord’s instruments who had encountered Him, who had been inwardly transformed, indeed, changed forever, by the encounter. The Apostles and their co-workers did not go forth alone for the Lord worked *with* them and *within* them, accomplishing *through* them ‘immeasurably more than they could ever ask or imagine’ (cf. Eph. 3:20). They went forth as those continually enlightened by the Word of God, and transformed by the living Presence of the Risen Lord – this is where they received strength for the journey; this is how they were united in mind and heart, and this is where they derived the capacity to be the Lord’s messengers and instruments.

In the light of God’s Word, perhaps we are better prepared truly to hear what Pope Francis is telling us when describes what a parish is and should be: “The parish,” he writes, “is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in Christian life, for dialogue, for proclamation, for charitable outreach, worship, & celebration. In all its activities the parish trains and encourages its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 29).

From the Eucharist we proceed and to the Eucharist we return, as to a summit, like those first disciples filled with stories of their earliest efforts to proclaim the Gospel. The summit to whom we return is the Christ, who gives us rest and refreshment, who deepens his life within us and sends us forth yet again. As we worship in spirit and truth may the joy of the Gospel fill our hearts, so that we may be the Lord’s witnesses, so that we may be his instruments, in bringing his saving truth and love to one and all.

May God bless us and keep us always in His love.