

HOMILY FOR RECEPTION DAY

October 30, 2009

Fr. James Puglisi, S.A.,
Minister General Franciscan Friars of the Atonement

Lessons: Romans 9:1-5; Psalm 147:12-15, 19-20; Luke 14:1-6

IN the first reading, Paul is obliged to treat a theme that affects him emotionally, namely the ‘providential’ nature of the people of Israel in the history of salvation. From the first moment, it may be noted that it is a theme in which he does not know how to move with full objectivity. Let us not forget that he considered himself a super orthodox Jew.

This is the reason why we need to note first and foremost his emotive and ethical behavior. The situation of Israel after the Christ event does not leave Paul indifferent. He even arrives to the point of wanting to be considered ‘anathema’ saying “I wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh”. This Greek word “*anáthema*” actually has a different meaning than what we are used to since it translates the Hebrew term “*herem*” which was something offered to God either for his service (Lev 27:28) or for its destruction (Dt 7:26). Only later is the sense of it being an object banned or condemned applied. Here it seems Paul applies to himself the process of ‘redemption through the incarnation’ in virtue of which “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by being cursed for our sake” (Gal 3:13). Paul is therefore willing to be ‘accursed and cut off from Christ’ for the sake of liberating his own people from this ban.

It is clear then that Paul accepts an openness and dialoging attitude with Judaism but without making diplomatic or apologetical

concessions. In fact he recognizes that an accumulation of attributes and divine promises belong to the people of Israel. In the last place he recognizes Christ who emanates from these promises, according to the flesh which leads him to his confession of faith in Christ: ‘who is over all, God blessed forever’.

Even though, by tradition, our Atonement community in commemorating the events of this reception day would have chosen different, more Atonement classical texts, I chose to keep the appointed readings for Friday of the 30th week in ordinary time – that curious title that the post Vatican II liturgy gives to liturgical time outside of the festive cycles of the liturgical year. But for us it is anything but ordinary time. For us this day was a ‘kairos’ moment, a moment out of ordinary time when something exceptional and, one might even say looking back from recent history, revolutionary. In the minds of the Founders, it might even be possible to say that the attitude of St. Paul was a model for Fr. Paul and Mother Lurana. Neither Paul of Tarsus nor Paul of Graymoor were thinking of themselves in terms of salvation of their own. Today’s first reading certainly expresses St. Paul’s anguish for the choices of his own people. Paul of Graymoor had the same feelings toward his own beloved Anglican church.

Through the extraordinary work that has been done in the archives of the Friars and Sisters of the Atonement we have today the attitude and the state of mind of these two charismatic figures and their small band of followers when the events of their day obliged them to follow their consciences and seek to enter into full communion with the Church of Rome. Much like Francis and Clare of Assisi they had no intention of being bound by the normal prescripts of their day. When ‘conversion’ was considered a private and individual affair,

both Paul and Lurana did not consider what they were about to do a conversion but rather a coming home. They never felt or believed for one moment they had been outside of the Catholic faith. This was really why they insisted so much that what they were doing in 1909 was simply coming home and completing their faith by being united around the chair of Peter.

The historical context of the Church situation at the turn of the last century is important to understand fully the prophetic and revolutionary decision that was about to take place with this small band of Christians. In the 19th and 20th century the American Episcopal Church, what has been described as the “last gasp” of the Oxford Movement that made an attempt to reform the Church by a return to the sources both Catholic and Anglican (patristics, Caroline divines, and liturgy). There was a growing emphasis and importance placed on the Church’s missionary role and its universal dimension as well as its unity. New social concerns were arising with the resultant industrial revolutions that were taking place and the expansion of missionary efforts that were exporting these issues. A renewed interest in religious life within the Anglican communion with many spiritual revivals, the use of spiritual direction and a renewed interest in the great spiritual classics being at the heart of this rediscovery of the patristic roots of Christianity. All of this was setting the scene for what that small band of Friars, Sisters and lay people did in 1909.

In what was called by Fr. Paul the ‘*Caput et mater*’ of our Institute, Our Lady of the Angels Chapel, Msgr. Joseph Conroy, Vicar General of Ogdensburg officiated at the reception ceremony. His assistants for the corporate reception of the Society of the Atonement into full communion with Rome were Fr. Patrick Drain, Pastor of Our Lady

of Loretto church in Cold Spring, Graymoor's parish at that time and Fr. Paschal Robinson, OFM representing the Friars Minor. Both of the Founders always believed that they were Catholic in heart and practice long before the official act of entrance. Mother Lurana noted this in her diary the next day when she noted: "The only fervor I felt was when I made my profession of faith yesterday, especially at the words, 'I believe all that the Holy Catholic and Roman Church believes!' Ah, it was good to say it out loud, and from inside!"

We may ask why was there such insistence on corporate reunion rather than encouraging individuals to be reunited? This event was indeed a unique event for the Catholic Church. For the first time, a group entered into communion with Rome keeping their original name, their original religious garb and their original mission. This was later to serve as an example for a small oriental Indian church which entered into full communion with Rome and whose bishop was a great friend with Fr. Paul. The Founders were insistent on the corporate aspect because they felt the original division was corporate and so should be the reunion. In many respects the Founders saw themselves in what St. Paul wrote in the first reading today. They were pointing the way.

Fr. Paul associated the role of the Society of the Atonement with preparing the way especially through prayer for unity. In a letter of 1922 to the mission in Hereford, Texas, Fr. Paul wrote:

When Lazarus died he was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. When Dives died he was buried in hell. Our Lord points to the great gulf between them. 400 years ago a great gulf was created among Christians...It is time that quarrels of 400 years' standing had been gotten rid of, and I feel (personally)

that I am a connecting link because my father was a Protestant before me and I spent part of my life in the Protestant Episcopal Church, and when I came over the great divide and emigrated to the Catholic side, I did not lose my esteem for my previous associates. In fact, I have always felt just as when they wanted to bridge Niagara Falls and shot a thin string across to which was attached a light wire, then a greater wire, and finally there was a grand suspension bridge over the great divide, over the raging torrent. So I feel as if I was a little kite that flew over this gulf of 400 years ago. By and by we will construct a bridge, so that we may be one again as our Lord wished that we should be when He prayed that they all may be one. ... We all look up to the same crucified Redeemer. It is time that these misunderstandings were done away with. It is not reasonable to expect that we see eye to eye at once. But the time has come when we should behave like brethren.”

The event that we commemorate today is linked with the anniversary of the beginning of what is now called the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The Founders burned with passion for the gift of unity because they burned with a love for the crucified one. They, like Francis of Assisi, wished to know the depth of that suffering love that the Redeemer experienced so that we may have abundant life. They knew the cost of their decision to follow their hearts’ desire. This was the small price that they had to bear for following their consciences.

The Franciscan Friars and Sisters of the Atonement have received

a great heritage from that first small band and from the foundational intuition that our Founders, Paul and Lurana left to us. They left it not only to the Society of the Atonement but to the whole Church. In ecumenical circles we speak of an exchange of gifts. The gift that was left was that of a renewed spiritual ecumenism formed by their Anglican roots and matured in their catholic development. Products of their own times they realized that we cannot “make” unity alone by our own powers. We can only obtain it from the gift of the Holy Spirit. Therefore spiritual ecumenism, namely, prayer, conversion to Christ and sanctification of life constitute the heart of encounter and the ecumenical movement. We may also say the best form of ecumenism consists in the living according to the Gospel.

Today we give thanks for their courageous and prophetic act. We pray that all those who are engaged in ecumenical dialogue may be enlightened by the Holy Spirit so that they may be able to find new ways of expressing our unity in Christ as a witness to the truth of the Gospel and the fulfilment of his prayer that all may be one so that the world may believe.

The Society of the Atonement, headquartered at Graymoor in Garrison, NY, has pastoral and apostolic centers in Los Angeles, CA, Apex, NC, Sterling, VA and Brockton, MA in the United States; in Toronto, and Richmond, Canada; in Kent, England; and in the Diocese of Yokohama in Japan, and performs ministry in hospitals and nursing homes in Vancouver, Canada, Harrison, NY, Burlington, VT, British Columbia, Canada. The Society also operates the Centro Pro Unione in Rome, Italy. The Society continues to promote the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which was initiated by Fr. Paul Wattson as the Church Unite Octave in 1908.



Original friary and chapel at Graymoor in Garrison, NY.