

**Homily for April 29, 2001
3rd Sunday of Easter Cycle C**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Acts 5:27b-32, 40b-41
Revelation 5:11-14
John 21:1-19**

To love God is to show it in service to others.

Three times Jesus asked Peter the same question: “Do you love me?” Peter said, “Yes, sir, I love you.” That is all he said, and the question Jesus asked had not been answered, at least not clearly. Peter might have meant: “I love you, Jesus, because I love to be with you, because I love to eat your fish, because I love your bread very much, because I love myself and find myself fulfilled in loving you.”

Jesus asked Peter the question a second time. Again Peter said: “Yes, I love you.” And still Jesus hadn’t made it clear what he really meant. So Jesus asked a third time: “Do you love me?” And when Peter again did not answer the question, Jesus answered it himself. He said: “If you really love me, Peter, if you really love my approach, if you really love my style of life, if you really love my way, then be not interested in yourself but in others.”

In other words, folks, our religious faith is not just for our own enrichment – it’s designed to reach out, to put us in touch with others – to make us part of a

worshipping, reconciling people. This is probably the most difficult aspect of our prayer as a Catholic worshipping community – to be part of a people and not just turned in on ourselves individually. You see, the Second Vatican Council’s demand for active participation went contrary to the way liturgy, our public prayer, had been inculturated in American Catholic society before the Council. Our prayer before the Council permitted the strong American trend toward individualism and personal piety to find a ready outlet. Each one prayed as he or she desired. The presence of other worshippers was an encouragement but really incidental. Vatican Council II forced one to see oneself as belonging to a worshipping assembly that was being introduced to a new depth of union with Christ that involves union with the other worshippers. No longer could one privately pray the rosary during Mass. No longer could one be silent. Mass was no longer to cater to the need for time for private converse with God. One had to do something in unison with others. Certainly there’s time for some private prayer – but those moments are brief.

Our Catholic liturgy is a communal prayer, while we Americans are still individualists. It’s not easy for us to think in terms of being a member of a gathered assembly at prayer and conditioned by that

participation. Moreover, we tend to interpret “personal” as meaning private. All prayer has to be personal, but our liturgical prayer is never private; it is always public and communal. This difficulty of being private individuals trying to pray a public prayer remains the most challenging of our times. We come out of an interpretation of liturgy that tended to see liturgy as private, even though the Church never accepted in theory such an interpretation. Priests really were never permitted to say, “private” Masses. A server was always supposed to be present, representing the full assembly of the people. Our liturgy literally makes us love Jesus by loving others – we can’t pray this prayer any other way. That’s the hard lesson the Gospel of John teaches that Saint Peter had to learn – and so do we all.

There are roughly three levels of participation in our Catholic liturgy. The first level is totally physical – we’re here – we came through that door – before that we got ready to come here with all that entails – the confusion, the travel – we gathered. And when we’re here physically we stand, we sit, we listen, we sing – but that first level of participation is not enough – we are not passive bystanders, but active.

This leads us to the second level of participation in which we recognize that this group is doing something – the *group*. It’s not a bunch of individuals doing something – it’s the group as a group acting – standing, sitting, listening, praying, praising. And we recognize that – we sense that – this crowd is at work.

And the third level of participation is to recognize that this group is really the body of Christ – that this is God at work – not in individuals alone, but in a group and as a group. Where is the body of

Christ? His body is found in the bread, in the person in front of you, and in all the people around you. Even in me the minister.

As we go through this Easter season, this is the traditional time of instruction for our newly received and baptized – and it’s a time for all of us to renew our faith practice and to learn more about what we’re doing. It’s called mystagogical preaching.

Jerusalem in the fourth century, when Cyril was bishop, the pilgrim Egeria wrote home to what was then Gaul about the liturgies in the Holy City. She describes how during each day of Easter week, the newly baptized and the rest of the faithful gathered to hear the bishop preach about the sacraments of initiation in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Egeria writes, “The newly baptized come into the Anastasis, and any of the faithful who wish to hear the mysteries, but no catechumen comes in, and the doors are kept shut in case any try to enter. The bishop relates all that has been done at the Easter Vigil and interprets it, and, as he does so, the applause is so loud that it can be heard outside the church. Indeed, the way he expounds the mysteries and interprets them cannot fail to move his hearers.

I don’t expect applause as we talk about the mysteries of our Catholic tradition – but perhaps in doing so during this holy season we come to full and conscious participation in our liturgy that is the right and duty of all the baptized.

To love God is to show it in
service to others.