

Homily for May 20, 2001
6th Sunday of Easter Cycle C

By Father Charles Bowes

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29
Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23
John 14:23-29

We learn and we remember because the Spirit teaches and reminds us.

“The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you.”

Folks, we are not alone because God sends the Advocate, the Spirit – the Spirit of the Father and the Son. We don't have to “catch” the Spirit; the Spirit is God's gift to us. All we need do is receive it. The human way of giving to God is to receive. God made us so that he might have someone to whom he could give – someone to whom he could give himself – the Spirit is that gift. All we need to do is invite – ask and we shall receive. Our passage today, verse 26 of chapter 14, is the only time in the gospel of Saint John in which the Advocate or Paraclete is called the Holy Spirit. It is sent in Jesus' name to teach and to remind us of Jesus' word. These are the tasks of the Spirit: to teach and to remind. These tasks leave us with two appropriate responses: learning and remembering. The way we learn and remember as a community of faith is through movement as well as by means of song and gesture or posture.

People who study the history of religions from which we all descend tell us this: it is not easy to separate the two things we call worship and dance – two of the ways in which we do our remembering and listening for our faith. For most of us, dancing is something that couples do at weddings, that people with strong ethnic traditions do on their holidays, that some very hard working folks do in modern dance and ballet companies. But in this room on Sundays? Worship and dance seemed to have parted ways long ago in western Christianity. No so, of course in other parts of the world. If dance is an ordered movement of one or many bodies, often accompanied by music, then dance is very much a part of religious worship in Asia and Africa and the Middle East as it continues to be a part of the life and worship that belongs to native Americans from both continents. Where we can witness this way of prayer – whether it be Zulu or Lakota or Hindu – we usually see that the movements that we call dance are not reserved for leaders, but belong to the whole community. Some people may have special parts to take, but everyone is caught up in the

movement – it's part of the ritual way of remembering and learning what the Spirit teaches and reminds of.

Now why should dancing and worship be so linked for so many people? What is it about a community gathered to praise or to beseech God, to initiate newcomers or to bury their dead, that leads to music and dance? One part of the answer has to do with this – a community praying is a community. It is not that several hundred people happen to find themselves in the same room at the same time, as they might at a department store, and each goes about his or her own tasks – no. When those who share one faith come together to give expression of that faith, then they act with some sort of unity – a unity that needs to be heard in song, and a unity that needs to be seen in the posture and the movement of their bodies. That is the way human beings have found that things work. Here, we are many people doing a common task. To make that happen, there is an order here, a flow to things. We are all to be at home in this liturgy. It is not my show; it is *our* privilege, our duty. The movements of this liturgy are ordered movements, predictable movements. If they are not so, then they can't belong to all of us. And that is why worship and dance have such a long story together and why our liturgy is predictable and much the same from week to week. Only dance, which is just ordered and practiced movement, can carry the day.

Now, it may not look like dance anymore here at Mass, but maybe our notion of dance is not wide enough. Whatever we wish to call it, the movements in the liturgy are ordered movements. Yours are, mine are, the movements of lectors and communion ministers and servers are. And all our movements together are ordered. We don't need to call it a dance, this movement we do together on Sundays in this room, but we do need to know that the movements make a difference. Like the music, and the posture, they build us up as a church or they tear us down. They are not neutral and they are the ways in which we try to listen and remember the teaching and the reminding that the Spirit does in our midst.

Look at just a few of the movements of our Sunday Eucharist. The liturgy, like any assembly of people, has to begin and has to end with movement: gathering and going out. The

gathering is like a great procession that begins in dozens and hundreds of places each Sunday, all around this community and ends in one place. This room. One by one, three by three, five by five, the individuals and the households and the friends arrive here, converging from all over, bringing with us all those worlds where we live and work and worry. We pass through an entranceway, maybe not the grand porches and gathering areas of some churches, but however humble, there is our door, and on this side of it is this great hall, this room that takes its name from our name, "church" – first the people, second a building.

Inside, the little processions perform some common actions. We take water on our hands, water that is meant to remind us of the baptism waters where we once put death to death and put on the life of Christ – in this Easter season we get it sprinkled on us like rain we're so immersed in the baptismal life of the Risen Lord. With that water on our faces and bodies, we enter among other baptized people. We may greet some friends and some strangers alike as we find a place in this assembly. All of these small processions are then brought to their conclusion as the presider and other ministers walk through the midst of the assembly. Their procession is only the end of all these other processions. They pass through the midst of the assembly here. That is not a way to get from the back of the room to the front of the room. This room has no back – it has no front. The procession binds all who have gathered here into one assembly, a church ready to do its Sunday work. In their special clothing, with all of us singing our songs, the processing ministers are the tail-end of this great movement, a climax that brings into our midst the book of God's word and then sets us down ready to hear that word and celebrate the Eucharist.

In the Liturgy of the Word, the dance, the listening and the learning is in the way we sit to listen to the first two readings and then stand to face the reader of the gospel. And the dance is the Alleluia – accompanied procession that takes us to that gospel proclamation. Like all dance, this is wasted motion. It doesn't accomplish anything. It's totally inefficient, the gospel could be read from anywhere. It could be read without me marching into the center aisle and coming back up – it's certainly not the most direct route. But this gathering is not about efficiency, it is about beauty and about spirit and about faith. And that is why our language here is poetry and dance. Silence and song.

In a few moments we'll begin the preparation of this table and its gifts. Again, there would be far more efficient ways than our procession carrying bread and wine to set the table. But we are concerned here with basic things that are also immense things: real

bread and real wine, good gifts carried to the table by various people from our community. And when we have prayed over these gifts giving God thanks and praise for all the work of creation and for the saving death and resurrection of Jesus which we make present again now – when we do these things then we again process toward the table, this time to receive the glorified body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. After a short time, we take leave of one another and of this house, processing now into our Sunday, into our week, into our world.

It isn't hard to see why the Church went for most of its life without anything like pews. What's the use of seating to a people on the move, to a people engaged in this ritual dancing – all these processions and postures and other gestures that we do together each Sunday? And that image, the dancing of this assembly, is perhaps the only way to break out of our deeply held notion that the Mass is something some people do for others, something that a few people do while others watch. If we want to compare the Mass to other sorts of human activity, we wouldn't choose a movie or a play or a baseball game. At these events, most of the people are spectators, on the sidelines.

For a real comparison to the Mass, we would have to choose a folk dance, a circle dance, something that was alive in nearly every culture until this century and is still a part of many societies. In such a dance, no one is a spectator; everyone is a participant. There may be leaders, but each person knows the steps and is at home in the dance. And the dance does its work. It makes the invisible community visible, it enables folks to learn and remember the teaching and the reminding from the Holy Spirit. It is an image of what life in this world is all about. It is the Spirit of that life, and it somehow shows each dancer how to keep on when the dance seems to end. We live this dance the whole week long and bring to the dance the prayer of that week and troubles and the loves and struggles.

Our Sunday liturgy is a circle dance with many movements we all know: taking the holy water and signing the body as we enter, bows and genuflections, signs of the Cross great and small, greetings of peace, taking bread and cup in the hands even reaching into pocket or purse for some financial sharing, some pooling of our resources to get our common work accomplished. All these things we know well to do. And in all these ways we learn and we remember the teaching and the reminding done by the Holy Spirit of God.

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