

**Homily for April 24, 2005
Fifth Sunday of Easter (A)**

By Father Charles Bowes

Acts 6:1-7

Psalm 33:1-2, 4-5, 18-19

1 Peter 2:4-9

John 14:1-12

That there is room for everyone in God opens us to a future only God can know.

There is something very disconcerting about being accosted by someone who challenges you with the question, “Have you been saved?”

This question is not as innocent or caring as might at first appear, because it frequently means: “Are you committed to God in the same way I am?” In such instances, such a query seems more an accusation than a sincere question. It implies that there is only one authentic manner of commitment, and all others are fraudulent.

Today’s Gospel, John chapter 14, has Jesus say, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” Jesus assures us that there are many places to live in the heavenly mansion. In other words, there is room for everyone.

Since each person is a unique creation of God, there will also be uniqueness to each one’s search for and encounter with God. This is not meant to enshrine every idiosyncrasy and regard it as akin to spirituality, but to acknowledge the diversity of valid spiritual searches.

But then just a few lines further in the same chapter, the Gospel has Jesus say, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

And therein lies the rub. If there is room for all sorts of folks in the heavenly mansion, and different encounters and searches to get there, how do we deal with Jesus’ claim that no one comes to the Father except through him? This claim has caused great religious antagonism, sometimes even resulting in bloodshed. How are we to understand this statement in the face of contemporary interfaith dialogue?

The Second Vatican Council’s “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” provides the beginning of an answer to this question. The document says: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions [Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, etc.]. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women.”

This is only the beginning of an answer, for we still struggle to reconcile acceptance and respect toward other religious faiths with the Christian belief that Jesus is the way to the Father. The council document offers some direction in the midst of that struggle when it says: “The church, therefore, urges its sons and daughters to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and

collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve, and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture.”

We see in this document that the church summons us to discussion, collaboration and witness of life as ways of dealing with the diversity among the religions of the world. Today’s first reading from the first letter of Peter, chapter two, offers an example of employing these very means within the church itself. A conflict between Greek and Jewish Christians was resolved in a way that “was acceptable to the whole community.” This conflict was ethnic in origin, not unlike many conflicts we face in the church today. Diversity is inevitable, and it sometimes results in disagreements. When this happens, the challenge is to address our differences honestly and to seek ways of resolving the disagreements with the kind of reverence to which the church exhorts us, as it does in the council document.

Jesus said that there are many dwelling places in the heavenly mansion. Since it is God’s mansion and not ours, we have no right to presume that some will be admitted and others will not. This is in God’s hands. All we can do is follow Jesus and continue our struggle to understand the teachings he left us and their implications in our lives today.

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