

Fifth Sunday of Easter  
May 22, 2011

We Catholics are living in difficult times. As a church, as a community we are convinced that Christ is the way to the Father. As today's Gospel insists, Jesus is the truth and the life. But these are difficult times for us. TV portrays and newspapers headline not what make us attractive to others, but what scandalizes others. In this context I recommend a look at the broader, richer picture.

The First Letter of Peter offers just such a vision. In the midst of Christians harassed by local populations, converts anxious about being aliens and strangers in a hostile world, an inspired writer cries out to them and to us: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."

A word on the four titles of honor. Here we have four Old Testament titles of Israel that Peter applies to the new household of God, to indicate its unique dignity, four titles that spell out our Christian vocation.

First title: You are "a chosen race." It is a title God gave to Israel through Isaiah. "My chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise." The significant word here is "chosen." As with Israel, so with us. Basic to Christian existence is a divine election. The church is a chosen community. And each of us has been called by God to share the life of that community.

Second title: You are "a royal priesthood." A holy priesthood. A Catholic truth all too easily forgotten. All of us are priests by baptism. All of us are on mission to reconcile the world to God in Christ. All of us offer the Church's central act of worship. In the Mass we offer not only Jesus but our very selves.

Third title: You are "a holy nation." Holy. Not simply pious, prayerful. Holy means you and I are consecrated to the Lord. Individually and as a community we are set apart for God. For this reason we can acknowledge we are a sinful people and still a holy people, for even in our sinfulness we are a people consecrated to God.

Fourth title: You are “God’s own people.” Whether we like it or not, we belong to God. Can you think of a higher calling? A more remarkable existence? And it is yours. You are that people.

So much for your calling and mine. What this single verse from a single New Testament book should do is put our problems in a broader perspective. Admit it: As a church, as a community, we are human, at times scandalously. We believe and we doubt, we hope and we despair. We love and we hate. It is the human face of the Church, a face that will not disappear till Christ comes again. And yet, it would be tragic if in focusing on the human we forget that we are part and parcel of something divine.

Go back to Peter. (1) Our call to be Christians is literally divine because it is *God* who has brought you and me into the Catholic community. God has chosen us. The words of Jesus at the Last Supper: “You did not choose me. I chose you.” (2) Unless God had chosen us, none of us could offer the Eucharist so central to our worship. (3) Unless God had graced you and me from the waters of baptism to the Bread of Life, none of us would be holy, part of a community consecrated to the Lord. (4) Only because Jesus died for us are we “God’s own possession.”

There it is. In God’s own Book. But there is more. Why this marvelous calling, these remarkable gifts? “In order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of the God who called you out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.” Like all of God’s gifts, these gifts are given... to be given.

Proclaim the mighty acts of God? Yes, bear witness to the gospel. One of very few children in the world’s richest nation grows up in poverty. 1.4 million unborn are aborted in the most compassionate of nations. A child is injured or killed by a gun every 36 seconds in a culture that abhors violence. Doctors committed to life are allowed to take life away.

Preach life. Respect all life. By our lives. All human life. Life in the womb and life near the tomb, enemy life and life on death row, life among immigrants and life in shelters downtown. Nonhuman life as well. The earth that sustains us. God looked upon creation and marveled, “It is very good.”

Over 1500 years ago Pope Leo the Great exhorted his people in an Easter sermon, "Christian, recognize your dignity!" It is yours. Live that dignity. Recognize that dignity in all God's holy people.

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