

Commentary for Holy Thursday

Holy Thursday - Cycle B - John 13:1-15



In the now classic *The Little Prince*, written in 1943 by Antoine de Saint Exupery, the fox tells the little prince, "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye."

A distressing Gallup Poll tells us that more than fifty percent of Catholics do not understand the teaching of the Church on the Eucharist. Furthermore, only one third of their number agree with the Church that bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus at the Consecration.

For these people, the Real Presence is the Great Absence.

Unhappily, too, my reading of the US college students I have worked with suggest that if anything, the Gallup Poll figures might well be conservative. Many Catholic students bring more reverence and awe to the bars in which they drink their beer than to the chapels in which they drink the Precious Blood.

All of this would puzzle our non-Christian friend Mahatma Gandhi. It was he who wrote, "In a world where millions go to bed hungry every night, the only form in which God would dare appear among human beings is food."

Perhaps though, in the words of my Irish mother to her young brood of years ago, "Ye all have it much too easy."

Yet, one thinks of the university students in Czechoslovakia and draws hope. This was during the period of Communist domination. Secretly they would slip into darkened, damp basements to celebrate the Eucharist with their "outlaw" priest. Were he caught, he would only go to jail for a time. But they would be expelled from the university. Their careers would come to an abrupt halt. Better put, they would have no careers. These young people would answer the Gallup Poll far differently than the unbenighted Catholics who opened our tale. They realized Jesus talks only to those who make the time to listen to Him.

Furthermore, when the Teacher said unequivocally, "Do this as a memorial for me," these Czech and Slovakian students understood Him perfectly. They knew He was not inviting them to debate the subject of Transubstantiation in committees. Rather, they instinctively judged He was telling them, "JUST DO IT!" Indeed, one senses that they concluded that the Master wanted them to become the cup and bread for one another in their daily lives. And the record attests that these young people became precisely that. They must have made the Teacher proud.

Like de Saint Exupery's fox, they saw rightly with their hearts. They fully realized that what is essential is invisible to the eye. With Thomas Merton, they realized the way of faith is necessarily obscure, for all Christians drive by night.

These persecuted Christians would have enjoyed this insight of Eugene LaVerdiere. "The Eucharist is a proclamation of the Gospel. Just as Christ, our Lord and Saviour, is the Word-made-flesh...the Eucharist is the Gospel-made-sacrament."

Remember John, who wrote this Gospel, never speaks of the institution of the Eucharist. He wrote the last of the Gospels. By that time, the practice of the Eucharist was widely observed in the rapidly spreading Christian world. Thus, his information would have been considered superfluous.

Like most everyone else, I was outraged by the imprisonment of journalist Terry Anderson by terrorists in Lebanon from 1985 to 1991. He described a Eucharist celebrated by fellow captive Father Martin Jenco. His congregation in addition to Mr Anderson were three other prisoners. His prose poem about the event is one of the most moving pieces I have ever read.

I share sections with you. "Five men huddled close against the night and our oppressors, around a bit of stale bread hoarded from a scanty meal...The priest's voice is calm, his face serene. This is the core of his existence, the reason he was born. Behind him I can see his predecessors in their generations, back to the Catacombs, heads nodding in approval...adding the power of their suffering and faith to his, and ours. The ancient words shake off their dust, and come alive...Once again Christ's promise is fulfilled...The miracle is real." Today you no doubt will want to receive the same Eucharist which was so precious to Mr Anderson and his companions in their Beirut prison.

We Catholics are indeed a fortunate people. But do we really realize it? Or was my Irish mother correct? Do we have it much too easy? Perhaps, as we prepare for tomorrow's day of strict fast and abstinence, we should make Julia Wemple's prayer our own. "Lord, help me to eat more heartily at your table and more sparingly at mine."

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