

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Jun 29th 2018

Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, Apostles - Mass during the Day

Acts 4: 32 tells us that the community of believers were of one heart and mind and that is how the apostles themselves are generally believed to have been, and –I surmise– that is also why Peter and Paul are celebrated together as pillars of the Church forming a harmonious dyad. Pillars they were all right and I have no doubt they were of one heart. But of one mind? They were that too, at least when the first Council of Jerusalem discussed essentials. However, oneness of mind in essentials did not necessarily mean oneness of mind in every single issue.

Even when enlightened by the Spirit, Peter's mind remained ultimately the mind of a good fisherman: down to earth, but not necessarily sophisticated, at least not in comparison to Paul's. Peter himself seems to admit to that much, as we read in his second letter: ...our beloved brother Paul... wrote to you, speaking of these things in all his letters. In them there are some things hard to understand... [2Pet. 3: 16]. One in heart they were, but oneness of mind was not to be taken for granted on Peter's side.

Or on Paul's side for that matter. It was not often that the two of them were together in the same place, but it did happen in Antioch. There Peter seems to have been backtracking on his conviction that associating with Gentiles was not forbidden to the followers of Jesus. Paul remembers that encounter very well: ...when Cephas came to Antioch, then I did oppose him to his face, since he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain people from James came, he used to eat with Gentiles; but as soon as these came, he backed up and kept apart from them for fear of the circumcised [Gal. 2: 11-12]. Not of one mind in that issue. Was Paul afraid that –out of fear– Peter could be sliding back into the dissembling that led him to deny –also out of fear– that he even knew Jesus?

Oneness of mind and heart speaks of unanimity (uni-animity or one-spirit-ness), not necessarily of uniformity. The apostolic faith planted by both Peter and Paul remained the same in its essentials, but in its details it was not cloned in every one of the many faith communities that sprang from their proclamation. Each exhibited its own identifying characteristics without being perceived as a threat to unanimity, a growth that in its diversity was seen as guided by the Holy Spirit. Today's Church extends over clearly diverse societies and cultures and, taking a clue from Peter and Paul, it strives to preserve unanimity. Micromanaging the growth of each local church over the planet may achieve the external impression of uniformity, but, in disregarding what is legitimately proper to the local church, it could hurt unanimity. Unanimity is a gift of the Spirit, uniformity is not. We need Paul's freedom to disagree with Peter and Peter's honest acknowledgment that there are levels of sophistication and depth in the grasping and articulation of our common faith, levels Peter was not always in a position to understand.

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