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Maintaining the Continuity of Teaching Authority

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Maintaining the Continuity of Teaching Authority

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Third Sunday of Easter

Sunday Readings for April 18, 2010 for Cycle C:

Acts 5:24-41, Ps 30, Rv 5:11-14, Jn 21:1-19

MAINTAINING THE CONTINUITY OF TEACHING AUTHORITY

Lawrence E. Frizzell

The rulers of many countries seek to secure a permanent place of power for themselves and their families. Even a "president for life" must acknowledge his mortality and plan for succession. In contrast, Jesus did not lay claim to secular power for himself; indeed, he told Pilate; "My kingdom does not belong to this world..." (Jn 18:36). Jesus was the heavenly Father's Agent for the inauguration of the divine Kingship (God's authority respected by the faithful) and Kingdom (the divine reign accepted by all creation at the consummation of history). As the Messiah (Anointed Son of David) and as Son of God, Jesus has an eternal reign; he promised to be with his Church always, even to the end of the world (Mt 28:20). Although Jesus had no need to plan for a successor, he did select a representative to be the visible sign of the unifying power of his presence.

The choice of Simon Peter and the other Apostles was based on the legal precedent of an agent who represents the ruling authority. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (Jn 20:21). In earlier times, the city of Jerusalem was governed by a deputy of the king of Judah empowered to be a father to its inhabitants. "I will place the key of the House of David on his shoulder; when he opens, no one shall shut, when he shuts, no one shall open" (Is 22:21-22). The king ratified the decisions of his mayor and held him responsible for welfare of the community. In like manner, Jesus offered Peter a unique role in collaborating with him. "I will entrust to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you declare bound on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatever you declare loosed on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:19).

Strikingly, the most explicit fulfillment of Jesus' promise is recorded in the Fourth Gospel. After the Master had manifested himself to several disciples by the Sea of Galilee and prepared breakfast for them, he reminded Peter of his triple denial during his passion. The first question tested Peter's humility. "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these do?" (Jn 21:15). Peter's enthusiastic self-assurance had been tempered by experience of his own cowardice (Jn 13:37-38 and 18:15-18, 25-27). Now he came to realize that being a leader is not based on superior qualifications but on divine goodness providing the strength required to fulfill the responsibilities given. So, avoiding a comparison with others, Peter answered simply: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you" (Jn 21:15). Then Jesus commissioned him to feed his lambs and to tend his sheep. The Good Shepherd had laid down his life for his flock, including Peter (see Jn 10:11 and 18); he had invited others to become assistants in his work. After the resurrection he instituted offices to carry on his mission until the end of time.

Like the prophecy of Nathan (2 Sm 7:8-16) which proclaimed the establishment of the Davidic dynasty at the service of the divine King and his people, Jesus founded a function that would continue until the historical order would give way to the eternal Kingdom. Although some early

Christians hoped for Jesus to return quickly, John records a strange saying of Jesus that he interpreted to indicate that Peter would be a martyr. So, like David and Solomon, as well as their representatives, Peter would have successors to care for the Church.

In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke presented several vignettes of St. Peter's role in the Jerusalem Church. He is portrayed as a prayerful and courageous leader who proclaimed the Gospel even in the face of threats and persecution. An abbreviated version of one such episode is read to complement this Sunday's Gospel.

During the trial of Peter and other apostles before the Sanhedrin, Luke told of a wise Pharisee named Gamaliel who cautioned his colleagues against any attempt to crush nascent Christianity. "If their purpose or activity is human in its origins, it will destroy itself. If, on the other hand, it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them without fighting against God himself" (Acts 5:38-39). This is sound advice for all political and religious leaders. Those Christians in authority have the responsibility to weigh the doctrines and opinions of all teachers to see if they resonate well with the Gospel. However, debates and discussions should take place so that the vigor of divine truth inveighs against error rather than brute force crushing its proponents. The teaching authority of the Church is at its best when the faithful are instructed adequately so that they can discern illusion and distortion. "Test everything and hold fast to what is good" (1 Thes 5:21). The task of feeding lambs and sheep with the nourishing sustenance of the Christian message is complemented by a continuing effort to defend them from noxious weeds. The awesome task of Peter and his collaborators is never easy, so we pray that they (and ourselves) be ever receptive to the guidance of Christ's Spirit of truth!