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Peace: God's Gift and Challenge

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Peace: God's Gift and Challenge

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Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 5, 2013 Sunday Readings for Cycle C:

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29; Ps 67; Rev 21:10-14, 22-23; Jn 14:23-29

PEACE: GOD'S GIFT AND CHALLENGE

Lawrence E. Frizzell

How do we perceive and describe the Church? The outsider sees an enormous international organization, larger than General Motors or any major corporation yet having a very simple structure -- a reality to be admired but also to be feared by many in government and big business because it stands for principles and values quite alien to most modern societies. In faith, of course, we recognize that the Church is an organism, the Body of Christ; it is a people that extends God's embrace to every corner of the world and invites the poor, the weak and the hungry to partake of gifts that fulfill all hopes yet are never exhausted or expended. Moreover, "the Church, which is called 'that Jerusalem which is above' and 'our Mother' (Gal 4:26), is described as the spotless Spouse of the spotless Lamb (Rev 19:7; 21:2, 9; 22:17). It is she whom 'Christ loved and for whom he delivered himself up so that he might sanctify her'" (Eph 5:26). This statement, excerpted from the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Church* (#6), draws upon the vision offered in the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Apocalypse, portraying the Church as Spouse/Mother and the Holy City of Peace.

The last chapters of the Apocalypse, associated in the liturgy with the triumph of Christ's resurrection being celebrated in the Paschal season, show how the suffering and victory of the Lamb transform the universe. The perennial tensions between nature and art, between countryside and city, are not inherent to creation but result from sin. In the new age, Eden and the new Jerusalem will be one. The Church, already personified as Mother of God's children (Rev 12:17), is paradoxically the Bride being prepared for the wedding feast of the Lamb. The New Jerusalem is described as coming down from heaven yet shows continuity with the long history of God's people. Thus, the gates to the city are named after the twelve tribes of Israel; the foundation stones are inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Does our experience of the Church, of our local parish, provide us with hints of this marvelous heavenly city and the wedding feast of the Lamb? Just as the city of Jerusalem at times seems far from the peace (*shalom*) that is integral to its name, so the Church of any age or place can be caught in dissension and controversy. The text from the Acts of the Apostles read this Sunday describes the tensions between Christians coming from different backgrounds. The burning question focused on the obligations of Gentiles who were received into the Church. Should the men be circumcised and should all the other laws of Judaism be observed? The distinction between moral laws (as contained in the Decalogue) and other practices was not clear to many. When a dispute cannot be satisfied locally, the community should send delegates to seek the wisdom of higher authority.

The apostles and elders in Jerusalem laid down a principle that was developed by St. Augustine:

"In necessities, unity; in other matters, liberty; in everything, charity." To preserve harmony in the community they exhorted the Christians of Gentile background "to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols (see 1 Cor 10:23-30), from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from illicit sexual union" (see 1 Cor 5:1-5). Common table fellowship is essential to a community, so non-Jews should make an effort to refrain from dietary practices unacceptable to Jewish Christians. They should also follow the laws of Leviticus 18 regarding marriage; later, drawing on Sacred Scripture and natural law, the Church would legislate on these questions relating to the family.

Are tensions in our day approached with such openness to the guidance of the Church's leaders, with such deference to our neighbor? Or are we rather remote from the peace which is Christ's final gift to the Church (John 14:27)? The Lord's peace is not merely a call for toleration, much less an invitation to compromise moral principles. Rather, it is a creative dimension of love which was acquired through the sacrifice that unites peoples by removing obstacles and barriers that isolate them (see Eph 2:14).

This peace of Christ after the resurrection is associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sin (Jn 20:19-23). Moreover, this Spirit is the Paraclete (the Advocate, Counsellor, Consoler and Admonisher), sent to instruct the community of faith in every age and to remind Christians of all that Jesus taught the Church. Undoubtedly the Church in our time needs inner peace to provide the vision of God's truth effectively to the confused world in which we live. May the prayer of the faithful for the gifts of the Holy Spirit intensify our response to be peacemakers in Christ's name!