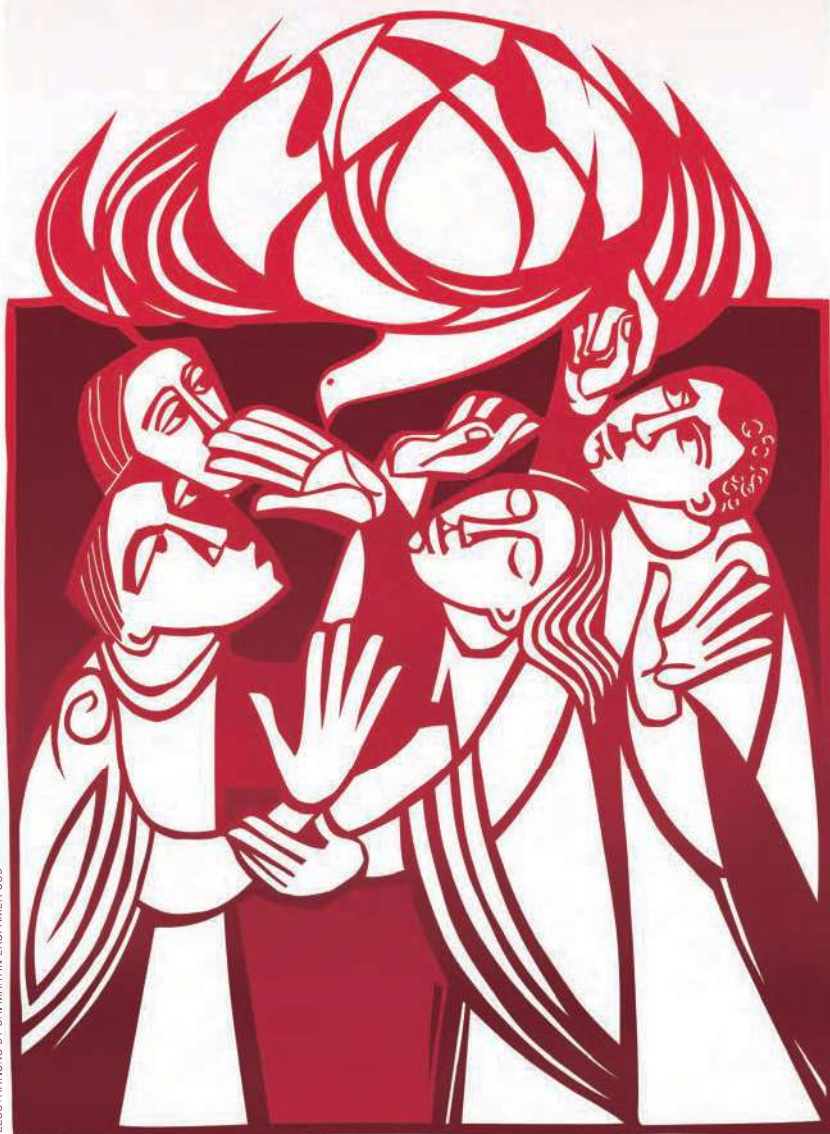


ACTS OF THE APOSTLES



BY RONALD D. WITHERUP, S.S.

What is your church like?" I have heard this question posed at gatherings of large groups of Catholics. The responses to this question often begin with comments about church buildings, and only later shift to descriptions of the congregation.

Yet that experience of the congregation, of the People of God everywhere, is what the Church is really about. In this *Update*, we'll look at the testimony of Luke and the early Church describing the experience of Church. The story is told in the Acts of the Apostles.

If we want to know more about the Church from a biblical perspective, we have to go beyond bricks and mortar.

ACTS REVEALED

The Book of Acts is the only New Testament document devoted exclusively to the story of the early Church. It is the companion volume to the Gospel of Luke (compare the Prologues, Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-5). The Church uses this book at Mass almost exclusively through the Easter season, from Easter Sunday to Pentecost.

In order to provide the proper framework for reflecting on Acts, we should note first its general outline. The book has four main sections: Prologue (1:1-5); The Mission of the Church in Jerusalem and Environs (1:6—8:3); The Mission of the Church in Judea and Samaria (8:4—12:25); and The Mission of the Church to the Ends of the Earth (13:1—28:31).

Acts gives a clue to this outline at 1:8. There the Risen Jesus promises the gift of the Holy Spirit who will enable the apostles to be emboldened and to embark on worldwide missionary activity. The text reads: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (All Scripture citations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.)

There is a certain irony in this geographic outline. If you go to the end of Acts (Chapter 28), you will see that Paul's missionary journey takes him to Rome, where he ends up in prison yet freely proclaims the gospel message (28:31). In what way can Rome be considered "the ends of the earth"?

Most everyone remembers the saying, "All roads lead to Rome." Indeed, the Roman Empire was an overwhelming influence, the world power, in the time of Jesus and the early Church. Its fabled road system enabled relatively quick and safe journeys around the empire. Some of these roads still exist today!

For Acts to conclude in Rome, then, is not a statement that this is as far as the Christian mission went. Rather, it is to say that if all roads led to Rome, then all roads also led out from Rome. For Acts, Rome is a symbol of the worldwide mission that the Risen Jesus gave to the Church. The Church is foremost an evangelizing community. It is a people empowered by the Holy Spirit to take the message of Jesus Christ to the whole world.

This message has not been lost on the Church today. The late Pope John Paul II regularly called for a "new evangelization" in the life of the Church. He basically was calling us to recapture the spirit of Acts. The Easter season offers a good opportunity to rejuvenate this call. Acts provides the perfect resource, for much of the book consists of "speeches" that provide testimony about Jesus Christ and his significance to the world.

This does not mean that we have to climb on our soapboxes at street corners and shout out the message. But it does mean putting our faith in both words and actions, as is described throughout the Book of Acts.

LIFE IN THE CHURCH

If Acts presents the essential character of the Church as an evangelizing community, it has much more to say about the qualities

of Church life. These are exhibited throughout the readings of Easter season. I will group them, for the sake of convenience, into four categories: 1) the Church as a multicultural, universal community; 2) the Church's need to give witness to Jesus Christ even in the midst of suffering; 3) the Church as a community of prayer, worship and joy; and 4) the Church's inevitable success spreading the gospel message through the Holy Spirit.

EVERYONE, EVERYWHERE

First, Acts reveals a Church which is a multicultural, universal community. One should not miss the fact that Easter Sunday the first reading taken from Acts is an excerpt of Peter's speech at the conversion of Cornelius and his household, who were gentiles from Caesarea (10:34-42).

Peter begins by noting that "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:34-35).

Peter confirms this judgment at the Council of Jerusalem, at which the Church more formally permitted the mission to the gentiles (Chapter 15). Between Easter and Pentecost, the liturgical year recounts the conversion stories of many others of differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds. They all provide testimony to the effectiveness of God's power, at work through the apostolic preaching, in bringing people to Christ.

This theme of the universal appeal of Christ returns at the end of the Easter season, like a matching bookend.

Pentecost is the quintessential story of universalism. The Holy Spirit descends on the apostles and enables them to speak in tongues mirroring the nations of the known world (2:1-11).

In this theme, Acts points out a quality of the Church that speaks to our own day. More than ever, we live in a small world where mobility has enabled the migration of many peoples.

Virtually every sector of the United States has been touched by the presence of diverse ethnic groups who have come to America seeking freedom, security and prosperity. Our towns and our churches are filled with people of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. It can be a challenge to incorporate them seamlessly into our faith communities.

A great hallmark of the Catholic Church has always been its openness to this diversity. *Catholic* (from the Greek *katholikos*) means "universal." The entire Easter season celebrates this universality. Peter's speech at Solomon's Portico, for example, expresses this stance.

Peter points out how Jesus Christ fulfills God's promise to Abraham that in him "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (3:25). Languages and accents may differ, customs and styles of dress may vary, but the Easter season testifies to the universal call of Jesus Christ.

WITNESS AND SUFFERING

Next, the Church described in Acts understands the necessity of giving witness to Jesus Christ even in the midst of suffering.

A prominent feature of Acts is the regular presentation of stories about giving witness in word and deed to the message of Jesus Christ. The Greek word for *witness* is the same as the English word *martyr*. Many of the stories of Acts heard throughout the Easter season remind us of the price our ancestors in faith paid for proclaiming the gospel message.

While Stephen's martyrdom is the prime model of witness for Acts (7:54—8:1), not all the persecutions end in death. Peter, John, Paul and others throughout Acts suffer imprisonment, beatings, trials and numerous other tribulations for the sake of testifying to their faith in Jesus Christ as the crucified and risen Savior of the world. At times, God sends them miraculous

aid (for example, when Paul and Silas were imprisoned in Philippi, 16:22-34).

At other times, the resourcefulness of the apostles themselves leads to a respite in their persecution (see Paul before the Sanhedrin, 23:6-11). In either case, the goal is said to be the same. The Church must give testimony in good times and in bad, in suffering and in success. In all cases, the community is to “bear witness” to Jesus (23:11).

This aspect of the Easter message may seem more difficult to apply in our own day, but perhaps not. For example, the Catholic Church is still coping with revelations of sexual abuse of minors. Many believe the voice of the Church as a moral force in our society and in our world has been weakened because of this terrible, embarrassing failure of trust.

In this case, the interference with the Church’s ability to give witness to

the message of Jesus Christ is not external persecution but internal misdeeds. Both can mute the voice of authentic testimony. The message of Acts is to persevere and not to let this stumbling block silence our voices permanently.

CHRISTIAN ESSENTIALS

T hird, the Church of Acts is a community of prayer, worship and joy. This may seem obvious, but we easily forget that many distractions can lure us away from the essentials of faith.

What Church community has not been tempted at times to emphasize the practicalities of administration, financial constraints and the upkeep of property and buildings to the detriment of more essential values? Yet Acts emphasizes that the Church is first

and foremost a community of prayer, worship and joy.

Already on the Second Sunday of Easter, which used to be called “Low Sunday” (probably in contrast to the “high” feast of Easter), the second reading describes in idealized terms the Church’s communal life. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (2:42).

The reading goes on to describe how all the members of the community shared their property in common. “Fellowship” included sharing goods with other members of the community (see the idealized description in Acts 4:32-35).

They broke bread in their homes (2:46), a New Testament expression for celebrating the Eucharist. Acts thus highlights the sacramental dimension of the community.

Acts also recalls the pervading attitude of joy and exultation, a joy rooted in the resurrection of Jesus. That joy resounds in the life of the Church, even in times of persecution (2:47; 5:41; 13:52; 15:3).

Such idealistic descriptions are reminders of the true nature of the Church community. But we might ask a legitimate question: How realistic is this picture? The Easter season is a time to reemphasize the goal toward which every Church community should strive.

We honestly should acknowledge that most of our communities fall short of this vision of being of “one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32). As many priests I know have jokingly commented, the good warmth of community seems to evaporate rather quickly in the rush to be first out of the church parking lot!

Interestingly, while the Easter season readings emphasize this ideal picture of the early Church, Acts hints at times that all was not perfect. One that the framers of the Lectionary left out is the curious story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). This married couple withheld from the common pot proceeds from the sale of some property. Peter confronts them and denounces their selfishness. Their punishment seems



rather severe, for, upon Peter's interrogation about their evil deception, they both drop dead! Little wonder that this reading did not make it into the Lectionary!

The message of instilled fear in the Church (Acts 5:11) goes counter to the hope-filled, joyful message of the Easter season. Yet perhaps the reading interjects a note of realism, namely, that it is not easy to fulfill the idealized vision of Church life presented by Acts.

WORK OF THE SPIRIT

Lastly, the Church described in Acts expects to succeed because the Holy Spirit is behind, within and underneath it all. From beginning to end, the Book of Acts shows the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the Church.

Luke emphasizes that everything that took place in the earthly life of Jesus and then that of the early Church was all part of God's mysterious plan of salvation, guided by the Holy Spirit. Luke emphasizes this, for example, by speaking of the "necessity" of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus as the Messiah (Luke 24:7, 44-46; Acts 1:16).

This divine necessity (this "must"), because it is accomplished under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, applies to the apostles as well. Thus Paul is told of the necessity of his bearing witness in Rome (19:21; 23:11).

For Acts, the Holy Spirit is the "promise of the Father" (Acts 1:4; see Luke 24:49). The Spirit comes to the apostles only after the ascension of Jesus takes place, 40 days after the resurrection (Acts 1:6-12). The 40 days, a symbolic biblical period of instruction and preparation to accomplish God's will, allows for the apostles to be prepared for their subsequent mission. They are then ready to receive the Holy Spirit and to be emboldened with courage.

The Spirit accompanies them throughout their mission. The Spirit is

their assurance of the presence of the Risen Jesus as their mission goes forth.

The 50 days of the Easter season, beginning with Easter and culminating in Pentecost, are in some ways devoted entirely to the Holy Spirit. Although the Spirit is often behind the scenes, Acts makes it quite clear that the spread of the gospel—the success of the apostolic preaching—is due entirely to the Spirit's guidance.

The Spirit gives courage and strength for testimony to the truth. These precise values are emphasized in our Sacrament of Confirmation, which is often celebrated in parishes during the Easter season. With this assurance, the Church is encouraged to have confidence in the future.

Despite whatever challenges, obstacles or setbacks we experience, we are to trust the gift of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we can breathe a sigh of relief that the ultimate success of the Church's message does not rest solely in our hands.

EASTER LESSONS

The Easter season, when we hear the Acts proclaimed at liturgy, offers us an opportunity to take stock of who we are as Church. This is not a matter of Church design, of buildings, of properties or programs, or even of attendance records and housekeeping details.

Something far more important is at stake. Who are we as Church? How do we today embody the ideal qualities

of the post-Resurrection faith community portrayed in Acts?

According to Acts, the Church is a community entrusted with a mission to carry the "good news" of Jesus Christ forth to the whole world. We are primarily a community of believers. We are called together in fellowship to support one another in faith, to celebrate the sacraments and a regular life of prayer, to share with the community from our possessions (material and otherwise) and to give testimony with joy and hope, confidently trusting that God continues to guide us in the Holy Spirit.

If the Easter season and the Lectionary cycle offer us this opportunity, it is not because it is the sole time to be Church in the world. It is, however, a unique time to reflect with joy that the Church miraculously grew from a small group of frightened disciples gathered in an upper room into bold proclaimers of the message of Jesus Christ. This is what the Church of today is called to be about. ■

*You can listen to an interview with Fr. Witherup about St. Paul at **FranciscanRadio.org**, American Catholic Radio show #05-15.*

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UPDATE

Question Box

- 1) How does Acts show that the Church is missionary?
- 2) What did Pope John Paul II mean by the "new evangelization"?
- 3) How is Pentecost the "quintessential story of universalism"?

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