



Ignatian Heritage Week Opening Mass

February 15, 2009

“They asked Him for a sign from heaven,” He (Jesus) sighed. Mark places the exchanges of Jesus with the Pharisees just after Jesus has fed 4,000. I can just imagine that sigh! These Pharisees did not really want to believe. 4,000 people had gathered to hear Jesus. He was concerned that they were hungry. He gathered seven loaves and a few fish. After he gave thanks for it, the disciples distributed the food. After the people had eaten, the disciples collected seven baskets of leftovers, and yet these Pharisees wanted a sign. That was not enough. They wanted such a spectacular sign that there would be no other way to understand. Some have suggested that people had food with them, that Jesus’ concern and compassion shamed them into sharing and thus the abundance; but other scholars note that this interpretation is not faithful to the Christology being taught here. For Saint Ignatius, the Gospels are available for our prayer and also to teach us.

The New Testament and Christology scholar, Father Gerald O’Collins describes this chapter of Mark as one in which Jesus is struggling to reach those who “lack the spiritual capacity to see and hear what Jesus and His message are offering them.”

I could not help but think of Saint Ignatius, who, in his autobiography, describes himself at Manresa as “thick and dull of brain.” If you will allow me to put that in our vernacular, I would say that here Ignatius is describing himself “as hard headed.”

Ignatius describes for us, in the Spiritual Exercises, that there are two styles in which God comes to persons depending upon their openness and commitment to follow God’s call; briefly like water falling on a sponge or like water falling on a stone. Ignatius is describing himself to be more like a stone in this moment.

Saint Ignatius goes on to do great things and to leave a lasting legacy. So what’s the difference between hard-headed Ignatius and those Pharisees? Understanding God’s will for his life does not come easily to Ignatius, but it is that openness to seeking God, rather than expecting that God will provide an irrefutable sign for all to see. An understanding of how God works in this world, that he works in us and through us. That is the difference.

Our heritage from Ignatius, and the over 400 years of Jesuit history, could be described as a series of journeys seeking to understand God’s purpose, presence, and grace. The way may not always be clear but when I look at the lives of some of those early Jesuits and their accomplishments, I know that God was with them.

Let me tell you about three.

First, Francis Xavier has been called a trail blazer, but he seems to me only one of many who were able to understand what God would have them do with their lives. It was Xavier who set out for India, alone. Xavier filled in for a colleague who was scheduled to go to India but who fell ill. Then his one traveling companion was detained by the king of Portugal, and Francis was left to go on his own. Now if I were Francis Xavier looking for a sign, I might have concluded that illness and then the loss of a traveling companion for this dangerous voyage were signs to postpone my travels. But no, with enthusiasm Xavier set out on a rocky and dangerous journey -- confidence in his mission sustained him. That could only have come from God.

A second figure, Mateo Ricci. Early Jesuits had failed to enter the closed society and country of China and had been turned back. Mateo Ricci studied Chinese for 10 years, largely teaching himself (no Rosetta Stone software for him) no great schools or learning support systems available. He published a document called *Friendship* – in Chinese. He changed the approach to new cultures with his willingness to learn and appreciate what was new and different. I very much doubt that God gave him any wondrous sign that this new approach to different peoples and culture would work, but I do believe that he could discern God's grace in his work. He and his companions did such great work that much of today's Christian community in China can trace their roots back many generations, through all of their history and suffering, to Ricci.

Finally, Christopher Clavius who spent his first 70 years defending the view that the Earth was at the center of the universe. Then when he was over 70, he received a more powerful telescope and confirmed Galileo's theory of the Earth, not at the center of the universe but as a satellite of the sun. A concept that went against Church authority and what he had taught all his life. What courage that must have taken. Only a man who believed that God would stand with him, and teach him anew when his eyes were open to new truths, could take such a position.

Someone recently pointed out that in Revelations there is a passage about Jesus at the door. It describes Jesus standing at the door and knocking. It does not describe Jesus as knocking down the door! I think these early Jesuits would agree that Jesus is there, but usually not if we're waiting to be bowled over with a sign.

One of our faculty was describing a student's experience on an immersion trip to Jamaica. This student was assigned to help in a senior citizens home, cutting toenails, applying lotion, brushing hair, shaving the men, and helping to dress persons who could not do these things for themselves. This young woman was helping an elderly Jamaican woman, but they were having trouble communicating. Between understanding the Jamaican accent and the possibility that the woman's ability to speak had been compromised by a stroke, it began as a less than a promising encounter. Somehow the lady was able to get across to the student that she wanted lotion applied to her face. Then as the student began massaging the old woman's face with lotion, tears began to roll down her cheeks.

They never had a conversation and yet in this unexpected moment, a John Carroll student experienced an insight, a moment of divine grace that has remained with her. What if she had felt so uncomfortable that she would have withdrawn? She would have missed this moment of grace. But instead she had a sign of God's grace that remains with her today.

As we celebrate our Ignatian heritage, let us all reach out into the world that God is creating today and discern God's presence and grace. He is here with us if we seek to know Him.