

Catholics On Call Partners Conference

2009

Closing Eucharist

Scripture Readings:

Haggai 2: 1-9

Luke 9: 18-22

“Does it seem like nothing in your eyes?” That is the semi-rhetorical question that the prophet Haggai, speaking in God’s name, addresses to the leaders and the people of Israel some years after their return from exile. The longed-for release from years of captivity in Babylonia did not quite lead to the halcyon days of old when the exiles returned to Israel. They were an impoverished people struggling to get along, and they faced daunting obstacles as they tried to rebuild their life and construct a temple to replace Solomon’s magnificent temple, which had been destroyed. For a while the Samaritans succeeded in blocking the temple project, but when King Darius ascended the throne, he ordered that it be rebuilt. Haggai is speaking to a people who are disheartened in their efforts, about to give in to defeatism and lethargy. Their discouragement has been intensified as they realize that the temple they are constructing seems puny when contrasted with the magnificence of Solomon’s temple. It does, in fact, seem like nothing in their eyes, at least in comparison to what they had before.

Does it seem like nothing in your eyes? This is a question that the prophet might address to us who minister in the church today. I used to direct one of our Passionist retreat houses in Queens, NY. Like most retreat houses these days, we had to work very hard to promote our retreats and to try to fill the house. Sometimes the house was filled; often it was not. Often I would listen to some of our older religious reflect on the days of old, when they were assigned to the retreat house. They would remember overflow crowds forcing the scheduling of extra retreats during the week in order to meet the demands. These men were not trying to be discouraging; they were just recalling important moments in their lives. But it was very humbling for me to hear those stories. Sometimes, in comparison, what we were accomplishing seemed like nothing in my eyes

Those of us who work with young adults have probably had similar experiences. Promoting programs for young adults, whether they be retreats, conferences, theology on tap, campus liturgies, or volunteer service programs, is a ministry that requires a lot of hard work and creativity. Those of you who work as vocation ministers know how much hard work it takes to connect with young people and to interest them in considering a church vocation. You leave no stone unturned, from websites to Facebook to Twitter to busy persons retreats, and so forth. And I suspect that you are sometimes regaled with stories about the magnificent days of old -- like Solomon’s magnificent temple -- when Masses were standing room only, sodalities and Knights of Columbus groups were filled with young people, novitiate classes were overflowing, and the discussion was about whether or not to construct larger buildings to house all of the candidates. As you work hard to connect with what may be a much smaller group of young people at liturgy, or a handful of folks at a Come and See weekend, the comparisons may dishearten you. What you are accomplishing may sometimes seem like nothing in your eyes.

In Luke's version of Peter's confession of faith we listen to Jesus talk about his impending passion. Despite his awareness of imminent conflict, he continues on to Jerusalem with trust in the God he calls "Abba." Jesus persists in holding on to the hand of God in the midst of what must have been enveloping darkness. The words of this gospel passage are followed by Jesus' teaching about the conditions of discipleship -- taking up the cross daily and losing our lives in order to save them. It seems to me that during the past twenty or thirty years our church has experienced its own share in the passion of Christ. We have been immersed in the experience of diminishment in many aspects of our lives and ministry: abuse and other church scandals, declining numbers, parish consolidation, etc. I don't need to go through the entire litany with you. Like the people of Jerusalem in Haggai's time, we may be tempted make comparisons with the "days of old" -- the 1940's, 50's or 60's -- and ask one another, "Does it seem like nothing in your eyes?"

But Haggai, speaking the word of the Lord to the people of Jerusalem, does not stop with that question. He goes on to say, "Take courage"; in fact he says that three times. And he exhorts them to get to work, all the while echoing the promise of God spoken in the midst of the daunting challenges they are facing: "I am with you."

None of us knows what the Catholic Church will look like as the 21st century proceeds, at least the church in the United States. It may well be a smaller church with institutions that are less grand, for example, much smaller religious communities. If this turns out to be the case, ministry in our church, whether it be lay ecclesial ministry, the ministry of religious, or ordained ministry, will have to adapt. Already in the 1950's, the great theologian Karl Rahner predicted that the church of the future would become more of a minority community, a smaller flock. He spoke about "the church of the little flock." At this point I don't think we know whether Rahner was right in that estimation.

At the same time, those of us who work with young adults today, in whatever ministry that is, know well that there are so many young Catholics who are men and women of deep faith and remarkable dedication. They are willing to engage their faith and to wrestle with the questions of where God is calling them, even though some of their friends and family members offer them little encouragement in the process. They do not always fit into the categories that "baby boomer" Catholics like to use, like conservative and liberal, pre-Vatican II and post-Vatican II. Their burning issues are not always our burning issues. Often they seem to integrate values and expressions of faith that we might tend to separate, like a deep love for the tradition along with a strong commitment to justice, peace and care for creation. And they are not very interested in comparisons with the 1950's and 60's. I suspect that one of the main reasons we are here at this conference is that we have been inspired by such men and women of faith. They have given us life. Whenever we finish a young adult conference, I find myself filled with hope about the future of the church, even though the contours of that future remain very uncertain.

And so, as we finish our time together, I would suggest that the Lord's words to us today are similar to those he spoke through the prophet Haggai to the flagging people of Jerusalem: "Take courage; be confident in your work; I am with you." Sometimes I wonder what people will think in the year 2060, when they look back on the previous century of the church. Will they eulogize the leaders of the 1950's and 60's when numbers were large and buildings were grand -- before the experience of diminishment? Or, perhaps, will they remember those leaders and ministers who journeyed on in faith in the years when things did not seem quite so magnificent? Will they remember the people who worked to build up the community of faith and to raise up a new generation of leaders in the church, trusting that the Lord was with them even when the future seemed uncertain? I suspect that it will be the latter.

As we conclude this conference and approach the table of the Lord, we listen again to the words of Haggai: "Take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord, and work! For I am with you, says the Lord of hosts." The Lord Jesus, who gives himself to us in this sacrament, is truly with us in our ministry with young people. I am convinced that it is a work that is very close to the heart of Christ. Let us, then, go forth from here as people of hope and of courage.

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