

## Appendix B

### REFLECTIONS FOR CONVENTION LITURGY

THIS IS THE WORD OF GOD!  
(2 Tm 2,8-15 and Mk 12,28-34)

This is the word of God! Our response after reading the scripture lesson is always like this. Is there a cumulative significance to the affirmation: "This is the word of God"? And so is this. And so is what we heard last Sunday. And what we'll hear tomorrow?

And so are those embarrassing passages that follow certain selections carefully pruned from their contexts for public reading at the liturgy. For example, that difficult "word of the Lord" from Colossians, "To slaves I say, obey your human masters perfectly . . . out of reverence for the Lord," which is no longer read at Christmas, though for some reason the injunction, "wives, be submissive to your husbands. This is your duty in the Lord," is still read on the feast of the Holy Family.

But this is Pentecost, not Christmastide, and I have lately found an example of liturgical pruning that is both seasonal and apposite to our convention theme. Trusting that clues to our questions of Catholicity and inculturation must lie in that originating mystery of the Christian community, when Medes and Parthians and Cretans all heard the gospel in their own tongues, I probed Acts for texts about the earliest experiences of the outpouring of God's spirit upon the faithful.

After the initial ecstasy of Pentecost, it seems the group settled down to life in the Spirit in a way that resolved all issues of diversity and pluralism, and gave us reason to affirm that being "one" is the first mark of the assembly of believers: "The community of believers were of one heart and one mind. None of them ever claimed anything as his own; rather, everything was held in common. Nor was there anyone needy among them" (Acts 4:32). To which lectors added, "This is the word of God," on the second Tuesday after Easter, only a few weeks ago. What I wonder today, however, is whether in these days of oaths and formulaic professions of faith, it might not be salutary to have an antiphonal response to our scripture readings, with one side of the congregation affirming, "This is the word of God," and the other side adding today's reminder from the apostolic letter to Timothy, "But there is no chaining the word of God."

This is the word of God. But there is no chaining the word of God. No chaining by *our* interpretations of exactly what it meant to affirm, for example, that "The community of believers were of one heart and one mind. None of them ever claimed anything as his own . . ."—especially in view of the evidence to the

contrary that follows in the next chapter of Acts, although interestingly enough, the church chooses not to remind us of this evidence and changes the subject entirely for the next day's scripture lesson. And so we may forget that right after the affirmation, "None of them ever claimed anything as his own," comes the story of Ananias and Sapphira, which suggests that perfect community of goods was at best an ideal to be sought rather than an historical accomplishment. Might not the same be said about the wondrous claim of unity and unanimity: "they were all of one heart and one mind"? Perhaps such unity and unanimity were felt at the moment of receiving communion, but surely not all of the time.

All our scriptural texts are canonical, but all are not central. So also with our classical doctrines, magisterial teachings, and longstanding Roman Catholic practices. These constitute our tradition, but we need to emphasize some more than others, and let the peripheral and the mistaken be left to the side. This may be the word of God, but there is no chaining the word of God.

Today's gospel shows that Jesus knew how to recognize priorities. Asked to name the greatest commandment, he cited two in one breath, because, as theologians from Mark through Rahner have seen, neighbor love is impossible to separate from love of God.

And does not this teaching of Jesus supply the hermeneutical principle we need regarding inculturation and "accommodation"? "Stop disputing about mere words," or about any other cultural forms or practices, and save your disputes for matters that impinge on your neighbor's well-being. This is the lesson I draw from today's readings. And how will we know what makes for effective love of neighbor? The most obvious way is to hear what people say they are experiencing. Their interpretations of what our words and practices are doing may *differ* from ours, and that difference must be respected. To respect does not necessarily mean to agree; sometimes it means recognizing that a difference will need to stand for a long time as part of the relationship. Perhaps if we members of the Catholic Theological Society of America can make this insight our own, and can model a way of staying in relationship even as we go forward in diversifying our membership so that formerly excluded voices are part of our conversations, if we can model a unity that does not depend on uniformity or unanimity on matters at some remove from the two great commandments, perhaps this will make us workers with no cause to be ashamed, because we are not only preaching the truth as best we know it, but we are also preaching it in a spirit of respect and love.

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