

Appendix B

HOMILY: MIDDLEMAN FOR CHRIST

It's a long way from Antioch to Philadelphia, from an apostle to a theologian, from Barnabas to the CTSA.¹ Rather than erode your liturgical time with lame apologies, I shall suggest a connection in three stages: (1) the bare bones of Barnabas' bio; (2) his significance then; (3) his pertinence now.

I

First, some bare bones from the Acts of the Apostles. There Barnabas strides on stage in a striking contrast. His foil is Ananias, a wheeler-dealer tempted to inside trading. Ananias sells a piece of property, brings part of his profit to the apostles, pretends it's the whole shooting match, is lectured unsparingly by the prince of the apostles on lying to the Holy Spirit, ends up lying lifeless at Peter's feet; so too for his short-term widow, Sapphira (cf. Acts 5:1-11). In sharp contrast, Barnabas. He too sells a piece of property, a field he owns. But he has no secret Swiss account; he simply brings in the whole bag, lays all the proceeds before the apostles for the needy of the community (cf. 4:34-37). Little wonder Luke sums him up as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith" (11:24).²

But it is not Barnabas' integrity that intrigues me. I am fascinated by a facet of his personality, of his apostolate, that flows indeed from his integrity but is more specific than sheer honesty, had important implications for the infant Church, and may well speak to today's theologian. Three concrete examples.

Item 1: Barnabas pleading for proselyte Paul. Paul has come from Damascus to Jerusalem, tries to join the disciples there. But they are in mortal fear of him, do not believe he is a genuine disciple of Christ. Barnabas intervenes. He brings Paul to the apostles, declares to them "how on the road [Paul] had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus" (9:27). From that critical moment for Christianity Paul "went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord" (9:28-29).

¹This homily was delivered at the Mass celebrated during the 1987 convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America. The date of the liturgical celebration was June 11, the feast of St. Barnabas, apostle and companion of St. Paul.

²On the problem of the generalized sharing of possessions in the early Jerusalem community, as well as the factual foundation of the Ananias-Sapphira story, see Edward J. Mally, S.J., "The Gospel according to Mark," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., and Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, © 1968) 45:31-32.

Item 2: Barnabas apostolic nuncio to Antioch. He has been sent there by the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem, an "official visitor to the new, partly Gentile Church."³ It is a delicate mission: for Barnabas is sent by the mother Church to a community founded by Hellenists, is commissioned not only to encourage and advise it, but to "bring it under the supervision of the Jerusalem community."⁴ As this young community grows, Barnabas seeks out Paul in Tarsus, brings him to Antioch, labors with him for a full year there—there where "the disciples were for the first time called Christians" (11:20-26).

Item 3: the fateful council in Jerusalem (15:1-12). Barnabas is sent by the Church at Antioch, sent with Paul and others, sent to Jerusalem to discuss with the apostles and elders a crucial issue for the Christian Church, an issue that divided not Antioch alone but Jerusalem as well: "Does salvation depend on faith in Christ, or on faith *with* circumcision and observance of the Mosaic Law?"⁵ Peter's voice prevailed, yes: "Why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" (15:10). But perhaps just as vital as the voice of Peter was the witness from Antioch: The assembly "listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles" (15:12).

II

So far, bare bones from Barnabas' bio. But how put flesh on those bones? What was his significance then? Exegete John Meier put his finger on it when he called Barnabas a "middle-man."⁶ He was an intermediary, a mediator, that arduous role where you struggle to reconcile varying visions, opposite opinions, passionately opposed parties or persons—yes, good Christians in conflict.

Item 1: Barnabas mediated between a feared persecutor of the Church and the apostles of that Church. He did it not only with a story—the unlikely story of a convert preaching Christ fearlessly in the very city where he had gone to take Christians captive. He did it by bringing that ex-persecutor face to face with the top men in the Church. "Here he is. Look at him, look into his eyes, listen to him, and then tell me what you see, what you hear." It was not an easy task for Barnabas; it called for courage. The atmosphere was fear: *all* the disciples in Jerusalem, Luke tells us, were afraid of Paul (9:26). I shudder to speculate what the face of the Church would have been like, had not an imaginative convert from Cyprus dared to confront the apostolic curia.

Item 2: Barnabas mediated between Jerusalem and Antioch. On the face of it, it sounds simple enough. The mother Church wanted the Gentile converts on the shores of the Orontes to know that Jerusalem rejoiced in their gospel joy. "When [Barnabas] came and saw the grace of God, he was glad; and he exhorted them all

³B. M. Ahern, "Barnabas, St.," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 2 (1967) 102.

⁴John P. Meier, in Raymond E. Brown, S.S., and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (New York/Ramsey: Paulist, © 1983) 33. For problems on the beginnings of the Christian Church at Antioch, see *ibid.* 32-36.

⁵Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., "A Life of Paul," *JBC* (n. 2 above) 46:29.

⁶Meier, *Antioch and Rome* 34.

to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose" (11:23). But Barnabas had also to make Antioch aware that if the Church's heart was everywhere, its head was in Jerusalem. Oh, not the jurisdiction of canon law. A much looser supervision—but perhaps for that very reason more difficult to explain to fervent new Christians converted by "men of Cyprus and Cyrene" (11:20). I am impressed when I read, possibly between the lines, that Barnabas was revered by Jerusalem and Antioch alike.

Item 3: Barnabas had to mediate within Antioch itself and in Jerusalem, had to mediate between converted Pharisees who insisted on circumcision for all and those who resisted such obligation. Here mediation could not mean compromise. Discussion, of course; persuasion, if possible. But the two sides stood in flat contradiction; only one theology could be authentically Christian. Here mediation ended in a definitive directive—what Barnabas and Paul saw as clearly as did Peter: no imposed circumcision, freedom from Mosaic law. Only thus could "the young Church" be "freed from its Jewish roots," be "opened . . . up to the world apostolate then confronting it."⁷ Even for the apostle Barnabas, mediation was a means, not an absolute in its own right.

III

So much for Barnabas; so much for his significance then. But what is his pertinence now, for a society of Catholic theologians? Very simply, the theologian is a mediator. It may not be our total task, but it is a crucial role.

Item 1: We are called to mediate between the People of God and the People's God. Not quite after the manner of the Hebrew prophets. Not ours, precisely as theologians, to castigate, to whip into line, to threaten with hellfire. And still, in a sense, it is ours to struggle to the point where we can assert with due humility "Thus says the Lord." Not definitively. But it is our task to help the People understand what the Lord God has spoken, from the silent fashioning of one world and two divine images, through the burning bush in Midian and the "still small voice" on Horeb (1 Kgs 19:12), to the shaping of God's Son in flesh and the signs of today's times. We are indeed "middlemen" and "middlewomen," invited by God and implored by the People to make a transcendent God and an ascended Christ come alive for the human mind, so as to be loved by the human heart.

Item 2: We are called to mediate between the authoritative magisterium and the rest of God's People. Here we are middlemen and middlewomen in a sense specially appropriate and potentially perilous: We are caught in the middle! In large measure, teaching from the Tiber and the "sense of the faithful" are in fair accord, particularly where doctrine does not disturb daily living. But we are expected by authority to pass on "the tradition" as understood in Rome even when, as with Murray and Congar, we are convinced that such is not the Church's genuine tradition, may think it inadequate, short-sighted, in error. And we are expected by more and more of the faithful to crystallize their own understanding of what God is asking of them, from control of birth to justice for women, even when they differ from those "whom the Holy Spirit has made [their] guardians" (Acts

⁷Fitzmyer, *JBC* 46:30.

20:28). The sanctuary is not the site for a solution. I simply say that, as men and women "in the middle," we have a difficult duty to shepherds *and* flock, and we must be prepared for crucifixion from one side or the other—at times from both.

Item 3: We are called to mediate within our own fellowship; I mean the fellowship of theologians. In one way we've done well. Whatever our ecclesial stripes, ecumenism has compelled or persuaded us to be more Christian, Christians in the middle, striving to reconcile, to bury the bias and bitterness of the past through the openness and love of the present. I only wonder, I only question, whether within our own Catholic theological body we are capable of disagreeing without disliking, of taking exception without excommunicating, of searching together for the truth the Son of God died to give us. In the twilight of my own existence, I ask myself often: Am *I* a force for reconciliation, or have I given up on those who find me less than Catholic: Catholics United for the Faith, the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars, the *Wanderer*, perhaps Opus Dei? It is not only the theologically unsophisticated for whom Christ prayed "that they may be all one . . . I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me" (Jn 17: 21-23). Experience tells me that the body of Catholic theologians will never be perfectly one in mind. What agonizes me much more is the fear that we shall never be one in heart.

Good friends: I suspect that, to be a theologian who reconciles, I must be a good bit more like Barnabas: "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith" (Acts 11:24). St. Barnabas, middleman par excellence, pray for us!

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