

Homily - Third Sunday of Easter
April 6, 2008

Introduction

Just a year ago I heard a homily preached by one of my Franciscan brothers at our house of studies here in the District, in which he asked a very simple question. But it was the way in which he asked it that caught my attention: "What on earth happened to those guys", referring to the male disciples of Jesus. "What possibly could have happened to them?"

The homilist went on to explain his question. From a scared, timid group of men, locked away behind closed doors (as last Sunday's Gospel described them) to the bold crowd of today's first reading, out there proclaiming the Risen Christ; and almost immediately getting themselves in trouble with the same authorities who only weeks before had sentenced Jesus to death and handed him over to be execute - what happened to them?

I

We, of course, know the answer to this question. The disciples received the Holy Spirit with her gifts of outspokenness, courage and conviction. And we know, too, that the disciples never stopped - all but one of the eleven died a violent death and so many others followed suit.

II

No less have we received the Holy Spirit - just as powerfully, in the same measure, as those first followers of Jesus. But I think that today there is a difference in the tasks before us. While other generations of Jesus' followers were called to "orthodoxy" - to right teaching about God's plan for salvation carried out by Jesus, today the call is to "orthopraxis" - to right action as a consequence of Jesus' death and resurrection.

III

Put another way, believers do not suffer violent death today because they are proclaiming the Risen Christ - in our secularized world not too many people worry about such things. Rather they suffer today because they are acting on that belief.

Think of the martyrs of our times: Franz Jaegerstatter, the Austrian layman, who contrary everyone else's opinion around him, found that he could not serve as a soldier in the Nazi war machine and was beheaded as a traitor. (Franz has just been named a "blessed" by the German Pope, Benedict XVI). Or Sister Dorothy Stang, whose own sister, Marguerite, is a member of our parish community, shot and killed for standing with landless peasants in Brazil and challenging large economic interests that are destroying ecological balance there. Or Archbishop Oscar Romero, killed as he said Mass on the day after he ordered the military of his country to "stop the repression". Or the four American missionary

women, who lost their lives in El Salvador for simply standing with the poor of that country.

These people practiced orthopraxis - right action.

Conclusion

In terms of today's wonderful Gospel story of the two disciples and their encounter with the Risen Christ on the way to Emmaus, a reflection on where we recognize Jesus in bread broken is in order.

For sure we recognize Him in wonderful gatherings like where we are now, having come together around the table and about to partake of the Bread that is His Body. We recognize Him here.

For sure in this parish community, where there is so much good will, openness and inclusivity. We recognize Him there as well.

But also, we recognize Jesus in the bread broken between people

-who actively seek peace

-who confront the sins of this empire

-who work together against violence of all kinds - personal, domestic, local, national and international

-who move against any impoverishment of the human spirit

-who work on behalf of a threatened environment

This is orthopraxis.

It is a way of living, of being on the way and feeling our hearts burn within us because we have put our lives at the service of something larger than ourselves, something that is soul-sized - the Reign of God for which Jesus died and now lives.