

Homily for May 7, 2000
Third Sunday of Easter Cycle B

By Father Charles Bowes

Acts 3:13-15, 17-19
1 John 2:1-5a
Luke 24:35-48

Gathering together puts us together inside our hearts and with one another.

Give those disciples credit who first believed in Jesus' resurrection...as the kids say, "They had it together"...for them their faith was not as a bunch of individuals isolated – they experienced and believed in Jesus as a group. "While they were still speaking...he stood in their midst..." ...And that's the key: he stood in their midst. They were assembled. They congregated. They got themselves together.

That's what we do when we assemble here – we get ourselves together. If I board a bus alone, I probably look for a seat alone. If I board the bus with a friend, we probably sit together, but we don't need to pay much attention to anybody else on the bus. That's a bus. We ask nothing more from a bus than that it take us from one spot to another. But if we come in here, to church, and act like we're on a bus – looking for a place to sit alone or just with a friend or family – we've misjudged what sort of thing is going on here. This isn't a bus. It's a boat that is rowed by everybody on board. It only goes when all the people move together. That's what liturgy is; that's what our public prayer as Catholics is: something done by everyone together for one another and not just for ourselves. Sure, different members have different roles, but the deed itself – moving the boat – is done by everybody. And that's what Jesus asks us to do in Luke 24, that we be witnesses of His resurrection and of God's saving intent for all humanity - beginning right here.

That's a long way of saying that when we come through these doors, it's clear what we are here to do. We are to make the church look like the church, act like the church and sound like the church. We congregate to make a congregation. We assemble to make an assembly. There are lots of times in life to come in here alone. There are lots of times in life to pray alone wherever we are. But Sunday mass is not one of those times. Sunday mass is what we do together – not unlike those early disciples St. Luke talks about. That isn't a theory that will work no matter how we look in here, how we sound, or how we act. It isn't a theory: it's practice. The Church gets itself together. If we work at it, all of us, maybe we'll come to a time when we'll walk through the door and, without even thinking about it, head for the empty place closest to the altar. If we work at it, we won't have to imagine that we are one in Christ; we'll act like we are – as the great Saint Augustine said, the liturgy makes the play actor into the true believer – here we go through the motions of unity and – lo and behold – gradually we become one here and elsewhere. The room will fill from these seats to those seats to those and only as far out as there are people here. The reason, let's be clear about this, is not that there is some special holiness in getting close to the altar; the reason is that there is the holiness of the church in getting close to one another and doing this deed together. So, during this Easter season, maybe we can begin to come forward when we arrive. And if a row is empty, not sit on the end protecting it – but take a place in the middle as if to invite others to sit beside us.

That's why we welcome one another here before Mass begins – it's a deed we all do for one another to make it clear that all alike are welcome here. There is graciousness in our gathering. Kindness and hospitality are not the enemies of peaceful assembly.

Is all of this important because we are like a club or a group of intimate friends getting together? We're not like that at all. Almost the opposite. Here we welcome people who would probably never be our friends. What we have in common is far more than blood, far more than the mutual affection of friends. What we have in common is baptism into Christ. That's it – the bottom line. That's all that matters here. That's all that mattered to those early disciples who were witnesses to the resurrection. They had a common experience, salvation in Jesus Christ. That's why rich and poor sit side by side here. Every barrier society erects to keep us apart is worthless here. Every bond society builds up to put us into this little group or that clan or that other club is also worthless here. In a sense, we are naked here, like a baby in the waters of baptism. All the externals are gone. All that we wear is Christ. We all wear Christ. And that – not simply that we might like one another – is why we come forward and ring this altar round.

Our getting together like those first disciples goes a step further when we begin the Entrance Rite of the Mass. Please don't think that "Entrance Rite" means the entrance of the priest who presides at the liturgy and the other ministers. It means the entrance of all of us together into the liturgy. Some parishes make it a habit of gathering in a gathering space and going in together all at one time – as we did at the vigil to come here for the baptisms and the Eucharist. Some may be in the ritual procession that begins our weekly mass, but in reality, we are all in the procession, all moving into our liturgy. All the words and songs and gestures are ways to get from where we are to where we want to be: a church ready to hear God's word.

And there are at least three moments in these gathering rites that we try to do well. First we sing. The song at the beginning is for all of us. It unites us, makes us one. We know we're not here alone. The song tells us something, a whole assembly is processing into this liturgy together. We sing to hear each other, to let our voice – good or poor as it is – get lost with all the other voices. We sing to signal the transition into communal activity.

Second, we make the sign of the cross. This simple gesture stands at the beginning of the liturgy because it stands at the beginning of the Christian life. The baby and the catechumen are claimed for Christ with this sign. It proclaims who we are and whose we are. We make it deliberately, with care. Remember, the liturgy, our public prayer, is not what the priest who presides is doing; the liturgy is what the people are doing – all of us together. The liturgy is this sign of the cross. And the third thing we do when we gather, just before the first reading, we pray. Sometimes we talk as if the whole liturgy is a prayer, but really there are all kinds of things happening in the liturgy, and prayer is one of them. So we come to the moment when the presider first says, "Let us pray." And we are quiet together, still and calm and aware of all these people silent and praying together. If there's a little cry of a child or some commotion – that's our prayer, too – the prayer God gives us at that moment – that we focus upon and lift up. Then attend to the words of the prayer that is spoken by the presider and, if you can agree that this is indeed our common prayer, join in saying, "Amen."

In these ways, images of Jesus and those first disciples become real right now, right here every time we gather.

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