May 26, 2019

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29
Ps 67:2-3,5,6,8
Rev 21:10-14, 22-23
Jn 14:23
Jn 14:23-29

By Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF, Ph.D.

This Sunday marks the close of the liturgical season of Easter, and anticipates the Feast of the Ascension and Pentecost – the return of Jesus to the Father and the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Church. Today’s Gospel foreshadows all of this by returning our attention to Jesus’ “Farewell Address” – spoken to the disciples gathered less than twenty-four hours prior to his crucifixion.

In many ways – though surely differently – our celebrations of the comings and goings in springtime and in anticipation of summer form a similar kind of life pattern. This is a busy time of nature’s new birth in the northern hemisphere, accompanied by Baptisms, First Communions, Confirmations, graduations – and more.

I teach at Catholic Theological Union – A Graduate School of Theology and Ministry in Chicago. May 5th marked the culmination of the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the founding of the school with a Mass celebrated by Cardinal Blaise Cupich. Over the decades, thousands of women and men, religious, lay and ordained from more than forty nations have left our hallowed halls for various kinds of ministry across the globe. One of the most profound moments of the liturgy was when the three icons of three of the alumni who became Martyrs for the Faith were brought forward to be blessed by the Cardinal.

After his graduation from CTU in 1977, Salvatore Carzedda, PIME was assigned to the Philippines. amongst his fellow religious, Salvatore was playfully called “Mouth of Gold” because his voice was clear and strong. He worked with the Silsilah Movement, an NGO dedicated to building interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Zamboanga City, a commitment that involved risk because of the acute tensions in the region. Salvatore paid for his commitment with his life. He was shot on his way home from a meeting — one of several CTU graduates to earn the title of a genuine martyr for the Gospel.

Called a “Martyr of Charity” by Pope John Paul II, CTU graduate Ezechiele Ramin’s cause for beatification is open since his death. Before being ordained a priest, he participated in mission trips amongst Native American communities in South Dakota, Baja, California and Mexico. This
spurred him to join the Comboni Missionaries in 1972 and he was ordained in 1980. Ezechiele was assigned to Brazil where he worked among the poor and landless in situations of poverty, injustice, and death. He fought for peaceful solutions to the conflicts among the campesinos and the landowners, being always at the side of the poorest. That commitment cost him his life; he was assassinated on July 24th, 1985, in Cacoal, Rondônia, Brazil.

Comboni Missionary, Fr. John Ssenyondo takes his place as one of several authentic martyrs who are alums of CTU in its brief history. A native of Uganda, John ministered to the persecuted indigenous peoples in the Diocese of Chilpancingo-Chilapa, Mexico. In April 2014 he was kidnapped by armed men as he returned home from celebrating a wedding and his remains were later discovered in a mass grave. Fr. John’s life is a compelling witness of the gospel values of justice and courage.

Reflecting on Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel in light of the witness of these modern martyrs challenges us to examine how we receive Jesus’ words:

“Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him. . .

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.
Not as the world gives do I give it to you.
Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.

The peace Jesus gives us is not merely the absence of discomfort or lack of conflict – indeed both will be part of our lives quite continually. Rather, it is the spiritual and moral capacity to hear, see, touch and engage with the world and our neighbors – as did He. It is a life-changing and life-shaping peace that comes to each Christian in the flow of the waters of baptism. In baptism we die to our old ways of life and rise to new life in Jesus. The more we say goodbye and let die the things or ways of being and wanting that are not leading to Jesus and heading his call, the more we have the capacity for his life in us.

In our life of faith we are a pilgrim people, on the move. We need faithful friends who travel with us. In today’s Gospel Jesus alerts his disciples to his imminent departure, his ascension into Heaven. He doesn’t say Adieu (French for a final farewell) but Au revoir (French for everyday brief separations) – “I am going away, but I shall return.” We never really say goodbye to God, for God always goes with us. Let us ask God today to send His Spirit more fully into our lives. Though we may not become martyrs for the faith as are Salvatore, Ezechiele, and John, may that same Advocate that inspired and reminded them of God’s constant presence, intercede for us and for our world so that we can understand the revealed Word of God more completely, allow our lives to be formed by that Word, and work more faithfully for greater justice, peace, and integrity of creation in our part of the world.

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