

6th Sunday of Easter cycle C

I saw a picture of a 1959 Chevy Impala not long ago; it brought back memories of my first time behind the wheel of a car. It was in a 59 Chevy that belonged to our neighbors across the street. I always thought it was the coolest car in the neighborhood, and my friend Jimmy and I were not supposed to be in the car, or even in the garage where the car was, but just imagining being in the driver's seat was not enough; we needed the feel of it, had to be right behind the speedometer, had to turn the steering wheel. The steering wheel was about all we could turn, what since we didn't have the key to the ignition, and even if we did, it was up on cement blocks; but we took turns pretending to drive, imagining what it must be like to actually have one of these machines in motion. When the day actually came, when I got behind the wheel and the car had to actually move, well, I remember that day too. My first day of Driver's Ed, Mr. Terry took us out; I thought he might have us get used to the feel of the car maybe in an empty parking lot or something, but no; one student had to parallel park on O Street right off the get-go; I suppose I lucked out by only having to take the car down Highway 2, which at the time was only two lanes but which had just about as many trucks then I think as it has today. We think back to those episodes that seem now like little more than marks on the timeline of life; I think of myself now confidently driving down that same Highway and it's easy to wonder what happened to that little boy in the 59 Chevy; what happened to that nervous teenager who both couldn't wait until he could drive, and couldn't wait until his turn driving that day was over? When did he get replaced by this middle-aged man with so many less fears, and so many fewer dreams? It's the miracle of growth, I guess; the little child that we all once were never stopped being, and yet is no more; we're born, we grow, we mature.

In the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we are presented with a short and quick story that actually tells us a lot about the Church, which enjoyed the same miracle of growth that any person on earth does. The Church that we see in the Acts of the Apostles looks quite a bit different from the Church which we experience today; no basilicas or Cathedrals, no EWTN or parish schools. And yet, it is the same entity; there is no point at which that early Church ceased being and was suddenly replaced, just as all of our lives have been a continuum of growth, and we are still the same and yet not the same. The controversies depicted in Acts are like the first baby steps of the emerging Church; there was a decision to be made, and it was an important one in its day. Do the Gentiles have to convert to Judaism in order to become Christian? Is Christianity a sect of Judaism, or do

you only convert to Christianity, by way of faith in Jesus and by being baptized, and not by submitting to the Jewish law and being circumcised? Arguments were made for both sides, but if there is but one truth, then a decision had to be made. And a group of the Apostles made the decision, and it had monumental consequences—monumental not because it meant that you didn't have to convert to Judaism, although that was a big enough decision in and of itself; it was huge, because it so defined the Church; she could and would decide these matters of faith. And it wasn't a democratic vote; it wasn't decided by the majority of people who called themselves Christian; and they didn't even think so much about the outcome they wanted and the ramifications of their decision. They listened to what the Holy Spirit said; "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us," it was the Holy Spirit's decision, and theirs because they embraced whatever the Spirit decided. The first steps we take are not monumental because "hooray, we made it to the coffee table." They're monumental because they're the beginning of miles and miles of walking that we're becoming capable of; getting behind the wheel the first time isn't so memorable because of where we went, but because it was the beginning of where all we might go. And while this decision of the Church had ramifications enough, mostly it was so huge because that Church that Jesus established, so small when it started, took the first steps of demonstrating authority, an authority that came from God and which he would use for all ages to communicate to his people his truth, to communicate his will for us, and to communicate his love.

We encounter Jesus through a much more mature Church today; she has two thousand years of experience under her belt; she's seen a lot, and been through plenty. She doesn't look like she did when she was a few months old, but she's still one and the same Church which her Lord established. Many of the controversies of the past have been laid to rest. I've gotten into many a discussion of Church doctrine in my day, but nobody I know is still arguing over whether or not you have to first convert to Judaism to join the Church, and we don't hear many people explicitly at least arguing over Jesus' divinity or his humanity. Ours is not the Church wrestling with those things; she is the church with the experience of having dealt with those things. She is the Church wrestling with new controversies and oppositions, however. We have controversies over moral issues, issues of when life begins, when life ends, what the value of life is; disagreements over the nature of marriage; and Holy Mother Church is still out there on the front lines, still making a case, still contradicting the so-called wisdom of this age, still going with the Holy Spirit instead of the latest pop culture poll. The Church today is anything but archaic and outdated; she's weathered the storms of the centuries, held fast to beliefs

when so many were selling out, learned some difficult lessons along the way; and her two thousand years of experience, far from making her irrelevant, make her all the more worthy of trust.

In the book of Revelation, John wrote “the angel showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It gleamed with the splendor of God. Its radiance was like that of a precious stone, like jasper, clear as crystal.” It is a description of the Church as she will one day be: perfected by her union with her perfect Savior. She will not look like that infant Church of the first century, and she will not look like the Holy Mother Church we know today. But she will be one and the same; and we who are joined to her by remaining her faithful children now, will be destined to share in that perfection she will receive from her God. She—and we—will be the perfect society; for the glory of God will give this holy city its light.

I’ve come a long way with my driving, from spinning the wheel of a Chevy on blocks to my first terrifying drive down Highway 2; and I know, too, that I will eventually be on the decline, if I’m not already; and eventually, the time will come when I should hand over my keys, and drive no more. It’s the natural progression of things: we become, we grow, we peak, we decline. Or, maybe the decline isn’t really a decline; maybe the ultimate driver is not the one who does more, but who has experienced more; maybe the ultimate experience needs to be the consummate experience, including the letting go. As Christians, we are always called to grow, always called to change and to become holier; but we are not called to decline. What we are called to is the ultimate perfection; it is a perfection which can’t quite be realized in our lives here. And we are called to become, to grow, and to become perfected as part of the Church: the Church which was made up of clusters of people who gathered in people’s homes in the first century; the Church which worships her Lord here today; the Church which is the Bride of Christ, enlivened and directed by the Holy Spirit; which will one day be the perfect society of the saints in heaven, forever one with the God who saved them.

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