

Readings: Deuteronomy 30:10-14, Philippians 2:1-4, John 14:23-29

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”

What is this peace? We can say what it is not: “Not as the world gives do I give it to you.” And what is the world’s peace? Merely an absence of war, strife and conflict — as when we pray for peace in Ukraine, or when we plead with those who threaten us: “Leave us in peace,” or when we make a “peace treaty” not to continue hostilities. By this measure, our congregation is quite peaceful. But Jesus isn’t simply wishing that his disciples won’t fight among themselves. What more does he mean?

When in doubt, I tend to look to obscure branches of history. In this case, it helps to look to early Christian epigraphy (the study of gravestones and catacomb inscriptions). In those inscriptions, *in pace* (“in peace”) is the most frequently occurring phrase; in fact, archaeologists say that the presence of this phrase is enough to confirm that the tomb is Christian. At first, we might think that the phrase simply means tranquility, for example when we read “She sleeps in peace.” But looking at them all, we come to realize that it clearly means something deeper: we read “He lived in peace,” “She died in peace,” “May you rise in peace,” “Peace be to you with the saints.”

What’s more, *pax* is often linked with another word, *communio* (“communion”), indicating the union of Christian believers, the community of the faithful, the bonds of fellowship that hold the Church together.

So, in early Christian usage, “peace” and “communion” seem to be synonyms. When we see the inscription, “She lived in peace,” we understand that she lived in the unity of the faith and sacraments of the Church. “He died in peace” means that he died in the community of the Church; “She will rise in peace” means that she will live again in the communion of saints; and the classic “Rest in peace” can be understood, “Now that you’re asleep in Christ, you’re still part of his body, still one with him, and with us in him.”

In other words, for early Christians, peace was something positive, the bonds of community that link the faithful to each other in the oneness of Christian faith in the body of the Church: *this* is what Jesus left us as his gift.

Thankfully, this isn’t something we have to conjure up on our own. Jesus has already given it to us. It comes to us from the Holy Spirit, sent to us in his name, speaking in our hearts so that we are united to him and need never be troubled or afraid. So, it isn’t something far from us, that we have to go get it, but “something very near to us, already in our hearts: we have only to carry it out.”

In other words, we as the Church, and we, too, as a congregation, are already “in peace” — we just have to let it manifest, and not get in the way of the Holy Spirit.

These are fitting thoughts as we prepare to elect a procurator. We rely on the peace of Christ,

his gift, to keep us in one body — his body. And, relying on the Holy Spirit prompting our hearts, “we have only to carry it out,” and not harden our hearts against it.

The advice of the second reading (Philippians 2:1-4) is addressed directly to each of us today: “Be of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart; don’t act out of selfishness or vainglory, but humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but for those of others.”

Now, God knows that Jesuits have strong convictions and often disagree with each other. There’s no need to expect uniformity. But that doesn’t mean we should cling to the idol of our own opinions and politely tolerate everything else.

When I grasp that so-and-so, with a completely different background and completely different tastes, may have something to teach me, or that so-and-so, who rubs me the wrong way, plays a legitimate part in balancing out the whole, or that so-and-so, who sounds a dissonant note in the group, is contributing to a larger harmony, and when we see that all of us are brothers in the same body and each of us has been called here for a reason ... then we can stop dictating and start listening. We can approach today as a true discernment, as the Holy Spirit using the limited instruments and partial views of each of us to surprise us with something new.

It’s like irregularly shaped tiles of diverse colors that in themselves show nothing, each one angled and catching the light slightly differently, but which, put together and seen from afar, coalesce to form a stunning mosaic.

In past congregations, I was moved during the voting. As I watched the numbers change, ballot after ballot, I could almost see the movements of the Spirit in real time, as if I were watching waves and currents and eddies in a pool as the Spirit blew upon it, or as if we were a single entity thinking things through, pondering different possibilities, gradually coming to clarity. The only reason that the numbers *can* change from ballot to ballot is that we’re listening to each other, and we’re being sensitive to the Holy Spirit active in ways beyond our own angle and experience. We’re acting as a body, not a collection of individuals.

We begin today with Mass because *pax* and *communio* are especially represented in the Eucharist. In the Eucharist our peace and communion are shown, but also in the Eucharist our peace and communion are *made*. Let us approach the altar again, as brothers, to strengthen those bonds among ourselves and with the whole province, Society and Church.

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