

Called to be a Learning Church (Jn 14:25-31)

We usually hear this passage from the farewell discourse John's Gospel read in year C of the Roman or Common Lectionary, in connection with the feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost. So it might seem a little strange to hear it now, when we have just celebrated the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, and when in the Western liturgical cycle, we are entering into Ordinary time and focused on the gospel accounts of Jesus' first appearances, the beginning of his public ministry, and the call of the first disciples. It seemed, nonetheless, important in the context of our reflections on "Receptive Ecumenism and the Learning Church," to step outside the liturgical cycle of readings to consider what this particular passage might have to say to us about the importance of learning for the Christian vocation and for the vocation of the church.

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (Jn 14:25-26). For the disciples, these words must have instilled no small measure of anxiety. They had walked with Jesus throughout his ministry. They struggled to understand his teaching, yet so much of what he said and did remained an enigma. They would not have spontaneously heard in these words a prediction concerning his Ascension and the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost. They were surely more sensitized to the possibility of his impending death. For them this meant their master and teacher was leaving.

Perhaps we can identify a little with their experience. If not with the dramatic threat of arrest or crucifixion, we have all experienced that moment of tension, that strange anxiety that seems to surface at the end of a course of study, or on the verge of a

new stage in life, when it is time for student and teacher to part. After all the learning, the observation, even the first awkward experiments at putting our new lessons to work and our new skills into practice, there is a moment of hesitation and fear, of uncertainty. There are so many things we have yet to understand. We are unsure of whether we will really be able to carry on living what we have learned. We feel strangely abandoned and perhaps a little lost without the teacher, the one to whom we addressed our questions, to whom we looked to know how things are done.

Jesus reassures his disciples. He is not abandoning them. Their apprenticeship will continue. The Father will send an Advocate, a helper, a mentor, who will continue to teach them. It is important to note that the Spirit comes, not to teach the disciples anything new, but to remind them of all that Jesus has said to them. The Spirit comes to keep alive the memory of Jesus' teaching in the hearts and minds of the disciples, so that their understanding may grow and deepen. That same Spirit sustains the memory of Jesus' teaching in ministry in the church today, the living memory that we have received from those first witnesses of the resurrection. The Spirit continues to teach us today and to help us receive anew all that Jesus has said.

In recent years, theology has become more deeply conscious of the church as a learning community. In the world of education, the term "learning community" has become a popular way of referring to the experience of collaborative learning, of mutual exchange, and to the collegial culture that characterize a healthy learning environment. In the context of the church, the term "learning church" is used in the context of a significant shift in the way we understand the exercise of the teaching office. From an understanding of church where teaching is done by a few (those entrusted with the

pastoral ministry of preaching the gospel by virtue of their ministry), and learning is done by the many (a largely passive and obedient laity), we have moved to a new awareness that all the baptized, by virtue of their anointing with the Holy Spirit through baptism, are co-responsible for preaching, by their prophetic witness, the good news of Jesus Christ. Bishops listen and learn before they teach. Lay persons not only learn, they teach and are co-responsible for the proclamation and handing on of the Christian faith. And so we can readily speak of the whole church as a learning church, and the whole church as teaching, as proclaiming and witnessing to the Word of God. If the whole church is truly a learning church, then we will need to create spaces for collaborative learning and mutual exchange. We will need to intentionally develop a collegial culture for holistic learning.

If the Spirit is our teacher, then learning in the church should perhaps be considered a spiritual discipline. True learning, true receptivity will only be cultivated through the practice of a certain asceticism. Those of us who have chosen to engage in scholarly pursuits as a way of life are perhaps more aware than others of the demands of such discipline, as we struggle to find and maintain a balance. Learning is hard work. There are no shortcuts. The information age is teaching us that learning is much more than merely amassing information. It requires discernment and a clear sense of judgment. It requires time and commitment: time for reading and research, for reflection and prayer, time for solitude and time for dialogue and exchange with other seekers of the truth. Indeed, the best learning is never less than a search for the truth. In our shared journey of receptive ecumenism and learning to be church together, we are not prepared to settle for anything less than the truth. We are in this to discern together the meaning of the gospel for our times, and to discern how best to be faithfully church together.

It is precisely this search for the truth, for a common understanding of what has been revealed to us in Jesus and what the Spirit has to teach us today that the ascetical dimension of learning is felt. Real learning requires a radical freedom and openness to go wherever the facts will lead us. Along the way we will be asked to let go our tightly held presuppositions, to set-aside our preconceived ideas concerning our partners in dialogue, and at times to revise the judgments of the past. Authentic learning takes humility. Without humility, we will never be open enough to receive the gifts of insight that are there to be received in the most unexpected places. This means having the honesty to say I was mistaken, I only had it half-right, and yes, often someone else got it better than I did. Bernard Lonergan spoke of the church's journey in the search for the truth as a "self-correcting process of learning." Learning will change us. Genuine learning will lead us to become all that we truly are and are meant to be.

"Peace I leave with you ... do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." Let these words of Jesus to his disciples be a comfort to us as we face the unsettling prospect of truly becoming a learning church. He speaks these words as he prepares to send the disciples out into the world to stand on their own feet, to assume their responsibility as witnesses to his message. We too are called to be a learning community, grounded in the Word of Christ and the teaching of the Spirit: "Rise, let us be on our way" (Jn 14:31).