

## Pentecost

A few weeks ago I attended the annual clergy conference for the Diocese of Iowa in Cedar Falls. I knew what was on the schedule, but I did not expect that we would be graced by the presence of Samuel Peni, formerly Bishop of our companion Diocese of Nzara, now the Archbishop for the Western Equatoria in South Sudan. If I had thought about it, I wouldn't have been surprised. It was right before the weekend he received a doctorate from Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, so it made sense that he was around.

Archbishop Peni told me to greet all of you here. He has moved back to his hometown of Yambio, where he is now the Bishop as well as Archbishop. He said that in July there will be an election for his successor in Nzara. (Until then, we'll continue to pray for him in the context of Nzara.) He seemed much more serious this time, as though the weight of his responsibilities is much greater. Indeed, he told us that he was preparing for a meeting with the Archbishops of neighboring countries, to ask them to put pressure on their governments to pressure the South Sudan government to stop all of the fighting.

That somber mood was also present in his sermon during a Eucharist. Archbishop Peni said that he has almost died five times. He described one of them, when a man next to him turned just before he was shot and the bullet passed through and killed the person behind him – who would have been Samuel if the man had not first turned. He also told of a governor's bodyguard who had been killed by the governor when that bodyguard, a devout Roman Catholic, refused to follow orders to execute prisoners on Good Friday.

Archbishop Peni's sober stories continue to reverberate within me. In some parts of the world, being a Christian has life-or-death consequences. That is not true for us, thank God. Many of us do not know how we would meet that test if we faced it. At the same time, such danger clearly sharpens and deepens the faith of those who experience it, which is why martyrs are so successful in spreading Christianity. I ask you to continue to pray for the safety and ministry of Archbishop Peni.

This past week I was struck by something very different, an op-ed column in *The New York Times* written by David Brooks on the future of the two major political parties. What fascinated me was not so much the politics as his focus on the generation gap in politics, because I see that same gap in the Church. Both have their origin in how people grew up. Many who grew up in the 1960s and earlier grew up in relatively homogeneous communities in a white-majority society. There were plenty of exceptions, of course. I myself grew up in a mostly black neighborhood and went to an academic high school where most of my classmates were Jewish.

Brooks points out that millennials have had a very different experience. Forty-four percent of the millennial generation is minority. "Seventy-nine percent of millennials think immigration is good for America. Sixty-one percent think racial diversity is good for America. . . They are much more sympathetic to those who identify as transgender." Again, to use a personal example: our son, Noah, graduated from Central High School across the street, where he encountered many students of color. Now on his own, he recently joined a newly-formed vocal group whose purpose is to show middle and high school students that classical music is open to everyone. Of the ten people in the group, he is the only one who would be called "white." This is the reality of many people of his age, and will only become more so in the future.

Millennials also seek authenticity. They want people to be real. To me that sounds like the long-standing assertion that the Church is full of hypocrites, people who say one thing and do another. I used to be defensive about that, but eventually I realized that the world is full of hypocrites; the Church doesn't have a special attraction for them. Few people live up to their ideals, becoming the person they want to be. In the Church, at least, we are, or should be, constantly challenged to live the way Jesus did. And we often hear how his disciples missed the mark even though they spent every day in his presence. I rather like Fr. Sinclair's response to the hypocrite charge. I've heard him say, "Of course we are! The Church is the perfect place for imperfect people! Imperfect people need Jesus!"

Generational differences are hardly new. I remember once asking my wise Uncle Henry about some problem I was wrestling with. I wanted to hear how he had dealt with it. I'll never forget his answer. He said, "You have to understand something. Ours is not a psychological generation. We are not that reflective. We do what we do out of a sense of duty." That sense of duty speaks for many people of a certain age or older, as well as a few who are younger. It does not speak for the vast majority of younger people, and attempts to convince them that it should, will only make them more annoyed. Conversely, attempts by the younger to convince the older that they are not authentic enough will annoy those who have sacrificed much in their lives out of a sense of duty. A much better approach is to ask one another what I call the Jesus question: What do you want me to do for you? It's remarkable how Jesus asked that even when the answer was obvious. He always created the space in which someone could articulate their own needs without fear of rejection. That's a powerful lesson for all of us.

So what does all of this have to do with the Day of Pentecost? The same Spirit connects all of it. As it says in the Letter to the Ephesians, which we say at the beginning of every baptism liturgy, "There is one Body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all." The mystery of the Church is that it is an odd assortment of human beings who love one other and drive each other crazy, who come together in spite of their differences – and, to be honest, sometimes *in order to* spite one another – who occasionally recognize Jesus in their midst, and *always* find forgiveness and acceptance from God if they are willing to take it. Whether it is an Archbishop concerned for his life, or a lifelong member showing up out of duty, or a parent hoping that maybe today there won't be any dirty looks because a young child is acting his or her age – somehow we all come together here in the presence of God, looking for Jesus, celebrating the Holy Spirit. Personally, I think it's a miracle. And so I will end with one of the most wonderful prayers in our *Book of Common Prayer*, over a thousand years old, still spoken at every Easter Vigil and every ordination (and forgive me if I have trouble saying it because of its power):

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquillity the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

[Pentecost: Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104; Romans 8:14-17; John 14:8-27. The David Brooks article quoted is "The Coming G.O.P Apocalypse" which appeared on page A27 of the June 3, 2019 New York edition of *The New York Times*. ]