



November 7, 2010

The Thirty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time

“Some Sadducees, those *who deny that there is a resurrection*, came forward and put a question to Jesus...” Luke 20:27

Dear Friends;

Authority, tradition and conservatism are important aspects of life and community. They help to preserve knowledge, hand on culture and hold together society. But that which preserves can also suffocate and stifle. That which seeks to hold on can prevent any new life from emerging. The dynamic tension between authentic Tradition and legitimate development is a constant throughout the faith history of the people of God. Both have inherent dangers and gifts.

The Sadducees in the Gospels represent the conservative and authoritative dynamic. The Pharisees represent the creative and emerging dynamic. The Sadducees in claiming that there is no resurrection represent the more primitive elements of Israelite faith. They were also descendants of the aristocratic kingly-priesthood. This aristocratic line ruled not just as priests but also kings. In questioning Jesus they were asserting their authority.

The Pharisees were a lay movement that emerged out of the experience of the exile in Babylon. There the Old Testament as we know it begins to take shape and was edited. Since they were in a foreign land and the temple was no more lay teachers and community centers (synagogues) developed to preserve the faith in a new situation. The Pharisees also claimed to preserve an oral Torah (Talmud) that was a commentary on the written Torah (the five Books of Moses).

One of the new understandings that emerge from the Pharisees, about 200 BCE, is the notion of Resurrection. Jesus is very likely a Pharisee. He is a rabbi (lay teacher of the law); he shares a belief in the resurrection and is accepted in the Gospels by the Pharisees as an equal (even if they do not agree with his interpretations). The tension between the Pharisees and Jesus seen in the New Testament are more a reflection of the division that occurred between Christian-Jews and Jews who did not accept Jesus as Messiah.

The Sadducees believed in only a strict literal interpretation of the Torah. They rejected the Pharisees use of the oral interpretation. The Talmud consisted of ways to creatively theologize (Mishnah and Gemara). The Sadducees were antagonistic to Jesus and the Pharisees because they represented a threat to aristocratic rule. Any new idea, especially if it did not come from them would be seen to undermine their autocratic, aristocratic, authority. Look how they attack Jesus in today's Gospel from Luke.

The Sadducees may have been correct in perceiving the threat. They disappear after the Temple's destruction and the Pharisee Party will give birth to two new interpretations of the faith of Israel—Christianity and modern Rabbinical Judaism.

The Sadducees fail to recognize that there is a difference between authority and leadership. Authority is to hold a position. Leadership is the ability to get people to follow. Authority divorced from the ability to lead becomes fear and self-preservation and eventually death. To be perfectly unchanging and static is the very definition of death.

Today in the Church there are many in authority (pastors and bishops) who behave like the Sadducees: They seek to establish the Church in a type of ultra-montanism (a heretical and fanatical movement focusing all authority in a monarchical papacy). They desire a return to a Baroque aristocratic style of clergy (hence the fascination with the Tridentine Mass which emphasize the separation between clergy and the people). They see any new idea, development of thought or interpretation as a threat. Any creative emergence is a threat and must be stifled. Constant appeals to authority reveal an inability to lead. And so the ranks of those who leave the Church continue to swell.

However the Holy Spirit has spoken at the divinely inspired Second Vatican Council. We cannot let fear tactics and hyperbole of supposed post-council abuses to scare us into giving up our rights as the Holy Communion of the People of God. Vatican II first defined the Church as the People before it was a hierarchy. The Church is too important to leave it solely in the hands of hierarchs. We all need to claim our share of responsibility for the faith and the Church's mission.

Peace,

Ft Ron