

Our Father in Faith — Abraham

The first Eucharistic prayer pays a special tribute to Abraham and deservedly so. For he is the Father of all believers. He stands at the origin of our life of faith. I have always been fascinated by him, and in him I have freshly discovered what it means to believe.



New insights into his life, his vocation and response to it have been most recently provided by Father Peter Van Breemen, SJ, and I am pleased to share his thoughts with you through this column. Since my ordination to the priesthood in 1942 I have been enriched by five libraries. Some books I have preserved as for all times and for all seasons. Others have provided inspiration for the moment. Father Van Breemen's, *Called By Name*, will be a permanent possession for he has given me a deep understanding of what it means to say, "I believe" in his analysis of Abraham's response to God's call.

When we think of Saints and models for our inspiration, we are inclined to limit our heroes and heroines to days that begin with the New Testament. I remember a sense of surprise years ago when I came upon a church in Venice called 'St. Moses.' I had recalled the expression 'Holy Moses' but it was uttered as an exclamation of surprise rather than a pious intercession. At a recent ordination ceremony in Holland there was inserted at the beginning of the Litany of Saints the petition "Holy Abraham, pray for us." God's grace has been operative since the beginning of time — through Abraham, Moses, Jacob and Isaac, and the long lineage of prophets and holy ones who prepared the way for the coming of Christ. We need to be reminded of this — and Father Van Breemen has provided this reminder.

Abraham is first presented to us in the simple and direct call of God:

"Yahweh said to Abram, leave your country, your family and your father's house, for the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name so famous that it will be used as a blessing.

"I will bless those who bless you,
I will curse those who slight you.
All the tribes of the earth
Shall bless themselves by you."

(Gen. 12:1-4)

God calls Abraham from the security of his possessions and his pagan country into the unknown. He hears the call and responds. Without knowing where he is going and without knowing who is calling him, he goes forth. His knowledge of God was not the basis of his faith. It was the response to the call that began the long journey of an ever-deepening knowledge of God.

The God in whom he placed his trust soon put Abraham to a severe test. A test is always a part of faith. Abraham's test was particularly severe. The three days that he spent on the way to the place of sacrifice of his son Isaac had to be agonizing. We who know the happy outcome of the test can easily forget his personal agony. How would we identify with his measure of faith?

He had been reared in the paganism of Mesopotamia where human sacrifice was not uncommon. And he had to think, "Is this new God who has called me much different from the gods of my early years? Who is around to guide and instruct me?" Yet he believed that God was reliable — and that is the essence of faith.

As Abraham journeys with Isaac to the mountain of sacrifice, the silence of the journey becomes increasingly painful. And Isaac spoke to his father Abraham: "Father, and Abraham replied with tender affection, "Yes, my son." Then followed the question of the boy: who sensed something amiss. "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" And Abraham replied: "My son, God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering." His son who is God's gift to him is the gift that God is now asking of him. His confidence in God is painful and filled with tears.

Faith always implies that we have the strength and courage to move ahead even when we do not know the answer. Faith is an attitude

acquired gradually through crises and darkneses. Abraham's ordeal tells us that the test of faith brings us a deepening of the knowledge of God. He is never a threat and never menaces us. He wants us to live and live more abundantly — to prosper, to grow and be happy.

When Abraham descends from the mountain, both he and Isaac have been transformed and renewed. The full understanding of the Abraham story is realized in Jesus Christ. Who, like Isaac, carried the wood for His sacrifice and survived the ordeal. Isaac is an only son and the foreshadowing of the full reality that is Christ Who has given us the fulfillment of Abraham's faith and who has assured us that God wants us to live — forever. To realize this truth is to experience the blessedness of faith which is not an intellectual assent to neatly packaged formulas of truth, but a 'yes' to a God who calls us to move from the security of our own Ur of the Chaldeans.

There is a psalm composed by the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Jesus on the response of Abraham which tells us what faith is all about — with no guarantees before yielding to God's Word:

To leave Ur of the Chaldeans,
to leave everyone and everything;
to give up everything;
to go away with nothing.
Just to break all ties and bonds;
to go away with nothing.

To leave Ur of the Chaldeans,
to leave on God's command,
The voice of God says "Go,
give up everything and go;
leave Ur of the Chaldeans,
into the desert, into the night!

To leave Ur of the Chaldeans
with only God as pledge,
into the country of all joy
and all abundance,
into an innumerable offspring,
numberless as the sands on the seashore,
numerous as the stars in the sky,
to leave on God's command,
to leave Ur of the Chaldeans."

Holy Abraham, pray for us whose faith must grow as yours.

The UNITY of the Church

Following is the text of Pope Paul VI's address at the general audience of Jan. 28 in Vatican City.

We return to the thought which has guided the spirituality of the Holy Year. It is a thought that must survive in the time that follows, and that must characterize this new period in the life of the Church; it is the thought of the renewal of our Christian mentality.



Let us read again together a passage of St. Paul, from which we can derive many teachings useful to guide us in the present which is evolving into the near future, renewed, as in a post-conciliar and post-Jubilee spring. St. Paul writes, in fact, in the 12th chapter of his letter to the Romans: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." How these words alone could serve as a comment, we say almost incidentally, on the recent Declaration of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on certain questions concerning sexual ethics, if we really wish to enter into the superior and original spirit of the Christian concept of life! Let us continue with the reading of our text: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is

good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honour" (Rom 12, 1-2, 9-10).

How many splendid things, in such simple and clear terms! It seems superfluous to comment on them. It is enough to meditate on them serenely and faithfully: They bring us back to that important text of the Acts of the Apostles, which marks the characteristic aspect, spiritual and social, of the first Christian community: "Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul" (Acts 4, 32). That is, they make us think of a first aspect of that desired renewal, which we have called "the civilization of love" and which is nothing other than agape, love, the first animating charity of our style of life.

Well, this animation of the individual and community life of the Church produces first of all, and then presupposes, as its constitutional foundation, unity in the Church. If the Church is not interiorly one, in her mystery which makes her live by Christ, and united, in her structural and social framework, which makes her the mystical and visible body of Christ, she is no longer the Church. Let those who wish, those who can, re-read, among the many documents which illustrate this truth, the famous writing of St. Cyprian about "the unity of the Catholic Church" or see St. Augustine and also J.A. Mohler's work, still relevant today, *Unity in the Church*.

It will be easier for us, even without having recourse to this golden literature, to inform ourselves on the ways that diverge from the unity of the Church, and therefore from the capacity of constructing a new civilization of

love. Everyone can diagnose the modern tendency to disrupt a real, solid, operating ecclesial unity, noting how a spirit of disintegration, contestation, liberal pluralism, facile criticism, personal and often polemical interpretation as regards the Magisterium of the Church, the authoritative and indispensable interpreter and guardian of the factors of ecclesial unity, has penetrated into various expressions of the mentality of the mystical body, and of Catholic communion itself.

A centrifugal influence of private judgment of Protestant origin, a concept of absolute freedom, isolated from the respective concept of duty and responsibility, the "treason of clerics" accepted with resignation, that is, a historical relativism, and a social and political opportunism, often in fashion, have considerably weakened the sense of unity, solidarity, and charity within the Church of God. This sense of unity is, it is true, stimulated by the ecumenical movement, fortunately, but it is not yet and not always sufficient to win back a true and organic unity, as willed by Christ and animated by the Holy Spirit.

What shall we do?

We will take again the path to the building up of unity, if we had ever yielded to a jealous and hostile affirmation of our spiritual and religious autonomy, to the detriment of docile and manly obedience to the requirements of concord and solidarity characteristic of Catholic communion; and we will all be together, fraternally and strongly, with the eyes of the soul fixed upon Jesus crucified, who "dilexit ecclesiam", "loved the Church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5, 25).

May it be so; with our Apostolic Blessing.