

Word for Sunday

By Father Albert Shamon

The Value Of Gospels

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Jn. 17:1-11. (R1) Acts 1:12-14. (R2) 1 Pt. 4:13-16.

For most of us, memorizing is a painful chore. It was easy when we were young, but it got harder as we grew older.

Fr. Shamon, older James Farley was a great politician because he had a prodigious memory; it is said that he knew 10,000 people by name. Dale Carnegie wrote a book on How to Win Friends and Influence People. The key was in memory: remember names!

To memorize a passage of over 3,000 words would be perhaps for most of us a difficult task. Yet that is the length of our Lord's farewell address to His apostles, after the Last Supper (Jn. 14-17). In the three Sunday's before Pentecost, the gospel readings are all excerpted from our Lord's farewell talk.

That discourse was to disciples, and only to disciples, revealing the meaning of His passion, death and resurrection. His words are freighted with meaning. They are

so profound—about the life of the Trinity and the Divine Indwelling—that they can easily go over our heads. Every single word is important, yet we can so easily forget them. The question that must arise in our minds is, how did St. John manage to remember them all? After all, his gospel was written at least 60 years after the event!

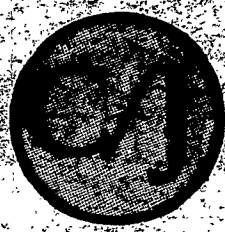
Of course, the memory in ancient times was far more developed than ours. Disciples learned the teachings of their masters by memorizing them. But that is not the whole explanation of John's writing. Nor is it enough to suggest that the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures suddenly gave the gospel-writers flashbacks. The long discourse remembered and recorded by John was not dictated by the Holy Spirit.

The gospel is not a feat of memory at all. If the talks of our Lord were word-for-word records of what Jesus had said, they could have been written while Jesus was still on earth. There would have been no need for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The truth of the matter is that John's gospel is the fruit of many years of prayer and reflection, of the Church living the faith. The gospel does not record so much what Jesus said as what Jesus meant.

Barnabas Ahern asked the bishops of the Vatican Council II which they would choose if they could have an actual talking picture of Christ, or the gospels. Ahern said he would choose the gospels. For, he explained, he could misinterpret the meaning of Christ's life, whereas the gospels, inspired by the Holy Spirit, set forth the correct meaning infallibly.

The two things in particular that helped the Church and St. John to a deeper understanding of the life and the teachings of Christ were prayer and persecution. Prayer brought the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit brought joy and steadfastness in persecution. The first reading gives us a picture of the infant Church. It was a Church gathered together around Mary, and devoted to "constant prayer." The second reading is addressed to Christians facing martyrdom. Prayer, suffering, the Holy Spirit—these three illumined the life of Christ for the early Church.

As Catholics, we too are called upon to deepen our understanding of God's word, so that we may spread the spirit of the gospel. Our gospel message is not simply an exercise in memorizing the truths and sayings of our Lord. No, the spirit of the gospels is to live them—by constant prayer and joy in suffering through the Holy Spirit, who is given to us.



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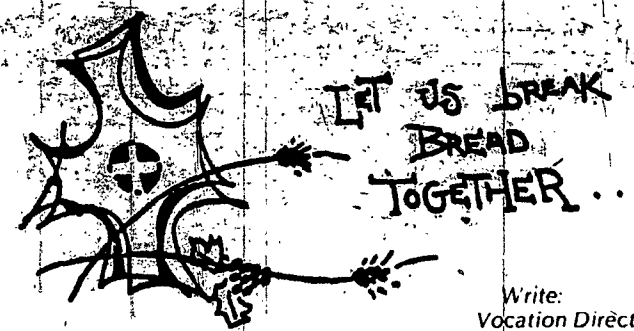
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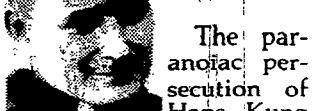
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The Church 1978

By Father Andrew Greeley

Scholars Freer In U.S.

I believe in giving credit where credit is due, even if it goes to bishops.



The paranoiac persecution of Hans Kung by the German hierarchy simply could not have happened in the United States. There may have been a time 10 or 15 years ago when American priest-scholars enjoyed relatively little freedom. Now, I would submit, scholars—clergy and laity alike—have more freedom in the American Catholic Church than they do just about anywhere else in the world. The American hierarchy seems to have made some kind of implicit collective decision to leave their scholars and universities alone, a decision that was as unannounced as the one to abandon the demand for book censorship but which had a profound influence on the development of freedom in the American Church.

How do I know that scholars are free in contemporary American Catholicism? Don't be silly, gentle reader. This column is in your diocesan paper, isn't it? A few bishops intervene

occasionally to suppress it on the grounds that it isn't "constructive" enough; but then other bishops don't object when their editors pick the column up, and at least on one occasion I know of, a bishop saved the column when his editor, intimidated by other priests, wanted to drop it. Indeed, the real constraints on freedom for Catholic scholars in the United States (at least if they are clergy) come not from the hierarchy but from the rigidity and envy of clerical culture.

So intellectual freedom abounds in American Catholicism even to the extent that at some Catholic colleges (such as Chicago's De Paul University), required freshman religion courses are taught by people who explicitly and vigorously attack the divinity of Jesus and the resurrection. (I am inclined to think that that is an abuse of freedom, but I gather from kids who have sat in on the class that they find the teacher, whose earlier work was filled with sentimental piety, to be more amusing than threatening.)

But why the difference between the German hierarchy and the American hierarchy in their pragmatism on scholarly freedom? After all, there are relatively few scholars among the American bishops, and though from one point of view that is a bad thing, it

does mean that scholarly envy is not added to clerical envy in hierarchical decision-making. The German hierarchy has a fair number of theologians who are furious at the popularity of Kung. American Catholic scholars are not that popular, but even if they were, there would at least be no professional rivals seething on the bench of bishops waiting for a chance to get even.

Secondly, the German/academic/ecclesiastical world tends to be undifferentiated and monolithic. It lacks the size, the complexity, the variety and the pluralism of the American Church. There are a lot of places to hide in American Catholicism and a lot more reason for the leadership to pretend that they don't really know where you're hiding.

But these cultural and structural explanations only go so far. American bishops, unlike their German counterparts, are Pragmatists, not Idealists (by which I do not mean people with high levels of idealism but rather people with preconceived, a priori visions of reality). The typical American hierarchical leader has more than enough problems as it is without taking on scholars, particularly if he knows he can't beat them anyway. Besides, maybe he can learn something from some of them and the others are at least useful to have around—you never can tell when you'll need one.

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