

COLUMNISTS

Selection of Matthias offers lesson

On Wednesday of this week the church celebrated the feast of St. Matthias, the one chosen to succeed Judas as one of the 12 Apostles (Acts 1:23-26).

There is little known about Matthias either before or after his selection. The eminent church historian Eusebius (d. ca. 339) reported in his famed *Ecclesiastical History* that Matthias was one of the 70 disciples mentioned in Luke 10:1, but there seems to be no independent basis for this.

A "Gospel According to Matthias" is mentioned by the early Christian theologian Origen (d. ca. 254) and the historian Eusebius, but the document was condemned as spurious in a sixth-century decree attributed to Pope Gelasius I (d. 496). Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 215) cites the "Traditions of Matthias," which is probably a separate work, and another ancient Christian writer suggests that the Gnostics (a heretical sect who based their beliefs on a special revelation given only to them) appealed to secret traditions handed down from Matthias to support their teachings.

Matthias is said to have been martyred either at Colchis or in Jerusalem, and his relics are venerated in St. Matthias' Abbey in Trier, Germany.

This is all very interesting (or perhaps not so interesting!) but what possible relevance does it have for the church today?



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

What makes the apostle Matthias of enduring interest are the circumstances under which he was added to the company of 11 Apostles, following the suicide of Judas, the one who betrayed Jesus.

Immediately after the ascension of the Risen Lord into heaven from "the mount called Olivet," the Apostles returned to Jerusalem, "a sabbath's day journey away" (Acts 1:12).

Upon entering the city, the 11 went to the Upper Room, where they were joined by "some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers" (1:14).

Soon thereafter, there was a gathering of about 120 people at which Peter stood up to speak. He reminded them of the treachery of Judas and his tragic end. Then he pointed out that another would have to "take his office" (1:20). This was so

because, at the time in Jerusalem, the 12 Apostles were regarded as symbols of the 12 tribes of Israel and as the foundation of the true Israel and later of the church (Eph 2:20; Rv 21:14).

It is necessary, Peter said to the disciples, "that one of the men who accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day on which he was taken up from us, become with us a witness to his resurrection" (1:22).

So the assembly proposed two names: Joseph called Barsabbas, also known as Justus (a Latin name for use among the Gentiles), and Matthias. Nothing is known of Joseph, or Justus, except that the historian Eusebius records a legend that he "drank poison but by the Lord's grace suffered no harm."

It is significant, given our present understanding of the church's governing structure, that Peter did not simply appoint Judas' replacement. Evidently, Peter was not acknowledged to have such absolute power over the church, despite his special relationship with the Lord and with the other Apostles.

The assembly prayed that the Lord would show them "which one of these two you have chosen" (1:24). Then they "gave lots to them, and the lot fell upon

Matthias, and he was counted with the eleven apostles" (1:26).

While it's possible that the reference to lots suggested a form of voting, some scholars argue that it referred to the practice of casting lots, where stones with names on them were put in a vessel that was then shaken until one fell out. Other scholars, however, suggest that the word "lot" was metaphorical, and indicated that the community had selected Matthias. Hence, God's will was manifested through the community's vote.

Whatever the case, Matthias was not simply appointed an Apostle by Peter. Instead, the church made use of means of selection available at the time, whether a formal vote or a kind of drawing of straws.

The point is that the methods by which the church has chosen not only its bishops but even its apostles is human in form. There is nothing divinely ordained about these methods.

To be sure, everything that happens is ultimately the will of God. But the will of God can only be manifested in human ways. That may be the lesson the otherwise obscure St. Matthias leaves for us today, some 20 centuries later.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Pentecost rolls in tide of God's spirit

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 20:19-23. (R1) Acts 2:1-11. (R2) 1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13.

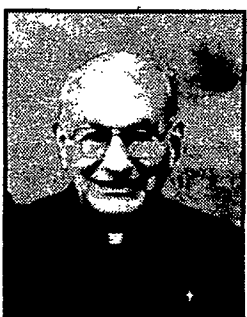
A ship strayed off course near San Diego some years back. It became stuck in a reef at low tide. Twelve tugboats were unsuccessful in their attempts to budge it.

Finally, the captain instructed the tugs to go back home. He sighed, "I'll just have to be patient and wait." He waited until high tide. All of a sudden the ocean began to rise, lifting the ship and putting it back into the channel with ease.

Something like that happened to the early church on the day of Pentecost. The Apostles were gathered together in the Upper Room confused, unmotivated, fearful; they were immobile, though commissioned to teach all nations. Then suddenly the tide of God's spirit rolled in. There came a noise like a strong, driving wind, and tongues as of fire appeared and rested on the heads of each of the Apostles.

At that moment, the Apostles enlightened by the Spirit saw Jesus for who he really and truly was. This enlightenment filled them with joy. They babbled in prayers of praise, the gift of tongues. Some thought them drunk.

Crowds heard the sound and assembled where the Apostles were. Some of them



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

understood the babblings of the Apostles — the gift of interpretation of tongues. Endowed with the gift of prophecy, Peter spoke as he had never done before and 3,000 were received into the church.

The Spirit poured spirit into the Apostles, a spirit that ignited the fire of God's love in the world. Oh, how much that Spirit is needed today! "I have come to set the earth on fire," said Jesus (Lk 12:49). But too many of us are about as sedate as former President Calvin Coolidge. Coolidge kept himself under such control that when his death was made public, someone quipped, "How can they tell?"

The Holy Spirit always comes in answer to prayer, especially community prayer. The coming of the Spirit on Pentecost was in answer to a nine-day community prayer

(the first novena). Our Lady at Medjugorje said we do not pray enough to the Holy Spirit. (Incidentally, I have made some prayer cards to the Holy Spirit. If you want one, send me a self-addressed envelope.)

God sends his spirit to us that we might bring the world to the feet of his Son. An impossible task? In Jack London's masterpiece, *The Call of the Wild*, a dog Buck seemed to have an impossible task. Buck was half St. Bernard and half shepherd — 150 lbs. of pure muscle. Because he was such an impressive animal, he was kidnaped off the streets of San Francisco and transported to Alaska where powerful dogs were needed to pull sleds through the wilderness snow. His kidnapers and first owners treated Buck so cruelly that they nearly broke his spirit by the time he fell into the kindly hands of John Thornton. Thornton was so humane in his treatment of Buck that Buck developed an undying loyalty to Thornton. Thornton wasn't perfect, however.

One evening in the Eldorado saloon, Thornton was lured into making a \$1,000 bet that Buck could break a thousand-pound load from a frozen standstill and move it 100 yards. It was a foolish wager, no dog ever did such a feat.

But Thornton believed in Buck. He

knelled beside the great dog and whispered in his ear, "As you love me, Buck, as you love ..." Buck did the impossible.

We too face the impossible task of bringing the world to Christ. All we have to go on is his voice, "As you love me, as you love me ..." Because he loves us, he sends the Holy Spirit upon us, who like a mighty tide can lift us up to do the impossible. We need only pray, "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful."

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

- Monday, May 19**
Sirach 1:1-10; Mark 9:14-29
- Tuesday, May 20**
Sirach 2:1-11; Mark 9:30-37
- Wednesday, May 21**
Sirach 4:11-19; Mark 9:38-40
- Thursday, May 22**
Sirach 5:1-8; Mark 9:41-50
- Friday, May 23**
Sirach 6:5-17; Mark 10:1-12
- Saturday, May 24**
Sirach 17:1-15; Mark 10:13-16

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