

Introductory comments from the celebration of the Eucharist at the end of the General Assembly of the School Sisters of Saint Francis at Saint Joseph Convent, Milwaukee (25 April, 2010):

*“It is a privilege to join you this afternoon, and I do so with joy certainly, but also with a personal sense of hesitation ... for only you who have yourselves participated in this General Assembly know the graces of the moment ... only you know what has now been newly assimilated into the Lord’s Paschal Mystery ... only you know what has come alive in a new way! My task then is to make Eucharistic space and to provide structure for your celebration ... **Entonces empezemos en el nombre del Padre y del Hijo y del Espiritu Santo!**”*

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(Readings for the Fourth Sunday of Easter: Acts 13:14.43-52; Rev 7:9.14b-17; John 10:27-30)

“Queridas Hermanas – Dear Friends:

A few moments ago you heard the first reading from Acts of the Apostles, an account of Paul and Barnabas visiting the city of Antioch in Pisidia. The town is located in today’s Central Turkey, on top of a high hill in a wind swept area once dominated by the great Hittite Empire. You can visit the site today as I did a few years ago on a warm sunny autumn afternoon with a pleasant breeze ruffling your hair. You can stand within the ruins of the very synagogue described in our reading. The University of Michigan excavated the site; so as a result you can stand surrounded by the very stone benches built for first century synagogue worshippers, and you can almost hear the voices of Paul and Barnabas encouraging those men and women to be faithful to the grace of God. They say the very same thing to you today, “Be faithful to the grace of God!” In fact their voices are now united with the living voices of your Foundresses whose memory and witness we celebrate today: “Be faithful to the grace of God!”

Grace is not merely a divine nudge to do something generous or kind or just (actual grace); it is also the spark of God which enters a person or a community... the spark of God’s life which enters a person or a community ... the spark of God’s life which transforms that person or community and makes them attractive. That type of grace makes others turn to take a second look because the witness of one’s life is striking and gracious. “Be faithful to that gift,” say Paul and Barnabas! “Be faithful to that gift,” say Alexia, Alfons and Clara!

Obviously, fidelity does not mean rigid conformity as this very reading makes very clear. Being faithful to God’s grace for Paul and Barnabas meant to change their strategy and to embrace the Gentiles in a new way. They were faithful Jews who came to understand that the grace and gift of election included all people for whom they, like Abraham and Sarah before them, must be a blessing!

We belong to a Church which embraces doctrinal development, certainly not simply casting off the past, but rather going ever more deeply into the living tradition of the Church's faith for contemporary meaning and life.

That development is found in the way we speak about our faith, and also in the way we live together in faith. At the center of it all is the person of Jesus Christ, and that is where this Gospel passage also fits into the larger picture of your General Assembly's celebration today in a remarkably striking and providential fashion.

Sheep often receive a "bad press," as if they are merely dumb, docile, mindless creatures, milling around aimlessly. Not true! Like all animals for anyone who bothers to stop and look carefully, they are very distinctive ... sometimes curious or indifferent, stubborn or gregarious or independent. This Gospel is really about a dynamic deepening relationship between community members and their chosen leaders. To "hear" biblically is to listen, respond and obey, thus becoming increasingly transformed by that relationship! To "know" biblically is to perceive facts about a person, but also to care deeply about that person. My favorite example of biblical knowledge is the expert who examines x-rays day after day and dispassionately diagnoses the pathologies ... suddenly confronted by an x-ray of her mother, and thus brings both professional knowledge as well as affection to the diagnosis! That also is a deepening and transforming relationship.

It is the witness of your community, marked by truly hearing and knowing and following which constitutes the grace to which you are summoned to be faithful!

On this Good Shepherd Sunday you hear each other, and know each other and follow each other generously, wisely and well into the deepest mystery of Christ's love ... and you are transformed in the process!"

- Richard J. Sklba