

Following the Spirit's Footprints

Acts 2:1-11; I Cor 12:3b-7,12-13; John 15:26-27; 16:12-15 (Pentecost)

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We have met believers who through their own lives tell the story of the Spirit's tirelessly creative activity.

Cultures are arriving by diverse paths at border areas, and, embedded within those cultures, we human persons live intimately the experience of being on the march in unfamiliar territory. There is bewilderment, there is a search for solid ground, there is a diversity of plans and initiatives.

Just in those places where human life used to be organized in some simple, predictable way, the Spirit is busy creating unexpected outlets, perhaps heterodox ones, yet outlets not only born from life but bearing life along.

Believers in the New Testament ventured forth to follow the Spirit's footsteps in stirrings that bore them along to transformation. That's why the Acts of the Apostles characterizes the Spirit's activity as a "strong driving wind" letting loose a new world that doesn't at all look like the supposed "real" one. (People outside the community of the disciples are "amazed" at them, as if they think the disciples are inebriated!)

The ecclesiology of Acts seems to describe the social and public aspect of the Spirit's activity in gathering and forming the community that must become the new world's sacrament.

People with eyes and ears open are capable of discerning where the Spirit is blowing. But to do that they have to allow the Spirit to bear them away; they have to learn to intuit the Spirit's activity and to become witnesses of her presence.

There was concern in the communities rallying around the Beloved Disciple about how to adapt to new situations while remaining loyal to origins. We recognize in the stories told in John's gospel a creative tension: the tension involved in welcoming the creativity of the Spirit as she sallies forth towards new horizons— to do so without renouncing connection to the historical Jesus. That's how the earliest community describes receiving the Spirit from Jesus himself. The community believed it had received her, not as their own invention, but as the consequence of its fidelity to the historical person.

Surrounded by so many situations that hem them in, migrant communities have to become capable of following the Spirit's footprints. Not every novelty is the Spirit's work. Not every form of reacting to challenge is inspired by her. What's certain is that amid this people forced to explore new forms of living, the Spirit makes a privileged and recognizable intervention. Yet often the intervention occurs where the people themselves least expect it. A handful of migrants are slowly discovering that their very way of living is a work fostered by the Spirit so that the Kingdom may become possible. Their discovery begins as they reflect on the decisions that brought them to the US in the first place... Each migrant takes years to decide whether he (or she) should leave his country. He has to decide whether it's worth the pain to break with family and begin again at zero. It's an agonizing process that takes many stages of discernment. Yet in a sense there is no decision to be made, there are no options to choose among. What's involved is taking that last chance to escape the bonds of misery. The decision once made, the person must follow the Spirit's path, if he or she really wants to move forward.

In our stories, personal as well as ecclesial, there must be real and effective footprints of salvation for us to follow. If we can't recognize them, we might conclude that the Spirit isn't at work, or that she is incapable of working. Yet such a conclusion contradicts the experience of the first Christian communities and the subsequent history of the Church. It's rather that we ourselves have lost the capacity to discover the Spirit. In that case, we will have to get to work following the Spirit's footprints in those places where the Spirit dwells and in those activities where the Spirit is the protagonist.