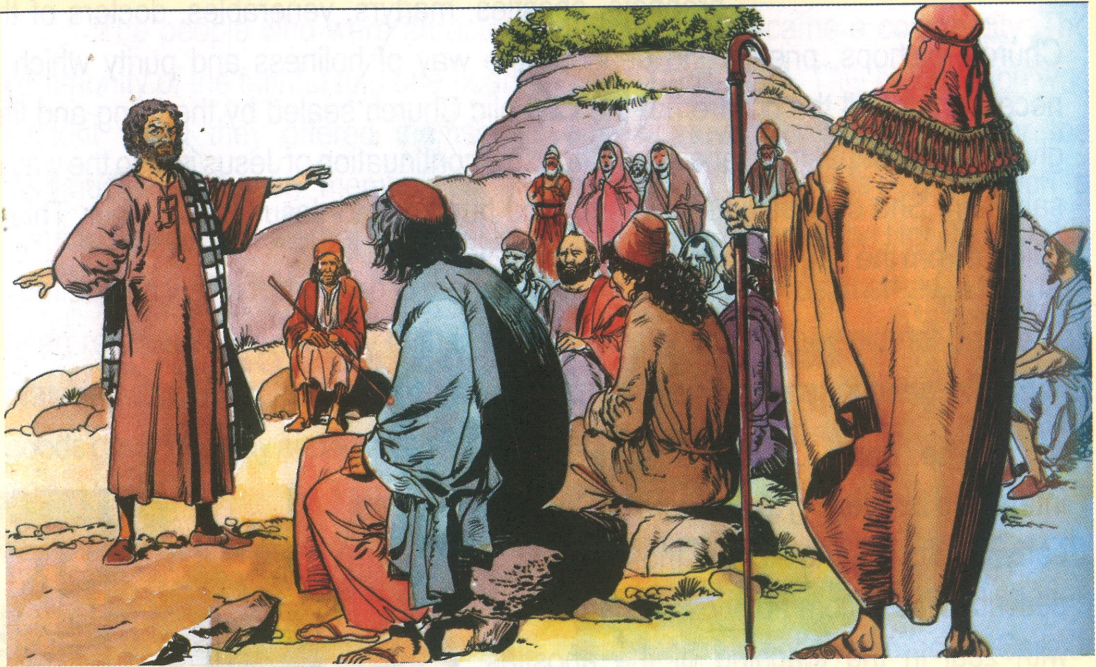


Lesson 3

THE MISSIONARY SPIRIT OF THE EARLY CHURCH



On the day of pentecost, the apostle Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, joined the other apostles and preached boldly that Jesus is the saviour and Lord. The people who listened to him asked - Brother, what should we do ? Peter said to them: "Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Him" (Acts. 2: 37-39). The Acts of the Apostles presents the Church as the means of salvation and community of the faithful. The term used in this book to refer to the nature of the Church is 'the way'. The Acts of the Apostles qualifies this way as 'The way of salvation', 'the way of Christ' etc (Acts. 16:17; 19:2).



Human beings have access to the presence of the Father through Jesus Christ (Jn. 14:6). Hence, Jesus is the way of salvation for us. In our Holy Mass, we pray : “Let all men know that Jesus Christ, our Lord and God came down and through the life-giving Gospel taught the prophets, apostles, martyrs, venerables, doctors of the Church, bishops, priests and deacons the way of holiness and purity which is necessary for all the children of the Catholic Church sealed by the living and life-giving sign of baptism”. Hence, the Church, a continuation of Jesus is also the way of salvation. She desires and strives to lead humanity to Jesus the Saviour. This is evident from the beginning of the early Church.

Community that Listened to the Gospel

The early Christians were always interested in listening to the word of God. The early Church, in the Acts of the Apostles, is described as a community who participated with zeal in the teaching of the apostles, communion, breaking of the bread, and



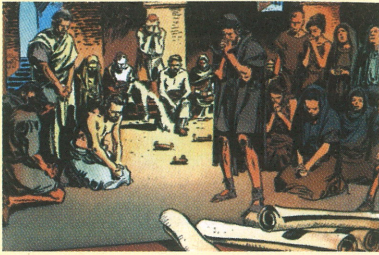
prayer. They who desired to grow, listening and accepting the word of God, came together in the presence of the apostles. The main content of the teachings of the apostles was the eternal salvation that God gives through Jesus Christ. People considered it a great blessing that they could listen to the apostles who lived with Jesus and who learned directly from Jesus. The apostles who plunged deep into Christ-mystery by the light of the Holy Spirit declared their experience and faith aloud. They tried sincerely to make the listeners understand the resurrected Jesus. Hence, the apostles taught elaborately the birth, life, words, deeds, suffering, death, resurrection of Jesus, the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the beginning of the Church communities.

Activity - 1. Discuss to what extent the missionary spirit of the early Church is realised in your parish.

Community that Lived According to the Gospel

The people who were attracted by the Gospel became a community. The community of the faithful had one heart and soul (Acts 4:32). This communion was evident when they offered themselves and whatever they had, fully for the community and each member of the community. They were led to such a communion not by external compulsion but by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This communion was not confined to mere sharing of material goods. Instead, a heart-to-heart relationship formed by faith in the resurrected Lord. They did not depend on material wealth. Trust in divine providence led them. Hence, sharing of material goods gave them joy and satisfaction.

The Church shows her identity by her communion with Jesus Christ and unity among the members of the Church. Hence, the apostles considered lack of sharing and similar drawbacks as big sin. St. Paul, the apostle, blamed the Church at Corinth in strong language when there was division among the faithful and there was no proper sharing in the Lord's supper (1 Cor 11:17-22). The gravity of this sin is made very clear in the death of the couple Ananias and Saphiera. (Acts 5:1-11). When the apostles heard that the Greek Christian widows were neglected, they took it seriously because they understood the importance of this communion. The apostles appointed deacons to maintain and strengthen this communion in Church communities. (Acts 6:1-7). Whenever they received some hints that the poor were ignored, the people along with the apostles were ready to take quick steps. They were ready to collect money for the poor (2. Cor. 8:11-15). In all this, we see clearly the power of communion formed through faith.



Community whose Source of Power was Breaking of the Bread.

The true power centre of the Church community who came together in faith was the service of breaking the bread. They participated in it with one mind and innocent, joyful hearts. They celebrated the breaking of bread in commemoration of the Last Supper as the sharing in the body and blood of Jesus. The conviction that the bread and wine which received was the body and blood of Jesus was deep in them. It is from the participation in the Holy Eucharist that they received special power in their struggles and crises. This sharing also made them grow in the life of faith.

Activity - 2. Examine the Gahantha prayers in the Holy Mass, find out and write the sentences referring to our missionary task.

Praying Community

A specific characteristic of the early Church who lived according to the Gospel was their prayer life. The early Christians followed the prayer model of Jesus. They prayed during certain hours to sanctify the whole day. We see in the Bible, the apostles who pray in the third hour (9 a.m.) 6th hour (12 am) 9th hour (3pm) and 12th hour (6 pm). On the day of the pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down upon the apostles in prayer at the third hour (Acts 2:15). While Peter, the apostle, was praying at the 6th hour, he got the revelation from God that the gentiles also can be accepted in the Church as her members. When Peter and John went to the temple to pray at the 9th hour, they healed the lame man who was begging at the Beautiful gate (Acts 3:1-10). We see in the Acts of the Apostles, examples of people praying personally and in community (Acts 4: 23-24, 7: 59-60). They prayed zealously before taking important decisions (Acts 1:24-25, 13:3). It is prayer that gave them consolation and strength when they were persecuted for Christian faith and suffered and underwent

crises for the sake of faith. In prison also they praised God and regained their courage. (Acts 16:25).

Community that Proclaimed the Gospel



In the word of God we see that almost all who received the message of the Gospel from Jesus turned out to be evangelisers (Jn. 4: 7-26, 9: 1-12, Lk. 19: 1-10). The early Church formed by the teachings of the apostles was filled with this spirit. Their life-style itself became the preaching of the Gospel. When their thoughts, attitudes and life-style became filled with the message of the Gospel, their mutual relationship was filled with love. As a result, the number of the faithful increased (Acts 2:47). They shared with others their faith and the experiences in the new community and proclaimed the Gospel courageously (Acts 4:31).

When they were punished and sent out with the warning not to talk in the name of Jesus, their reply was, "For we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). Even when they were scattered in the name of faith, they went on moving, preaching the word of God (Acts 8:4).

The early Church grew in faith and communion, listening to, living and proclaiming the word of God and gaining strength from the service of the breaking of the bread. Let us also, in a similar way, share the missionary spirit of the Church and grow and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus.

Let us Read the Word of God and Meditate

Acts. 4:32-37

A Word of God to Remember

"The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul".
(Acts 4:32)

Let us Pray

O Lord Jesus, just as the early Church grew in love and unity,
help us also to grow in love and unity.

My Decision

At least once in a month I will read the word of God and share it
with my friends of the pious association in which I am a member.

Let us think with the Church

The Church which is intimately related with Jesus is the sacrament of union with
God and unity of the whole humanity or it is the sign and instrument of
such unity and union (GS:51)

Let us find out the answers

1. Why do we say that the Church is the way of salvation ?
2. The early Church is the community that listened to the Gospel and lived the Gospel. Illustrate.
3. How did the early Church grow in communion experience ?
4. Explain the statement that the service of the breaking of the bread was the power centre of the early Church.
5. The early Church was a community rooted in prayer; Illustrate.