

God's work among us: Acts 2:42-47

by [William Brosend](#) in the [April 8, 2008](#) issue

I have absolutely nothing new to say about the 23rd Psalm or the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, and most readers have little need to rehash what they've already learned. What I don't know much about, and what many of us fear to fully and faithfully confront, is the reading from Acts. In an election year, in a national recession, and in a global economy whose rules seem to shift like tectonic plates, maybe we need to know more.

The setting in Acts is tricky because it is immediately post-Pentecost while Christians are about halfway into Eastertide. The lectionary loves to do that. But the setting is interestingly suggestive. Just before Acts 2:42 we read, "So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added" (2:41). Hmm. Three thousand new members. That is an interesting challenge. I know the sociocultural situation is a tad removed from our own, but what *would* you do with such an influx of new believers? What would your confirmation class look like? Ted Gulick, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Kentucky, reminds us, "The principle problem in the [insert your denomination] Church today is inadequate catechesis."

We may not be working with 3,000 converts, but between Easter vigil, Easter sunrise services and Pentecost to come, there is going to be some new blood. What should we do with it? All the glorious sermons on the Good Shepherd and reflections on Psalm 23 are not really going to help, because we are not just talking about flocks to care for, but new disciples to send into the world. Acts helps.

The formula is fairly set: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayers. Got it. We need to teach the basics of the faith, nurture fellowship, emphasize the Eucharist and be devoted to prayer. Who could object to that? What we get all worked up about is: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." The Berlin Wall fell two decades ago, so no one is going to criticize Acts as "communist" or "pinko." So what's the problem? The problem is not the fading potential for name-calling, but the stark reality of the early Christian Jerusalem

community. Its members shared. Radically. And the community grew as a result. Not forever—the realities of empire and temple saw to that. But it grew in a way we can't ignore.

The trouble is we ignore the wrong thing; we ignore the sharing. After all, before you can say "Trinity Sunday," this egalitarian community will be in such dire straits that Paul will have to pass the hat in Thessalonika. So what kind of sustainable model of community is this? Point taken. But is it the right point? I don't think so. The "all things in common" and "sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all" is not the beginning point of community, but rather the logical outcome of "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers." You do not start with radical egalitarianism: it is what happens when you start practicing the faith. What happens then? "Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles." What stands between us and 3,000 believers "having all things in common"? Not much, just "many wonders and signs."

Where exactly are we supposed to find wonders and signs? There are two possibilities. One is to wait and hope, trusting in God to bless you and whatever you are up to. The other is, with no less trust in the blessing of God, to "devote [our]selves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers." It is a simple suggestion: if the faithful devote themselves to the same things the first generation of believers did, good and wonderful things will result. When a true community of faith arises (fill in the blank with the name of a community that you know), startling things happen. Faith happens.

The wonders and signs surprise us. I visited Monseigneur Arturo Bañuelas in El Paso, Texas, last year and preached at St. Pius X, which is known as one of the best Roman Catholic parishes in the country. At the 9 a.m. mass more than 20 award winners in a regional Special Olympics were recognized, then honored at a breakfast following mass. Arturo needed to meet with another group, so I, "Father Bill," was invited to the photo op. To my joyful surprise my Episcopal ordination did not matter. Because I was present to them, and because Father Arturo had honored me as priest, they knew all they needed to know and wanted to have their picture taken with me, have me bless their medals, have me be the recipient of their hugs and kisses. You well know who was most blessed, because we "had all things in common." And what was it we had in common? The teaching, the fellowship, the

breaking of bread and the prayers. Because my friend had well and truly formed the people in his parish, my preaching, my presence, even my priestly blessing were received by those who were in communion, and they welcomed me into that communion.

“Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.” This prayer becomes more common as our capacity to recognize God’s work among us increases, but the recognition scares the faith out of us. As long as it scares the faith out of us and into the world, we’re good.