

Comment

'The faith of the first community of believers', so we read in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (paragraph 642), 'is based on the witness of concrete men known to the Christians and for the most part still living among them'.

'Concrete men'? Well, they certainly include women. As the text makes clear, they include, for example, the 'more than five hundred persons' whom Paul mentions (1 Corinthians 15:6). In the Greek, as it happens, he says 'brothers', not 'persons'. We have 'persons' in the English version of the Catechism simply because the French original, reporting rather than quoting what Paul says, has '*personnes*'. Whether that reflects sensitivity to the gender question by the authors of the French text seems unlikely. It cannot, anyway, be a concession to the increasing practice in American English of seeking 'inclusive language', since the authorities in Rome decided, Canute-like, to resist that manifestly irreversible trend. On the contrary, it just reflects the other decision taken in the Vatican, which was apparently that the English version of the Catechism should stick as closely as possible to the underlying French vocabulary and syntax. It would have been more natural to say that the faith of the original community 'was' based on the witness of these concrete men, but even the historic present, much more common in French, is usually preserved in the translation, often in defiance of English idiom.

'Concrete men', for '*hommes concrets*', is no doubt the most bizarre example in the Catechism of the obsession to replicate French idiom, although there are many other instances of this *franglais*-in-reverse. The problem with the word 'concrete' is that the primary sense in English, since the early nineteenth century is too closely connected with what the French call 'béton'. Some years ago, a graduate student in philosophy submitted a proposal to write a doctorate thesis in a university in the English-speaking world on 'the idea of the concrete' in the work of a then fashionable French thinker and was somewhat taken aback to get the go-ahead from the academic authorities to do research on 'the idea of concrete'.

Not that we are fixated with cement. On the contrary, we are familiar with the distinction between abstract and concrete nouns (those of us who were ever taught grammar): a much earlier sense of the word, dating back to the late sixteenth century. Exasperated by apparently fruitless discussion, in committee meetings say, about a plethora of hypothetical courses of action, we might ask, with some impatience, what difference any of the proposals would make 'in the concrete' (a

phrase found in Hobbes, 1656). We might also have heard of, and perhaps even have heard, 'concrete music' (Stockhausen and the like, I think): music constructed by rearrangement of recorded sounds. We might have come across 'concrete poetry' (by Edwin Morgan, for example, or the late Dom Sylvester Houédard of Prinknash): poems that are constituted by typographical devices. But 'concrete men'—is that an acceptable English expression?

'Particular individuals', perhaps one might say—the names of whom have mostly not been recorded. How many of Paul's 'more than five hundred' can we identify? For that matter, we know little, and sometimes nothing, beyond the bare names of most of the Apostles. But the point that the Catechism is making, with this solesistic reference to concrete men, is as follows: 'Given all these testimonies, Christ's Resurrection cannot be interpreted as something outside the physical order, and it is impossible not to acknowledge it as an historical fact' (another ill-formed English sentence). That is to say, Christ's Resurrection had effects in the real world because it impinged upon particular human beings—Mary Magdalene and the holy women, Peter and the Twelve, and several others. That these people are mostly anonymous is neither here nor there. Nor does it matter that so little has been recorded about the previous and subsequent histories even of Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter. The thing that matters is that they were people like ourselves, in whose lives something unique happened.

Christ's Resurrection is no doubt something suprahistorical. It is the form of the incarnate Son's communion in the Holy Spirit with the Father—'who raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places' (Ephesians 1: 20 and suchlike)—an event, or a relationship, that transcends history. But, at a dateable time and in a locatable place, this was perceived by—if you like, revealed to—a small number of very specific women and men. It was not revealed to just anybody, or to the world at large, but to those 'who were chosen by God as witnesses' (Acts 10:40–1). These particular people were commanded, as Simon Peter goes on to say, to testify that Jesus 'raised on the third day and made manifest' is 'the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead'—words which brought the Holy Spirit on all who heard them (verse 44). How could anyone forbid water for baptizing these people, Simon Peter asked, when he heard them extolling God—'*these* people who have received the Holy Spirit just as *we* have' (my italics). From the beginning, that is to say, it has been a history of particular people's personally recognizing in one another the faith of the first community—a faith based on the witness, not of concrete men, but of very specific individual human beings, each of whom has received the Holy Spirit.

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