

Priscilla and Aquila, the Married Apostles of the Early Church

In this Year of the Family in the Church, here is an article by Fr. Joe Thomas, chaplain at Mercer House in Princeton, New Jersey, that was published recently in the "National Catholic Register."

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Priscilla and Aquila, the married couple who appear in Acts of the Apostles and some letters of St. Paul, might not grab too much of our

attention at first. If we were to think about the most important persons in the New Testament, many others would come to mind first: Christ, Mary or the apostles, for example.

While that reaction is understandable, perhaps we should give more attention to this married couple. In this special Year of the Family which will last until June 26, we would do well to reflect more deeply on this man and woman, who tell us so much about the important role of married persons and lay persons in the Church's mission.

The Acts of the Apostles tells us in detail of Paul's great missionary journeys as he brought Christianity to the Greek world. We might tend to see him as a kind of superhero of holiness, whose heroic efforts, guided by the Holy Spirit, opened up new paths for the Gospel.

However, a closer look at Paul's journeys shows us just how much he needed collaborators so that his mission might be effective. Through the trials and tribulations he encountered, Paul came to realize how essential it was to have lay persons actively engaged in evangelization.

By the time Paul meets Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth, on his second missionary journey, Paul has had ample experience of the harsh realities of being an apostle. Along with the joy of planting Churches and seeing persons embrace the faith, he encounters constant opposition which prevents him from establishing a stable apostolate.

In Pamphylia, the women of prominence and leading men of the city expel him. Paul teaches, as he returns from his first missionary journey, that "it is necessary for us to

undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

In light of this backdrop of intense persecution, we can appreciate why Paul’s encounter with this married couple is so significant. After being scoffed at in Athens, Acts tells us that the apostle comes to Corinth. In this moment, Paul is not in the best of spirits. As he later recounts in the first letter to the Corinthians, “I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling” (1 Corinthians 2:3).

It’s precisely in this moment that there’s a beautiful new page in Paul’s missionary adventure. He meets Aquila and Priscilla, who were among the first converts to the faith. Not only does he befriend them, but he stays with them and works with them (Acts 18:2-3).

In so much time spent together, there must have been a profound sharing of the newness of the radical

message which Christ had entrusted to Paul. Aquila and Priscilla would have come to realize that all of the members of the Church are called, in some way, to be witnesses to Jesus. While not all would have the public role of apostle that Paul and the other apostles had, all Christians are called to attain “the full stature of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

However, the relationship between Paul and this evangelizing couple was not simply one way, as if Paul was the only one who was teaching and guiding. Rather, Priscilla and Aquila were a key source of support for the man who became known as the Apostle of the Gentiles. They offered Paul the warmth of their home, which undoubtedly was a source of strength after so much hardship. After some time working together in the same profession, Paul was able to dedicate himself fully to

his specific mission of preaching the word (Acts 5:5).

But Paul was not the only member of that household who preached the word. Through their ordinary life and testimony, Priscilla and Aquila gave their own witness to Christ. This testimony, along with Paul's, was an essential means by which the Gospel spread. Paul is able to continue his mission in Corinth for a year and a half, in contrast to the brevity of his earlier stays in other towns.

Paul certainly encounters opposition and insult in Corinth (Acts 18:7). However, whereas in Pamphylia the leading men and women of the town force him to leave, in Corinth Paul is able to continue his mission. One night in a vision, our Lord tells assures him: "No one will attack and harm you, for I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:10).

In these words of Christ, we can appreciate the immense contribution made by the presence of lay men and women in Paul's work of evangelization. As our Lord indicates, Paul is able to preach precisely because of the presence of a larger number of men and women who are committed followers of Christ. These men and women are not known as apostles in the same way, but in a very real way they are apostles who allow Paul to carry his own special mission.

After nine months of fruitful preaching, Paul is the subject of a renewed persecution. The proconsul Gallio dismisses the charges made against him, but the apostle decides that it is time to move on to Ephesus, an important city of the Roman Empire. In this move, we see one more radical innovation in the history of Christianity: "Paul remained for quite some time, and

after saying farewell to the brothers he sailed for Syria, together with Priscilla and Aquila" (Acts 18:18). For the first time, we hear of a *married couple* accompanying St. Paul on his missionary travels. After his fruitful stay in Corinth, the apostle has come to realize that married couples form an essential part of his evangelizing mission.

Priscilla and Aquila later give Christian witness in their efforts to instruct Apollos, a powerful preacher and an expert in the Scriptures (Acts 18:24-28). Apollos' teaching needs clarification, and "when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the Way (of God) more accurately." With this loving correction, Apollos continues in his public mission with a new effectiveness. Priscilla and Aquila would have possessed a similarly profound knowledge of the Gospel as this preacher, yet nowhere do we

hear that they are engaged in public preaching as Apollos was. That was not the particular mission to which God had called them.

Nonetheless, Paul would have come to realize that the cooperation of couples such as this one was essential for the Gospel message to bear fruit. We can see this in the special affection with which he addresses this married couple in his letters. At the very beginning of his greetings at the close of the Letter to the Romans, he states, using the more formal version of Priscilla's name: "Greet Prisca and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus." (Romans 16:3). Paul has come to appreciate that they are truly "co-workers," equals in his apostolic mission. They have shown their full engagement in the Church's mission by the way they have "risked their necks for my life" (Romans 16:4).

The apostle feels the need to recognize the profound debt which he, and all those who have benefited from his mission, owes to this man and woman: “not only I am grateful but also all the churches of the Gentiles” (16:4). When he writes to his beloved disciple Timothy from captivity, in what is thought to be the final letter before his death, St. Paul again begins his final greeting with mention of “Prisca and Aquila” (2 Timothy 4:19).

So, a closer look at the New Testament reveals that this married couple was at the very forefront of the initial spread of Christianity. The Church that met in their home was a vital center through which the Gospel message was made present in the most ordinary realities of human life: marriage, the family, and the daily work by which Priscilla and Aquila sustained themselves and served the community around them.

Nearly 60 years ago, the Second Vatican Council wanted to solemnly affirm the reality which this admirable couple reminds us of. The Council recognized that, in order to respond to the urgent needs of evangelization in today's world, the Church deeply needs married couples and all the laity to act as protagonists in the life of the Church.

These lay persons, just as much as those with a public ministry in the Church, have an essential role in offering authentic witness to Christ. If they do not fulfill this function, as St. Paul came to realize, the proclamation of the Gospel will be lacking in power and fruitfulness.

When we reflect, then, on the many important lessons offered to us by the early history of the Church's life, we will do well to keep in mind the lesson given to us by Priscilla and Aquila. Along with the singular deeds

accomplished by St. Peter and St. Paul, there are the countless other holy actions of this married couple, along with so many other ordinary men and women who recognized their role as living members of the Body of Christ.

Such persons remind us that, as Paul was “called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1), so too God also calls and sets apart each Christian to announce that same good news, in the midst of everyday life. It is only with that apostolic witness, just as the beginning of the Church’s life, that the Gospel message can truly reach the hearts and minds of the men and women of today.

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