



**Can I get a witness?**  
**Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19**  
**Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (5-16-21)**

By a show of hands, let's see how many of you tried to learn a new language. How many of you did, in fact, learn a new language? What helped you? What helped me was full immersion and field experience. I learned my high school level English in class but it really took off when I spent a whole summer in London cleaning hospital floors with the cleaning crew in the morning and going to English as second language school in the evening. It was a challenge to learn to hear and speak new sounds and to overcome the self-judgment that I wasn't learning as fast and as accurately as I had wanted. There were many embarrassing moments. Many times, I felt frustrated because I knew what I wanted to say but didn't have the proper vocabulary just yet. It was only with perseverance and hard work that I finally was able to follow the news and make myself understood with proper British accent. Then, I came to the States.

As babies, we learn our parents' language by repeating the sounds we hear, graduating from single words to short sentences to more complex syntax. Parents teach babies to speak by talking slowly, repeating words at first, modeling the shape of the mouth to get the sound out, then creating simple object sentences.

When the Son of God took on flesh and came to live in our midst, he modeled to us the divine speech. We learned to hear the sound and interpret the meaning of the Word by watching and repeating what Jesus did. This learning is not mistake-free, of course: meaning can still get lost in translation. We are still subject to misinterpretations and misunderstandings; we still need to check our learning against what others, namely the community of believers, current and ancient, have understood. Scholars of divine "semantics" are very much appreciated. We still learn and expand our spiritual awareness through the experience of the Spirit constantly moving and operating in our midst.

Those who have passed on that spiritual awareness, the apostles who have seen and heard and walked with Jesus from the beginning, have witnessed to his love for God and perceived God's love for all humanity. Just as Jesus was sent by the Father, he sent the apostles and ultimately us to share the good news: God loves us intimately and wants a personal relationship with each and everyone of us. We each are precious and beloved in the eyes of God. What freedom and joy does that message bring!

We are all witnesses to that.

The apostolic succession has passed on the message of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension as in a chain not unbroken by human failures, apathy, misrepresentation, conflicts, and distortions of the truth but kept together in good conditions in the diverse regions of the earth and times of history by the grace of God and the creative power of the Spirit. We ourselves may be poor instruments of transmission of the message and subject to our own blind spots and at times



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stained by our personal eccentric ways or egoistic choices. Remarkably and thankfully, God still values and uses us, and we become each and together sounds of God's love language.

The witness of the Church is important and needs to be credible and complete. In Luke's mind, Jesus has elected twelve disciples to represent the twelve tribe of Israel. Hence, the election of Matthias to fill the spot left open by Judas. The criteria set by Peter for the selection of the new apostle were clear: "one of the *men* who have accompanied us... beginning from the baptism of John until the day when [Jesus] was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." (Acts 1:21-22)

Sadly, not one woman was considered for the position. Yet, women (v. 14) were part of the followers of Jesus from early on<sup>1</sup> and were the first ones to learn and report to the disciples about the resurrection. Moreover, the men Jesus called to be his core disciples<sup>2</sup> were not there at the baptism of the Lord if this were to be Peter's criteria of qualification for the new apostle. Is this a bias towards men and an indication of how patriarchal the Church was about to turn?

But what does it mean to be a witness to Jesus' Baptism and Resurrection anyhow? Are we all supposed to be able to speak eloquently and convincingly on what Baptism means and on what happened to Jesus after he was killed and placed in a tomb? For the most part, we don't like to get into arguments with people and certainly despise the idea of proselytizing, of having back and forth with people for the purpose of demonstrating how necessary it is for them to convert.

But when we witness to his Baptism and Resurrection we rely on God's witness: the testimony is in our hearts (1 John 5:10), it responds to the question: what difference does Jesus make in our life? His Baptism tells us that he took the incarnation seriously, that he was truly dedicated to us: Jesus "is the one who came by water and blood" (1 John 5:6), referring to the water and blood that spilled out of his side when at the crucifixion the Roman soldier pierced his side. This is a reminder of his total commitment to us until the end.

Has Jesus changed our life? In which way? Have we experienced renewal and healing? Did we experience the grace of acceptance and forgiveness? How does that encourage us to be accepting and forgiving? Eternal life is to know Jesus intimately and allow him to take over our life. We are not talking about something that will happen to us one day after we die. Eternal life is life lived in depth, meaningfully, generously, simple-heartedly.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 8:1-2; 24:22-24; Matthew 27:55; Mark 15:40-41

<sup>2</sup> According to the other gospels, the Synoptics, Jesus called them after his baptism. John has two of John the Baptist's "disciples" follow Jesus (1:35-42): one is Andrew; could the other one be a woman? Maybe not, but it is not said that those Jesus called later on were present at his baptism.



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God the Father testifies in our heart and creates the trust necessary to follow Jesus. Jesus reveals to us the intimate love of the Father for each and every one of us, and the Holy Spirit ignites the fire of compassion that inspires us to work for universal justice and peace. Witnessing to the gospel is not other than listening to the voice of God calling us to greater trust and to a joyous life of abundance and then live accordingly. It's not a matter of mastering apologetics, the discipline of defending eloquently the faith. If we can learn that language, fine. But that is the cherry on the cake. The language we need to learn is a language expressed in practical faith living: they will know you by your love for one another, Jesus said.<sup>3</sup> Am I practicing that life language? Am I learning to make more complex sentences with that faith language? Can my neighbors see the difference that Jesus has made in my life?

Gracious Father, we pray for your holy catholic church. Fill it with all truth and peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it; where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in need, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen. (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p.73)

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<sup>3</sup> John 13:35