

Third Sunday of Easter

The Journey to Emmaus in a Time of Pandemic: Growing in Hope as a Community of House Churches



Several weeks ago my pastor sent me an article by ecclesiologist Massimo Faggioli. As part of the subtitle was the phrase: ". . . how COVID-19 is 'unmaking the Clericalist Church.'" A couple of weeks ago I met with a directee who posed questions about some of the things that were coming to the fore in recent papal and other Church documents -- things like indulgences (a devotional practice she knew little about and viewed with rightful suspicion), but

also questions re how we approach a Sacramental Church that is not able to minister the Sacraments? Both Faggioli's article and my client's questions pointed directly at a couple of linked deficiencies we have been talking about for a long time, but which have, with this pandemic, become critical, namely, Vatican II and the post-Vatican II Church identified us clearly as 1) a priestly people dwelling in a 2) fundamentally sacramental world, and living (too-often unconsciously) by extension, a liturgy of everyday life (my expression), rooted in 3) the presence of God and nourished by His Word and Spirit.

To a large extent, Faggioli argued, the Church is unprepared for this pandemic precisely because we are so seriously clericalized. I agree. When we are deprived of access to the Eucharistic Liturgy we turn (and return) instead to a devotional approach to spirituality which tends to privatize spirituality in a way which is unworthy of a truly priestly people. Let me be clear; there is nothing wrong with devotions per se: rosaries, novenas, chaplets of mercy, etc., have their place in every prayer life. But there are other forms of prayer and sources of Christian and ecclesial life which can serve not only to give a rightful sense of sacredness to the whole day, but especially, to form us as Christians in and through the Word of God. In this post I want to say a little about the liturgy of ordinary life and also look briefly at a couple of things which might help folks make the best of their time in "lock-down" and provide ways of praying which contribute to 1) a sense of the sacredness of our days, and 2) our sense of being a priestly people living from and for the Word of God. None of this detracts from our need for ordained ministry; in fact, it will underscore our need for this even as it relativizes it. But it will also help allow us to discover the roots of our Sacramental lives in the sacramental nature of all reality and to make of our families what Peter Damian once called "ecclesiolae" or little churches -- a central image he used for hermitages.

A Little on the Liturgy of Ordinary Life: Family Meals as Eucharistic:

One of the things folks recognize when they attend Mass is the similarity it bears to family life more generally. The liturgy centers around a meal, but also involves periods of storytelling as we hear about the important people and events in our own history, lives, and ancestry. We signal how important these are by framing them within a ritual with significant gestures and symbols, and we mark their holiness and the way they call us to holiness in the same way. What is important for us to realize at this particular time, I think, is how it is the Mass participates in and reflects the larger holiness of our world, our relationships, our meals and other activities together. Yes, as the Church teaches the Eucharist is the sum and summit of our spirituality but that means it reflects and perfects our more usual moments and spirituality of ordinary life. It invites us to see meals (including preparation and clean up), and time together sharing stories, history, struggles, consolation, etc, as sacred events in an overarching liturgy of ordinary life.



We mark this truth by praying grace before (and after) meals. But we also do it simply by treating meals as eucharistic moments where Church is created and we are nourished and give to one another in all the ways meals make possible. For families who never have the time to prepare meals or eat together, the sense that Mass is the reflection and perfection of what happens (or *should happen*) every time people come together for a meal may be a new idea, but in this time of shelter-in-place when attending Mass is not possible, it becomes especially important that we take the time to observe family meals for the sacred time and opportunity for creating community they really are. We might then also take some time for sharing Scripture, reading a Bible story, and praying the Lord's Prayer, before dinner (or we could use the Lord's Prayer to end the meal perhaps). I would suggest that the Easter Season is a perfect time to begin such a practice, especially during the lock-down practices most of us are living with. Such meals are not Eucharist, nor do they replace Eucharist; even so, they are profoundly Eucharistic and point to Eucharist if we allow them to do so.

Just as Eucharist nourishes us and allows us to experience the strength of communal life and love needed for Good Friday and Holy Saturday, and so, for the variety of darkneses that assail us, such "ordinary meals" do the same and are essential for us. We must recognize that everywhere we look we see the hand of God and we use the things of nature for our Sacraments. In some ways these are the perfection of nature and Symbols (not mere signs) of the presence and power of God. Bread, wine, water, oil, and beyond these, even breath, stone and wood -- all become ways in which the sacred quality of our world nourishes and inspires. If we can allow our ordinary reality to function as the gift of God it is, if we can learn to allow God to bless us and all of reality, we will help fulfill our vocations as God's priestly people -- especially at this time when ordained ministry has been limited in the ways it can serve us.

The Liturgy of Ordinary Life: Creating Days of Balance and Regularity



We do this by making of our days something ordered and given over to the regularity of prayer, work, recreation, community, and solitude. Psychologists tell us how important regularity is, how crucial it is to have things we can look forward to even as we fully engage with the present. How much more important all this is in a time of pandemic when the truth of our vocations to serve others with our lives removes us to the relative solitude known by hermits and cloistered

religious. Monastics have known and practiced these things forever and the Church herself encourages us to build such things into our lives and, in a certain way, to make a liturgy of our days. As the priestly People of God we ARE Church and we are called to be Church in our everyday routines, our prayer, our family life, our solitude, our struggles, our work, recreation, and so forth. Again, our lives are meant to be liturgies and our homes are each meant to be "ecclesiolae" (little Churches) and we are the celebrants of this liturgical life.

Liturgy of the Hours:

One of the hallmarks of monastic life we can all gain from is the conviction that all of time is sacred and marked by the presence of God. Prayer is the way we make this presence conscious and real in our own time and space. In monastic, religious, and eremitical life one of the ways we do and have done this throughout almost the entire history of the Church is with the Divine Office or Liturgy of the Hours. With Vatican II the Church began to promote this as the official prayer of the Church and encouraged every Catholic to pray at least Morning and Evening Prayer as well as Night Prayer if possible. It is time to renew this encouragement. Many of the laity already pray "Office" because they are Benedictine oblates, or because their parishes have been successful in fostering the practice, for instance. There are manageable resources which allow folks to pray an abbreviated form of the Office like *Magnificat, Give Us This Day* (print and online versions), *Universalis* (online source), as well as *Christian Prayer* (a 1 volume version), for instance.

Each of these can also be tailored by the individual. They include psalms, canticles, prayers (especially the Lord's Prayer and intercessions), and brief readings from Scripture. If one can give 20-30 minutes to pray this, one can easily choose a different hymn or song (or play a CD or even use none), select a single psalm to pray slowly alone or with others, spend some time with the Scripture provided, modify the intercessions to meet needs we know of, and finish with the Lord's Prayer and a blessing, for instance. If families use this for Night Prayer (my personal favorite "hour"), and however briefly they do this, they could end their time together with each member being blessed (signed on the forehead as is done in Church) by a parent, or for a couple, by a mutual blessing by spouses, etc. We may not be able to "spend" time in the ways we ordinarily do, but we can certainly find effective ways to sanctify (allow God to sanctify) it. This is one way the Church does this.

Lectio Divina:

Above all, during a time when folks are unable to attend Mass and receive Communion, it becomes critical that we recall what Vatican II taught about the presence of the living God in the Word of Scripture, namely, *[[The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body.]]* (*Dei Verbum*, 21) Divine presence is very clearly affirmed in these two very different modes. This same affirmation is found in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*: *[[He is present in His word since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church.]]* (*SC*, 7). To take time praying with Scripture, to learn to read this under the impulse of the Holy Spirit is to allow Christ to truly be present to us in the same way he is present under the consecrated species of bread and wine. While this happens in a preeminent way during liturgy, it also happens among God's priestly people engage in the reverent reading of Scripture as part of their own liturgy of ordinary life.

Summary:

Over the past almost 60 years the Church has tried to encourage the whole People of God (laos) to take seriously the ways in which they are called to be a priestly people. As we enter into this Easter Season, often without access to ordained ministry because of this pandemic, it becomes even more critical that we begin to take advantage of the sources of Christian life which do not require ordination but are central to the vocation of each and all of us as Laity. We can turn primarily to devotions which are private and may, especially in the given circumstances, tend to privatize our spirituality, or we can more primarily turn to those forms of prayer which build the Church by recognizing the sacramental character of all reality, the sacred nature of space and time, or by mediating the very presence of the Risen Christ in the Word of God. In this way we make of our own household the "little churches" of St Peter Damian. After all, this pandemic will continue on for some time and we have the time to build new habits, perceptions, and increase our own deep reception of Vatican II's teaching. We will all rejoice together when we come together with our ordained ministers (and how we miss their ministry!), but we will also do so as people who know more fully and effectively our own identities as members and representatives of a priestly people in a sacramental world.

