

EASTER VIGIL 2020

The house we live in has a long memory. This is not the first time that prayers have been said here behind locked doors and in fear of ones life. The Penal Code and the Covid-19 virus are very different, but the ramifications, spiritual and psychological, of both are surely similar. How do we cope, what can we learn?

Fr. Tom O'Loughlin in an article in the Tablet reminds us of some truths about our nature as an Eucharistic community that can serve us well. Eucharist is not a thing, not something given and received, we don't 'get' the bread and wine as some sort of spiritual commodity. Eucharist is not restricted to the Mass. Eucharist is an action, it is an act of thanksgiving, giving thanks to the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit. It is something that we do together that involves the whole community, and it is something that is not restricted to the specific actions of the mass but available to us at all times and in every place.

There is a long monastic tradition that the refectory is a place parallel to the chapel. There are times when I struggle to experience it as such. The fact that we are more casual in our behavior, often more intent on getting our food than in making way for others, indulging – dare I say it – in eating habits that in a 'normal' setting would be considered uncouth ... ,all this abetted I sometimes feel, by the practice of silence which can be a cloak for rudeness rather than an aid to prayerfulness... all this contributes, for me, to a general sense of distraction and annoyance, not prayerfulness, during our meals. But! On the Feast of St. Benedict, the first day that there was no mass or communion service in our chapel, I was very struck by how prayerful, yes even sacramental, dinner was. Maybe it was the shock of not having mass, maybe it was the fact that we were sitting a bit further than usual from each other [our monastic 'social distancing']... or maybe it was grace. That day, for me, the Refectory was a profoundly Eucharistic space.

Eucharist is thanksgiving, especially thanksgiving for food, but also for fellowship and friendship. Thanksgiving for help when needed and for the ability to help another. Thanksgiving is kindness, a recognizing of the other as not altogether 'other' but also of the same kind, as kin. A list came from the bishops about ways to pray during this time of closed churches and social distancing, At the end of a series of pious practices came the suggestion to be kind to others! One of us suggested that it would have been much better to start the list with kindness!

And there is a mystery in this...

Br. John spoke on Friday about 'suffering at one remove.' Of the danger of becoming a 'Job's comforter' and of the disciples willingness to share Christ's suffering, but still at one remove. Suffering, personal suffering, is always precisely that, personal. We know it (or flee it) within ourselves and know that essentially no one else can know it. When someone says 'I know how you feel' the instinctive response is always, 'how can you possibly know?' We are each of us called to our own time of suffering and our hope and faith is that Christ will be there with us: 'for his suffering is uniquely, unlike ours, for us all.' As Br. John said in his Good Friday Homily.

Knowing this, believing this, in the words of Hebrews: 'we should have a strong encouragement to take a firm grip on the hope that is held out to us. Here we have an anchor for our soul, as sure as it is firm, and reaching right through beyond the veil where Jesus has entered before us and on our behalf...'

In these strange and frightening times an 'anchor' sounds just about right. Let us hold firm to this anchor and make thanksgiving together!

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