

### Aware of God's Presence

Whoever would have imagine when we gathered here in church just over two months ago on the Third Sunday of Lent, that two days later the church throughout the world would be closed, and all public masses would be canceled until further notice! I was at the Priests' Senate meeting this past Tuesday – via zoom! – and Bishop Lucia said it was a lot easier closing of churches in the Diocese than trying to figure out how to open the...! Using the guidance of the CDC and the Governor's office, we're all trying to figure out when and how we might be able to gather once again safely in church. In the meantime, we will continue our Sabbath liturgies remotely.

Last week I invited us to reflect a bit on the question: "How might this horrific pandemic be a game-changer...; a moment of creativity and conversion... for our individual lives, our families, our church, nation, world and all of creation?" This weekend I would like to reflect on this question from a spiritual perspective: "How might this pandemic be a game-changer in our relationship with God?"

For me, and I would guess for most of us, this is the longest in our lives that we haven't gone to church. My guess is that we really miss our Sabbath liturgies — I know I do! In the midst of this absence I would pose the question: "How have we felt or not felt the *presence of God* in our lives?"

This experience might help us focus on an attitude – quite prevalent in our Church for centuries – that could be dangerous for our spiritual health; an attitude we may be feeling during these days of not being able to go to church.

During Lent and Easter, I've been reading and reflecting on the late Fr. William Shannon's book "Silence on Fire: The Prayer of Awareness." In the book, the theologian writes about "spiritual apartheid." What does he mean by that? He gives this example:

In recent years, in the midst of our ever increasing busyness and responsibilities, more and more people come to see the necessity of making a 'Retreat' or going on a 'Day of Recollection' to find God, ... to put our lives in order, ... to deepen our prayer lives, ... to achieve a sense of peace and tranquility that otherwise seems unattainable. If we don't actually do this, at least we might wish we could.

Someone might say: “I need to get away to be with God.” “I need to get rid of all that distracts me and truly find God in my life.” When we were kids my mother used to put it a bit more bluntly: “If you kids keep driving me crazy, I’m going to leave and join the convent!”

Fr. Shannon writes that in the same way that a pack of cigarettes carries the warning: “The Surgeon General has determined that cigarettes are a danger to your health;” the attitude that getting away in order to be with God ought to carry a faith warning which reads: “Your Spiritual Director has determined that such an attitude toward a Retreat is dangerous to your spiritual health”!

“Spiritual apartheid” is the mentality that sets God apart from us, apart from Creation: ... God is ‘*there*’ – created things are ‘*here*.’ Spiritual apartheid restricts God’s presence to certain places: the church, the retreat center, the mountaintop... but *not ‘here,’ not ‘now.’* Retreats are wonderful, but to say or feel that we “must go on a retreat” or we “must go to church” in order to be with God suggests that God is ‘*there*’... but God is *not ‘here*’ – in my home, at work, with my family and friends. God is more ‘*there*’ than ‘*here*.’

Spiritual apartheid is very dangerous for spiritual health for it tends to limit spirituality: restricting it to certain “holy places” and “sacred times.” This type of spirituality enshrines a mentality that I am “spiritual” *only on certain occasions and in certain places* and that *most of the time I’m not!* This mentality even places restrictions on God, because for all practical purposes it allows God to have meaning in only one area of our lives – namely the area we call “spiritual.” Spiritual apartheid is an evil because it separates God from God’s Creation and from God’s people. (Such thinking separates *physical* reality, including our bodies, from the *spiritual*; with among other things, disastrous consequences on our attitudes and teachings about human sexuality. That’s a subject for another homily!)

With all that being said, the basic, core teaching of our Christian tradition – which those of us with grey hair remember from the Baltimore Catechism – is: God isn’t only *here*, God isn’t only *there*, *God is everywhere* ... being “in the presence of God” is a necessary condition of our existence! God is the source of our being, the ground of our existence. *Being in the presence of God is not something we choose!*

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Sisters and brothers, our greatest spiritual need and challenge is not to be in the presence of God — *we're in the presence of God* whether we are in church or in our marriage bed. Our greatest spiritual challenge is *to be truly aware that we are in the presence of God... 24/7 ... all the days of our lives!* Religion, church, sacraments, the Bible, prayer are all means to assist us in becoming aware that we are in God's presence!

Sisters and brothers, this Sixth Sunday of Easter weekend concludes two months that we have been sheltering-in-place, throughout which we have not been able to gather in church. I invite us to reflect on the past two months from a spiritual perspective... Have we experienced the presence of God in new ways? Perhaps in the depth of conversation at table? Perhaps in calling someone you haven't called in a long while and being amazed at the depth of the conversation? Perhaps in a sense of gratitude for our blessings? Maybe in enjoying the intimacy of breaking bread together... or, maybe in feeling the pain of those suffering and dying from the virus. I'd invite us to share with those with who we're sharing this liturgy, where we experienced God's presence these last two months – while perhaps not necessarily “naming” it as such. Often we don't “name” these awareness moments.

And as we slowly “opened-up” our society, perhaps we can commit ourselves to the journey of *waking-up* to the presence of God *here and now*. The goal of prayer is to become more deeply aware of God's presence and it is awareness of being in God's presence that changes our lives. Again: *The goal of prayer is to become more deeply aware of God's presence and it is awareness of being in God's presence the changes our lives.*

In conclusion, a thought on our Sabbath worship and the *Real* Presence of Jesus: Fr. Shannon concludes his book with a chapter entitled “*Church: The Community of Those who are Aware*”! I'm sure that we have missed

- ❖ the *Real* Presence of Jesus in our Sabbath Community gathered to worship;
- ❖ the *Real* Presence of Jesus in the Word proclaimed in the Assembly;
- ❖ the *Real* Presence of Jesus in the bread and wine.

Although our remote connecting during this crisis has been truly a gift, we look forward to the day when we will be connecting in *real time and space* – as well as remotely, for those who are unable to attend, for we know that many folks will continue to be unable to attend safely until there is a vaccine and cure.

But it's good to remember the teaching of St. Augustine: "We receive the Body of Christ in order to become the Body of Christ." Each one of us is the Body of Christ regardless of if we are in church or at work. When we greet each other with "*Namaste*," we are recognizing the spark of God – present *within each of us*! St. Paul puts it so well in his Letter to the Corinthians:

*"The body is one and has many members - but all the members, many though they are, are one body; and so it is with Christ... you then are the Body of Christ. Every one of you is a member of it."*

(1 Cor. 12: 12, 15)

We all together are God's presence.

Finally, as we journey toward Pentecost, John's words in the Gospel are powerful. At the Last Supper, Jesus sees the frightened faces and the growing despair in the eyes of his disciples; knowing that the end is near and that he would no longer be in their presence, Jesus said to them:

*"I will not leave you alone. Another helper will be given to you, a helper from within you, the Holy Spirit. She will help you with everything; she will help you to do all I did for you and even greater things."*

Amen.