

WORSHIP IS HUMAN AND DIVINE

FR. DOUGLAS MARTIS, THE LITURGICAL INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITY OF SAINT MARY OF THE LAKE

I WAS ASTONISHED TO DISCOVER that the word Catholics use to describe themselves as members of a Catholic community, “parishioner,” is related to the English word “pariah”: outcast! In fact, I did not believe it at first. So I consulted dictionaries and lexicons, word-studies and etymologies, trying to prove that the connection was misguided. I found that the word has a Greek origin: *paroikos*. It literally means “alongside the house,” but the translation that is usually given is “resident alien”: the one who is alongside the house is not inside and is thus “alien.”

“Parishioner” enters our Catholic vocabulary through the writings of Saint Paul. In the letter to the Ephesians he reminds Christians of their relation to each other and their dignity in Christ:

...You are strangers and aliens no longer. No, you are fellow citizens of the saints and members of the household of God. You form a building which rises on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. Through him the whole structure is fitted together and takes shape as a holy temple in the Lord; in him you are being built into this temple, to become a dwelling place for God in the Spirit. (Eph. 2:19-22)

The word Saint Paul uses here as “aliens” is the same word as “parishioner.” And his point is clear. We are “sojourners” on earth, wanderers, never quite comfortable with the world because this is not our home. For Christians, our true home is in heaven.

I recall Jesus’ prayer for his disciples in the Gospel of John “I do not ask you to take them out of the world”... “They are not of the world” and “they are really yours.”

The politically correct term we use is “pilgrim.” But this makes most Americans think of sweet potatoes and roast turkey, women wearing bonnets and men with tall hats and big shiny buckles on their shoes. Pilgrims, in our cultural context, were adventurers and colonists, industrious and friends of new peoples.

Exchanging the nuance of parishioner for that of pilgrim may take the edge off. But what we lose is the determined claim of our religion that a better place awaits us and that we must live in this world with our eyes set on the world to come. It might sound strange to say so, but the problem with middle-class Christianity is that we have pretty much everything we want. And if we don’t have it we can buy it. Few long for heaven with the deep yearning of exiles. We do not feel out of place on earth; we have our comfortable homes; life here is just fine, thanks.

But Catholics ought to stand as witnesses to the reality of eternity. The Second Vatican Council teaches us the “Church is essentially both human and divine, visible but endowed with invisible realities, zealous in action and dedicated to contemplation, present in the world, but as a pilgrim, so constituted that in her the human is directed toward and subordinated to the divine, the visible to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, the object of our quest.” (SC, 2)

In some way it is beautiful that we have this persistent and uncomfortable reminder that here is not the end. Every time we call ourselves parishioners we should remember that we are headed to heaven: our true home is there.

This is why there are so many processions in the liturgical expression of the Catholic Church. Have you ever noticed? In a typical Mass there are four processions: at the Entrance, the Gospel, the Offertory, and again at Communion. A procession is an assembly on the move. We do not stand still because we have a direction, a destination!

The liturgy is for those who have a clear sense of direction. We Christians are “homeward” bound. Every sacra-

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mental celebration has woven into it a kind of geographical movement. Even in baptism we move from door to nave, from nave to font, from font to altar.

This so important for our understanding and celebration of the liturgy because it gives us a bodily reminder that we have not arrived. The Church associates herself with the

Chosen People who were determined to enter into the Promised Land. The Church is the New Israel. She longs to find her way to her heavenly homeland.

The liturgy is our help along the way, and a recurrent moment where we get a “foretaste” of what is to come. Even our entry into the church building can be a sacramental experience where we recognize that we are destined for another world. Cross the threshold, join with the angels and saints. They are present with us. Can you see them, hear them, as we sing “Holy, Holy, Holy?” ✠