

“Creatively Living the Call to Communion in New and Renewed Ways”
Homily, 4th Sunday of Lent, Year “A”

Introduction

We participate in Holy Mass today in truly unusual, even unprecedented, circumstances. I am grateful to all of you who are following this Mass via livestream from your homes, and are feeling the loss of participating physically here in church. I cannot help but think how pleasing your deep devotion and sense of loss must to our dear Lord.

A People Gathered

The unique circumstances under which we are worshiping today are a reminder to us of how our religion lives on the principle of people being gathered together, gathered together to give honor and glory to God. The very word “Church” is expressive of this: it derives from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which originally meant an assembly of Greek citizens. More than a building, more than an institution, even more than a system of belief, the Church is a people of faith assembled together, members of one body in and under Christ our head. The Church has always understood that God created us for community, to be in relationship, that is to say, for communion, ultimately communion with Him.

To be cast out of that communion, then, is a dreadful prospect. Such was the predicament of the man born blind, and of his parents, who faced the risk of being expelled from the synagogue if they were to admit that Jesus cured their son and so must be God’s Anointed One. The word “synagogue” is the same idea, coming from two Greek words which mean “to bring together.” To be expelled from the assembly of believers at that time was something far more than a private religious matter. It meant being outside of all social interaction, the loss of one’s livelihood; no one would have anything to do with you. Such was the man’s parents’ dilemma when they were interrogated by the Pharisees. But first, let us consider the plight of their son.

A Journey to Spiritual Healing

Notice how the Gospel passage starts out: Jesus sees a man born blind, and his disciples ask him, ““Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” This right away tells us two things: first of all, that it was well known that this man was born blind, otherwise how could they have known it upon seeing him? It is also revealing of the belief of people in the ancient world that physical infirmity was the result of sin, not only one’s own sin but it could also be a sin that was inherited from one’s ancestors.

So now think about what it must have been like for this man who was born blind: he was believed to be a manifestation of sin, somehow cursed, and so left out of the regular circles of society. He did not have to be officially expelled from the synagogue, people already treated him that way. Notice how there is not even any mention of his name in this story. He was a nobody, reduced to begging his whole life. He likely received alms, for it was a deeply held biblical belief that giving an alms to the poor is like making an investment in one’s heavenly bank account, building up spiritual merit in God’s eyes. But other than that, no one would have anything to do with him. As a result, he developed a sort of cynical, bitter attitude toward others and toward life in general. Notice how bold and brazen he is even in his interaction with the Pharisees, the authorities who had social as well as religious power over him. He even taunts them when they return to question him a second time. First he subtly rebukes them: ““I told you already and you did not listen””; and then, he provokes them: ““Do you want to become his disciples, too?””

Now, let us return to considering the man’s parents: when they are put on the spot they do not come to their son’s defense. Rather, they’re looking for a way to conveniently maneuver themselves out of the dilemma they’re in. Apparently, this man did not even have a happy family life growing up, with parents who would love him, nurture him, and give him the special protection he would need in his situation. So we see that even beyond having to live with the great tragedy of being born blind, this man was bearing deep spiritual scars. And this is where we see the real healing when we look at the interaction between Jesus and the man.

Notice how Jesus works: he begins with the physical, in order to move to the deeper spiritual healing the man needs. He recognizes that there is goodness in that man, there is an unconscious

disposition to belief: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”; “Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” So we see him softening up: that harsh, bitter attitude is beginning to wane. The change did not come from without; Jesus is bringing out what was already within him in order to transform him. And then Jesus brings him to faith: “You have seen him, the one speaking with you is he.’ He said, ‘I do believe, Lord.’” And then the healing is complete: “... and he worshiped him.”

The pattern Jesus sets here for bringing people to the deeper spiritual healing is the one the Church has always followed in bringing people to worship him: beginning with the physical, and then moving to the spiritual. This is why the Church has always been committed to works of charity, not just to fulfill the needs of others and assuage a perhaps guilty conscience, but to share the love of Christ that leads to the encounter with him. It is one of the three transcendentals that the Church has always championed to imbue culture with the Gospel of Jesus Christ: goodness, along with truth and beauty.

Coming Into the Light

Returning, though, to this story of the healing of the man born blind, notice what Jesus really does here: he brings out into the light what was already present but hidden in secret, both within the man born blind and the Pharisees, exposing their spiritual blindness. This is what St. Paul is speaking about in his letter to the Ephesians when he refers to light that produces “every kind of goodness and righteousness and truth.” Darkness, on the other hand, is to be avoided: “Take no part in the fruitless works of darkness; rather expose them, for it is shameful even to mention the things done by them in secret.”

As the great Scripture scholar William Barclay explains in his commentary on this passage:

... in the bazaars of the east the shops are often simply little covered enclosures with no windows. A man might wish to buy a piece of silk or an article of beaten brass. Before he buys it he takes it out to the street and holds it up to the sun, so that the

light might reveal any flaws which happen to be in it. It is the Christian's duty to expose every action, every decision, every motive to the light of Christ.

Shameful acts are always performed in darkness. Thieves operate under cover of night. But there is also often goodness hidden deep within people where one might not expect it. With Christ, all is brought out into the light, and without his light there is no healing.

Rediscovering Communion

Healing is certainly of urgent and paramount importance right now, as we are facing the crisis of the current pandemic. But spiritual healing is needed as well. We perhaps feel that more acutely at this time, especially now that we have to worship in a way that is in a sense contrary to the Church's very nature: virtually, remotely, not in a physical gathering of the community of believers. But God created us for communion, and we still have opportunities to enhance that sense of communion even now. I would like to suggest three ways we can do this.

The first, although it may sound ironic, is to rediscover the power of the communion of the Church. Physical absence from church service, and especially lack of sacramental communion, can renew and deepen our love and appreciation of the Church's worship and sacramental life. It's a challenge to continue the spirit of worship at home, but to do so strengthens our sense of connection to the sacred: following Mass on television or livestream in real time by participating in the same way as one would in church – standing, sitting and kneeling at the proper times; being properly dressed (no pajamas!); participating in the prayers; observing silence; keeping food and drink out of sight; and, especially, making a spiritual Communion at the moment that you cannot partake of sacramental Communion. This applies even if you are following the Mass at home alone – indeed, especially so, for as the old saying goes, one's character is judged by what one does when no one is watching.

Next: now is a time more than ever to rediscover the communion of the family. This is an excellent opportunity for family members to pay attention to each other. Staying at home means the

hectic pace of life outside the doors of the home are set aside. What a welcomed opportunity, then, to put away the digital devices and pay attention to one another. The physical and mental presence of family members to each other can lead to a deeper spiritual communion of the family. Share a meal together, engage in conversation, play cards, play a board game, do a jigsaw puzzle together, read a play, listen to good music or watch a good movie together. Above all, pray together, especially the family rosary. I believe it is providential that this crisis is taking place during the season of Lent, for it provides us an opportunity to make a spiritual retreat at home.

Finally, the current situation can renew us in living out what I would call the virtue of "neighborliness." This is especially opportune for those who live by themselves. At a time when people are feeling panic and are moving into a survival mode, thinking only of themselves first, it is critical that we as people of faith lead by example in thinking of *others* first. While observing the usual rules for safe hygiene, the current situation gives us added motivation to pay attention to those in need, helping one's neighbors who are elderly or especially vulnerable and cannot venture out to obtain groceries, for example, or who have any kind of special need. Perhaps God is letting us suffer this hardship – a hardship that comes in so many ways – in order to rediscover the love of community.

Conclusion

Why did St. John in his Gospel not mention the name of the man born blind? I'm inclined to believe that it's because that man is all of us. We all need the spiritual healing that can only come from pure and singlehearted worship of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ. Living these paths to communion is the way to do so, for that is what God created us for: communion with one another that leads, ultimately, to communion with Him.