

Reflections from Where I Sit Toward a Spirituality of St. Robert (and Maybe the Broader Church)

These reflections are offered informally and may be circulated and shared if judged appropriate. Nothing written here is official in any way; I simply would like to share with you some observations in the spirit of Christian friendship and service.

My work-week began on Tuesday morning with a tour of St. Robert church to a 7th grade class from a non-Catholic (and non-Christian) school. The class was studying Romanesque architecture. I found their questions fascinating: they wanted to know what holy water does to a person, who the statues were of and why they were selected, why there were candles lit,... They found symbols in places I had never noticed (like the fleur-de-lis in the iron work). They told me that in Roman times the capitals on the tops of pillars were used to denote economic and social status (ornate Corinthian for the elite, Doric and Ionic for other economic classes). I asked them, “hm... if that’s the case, what do you think the architects of this church had in mind when they put Corinthian capitals you see on these pillars?” One girl responded, “that everyone is special here and everyone is equal.” Wow! Of course Margaret Sankovitz should have the final word on our church architecture, but this is a profound insight on the part of a non-Catholic 7th grader.

The tour group was interested in relics, confession (or, more accurately, confessionals), and “the wafer.” I answered their questions and expanded their vocabulary. The very enjoyable tour proved much too short to both me and to the extremely well-behaved students. Our own 5th grade Religious Education group found other symbols, too, in a recent tour, including not one, not two, but three uses of the shape of a shell in the baptismal font in the baptistry, and multiple doves throughout the church. (This tour, too, was all too brief, and what I hope all of our children come to know is that this is their church and they should always feel welcome.)

So, my first observation won’t come as anything new to anyone: centuries of salvation history are literally, physically built into our own church right here. I used to think that Middle Easterners, Mediterraneans, and Europeans have an easier time (sometimes) being reminded of the Christian story because everywhere you walk, in some of those countries, there are visual and physical reminders—statues, churches, memorial tablets, relics, etc. Here we don’t have those reminders in such frequency. But I have a new appreciation for the depth of history that can be mined right here in our own church. Consider this, then, an open invitation for parents (or grandparents) to walk their child through our church. (I remember my Mom used to do this for my three siblings and me, and I was tremendously embarrassed at the time. Now I really appreciate her having done that.)

My second observation is that our church is its own evangelization tool. As a welcoming community, each of us is an ambassador, not only of our own parish, but of Christianity in general and the Catholic expression of it. Let us be conscious, then, for example, that we have

a relic of the Ugandan martyrs in our church, that symbols of the arts and sciences greet us in the vestibule as we enter (a visual reminder of bringing the professions and pursuits of daily life into our liturgies), and that the patron saint of priests and the patron saint of attorneys flank our sanctuary as a constant reminder for the clergy and the laity to collaborate with each other in our mutual vocation to holiness.

A second of four observations from my week: the Prayer Network is on people's minds, and there is much to pray for. Three people came to me recently with questions about how to put someone on our parish's "prayer list." (This, for those who haven't heard about it, is a phone network of people who promise to pray for the intentions of people of our community and beyond.) The go-to person is Maripat Shaw (whose number is on the cover of our weekly bulletin), or intercessions can be placed via our parish website. Being a "pray-er" for the Prayer Network, in my view, is one way to exercise the priestly role (small "p") of intercession on behalf of others. When we were baptized into Christ we were baptized into his death, his life, his ministry, and his mission. So, as Christ prayed for all of us before his death (and still intercedes for humanity), we share in this ministry, in part, through our Prayer Network. We do this informally, of course, as we pray for others throughout our day; if you'd like to formalize that participation and be part of the Prayer Network, please contact Maripat.

As my week went on, I reflected on another dynamic I've been witnessing lately. Expectations on the part of Catholics (and marginal Catholics) toward their church are very high (maybe at an all-time high). This is good; it's also a challenge. Engaged couples comparison shop. Seekers comparison shop. Globalization is a given in almost every aspect of our lives, and some form of local connection or acceptance in a community is also an expectation (at least on the part of some). Not only are there expectations that we "think globally and act locally," but we risk losing seekers and marginalized Catholics if we don't meet those expectations. It may be that we Catholics have a jump on this dynamic already. After all, we're a worldwide church which has always found its expression in local communities. I'm not sure we're always conscious of that...or even what being more conscious of it looks like.

Moreover, among active Catholics there is a post-Vatican-II, post-John-Paul-II expectation that we be justice-oriented, liturgically-oriented, youth-oriented, evangelization-oriented and pastorally expert, with formation activities that reach people's hearts...every time (or else it's likely that people won't return). Combine those expectations with societal expectations that we do so with the most engaging technology and the most feeling-friendly openness.

We cannot please everyone all of the time. We are not (and will never be) a church motivated by entertainment in our weekend liturgies. But they can be engaging, welcoming (or, as one of my liturgy professors at the seminary used to say, we aim for 'hospitable reverence and reverent hospitality'). We cannot (and probably never will) provide the social service safety-nets that everyone needs. But we can help provide some basic needs to some of the people some of the time, thanks to all the many people in our parish engaged in Human Concerns and Vincentian ministries (Ladies of Charity, St. Vincent de Paul Meal Program and Society).

We are a both/and people, as Bishop Sklba often says. As Catholics we balance mind and heart, the communal and the individual, the imminent and the transcendent, the hierarchical and the egalitarian, the anonymous and the intimate, the global and the local. Those at the ends of any spectrum may have difficulty with both/and situations. Certainly I'm not asking that people lower their expectations, although I can say that they can never all be met. I'm simply naming a dynamic that I see. On some days I feel caught in the middle of these expectations as a member of my generation and, at the same time, as an inheritor of the Christian tradition.

Bringing this to a close, I'll share with you a final observation. This afternoon I was walking through church and found myself in the vestibule where someone had placed a large box with a poster designed by a child inviting people to bring in items for the House of Peace. It was a delightful surprise ("delightful" because it showed that our young people have in mind those in need; a surprise because that was the first I heard about it). Steps away, near two posters with the names of those children from our parish preparing to receive the Eucharist for the first time, was a small number of hand-crafted rosaries with a hand-written sign inviting people to take one. I have no idea who made the rosaries or who put them there. But I don't need to know. I guess that's part of being Catholic. These beads, knit together as much by hands as by love, are a sign to me of both anonymity and intimacy, of the local and the global, of a string of generations bound together by prayer.

Claire Anderson

Shorewood, WI

7 March 2010, feast of Saint Perpetua and Companions