

22ND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME - AUGUST 29, 2004 - BLESSED SACRAMENT

The brief passage we have heard from the Epistle to the Hebrews sets out a dimension of our Christian existence to which we perhaps do not give sufficient attention. At every Sunday Mass this dimension is explicitly evoked, but I have found that many people pass right over it, without appreciating it at its full value.

At the end of the Creed we profess our belief in “the communion of saints.” Both in Greek and in Latin, the original languages of our ancient creed, the phrase could also be translated as “the communion in holy things”; in other words it would refer to something objective: the holy things of God’s word and grace in which we all share. In the usage of the NT, of course, those who share in these holy things are themselves called “holy”; “saints” is one of the earliest self-designations of Christians. It did not refer first of all to their personal holiness, but to their having been blessed by holy gifts. Both translations, “communion in holy things” and “communion of holy ones,” are possible; in fact, one could say that they imply one another.

Today’s reading gives one list of the “holy things” to which Christians have been given access. A contrast is drawn with the assembly of Israelites at the foot of Mt. Sinai, with its dramatic character: blazing fire, gloomy darkness, storm, trumpet blast, and God’s powerful voice from heaven. What Christians encounter in their assembly, instead, is the heavenly Jerusalem, “the city of the living God,” with hosts of angels and the assembly of the firstborn, and God, and Jesus, with the sprinkled blood of the new Covenant.

We may be tempted, as we surely are with regard to the phrase “communion of saints,” to think only of something in the future in this description, but the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews has put it in the present tense, as something to which we already have access. And that is also how it is expressed in the other moment in every Mass when this teaching is evoked. At the end of the preface, the priest gathers up the praise of the assembly, like this one here and now, and links it with the praise being offered by the angels and the saints: “And so with all the angels and saints we take up their endless song of praise.” And then we go on to sing the “Holy, holy, holy”, the song which the prophet Isaiah, in the great description of his own call, heard the seraphim singing.

And we may imagine either of two things: one, that with our joining in that angelic hymn we are ourselves transported to the heavenly liturgy and are singing alongside the holy people of earlier generations. Or, two, we may

imagine the saints and angels as here alongside us, adding their voices to ours. In either case, the common share in holy things extends our communion, fellowship, out beyond the number of us here in this Church at this moment to include all those whom God's grace and truth have made holy.

I had a powerful experience of this once. My Slovak grandfather was one of the founders of the Slovak national church in Haverstraw, N.Y. He walked from Slovak community to Slovak community to raise funds to build the church, and my family possesses the little notebook in which he recorded the nickels and dimes he collected. And then he himself physically helped to build it. My father was baptized in that church, and so were all the members of my generation. It was from that church that he and my grandmother were buried, as well as aunts and uncles and cousins.

The church had fallen into disrepair, but a good priest, an Italian, came in and got the roof repaired and the frescos restored and the whole thing repainted, so that it looked as beautiful as the day Mass was first said there. He asked me, as a descendant of one of the founders, to say the Mass to celebrate the restoration of the Church. We started with a procession up the main aisle, singing a hymn, and everything went as usual. But then as I reached the sanctuary and turned around to face the congregation, an overwhelming feeling came over me that in addition to the people I saw in front of me, there were gathered around us all those people who had built that church, who had been that church, who had been baptized there, confirmed there, celebrated Mass there, been married there, had their children baptized there, been buried from there. I was as convinced of their presence there as I was of the presence of the flesh-and-blood people I could see in front of me. It was so powerful and convincing an experience that it took me a while to regain my composure so that I could get on with the Mass, and I still get emotional recounting it.

That was, I think, an experience of the communion of saints, of our presence to those who have gone before us, and of their presence to us, that we affirm in every Mass. Perhaps we need to personalize it more so that, when we think of those angels and saints whose song of joy we take up, we don't think only of ancient saints, or of great saints, but think also of holy people we have known, of grandparents and parents, brothers and sisters, friends, teachers—of people with whom here on earth we shared the holy gifts of God, with whom we believe we continue to share them, in a fellowship, a communion, that death does not destroy and that will be restored in even greater degree in the resurrection on the last day.