

Personal Prayer versus Communal Prayer ***(....And The Struggle For The Essential)***

I am writing the draft of this piece sitting on the last pew of an empty church. It has been more than a couple of weeks already since our churches are closed as part of the strict restrictions imposed by civil authorities to counter the spread of covid-19. Churches and public worship, after all, are not considered essential unlike the schools and grocery stores. People of faith can not agree with this classification. Some would go the extent of accusing the authorities of infringing the people's right to worship, of taking advantage of the current situation to suppress freedom of religion. However, before imputing malice on these regulations, men and women of faith may bear in mind that there is a big difference between error and malice. These measures simply reflect how the pervading secular mentality distorts society's way of seeing things, so that modern men and women cannot fathom the meaning of the words of the Lord to the Deceiver in the desert, "Not in bread alone doth man live, but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God" (Mat 4:4). They think that faith is purely a private or personal matter. Maybe this crisis we are facing now is challenging modern society to a change of perspective on everything it holds important and to rethink what it deems essential and non-essential in life! I just can't shake off the strange coincidence that these things are happening in the year 2020 which has allusions to the 20/20 perfect vision that humanity must have.

Public worship is essential. People of faith must be allowed to gather to pray together. Churches should not be totally closed. There should be strict limits, of course,

just like in other institutions considered essential. Christian charity demands it. We should not unnecessarily take risks or put other people at harm's way. However, people must be allowed to satisfy their hunger for the spiritual or vicariously do so for the entire community, and this is urgent. Can one not feed on the words of God in the privacy of her own home? Sure, one can. However, it does not take away the necessity of communal worship. Personal prayer and communal prayer are two aspects in the life of faith that addresses different needs, while each one nourishing the other.

Personal prayer is adapted to the needs of the individual and can vary from time to time depending on the circumstances encountered by the individual. It is communicating with God in order to adore him, praise him, to thank him for his gifts, to make reparation for offences, and to ask for various need, both spiritual and temporal. As St. John Damascene succinctly puts it, "Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God." Personal prayer develops our personal intimacy with the Lord according to the way that best suits our respective temperaments. That is why the manner of praying of the same prayer may vary from one person to the next. For example, two people praying for healing of a common friend may do so differently. One may do it by praying in tongues; the other may ask the intercession of a saint. Nevertheless, a Christian does personal prayer in obedience to the Lord's instruction to go to his room, close the door and pray privately to the Father who reads the secrets of one's heart (Mt 6:6). Jesus gave his own example by frequently going aside to pray alone (cf. Mt 14:13, Mk 1:35, Lk 5:15-16).

On the other hand, this same Lord teaches the importance of public worship when at a very young age he was found at the temple and declared, "I must be about my

Father's business" (Lk 2:49) Scriptures also mention that it was his custom to go to the synagogue during the Sabbath (Lk 4:16). These actions prefigure what God wants to accomplish through public worship.

For Christians, public worship refers to the liturgy. The word "liturgy" etymologically means "public work" or "service in the name of/on behalf of the people". As used in the religious context, it means the participation of the People of God in the work of God acting through the minister and the gathered community. Through the liturgy Christ, our Redeemer and High Priest, continues the work of our redemption in, with, and through his Church. This is why an "online worship service" cannot substitute it. Liturgy is "a work of Christ" and also "an action of his Church". And as such it means life for believers! This is especially true in the Catholic tradition where Christ is considered really present in the Holy Mass. From the Eucharist, "grace flows in us as from a source, and obtained with the greatest efficacy is the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God, to which all the other activities of the Church tend as to their end (SC, 10)," says the Fathers at the Second Vatican Council.

So, you see, asking to open up our churches is much more than the right to do something; it is much more than the right to gather or even the freedom to worship. It is about the right to receive Someone – the Only One Essential!

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