

New Life Community, Church of Hope

These words are from a billboard which I see every week as I drive westbound on US-20 on my way to Chicago from my parish in Mishawaka, Indiana. I suspect that it refers to one of those non-denominational Protestant churches which have sprung up everywhere – perhaps as people seek nourishment not found in the established mainline Churches like our own. Beyond that, I know almost nothing about this congregation except for its very significant name.

First of all, they refer to themselves as a community. The English poet John Donne, in “Mediation XVII”, tells us how important this is.

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind...”

Does this describe us? Hardly! Often, our parishes are only a community to the extent that we gather together in the same building, and not even at the same time. Perhaps we are more like gamblers in a casino filled with slot machines: we pay no attention to those around us – neither to the person at the next slot machine nor to the one in the next pew - so focused are we on what we are doing and on what we want. Perhaps our Protestant friends in Indiana are right to remind us that we are to be a community, that our vocation is to become a credible icon of the loving community which is the Trinity.

Then they tell us that their community is about new life; ours should be as well. Jesus tells us: “I have come so that you might have life, and have it more abundantly.” St. Irenaeus of Lyon says that “the Glory of God is a human being fully alive.” Does this describe our Christian lives? I get the impression that we often endure our liturgies rather than celebrating them, that we go through the motions as a matter of habit rather than joining in wholeheartedly. After we leave the church building, do we share joyful acts of goodness, or do we display grudging obedience in actions controlled by fear rather than love?

Finally, our friends in Indiana strive to be a “Church of Hope”. Do we? Sometimes it seems that we are so tied to another time long ago, to another place far away, that we pay little attention to the God Who is not only our past but also our future, and Who right here and now invites us to join Him on the way. Are our communities so burdened by declining numbers and revenues that we can scarcely stand upright in order to recognize the sparkling eye of the One Who is our hope? Jesus promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against His Church; do we trust Him enough to let ourselves be transformed into the hopeful, living community for which the world is so desperate?

By the way, it seems that the church along US-20 also sponsors a restaurant and catering service named “Holy Macaroni!”. So much food for thought!

-Fr. Jim, op