

Homily
All Saints
Oct. 31/Nov.1 2015
St. Bernard Church

Dream – image of tree stumps

Woke up – wondered what it was all about

Morning prayer in chapel of Catholic Charities

1 Chronicles 16:33

“Then shall all the trees of the forest exult before the Lord, for he comes: he comes to rule the earth.”

The meaning of the dream, the image

Why do I mention this?

The highest form of praise from a human being comes when we have an experience of God’s grace, of God’s love.

When God touches us, when we know His love for us is real, when He intervenes in our lives, we experience a profound joy, which is then expressed in the deepest and most authentic praise.

I don’t know about you, but this kind of joy, this kind of praise, is a challenge for me.

I’m Irish, so I am more comfortable with feeling melancholy. That’s what you are when something good happens but you can’t fully enjoy it because you think something bad must be around the next corner.

Our First Reading today, from the Book of Revelation, contains a vivid description of the communion of saints in heaven, all filled with joy, kneeling before the throne and constantly singing their praise of Jesus, because they all know the exhilaration of experiencing God’s grace in their lives.

There’s another powerful passage in the Book of Revelation in Chapter 5. St. John describes the sounds he heard when he experienced his vision of heaven:

“Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, everything in the universe, cry out: “To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor, glory and might, forever and ever.”

The question for each one of us, today and every day of our lives, is this:

“Do we hear the music?” - the music of every created person and thing constantly praising Jesus

Then there's a second question:

“Is the song of my life a solo or am I part of the choir?”

How do we hear the music? How do we experience such joy from our relationship with Jesus that we are constantly praising Him along with the communion of saints?

Maybe the best way I can answer these questions is to tell you about a community of Catholics that I came across a week ago.

In a rural area just outside St. Augustine, Florida, I met about 50 young adult Catholics, men and women, whose faces radiated such extreme joy that you couldn't take your eyes off them. I know lots of happy people. But I have never seen the degree of joy that I witnessed on the faces of these young adults.

What is particularly interesting about these young men and women is that every one of them had been through a long history of addiction to alcohol and drugs. Out of total desperation, they had come to this Catholic community in Florida as perhaps their last chance to climb out of the depths of their addiction.

The treatment, if you want to call it that, in the community does not involve any medication. There is no counseling in the normal sense.

It's a residential program, and each person who enters makes a commitment to stay in the community for at least three years. There is no charge.

Here's the formula, the process that is followed that heals and transforms virtually every person who enters the community.

First, simplicity. The facilities of the community are very basic. There's nothing fancy.

Second, prayer. The members of the community say the rosary 3 times a day. There is Eucharistic Adoration every day. They say the Liturgy of the Hours. There are frequent Masses. There is a strong devotion to our Blessed Mother. Everything that happens in the community depends on prayer. They have no formal fund raising. They simply pray for the resources they need.

Third, work. They grow and raise their own food. They cook and serve their meals. They build and care for the facilities they live in.

Fourth, community. They learn to serve others before taking care of their own needs. They develop a spirit of self-sacrifice and a deep friendship with other members of the community. There are frequent community celebrations with music, dancing and skits.

Fifth, and most importantly, faith in Jesus. They believe that Christian life, lived to its fullest, is the true answer to every restlessness in the human heart and that, through a deep relationship with Jesus Christ, we are reborn into a life of hope and are released from the chains that have enslaved us. As Jesus himself told us, “the truth will set us free.” Anything less than the full truth does not set us completely free.

The experience of the young men and women I saw in Florida is captured very beautifully in the first few verses of Psalm 40:

“I waited, waited for the Lord; who bent down and heard my cry, drew me out of the pit of destruction, out of the mud of the swamp, set my feet upon rock, steadied my steps, and put a new song in my mouth, a hymn to our God.”

I think the problem for most of us is that we don’t know that, down deep, we’re all crying, crying for a deeper union with God, to truly experience His presence, to know the reality of His intense personal love for us.

Most of us don’t suffer from an extreme addiction. We’re in the range of normal. Our life is a mixture of faith and the ordinary concerns of getting ahead, buying stuff, filling up our days with lots of busyness, and so on. Our concern for what we call the things of the world seems so normal and yet it might be the main thing keeping us from experiencing the joy that I witnessed in the young men and women in Florida.

Perhaps we can learn from them and follow the same principles:

Simplifying our lives, praying throughout the day, working to serve the needs of others, building a truly Christian community and developing a deeper relationship with Jesus, all the time praying for God’s grace and His direction for our lives.

If we do this, maybe we can all hear the music. Maybe then we can join the choir with the saints...and the trees.