

ST. BENEDICT'S 125TH ANNIVERSARY

JULY 11, 2021

H. JOPP

AT THE END OF A PANDEMIC THAT HAS SEPARATED US FROM EACH OTHER AND CONSTRAINED OUR OPPORTUNITIES TO WORSHIP TOGETHER FOR OVER A YEAR, WE GATHER TODAY TO CELEBRATE. BUT WHAT EXACTLY ARE WE CELEBRATING? ON ONE LEVEL WE CELEBRATE THE 125TH ANNIVERSARY OF A STRUCTURE – ST. BENEDICT'S CHURCH. IT'S A BUILDING, BUT SO MUCH MORE. IT'S THE SEAT OF OUR PARISH'S LITURGICAL LIFE AND ITS SOCIAL LIFE. FOR MANY OF US, IT'S BOTH A PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL HOME.

IN ONE OF HIS POEMS, THE AMERICAN POET ROBERT FROST WRITES: "HOME IS WHERE WHEN YOU HAVE TO GO THERE, THEY HAVE TO TAKE YOU IN." HE WASN'T SPEAKING ABOUT A CHURCH, YET HIS DESCRIPTION OF HOME IS AN INTERESTING SPRINGBOARD FOR REFLECTION. PERHAPS WE MIGHT DESCRIBE OUR PARISH HOME AND THIS BUILDING IN SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT WORDS: "OUR PARISH HOME IS WHERE WHEN WE WANT OR NEED TO GO THERE, WE ARE ALWAYS WELCOMED IN".

MY ENTIRE LIFE HAS BEEN CENTERED AROUND THIS PARISH. I RECEIVED FIRST COMMUNION AT ST. ELIZABETH'S AND WAS CONFIRMED AT ST. BENEDICT'S. AFTER I WAS ORDAINED A DEACON IN 1980, I PREACHED MY FIRST HOMILIES IN BOTH CHURCHES. THERE ARE THOSE HERE TODAY WHOSE FAMILIES HAVE WORSHIPPED IN THE PARISH OF ST. BENEDICT FOR GENERATIONS; OTHERS HAVE JUST RECENTLY JOINED OUR COMMUNITY. BAPTISMS, WEDDINGS,

FUNERALS – ALL HAVE FILLED THIS BUILDING AND TOUCHED THE HEARTS OF THOSE WHO PARTICIPATED IN THESE SACRED RITUALS.

OLDER BUILDINGS OFTEN COMMUNICATE A SENSE OF STABILITY. SOMETIMES, THEY BECOME LANDMARKS FOR OUR SPIRITUAL LIFE. FREQUENTLY THEY ARE OUR HAVENS, ESPECIALLY IN TIMES OF NEED, SUFFERING AND LOSS. AND YET, IRONICALLY, THESE BUILDINGS ARE NOT REALLY STATIC AT ALL. WHEN I WAS GROWING UP IN THIS PARISH, MY IMMIGRANT GRANDPARENTS HAD NO CAR. THEY CAME TO CHURCH IN A HORSE-DRAWN WAGON. FARM FAMILIES WERE A MAINSTAY BACK THEN. BENEDICTINE NUNS WOULD TEACH US THE CATECHISM IN THE CHURCH, THE DIFFERENT GRADES SEPARATED BY EMPTY ROWS. THERE WAS NO FAMILY LIFE CENTER. FAMILIES TENDED TO OCCUPY THE SAME PEW EVERY SUNDAY. TO A CHILD’S MIND, EVERYTHING SEEMED THE SAME FROM WEEK TO WEEK.

OF COURSE, THAT WAS NOT THE CASE. IN MY FIRST PHILOSOPHY CLASS, I HEARD THE PROFESSOR CITE THE GREEK WORDS: “PANTA REI” – “ALL THINGS FLOW.” MOVEMENT AND CHANGE ARE THE ESSENCE OF OUR HUMAN LIVES. THIS COMMUNITY GATHERED HERE TODAY MOURNS THE LOSS OF A NUMBER OF ITS COMPANIONS OVER THE PAST YEAR. THE PANDEMIC MEANT THAT IN MANY CASES WE COULDN’T EVEN GATHER TO ATTEND THEIR FUNERALS. WE MISSED NOT BEING ABLE TO COME HOME. STILL, ALL THINGS KEPT FLOWING

AN ANCIENT METAPHOR FOR THE SPIRITUAL LIFE IS THE IMAGE OF THE “WAY” OR THE “JOURNEY.” LIFE IS ANYTHING BUT STATIC. THE CHURCH FATHER ST. BASIL THE GREAT WROTE: “LIFE HAS BEEN CALLED A ‘WAY’ BECAUSE EVERYTHING THAT HAS BEEN CREATED IS ON ITS WAY TO ITS END.” IN A SENSE,

WE ARE ALL ON OUR SEPARATE WAYS TOGETHER. HERE, IN THIS BUILDING, IS WHERE WE GATHER FOR RESPITE, SUPPORT AND REST IN GOD. STOPPING HERE REGULARLY IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF OUR WAY. I AM REMINDED OF ST. PETER'S DECLARATION AT JESUS' TRANSFORMATION ON MOUNT TABOR: "LORD, IT IS GOOD FOR US TO BE HERE."

AS YOU MAY BE AWARE, THE MOTTO FOR BENEDICTINES AROUND THE WORLD, DRAWN FROM THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT, IS "ORA ET LABORA"- PRAY AND WORK. IN A SENSE, IT'S ALSO THE MOTTO FOR OUR PARISH – PRAYER AND WORK. THEY ARE WHAT OCCUPY US ON OUR WAY. HOWEVER, THESE ARE NOT REALLY DISTINCT FUNCTIONS. THEY ARE INTERTWINED. AS WE JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS, WE ARE LIKELY TO DISCOVER THAT, IN FACT, THERE IS BOTH THE PRAYER OF WORK AS WELL AS THE WORK OF PRAYER. SCRIPTURE ENCOURAGES US TO PRAY ALWAYS. THE CHALLENGE TO DO THIS IS THE "WORK OF PRAYER." THE MORE WE ARE SUCCESSFUL AT IT, THE MORE WE DISCOVER THE "PRAYER OF WORK". THEY OVERLAP IN OUR LIFE'S JOURNEY. TOGETHER, OUR PRAYER AND OUR WORK SUSTAIN US. IN THIS WAY, THE SPIRIT OF ST. BENEDICT LIVES ON IN OUR PARISH

THE VERY BUILDING WE CELEBRATE TODAY HAS ALSO BEEN ON A JOURNEY. MODIFICATIONS HAVE BEEN MADE OVER THE YEARS; FURNISHINGS HAVE EVOLVED AS HAS THE LITURGY. I REMEMBER THAT SHORTLY AFTER THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL THE OFFICE OF "COMMENTATOR" CAME ABOUT DURING THE TRANSITION FROM LATIN TO THE VERNACULAR. I RECALL VIVIDLY AT MASS READING THE ENTIRE LITURGY IN ENGLISH AT THE ALTAR WHILE THE PASTOR PRAYED IT IN LATIN. I WASN'T A DEACON AT THE TIME. LOOKING BACK AT IT, I

AM PRETTY SURE THAT WE WERE STRETCHING THE RUBICS. I ALSO REMEMBER THAY WHEN THE CALL WENT OUT FOR LAY READERS, ONLY ONE PARISHIONER DARED TO VOLUNTEER, BUT THE WAY CONTINUED. TODAY WE ARE TRULY BLESSED BY A VARIETY OF MINISTRIES: SOME VISIBLE TO ALL AND MANY OTHERS DONE QUIETLY BEHIND THE SCENES. WE HAVE ALL GOTTEN INCREASINGLY COMFORTABLE PARTICIPATING IN THIS HOME WE SHARE AND CARE ABOUT.

WHEN THE CHURCH OF ST. BENEDICT WAS BUILT, ITS FAITH COMMUNITY WAS MUCH SMALLER AND FAR LESS MOBILE. THE WORLD OF TODAY IS VASTLY DIFFERENT. SOME CHILDREN REMAIN LIVING AND WORKING WITHIN THE PARISH WHILE FOR OTHERS, THEIR WAY LEADS THEM FAR AWAY. THEY COME BACK FROM TIME TO TIME TO THEIR HOME. IT'S ALWAYS GOOD TO SEE THEM. IT'S WHERE THEY WILL ALWAYS BE WELCOME. HOPEFULLY, THEY CARRY SOME OF THE SPIRIT OF ST. BENEDICT WITH THEM IN THEIR HEARTS AND IN THEIR MEMORIES.

IN ONE OF HIS COMMENTARIES, ST. BASIL OBSERVES: "THE 'WAY' DOES NOT BELONG TO YOU NOR IS THE PRESENT UNDER YOUR CONTROL. BUT AS STEP SUCCEEDS STEP, ENJOY EACH MOMENT AS IT COMES AND THEN CONTINUE ON YOUR WAY." THAT'S WHAT WE ARE DOING TODAY. LET US CELEBRATE AND ENJOY THIS MOMENT AS OUR PRAYER OF WORK AND OUR WORK OF PRAYER ACCOMPANY US ON OUR INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE WAYS TO THE ETERNAL HOME THAT AWAITS US AFTER OUR TEMPORARY SOJOURN, HOWEVER BRIEF OR LONG, IN THIS SPECIAL HOME THAT HAS BEEN AND IS ST. BENEDICT'S.