

Insights in Liturgy

Lent: A Spiritual Journey

By MSGR. WILLIAM H. SHANNON

For so long a time we have tended to think of the Church almost exclusively

in terms of its institutional model. In this context we have seen the Church as divided into two groups: the clergy and the laity. But there are other models of

the Church. One of them is the Lenten Church, which is the pilgrim Church: the Church on a spiritual journey. Whereas the institutional Church is defined in terms of lines of authority, the Lenten Church is defined in terms of the stages of the spiritual journey.

Him in the desert, the place of fasting, of prayer and of victory over temptation (See the Gospel of the first Sunday of Lent). They meet Him on the mountain (See the Gospel of the second Sunday of Lent), where He is transfigured before them and they come to a new vision of who He is. They meet Him at the well of living waters (Gospel of the third Sunday), at the pool of healing waters (Gospel of the fourth Sunday), and at the tomb where life springs from death (Gospel of the fifth Sunday) and in the meeting they are transfigured before Him, as His healing word and touch penetrate their being and make them new men and women.

ON THE RIGHT SIDE



Fr. Paul J. Cuddy

Last week this column narrated the preparation for an interview with the pastor of Assumption Church, Wyalusing, Penn., 20 miles beyond Towanda, where holy visions are alleged to appear to some people on the tabernacle veil. Here is a resume of the interview.

On the first Friday of May, 1977, before Mass, a person saw a strange sight on the tabernacle veil. It was the face of Christ. For nearly a week he saw this, but said nothing. Then another parishioner came saying he had seen Christ on the veil. Then others reported the same thing. In time, the claimed images included others besides Christ: His Blessed Mother, saints, angels, and later even Padre Pio and Pius XII. The reports were diverse. Some saw one image; some another; others saw many; and some saw nothing at all excepting the satin tabernacle veil covered with a lace, gold, brocade netting.

As word spread about, people began to come from distances: Elmira, Buffalo, Rochester, Hornell, Connecticut. More came from New York State than from Pennsylvania. In the summer crowds came to overflow the tiny 150 seat country church, making it unbearably hot. The pastor presents a simple message, similar to Fatima: devotion to the Eucharist, and to Our Blessed Mother, especially through the rosary. In six months 25,000 rosaries have been taken. With my pragmatic mind I asked: "Do they pay for what they take?" He smiled: "Some leave a donation for them; and some take a dozen and leave a dollar. We could not pay the rosary invoices from the donations, but candle donations help to cover the costs." He added: "There is a Sister Imelda in your diocese who has a group — I think they are connected with St. Joseph's Hospital, Elmira, — who make rosaries and send them to us. We would be harder pressed without their help."

Are the visions only on the veil? Some claim to have seen them on the walls of the church, reminiscent of the shrine of Our Lady of Knock, County Mayo in Ireland. I talked with a parishioner who claims that at Christmas Mass she saw distinctly the beautiful hands of Our Lord's Mother, with a blue veil on her head, appearing on the shoulder of the priest's chasuble.

With sorrow the pastor spoke of the decline of the rosary devotion these past years. He told of a 75-year-old man, who had become a Catholic 40 years before, who did not know how to say the rosary. So he gave the man a set of blue beads and a folder on how to say the rosary. During Mass the

beads changed from blue to crystal. "I know this happened because there are four witnesses to it right in the parish." Some have not denied the visions, but say it is the work of the devil. "But the devil hardly advocates Holy Communion and confession and the rosary. One of the effects of these manifestations is the return of so many to confession and Communion, marriages straightened out, and a great love of the rosary with a genuine conversion in life."

And myself? What do I think? I am hesitant to make any positive conclusions. It is said that the little church brings tranquility. This did happen to me. But did I see anything on the veil? For most of the time I did not even look at the veil, but prayed with eyes closed, thinking "More Precious than any sacred pictures on veils is Our Lord within the tabernacle." Later, during a Holy Hour I studied the veil. Slowly there came to sight a perfect representation of a Fra Angelico "Annunciation" Gabriel standing before Mary as she knelt in graceful prayer. Some time later, less distinctly but clearly recognizable, there came a picture of the Virgin kneeling before her new born Son, much as we see on Christmas cards. Were these just from natural shadows and co-incident folds in the veil to make these remarkable representations? Perhaps. I do not know.

But there is something strange that these particular images of the Annunciation and of the Word Made Flesh in Bethlehem, whether from natural shadows or elsewhere should be for me. Why? Because ever since Pope Paul wrote his Cultus Mariae (Devotion to Mary) in February, 1975, asking the bishops of the world to encourage their people to recite the rosary and the Angelus, I have worked diligently — and quite unsuccessfully — to have the Angelus recited in our churches, rectories, convents, schools, Motherhouses, and Seminaries, CCD classes and homes, at the sounding of the Angelus bell. I have distributed thousands of a beautiful Angelus folder which I order by the thousand from Jeffery Manz in Philadelphia. It has the French artist Millet's picture of the Angelus on the front of the folder, and the Angelus prayer inside.

It does seem a devout coincidence that the images which I should see, even if from shadows and folds in the tabernacle, should be the Scriptural account of the coming of Christ into this world, Gabriel's announcement, Mary's acceptance, and the birth of the Word to dwell among us.

God willing, I hope to return to Wyalusing.

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There are three groups in the Lenten Church, each identified in terms of the way in which it participates in the spiritual journey: (1) the catechumens, (2) the penitents, and (3) the faithful. The catechumens are those who are beginning the journey. The penitents are those who are resuming the journey after having left it for a time because of sin. The faithful are those who continue on the journey they began with Baptism.

What is the goal of the spiritual journey? The goal is Easter. The Lenten Church may be defined as the Church that is straining to become the Easter Church in its fullness, namely the Church that fully participates in the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord. Each of us plays a role in transforming the Lenten Church into the Easter Church. But that transformation will be fully achieved only at the final coming of the Lord. For the "Easter Church" is the Church that is fully the Lord's, wherein nothing escapes his dominion. The Lenten Church is on the way to that fullness.

On the spiritual journey toward Easter the members of the Lenten Church meet Jesus their Lord in various ways and places. They meet

The desert, the mountain, the well, the pool, the tomb are stages along the way of the spiritual journey. They are experiences that touch us. They are the sacraments of Lent, for they express and deepen the reality of our meeting with the Lord. For in the spiritual journey we must follow the Way and the Way is Christ.

Perhaps this Lent we might realize, more consciously that we are men and women on a journey, intent on making the journey with earnestness and helping others to do the same. Then we too will come to Easter, probably not this year the ultimate Easter, when all will be fully the Lord's, but at least the penultimate Easter that prepares for that final glorious moment that will climax human history: the moment when the Lenten Church will become in the fullest sense the "Easter Church".

Adult Ed. Courses Set at Holy Name

The religious education staff of Holy Name parish has arranged two evening courses for adults, one on morality, scheduled to begin Feb. 21, and one on teaching methods, techniques and tools.

The latter course, which begins March 28, is Phase IV of the Diocesan Certification Program for religion teachers, but it is open to anyone interested.

On five consecutive Tuesdays, 7:30-9:30 p.m., matters of morality will be examined from various angles by the following speakers: Father David

Fedor (Feb. 21); Sister Michael Lappetito, RSM (Feb. 28); Father Henry Atwell (March 7); Father William Graf (March 14); Father James C. Burke (March 21).

The teachers' course also is scheduled for five consecutive Tuesdays, March 28 through April 25. Instructors will be John McKiernan, Judy Kollar, Daniel McNamara and Denise Mack. There is no fee. Details may be obtained through 716-621-6343.

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With the season of Lent, comes the question, "How can I best keep Lent?" The answer is we must make sacrifices on our own and nothing is a sacrifice unless it hurts. What will be your sacrifice? ... Just think of the missionaries in our 18 emerging countries who keep Lent all year long. Sacrifice something big this year. When helping others hurts a bit, you know you've made a sacrifice.

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