The Eucharist Helps Us Open Our Hearts, Minds and Souls

A story is told of a monastery that once had a great number of monks, but had fallen on hard times due to persecutions of the 17th and 18th centuries, and the rise of secularism in the 19th century. Because of this, all of its branch houses had closed, and the once great order was reduced to 5 monks, all who were over the age of 70 living at the mother house. The writing was on the wall; it seemed that the order would soon be no more.

Deep in the woods near the monastery, was a small hut that a rabbi from a nearby town would occasionally use as a hermitage, a place to be in solitude and to pray. Through many years of prayer and contemplation, the monks in the monastery developed a sixth sense in which they could tell when the rabbi was in the hermitage. And so as he agonized over the imminent demise of his order, the abbot pondered going out to visit the rabbi to see if by some chance he would have some advice to give as to how the monastery might be saved.

Meeting his friend, the abbot asked for advice and if the rabbi had any.

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery, his fellow monks gathered around him to ask what the rabbi had to say. He told them all the rabbi said was that the Messiah was one of us –but I don't know what he meant.

The monks pondered this statement over the next months. They asked themselves if he meant one of the monks at the monastery. And, if that were the case, which one did he mean? Perhaps, they thought, it was the abbot. They thought surely it must be him, for he had been the leader of the abbey for more than a generation. But then, as they thought more about it, it could be Brother Thomas the old rabbi was referring to. Certainly he was known as a holy man, and a man of light. Or, quite possible, it could have been Brother Elred. He could be a bit of a curmudgeon at times, but even though he got on some of the other monk's nerves, he usually ended up being proven right. There was also Brother Philip, but they thought he probably wasn't the one who was going to save the monastery, for he was so passive. But then, as they thought about it more, he always had a tendency to show up when you needed him most. And as each monk pondered this statement, "the Messiah is one of us," each monk also thought that surely the rabbi was not referring to him. "He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for you, could I?"

The more though they thought about this question, the more also the monks began to change. They treated each other with extraordinary respect on the off-chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves also with greater respect.

All the while this was going on, people began to notice the monks more. The monastery was situated in a beautiful forest, and so people would still come by to visit the monastery and picnic on it's small lawn, and wonder along the paths, and even every so often go to the dilapidated chapel to meditate. And as they did this, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something so strangely attractive, even compelling about this old monastery. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more and more to picnic, to play and to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then, a miracle happened. Some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while, one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality.

The story of the rabbi's gift is a version told by the late Dr. Scott Peck, a psychiatrist. It's featured in his book "The Different Drum," though he's probably most famous for his first book "The Road Less Traveled."

Our catechism teaches us that "as bodily nourishment restores lost strength, so the Eucharist strengthens our charity, which tends to be weakened in daily life…by giving himself to us Christ revives our love and enables us to break our disordered attachments to creatures and root ourselves in him." (#1394). This is why it's so important we come to Mass; for it is at Mass we receive our Lord in a unique way and receive both forgiveness of sin and strength to combat sin through this spiritual nourishment. When we ponder the words, "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the words and I shall be healed," we also need to think about the words He is speaking to us. Where is it He wants us to change? What sins to we cling to? Where do we need to see spiritual growth in our relationship with God and one another? Jesus coming to dwell within us is the light that helps us find our way around bitterness, denial, stubbornness and to look for the hand of God, which is the hand of freedom.

However, there must always be a connection to one another; the Eucharist helps us to see Jesus in other people. But this takes work! Even though the story didn't make mention of the Eucharist, I think it illustrates what the Eucharist does. The monks presumably were receiving Communion every day together as a community, but something had changed over time so that they were no longer growing as they should. The rabbi, in his wisdom, helped them see that each of them was the Messiah, the one who would save the community, because each of them was vital to it. I think this is more important than ever to remember, and hopefully the Eucharist helps open our eyes to the difference we make when we are kind, when we refrain from gossip and tearing others down, when we are patient, and when we do simple acts that make such a difference.

What a gift we have in the Eucharist. Jesus journeys with us each and every step of the way. May we never forget the incredible gift we are given in His Body and Blood, and, nourished by it, may we grow closer to Him through our way of life, and strive to become His voice and His presence in the world in how we love one another as He has loved us.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul