

THE TRANSFIGURATION
Preaching for Second Sunday of Lent, February 28, 2010
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Luke 9:28b-36 - While he was praying his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white.

The latest issue of the Catholic magazine, *Commonweal*, has “spirituality” as its theme. My initial reaction on seeing the cover was rather skeptical. Oh great, I thought, here goes another round of separating “spirituality” from “religion” -- an either/or division that names one as good, real and authentic and the other as useless, false and fake. It has become a cliché today to be spiritual but not religious and to be against so-called “organized” religion. But once I started reading the articles, I was pleased that they seek to demonstrate the deep interconnectedness between the outer and inner workings of religious faith and practice. I highly recommend these articles, especially Prof. Barbara Mujica’s article on St. Teresa of Avila, and how she, an atheist, came to faith through a retreat that was advertised through the local Newman Center. But this homily is not just a magazine review. This topic of the connection between external religious observance and mysticism is directly connected to the Transfiguration of Jesus that we heard about in Luke’s Gospel.

The whole point of each of the four Gospels is to ask and answer the question, Who was this guy? They seek to convince us that the answer is: The Messiah of God who was, in fact, God among us in the flesh. In the narrative of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Transfiguration occurs at a pivotal point in the story. Just a few days before Peter had made his profession of faith that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus knew that his Passion lay ahead in the not-too-distant future. So he took his three closest disciples, Peter, James and John, and gave them a glimpse of a reality they could scarcely imagine. To them, Jesus’ appearance changed, his face like that of the sun, his clothing bright as high-altitude snow at mid-day. But in reality Jesus did not change. He only lifted their spiritual blindness for a moment. This is what is known as an epiphany, or better yet, a theophany - a mystical manifestation of the divine breaking into everyday life. Such an event

provides a perspective that changes everything for the better. The transfiguration was a validation of Peter's previous confession. It was a foretaste of Jesus' resurrection. But above all it was a manifestation of Christ himself as the visible sacrament of the divine, Trinitarian love. The glory of God, who is Love, flashed right through him and even through his clothes. The significance of the incarnation is shown through the Transfiguration, indicating that nothing can pass from God to human beings, nor from human beings to God, except through Jesus Christ. As I said, the transfiguration did not change Jesus; the transfiguration was a momentary glimpse of who he really is and what he must accomplish.

Even after nearly 2000 years we are probably only beginning to grasp the significance of the Incarnation, of God become human in the person and body of Jesus Christ. We recite every Sunday in the Creed that Jesus is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God." We also rather glibly speak and sing of the Church by saying that "We are the body of Christ." And we are. But do we recognize how utterly mystical these high doctrines are? Do we meditate on their practical consequences? Do we recognize how profound it is that we otherwise ordinary human beings constitute the visible sacrament of Jesus Christ in the world? The humanity of Jesus is the vital place where human beings are transfigured. What the Second Person of the Holy Trinity did to humanity by becoming flesh through the Virgin Mary was to elevate humanity up into godhood through the grace of God's plan of salvation. The very meaning and potentiality of being human is transformed in light of Christ. And it all comes full circle when we receive the body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ sacramentally in the Eucharist. This is the Bread of Life and this is the Cup of Salvation that feeds us spiritually so that we may become what we consume - and become that in communion, in community. This is the deep spiritual meaning of our "organized" religion.

The Mass is an occasion of the epiphany of Jesus Christ in the world today. We are most the Church, and we are closest to heaven on earth, here gathered to offer Eucharist. Here and now, right in this place,

something is happening that is deeper than thought, more profound than epic emotion, something that is elevating in a way we can hardly describe. Right now we are engaged in the divine liturgy, and in doing so we are participants in the Transfiguration of our Lord within our very bodies. Too bad we don't experience it this way most of the time. Most of the time we find ourselves going through a familiar ritual. It may give us comfort to be doing something that has been going on since the days of the Apostles. This is a good thing, but so often we are not even mindful of that. But here in this place the transfiguration happens, whether you notice or not. But if you did notice it, what might be the most tangible manifestations of this epiphany of God in Christ in this place? For one thing, Jesus promises an abiding Peace beyond understanding. For another, there might be a sense of an almost frightening depth of Love that is capable of incredible sacrifice. Yet the pain of such sacrifice doesn't bring sorrow, but rather it brings an unexplainable Joy. The transfiguration at work within us produces this abiding Peace, the depth of Love, this unfathomable Joy.

So how might we insure that Mass itself becomes a mystical experience for us, recognizing, at least occasionally, that it truly is an occasion of our transfiguration into the Body of Christ? Be mindful, be active, be open. The Mass is primarily the work of Christ in which we are privileged to participate. But Christ wants us to be mindful and active recipients of his love, joy, peace. So as Lent progresses, think about the meaning of the Mass, meditate on it. During Mass, let's seek to participate with our whole bodies, ears and hearts, mouths and minds. If we are open to the work of the Spirit within, we just may catch a glimpse of Christ's transfiguring work of glory within us and among us today.