

OPENING THE WORD | CARL OLSON

Life-giving communion

Divine work of unifying humanity has always been difficult; we must do our part by doing God's will



“Christ is the Light of nations.” That statement is the opening sentence of *Lumen Gentium* (“Light of the Nations”), the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. The council, the document explains, desired to proclaim the Gospel to “all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church” (No. 1). The Church, it continued, “is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole hu-

man race...” These themes of communion with God and the union of mankind by the grace of God are emphasized throughout the document.

In a closely related manner, the Catechism of the Catholic Church points out that the early Christians said, “The world was created for the sake of the Church” (No. 760). That refers to the fact that God created the world out of his love and goodness so mankind can share in his divine life. Since communion with God’s divine life is realized in the Church, this means “the Church is the goal of all things ...” (ibid). This work of unity is alluded to in today’s reading from Isaiah. “I come to gather nations of every language; they shall come and see my glory.” Israel was chosen to be a light for the nations, the firstborn son who would draw all peoples to the one, true God. Those Gentiles, Isaiah explained, were “brothers and sisters from all the nations”; they also desired to bring an offering to the Lord and his “holy mountain.” After all, Psalm 117 states, “Praise the Lord, all you nations! Extol him, all you peoples!”

Alas, those exhortations went largely ignored. The fact is, the

divine work of unifying fallen humanity has always been a difficult one. As God has pursued a merciful mission of unity and reunion, mankind has pursued a course of disunion and rebellion. Like children intent upon holding fast to toys and games, we seek security in the passing pleasures and distractions of this world. There are even more subtle distractions, as indicated by the question found in today’s Gospel: “Lord, will only a few people be saved?”

And it seems to be a fair question. Who hasn’t wondered, “Who will make it? Will he? What about her?” But Jesus would have none of it, for the question distracts from the responsibility we each have when it comes to our salvation. Yes, we are saved by grace, but we must actively

and constantly cooperate with the gift of grace. “Strive to enter through the narrow gate,” Jesus said, “for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough” (Lk 13: 24). Remaining in communion with God requires effort, fidelity and sacrifice. Being born into the family of God does not exempt us from striving to be a true son and daughter of God.

As *Lumen Gentium* warns, “He is not saved, however, who, though part of the body of the Church, does not persevere in charity. He remains indeed in the bosom of the Church, but, as it were, only in a ‘bodily’ manner and not ‘in his heart’” (No. 14). Those sobering words compliment the Epistle’s warning that God sometimes has to discipline the wayward child. The journey to authentic unity and life-giving communion is difficult; arriving at the final destination of beatitude is not a given.

“All the Church’s children should remember that their exalted status is to be attributed not to their own merits but to the special grace of Christ” (ibid).

Carl E. Olson is the editor of Catholic World Report.

TRAVEL



Pilgrims process during a pilgrimage honoring Our Lady of Perpetual Help at Mount St. Macrina in Uniontown, Pa. Courtesy of Mount St. Macrina

Physical connections to the divine

Shrines and grottoes throughout the United States afford pilgrims a spiritual experience

By Maryann Gogniat Eidemiller

The liturgical year of the Byzantine Catholic Church begins Sept. 1 and, in Uniontown, Pa., the Sisters of St. Basil the Great celebrate with a Labor Day weekend pilgrimage honoring Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

The event at Mount St. Macrina has been held since 1934, when they celebrated the blessing of their new monastery. The theme was set in 1935 after Pope Pius XI gave the sisters an icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and requested that they spread devotion to the Mother of God under that title.

It’s now the oldest and largest Byzantine Catholic pilgrimage in the United States and attracts up to 8,000 people from all over. The monastery and shrines also attract visitors year-round.

“They come because they’re able to connect with this holy place and with one another,” said Sister of St. Basil the Great Barbara Jean Mihalchick, monastery vocational director.

The pilgrimage opens with Matins Aug. 31 and closes with a candlelight procession Sept. 1. Both days have full schedules of liturgies, reconciliation, processions, vespers,



Thousands of pilgrims visit El Santuario de Chimayo in New Mexico on Good Friday. Photo by Father Julio Gonzalez, S.F.

prayers, anointing, children’s programs and opportunities to visit shrines, chapels and places for prayer.

Pilgrimages such as this one are rooted in Christian tradition from the Middle Ages, when the faithful took long and dangerous journeys to holy places. Contemporary Catholics have many more opportunities, and in the United States there are shrines and grottoes in nearly every state. In addition to Mount St. Macrina, the following three sites are worth checking out.

El Santuario de Chimayo

With nearly 500,000 annual visitors, El Santuario de

Chimayo has been called the “Our Lady of North America” and one of the most important pilgrimage sites in the world. Here in the high desert of northern New Mexico, 40,000 Christians come on Easter weekend alone, some walking long distances, carrying crosses and waiting for hours to get into the church.

On the last Sunday in August, Vietnamese communities from around the country come for their own celebration. Three years ago one community donated a statue of Our Lady of La Vang.

“It’s been an historical pilgrimage site for nearly 200 years,” said Joanne DuPont



Brother Richard Merling anoints a woman at a blessing of the sick in St. Bonaventure Chapel. Courtesy of the Solanus Casey Center



Grotto of the Redemption. Courtesy of the Grotto of the Redemption

Sandoval, manager of the site. “People of all faiths and of no faith come, and many say that they find a kind of peace and sacredness in this simple, humble chapel that they don’t find elsewhere. People want some connection with the divine, and this is a physical, tangible way of entering into that.”

According to tradition, in 1810 a friar discovered a buried crucifix, known as Nuestro Señor de Esquipulas, on the site, and there followed miraculous occurrences. It’s said that to this day, people receive spiritual, physical and psychological healings, and many leave behind messages, pictures, small gifts and cast-off crutches. They also take away small amounts of Holy Dirt from the “el pocito” (little well) that many believe have curative powers. El Santuario de Chimayo is one of several sites in the Holy Pilgrimages of Northern New Mexico.

Solanus Casey Center

About 300 people attend the blessing of the sick every Wednesday at St. Bonaventure Chapel of the Solanus Casey Center at St. Bonaventure Monastery in Detroit. The service is held next to the crypt of Venerable Solanus Casey (1870-1957), a Capuchin Franciscan friar who, because

he didn’t do well in seminary studies, was not permitted to hear confessions nor preach doctrinal sermons.

Instead, Father Casey served in humble monastery positions and, in 1924, was sent to St. Bonaventure to be the porter and doorkeeper. In that lowly role he touched so many lives with prayers, charity, comfort and many reported healings. When he died, more than 20,000 people filed past his casket. His incorrupt body was later disinterred and transferred to the monastery, and he was placed on the path to sainthood in 1960.

“The draw here is Father Solanus,” said Capuchin Father Jim Hast, assistant director of the center. “Some people come for the blessing every week, and others come for a pilgrimage and stay for the blessing.”

The center and chapel are open daily, except on major holidays. Prearranged pilgrimages include a tour of the center, a movie on the life of Father Solanus, and an opportunity for confession and Mass. A blessing service also is held on the fourth Sunday of the month.

Grotto of Redemption

When Paul Matthias Dobberstein (1872-1954) was a seminarian, he became criti-

HOLY PLACES

Our Lady of Perpetual Help Shrine: 500 W. Main St., Uniontown, Pa.; (412) 438-7149; sistersofstbasil.org

El Santuario de Chimayo: 15 Santuario Dr., Chimayo, N.M.; (505) 351-9961; elsantuario-dechimayo.us/Pilgrim

St. Bonaventure Chapel: 1820 Mt Elliott St., Detroit, Mich.; (313) 579-2100; solanuscasey.org

Grotto of the Redemption: 300 N. Broadway Ave., West Bend, Iowa; (515) 887-2371; westbendgrotto.com.

cally ill, prayed to God and the Blessed Mother, and promised to build a shrine in her honor if he recovered.

The promise became the block-long Grotto of the Redemption near Sts. Peter and Paul Church in West Bend, Iowa, where Father Dobberstein was pastor for 57 years. Beginning in 1912, the priest built nine scenes from the life of Christ in an extraordinary geological setting.

“He started collecting rocks around 1900, and when people heard about his vision, they sent things from all over the world,” said Mary Straub Lavell, executive director of the shrine. “When you walk into one grotto and look up at the ceiling, 30 feet of it is done in beautiful crystal. You can’t imagine it unless you see it.”

The outdoor grotto was built with Italian marble, petrified wood, minerals like quartz and calcite, and precious and semi-precious stones like rubies, sapphires and pearls.

“It’s amazing from a geological point of view,” Lavelle said. But the main draw for 40,000 visitors a year, she added, is “a spiritual experience.”

In one grotto, Mary holds Baby Jesus out to the world. In another, Christ suffers in the Garden of Gethsemane. Still another honors the Holy Trinity. In June, 2,600 visitors of all ages came from 32 states and 13 countries. The outdoor grotto is open daily year-round, is pet friendly and has a campsite.

Maryann Gogniat Eidemiller writes from Pennsylvania.

PASTORAL ANSWERS | MSGR. CHARLES POPE

Closing parish doors

Laypeople — not bishops — ultimately determine the fate of parishes; it’s up to them to keep the Faith



Question: Our bishop is closing our parish. My grandparents were among those who built and paid for this parish. By what right does the bishop close what is ours?

—Name withheld
Philadelphia, Pa.

Answer: Canonically, there likely are some solutions that permit the lay faithful to take possession of a building slated for closure, undertake its maintenance and keep them open as chapels, etc., under the supervision of the local church. Frankly though, most congregations that have reached a critical state where closure is deemed necessary are not, in fact, able to undertake such solutions.

While there are legitimate canonical issues, and as the lay faithful you have canonical rights at the closing of the parishes, I am not a canon lawyer and would like to answer your question pastorally.

And from a pastoral point of view, it seems evident that bishops do not close parishes, people close parishes. The fact remains that many parishes filled to overflowing back in the 1950s now sit increasingly empty.

This is a teachable moment, and we must accept some very painful facts. When only 25 percent of Catholics go to Mass nationwide, and when Catholics stop having many children or effectively handing on the Faith to their children, this is what happens.

The Church simply cannot maintain parishes and other institutions such as schools and hospitals, when Catholics are largely absent. Pastorally speaking, people — not bishops alone — close parishes. Many parishes, schools, seminaries and convents now sit largely empty. And as they become empty, bills are unpaid, maintenance is deferred, and the situation eventually becomes criti-

cal. Decisions have to be made.

Pastorally, one would hope that long before things go utterly critical, that bishops, working together with communities that are going into crisis, can speak honestly and work for solutions. But this is not simply the responsibility of the bishop, it is the responsibility of all of the people of God to have such honest discussions. Thus, we are left with a difficult but teachable moment about what happens when the Faith handed down to us is largely set aside by the vast majority of Catholics.

It’s time to evangelize and make disciples, as Christ commands.

Washing of hands

Question: Our new priest does not wash his hands at offertory in daily Mass. He says without a server it is hard and the rite no longer has practical use. Is this right?

—Bill Eitenauer
Plains, N.Y.

Answer: The priest celebrant should wash his hands, even if there is no server. The priest’s explanation that there is no practical necessity for him to wash his hands does not hold. It is true that the hand washing in ancient times had more practical purposes due to the reception of many and varied gifts during the offertory procession. Handling these things often soiled the priest’s hands.

But liturgical rites don’t have a merely practical point. The washing of the priest’s hands has an important spiritual dimension as well, indicating his desire to be free of sin before offering the Holy Sacrifice, and handling the body and blood of Christ. Omitting this rite is not permitted.

Msgr. Charles Pope is the pastor of Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian in Washington, D.C., and writes for the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., blog at blog.adw.org. Send questions to Pastoral Answers, Our Sunday Visitor, 200 Noll Plaza, Huntington, IN 46750 or to msgrpoppe@osv.com. Letters must be signed, but anonymity may be requested.