

Coming Home for Ordinary Times

(Column 35, June 1, 2020)

By Lucia A. Silecchia

“The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning.”

So said Pope Francis five years ago in his encyclical, *Laudato Si.* This line caught my attention back then when I was writing commentary about the encyclical for Pope Francis’ visit to Catholic University.

But these words have come back to me in recent days as we – in different ways, in different places – begin our return to the churches that we love. The “history” of my own “friendship with God” has played out in so many places dear to my heart. Yet, for me – and likely for so many -- it is our simple parish churches that have a special place in that history. That explains the unexpectedly strong grief for closed parish churches – and the deep joyful hope it is to anticipate and celebrate our return to home.

My childhood parish church is still the one my heart calls home. My parents married there, I was baptized there, and I received both my first and my most recent Holy Communion there. It is where I was Confirmed, taking for my Confirmation name that of the parish’s patron saint. It has been the heart of – and not merely backdrop to -- my life’s most joyous and sorrowful moments. It is where, until embarrassingly recently, people who knew me as a toddler still told me that I was getting taller (?!), and where even today I can still greet neighbors who knew my grandparents. It is where a Paschal candle burned both at the funerals of my parents and at the Baptisms of their grandchildren. It was at that church that my “friendship with God” was born, nourished, and celebrated.

It is also a friendship shaped and fostered in all the parish churches of my adult life – the parish families I joined when I moved away from home, attended school and moved for work. These homes are where I have met some of my dearest friends and celebrate the sacraments of my youth with a more adult understanding – or, at least, a more adult *desire* to understand.

In all the parish churches I have been blessed to call home, I have sought out the joy of sharing Mass with others and the solitude of being utterly, silently alone with God. They are the places where the quiet daily witness of others inspires me when my own faith falters. They are the places where the words of challenging homilies sometimes seem directed solely – and, thus, uncomfortably – just to me. They are the places where the words of consecration and absolution bring forth the miracles I will never comprehend on this side of eternity.

Faith tells us that our true home is not of this world. Particularly in recent months, I have done my best to remind myself that the God who promised “I will be with you always” is also certain to be with us everywhere.

Yet, places remain important. God’s presence is often seen and known, as Pope Francis wrote, in “particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning.” A humble stable in Bethlehem, the unnamed temple where Anna and Simeon welcomed their infant Savior, a boisterous wedding hall in Cana, the hospitable home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, the wave-tossed fishing boats of the disciples, the lonely depths of the desert, the banks of the Jordan River, a temple hall riddled with money changers, the light and splendor of Mount Tabor, the crowded fields where multitudes feasted on bountiful bread and abundant fish, a triumphant entry road to Jerusalem, an upper room for the Last Supper, the dark Garden of Gethsemane, the sinister court of Pontius Pilate, the bloody hills of Golgotha, the grief and glory in a borrowed tomb, and the long road to Emmaus, to recall but a few, are all recorded in Scripture. Specific places are important to us who dwell in time and place.

So, as we slowly return to our parish homes, I am filled with gratitude to be able to come, once again, to these places so dear to my heart, to do those things so dear to my soul. It is gratitude for having been blessed to know such homes and be able to return. It is gratitude that conditions are improving – albeit painfully slowly. It is gratitude to pastors who work mightily to make this return possible – navigating the maze of diocesan directives, civil orders, ever changing medical advice, tight budgets, and the spiritual and physical health of their parishioners. It is gratitude that for many years, unlike so many in the world, I have had such easy access to my parish churches and the sacramental life that lies at their heart. It is even an odd gratitude for this period of deprivation that will make it harder for me to take all this for granted again.

Mostly, though, it is profound gratitude that once again I will be able to write a new chapter in the history of my friendship with God. It will once again be in the sacred places that are home for the most extraordinary moments of my ordinary times.

Welcome home!

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