

Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord

August 6, 2023

Today being the 6th of August, Mother Church invites us to put aside the 18th Sunday liturgy for the celebration of the Feast of the Transfiguration of Jesus. This feast is celebrated by various Christian communities. The origins of the feast are less than certain and may have derived from the dedication of three basilicas on Mount Tabor. The feast was present in various forms by the 9th century, and in the Western Church it was made a universal feast on August 6 by Pope Callixtus III.

All three Synoptic Gospels tell the story of the Transfiguration (Mt 17:1-8; Mk 9:2-9; Lk 9:28-36). With remarkable agreement, all three place the event shortly after Peter's confession of Faith that Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus' first prediction of his passion and death. Peter's eagerness to erect tents or booths on the spot suggests that the event occurred during the Jewish week-long, fall Feast of Booths.

Those of you who went away to college (that is, chose a college that was far enough away that you needed to live there) know that it is a unique experience. I got to know this from my one year at Old Dominion University at Norfolk Virginia as Chaplain of the Catholic Campus Ministry.

There is really nothing like it, nothing later in life that is remotely similar to what people experience when they leave home and embrace an on-campus life. The older one gets, the more one realizes just how special it was. Doing pretty much what one wanted when one wanted. Meeting hundreds of new people and making dozens of new (and often lifelong friends). Hours and hours of fun and joking around and harmless pranks and late night parties and falling in love and athletic events and all-you-can-eat dorm cafeterias, all good stuff.

Of course, there were classes too. Some people really looked forward to those. Some others only kind of tolerated them. And some people actually dreaded them. Yet, my gut tells me that most college students

(from the least bookish to the most academic-minded) looked forward to the day when they wouldn't have to attend classes anymore. I think most of us can relate to that. But all that other stuff? The fun? The friendships? The parties? The limited responsibilities? Well, most of us . . . never wanted it to end.

“Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

So says Peter on that mountain long ago, as he and James and John witnessed something pretty incredible. Here they were seeing their friend in a way they had never seen him before, in some sort of glorified, dazzling, divine-like way. On top of that, he was accompanied by and conversing with two of the true giants of the Jewish faith - Moses and Elijah. That must have been an unbelievable, life-changing moment for the three of them. I can't imagine what must have been going through their minds. Well, that's not entirely true. We do sort of know what was in the mind of Peter. He seems to have . . . never wanted it to end.

And we, two thousand years later, understand that. Who of us (had we been there) would have wanted to go back to our day-to-day drudgery? Who of us would have wanted to step away from that incredible experience, come down from that mountain, and have to face all the challenges and difficulties and disappointments of life? Not me for sure. And maybe not you either. It seems that when it comes to the best things in life, we never want them to end. We just want them to go on forever.

It might seem that we don't have to make such a decision, that we don't have to decide whether to remain on “the mountain” or whether to come back down it. After all, we don't ever find ourselves witnessing the Transfiguration. Or do we?

My dear friends in Christ, in some ways, the whole Liturgical life of the Church (and its devotional life as well) is an attempt to give each of you

and me a “mountain top” experience. These mysteries are meant to truly awe us, inspire us, and give us a glimpse into the very life of God, to “commune” with him in an intimate way. And most of us (maybe all of us) would not be here week after week if that wasn’t the case, if we didn’t get to experience a little bit of the divine each time we come through those doors and gather in faith to worship.

In a certain sense, all these small grace-filled moments are small transfigurations experiences that draw us close to our God in all his glory. And nowhere is that more visible than at this holy table, a moment to see our God truly present, not with our eyes but with our hearts and minds and souls.

And most of us probably don’t want it to end, just like Peter. Anyway, I don’t mean that we want forty-five minute homilies, or liturgies that simply go on and on and on. But what we probably want is the feeling to never end that beautiful, awe-filled, comforting sense that our God is so very close, that our problems have sort of dissolved into the background for a moment, and that the worries of the world don’t seem quite as big as they were before.

But it can’t be that way. At least, we can’t remain on the mountain forever, can’t simply use the Church’s liturgical and devotional life to sort of escape from the world, or from our responsibilities. Rather, at some point we must come down from the mountain and “use” the power of those experiences to face the challenges of day-to-day life. You see, true faithfulness is not about staying on the mountain top. It’s about being willing to come down the mountain, roll up our sleeves, and continue the work of the Lord.

“Lord, it is good that we are here.”

Yes it is. But what we do here, what we go through here and what we experience here, ultimately can’t remain here. We must take it with us as we exit this holy place, enabling and empowering and inspiring us to “transfigure” and “transform” our world into a beautiful place it can be, a

world filled with love and mercy and compassion. Only then will our communion with our God be complete.

As we celebrate the Transfiguration today, let's look at this event as a foretaste of the reward awaiting us, and a source of encouragement to endure all sufferings for the final victory of Christ. The Christian life, as stated by Jesus Himself, is about suffering and dying out of love and with unwavering hope. By uniting our trials with Christ's Cross, we share in His glorious victory for all eternity.