

The Community of the Baptized, Take Two

Well, that was scary!

Sorry, I'm not referring to 2020, the year drawing to a close (though that's been scary enough). I'm referring to something I found in my files.

Last January, I wrote a newsletter article on "the Community of the Baptized." In that article, I discussed our increasing disconnect from family, friends, neighbors, and congregations. As researcher Robert Putnam put it some years ago, "We're even bowling alone." So in my final lines, I wrote, "Take the time to reconnect with this Community, your congregation. Get to know your fellow saints, or to know them better."

It was just a few weeks later when, bang! Those connections were forcibly severed by the onset of the pandemic. Very quickly, millions of people around the world were cut off from each other by regulations and lockdowns. For many of us, it's been a long time since we've seen or shown our whole faces in public. How long has it been since you've greeted someone with a handshake or (heaven forbid!) a hug?

And yet, in spite of the imposition of physical barriers and the onset of "social distancing" (the oxymoron of the 21st century!), we weren't completely cut off from one another. Not we who believe in Christ. For the Community of the Baptized transcends time and space, even amid pandemic and lockdown. Though physically separated, in Christ we continue to be connected to one another, to "angels and archangels and all the company of heaven."

I wish I could say we're out of the woods, but we're not. In spite of the arrival of effective vaccines, we still have difficult months ahead of us. In earthly terms, things may very well get worse before they get better.

But personally, I am grateful for and encouraged by the care, the concern, and the unity I've seen within the Church at large and within our congregations in particular. We've continued to support one another in prayer and in person. We've continued to "gather" as God's Community, Christ's Church, whether it's been in person, over FM radio, or online.

Now, I look out on the congregations where I preach, at the people looking back at me whose faces I cannot see. Some are relatives of others in the crowd, others are neighbors. In most cases, they know one another; in some cases, they don't. Yet they hear God's Word together, pray together, sing together, receive the Lord's Body and Blood together. Each assembly is a community established not by the will of man, but by the power and gift and love of God. They gather around God's Word and God's Sacraments, because "The Church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered" (Augsburg Confession VII). That's where the Holy Spirit has promised to work, and so that's where the Church is.

From where I stand, I would say that the Church is not just 'surviving' this pandemic. It's thriving through adversity. It's growing in faith, in hope, and in love, even as we carefully pick our way through these difficult days.

For the Christ who was born for us, the Christ who lived, suffered, and died for us—He is still with us. And nothing, I repeat, nothing—not even a pandemic—"will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39). So rejoice in your Savior, and give thanks to Him in this New Year of His grace, as He continues to bless His Community of the Baptized!