

March 19, 2006

To the Jews of Jesus' day, the Temple was of paramount importance. It was in the Temple more than anywhere else that they encountered God, and many things about the temple area reflected the mystery of the God of the Israelites. You entered the Temple in stages: the outside area was more of a gathering place, not unlike our vestibule. Then you entered into the worship space, much like the naves of our churches. The central part, the most important part, the part that gave the Temple its meaning and importance, was where the altars were located and the sacrifices were offered. Then finally, the innermost part, the part where only a select few, the priestly class, were ever allowed to enter: the holy of holies. In similar fashion does man *encounter* God progressively. Most people have an awareness of God, a basic belief. If not in God the Father as he has revealed himself, most people at least acknowledge a higher power than just us humans. But then you move in closer to God, and see his revelation; he discloses himself little by little to us, and we learn how he is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving. But then there's the next step, which is to enter into a personal relationship with him through prayer. It's a form of friendship: God shares himself with *us*, and we disclose *ourselves*—our fears, our hopes, our anxieties—to him.

To really know God, we must know him as he exists in the Trinity. To know the Trinity, we must obviously know the Son. And to really know the Son, we should understand his identification of himself with the Temple in Jerusalem and pay attention to what he says about the Temple. He said "destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up." John says explicitly that he was talking about the Temple of his Body, which we know he raised in three days after his death. But in the passage today, we know that he also drove the moneychangers out of the Temple; an interesting story on a couple of levels. First of all, too many people use it to justify anger: look at how mad Jesus got, so it's okay when it's justified. Maybe so, but it probably wasn't anger as we experience it so much, but passion, and zeal; and would that we could truly get rid of our anger, but amp up our zeal for those things which deserve it. But also, it wasn't as if those who were buying and

selling had turned the place into a Walmart Supercenter. They were most likely selling items needed for the sacrifices which occurred in the Temple: sheep, oxen, and doves, as required by the Jewish law. The moneychangers were there because there was the Temple Tax to pay, and people might need to make change. The issue was not just their actions, but their intent: they had become MORE interested in this part, in the outer part of the Temple, than in remaining true to the sacrificial part, which they were to show allegiance to by not only partaking in the sacrifice but by living out the entirety of their lives in accordance with God's laws. They were, in a sense, beginning to turn the Temple into a marketplace rather than a sacrifice place, not just due to their attention to buying and selling, but because of their inattention to God's law. Remember when Peter, upon learning that Jesus would die, said "heaven forbid," and Jesus responded by saying "get behind me, Satan." Peter didn't want Jesus to be the sacrifice, only the teacher. But the sacrifice is what gives the Temple its importance; Jesus' sacrifice was what made him our Savior, who takes away our sins. And it is his sacrifice, more even than our worship, that makes this space so holy.

For us, the ultimate Temple is not the church building, nor even the Tabernacle, nor the altar; it is the Host, the consecrated Host. It is by the Host that we know that Jesus is truly present; it truly is his Body, even though it still looks like bread. *And zeal for your house shall consume me.* We see Jesus' example of zeal in his exchange with those who are buying and selling. In the reading from Exodus, the passage listing the Ten Commandments, God says that he is a "*jealous* God, inflicting punishment for their father's wickedness on the children of those who hate him." That doesn't mean that God has out-of-control emotions, or that he punishes unfairly; it means that that he has the right to, and may expect, our exclusive allegiance to him as God, having no other Gods besides him; both of these, bespeak of passion on God's part. If zeal for God's house is to consume us, it means we, as Catholics, must be passionate about our Lord's presence in the Eucharist; we should *feel* strongly, *believe* strongly, and *act* strongly that this is Jesus, and that this Host is the most sacred thing there is for us to encounter on earth. It calls for reverence and thoughtfulness as we approach our Lord to receive him; it calls for

the same outside of that time as well. Zeal for the Eucharist means making a good confession, it means defending the faith when it's being attacked or even just misconstrued; zeal means learning more about our faith, so that we *can* defend it and explain it when necessary. Zeal means paying visits to the Blessed Sacrament, because we firmly and truly believe that Jesus is there, right before us, not over there, or just kind of vaguely "around," but in a place, in a space to which we can draw close and focus our attention. Zeal means sacrificing because of our faith, and not doing like the money changers did, just pushing the sacrifice to one side, and giving ourselves more to lesser things.

The Commandments which were listed in the first reading today say a lot about the power of our actions: keep the Lord's Day holy; it matters what we do and don't do on his day. The Commandments also show the power of our words: how we use the Lord's name really does matter, not only because his name is important, but because our words reveal our interior dispositions. One of the most important words we use and one of the most powerful ones is "amen." It means "so be it," or "I believe"; it means we give our assent to the words which were just spoken; it ratifies what was just said, and makes it our own. And so we should never say "amen" unless we do truly believe what it ratifies. It's easy to fall into routines in the liturgy, and to do things out of habit—probably easier for us priests than for anybody. But what we say is ultimately overshadowed by how we say it, and by what we really mean. A lot of times our "amen's" become thoughtless and routine; really, just great big "whatever's" Whatever: no real thought, no real assent, no zeal or passion, just going through the motions: It reduces Mass to just so many lines to be recited: oh, here's where I'm supposed to say "amen." If we say it without thinking, we may also end up saying it without really meaning it.

Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians that "Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom." Signs serve as proof; wisdom begs for an explanation. But as Christians, we seek neither signs nor that kind of wisdom, but faith; because we've accepted the explanation and acknowledged the proof which we have already been given. This faith is

tied up in our belief in the power of Jesus' sacrifice, which he made for us: it's a stumbling block to those who want proof, because the proof now is not the tomb, but the apostolic witness which arose from seeing the empty tomb; faith is a stumbling block to those who seek an explanation, because the explanation not only imparts knowledge: it demands conversion. Many people have had this presented to them, and have not accepted it; many have accepted only to reject it later. But most of those who have turned away either didn't or wouldn't grasp the truth, and be converted, and therefore lost the faith. Today, at Mass, at the consecration, take a good look at the Host I hold in my hands: powerlessness in the eyes of those who have no faith, but we know that therein lies the power to redeem mankind. Foolishness to those who don't believe; but we know therein lies the wisdom of God, who has presented us with one of the simplest substances, and allows it to become the greatest mystery known to the world. As a priest, may I never stand with this Host in hand and not be awed by what God has called me to be a part of; and as Catholic Christians, may we never respond to this mystery essentially with "whatever's," but only and always with zealous, passionate, heart-felt "amen's."