

FEAST OF THE HOLY TRINITY - 2007
“Our Transcendent-Imminent God”

Our Christian understanding of God is unique. No other faith sees God the way we do, not even the Jews. For us, God is a trinity of persons in one divine nature. While we believe in the God of Hebrew scriptures, we also believe that that one God can be seen as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And, if we are not careful, we can get all tangled up in the complexity of it all. But it is this unique understanding of God that allows us to see reality the way we do, and this has a profound effect on the way we are called to live our lives.

Today, I’m not going to examine the nature of God, which we believe to be a Love that existed for all eternity. Love is what God does because love is who God is. Nor do I want to get into the difference between the persons, the Father, Son and Spirit; the Lover, Beloved and the Love between them. Rather, I want us to examine two qualities of God that seem to be contradictory, but are critical to our Catholic Faith. God is totally beyond us and yet, God is also with us. Or to use twenty-five cents words, God is both **transcendent** and **imminent** at the same time. I believe that the way many choose to look at God, as either transcendent or imminent, is one reason for much of the polarization in the Church today. (I am not going to develop this idea here, but you may see what I mean as I go on.)

God is totally transcendent. God is beyond us, a mystery that we can only understand by way of analogy. Any human attempts to fathom the mystery of God will always fall short. The best way we can define God is to use St. John’s description: *“God is love.”* And who understands the mystery of love? The transcendent God is the God of the burning bush. So unworthy was Moses to approach it that he had to remove his sandals. The

beautiful gothic cathedrals of Europe with their vaulted arches are an attempt to express this transcendence of God. These magnificent churches lift the heart and soul to heaven. (Helena Cathedral) We want to fall on our knees before the transcendent God because we seem so small, so unworthy, and God is so far beyond us. In these sacred spaces adoration becomes our proper response to God's transcendence.

But, when Jesus was born, the angel Gabriel said that he would be called Emmanuel, that is, *God with us*. God entered into our lives and took on the human condition. God is present to us. Where love is God is. Through the Holy Spirit, God abides in us and we abide in God. In other words, God is imminent to us. The divine has entered into our lives and is as close to us as our own breath. Not only are we made to the image of God, we are also, as St. Paul says, "*living temples of the Holy Spirit*." Jesus also said, "*Where two or three gather in my name, there am I in their midst*." Rather than being a God just to be adored, the God-with-us is a God that calls for action. "*If you do it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you do it to me*." Jesus is not only present in the Eucharist, but, through his Spirit, is present in our assembly even before the words of institution.

Our church here was designed around this understanding of God-with-us. While the transcendence of God is neither ignored nor denied, this space emphasizes the imminence of God. While the gothic cathedral inspires awe, this design should inspire participation. The sanctuary of the gothic church, that is the holy area around the altar, was for the priest and ministers at the altar. The people were separate from them, usually passive, often saying private prayers with the high point being adoration of the Host during the elevation after the consecration. But our church is all sanctuary, and embraces us all who gather around the altar. In the old liturgy, the priest

offered Mass for the people. God was seen as beyond us. But our understanding now is that we all offer the Mass together, with the priest who leads us. God is with us. We take part in the action of offering ourselves in union with Jesus to the Father.

I truly believe that it is our fallen human nature that wants to make one right and the other wrong. When in reality, we have preferences. Some of us prefer to think of God as totally beyond us, and others of us prefer to think of God as with us. To emphasize one at the exclusion of the other is a mistake, even heresy. It's wrong, as is putting down as less holy those who disagree with us. For us as Catholics, we understand that our God is both beyond us and with us at the same time. At times we will feel a tension between the transcendent and the imminent. If we prefer Mass to be quiet and stay non-involved, we probably prefer a transcendent God. If we like to sing and respond to all the prayers, we may prefer the imminent God. I recommend that we try to cultivate that quality that is the more difficult for us.

A few weeks ago I wrote in the bulletin about our proposed stained glass windows. I envision these lower windows on this south side of the church to be the transcendent windows, expressing the transcendental qualities of God, **one, true, good and beautiful**. They are those qualities that we long to have for ourselves but never can fully attain. Made in the image of God, we long for them, but we can't reach them. We want to be one, but we fall short. You are measuring everything I'm saying to see if it makes sense. We are made for truth; we can't help it, but truth still eludes us. In the same way, the will must choose good, or what at least appears to be good at the time, but we can be so wrong! We all want to be beautiful, but that isn't enough to make it so. Nevertheless, to the degree that we

experience them, we experience something of God. When Pope Pius XII was on his deathbed, he asked to listen to Beethoven. In experiencing beauty he would something of the divine. Could it be that Love is the highest expression of all four? Could Love not be what brings the most unity, the highest truth, the greatest good and the most wonderful beauty?

On the north side, the windows would express how God touches our lives today, especially through the sacraments. Love gives life, Baptism. Love empowers, Confirmation. Love unites, Eucharist. Love is for others, Matrimony and Orders. Love forgives, Reconciliation. Love heals, Anointing of the sick.

In the middle of the south (transcendent) wall is the Sanctuary Lamp, inviting us into the Blessed Sacrament Chapel, the most transcendent room in the parish, where we want to fall on our knees in adoration. In the middle of the north (imminent) wall is the statue of Mary, the Mother of God, Emmanuel, God with us. More than anyone, Mary knew the imminence of God. And between the two walls is where we celebrate the Eucharist, where we sing “*Holy, Holy, Holy*” in praise of the transcendent God, and then, a few moments later, receive God in our hands.

Folks, our faith is beautiful. Without the transcendent, it wouldn't be. Without the imminent, it wouldn't be. Why do we fight so among ourselves over such a magnificent gift? It is so silly, so sad! If we pull off these stained-glass windows, we will always be reminded of the balance we need between the transcendent and imminent dimensions of our faith. And then we will be free to live our faith to its fullness.