

## Reflections from a Practicing Catholic

By Frank Gemmato, L.Ac.

*An air of quiet anticipation hovers over the Church. The presence of the holy is palpable. A bell rings and the Mass-the ritual reenactment of the Passion, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ-begins. The priest, preceded by two altar servers and a lector, enters the Sanctuary and genuflects before the Tabernacle where the Body of Christ - the Eucharist - is reserved. For two millennia and at every of hour every day the world over this holy sacrifice takes place in Catholic Churches ranging in size from tiny rooms to giant basilicas.*

I am a 41 year old Roman Catholic. I have received Holy Communion every day of my life for the past nine years. I believe that the Church represents the authentic teaching of Jesus Christ: the historical revelation of God through apostolic succession. I am also an acupuncturist, comfortable with the language and ethos of the New Age, psychotherapy, and 12-step programs. I appreciate the deep truths revealed in all of the world's major religious traditions.

In college I sought refuge from the pain of my own shame and abandonment in promiscuous sex, recreational drugs, and ear-splitting rock music which left me weakened and debilitated with a heart condition. My faith journey has taken me around the world, to an ashram in India, through the Zen and Hindu traditions, and ultimately back to my Roman Catholic roots. Opening my heart to Jesus Christ, and discerning a destiny as healer came in a single epiphany, a lightning bolt of insight: I knew with certainty that in order to heal myself I needed to help others to heal.

*The priest intones the "Kyrie", the ancient Greek prayer, Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy. We place ourselves at the feet of Our Lord, knowing that he judges mercifully, and that "a humble, contrite heart he will not spurn."*

I realize that I am powerless over my many addictions. And I have come to believe that a power greater than myself can restore me to sanity. Now I can make a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of the Living God. I have learned that just because I *make* a mistake, it does not mean that I *am* a mistake. This is the moral inventory of the twelve steps, and is supported by my tradition through the sacrament of penance, which brings healing and reconciliation when I have wandered from the path of truth.

*Then there is the Liturgy of the Word, reading from sacred scripture believed to be divinely inspired words of truth. The Epistle and Gospel are read. The teachings of Jesus resound through the Church: "As long as you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me." And the priest gives a homily applying the teachings to our lives.*

The Catholic tradition is intensely rich. In addition to the Mass, the recitation of the Divine Office and the Holy Rosary complete my daily practice. The Office is sung at several times during the day and is primarily based on the Psalms. It is a beautiful prayer that reminds me of the purpose for which I am made: to adore God. The Rosary incorporates another central aspect of my faith: devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. This is the way the Church incorporates the feminine aspect of the Divinity. As intercessor and purest of all the Saints, the Blessed Mother occupies the highest place in heaven, and is willing to help all who ask. She is the head of an entire community of persons in heaven known as the Communion of Saints: women and men outstanding in holiness who have gone before us and are recognized by the Church as models of the Christian life.

*Prayers of intercession are offered for the needs of the world, our families and friends and those who have died. The Creed is said, our belief in the Triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and the Church - one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.*

All of these forms are important aids that ideally lead to a place of interior silence, always a challenge in a busy life. This is the place where the disparity of forms is irrelevant, and even words are superfluous. This is fertile ground for ecumenical dialogue precisely because there are no words. It is where I stand naked in silence before God. All devotion leads directly or indirectly to this place of silent prayer, prayer of the heart, where the nature of God can only be expressed by what God is *not*. This is what St. John of the Cross called the Dark Night of the Soul. This is where I die to my self, my ego, and stand face to face with God in the darkness of unknowing. I release my self will and surrender wordlessly to the Divine will. My tradition helps me to journey safely to these places. Knowing, believing there is a benevolent, caring Person pervading all reality means the universe is an inherently safe place.

*The Liturgy of the Eucharist follows - the reenactment of The Last Supper in which bread and wine are transformed into the sacred body and blood of Christ. First the Sanctus, the thrice holy hymn is sung and then the Consecration begins. The Holy Spirit descends upon the gifts making them holy. The priest holds up the Host. "Take this all of you and eat. This is my body which will be given up for you." The bells ring. God's eternal outpouring of love emanates in concentric rings from the elevated Jesus.*

My Church is far from perfect. Inequalities against women and a strong hierarchy dominated by men who make mistakes leave lots of room for improvement. But the refusal to blow in the winds of fad and style make the Church a reliable bedrock for the truth. The cult of suffering and the preoccupation with guilt and sin are, in my opinion, mistaken. Sometimes I feel angry and have doubts about what the Church does. I have been shamed and hurt and neglected and abandoned within the Church. I have at times given my power of free choice away to the Church and found myself going to Mass in a

mechanical way. *Religious addiction* confronts me at the core. The danger is getting caught up in the moralistic forms of religion, losing sight of the core truths. The Church is composed of fallible human beings who nevertheless participate in the deliverance of the human race from suffering and death.

*In the same way, "he took the cup." The wine is consecrated. Then we pray for the Pope, Bishops, clergy; and ask the intercession of Mary and all the Saints. The Great Amen is sung. And then we pray in the words our Savior gave us: "Our Father..." We offer one another a sign of Christ's peace, and receive Holy Communion. The power of Christ's presence is released in us.*

How the experience of the liturgy provides an entry into Silence and also supports my practice as an acupuncturist is a divine mystery. The worship forms and sacraments of the Church are a gateway into ineffable Silence, where the devotional outpourings of a lover yield to the infinite deep of God's silence and mercy. As healer I am a channel of the love that flows out from the Sacred Heart of Jesus - pierced, broken, yet full of infinite healing love. I am also the Church, part of the Body of Christ, an awesome, human, miraculous, divinely inspired Gift.

*"The Mass is ended, let us go in peace," the priest intones. The service of Benediction follows with the wafting odor of sweet smelling incense. The statuary - Mary's Immaculate heart, the Little Flower - and the wood, the light, the air and the energy of God's House impart a foretaste of Eternity.*