

Transfiguration and prayer: Often misunderstood, deeply related

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"Transfiguration of Christ" (c. 1487) by Giovanni Bellini [WikiArt.org]

Editor's note: *The following homily was preached by the Reverend Peter M. J. Stravinskaskas, Ph.D., S.T.D., on the feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord [August 6, 2020] at the Church of the Holy Innocents, New York City.*

Did you ever walk into a theater while the last showing was still going on, so that you saw the end of the film before the beginning? That is something like the experience Peter, James and John must have had on Mount Tabor, as they got a kind of sneak preview of Jesus' glory. Peter especially loved it up there on that mountain. It was comfortable; there was

no suffering; there were no enemies, only close friends. And Peter wanted to stay.

But that's not real life, as we know all too well. That's some far off Utopia. But **Christianity is a religion that enables us to cope with real life, and so Jesus brings the disciples back to reality with the stark message that the Son of Man must suffer before entering into His glory. And if Christ must go through suffering and death, so must we.**

Of all the events recorded in the New Testament, perhaps none has raised more questions or caused more confusion than the Transfiguration. And, of all the aspects of the Christian life, perhaps none is more misunderstood than prayer. What do these two seemingly unrelated situations have to do with each other? They are definitely related because both deal with having contact with God, or encountering the presence of the divine. Let's spend some time this evening talking about prayer, using the Apostles' experience of the Transfiguration as a model.

Prayer is seeking Reality. Some people, Christians included, have the notion that prayer is a way of escaping reality. Nothing could be further from a correct theology of prayer. Peter wanted to use prayer in that way, it seems, but Jesus did not allow that to happen. Peter had found the experience of the divine to be a comforting thing, a nice feeling, and he didn't want to let go. However, the Apostles could not stay on the Mount of the Transfiguration; there was work to be done in the world, and they were the ones who had to do it. Good prayer provides us with encounters with God that should give us the strength that we need to get through times of doubt and confusion, but it is never a substitute for reality. Surely, Our Lord intended the Transfiguration to be a means of helping His Apostles confront the harsh realities of His impending Passion and Death.

Genuine prayer is a conversation. That means communication, which is never easy and which always requires real effort. It also implies that we are involved in a dialogue, a point most people neglect in prayer. **We are usually quite good at telling God what we need, but we fail to allow Him to respond.** The Father's advice was important: "This is my beloved Son – ***Listen to Him.***" **We dislike silence and listening, so we often fill in the gaps with our own answers, rather than waiting for His;** we find a healthy antidote in the advice offered by Cardinal Robert Sarah in *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise* – a wonderful "read" for summer leisure. Some years ago a second-grader was teasing one of his classmates about not getting the bike for Christmas for which he had prayed all during Advent. "You prayed

and prayed, and God didn't answer your prayer," said the one fellow. "Yes, He did," the other responded. "He said, 'No!'" That little guy knew the meaning of listening; he also knew another aspect of prayer that we need to consider.

He knew, at least subconsciously, that **when we approach God in prayer, we must be willing to be changed by Him and to have our desires conformed to His will.** Jesus exemplified this most clearly in His final agony, during which He asked His Father for release, but ended His prayer with an attitude of submission, "Yet not My will, but Thine be done" (Lk 22:42).

We must also have a regular routine of prayer; it must be as natural a part of our lives as eating and breathing. Otherwise, we run the risk of falling into that trap of using God when we want Him and ignoring Him when we don't. That kind of prayer is not only cheap; it's immature. There are also very special times in life that require us to "get away" from it all, moments when we have to be alone with God – in times of crisis, before important decisions, on a retreat when we try to have a kind of "second honeymoon" with God. Today's feast was one of those unique occasions.

The Apostles' initial reaction to beholding the glorified Christ was one of fear, and that is a very normal reaction. **It can be terrifying to experience the presence and power of God because we then realize the tremendous gap that exists between His holiness and ours.** Nevertheless, we seek to deepen our relationship with the all-holy God because that is the only way we will ever come even remotely close to our ultimate goal of sharing in His holiness.

Peter, James and John profited greatly from getting a glimpse of Christ in glory; it helped them understand the glory to which they were called. Prayer works in exactly the same way for us; it enables us to keep our gaze fixed on the finish line as we realize that the moments of happiness known now in prayer are but an obscure shadow of the joys yet to come. However, one specific form of prayer – liturgical prayer – must also be considered. Let me back into that.

In the spring of 1980, I had the privilege of visiting the Holy Land, including the opportunity to celebrate Mass on Mount Tabor, the site of our Lord's Transfiguration. It took us over thirty minutes to scale that mountain – by car. Only after that day could I fully appreciate Peter's suggestion to Jesus that they build some tents and stay awhile! After all, they had trekked up on foot. Seriously, though, what does the Transfiguration represent?

This strange event asks believers to look to another dimension of existence. Like Abram, we are urged to “go forth . . . to a land” that God will show us (see Gen 12:1). To apprehend the experience, one must be willing to view reality from the perspective of the unforeseeable future, rather than from the limited present.

So often, we hear people say, “If only I had been there with Peter, James and John, then my life in Christ would be so different, so much stronger.” Ah, but we have been there – many times over. Each time we have participated in the Church’s liturgy, we have transcended the constricting categories of space and time; we have ventured into eternity. As a result, we see Jesus in a new and different light – and thus see ourselves transformed by the action of divine grace.

Consider these sacramental encounters as the continuation of the mystery of the Transfiguration. Baptism inserts one into the process and radically transforms that person into a new creation. Penance restores life to a soul dead through sin. The Eucharist is the means through which the Head and members of Christ’s Church are wondrously united in a bond of intimacy and charity. I think you get the point.

Good liturgy does for us what the Transfiguration did for the Apostles – it allows us to face with trust and even joy the crosses in our own lives, confident of final victory, a victory re-presented in each liturgical encounter.

Good liturgy, like the Transfiguration before it, impels us to “go forth” with the Word of the Risen Christ received in the Church to spread His Gospel by a testimony given not only with our lips but with our very lives. In other words, the liturgy we celebrate on earthly Tabors renews us as witnesses in the world to the glory of the Transfigured Christ.

Good liturgy, in short, “makes manifest” the “grace bestowed on us in Christ Jesus before time began” (2 Tim 1:10). It gives us a glimpse of what awaits us in the life to come; it provides us with the incentive to push on to the finish line, where we will see God as He is – in the eternal Liturgy of Heaven. The Church’s liturgy, then, transports us to Mount Tabor – even if so briefly – helping us to behold the Transfigured Christ, in whom we find ourselves transfigured.