

October 28, 2012

Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Saint Luke's account of Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree (19:1-10) is a story rich in spiritual reflection; preachers and Bible-readers, coming from a variety of backgrounds, have explored the narrative unto great profit for the education of the soul.

A certain liturgical use of the text is particularly instructive; namely, the story of Zacchaeus has long been read in the dedicatory service of a new church building. This liturgical custom---warranted by Jesus' assertion, "Today, I must stay at your house"---indicates a symbolism: The home of Zacchaeus represents the consecrated places where Christians gather to meet, worship, and commune with Jesus.

There is an irony here: Even as we insist that Jesus preached the Gospel to the poor, he sometimes did so in the homes of wealthy. The reason was very simple: the wealthy had larger homes; a greater number of people could actually assemble there. (Some folks, doubtless, will be offended by this consideration, but let me mention that the first complaint on the point was made at the time-Luke 19:7).

This consideration of wealth is pertinent to the custom of reading the story of Zacchaeus when a church building is consecrated. It is a tacit admission that the construction of a church building absolutely requires a significant accumulation of wealth.

Visiting the great cathedral of Rheims, for instance, where the kings of France were crowned, I found it impossible not to reflect that that famous temple was constructed with the income derived from the many miles of Champagne vineyards that surround it. Consequently, after praying in the cathedral for a bit, I gladly paid my dues by walking down the Rue de Vesle and purchasing several bottles of that excellent vintage. Wearied by all this activity, I sat at a café on the main square and drank a hearty toast to Zacchaeus.

The same must be said of the cathedral at Rouen, which sits in the midst of the extensive apple orchards of Normandy. Yes, I reflected on this fact as I rested at a sidewalk table and raised another toast---Calvados, this time---to the dear tax collector of Jericho.

You know, it is remarkable how many churches have been constructed by a sound Christian response to thirst. One of my favorite examples is the Church of Saint Clement at Ochrid in Macedonia. After praying in that ancient shrine, I fulfilled my simple but very clear duty to cross over to Saint Clement's Café for a draft (or, probably, two) of Skopsko.

Dare I omit St. Vitus, the lofty cathedral dominating the skyline of Prague? The Czechs, a truly remarkable and inspired people---with sane and praiseworthy theories about the satisfaction of thirst---constructed that cathedral with wealth acquired, over many centuries, by the brewing of Pilsner.

Accumulated wealth pays for churches to be built.

Another of my favorites is the Cathedral at Cologne, which was started in 1248 and not finished until 1880. Although I spent several hours there, I confess that I failed in my duty to purchase some of the famous perfume that provided for its construction.

What can I more say? For the time would fail me to tell of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, Saint Basil in Moscow, Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, Notre Dame in Paris, Saint Sava in Belgrad, San Marco in Venice, Stephansdom in Vienna, or Wawel in Krakow. These buildings consecrated to worship---and thousands more---were constructed from the accumulated wealth of those who owned vineyards and and picked apples, operated shipping interests and carried cargo, possessed flocks and tended sheep, owned forests and harvested lumber. Their wealth and labor were consecrated by the building of houses in which Jesus could gather together with his friends.

I have mentioned European churches, being more familiar with them. The largest church in the world, however, is the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace in Yamoussoukro, the capital of Ivory Coast. Although the construction of this immense temple required funding from many sources, it is certainly related to the fact that Ivory Coast is the world's largest exporter of cocoa and cashew nuts. (Your duty here, brothers and sisters, should be obvious.)

Such examples emulate the hospitality of wealthy Zacchaeus, who made his well-appointed home available to Jesus and his friends. The construction of churches is the consecration of the entire economic order to the worship of God.

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