



Contributed by Father Tim Uniac, C.R.

Father Tim was ordained in 1986. Over the years Father Tim has served in parish ministry as both Assistant Pastor and Pastor. For a number of years he worked full time in youth ministry. He has served his Religious Community as Vocation Director and as Vicar Provincial. He also served his Community internationally as the Vicar General, residing in Rome for six years. Currently he serves as the Provincial Superior of the Ontario-Kentucky Province of the Congregation of the Resurrection.

4TH SUNDAY OF LENT
March 14, 2021

GATHERING TIME
(10-15 Minutes)

Introduction to the Word:

During my life time my understanding of church, what it means, has evolved. For instance, as a child 'church' was the physical place we went in order to have Mass; it was an actual building whose sole purpose was to offer a place to pray and worship. So when my parents said we were going to church, I understood exactly what they meant and where we were going. This understanding worked fine in my early years, as we attended a Catholic church in London. However, when we moved to a small town that had no Catholic church, things changed. In our small town, we went to the school gym on Sunday for Mass. My parents continued to say we were going to church (rather than we were going to the gym), but it was not the same. The gym was not a dark and mysterious place; it did not smell like incense; it had no organ (goodness me, they used guitars!); there were no kneelers; the sanctuary was not a closed-off space solely for the priest; you certainly could not stop in during the week for a quick prayer, etc. I could not help but ask: what is Church? It would not be until years later that I realized my understanding of Church was profoundly shaped by my experience of Mass in a school gym – Church had become the people, not the building.

Later my family would move to a place that had an actual church, but I carried my experience of 'gym Mass' with me. During my tween years, during the summer months, my family would often attend Sunday Mass at the military camp near our summer cottage – there was no actual Church on base. Sunday Mass actually took place outdoors. Clearly, Church was not a physical building! I must confess I would sometimes pray for rain so we did not have to go to Mass! My parents, of course, had a solution for that: we would drive to the nearest town and go to Mass in a church.

University would once again change my understanding of Church ... Church was now a small chapel. At Sunday Mass on campus, the priest would actually talk to us during the homily, ask questions, and expect us to respond. Church included involvement and participation; it was not a time for private prayer. For the

first time in my life, Church had become an experience of community, not only during the Mass itself, but also during the pizza that often followed Sunday evening Mass on campus.

All of these experiences have helped to shape my understanding of Church. It has not resulted in my being able to offer a brief concise definition for Church; it has, in fact, done the opposite. I would describe my definition of Church as vast and broad, encompassing all kinds of different expressions, not limited to a building, but most certainly always focused on people rather than place. One thing I can say with confidence: there is no Church without people.

Warm-up Activity *(about 8-10 minutes):*

One of the recurring topics of conversation among Christians, and one that does not necessarily lead to heated debates but, rather, thankfully reveals a difference in spirituality, is the question of defining the word 'Church'. Is Church solely defined as a physical place of worship and praise of God? Is Church intended to refer only to the people of faith who gather, regardless of where they gather, to worship and praise God? When the term 'universal Church' is used, what does it mean? For those who identify the physical building as Church, does that mean they can only worship and praise God in a Church? Those who see the people of faith as Church, why would they ever need a physical structure in order to worship and praise God? Is your small group a Church? Discuss.

The Table of the Word

THEME: Temple vs. Church

Some information you might find interesting concerning the differences between a Temple and a Church. The word Temple is derived from the Latin “templum,” which signifies a building dedicated to religious and spiritual activities. Most often Temples are used by non-Christians. In ancient Judaism, the Temple in Jerusalem was seen as the “abode” for God on earth. As we know that Jewish Temple was destroyed for a second time, by the Romans, around 70AD; there is no longer a functioning Temple in Jerusalem. Because there is no Temple in Jerusalem, Jews now worship in synagogues (the generic name for a Jewish house of worship) as they await the building of the third Temple in Jerusalem. The word Church is derived from the Greek “kyriake”, which literally means the “Lord's thing”. So as to confuse us, or perhaps highlight the limitations of English, Church can mean *both* a building or a gathered community of people of faith. The name Church is used most often by Christian denominations. Because Church can be both a physical structure or actual people, Church is perhaps best defined as the 'Body of Christ'.

Leader: Let us turn to the light and humbly seek God's merciful love.

For the times we have hidden in the darkness of sin,
For the times we have failed to see the light of Christ,
For the times we have rejected God's merciful love,

**Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.**

Let us pray (together)

*God of mercy, who sent your Son into the world
not to condemn it but to save it,
open our eyes to behold Jesus lifted up on the cross
and to see in those outstretched arms your abundant compassion.
We ask this through Christ, with whom you have raised us up in baptism,
the Lord who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION TIME (45 minutes)

*(As Christians we believe that the **WORD** of God we hear proclaimed each Sunday is an empowering word, and that God is present in the word proclaimed. This is the word that God wants us to hear today. The dynamic of the small Christian community, namely, reflecting on our life story within the context of this word, and sharing the insights of these reflections, is such that God's Spirit becomes present, and the gifts of the Spirit are experienced as empowering and life giving.)*

FIRST READING (2 Chronicles 36:14-17a, 19-23)

All the leading priests and the people were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations; and they polluted the house of the Lord that he had consecrated in Jerusalem.

The Lord, the God of their ancestors, persistently sent his messengers to them, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his Prophets, until the wrath of the Lord against his people became so great that there was no remedy.

Therefore, the Lord brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels. The king took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also declared in a written edict: "Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go up."

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

SECOND READING (Ephesians 2:4-10)

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – for it is by grace you have been saved.

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come God might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

For by grace, you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. This is not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL (John 3:14-21)

Jesus said to Nicodemus: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. The one who believes in him is not condemned; but the one who does not believe is condemned already, for not having believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God.

“And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

The Gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.**

Lectio Divina means “sacred prayer through sacred reading.” It was a popular form of prayer in the early Church. This word proclaimed today is God's own word, God's way of speaking to you today through God's own Spirit. So take a few moments to be quiet, allowing this word you have just heard to touch you or soak into you as you reflect quietly on the three readings. Is there a word or thought that somehow attracts you or has your interest? If so, simply identify it and describe it in a few words.

COMMENTARY:

2 Chronicles 36:14-17, 19-23. Written towards the end of the fifth century B.C., this scripture passage offers a very concise history of Israel from the time of Solomon, to the division of the kingdom, to the sending of prophets, and ultimately to the return from exile. These few verses show us the unfolding of God's plan, a plan that shows how Cyrus, king of Persia, was instrumental in returning the people from exile to their homeland.

Ephesians 2:4-10. Paul is speaking to the Ephesians about the love of God, a love so great that God did not abandon them. He goes on to say that this great news, about the amazing depth of God's love, is a total gift from God. This gift is not attained by us through our own merits, but rather it comes to us through faith. Faith in the ultimate revelation of God's love, the gift of Christ. Paul reminds us that faith in Jesus, who died on the cross and then rose from the dead, affords us the opportunity to share in new life with Christ, eternal life through the resurrection.

John 3:14-21. This section of John's gospel should somehow grab the attention of all those who watch sports on TV. As the camera spans the crowd how often have you seen a sign held aloft that simply says: "**John 3:16**" ("For God so loved the world ...")? This one verse holds a profound message of hope that reveals the depth of God's love for the world, and the promise of life eternal! In the complete gospel passage for today, fittingly proclaimed during the season of Lent, Jesus invites us to behold the cross, but yet, we are told not to let our gaze remain there. Look beyond the cross and see the revelation of the resurrection. Jesus' message is very clear: if you believe in the one lifted high on the cross you will have eternal life. The gospel says we are faced with a choice; allow ourselves to be lifted up by the grace of Christ in order to behold the light of eternal life, or to look downcast into darkness and sin where eternal life cannot be found.

Allow 5 – 10 minutes for the participants to react to the **commentary** to identify a newly discovered insight.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

2 Chronicles 36:14-17, 19-23 "*... build him a house at Jerusalem, ...*"

King Cyrus proclaims to the people one of the things the Lord had requested of him: to build a house in Jerusalem in honour of the Lord. In response to this call from God Cyrus allows the Judeans, who had just returned from captivity/exile, to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. While the Temple is seen as the centre of life, and the place for the Holy Scriptures, for the Judeans it was also seen as the place for religious ritual, a place to offer honour and praise to God for all that they had received. Most recently, their release from captivity was something for which they desired to offer praise and thanks to God. Where is your "Temple"? Where do you go to offer praise and thanks to God for what you have received?

Ephesians 2:4-10 "*God, who is rich in mercy, ...*"

God's love for us is a total unconditional free gift, requiring nothing from us but faith; we need not do anything more than to simply believe in order to receive the fullness of God's love. While we have no doubt heard this message before, I would suggest our response each time we hear it should be to stand in wonder and awe before God and say WOW! Discuss what this message evokes within you.

John 3:14-21 "*... have eternal life ...*"

Just as in the passage from Ephesians, the message in John should evoke the same response within us: WOW! God loved us so much that He gave us his only Son so that we might have eternal life. Humans sometimes doubt themselves worthy of this amazing love from God, for what have I done to deserve such love? How can we better reach the point of believing that we are in fact worthy of this love from God?

CARING-PRAYING TIME: (15-20 minutes)

1. **Word of the Week:** "*For God so loved the world that he gave us his only-begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*"

2. Suggestion for the Week:

Spend some time this week reflecting upon your **worthiness** to receive God's love. Perhaps make a list of all your positive qualities, those things that truly identify you as one who is worthy of God's love.

3. Intercessions: (Response: **Lord, hear our prayer**)

Leader: Let us offer our intercessions to the God who is rich in mercy.

That the church, the house of God, may be built up by the challenge of prophetic voices and the fidelity of God's people, we pray to the Lord ...

That lands made desolate by war and refugees driven from their homes by conflict may come to a sabbath of healing and a season of peace, we pray to the Lord ...

That God's healing power may work through medical personnel who dedicate themselves to the physical wholeness of others, we pray to the Lord ...

That the Elect may be enlightened and reveal God's mighty works to the world through their witness, we pray to the Lord ...

That our Lenten observance may wake us from sleep and fill us with light to bring forth all that is good and right and true, we pray to the Lord ...

That the dead may be raised up and seated with Christ in the glory of heaven, we pray to the Lord ...

How can we help you in prayer this week?

Let us pray (together)

*O God, ever faithful and kind to all,
with tireless love you call the wayward home,
inviting them back to the path of true conversion.
Grant us the abundant riches of your grace,
that, with our spirits renewed, we may be able to respond to your love.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

**With hands and hearts united in gratitude for God's favours today, we pray that all those in our influence be moved to be open to your Word and your Spirit, while we pray as one,
OUR FATHER ...**

Celebrating the Word, Resurrection Ministries of the Congregation of the Resurrection Ontario-Kentucky Province (including the former Resurrection Centre), 265 Westmount Road North, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G7. (Celebrating the Word was founded by Father Frank Ruetz, C.R. deceased 2012). The Scripture version used in this commentary is the New Revised Standard Version (copyrighted by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA). **website:** www.resurrectionists.ca. **Email:** provincialoffice@resurrectioncollege.ca