

"Seeing and Loving God in Others"

Homily of October 27, 2002

by Fr. Gerry Murphy

Recently I took a short vacation in New York City. It's a city I had never visited and one I had heard so much about. So, when an opportunity came my way to spend a few days there, I naturally jumped at this chance to explore the Big Apple. Now even though I only spent about three days there I do feel that I sampled and savored something of the character and spirit of this unique city. From riding on the famous subway, to being exposed to the glitzy, sensory-overload nightlife of Times Square and Broadway, to simply spending a quiet moment in prayer at Ground Zero, I felt the pulse of New York city throbbing in my body and soul.

Of the many places of interest I managed to squeeze in over those few days, the one place that has left a deep lingering impression on me is that of Ellis Island in New York harbor. From 1892 - 1954 this island was the principal facility through which waves of immigrants from all over the world were initially assessed and processed for integration into American life, having fled poverty, war or political unrest in their own lands. From the moment you step on the island until the moment you leave, you can literally walk in the footsteps of those immigrants and imaginatively experience the whirlpool of emotions they surely had when they first stepped ashore in the big, strange new land that was to become their home - thousands of miles from family and loved ones.

Because of the constant volume of human traffic passing through the facility, and because of the huge cultural diversity of the immigrants arriving daily, it was at times extremely hard on both the immigrants and the Ellis Island staff to make this rite of passage easy on everyone. But the overall sense and impression I got from my time on the island learning about its history, was that a tremendous amount of good will, respect and dignity was shown to the immigrants, and every effort was made to accommodate their many needs and ease their integration into the new world. Therefore, to my mind, Ellis Island will forever stand as a monument to what is most noble in the human person and most distinct about this great nation - loving acceptance, hospitality and kindness shown to the stranger.

In our first reading this morning from the Book of Exodus we are given a sampling of the hundreds of laws that governed the moral life of the ancient Israelites. As this sampling illustrates some commandments pertained to the poor: Do not mistreat the stranger. Protect the widow and orphan. Do not take advantage of people needing loans and so on. So, one can certainly conclude from this reading that the God of the ancient Israelites, and our God, is a God who has deep compassion for the outcast and the most abandoned - just as Jesus had when he identified himself with the hungry and thirsty, with the sick and with those in prison. The question for us is: who are the orphans, the

widows, the lepers and the outcasts in our modern society and how well do we, as individuals and as a Christian community, care for them?

Perhaps the orphans today are the many teenagers who have no real family life as their parents have long separated or simply pass one another on the way to their respective jobs. Perhaps the widows today are the thousands of young women who daily abort their unborn babies and motherhood because they feel rejected, alone and desperate. Perhaps the lepers today are the AIDS victims, or alcohol and drug addicts who homelessly roam our streets. And perhaps the outcasts today are the underachievers in our power and success driven society.

In our gospel reading this morning Jesus clearly asserts that love of God and love of neighbor are two sides of the one coin. As a Eucharistic people who gather every week to break and share the word of God and the bread of life, there is a clear moral imperative implicit in this assertion for us. And that is that eucharistic communion, albeit a beautiful and uplifting ritual, can have no depth or meaning whatsoever if it does not move us, as individuals and as a community, to bring loving communion into our daily lives and into our world, especially by the acts of kindness, acceptance, understanding and justice we show to the stranger in our midst.

As the Prayer After Communion for this mass proclaims: Lord, bring to perfection in us the communion we share in this sacrament. May our celebration have an effect in our lives. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord. Amen.