

"Another Planet"

Homily of July 6, 2003

by Fr. Michael Dibble

With your help, I want to think about a couple of phrases that we just heard. Jesus went to the synagogue and, later on, it uses the words “in his own hometown, in his own house, in his own place.” That’s where we are now, you and I. You know, we are in our synagogue, our place of worship, our hometown, our native place, in His house.... We are in His house. And, unlike the sad ending of the Gospel that we just heard, you and I should be amazed at our presence of faith, our dogged faith, that, on a gorgeous, glorious summer afternoon, brings you to Mass. I am amazed and delighted! Jesus was amazed at his hometown. They didn’t believe him because “Oh, well, we know him so well. We know his family....” But, in all the sufferings of two thousand years of Catholicism, here you are..... amazing faith, dogged, not emotional most of the time... That is the phrase for today, “in His house.”

About a year ago, I told you about a group in New York City, when I was in college and in the seminary, called the “Catholic Evidence Guild.” Women and men, such as yourselves, and some seminarians (We would get up during the summer, when we had vacation.) and we would go to different street corners in New York City and we would set up a soap box. That was what it was. We would bring an American flag so the police wouldn’t think we were Commies. And we would talk about the Catholic Church. There were two of us usually.

That summer, the summer of 1954, Joe was going to be a deacon when we got back in September to the seminary. He had a year to go. He was about twenty-five. And I was going to the major seminary. I was twenty. Joe would give a talk about fifteen minutes, seventeen. And I would give a talk about fifteen or seventeen minutes, and then we would have questions and answers. We would talk about everything: the divinity of Christ, the existence of the Trinity, eternal life, the role of Mary.... We were given the neighborhood where we lived. Now, I lived next to Columbia University. That was my perch, and these summer nights, we would go out there, about seven o’clock, and set up our flag on the Columbia campus. (I would pray for earthquakes, tidal waves, the seven plagues of Egypt. Because, you can imagine the Columbia campus....) Although, I must say the only hostile hecklers we ever got, that summer, were Catholics who were mad at the Church. You know we would get these negative gestures, and sometimes we’d get even more vivid gestures! But, on this particular summer, there was a Jewish gentleman (And this is just a little footnote, but I always found Jewish listeners the best: polite, courteous, inquiring, sceptical, but really “ladies” and “gentlemen.”) And there was this Jewish fellow. We will call him “Mo.” Joe was the older seminarian. Then you have me. And then you have Mo. Mo would always stand right up front, next to the flag. He was a Jewish gentleman. It was summertime, but he had this little porkpie hat

and a very, very thin bowtie, and a jacket. It was a threadbare jacket, but he would have this jacket. And he would listen, and every so often you would hear him muttering, not maliciously, but in a kind of hushed awe. He would mutter, "You guys are from another planet."

The last night we were there at the end of August, he was still saying, "You guys are from another planet," and Joe turned to me, in front of Mo, and Joe said, "Yeah. I guess we are, in a way, and that's OK. Yeah. In a way, we're from another planet, and that's OK."

Mo would invite us out for ice cream sundaes after the sessions and then, finally, around the middle of July, Joe turned to Mo, when the crowd had dispersed at the end of the two talks, and he said, "Mo, would you like to see what goes on in a Catholic Church during Mass?" And Mo said, "Oh, I don't know. I worked all day. I'm tired from my working." (He did say "worked." I am not stereotyping. That is just how he talked. Glorious New York City Jewish guy, so likeable!) I had a key because I worked in the rectory when I wasn't schpieling, and we went to Corpus Christi. That's the church right next to Columbia.

We came in at night. I turned on the lights, and Joe explained the Mass, and all the things that I take for granted, even today. But, for Mo, it was from another planet! And Joe explained the Mass and the different things. Let me just take a few of them in His house and how Mo was amazed at our faith. First thing that Joe explained was Catholic art, statues and images of Our Lord and Our Lady. Now, of course, Mo was a Jew. Mo said, "Graven images. Graven images. You shouldn't have pictures. God is pure spirit." And Joe tried to explain that Catholicism believes in feeding the senses, the eyes, and we have pictures of Our Lord and Our Lady and all that. He was explaining Catholic iconography, and picturing the Father and the Son and the Spirit. "That's terrible! No. God is pure spirit. This is bad work!" And I remember sitting back in a pew, that night, and thinking, "I like Catholic imagery. I understand the Jewish point of view: God is pure spirit. Don't make images." But, I like the idea of God as an old man, and our Lord's wonderful face on the Shroud of Turin, and, even the Holy Spirit as a dove, a beautiful white dove of peace and wisdom.... Catholic imagery.

C.S.Lewis once wrote: "Has anybody really lost her or his soul by thinking of God the Father as an old wise sagacious, loving man?" It's OK. We know God is pure spirit. It's a lovely image. Now, in my many years as a priest, I have come across people, highly educated people, PhD's on their walls and some of them still go on, thinking of God this way. Iconography. They think of God in one way or the other. One way is this extreme: an angry, mean old curmudgeon who has a giant ledger up in the celestial condominium and has got a huge old-fashioned quill pen and he dips it into this scarlet ink and he leans over the parapet of Paradise and spots all of us. "Aha! A dirty thought, and in church too!" He splashes it down. "Oh, that one. She is thinking of some kind of

jealous revenge!.... And that one, pride!" The ledger is getting full and fuller. And then we die and face him..... "Now, I've got you!!" Forgive this absurdity. You know I am doing this in a dumb, cartoonish way. But you talk to these people, and especially if they have had a couple of drinks, and that is exactly how they think of God, this ineffably grouchy curmudgeon. That is one extreme.

The other extreme, and I have met many educated people (I don't mean just Catholics. I mean Christians.) who think and want to think that God is not that, but this, namely a kind of boozey old uncle who, at the Fourth of July, has had a little too much bourbon and is a little swizzled. And this God is leaning over the balcony of heaven and saying, "I hope my kids are having a good time, little fornication, a little cheatin', a little killin' as long as the kids are havin' a good time, I'm with 'em. You got another bourbon?" Of course, that's hyperbolic. But a kind of God that just as long as we're happy, he's happy, no matter how much of a spiritual wreck we're making of our lives.

What's wrong with the kind of father Our Lord talks about, as in The Prodigal Son? It is a loving, wise father. Can't wait to rush out and embrace us and bring us back after a life that we have messed up! What is so wrong about that, even with a beard? And, as far as Our Lord goes, my dad had, even in '54, a magazine with the cover of the Shroud of Turin, you know the face of Our Lord on the Shroud. Incidentally, according to recent scientific data, it looks like the authenticity of the Shroud is validated again. And, if that wasn't Jesus' face, it ought to be! On one of the nights we were hanging out at Corpus Christi Church, after CEG, I showed this pamphlet. I said, "This is a picture that I believe is Jesus." Mo looked at it and said, "Yeah, well, he looks Jewish. He's got the nose..." Our Lord, on the Shroud image, does have a semitic nose, but what a beautiful face! There's incredible strength and tenderness. If it wasn't Our Lord, it should have been! And Mo was deeply touched by this photo.

And, as far as the Holy Spirit, in our iconography, as a dove, a white bird of peace, a beautiful white bird, that's OK. We know it's an image of pure spirit of wisdom. It's better than the buzzards. (I mentioned the "buzzards" about a year ago. I still live with them. And, maybe a few of you do. These invisible kind of creatures, like buzzards, with mean, mean little pink eyes and beaks, like awful demonic Disney creations, and they flap in. They are invisible. I once mentioned this to a nun who is a Psychiatrist, and she said, "You see buzzards, Father?" backing away. I said, "Sister, I am talking metaphors. I used to teach English. It's just a metaphor." But, you know, buzzards sometimes, even in church, will alight on your shoulder, this invisible, almost devilish creature, and he will peck away, a mean buzzard. He will say, "You loser! Instead of going into all of this junk, you should be taking them through every line of the scripture readings, especially the Old Testament, and explaining about the Philistines and the dynasties of Egypt, instead of all of this superfluous anecdote. And you look like something out of Edgar Allen Poe. And the other buzzard flaps in. He goes to the other extreme. He says, "Oh, Michael, you are a saint, a saint, in the eighth grade, rejected by

Patsy Collins for the graduation dance, going bald young, spending all those years in the classroom teaching Shakespeare when you could have been in the mission in Tierra del Fuego. You are a saint and nobody appreciates just how wonderful you are.” Now, both those buzzards are liars! And if we imagine the Holy Spirit, which the Bible tells us is a spirit, a very personal force of wisdom, the Holy Spirit comes in and says, “Be calm. Buzz off, buzzards...” to us. We are not messes and we aren’t yet saints. We are struggling human beings who are loved. So, be calm and have some wisdom and trust in His power.

So, that’s OK. Iconography is OK. And then Joe brought Mo down the aisle and he explained this, genuflection, how we often genuflect when we enter the church and we kneel often during the Mass. And Mo said, “What are you looking at? What are you genuflecting at?” And Joe pointed to the tabernacle. He said, “We believe that Our Lord Jesus is present, under the appearance of bread, in that tabernacle.” And Mo said, “Oh, I get it. That’s OK. It’s like the Ark of the Covenant.” Joe said, “Yes, it is like the presence of God, like the Ark of the Covenant.” And Mo went along with that, not embracing the Faith, but understanding why we do so. Mo even tried to genuflect a couple of times, to get the hang of it.

I thought years later, when I was a priest in that little town upstate, I saw a genuflection I will never forget, just one that I would like to tell you about. “Paul” is the name of the man. He is now deceased. Paul worked at IBM, a high job at IBM, in Poughkeepsie, in the parish. He lived in the parish also. One day, one Monday morning, he set out for work at IBM, big executive job, and, twenty minutes later, he came back to his house in Millbrook. He walked into the living room. He sat down on the rug and put his attache case on the rug, like that. His wife came from the kitchen. She said, “Paul, Honey, what’s the matter?” And Paul, after all those years at IBM, the ferocity of the competition, the normal pressures of any executive, said, “Honey, I can’t do it any more....I can’t do it any more.” And, he continued to stay in the house for a couple of months. He got better. But, I would see him. I knew his story, as the parish priest. And I would see him genuflect at Sunday Mass during those two months of suffering, like I have never seen anything. It wasn’t show-off-y and it wasn’t grandiose. There was a kind of vulnerability to the way that Paul genuflected. I found out later (He told me.) that when he genuflected at Mass on Sunday, during those two months of anguish, he would say this, as he went down, lowering his body, “You’re the Lord. I am not the Lord. Hold my hand.” Now, maybe something in some of us might say, “Well, isn’t that puerile! A grown man, an executive, in a big company, saying, ‘Hold my hand.’ “ That is just what Jesus meant when he said, “Unless you become like little kids..... you won’t even get into the kingdom of Heaven.” He got better and stronger. But when he genuflected and lowered his body, “You’re Lord. I’m not. Hold my hand.”

And, the last thing is Holy Communion, Joe explaining the Eucharist. Now imagine poor Mo. If he didn’t want to imagine God in human form, it was another terrible leap

for him to imagine God Man under the appearance of bread. And Joe got carried away. Joe was a very brilliant deacon, I thought. He explained the hypostatic union and transubstantiation and matter and form..... And Mo listened so politely. He even took off his porkpie hat. And I thought, "OK. It's still an ineffable mystery. But it is a great reality. It is Our Lord. (Forgive my always using these silly phrases, but it's not a holy fig newton or a blessed cracker.) It is Christ, in some ineffable way. It is Our Lord, and he comes into our body for a few minutes. Then Mo said, as we went out to go to Scraft's for an ice cream sundae, "Well, after you take the bread, what do you do?" And Joe said, "We talk to him." Four syllables summed up months of theology. "We talk to him." "Oh, OK. I'll have a chocolate ice cream sundae here."

If I can introduce a personal note here, it breaks your heart to see Catholics (and again stereotypical terms, conservative Catholics and left-wing Catholics) at each other's throats about, just one example, about the Eucharist. Before I came to California, I was at a bash for priests, which I usually avoid like a plague because they often evolve.... These were good guys, hard-working, bright guys, but they suddenly got into communion. Some of them said, "It's just awful how some people, coming to Mass, still insist on receiving the Lord this way (tongue out), just terrible. It's that childish, pre-Vatican II." And other people said, "Well, extending the hands, they are not used to extending the hands. They remember as a child receiving...." I did. I only started putting out my hand about ten years ago. I remember just sitting there. I wasn't the hero of this. I kept my silly mouth shut. But I remember thinking, "Why are you fighting about how they receive? They are receiving. They believe. They wouldn't come out on a Sunday morning and walk down a lane just for a piece of bread! They are believers! If they want to receive with the hand or the tongue, they believe it is Christ Jesus in their bodies. Let's stop slashing at each other, while the whole world is yawning and breathing in scepticism and cynicism and "Who cares?" and "There is no god." and "Jesus wasn't god." They believe He is even in the Eucharist for a few minutes in their bodies. Let's unite with our love of the Lord and belief! I am saying it to you now because I can be nice and brave. I should have said it that night!

This really is the last one now.... At the end of Mass, the priest gives the final blessing. It is a wonderful, wonderful way to end the Mass. Power of Our Lord and the Father and the Spirit go with you. And we have all seen signs of the cross that were just great. I remember when I was a teacher, kids taking finals, even cool, sophisticated kids. And then, once in a hospital in Poughkeepsie, (I have also mentioned this.) a husband and wife were sitting on a bench on the fourth floor of this hospital, St. Francis, because they thought their little boy was going to die that night. He had been in a car accident. He did not die. He is alive today. He has kids of his own. But it was an awful night and I, the parish priest, was pacing up and down saying the rosary. But the wife was on the bench with the husband. The husband was Bruce Biceps, and she was this very petite, little lady, with tiny, tiny fingers. And through the evening, she had her arm around his bulging muscles, but with this hand, every so often, she would reach up and on his

forehead, make the sign of the cross. I thought, "Yeah! That's great, great Catholic Christian power and belief."

And the third incident is this one, about the sign of the cross and belief in His house. In 1954, after that summer of Catholic Evidence Guild-ing, we went to the seminary. Joe is now a deacon and I am a freshman, so to speak. We had a first week of seminary retreat. All the deacons would go to Father Gooch and the rest of us would go to Father Igor. But the deacons had exclusive availability to Father Gooch. I later found out, just before Christmas vacation, that all the deacons who went to Father Gooch got this as a penance. (I wrote it down.) "Select the most timid, nervous, droopy type, newcomer in the seminary and ask him to go for a walk, and begin the walk by inviting him to join you with the sign of the cross. I heard that on the morning starting Christmas vacation. When I got home that afternoon, I remembered that, a week after the retreat in September, three deacons came up to me and said, "Mike, would you like to go for a walk, and would you join me in the sign of the cross?"....."OH, YEAH! I'd love to go for a walk...." And, in the forty-two years that I have been hearing confessions, never once did I ever ask a penitnant, as penance, to go for a walk with a wimp.

There is no Walt Disney ending to the Mo Story. I can't say that as I went back to the seminary, Mo blended into the baptismal font. I don't know what ever happened to him, but he was teachable. He found it worth listening to, even though he kept saying, "You guys are from another planet." I often think of Joe saying, "Yeah. I guess we are. I guess we are, in a way, from another planet. That's OK."That's OK!