



Archbishop of Montreal

Homilie
Wednesday, June 24, 2020

Solemnity of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist (Lk 1:57-66, 80)

Have you been able to recognize Jesus' presence in your life?

Over the course of the last three and a half months, since the onset of the pandemic, have you been able to recognize Jesus' presence in your life? In retrospect, when we look back at our personal, family, social and faith-life experiences, what have we learned from them? In general, a test is much like a double-edged sword; it can cut us, it can force us to the ground, but it can also open up a time for growth. Some questions that can come to mind: what will help us emerge from this experience and grow from it? It is through trials that we will succeed. The pandemic is a trial. But what can lead us through it? How do we look back at our experiences and make sense out of them? What do these experiences lead us to discover? Somehow, we tend to feel that all the powers of this world have been "weakened". What is left? It is the dignity of every human that remains; every human having been created in the image of God. And that, regardless of our situation, our health, our illness, or our loneliness, remains constant. Every human being is created in the image of God and called to eternal life. This is the inherent dignity of every human being. It is the dignity of each and every one of you. It is the dignity of all mankind, to be created in the image of God, which characterizes our inherent value. It becomes a matter of rediscovering the dignity of every human being.

Another area in our lives which needs to be recognized, but is sometimes taken for granted, is the family. As the world lives in confinement, only those closest to us live together on a daily basis. The family is what we often take for granted. The family, which is often tested, has already, under normal circumstances, its own share of trials to face amid its many commitments and engagements. During these times, however, the family has come together, more than ever before! Perhaps it was the first opportunity in a long time for many families to have happiness and rest restored in their homes by their newly found time together. However, perhaps certain wounds emerged as well, through fragile relationships, or misunderstandings. Maybe for many families, the time together was an opportunity to forgive again.

In every case, the time together became an opportunity to rediscover the importance and the true value of family; and not only the value of family, but that of every individual, every human being, given that everyone is, in one way or another, related to a family! It was a chance to rediscover not just the importance of the family to the individual, but also the importance of the family to society as whole. The family is the nucleus that serves as a building block for society. We must also recognize the importance of the family unit in the Church. It is the family from which life is born, that provides new life, that raises new citizens, that brings forth children for Baptism; it is the true backbone for society and the Church.

This increased awareness of the true fundamental value of the family is important for every-one as a member of a family, for parents and for children. It is also important to society, and for the Church to know how to advocate for and minister to families. Do we know how to help foster family life and be of service to families? It is not always evident. Sometimes, we want to help or serve as a member of a family, and make family life a priority in our lives, but again, amid busy family life, it is not always easy. The family is very important, indispensable, and essential. A

weakened family leads to a weakened society and to a weakened Church. A strong family unit however, helps create a stronger society and build a stronger Church.

Many continue to express a serious issue affecting family life: “We are still on 24/7. We have teenagers who work on weekends. In order to gather together at mealtimes, we have to book it with a month’s advanced notice.” Many have considered having Sunday become a common day of rest for everyone, allowing families to get together. It can be tiring being away so much from our families. Being together can be a great form of rest. So why not, then, put this request into action? Currently, there is a petition being presented to the National Assembly, advocating for Sunday as a designated common day of rest. I invite you to give your support and sign the petition online.

There may also be other issues that persist during the pandemic. Yet, in addition to the dignity of a person and the value of the family, above all, there is God. Among these three, God, in his miraculous ways, remains the one consistent presence that connects everyone on the entire planet. Interpersonal relationships, physical distancing, hindered communications, homes for the elderly, for healthcare, all these have become difficult, staying connected has become difficult. The only one who has the power to remain ever-present, to come close to us, is God himself. We cannot fathom the immense work it entails: all the time, all the love, all the care that God has given to all of humanity, to each and every one of us and to our families, to stir within us and coming knocking at the door of our hearts.

So the question really becomes: do I want to open the door of my heart to God? Do I want to make room for God? Several people have testified that if it were not for the pandemic, they

would not have rediscovered prayer; be it personal prayer, family prayer, rediscovering prayer life and learning to give time to prayer again. Sometimes prayer can start off like a cry. It can start poorly but once you say “Lord, help me!”, that can become our prayer for the day! Saying “Lord, help me!” is a form of prayer that the Lord always hears.

It is also very important to rediscover our spiritual life. We recognize that our physical health is important. And that is an excellent thing! At the start of the pandemic, we focused a great deal on physical health, but a few weeks later, we started addressing psychological health, mental health, personal health, and overall health. Thus, psychological health is very important, too. It is also important to consider emotional health, mental health, and the health of our relationships. But we must not forget our spiritual health, the quality of our spiritual life, and in health, everything is connected. When we care for our physical health, it helps our psychological health and vice versa. When we nurture our spiritual health, it helps both our psychological health and our physical health. The human being is not a mechanism comprised of different parts: “Ah, I have a gear here which is damaged. I will fix it and it will be fine!” No! Every dimension of our being affects us as a whole! When our feet hurt, our whole being can hurt! When we are weak in some areas, our whole person becomes weakened.

To rediscover our spiritual dimension is to rediscover that we exist before God, we exist to pray, we exist in being called to eternal life. When we use “I”, we exist in the spiritual realm and affirm our spiritual dimension. It is our center, our heart, our spirit. It is our soul expressing itself through the body which exists as one with our spirit. But it all starts from within a spiritual core. A spiritual core that has an impact on our emotional life, on our health, and on our relationships. When we pray for each other, and with each other, it brings us closer to one another, much like the spokes of a wheel that meet at the centre. When we pray, we draw closer to God; and when we draw closer to God, we draw closer to one another, because we are all God’s creatures, called to be God’s children, and loved by God. God never ceases to look upon us as his beloved children! As his children, what then does this mean? This means that we are all brothers and sisters to one another!

Spiritual life has a very huge impact on the personal, familial, social, and most certainly, Church life. This pandemic presented an opportunity to rediscover these dimensions, the different fundamental dimensions of life: on being human, on dignity, on the family, and the spiritual life.

On this feast of St. John the Baptist, whose vocation was to prepare the way of the Lord, let us pray to St. John the Baptist that the Lord may prepare the way for our hearts to welcome Him, to welcome his presence, his work from within us and through us, so that we can all get through this pandemic, having grown in spirit, i.e. becoming more rooted in God, in solidarity with one another, in service to the most needy and the poor, in society and in the Church.

After the Prayer of Communion

For three and a half months, I have spoken to priests, pastoral lay leaders, volunteers, via Zoom, on other platforms or by telephone. I am grateful to God because during the first week of the health crisis, many of us did not think that it would last long. But we soon found out that this would last much longer than we thought. People began respond rapidly in service to our mission during which there was no pause, it continued. Our mission to announce the Good News, to announce Jesus Christ and to speak of the Kingdom of God. In reality, we are called to be witnesses to the Word through our actions, our example, and our lives. The mission continued. But we needed to rediscover how to keep it going, because in the Church, as in society, much of our lives is based on physical contact and personal relationships! How then, do we continue our mission? Online platforms, various social media, the internet, everything that was possible, all became the tools to reach people. What was most surprising and astonishing were personal accounts from people who had been away from the Church but who had been touched by this outreach; this included those who have been absent from the Church for a while, and those had no faith or did not know Jesus. Many have been touched by the fragility of our circumstances, which we all experience on a daily basis. It is also a time of rediscovering our own lives and to perhaps realign ourselves with our priorities. Perhaps we are also realizing more fully that we need God in our lives. I am certain that for many of us, it had become an occasion to rediscover God – to quench our thirst for God, which He instills in our hearts.

This is evidence of the amazing hand of God at work! It is much like the tip of the iceberg, a great deal remains hidden beneath its surface, the great spiritual source alive and active during the pandemic. I contacted those who were shut-in, many who live alone, some who were lonely, and others whose network of resources and relationships were suddenly severed. Many shared with me how this became for them an occasion to renew their personal prayer life and to also renew their devotion to God. It was a similar experience for many families. I am thinking of a family who went to Church on Sundays and who, since the pandemic, pray together every day, more than ever. Though their children might have seemed a little distracted when they came to Mass, grew to share a prayerful life with their parents — the family became prayerful. And therefore, a lot of good was present, there was a lot of gentle tugging at people's hearts. We try to do things- we try to help, but in the end, Thank God for He is the most powerful Responder! Because only He has the power to touch our souls in a profound way.

But to see deeply into the soul, only God can do that! And it is better that way for us because God also protects our souls from anything that is invasive and menacing. Only God can really see profoundly into our souls - for God always does so by tugging gently at our hearts – God always does it by addressing our freedom. It seems to always be the case to ask, 'Do we want to open our hearts to Christ?' This is the major question that each one of us needs to ask. This is the essential question that each human being needs to ask when witnessing to their faith. It is the freedom of every individual who is addressed to answer. It is there that God touches the depths of our souls - but God also comes knocking at the doors of our hearts too.

Let us believe then in the work of God which is happening now and will continue to manifest itself. Let us ask for the grace to be ourselves in the light of God's work, to be more open to God's spirit within us, and that through us - God can use us as instruments in building the Kingdom of God.

On this feast of St. John the Baptist, let us pray to him, that the paths of our heart, all that impedes our hearts from being open to Him, that the curves or the mountains or the hills that prevent the Lord from reaching us, may be smoothed out so that we can welcome the Lord with generosity, trust, and openness.

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