



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Cheeses for Jesus: the Gift of Focus."**
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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Zechariah 9:9-12
Epistle Romans 7:21-8:6
Gospel Matthew 11:25-30

One of the treats I had during my recent home leave in the United States was the chance to visit a place that is rather special in the list of important religious sites in the county. It is the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani, located perhaps 75 miles south of Louisville, Kentucky. This unassuming and austere place was the monastic home of one of America's greatest spiritual writers, Thomas Merton. It was where he wrote many of his important works on spirituality that have influenced several generations of Christians and even those of no particular faith at all. Merton was raised as a nominal Episcopalian, but that hardly figures in an early life of philosophical study coupled with parties, sex and booze. It was in early middle age that God called to Merton and offered him a very different life- that of a monk. Merton lived that life for the rest of his life until, on a rare trip outside of the monastery, he died in a freak hotel accident in Bangkok in 1968. I visited his very simple grave there where he lies with the other departed monks in the monastery grounds.

One of Merton's goals was to recall his readers to a simpler, more spiritual Christianity: one that would help honest seekers to come nearer to God and to live a life more fully dedicated to God's will. Gethsemani Abbey helped him to live out that goal. Its daily routine is still marked by frequent services in the chapel, but punctuated with simple, homey tasks that not only bring income to the community,

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but also give the monks the opportunity to keep busy at honest work. And what do the monks do? They make cheese. Cheese and some top-notch Bourbon-soaked fruitcakes judged by no less than the New York Times as being amongst the very best in the U.S. Gethsemani Abbey found what it did well and continues to do just that, avoiding all temptations to expand or diversify. Once when Merton was asked what he and his brother monks did to pass the time, his typically humorous, but insightful response was, "We make cheeses for Jesus."

That principle was in my mind this weekend as the vestry was on retreat up near Tagaytay. Fr Marc and his wife Suzanne did an excellent job of reminding us of the importance of establishing our values and our principles and then using them to be the best that we can be. In one of the last sessions we were asked to consider "What is the Big Thing that God has in mind for Holy Trinity?" In other words, we were asked to begin to consider what it is that our parish does best and then to do all we could to make that the focus of our work and our life.

Normally, I would be thankful that the vestry committed themselves to coming to a retreat like that, but would be sadly aware that these kind of "mountaintop experiences" have a hard time being translated into the life back home when we meet every month to discuss finances, repairs, special events and the Sunday School. But this year something different happened. Somehow the vestry this time has reached critical mass in the variety of people who are members, the races and linguistic backgrounds represented, and the spiritual gifts each contributes. This year, to my deep amazement, the vestry members actually talked about their faith and how Holy Trinity was part of that. And it wasn't only the "usual suspects": those who like to talk- a lot. No, this time everyone had something to say, something to share. The result was that for the first time in a very long time, the vestry of Holy Trinity Church was taking its spirituality very, very seriously, and discovering new ways of appreciating what each member had to contribute to our life together both as a vestry and as a parish.

St. Paul, in the epistle reading from his letter to the Romans, seems to approve of this development today as he comments: "...Those who live according the flesh set

their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who lives according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.”

Yes, the vestry is the fiscal body of the church, elected to manage its early affairs. But now we have the opportunity to transform those mundane concerns by making them conform to an overall spirituality, making what we do dependent on who we are, and making who we are dependent on the plans God has for us. That is a liberating thing, and perhaps a bit frightening. But it is certainly the most hopeful development that I have experienced in Holy Trinity since I began my work here, and it makes me pretty glad that I decided to stay a bit longer!

But the proof of the value of this experience will be in the way we put it into action. And here is a place where the congregations of our parish can do their part by reminding the vestry, and the clergy for that matter, of the centrality of a healthy and loving spirituality in our common life. It is easy to do lip service to the idea of the Church as something special, something of God, something devised by Christ to bring salvation to the world, and then turn around and run it like any another human, ego-ridden organization. It will be your duty, members of Holy Trinity, to keep us accountable God and to you- dedicated to making this church focused and healthy, and ready to discover, and then perfect, the special work God has in store for us- the ‘Big Thing’ that will be what Holy Trinity’s people do best. Will it be “cheeses for Jesus” or the best Chinese breakfasts and potluck lunches in the city? Will it be the witness of all of the racial colors of our rainbow working and praying together? Will it be education, or service, or music? I don’t know. Not yet. But I do know that this weekend may have made a definitive difference in who we are, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can be more than we ever imagined.

“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes.” That’s what Jesus says in today’s Gospel. Well, perhaps the vestry came together this weekend as children in their spiritual understanding of themselves and their roles in the life of Holy Trinity, but our schooling is now well underway.