

March 4, 2018 Cleansing The Temple Homily: Until recently, while driving north on route 787, I could always count on seeing an impressive and inspiring sight: a lovely church steeple off in the distance, on the Western side of the roadway. And then one day it simply vanished. Much to the chagrin of the native people one of the landmarks of the city of Watervliet, St. Patrick's Church, had been demolished. I was deeply saddened. But my sadness was a mere trifle in comparison to the grief experienced by the longstanding members of the parish, who were in mourning at the loss of their church which had been constructed over one hundred years earlier. In its place is now a shopping center. Yes, a shopping center!

In Germany's largest diocese, Trier, the number of parishes will be drastically reduced by eighty percent in the next two years. The numbers are telling: from 172 parishes to only 35 in 2020. The massive decline of church membership is often cited as the main reason for the unprecedented pastoral plan.

In many parts of Western Europe once magnificent churches have been sold and later converted into art studios, restaurants, bars and discotheques. Huge shopping centers are now replacing churches and temples where people gather together.

From the standpoint of faith, this is an ominous trend that shows no sign of letting up. Does faith matter anymore?

In today's gospel, we are given John's account of the cleansing of the temple. For the Jews, the Temple, one of the architectural marvels of the ancient world, is the sign of the presence of God. It is in the Temple that God instructs his people and receives their worship. Surely, it is not without significance that the first place Jesus visits when he goes to the holy city of Jerusalem is the Temple, the house of his Father. In John's account Jesus is in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, a solemn feast commemorating the liberation of the Jews from their long bondage in Egypt. The destruction of the Temple in the year seventy of the Christian era was a devastating blow to the Jewish people. Even today, a two thousand year old tradition is observed at a Jewish wedding. The groom breaks glass under his foot to commemorate one of the most tragic events in the history of the Jews.

What does Our Lord find upon entering the court of the Gentiles in the Temple? People selling cattle, sheep and doves. His Father's House has been converted into a place of commerce. Animals for sacrifice were sold at unjust prices and the poor were exploited for selfish gain. Making an idol of money in the sacred place infuriated Jesus. Zeal for His Father's house consumed Him. And his righteous zeal will eventually consume him to the point that it will lead him to the cross.

Jesus boldly speaks of his body as a Temple because God is present in Him. So, too, are members of his Church. We are God's building, declares St. Paul. We are called to be the dwelling place of God Himself. At a time when churches are closing and fewer people are engaged in worship, it is all the more important that we reflect in our own lives the invisible presence of the Christ who lives.

The French Canadian writer, Jean Vanier, tells the remarkable story of Etty Hillsaum, a young Jewish woman who was gassed by the Nazis in Auschwitz. This extraordinary woman of faith had a deep sense

of the value of each person as the 'house' of God. She has left behind a beautiful letter that she wrote to the Lord.

“And I promise you, my God, that I shall try to find a home and a roof for you in as many houses as possible. There are so many empty houses, where I will bring you in as a guest of honor”

In Hasidic Jewish folklore, a question is asked. “Where does God reside? The answer, “Where he is invited to enter”. Such wisdom must not be ignored in our secular culture. God seeks a home. May he find one in our churches and in the life of the baptized who proudly proclaim Him as Lord and Savior!

Amen!