

The New Huddled Masses

At the feet of the Statue of Liberty a famous series of lines from a sonnet penned in 1883 by the poet Emma Lazarus can be found. Words that spoken from the lips of “Lady Liberty” were directed at nations in far off lands across the Atlantic Ocean throughout the European continent and reaching as far as Asia:

“.. Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Gazing out today, we are witnesses to a new set of huddled masses. In principle, they are no different from those referred to by the words of E. Lazarus. Why? Because the ideals she represents go beyond a specific culture and timeline. Immigrant groups from the “east” (Europe and the Asian continent) across the Atlantic were the recipients of Lady Liberty’s ‘message’ two centuries ago. The new recipients of that message today are those from the “south.” The “south” represents the poor, the sick, and the immigrants. Among those immigrants are those from Latin-America. Their pursuit of opportunity and well being is no different than anyone else’s.

Three hallmarks of our faith include: universality (Catholic), community (church), that re-members (Eucharistic). These three dimensions constitute our essential identity (who we are) and our call (how we are to live).

Much of the awareness of who we are as a people of God comes by virtue of remembering where we have come from. This lends to the realization of a saving God that has chosen his people, established a covenant, guided them to the promised-land, and shepherded them throughout history. Precious prayers of thanksgiving such as Mary’s ‘Magnificat’ (Lk 1,46-54); and Zacharias’ ‘Benedictus’ (Lk 1,68-79) are great examples of this act of remembering. The evangelist Luke emphasizes God’s saving power and faithfulness to His promises. In the Gospel accounts, both prayers are joyfully proclaimed as a result of each witnessing the realization of those promises. Our Catholic biblical and liturgical tradition of remembering reaches its peak at Christ’s table when we hear the words of Jesus

repeated by the celebrant, “Do this in memory of me” (Lk 22,19).

I believe that as members of a Catholic family that has inherited the rich Eucharistic liturgy based largely on the exercise of remembering, there are many lessons to be learned; lessons that can be applied to our lives as members of our society and as members of Christ’s body.

As members of society today, one of those lessons involves calling to mind precisely our immigrant past, whether it’s our very own or that of our great-grandparents. There is a lesson of “thinking back” in order to “look forward”. Better yet, to look at one another and appreciate each other based on our shared experience as pilgrims through this life and onto the next.

As members of Christ’s Body, we are called to be acutely aware. The apostle Paul pointed out to one of his groups that as members of Christ’s body, they shared in the joys and pains of the community (Rom 12,15). He also exhorted them to give thanks at all times (1 Thes 5,18; 2 Thes 1,3).

To end, rather than to imagine Lady Liberty tilting her head toward the ‘South’ to recognize the new set of huddled masses, it’s more realistic –and Christian- to turn inward toward the mystery of God within and then toward each other where that mystery unfolds through love in His Church. Upon this moment perhaps then we will realize ‘those new huddled masses’ are really us. Perhaps then we will realize -with great awe- that we were God’s new huddled masses all along. Then we will burst out in joy with our very own ‘Magnificat’.

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