

The Essence

Not so long ago my sister and I sold a house we had owned on Cape Cod for about 20 years. It was very modest place which was a retreat and gathering place for the whole family. When it was time to sell, the realtor had us do something I wasn't expecting. We had to "stage" the house. It was already furnished and lived-in, but we had to make it look like a picture in a real estate magazine. We had to strategically put a throw blanket here, and a vase of flowers there, and a bowl of fruit somewhere else. In other words, we had to make it look furnished but as if anal-retentive decorators lived in it.

Though I cooperated with this requirement, it wasn't easy: I have a terrible allergy to bull-ony. I thought, "*The house is solid: It has a good roof and windows and floors and so forth.*" All that was essential was there and in good order. If you want vases of flowers and bowls of fruit, by all means, bring them in after you buy the house.

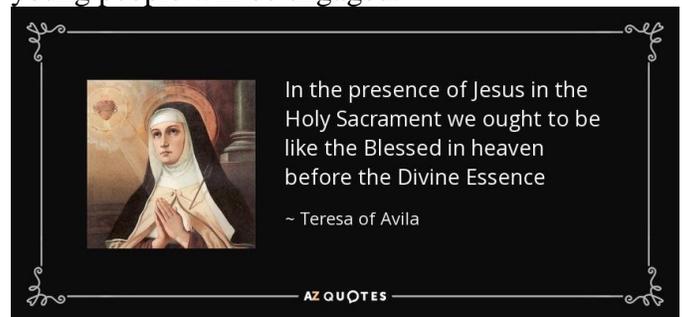
To speak of the "essence" of anything, whether a house or a person or an apple is just to say exactly "what" it is. If you will, "essence" is the "what-ness" of any given thing. The bowl of fruit, the vase of flowers and the decorative throw are, clearly, not part of the "essence" of the house. Maybe an argument could be made that they are part of the essence of "home" or "home-making," but not the house per se.

What's the point? The Mass we celebrate every week is, essentially, worship of our God. There are many accoutrements or garnishes we apply to attempt to enhance the experience. The music is part of the essence, but certain styles or forms may fall into the category of enhancement or garnish. The amusing story the priest tells as an introduction to the point of his homily is probably non-essential: It just serves as an attempt to get people to focus their attention, to prepare for the message and, perhaps, to ingratiate them in some way or other.

Okay, so what's the point? Well, I think that it's easy to lose the "essence" behind things which are "non-essential." I think that this is true when the focus becomes more about the emotional power of a church's worship than the worship itself. There

seems to be a confusion of *inspiration* with *emotions* in some corners of Christianity. The emphasis on feeling something or, even, getting something out of it constitutes a *turn* from worship of the Lord to something happening inside of one's self. Don't get me wrong; these things are not mutually exclusive! To be human is to have feelings and emotions. Rather, it is a matter of priority: If we can come to Church with a firm focus on worship, no matter what feelings or emotions or stimulations may or may not be aroused, then we are capturing the "essence" of Mass and of Church.

All of that said, it is incumbent upon people in my position to recognize and respect the needs of human nature as it is in our day and age. The pews are hard on the posterior. People have been formed with short attention spans. Inductive methods are probably better than didactic ones, [In other words, the use of stories, humor, analogies and other devices to gain people's attention, as opposed to straight, doctrinal explanations.] People also need the warmth of human relationships and I should create opportunities for gatherings and interactions both spiritual and social. And, there is also a need to do things in such a way that little children and young people will be engaged.



All of the above are meant to be in service to the "essence." If it becomes "comedy hour" or some sort of "song and tap-dance" on the part of the priest each Sunday---as delightful as that may be---the essence is lost. If it becomes nothing more than a social club which just happens to offer a Mass then, again, the essence is lost. So too, if creating a spectacle to delight the children becomes the driving force then the essence is lost.

The essence is worship. We find ourselves when we lose ourselves in the Lord. As the Apostle says, "*It is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me,*" (Galatians 2:20)