

Doors to Go Out

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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For those of us who are religious, 'going to church' is extremely important. We gauge someone's faith commitment by how often they come to mass and often joke about those who haven't 'darkened the doorway of a church' in years. While coming to church can be an indicator of someone's faith, we must be careful not to make it the end all be all of religion. Perhaps even more important than coming into church is to go out from church. Doors are meant to be entered, but also exited.

The week before he was named pope and took the name Francis, Cardinal Bergoglio from Argentina gave a talk to the other cardinals in Rome in which he challenged the dominate understanding of the church. For many of us, the church is successful whenever our congregations are stable, the structures are supported, and there are no hardships. In this talk, however, Cardinal Bergoglio said that the church can appear to be doing very well, but still be sick. That is because the church shouldn't primarily be concerned with itself in the first place. He calls this 'theological narcissism.' It is amazing that this man was still elected pope after saying that!

The church that Pope Francis envisions is a church that primarily goes out of itself. That is why he is constantly speaking about going to the peripheries and living on the margins of society: with the poor, the minorities, and the lowly. To maintain our status at the center will lead us to forget our mission. The mission is to send us out to make disciples of all nations.

As part of his talk, the future pope drew attention to the book of Revelation where we have the image of Jesus standing at the door and knocking. “Obviously,” he says, “the text refers to his knocking from outside in order to enter, but I think about the times in which Jesus knocks from within so that we may let him out. The self-referential church keeps Jesus Christ within herself and does not let him out.” This certainly is another way of looking at it.

In today’s Gospel, we have another reference to knocking and a door: ‘ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you.’ Pope Francis’ reflection could apply here and should remind us that while we usually knock at a door to be let inside (like the friend in our Gospel who came at midnight looking for food), sometimes, we have to knock on doors from the inside so that they will be opened to let us out.

Jesus knocks on the doors of the church not only to be let in, but also to be let out.

Do I put more emphasis on me coming to church or me going forth from church?

If we put too much emphasis on coming to church, we can inadvertently trap Jesus there. Pope Francis calls us beyond this form of church, for the church doesn’t exist for itself. It exists to be the light and salt of the earth, the leaven in the dough, and the sacrament of the salvation of the world. Isn’t it ironic that the very name we give to our worship, ‘mass,’ actually means ‘dismissal’? Mass is not something we come to, but the place we are dismissed from.