

This is the text of Charles Blair's presentation on Stewardship Sunday, November 13. He has a Masters degree in theology from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in addition to his professional degrees and is Director of the Digital Library Development Center of the University of Chicago Library.

I have been asked to say a few words about what being a parishioner at St Paul's Parish means to me. I'll begin with the following words from Father André Louf,¹ written after he retired as abbot of a Cistercian monastery in northern France, a position he held for over thirty years.

"In order to realize community, the Church absolutely does not need to be imposing, numerically important, astonishing. [On] the contrary, everything was already given at the foot of the Cross. The [Church] was then reduced to Mary, John, the converted sinful woman, the holy women, and also that pagan, the Roman centurion who confessed the divinity of Jesus, and finally the good thief, who preceded all the others into the kingdom of God. ... Peter is not [entirely] absent [but] his mode of presence is peculiar. At that hour, he is given over to weeping, entirely turned around by the gaze of Jesus. As at Golgotha, the Church is also present in the upper room of the Cenacle on Pentecost: Mary, John, Peter, the other apostles, and the rest of the disciples. All is already given in this little seed.

"Today we have nothing in addition to this. ... [Yet]

"It has sometimes been a temptation for the Church ... to draw up statistics and, above all, to attach a certain importance to these statistics. The fervor of the Church is not to be measured by the number of baptisms, communions, and so forth, that one tallies up in the hope that these numbers will be as high as possible. In fact, that is a completely erroneous way to say anything worthwhile about the Church of Jesus. In the Old Testament, King David was severely punished for an attempt of this kind. ... In the eyes of God, such a gesture was deprived of any significance. The Church will always be small in some sense—a bit of leaven in the dough, a mustard seed ... "The Church ... lives in *diaspora*, in the midst of the world, like a hidden but revelatory sign of that which, one day, will come to be. There are little groups within the Church that emerge and become visible more or less everywhere and that are signs of the salvation that they enact by their very nature: places of charity, of peace, of prayer, of divine life, of communion."²

This statement, by a man held in such high esteem on the other side of the Atlantic that his words were sought by successive popes on two occasions,³ is reminiscent of the notion of remnant found in the works of the English priest and theologian Martin Thornton, to whom I was introduced by Matthew Dallman, who also introduced my family and me to St Paul's Parish.

At St Paul's we sometimes talk of being part of the remnant, a pre-Constantinian Christian, and we might therefore also say, Catholic, core. Any particular church is a visible and particular manifestation, an outcropping, of a larger whole, the Church at large, which as a movement of the Spirit may be largely hidden, underground. A member of this Church, as St Paul tells us, has particular gifts, but does not stand alone, being inextricably connected with the larger whole. (1Cor. 12:27-31) Church membership is, therefore, participation in the larger

1 André Louf, OCSO (1929-2010), born in Louvain, Belgium, was abbot of Mont-des-Cats in French Flanders from 1963 until his retirement in 1997.

2 André Louf, *In the School of Contemplation* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Cistercian Publications, [2015]), pp. 36-37. Translated by Paul Rowe, OCSO, from *À l'école de la contemplation*, 2004.

3 "In 1968 he, along with Thomas Merton and the Procurator of the Carthusian order, was asked by the last Pope Paul VI to compose 'Letter from Contemplatives' which was subsequently to appear in English in Thomas Merton's posthumous volume *The Monastic Journey*. ... in 2004 Pope John Paul II asked him to write the meditations for the Way of the Cross held at the Colosseum in Rome for the annual Good Friday Services held there each year." André Louf, *The Way of Humility* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2007), p. vii.

Church through involvement in a particular church. This is included in what Louf is telling us. So what is it about St Paul's that keeps me here?

An intentional liturgy, which is the first thing that struck me upon first having risen from the pew, is matched by first-class homiletics, which I have observed time and time again. To be human is to have the capacity to hear and to speak words, and I suppose one has to wonder whether human being as the image of God is not therefore somehow intimately connected with the capacity for words, for as God created the world through the Word, humans in some sense create the worlds they inhabit, and do so, so the philosophers tell us, by means of thought, and thought takes place through the mediacy of words, as the philosophers also tell us. Whatever the case, the words from the pulpit must, I think, connect one to the Word, not to opinion pieces or editorials or what have you. There are plenty of other venues for that.

I find the culture of St Paul's welcoming and supportive in various important not to say surprising ways. I have been surprised by the many different kinds of generosity I have found here, not that generosity should be surprising, but it often is, and its expression in so many different ways here speaks to its genuineness, so let me speak not just of generosity, but of a spirit of generosity or generosity of spirit as well. I find that St Paul's encourages parishioners in their individual initiatives and explorations, whatever these might be.

One thing that increasingly strikes me about the Gospels is the spirit of largesse: Jesus seems to hand gifts out left and right, hand over fist, come what may, which the parish life here seems to reflect. There is no parsimony here. It is perhaps because of this that St Paul's manages to do without the need to impose outside distractions on its parishioners; it is possible that there just is not room or time for this.

I suspect that it is often easier to avoid God than to turn towards God, simply because turning towards God implies challenge, change and commitment, and these can be scary: who can see God and live (Ex. 33:20) as he or she has been accustomed; who really wants to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow. (Mark 8:34; Matt. 16:24, 10:38; Luke 9:23, 14:27) Ours is a nature reinforced by a society that finds these behaviors difficult. Avoidance is often more comfortable. Distractions may serve to mask that avoidance, setting up alternative centers of attention and devotion which can be justified and defended on what may seem to be very good grounds. However, to institutionalize our masks strikes me as being a form of idolatry at worst, even if not willful or intended, and sclerotic at best, since it is easy to become, in the words of St Paul, merely a ringing gong or clanging cymbal. (1 Cor. 13:1)

A parish culture which seeks neither to compromise with the world nor to wage war on it, a culture which would nourish and strengthen those who embrace it, and whom it embraces, allowing individual initiative and exploration, guided by the corporate whole, to strengthen the individual, and in so doing to strengthen the whole as well, is a culture which, I believe, approaches very closely the essence, experience and expression of Christian community which André Louf describes. I'd like to end with a continuation of his words.

"From the foregoing there follows an important consequence for the ... Christian community. What is our situation as a community? Man left to himself is not capable of living in community. His normal condition is life in *diaspora*, in dispersion in the midst of the world, separated from others and, more profoundly, from himself. This being so, a Christian community, wherever it comes to birth, can only be a gift, a sign of the mercy of God, an anticipation, a prefigurement and foretaste of the kingdom that is to come, of that which, only later, will be a reality for the whole Church. The Christian community is always something prospective: a window opening out to heaven. ...

"A community ... offers even now a glimpse of what will be fully realized ... at the end of time. Hence it is evident that the Christian community is always a locus of grace. It is a prodigy that God manifests in this world today. The community is never a human work. We do not have such a right. In a certain sense, we do not belong to this community any more than it belongs to us. It is for us to receive it as a gift of God, in the face of which we must always maintain a welcoming stance and to which we must always open ourselves ever more."⁴

⁴ Louf, *In the School of Contemplation*, pp. 37-38.