

Each time we, as a Christian Community, celebrate Holy Baptism, we do something that seems even stranger than pouring a little blessed water over a Candidate's head. We take some oil, consecrated by a bishop, called *chrism*, and the priest marks on the forehead the sign of the cross and says "April Joy" or "John Mark" (or whomever), "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." In so doing, we publicly proclaim that April Joy or John Mark *belongs* to Christ, and will be given strength by Christ to meet whatever comes to her or him in life. She or he is marked as a member of the Christian Community forever.

The chrism, the oil, doesn't last forever. Most of us can't even see that oil when the anointing takes place – and one good bath will take care of whatever is left. That's true for all of us who have been baptized. You can't *see* the mark of Christ – on first glance anyway. But how do we baptized Christians *experience* our identities in being *marked as Christ's own forever*? What are the *marks* of this Community of Christ's? What are the marks of Christian Community?

The first *mark* of Christian Community is manifest in every gathering to worship the God whom we love with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We are doing that now. The gathered, redeemed community marked by a single-minded focus on God, expresses that focus through worshipping. It is not *passive* worshipping, however. In nonbiblical Greek the same verb used to express the word *worship*, can also refer to labor that is performed for wages. The life of the faithful in worshipping God is also involved in the life of the larger community. Do we, as individuals, but more importantly as a community, bear this mark of our Christian identity out into the world? Are our lives, no matter how complex they may be, ultimately focused on God? Would others be able to "see" this invisible mark of our community? It's relatively easy when we are, quite literally, gathered around the altar on Sunday mornings – but what about the rest of the week? The first mark of Christian Community is a single-minded focus on God.

Secondly, the Christian Community is marked by *diversity*. Its members are drawn from every nation, people, and language, and yet they speak a common voice. We sing songs of love and justice and peace. We share the good news of God's redemptive activity in the world. Our proclamation announces the activity of a God who knows no boundaries of race, culture, language, or nationality. All groups will be represented before the throne of God, and narrowness and bigotry will be wiped from every human heart.

I'm aware that the word *diversity* is perhaps overused in today's Church. In many cases people can be turned off by it. Nevertheless, the extent of God's love is boundless; the spectrum of God's Church runs the gamut; and we would do well to think about what diversity in community really means.

Parker Palmer, in his book *The Company of Strangers*, defines community as: *that place where the person you least want to live with always lives!* And he adds to that definition that when that person moves away, someone else always arrives to fill the empty space. Too often we, in the Church, attempt to be with and even develop like-minded, homogeneous little communities. We tend to go to the church where people worship the way we like to worship and agree with our basic philosophies. If we're already in church, we usually work toward trying to get everybody to agree on everything.

But real community is a much greater challenge than that. Real community in the Christian Tradition, brings together people who are so different that the *only* thing they may have in common is Jesus Christ. And that may be enough! To some extent, the strength of a diverse community lies in the breadth of the spectrum of people gathered round the throne. A second mark of Christian Community is diversity.

A third mark of Christian Community is that the bonding that occurs between people transcends death. Here is where we get into that marvelous image of the communion of saints. On the one hand, the future is unknown. Its details are blurred. No real description is given of heaven's furniture. On the other hand, the future is sure and it is God's future.

None of us knows in precise detail what it's like to die. That some kind of joyful meeting – a kind of “re-union” will occur, which builds on the memory of past love but promises to grow even more fully into the future – that is the hope that comes to those who see reality through the lens of the Christian Gospel.

Several years ago, the late Dr. Fred Craddock, who taught at the Candler School of Divinity of Emory University in Atlanta, preached a moving sermon on the communion of saints, using the entire sixteenth chapter of Romans as text. Have you ever read Romans 16? The chapter is largely a list of names! Paul is writing to the Church in Rome and asking to be remembered to a variety of individuals whose lives have become linked to his somewhere in the past. Dr. Craddock invited all in that congregation to get out their bulletins and begin to write their list of beloved individuals. He instructed them to carry that list with them wherever they went in the future – and to add names to it as the circle of their affection grew. He went so far as to say: “When you die, take that list with you into the next life.” Then he said: “I know when you get to Heaven's Gate, St. Peter will stop you and say, ‘Look, you can't bring anything with you from the other life. Let me have that piece of paper.’ And you will probably say, ‘Oh, it's really not anything. It's just a list of people whom I have loved and who have loved me across the years.’ And St. Peter will say, ‘Can I look at it?’ And you will stand on one foot and then the other and say, ‘Oh, those names wouldn't mean any more to you than the names St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans. They are just my particular company of saints.’ But St. Peter will insist, and you will finally hand over the list to him.” Then Dr. Craddock concluded by saying: “Saint Peter will take that list and begin to read it: “Ann, Douglas, Diane, Karl, Margery, Lois, Barbara,” and then a great smile will break across his face, and he will say, ‘Do you know what? When I was walking to work this afternoon, I saw these very people. They were making a poster. It had your name on it, and it said: *Welcome Home!*”

This is a hope we have, because the Love that gave us birth in the beginning is larger than life and stronger than death. And once we begin to really love each other, because of God, there will be no end to it.

So: the marks of Christian Community. The community abiding in Christ has a single-minded focus on God; is marked by diversity; and the bonding that occurs transcends death. To me, that's why each Eucharist we celebrate together is so very, very exciting. *We* are the ones who join with those already gathered around the throne, “with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven” – to praise God, to worship God, and to be nourished, once again, by God's never-failing care and love, through Jesus Christ our Lord.