

In The Trenches

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What does it mean to be part of “The Franciscan Family” and how does this relate to the whole family of the church? This question has stumped the panel for so many years, that the only way I can address it in this little space is to tell a story. This is the account of one Secular Franciscan’s experience of Easter Sunday Mass this year. For those who know the deadline of this newsletter (April 15), I offer this as a hastily written inspiration, following one of my sandier desert experiences of Lent.

This Secular Franciscan, (we’ll call her Mary), and her family arrived at their church, a very large gothic structure which comfortably holds almost one thousand people, only to find families leaving to go elsewhere because the church was overflowing.

This eleven-thirty liturgy was widely known throughout the city as exceptionally wonderful every Sunday and had obviously attracted hundreds of non-parishioners for Easter. Not wanting to miss what they knew would be a glorious culmination of their Easter Triduum, she and her family decided to try to squeeze into the back of the church.

When they climbed the stone steps, there were a few teens sitting around and some adults in the doorway but it was not until they tried to get into the back of the church, that it became obvious that these folks were on the steps because that was the only place left to be.

Mary admits to an initial nudge of irritation and a wave of something that felt like panic when she realized that she really could miss her favorite liturgy and even Easter Mass altogether if they could not get into the church. She was all set to leave for another church when her husband and two sons performed a few sidestepping football moves and following them closely, she found herself inside. The music, thundering in the sanctuary echoed in the back of the church. When the lector started the first reading, Mary decided that she couldn’t bear not understanding what was being said. Squeezing as politely as she could through the aisle filled with people standing with strollers and children in fluffy dresses and little tailored short pants and saddle shoes, she found a small space next to a pillar that was waiting for her to slip into it.

Then, looking around her at faces of young, old, Black, Hispanic, Oriental, married, single, able and disabled people, she broke into a smile that stayed on her face for the whole Mass. The excitement and joy of this hubbub of humanity was palpable. There were not enough seats, but no one seemed to mind. Most of the people could not see the altar but there was no need, because God flowed from the altar into the furthest corner of the church. The only regret this Secular Franciscan had was that she had no program and could not join in the singing. She found herself tapping her foot, and straining to see the words on a distant page, when she noticed that a young teen standing next to her was not singing and had a program in his hand.

Unable to resist the music, Mary asked him for his program. A very Franciscan approach; when in doubt - beg. He was happy to give it to her and she was happy to hold it open for others to share. Before she knew it, there were four more people in the aisle singing their hearts out, grateful for the opportunity to have the music.

The entire liturgy was one big Alleluia, with traditional hymns and vibrant gospel music,

rhythmic clapping and a gentle African lullaby to ease the crowd forward for Communion. No one seemed to care if things took longer than usual. The church had ceased to be a number of individuals sitting alone on pew benches, lost in the private devotions of Good Friday. They were a family all crowded into the dining room, elbow to elbow, all mingled perfume and color, glad to see friend and stranger alike, in a ballet of love that excluded no one, that moved as a whole and throbbed with a joy both rare and terribly familiar on a deep visceral level, uniting saints from both past and future, heaven and earth

This throng was her family and this, a modern day miracle of loaves and fishes, a pinnacle experience of church. Mary left the building singing and was shocked that the Mass was only one hour and fifteen minutes long. The experience of this celebration seemed to have transported one church full of people beyond the limits of time and place.

There were, of course those who were caught off guard by this Mass, those who dashed off early to get out of the crowded parking lot, who muttered about the kids, the length, the music. But these were gone in no time. Those who milled around the back of church spilling out onto the steps were bursting with joy. Mary was well aware that it was God's grace that filled her heart with joy. She knew that she had felt irritated when she approached the crowded church. She knew that it was Jesus' Easter gift to her that washed this sinful attitude away and invited her to be reborn in glory. What more could a person want for Easter?

The only negative thing Mary experienced about this liturgy actually came when she tried to describe it to a friend who bitterly passed it off as simply "Easter and Christmas Catholics". Ah, the sour jellybean at the bottom of all that chocolate. It would not stop Mary from feasting on the treats of the Lord, just as the naysayers could never stop Francis.

To relate this experience of liturgy to our rule is a daunting task. There is one line however, that does sum up the very Franciscan nature of Mary's experience. In Chapter One, Art.1 the second paragraph reads: "*In various ways and forms but in life-giving union with each other, they intend to make present the charism of their common Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the church.*"

Let us intend to make present this charism. Let us look for various ways and forms to do it. And let us always try to be filled with joy. It has such an impact on the folks around us. The important thing to remember is this - we can choose to be singing or grumbling in any given experience. It is the abandoning of self that makes the difference.