

## CHRISM MASS HOMILY 2010

### “Creating Thin Places”

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In his commentary on the readings for the second Sunday of ordinary time in the *Living With Christ*, Anthony Chuzzi of Sudbury, Ontario, spoke of a Celtic concept known as a *thin place*. A thin place, he explains, “is a time, place or event in which, for a very brief moment, our humanity is embraced by the mystery of the divine and we are filled with the wonder of God. It can happen at the most unlikely time or in the very ordinary events of life.”

This celebration and all our celebrations of the sacraments in our pastoral ministry can be occasions of that thin place, of an encounter with God’s loving mercy.

The death of my late brother Louis is an example, I believe, of that thin place. His faith in God’s love in Jesus and his love for his family remained strong throughout his four year struggle with cancer. Amazingly, he remained grateful despite the loss of his abilities one by one – first his peripheral vision, his speech, his memory, his ability to drive, then his sight, his ability to walk and in the end his ability to even move at all. Often he would murmur, “Thank you Jesus. He even thanked a nurse who had given him a suppository - a first for her. All this love, faith-filled suffering and loss made the veil between this life and the next so thin that on Tuesday morning, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009, in Judy’s arms as she had long prayed it would be, Louis simply stepped through that veil without a sound.

It strikes me that our use of the oils that we are consecrating, that we will administer to the sick and dying; to those being initiated; that we will use to bless and to ordain, can all be seen in terms of creating thin places. The pastoral compassion, love and sensitivity that we infuse into these events and rituals help to make these moments truly sacraments, experiences of a thin place - encounters with the divine.

The Word of God today speaks to us of ministering in thin places. The first reading calls us to be priests and ministers who make the Lord’s favor known to the poor and needy. In the Gospel, the synagogue in Nazareth becomes a thin place where the scriptures are fulfilled by Jesus in the hearing of all the people. The second reading reminds us that we are to live within the reign of God until Jesus comes again in glory.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus asked the Samaritan woman, a woman in a common-law relationship, to give him a drink. She experienced in that encounter with him the compassion of God and was transformed. He created for her a “thin place.” That is extraordinary. Can our ministry also be extraordinary in the same way, upholding the teachings of the church but with extraordinary sensitivity, compassion and caring?

In this spirit of creating a thin place, a rule of thumb that I suggest we follow is to take people where they are at; accept them as they are and journey with them together with compassion and love to a new place of life and worship.

Someone who lived and taught this principle was the late theologian Edward Schillebeeckx who died recently. His final message to his colleagues at a symposium in Leuven in December 2008 was *Extra mundus nulus salus* – there is no salvation outside the world. “That conviction,” his friend, colleague at the University of Notre Dame and fellow Dominican Mary Catherine Hilkert wrote in *America* magazine, “captures the love of the world and the grace-optimism that characterized his life’s work.”

From his earliest to latest works, she writes, Schillebeeckx helped readers grasp the core sacramental insight disclosed by the Incarnation - the mystery of God is to be encountered in human life and creation. For Schillebeeckx, the creative and saving presence of God’s grace becomes manifest wherever human persons minister to one another, especially to the neighbor in need. Human life is an embodiment, a sacrament, of God’s love. He called these experiences “fragments of salvation.”

This sacramental view of the world and of the church’s role within the world was, according to Mary Catherine Hilkert, at the heart of Schillebeeckx’s writing, preaching and teaching over seven decades, just as it was central to the vision of the Second Vatican council. Schillebeeckx reminds us that God is new each moment and that wherever injustice occurs, whether in the world at large or in the church itself, the Spirit is actively at work, prompting resistance, hope, courage and change. The goal of this ministry is to help all people experience the fullness of life that he called “God’s eternal surprise.”

Another example is Jean Vanier whose ability to cut to the quick; to speak to the heart, to share unconditional love with the mentally challenged, makes of L’Arche a thin place. Articles about him and that movement appear in the

strangest of places. One such article lamented that the movement is not better known in the States.

In a like manner, our challenge then is to take the depth and richness of the Church's teachings, sacraments and faith and to present it to the world with such compassion, sensitivity and love that we become facilitators of those *thin places* where others may experience the divine.

The Eucharist we celebrate now is our privileged thin place, where through Word and sacrament, we encounter the Living God and are transformed into his Body.

As pastoral ministers, let us strive to make every sacrament that we celebrate, every human encounter we participate in, a thin place, an encounter with the divine and an experience of God's eternal surprise.