

The priest residence I lived in while pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in Gilbertville was built in the early 1900s. It was a large Victorian style house which sported a two-story bay with five windows per floor, five suites of rooms, 3 full baths, large pastor's office, a common room, large dining room and kitchen. At one time it was home to the pastor, his housekeeper (a staple of rectory life until about 30 years ago), an associate pastor, and later the priest-principal of Don Bosco High School, the central Catholic high school for the area. While I was pastor, I was the only occupant. Shortly after my arrival married friends of mine and their two children called and said they wanted to come and visit. Asking if they needed to get a motel room since there would be four of them I replied, “No, in my “Father's” house there are many rooms. I will prepare a place for you.”

Jesus uses the image of a house with many dwelling places (or a mansion with many rooms as some other translations render it) but not to give us a physical description of what we call “heaven.” The context of Jesus' words is the Last Supper. He is preparing his disciples for his immanent departure through his death, resurrection and return to the Father. The church utilizes this gospel as we liturgically transition to the latter part of the Easter season and progress toward the feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost.

Jesus desires for his followers the same kind of indwelling/union he enjoys with the Father, as he prays later in this same Gospel, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us” (Jn. 17:21). The dwelling Jesus speaks about and prays for is a profound union with him now and a continually deepening movement that will be brought to completion in the fullness of time. As I reflect on Jesus' words, I hear Jesus giving us a description of his Father as well as a description of the inner life shared by the Father, Jesus and the Spirit as the divine community, the Holy Trinity. Jesus is telling us that the God's heart is so large that there is room in it for everyone. And the most sure way to the Father's heart is through relationship with Jesus, who in response to the apostle Thomas' question, states, “I am the way, the truth and the life” (Jn.14:6). The sacraments of baptism and confirmation initiate and cement us into the life of Jesus. We are made “living stones” (I Pt. 4:5) of the community, the Church. The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is the on-going gift of Jesus' risen presence given for us as the

means of growing into ever deeper relationship with him and the Father in the bond of their unending love, the person of the Holy Spirit who now dwells within us.. What a great consolation!

In the Apostles' Creed like the Nicene Creed, we proclaim our belief in "the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints." The Church, you, me all believers, is the visible sacrament of the union between God and all believers in Jesus. At the same time it is called to mirror for its members and for those outside it the same largeness of heart and union that Jesus speaks of today. Here is the on-going challenge for us.

Presently I am reading a book titled "*Come and See, Monastic Life Today*" by Abbot Brendan Freeman of New Melleray Abbey just outside Dubuque. In one of his reflections Abbot Brendan reflects on the qualities that should mark a healthy monastic community. His words, I believe, apply equally well to parish life.

A parish should be open to receiving new members. This is not as easy as it sounds. To be open means to be a welcoming community, a place of hospitality. It means being open to being changed. Every new member of the church changes it. Being "catholic" means embracing a variety of characters. We do not restrict admittance to only those who think like us. There are liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats in the church. We are called to have unity in diversity. Yet there are boundaries to which all submit. A healthy church will have good communications between its members, a function facilitated by representative groups such as the parish pastoral council and other consultative bodies. A healthy church fosters both human and spiritual growth for all its members in varieties of ways. A healthy church is capable of generativity, the passing on and fostering of its life. But always, its focus must be Jesus, not personal or communal agendas or the personalities of its leaders.

"In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." A message of consolation. A challenge for us emulate with our own heart personally and communally.