

30 December 2020

Writings: Church Lady

“In the Temple, there was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher” (Luke 2:36).

Within each parish, there are a number of people I like to call “characters”. There is the “fundraiser” who takes charge of any fundraising campaign and always seems able to get people to donate money regardless of the cause. There is the “organizer” who takes charge of all parish events and no matter what problems arise, always makes things run smoothly. There is the “youth leader” who comes up with ideas for parish events for young people and convinces them to participate and often run them. And then, there is the “church lady”. She is usually an older woman who is waiting each morning when you open the Church and is the last one to leave the Church as you are locking up after Mass. If she is involved in any parish group it is never in a leadership capacity. Her appearance indicates she is neither a professional nor wealthy. Her behaviour seems a little eccentric and she becomes the butt of a few jokes by other parishioners. In some ways, she represents the ordinary people whose faith is strong but ignored.

In today’s Gospel, the parents of Jesus encounter Anna, an elderly widow, who has spent most of her life worshipping with fasting and prayer in the Jerusalem Temple. As a widow, Anna would likely have been poor and vulnerable unless protected by her male relatives. Like Joseph and Mary, she does not appear to have been part of the religious or social establishment. While her knowledge of Judaism was probably limited, her faith was strong. All she had to keep her going was her trust in God.

Anna was probably the “church lady” of her time. It is always easy to recognize the other “characters” I mentioned in a parish. These are the people who make things happen and parishes need them. After all, a parish does require money to pay the bills. Successfully organized events help build the sense of community which is so essential the health of every parish. If any parish is to have a future it must have activities which appeal to and involve young people. Yet, what about the people who don’t have the education or skills to contribute much to such activities? What about the people with poor self-esteem and a lack self-confidence? Remember the kid at school who was always slow when learning to read, usually had no friends with whom to play at recess, was often picked last when choosing teams in gym or was told by teacher “you will never amount to anything”? Some of those kids grew up to become the “church lady”.

People like that often don’t contribute much to parish activities but they do have faith and that is their gift to us. Perhaps they know that although others may have given up on them, God has not. As the days, weeks, months and years pass, they show up in Church to pray (maybe for themselves, their families, their fellow parishioners or their Pastor), light votive candles and bring a little Holy Water home. Their faith is simple but strong. Few parishioners notice them; many don’t even know their names. But God knows who they are and they come to Church for him.

During this pandemic, the people who make things happen (doctors, nurses, medical researchers etc.) are getting a lot of well deserved attention. However, there many individuals whose contributions to stopping the spread of Covid 19 will never be recognized like those who wash their hands frequently, wear a mask and social distance. They call on elderly neighbours and listen to their kids talk about their fears. Perhaps the “church lady” can teach them a lesson. Lasting results only come from doing the right thing for as long as it takes. Success is not measured by where one is today or whether other people are noticing your efforts. It requires a strong faith which means trusting in God, full commitment to the effort and the patience to arrive at the result.

Anna the “church lady” of her time was rewarded with meeting Christ. The reward for today’s “church lady” might be to show us how we can survive Covid 19.

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