

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, May 28th 2014

For as I walked around looking carefully at your shrines,

I even discovered an altar inscribed, 'To an Unknown God.'

Acts 17:23

If Paul were to walk around our cities today, what shrines would he find? Surely the hyper-sexualized shrines to the human body (tanning parlors, "adult" stores, cosmetic surgery centers, strip clubs, magazines at the checkout aisle, etc.) would not slip by him. Certainly he'd notice our overabundance of banks, quick loan shops, and "investment opportunities". He'd have to close his eyes to miss our shrines to sports (stadiums, golf courses, 24/7 ESPN coverage, athletes' faces everywhere, team logos on clothing apparel). Every few miles he'd see an advertisement for a lawyer offering to sue for him. Standing at one restaurant that's promoting an unhealthily large meal, he could spot several others without moving a foot. The sheer volume of examples he'd have of our materialistic shrines would be staggering (car dealerships, shopping malls, real estate signs, clothing labels, etc.). Even our shrines to the degradation of human life (Planned Parenthood and other abortion clinics, ads glorifying contraception, etc.) would vie for his attention.

On the other hand, how hard would he have to look in order to find our soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and adoption centers? How long would he have to search to find good, Catholic books and literature? Now here's a crazy thought, how about trying to find a sculpture, mural, statue, fountain or memorial of a saint or a pope? Good luck, Paul.

There is no question that Paul could call us a "religious" people with shrines to all sorts of worldly pursuits. Certainly not all of these are intrinsically evil, but the amount of time and money we spend on a given subject is a clear indication of our priorities. He would clearly note that our worship is for amassing financial property, distracting ourselves with hours of sporting events, indulging in gluttonous meals, attracting others with our bodies, and using others' bodies for our own pleasures, to name a few.

Boiled down, our culture espouses three values: hedonism (pursuit of pleasure as the ultimate goal), individualism (asking "what's in it for me?"), and minimalism ("what's the least I have to do?"). These three are so clearly contrary to our goal of knowing, loving, and serving God that they do necessitate explanation.

One of my roles as a physician is to point out to my patients when something is wrong. Sometimes my

patients are already aware of their diagnoses, sometimes they simply know that something isn't right, and occasionally they are blind-sided by my news. I would suspect that the majority of us fall into that middle category regarding the worldliness of our culture: we know there's something wrong, but can't put our finger on it.

Today let us ask God to open our eyes to the "shrines" that we build in our homes, in our vehicles, at our workplaces, and all around us. Perhaps we should also ask for the grace to understand that we construct and maintain these shrines and are not simply passive observers. Then let's prayerfully discern which temples bring us closer to God and which of them are dedicated to worldly pursuits. Finally, let's ask God to show us how we can help him transform this culture into one that more clearly reflects our Catholic values.

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