

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Letters

If you want to know what's wrong with the world, I have one suggestion: We don't write letters any more.

Oh, we zip off emails and text messages and cryptic shorthand on our smartphones. Now and again we'll fire off postcards from vacation, scribbling with lazy fingers still moist with Coppertone. "Great weather. Wish you were here."

But when was the last time you got a letter, an honest-to-God letter, from someone you hadn't seen in months? It's a dying art.

Saint Paul was a prolific letter-writer—we hear his epistles again and again, Sunday after Sunday—and down through the centuries, popes and bishops have done a good job of leaving us letters and encyclicals that we can strain to read until our eyes fall out.

But these days, most of us, I think, prefer to just call or send an email. And that's a tragedy. We are missing something—something vital and necessary.

I once stumbled on these words, written by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux:

While I write this letter you are present to me, as I'm sure I will be present to you when you read it. We wear ourselves out scribbling to each other, but is the Spirit ever weary of loving? We find rest in those we love, and we provide a resting place in ourselves for those who love us.

It's hard to feel love from a laptop. But you can get some small sense of another's feelings by holding in your hand a letter—a piece of paper that another person once held in his or her hand, carrying ink from their pen, words from their heart.

The great teacher of the disabled (and, in my opinion, living saint) Jean Vanier once read those words of Saint Bernard and reflected:

Love can be a real nourishment. We should not be afraid of loving people, and telling them we love them. That is the greatest nourishment of all.

That says it. Our hearts hunger to rest in those we love, much as we rest in God. "Our hearts are restless until we rest in You," Saint Augustine famously wrote. I think that one of the transcendent miracles of the Eucharist is that it enables God also to rest in us. That is part of the great wonder and tranquility of what we call "communion." We find union with God, and He with us.

And we need to find union with one another, too. We need to make ourselves present, as Saint Bernard did in letters to his friend. (We need, perhaps, to be Eucharist to one another—sharing each other's presence in mutual thanksgiving.)

I can't help but think that a good way to find that union is with pen and paper. This week, find the time to write a letter to someone you love—a spouse, a friend, a relative. Give them something besides an email or a call. Give them something that requires effort, and thought, and a little bit of your heart. When you write it, they will be with you; and when they receive it and open it, you will be with them. Hearts and minds will embrace.

When was the last time forty-seven cents bought something so miraculous?

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