

What Would Happen?



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It was in the fall, 2019. I had spent several months in a wheelchair. For weeks I had been unable to have access to my books, which are upstairs, until some friends and students brought a few of them downstairs. The project I was working on was progressing very slowly. And I must confess that I was feeling rather sorry for myself. I was looking forward to an operation in January 2020 that would make it possible for me to walk again and to an electric lift that would help me get back to my office with some ease. Worried about my health, my project, my problems, I paid little attention to a very brief notice hidden somewhere in the newspaper regarding a disease that had broken out in a distant city halfway around the world. I had my own problems. Wuhan was far away. My operation and my chairlift were so much more important!

Now, roughly a year and a half after that first notice, I realize that what was happening in Wuhan back then was much more significant than my operation and my chairlift, not only for the world, but even for myself. The operation went well. The chairlift arrived. The project was completed. But this did not make the year 2020 any better than 2019. Indeed, what was happening in that distant city in 2019 would impact my own life much more profoundly than what was happening in my own living room at the same time.

This experience brings to mind what Cyprian said in the first century regarding a great pandemic that swept the Mediterranean world at the time. Then, as today, there was much blaming and finger-pointing. But Cyprian made it clear that, beyond all the unfounded accusations as to who was responsible, one thing was clear: He said, “we all live in a single house, and whatever happens within that house affects us all equally.”

Now I see that truly my house goes far beyond the walls within which I live or the fences that limit my yard. We are all in one house together, and whatever happens in this one house affects us all.

How do we, as Christians, make this reality clear? In a country politically as polarized as ours, where one side can see no good in the other, where there are “alternative truths” to supposedly “fake news,” how do we overcome division and prejudice? This is not easy, because we are all sinners, because we all tend to think that “we” are completely right and “they” are absolutely wrong; because we convince ourselves that our motives are all good and loving and “theirs” are all evil and hateful.

There are many paths that need to be followed. But here let it suffice to say that we must all make a commitment to be clear that when we worship it is not just we who are present in a particular place that are worshipping together. The “we” of worship is part of a great host that includes, as Revelation would say, “a great multitude that no one could count, from every

nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.” It is a great crowd whose presence we claim when we sing: “Praise him above, *ye heavenly host*; praise him *all creatures here below*.” This is why, when celebrating communion, we say: “Therefore, with angels and archangels, and we all the company of heaven, we magnify thy glorious name, evermore praising thee and saying, ‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts’ ...”

Imagine what would happen if each of us who lead in worship – pastors, choirs, others – would commit not to say or do anything in worship that we would not say or do in the presence of that great host. What would happen if on Thanksgiving Day we would make sure that we say nothing that we would not say in a Cherokee or a Navajo congregation or before a poverty-stricken church in a third-world country? What would happen if when we speak of social justice, we say nothing that we would not say at a homeless shelter, in the halls of power, before the board of great corporations, to the major donors of our great institutions? What would happen if every white congregation conducted worship as if half of the congregation were minority people? If we are in a minority congregation, what would happen if half of our congregation belonged to the dominant culture and to other minorities?

And then, what would happen if we were to take the next step? What would happen if we brought to a predominantly white and conservative congregation the faith, the hopes, and fears of the African-American community? What would happen if we brought to a liberal congregation the faith, the hopes, and fears of those who disagree with us?

What would happen if thousands of congregations, after prayer and discernment, committed themselves to follow these simple steps?

What would happen if we finally came to realize that Cyprian was right, that we all live in the same house, and that whatever happens to one of us affects all of us?

The answer, trite as it may sound, is: Only God knows!

