

CELEBRATE WHILE WE WAIT

When I was at my first parish after ordination, St. Bernadette in Evergreen Park (over 40 years ago), I created an Advent night of prayer with the liturgy committee there which had the words above as its title. It was an hour of scripture readings, songs, reflections and liturgical dance, usually during the second or third week, and it brought several hundred people to church for three years in a row to do just that: to celebrate *while* we waited for the big celebration of Christmas.

Last week, I reflected on the value of waiting—how it's a good thing to not have everything now, to savor the delight of anticipation and to appreciate the value of deferred gratification. But the flip side of that is the importance of living fully in the present moment, attentive to the world around us and the person in front of us. I found myself reflecting on that one night this past September as I dined alongside the Ionian Sea in a little town on the southwest coast of Greece.

The Greeks eat supper very late, even later than the Italians. I'm not sure how they ever get up early enough to get to work! I would start to wander along the seaside promenade in Marathopoli around 8:30p.m., checking out the menus and all the empty tables in a dozen lovely restaurants. I was reluctant to go into any of them because I would have felt a bit odd, dining "so early." So I would continue to walk until I saw at least one or two tables occupied by other "early" diners—usually a bit after 9:00. (By the time I was finished around 10:30, most of the other restaurants were full.) One beautiful, warm moonlit night, I took a table in a charming little place, about twenty feet from the sea, ordered my half carafe of wine (my hotel was only a short walk away), and sat for a while pondering the menu and looking out to sea.

After a little while, a very fashionably dressed young couple arrived and sat down at a table between me and the sea. They spent the first five minutes kissing, which led me to think that they might be on their honeymoon. They spent the next 45 minutes or so taking selfies—he of himself and she of herself—showing their selfies to one another and then sending them off into cyberspace. When they weren't taking selfies, each of their faces were buried in their own smart phones, texting and reading texts (from my vantage point I could see over their shoulders) and scrolling through photos on their phones, "liking" some and deleting others.

All this time, the full moon was rising and shining down on the Ionian Sea, the stars were twinkling, and a wonderful, light breeze was wafting over us and sending waves rolling gently over the rocks below. I figured that, at some point, they would have to notice both each other and the world around them, and that finally happened when their food arrived—at least for a moment. I'm sure you can guess what they did next: photos of their food were launched across the miles, probably to several hundred of their closest friends. They did, eventually, eat.

They were still there when I left, alternating their attention between their food and the phones alongside their plates, barely speaking to one another, much less noticing the beauty all around them. I admit that I was irritated with myself for being so irritated by them; but every time I tried to focus on that moon-drenched water and the beauty of the night, there they were, between me and the deep blue sea. If they were on their honeymoon, I wouldn't take bets on how long their marriage will last.

It's so very important to learn the discipline of waiting and to find delight in the anticipation of some wonderful event. But it's equally important to live in the present moment, to find joy and wonder in the world and in the people around us, to "celebrate *while* we wait." May this "rejoicing" Sunday and this third week of Advent bring you much joy, not only in what's to come, but in what's happening right now, all around you.

Fr. Bob