



Bishop's Reflection

EMBRACING THE DIVINE MOSAIC

BY THE RT. REV. PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER

When living near Carthage, in modern-day Tunisia, North Africa, I developed an interest in ancient Christian mosaics. Some of the most beautiful examples date from the time of St. Augustine, the bishop of Hippo in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, and the North African early church. Frequently, the most beautiful mosaics were on ancient baptismal fonts built into the ground.



Eastern Byzantine baptismal font from the 6th century AD, found in the Parish Church of Demna near Kalibia (Cape Bon), Tunisia, North Africa.

However, the original beauty and glory of these tremendous mosaics has often faded, not because of aging, but due to individual pieces that have been lost. In the same way, I see the Church in any one culture, as an incomplete mosaic. In order to enhance the beauty and glory of our own faith, we need to benefit from other cultural expressions of Christian faith.

One of the greatest gifts we have been given in this 21st century is that our local “worlds” are becoming increasingly multicultural.

A number of years ago, I read that if the world was a small town of 1000 people, it would include 564 Asians, 210 Europeans, 86 Africans, 80 South Americans, and just 60 North Americans.

Religiously, it would work out to 300 Christians, 176 Muslims, 128 Hindus, 55 Buddhists and 47 Animists.

In the midst of this incredible diversity, we are being brought together as never before.

A thousand years ago, the world known to Western civilization centered on the Mediterranean Sea. It extended to China in the East, the Baltic Sea to the North, and Saharan Africa and India to the South. To the West lay the vast and dreaded “green sea of darkness” (Atlantic) and farther south smoldered a semi-mythical terra incognita – Africa – a land so little was known about that it was termed the “Dark Continent.” Societies lived in ignorance of one another. The French did not know of the Inca. The royal tribe of the Songhai of West Africa had no inkling of the Inuit.

Yet, the beauty of history is that it has increasingly brought us together with those of other cultures. Like never before, our world connects us with others. It is what sociologists call “the Great Convergence.” Just like that imaginary town of 1000, our own faith is an extremely diverse collection of people from every ethnic group and culture. One of the greatest spiritual gifts we are being given today is to discover God more deeply through those from different faith and cultural backgrounds.

Christianity is like a divine mosaic, with each piece being a different cultural expression of the faith.

It is fascinating to see how often Jesus uses an example of someone from a very different culture, and even a different faith tradition, who had a profound faith in God, to expand his listeners’ spiritual horizons – to enable them to experience a deeper dimension spiritually. In fact, he begins his ministry in Galilee, a region encircled by non-Jewish peoples. And in his first public teaching there, he highlights the faith

examples in the Hebrew Bible of two individuals from completely different cultures and ethnicities - a Lebanese widow (from Sidon) who was helped by Elijah, and Naman, a Syrian military commander who was healed

of leprosy when he reached out to Elisha. He shares that these two individuals from a foreign and looked down upon culture and faith tradition, had a depth of faith in God from which they could all learn.

When he encountered the Roman Centurion, whom we would call an Italian today, who came to Jesus about his sick employee, the Gospel says, “Jesus marveled at his faith... I have not found such great faith even in Israel.” And when the Canaanite woman, whom we would call Lebanese today, came to him to ask for healing for her daughter who was suffering from a mental illness, Jesus said, “You have great faith.” No one else in the Gospels receives that compliment. Even in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus portrays the “foreigner,” the Samaritan, as the character that does the right thing. And of course, we can’t forget that a foreigner, Simon of Cyrene, a Libyan, carried the cross for Jesus.

Christianity is like a divine mosaic, with each piece being a different cultural expression of the faith. And when all the pieces are in place, and none are missing, the whole mosaic portrays the beauty of God as perhaps nothing else can. Certainly, it is in the continual learning from these many expressions of faith that our own faith can be made most complete.



Mosaic by Luca Barberini in Ravenna, Italy

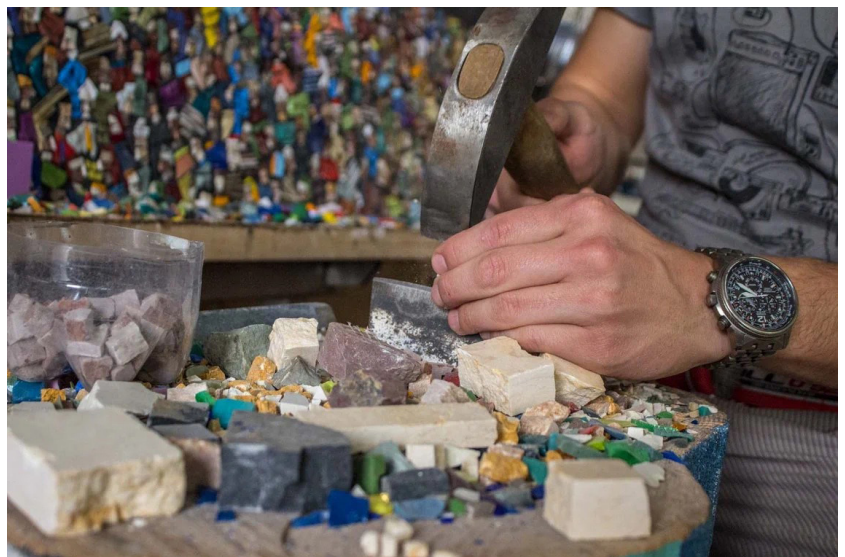
The beginning of Christianity took place at Pentecost when Peter stood outside and preached about Christ's life, death and resurrection, and thousands became followers of The Way. We are told that among those present in the crowd were "Arabs, Egyptians, Libyans, Medes, residents of Rome (Italians), Turkey, Asia and residents of Mesopotamia." In other words, people from all different cultures around the world. And at the very end of our spiritual journey, when the Scriptures speak about the "new heaven and the new earth" in the book of Revelation, it says that standing before the throne, is "a great crowd that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language." The challenge presented to us, is to let that knowledge of the past, how it all began, and that picture

of the future, how it will end, serve to guide our spiritual lives in the present.

This openness to our sisters and brothers from other cultures lies at the very foundation of the potential for depth in our own spiritual lives. The experience of faith from those in cultures and traditions other than our own gives us a whole new perspective on seeing God with fresh eyes and the beauty that God so longs for each of us to experience. As the early 20th century French novelist Marcel Proust said, "The only true voyage of discovery, is not to go to new places, but to have other eyes."

As I write, my heart is very much on Ukraine, where we used to serve, not long after the former Soviet Union collapsed. In some ways, I attribute my pilgrimage into our Episcopal tradition because of what I learned from my Eastern Orthodox sisters and brothers. Never before had I experienced the sense of the majesty and mystery of God as I did when worshipping in the ancient St. Sophia's Cathedral in Kyiv, which was fashioned after St. Sophia's Cathedral in Constantinople in the early 1000s. And like Cyril and Methodius, the "Apostles to the Slavs," I found myself also saying, "We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for on earth that is no such splendor or beauty... We only knew that God dwells there among [them]. We can never forget that beauty." The whole experience of working with the Eastern Orthodox Church resulted in a profound new sense of reverence for God in my own life.

What a privilege it is to learn from the faith of those from cultures different from our own. It is an incredible gift given to us all by the Creator of the Divine Mosaic.



Italian mosaicist Luca Barberini at work