

My travel from one country to another let me observe some cultural differences, not only in how people live but in what they value. In some cases, quite honestly, their values seem better than ours, but in other cases we come out ahead. For example in Italy people take pride in having fresh food. If a food you like isn't in season and you can't get it fresh, you're less likely to find it frozen or canned there. People let agricultural seasons govern their diet, and for the most part they eat healthy food. On the other hand, the Italians smoke more in public than we do. A smoking employee doesn't seem to hurt sales. In India, especially in the part I visited last week, there are fewer telephones and televisions. People live in simple homes and they spend their free time with people, doing chores or enjoying the company of family and friends. On the other hand, I saw very few public trash cans; littering and pollution are serious problems in the areas I visited. Coming home it became apparent again how much value we place on entertainment and possessions and on getting what we want when we want it, but you can also find national pride, midwestern friendliness, and the freedom of religion. We probably don't give it much thought when we pull on clothing that sports a logo, when we let televisions babysit children, when we buy disposable products, and make disposable friends, but in many ways we let our culture form us. We conform ourselves to the world in which we live.

St. Paul warned the Romans about being conformed to this world. We've been hearing a lot from Paul's letter to the Romans all summer long and with today's passage the letter takes a decisive turn. Throughout the whole first part, Paul has been explaining things about what we believe -- the love of God, the unity of the body of Christ, the promise of redemption. In today's passage Paul starts talking less about what we believe and more about how we behave. If we believe the things in part one of his letter, we will behave according to part two of his letter. Paul says at the beginning of part two today, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." He describes it as making a sacrifice of ourselves to God. In Paul's day people offered dead animals in sacrifice to the gods. He says what we should offer is a living sacrifice, our very own bodies, our own renewed minds.

The renewal of our minds can happen in different ways. You may hear a point of view different from what you've always believed. You may see people act differently when you travel. You may make friends with someone who belongs to a different religion, a different race, or who likes different music, and you start to reassess the values you hold. Paul appeals to the Romans as Christ appeals to us. May our belief in God affect the way we behave. Wherever the world has formed us, may faith transform us.