

RON ROLHEISER



IN EXILE

2020

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| The little way | 5 |
| Inadequacy, hurt, and reconciliation | 7 |
| On self-hatred and guilt | 9 |
| Magnanimity | 12 |
| On hallowing our diminishment | 14 |
| Speaking with authority | 16 |
| Our congenital complexity | 18 |
| Jean Vanier – revisited | 20 |
| Judgment day..... | 22 |
| An alternate expression of love and trust | 24 |
| Love in the time of Covid 19 | 26 |
| The dispelling of an illusion | 28 |
| The meaning of Jesus’ death..... | 30 |
| Huge stones and locked doors..... | 32 |
| Churches as field hospitals | 34 |
| God and the principle of non-contradiction | 37 |
| Fever | 39 |

| | |
|--|----|
| Leaving peace behind as our farewell gift..... | 41 |
| Facing our tough hours..... | 43 |
| Faithful friendship..... | 45 |
| Some advice on prayer from an old master | 47 |
| A magnificent defeat | 49 |
| Dignity..... | 51 |
| Our deep failure in charity | 53 |
| Praying when we don't know how | 55 |
| Deeper things under the surface | 57 |
| Some secrets worth knowing | 59 |
| Sacred permission to feel human..... | 61 |
| On not locking our doors..... | 63 |
| Letting go of false fear | 65 |
| Suicide and melancholy | 67 |
| Pornography and the sacred..... | 70 |
| The invitation to courage | 72 |
| The last temptation | 74 |
| Mystical experience and everyday people | 76 |
| Moving beyond mistakes and weaknesses | 78 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| God is happy..... | 80 |
| The hidden face of evil..... | 82 |
| Spirituality and the second half of life | 84 |
| Pope Francis' new encyclical | 86 |
| The prince of lies | 88 |
| What kind of house can you build for me? | 90 |
| Structure, ritual, and habit as anchoring love, prayer and service..... | 92 |
| The law of gravity and the Holy Spirit..... | 94 |
| Can the ground cry out?..... | 96 |
| An invitation to maturity – Weeping..... | 98 |
| Over Jerusalem | 98 |
| Our wounds, our gifts, and our power to heal others | 100 |
| From saint Tarcisius to people magazine: our evolution in admiration and imitation | 103 |
| The illusion of invulnerability..... | 105 |
| Christmas as shattering the containers of our expectations | 107 |
| My top ten books for 2020 | 109 |

THE LITTLE WAY

JANUARY 13, 2020

Most of us have heard of St. Therese of Lisieux, a French mystic who died at age 24 in 1897 and who is perhaps the most popular saint of the last two centuries. She's famous for many things, not least for a spirituality she called her "little way". What's her "little way"?

Popular thought has often encrusted both Therese and her "little way" within a simple piety which doesn't do justice to the depth of her person or her spirituality. Too often her "little way" is understood simply to mean that we do little, hidden, humble, acts of charity for others in the name of Jesus, without expecting anything in return. In this popular interpretation we do the laundry, peel potatoes, and smile at unpleasant people to please Jesus. In some ways, of course, this is true; however her "little way" merits a deeper understanding.

Yes, it does ask us to do humble chores and be nice to each other in the name of Jesus but there are deeper dimensions to it. Her "little way" is a path to sanctity based on three things: *Littleness*, *Anonymity*, and a *Particular Motivation*.

Littleness: For Therese "littleness" does not refer first of all to the littleness of the act that we are doing, like the humble tasks of doing the laundry, peeling potatoes, or giving a simple smile to someone who's unpleasant. It refers to our own littleness, to our own radical poverty before God. Before God, we are little. To accept and act out of that constitutes humility. We move towards God and others in her "little way" when we do small acts of charity for others, not out of our strength and the virtue we feel at that moment, but rather out of a poverty, powerlessness, and emptiness

that allows God's grace to work through us so that in doing what we're doing we're drawing others to God and not to ourselves.

As well, our littleness makes us aware that, for the most part, we cannot do the big things that shape world history. But we can change the world more humbly, by sowing a hidden seed, by being a hidden antibiotic of health inside the soul of humanity, and by splitting the atom of love inside our own selves. And yes, too, the "little way" is about doing little, humble, hidden things.

Anonymity: Therese's "little way" refers to what's hidden, to what's done in secret, so that *what the Father sees in secret will be rewarded in secret*. And what's hidden is not our act of charity, but we, ourselves, who are doing the act. In Therese's "little way" our little acts of charity will go mostly unnoticed, will seemingly have no real impact on world history, and won't bring us any recognition. They'll remain hidden and unnoticed; but inside the Body of Christ what's hidden, selfless, unnoticed, self-effacing, and seemingly insignificant and unimportant is the most vital vehicle of all for grace at a deeper level. Just as Jesus did not save us through sensational miracles and headline-making deeds but through selfless obedience to his Father and quiet martyrdom, our deeds too can remain unknown so that our deaths and the spirit we leave behind can become our real fruitfulness.

Finally, her "little way" is predicated on *a Particular Motivation*. We are invited to act out of our littleness and anonymity and do small acts of love and service to others for a particular reason, that is, to, metaphorically, wipe the face of the suffering Christ. How so?

Therese of Lisieux was an extremely blessed and gifted person. Despite a lot of tragedy in her early life, she was (by her own admission and testimony of others) loved in a way that was so pure, so deep, and so wonderfully affectionate that it leaves most people in envy.

She was also a very attractive child and was bathed in love and security inside an extended family within which her every smile and tear were noticed, honored, (and often photographed). But as she grew in maturity it didn't take her long to notice that what was true in her life wasn't true of most others. Their smiles and tears went mostly unnoticed and were not honored. Her "little way" is therefore predicated on this particular motivation. In her own words:

"One Sunday, looking at a picture of Our Lord on the Cross, I was struck by the blood flowing from one of his divine hands. I felt a pang of great sorrow when thinking this blood was falling on the ground without anyone's hastening to gather it up. I was resolved to remain in spirit at the foot of the Cross and to receive its dew. ... Oh, I don't want this precious blood to be lost. I shall spend my life gathering it up for the good of souls. ... To live from love is to dry Your Face."

To live her "little way" is to notice and honor the unnoticed tears falling from the suffering faces of others.

INADEQUACY, HURT, AND RECONCILIATION

JANUARY 20, 2020

Even with the best intentions, even with no malice inside us, even when we are faithful, we sometimes cannot not hurt each other. Our human situation is simply too complex at times for us not to wound each other.

Here's an example: Soren Kierkegaard, who spent his whole life trying to be scrupulously faithful to what God was calling him to, once hurt a woman very deeply. As a young man, he had fallen in love with a woman, Regine, who, in return, loved him deeply. But as their marriage date approached, Kierkegaard was beset with an internal crisis, one both psychological and moral, within which he discerned that their marriage would, long range, be the cause for deep unhappiness for both of them and he called off the engagement. That decision hurt Regine, deeply and permanently. She never forgave him and he, for his part, was haunted for the rest of his life by the fact that

he had hurt her so badly. Initially, he wrote her a number of letters trying to explain his decision and apologizing for hurting her, hoping for her understanding and forgiveness. Eventually, he gave up, even as he wrote page after page in his private journals second-guessing himself, castigating himself, and then, conversely, trying to justify himself again and again in his decision not to marry her.

Nearly ten years after that fateful decision, with Regine now married to someone else, he spent weeks trying to draft the right letter to her – asking for forgiveness, offering new explanations for his actions, and begging for another chance to talk with her. He struggled to find the right words, something that might bring about an understanding. He finally settled on this letter:

Cruel I was, that is true. Why? Indeed, you do not know that.

Silent I have been, that is certain. Only God knows what I have suffered – may God grant that I do not, even now, speak too soon after all!

Marry I could not. Even if you were still free, I could not.

However, you have loved me, as I have you. I owe you much – and now you are married. All right, I offer you for the second time what I can and dare and ought to offer you: reconciliation.

I do this in writing in order not to surprise or overwhelm you. Perhaps my personality did once have too strong an effect; that must not happen again. But for the sake of God in heaven, please give serious consideration to whether you dare become involved in this, and if so, whether you prefer to speak with me at once or would rather exchange some letters first.

If the answer is ‘No’ – would you then please remember for the sake of a better world that I took this step as well.

In any case, as in the beginning

so until now, sincerely and completely

devotedly, your S.K.

(Clare Carlisle, The Heart of a Philosopher, Penguin Book, c2019, p. 215)

Well, the answer was “no”. He had enclosed his letter in another letter which he sent to her husband, asking him to decide whether or not to give it to his

wife. It was returned unopened, accompanied by an angry note, his offer of reconciliation was bitterly rejected.

What's the moral here? Simply this: We hurt each other; sometimes through selfishness, sometimes through carelessness, sometimes through infidelity, sometimes through cruel intention, but sometimes too when there is no selfishness, no carelessness, no betrayal, no cruelty of intention – but only the cruelty of circumstance, inadequacy, and human limit. We sometimes hurt each other as deeply through being faithful as through being unfaithful, albeit in a different way. But irrespective of whether there's moral fault, betrayal, or an intended cruelty, there's still deep hurt, sometimes so deep that, this side of eternity, no healing will take place.

Would that it be otherwise. Would that Kierkegaard could have explained himself so fully that Regine would have understood and forgiven him, would that each of us could explain ourselves so fully that we would be always understood and forgiven, and would that all of our lives could end like a warm-hearted movie where, before the closing credits, everything is understood and reconciled.

But that's not the way it always ends; indeed, that's not even the way it ended for Jesus. He died being looked at as a criminal, as a religious blasphemer, as someone who had done wrong. His offer of reconciliation was also returned unopened, accompanied by a bitter note.

I once visited a young man in who was dying of cancer at age 56. Already bedridden and in hospice care, but with his mind still clear, he shared this: "I am dying with this consolation: If I have an enemy in this world, I don't know who it is. I can't think of a single person that I need to be reconciled with."

Few of us are that lucky. Most of us are still looking at some envelopes that have been returned unopened.

ON SELF-HATRED AND GUILT

JANUARY 27, 2020

Recently on the popular television program, *Saturday Night Live*, a comedian made a rather colorful wisecrack in response to an answer that Nancy Pelosi had given to a journalist who had accused her of hating the President. Pelosi

had stated that, as a Roman Catholic, she hates no one – and this prompted the comedian to make this quip: “As a Catholic, I know there’s always one person you hate – yourself.”

I’m not someone who’s easily upset by religious jokes. Humor is supposed to have an edge and comedians play an important archetypal role here, that of the “Court Jester” whose task it is to deflate whatever’s pompous. Religion is often fair game. Indeed, I appreciated the wit in this wisecrack. Still, something bothers me about this particular wisecrack because it plays into a certain stereotype that’s, unfortunately, very common today wherein people from all kinds of religious backgrounds (this is not specific to Roman Catholics) blame their religious upbringing for the struggles they have with self-hatred and guilt feelings.

How true is this? Is our religious upbringing the root cause of our struggles with self-hatred and guilt feelings?

Obviously our religious upbringing does play some role here, but it’s far too simplistic (and not particularly helpful) to blame all of this, or even most of it, on our religious upbringing. Psychologists and anthropologists assure us that the issue of self-hatred and free-floating guilt is infinitely more complex, especially since we see it playing out in people of every kind of religious background as well as in people who have no religious background at all. Struggles with self-hatred and guilt is not a particularly Roman Catholic phenomenon, Protestant phenomenon, Evangelical phenomenon, Jewish phenomenon, or Moslem phenomenon; it’s a universal phenomenon that makes itself felt in most every sensitive person. Moreover that struggle is not always unhealthy.

Any morally sensitive person, unlike someone who’s morally calloused, will constantly be self-assessing, often anxious as to whether she’s being selfish rather than good, and perennially worrying that some of her words and actions may have hurt others and damaged her relationship with God. To experience this kind of anxiety is precisely to be struggling with feelings of self-hatred and guilt; but, at one level, this is in fact healthy. When we’re anxiously self-assessing, there’s far less danger that we will take others, take the gift of life, or the take the goodness of God for granted. Moral sensitivity is a virtue and, like aesthetic sensitivity, it keeps you healthily fearful lest in ignorance and insensitivity you paint a moustache on the Mona Lisa.

Some of this, of course, is unhealthy. As Freud taught us, our conscience doesn't tell us what's right and what's wrong, *it only tells us how we feel about our actions*. And when we have guilt feelings about what we have just done or left undone those feelings are, no doubt, often powerfully influenced by the social and moral standards that have been put into us as children by our parents, our teachers, our culture, and our religious upbringing. Our religious and moral upbringing does leave us struggling with some false guilt.

But, that being admitted, there are deeper causes as to why we struggle with self-hatred and free-floating guilt and why we just never quite feel good enough.

If we could review our lives in a video, we would see the countless times we were in, every kind of way, told that we're not good, not adequate, not lovable, not valued, not precious. We would see the countless times we were *shamed in our enthusiasm*; and this, I submit, more than any other factor, lies at the root of our self-hatred, our free-floating feelings of guilt, and the bitterness we so frequently feel towards others.

It starts in the highchair when, as toddlers, in our blind energy, we eat too enthusiastically and are told not to eat like a pig. Likewise, as toddlers, full of food and zest, we shout and throw some food on the floor and are told to stop it, to shut up, that our natural energies aren't healthy. Then, as a preschooler, we are often further shamed in our enthusiasm. Eventually things move on to the playground, the classroom, and into our family circles where our uniqueness and preciousness are not often sufficiently recognized or valued, where we're frequently ignored, put down, treated unfairly, bullied, made aware of our inferiorities and failures, and, in ways subtle and not-so-subtle, told that we're not good enough. This sets us up for the rejections we absorb in adulthood, for the jealousies we feel when the lives of others look so much richer than our own, for the unexpressed bitterness we nurse because of our own inadequacies, and for the guilt we feel because of our own betrayals.

It isn't primarily because of our religious training that we hate ourselves and are haunted by a lot of free-floating guilt.

Yes, most of us Catholics do hate ourselves. Sadly, would it were otherwise, so too does everyone else.

MAGNANIMITY

FEBRUARY 3, 2020

What does it mean to be big-hearted, magnanimous?

Once during a baseball game in high school an umpire made very unfair call against our team. Our whole team was indignant and all of us began to shout angrily at the umpire, swearing at him, calling him names, loudly venting our anger. But one of our teammates didn't follow suit. Instead of shouting at the umpire he kept trying to stop the rest of us from doing so. "Let it go!" he kept telling us, "Let it go – we're bigger than this!" Bigger than what? He wasn't referring to the umpire's immaturity, but to our own. And we weren't "bigger than this", at least not then. Certainly I wasn't. I couldn't swallow an injustice. I wasn't big enough.

But something stayed with me from that incident, the challenge to "be bigger" inside the things that slight us. I don't always succeed, but I'm a better person when I do, more big-hearted, just as I am more-petty and smaller of heart when I don't.

But just as our teammate challenged us all those years ago, we remain challenged to "be bigger" than the pettiness within a moment. That invitation lies at the very heart of Jesus' moral challenge in the *Sermon on the Mount*. There he invites us to have "a virtue that's deeper than that of the Scribes and the Pharisees". And there's more hidden in that statement than first meets the eye because the Scribes and Pharisees were very virtuous people. They strove hard always to be faithful to all the precepts of their faith and were people who believed in and practiced strict justice. They didn't make unfair calls as umpires! But inside of all of that goodness they still lacked something that the *Sermon on the Mount* invites us to, a certain magnanimity, to have big enough hearts and minds that can rise above being slighted so as to be bigger than a given moment.

Let me offer this example of what that can mean: John Paul II was the first pope in history to speak out unequivocally against capital punishment. It's important to note that he didn't say that capital punishment was wrong. Biblically we do have the right to practice it. John Paul conceded that. However, and this is the lesson, he went on to say that, while we may in justice

practice capital punishment, we shouldn't do it because Jesus calls us to something higher, namely, to forgive sinners and not execute them. That's magnanimity, that's being bigger than the moment we're caught up within.

Thomas Aquinas, in his moral astuteness, makes a distinction that one doesn't often hear either in church teachings or in common sense. Thomas says that a certain thing can be sin for one person and yet not for another. In essence, something can be a sin for someone who is big-hearted, even as it is not a sin for someone who is petty and small of heart. Here's an example: In a wonderfully challenging comment, Thomas once wrote that *it is a sin to withhold a compliment from someone who genuinely deserves it because in doing so we are withholding from that person some of the food upon which he or she needs to live*. But in teaching this, Thomas is clear that this is a sin only for someone who is big-hearted, magnanimous, and at a certain level of maturity. Someone who is immature, self-centered, and petty of heart is not held to the same moral and spiritual standard.

How is this possible, isn't a sin a sin, irrespective of person? Not always. Whether or not something is a sin or not and the seriousness of a sin depends upon the depth and maturity within a relationship. Imagine this: A man and his wife have such a deep, sensitive, caring, respectful, and intimate relationship so that the tiniest expressions of affection or neglect speak loudly to each other. For example, as they part to go their separate ways each morning they always exchange an expression of affection, as a parting ritual. Now, should either of them neglect that expression of affection on an ordinary morning where there's no special circumstance, it would be no small, incidental matter. Something large would be being said. Conversely, consider another couple whose relationship is not close, where there is little care, little affection, little respect, and no habit of expressing affection upon parting. Such neglect would mean nothing. No slight, no intent, no harm, no sin, just lack of care as usual. Yes, some things can be a sin for one person and not for another.

We're invited both by Jesus and by what's best inside us to become big enough of heart and mind to know that it's a sin not to give a compliment, to know that even though biblically we may do capital punishment we still shouldn't do it, and to know that we're better women and men when we are bigger than any slight we experience within a given moment.

ON HALLOWING OUR DIMINISHMENTS

FEBRUARY 10, 2020

Thirty years ago, John Jungblut wrote a short pamphlet entitled, *On Hallowing Our Diminishments*. It's a treatise suggesting ways we might frame the humiliations and diminishments that beset us through circumstance, age, and accidents so that, despite the humiliation they bring, we can place them under a certain canopy so as to take away their shame and restore to us some lost dignity.

And we all suffer diminishments. Certain things are dealt to us by genetics, history, circumstance, the society we live in, or by the ravages of aging or accidents that, seen from almost every angle, are not only bitterly unfair but can also seemingly strip us of our dignity and leave us humiliated. For example, how does one deal with a bodily defect that society deems unsightly? How does one deal with being discriminated against? How does one deal with an accident that leaves one partially or wholly paralyzed? How does one deal with the debilitations that come with old age? How does one deal with a loved one who was violated or killed simply because of the color of his or her skin? How does one deal with the suicide of a loved one? How do we set these things under some canopy of dignity and meaning so that what is an awful unfairness is not a permanent source of indignity and shame? How does someone hallow his or her diminishments?

Soren Kierkegaard offers this advice. He, who was sometimes publicly ridiculed during his lifetime, including newspaper cartoons that made sport of his physical appearance (his "spindly legs"), offers this counsel: In the face of something like this, he says, it's not a question of denying it, covering it up, or trying various distractions and tonics to deaden it or keep its sharpness at bay. Rather we must make ourselves genuinely aware of it, "by bringing it to complete clarity." By doing this, we hallow it. We bring it out of the realm of shame and give it a certain dignity. How is this done?

Imagine this as a paradigmatic example: A young woman is walking alone along a deserted road and is forcibly picked up by a group of drunken men who rape and kill her and leave her body in a ditch. Her shocked and horrified family and community do as Kierkegaard counsels. They don't try to deny what happened, cover it up, or try various distractions and tonics to deaden their pain. Instead, they bring it to "complete clarity". How?

They pick up her body, wash it, clothe her in her best clothing, and then have a three-day wake that culminates in a huge funeral attended by hundreds of persons. And their ritual honoring of her doesn't stop there. After the funeral they gather in a park near where she lived and after some hours of testimony that honors who she was, they rename the park after her.

What they do, of course, does not bring her back to life, does not erase in any way the horrible unfairness of her death, does not bring her killers to justice, and it does not fundamentally change the societal conditions that helped cause her violent death. But it does, in an important way, restore to her some of the dignity that was so horribly ripped away from her. Both she and her death are hallowed. Her name and her life now will forever speak of something beyond the unfairness and tragedy of her death.

We see examples of this on the macro level in way the world has handled the deaths of people like Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, Malcolm X, Jamal Khashoggi, and others who were killed by hatred. We have found ways to hallow them so that their lives and their persons are now remembered in ways that eclipse the manner of their deaths. And we see this too in how some communities handle the deaths of loved ones who have been senselessly shot by gang members or by police, where their manner of death belies everything that's good. The same is true for how some families handle the diminishment of their loved ones who die by drug overdose, suicide, or dementia. The indignity of their death is eclipsed by proper clarity around the very diminishment that brought about their death. *Their memory is redeemed.* In short, that's the function of any proper wake and any proper funeral. In bringing to clarity the very indignity that befalls someone we restore her dignity.

This is true not only for those who die unfairly or in ways that leave those they left behind grasping for ways to give them back some dignity. It's also true for every kind of humiliation and indignity we, ourselves, suffer in life, from the wounds of our childhood which can forever haunt us, to the many humiliations we suffer in adulthood. We cannot change what has happened to us, but we can hallow it by "bringing it to clarity" so that the indignity is eclipsed.

SPEAKING WITH AUTHORITY

FEBRUARY 17, 2020

We are growing ever more distrustful of words. Everywhere we hear people say: “That’s just talk! That’s nothing but empty words!”

And empty words are all around us. Our world is full of lies, of false promises, of glittering advertising that doesn’t deliver, of words never backed up by anything. We trust less and less in what we hear. We’ve been lied to and betrayed far too often, now we’re cautious about what we believe.

But distrust in the words we hear is only one way in which our spoken word is weak. Our words can be truthful and still have little power. Why? Because, to use Gospel terms, we may not be speaking with much *authority*. Our words may not have what they need to back them up. What’s meant by this?

The Gospels tell us that one of things that distinguished Jesus for the other religious preachers of his time was that he spoke with *authority*, while they didn’t. What gives words authority? What gives them transformative power?

There are, as we know, different kinds of power. There’s a power that flows from strength and energy. We see this, for example, in the body of a gifted athlete who moves with authority. There’s power too in charisma, in a gifted speaker or a rock star. They too speak with a certain authority and power. But there’s still another kind of power and authority, one very different in kind from that of the athlete and the rock star. There’s the power of a baby, the paradoxical power of vulnerability, innocence, and helplessness. Powerlessness is sometimes the real power. If you put an athlete, a rock star, and a baby into the same room, who among them is the most powerful? Who has the most authority? Whatever the power of the athlete or the rock star, the baby has more power to change hearts.

The Gospel texts which tell us that Jesus spoke with “authority” never suggest that he spoke with “great energy” or “powerful charisma”. In describing Jesus’ authority they use the word “*exousia*”, a Greek word for which we don’t have an English equivalent. What’s “*exousia*”? We don’t have a term for it, but we have a concept: “*Exousia*” might be described as the combination of vulnerability, innocence, and helplessness that a baby brings into

a room. Its very helplessness, innocence, and vulnerability have a unique authority and power to touch your conscience. It's for good reason that people watch their language around a baby. Its very presence is cleansing.

But there are a couple of other elements too undergirding the authority with which Jesus spoke. His vulnerability and innocence gave his words a special power, yes; but two other elements also made his words powerful: His words were always grounded in the integrity of his life. As well, people recognized that his authority was not coming from him but from something (Someone) higher whom he was serving. There was no discrepancy between his words and his life. Moreover, his words were powerful because they weren't just coming from him, they were coming *through him* from Someone above him, Someone whose authority couldn't be challenged, God.

You see this kind of authority; for example, in persons like Mother Teresa and Jean Vanier. Their words had a special authority. Mother Teresa could meet someone for the first time and ask him or her to come to India and work with her. Jean Vanier could do the same. A friend of mine shares how on meeting Vanier for the first time, in their very first conversation, Vanier invited him to become a missionary priest. That thought had never before crossed his mind. Today he's a missionary.

What gives some people that special power? "Exousia", a selfless life, and a grounding in an authority that comes from above. What you see in persons like Mother Teresa and Jean Vanier is the powerlessness of a baby, combined with a selfless life, grounded in an authority beyond them. When such persons speak, like Jesus', their words have real power to calm hearts, heal them, change them and, metaphorically and really, cast out demons from them.

But we don't always have to look to spiritual giants like Mother Teresa and Jean Vanier to see this. Most of us have not been so personally influenced by Mother Teresa or Jean Vanier, but have been spoken to with authority by people around us. In my case, it was my father and mother who spoke to me with that kind of authority. As well some of the Ursuline nuns who taught me in school and some of my uncles and aunts had the power to ask sacrifice of me because they spoke with "exousia" and with an integrity and a faith that I could not question or deny. They asked me to consider becoming a priest and I became one.

What moves the world is often the powerful energy and charisma of the highly talented; but the heart is moved by a different kind of authority.

OUR CONGENITAL COMPLEXITY

FEBRUARY 24, 2020

The renowned spiritual writer, Ruth Burrows, begins her autobiography with these words: “I was born into this world with a tortured sensitivity. For long I have puzzled over the causes of my psychological anguish.”

Unfortunately, to our loss, too many spiritual biographies don’t begin like this, that is, by recognizing right at the start the bewildering, pathological complexity inside our own nature. We’re not simple in heart, mind, and soul, nor indeed even in body. Each of us has enough complexity within us to write our own treatise on abnormal psychology.

And that complexity must not only be recognized, it needs to be respected and hallowed because it stems not for what’s worst in us but from what’s best in us. We’re complex because what beguiles us inside and tempts us in every direction is not, first of all, the wiliness of the devil but rather the image and likeness of God. Inside us there’s a divine fire, a greatness, which gives us infinite depth, insatiable desires, and enough luminosity to bewilder every psychologist. The image and likeness of God inside us, as John of the Cross writes, renders our hearts, minds, and souls “caverns” too deep to ever be filled in or fully understood.

It’s my belief that Christian spirituality, at least in its popular preaching and catechesis, has too often not taken this seriously enough. In short, the impression has too much been given that Christian discipleship shouldn’t be complicated: Why all this resistance within you! What’s wrong with you! But, as we know from our own experience, our innate complexity is forever throwing up complications and resistances to becoming a saint, to “willing the one thing”. Moreover, because our complexity hasn’t been recognized and honored spiritually we often feel guilty about it: Why am I so complicated? Why do I have all these questions? Why am I so often confused? Why is sex such a powerful impulse? Why do I have some many temptations?

The simple answer: Because we are born with a godly fire within. Thus the source of so many of our confusions, temptations, and resistances comes as much what best in us as from the wiles of the Satan and the world.

What should we do in the face of our own bewildering complexity?

Some Counsels for the Long Haul:

- *Honor and hallow your complexity:* Accept that this is a God-given gift inside you and, at the end of the day, it's what is best inside you. It's what separates you from plants and animals. Their nature is simple, but having an immortal, infinite soul makes for lots of complications as you struggle to live out your life within the finitude that besets you.
- *Never underestimate your complexity – even as you resist massaging it:* Recognize and respect the “demons and angels” that roam freely inside your heart and mind. But don't massage your complexity either, by fancying yourself as the tormented artist or as the existentialist who's heroically out of step with life.
- *Befriend your shadow:* It's the luminosity you've split off. Slowly, with proper caution and support, begin to face the inner things that frighten you.
- *Hallow the power and place of sexuality within you:* You're incurably sexual, and for a godly reason. Never deny or denigrate the power of sexuality – even as you carry it with a proper chastity.
- *Name your wounds, grieve them, mourn your inconsummation.* Whatever wounds that you don't grieve will eventually snakebite you. Accept and mourn the fact that here, in this life, there is no finished symphony.
- *Never let the “transcendental impulse” inside you become drugged or imprisoned.* Your complexity continually lets you know that you're built for more than this life. Never deaden this impulse inside you. Learn to recognize, through your frustrations and fantasies, the ways you often imprison it.
- *Try to find a “higher love” by which to transcend the more immediate power of your natural instincts.* All miracles begin with falling in love. Hallow

your spontaneous impulses and temptations by searching for that higher love and higher value towards which they're pointing. Offering others your altruism and the gaze of admiration will feel so good and right that it will bring to fulfillment what you're really yearning for.

- *Let your own complexity teach you understanding and empathy.* By being in touch with your own complexity you will eventually learn that nothing is foreign to you and that what you see on the newscasts each day mirrors what's inside you.
- *Forgive yourself often.* Your complexity will trip you up many times and so you will need to forgive yourself many times. Live, knowing that God's mercy is a well that's never exhausted.
- *Live under God's patience and understanding.* God is your builder, the architect who constructed you and who is responsible for your complexity. Trust that God understands. Trust that God is more anxious about you than you're anxious about yourself. The God who knows all things also knows and appreciates why you struggle.

JEAN VANIER – REVISITED

MARCH 2, 2020

Like many others, I was deeply distressed to learn of the recent revelations concerning Jean Vanier. He was a person whom I much admired and about whom, on numerous occasions, I have written glowingly. So, the news about him shook me deeply. What's to be said about Jean Vanier in the light of these revelations?

First, that what he did was very wrong and deeply harmful, not least to the women he victimized. Without knowing the specifics of what happened (and without wanting to know them) enough is known to know that this was serious abuse of trust. No cloak of justification can be placed around it.

Second, what he did may not be linked to or identified with clerical sexual abuse. Vanier was not a cleric, nor indeed a canonically vowed religious. He

was a layman, a public celibate admittedly, but his betrayal of his commitment to celibacy may not be identified with the clerical sexual abuse. He broke the sixth commandment, albeit in a way that merits a harsh judgment, given his public stature and the abuse of a particular kind of sacred trust. However, his breaking of his professed celibacy doesn't put into question the legitimacy and fruitfulness of vowed celibacy itself, any more than a married man being unfaithful to his wife puts into question the legitimacy and fruitfulness of the vocation of marriage.

Third, Vanier's transgressions do not negate the good work of L'Arche nor cast any negative shadow on the dedication and good work of the many women and men who work there and who have worked there. *By their fruits you shall know them!* Jesus taught that and no one, no one, can deny or question the good work that L'Arche has done and continues to do in more than thirty countries. L'Arche is a work of God, of grace, of the Holy Spirit. It turns out now that its founder had some flaws. So be it. Jesus is the only founder who had no flaws. Indeed, the good work being done by L'Arche attests too to the fact that Vanier is and was bigger than his sins. Nobody who is essentially duplicitous can leave behind such a grace-filled legacy.

Finally, the disillusionment and anger we feel says as much about us as it says about Jean Vanier. In Luke's Gospel, a young man comes up to Jesus and says to him: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (18.18-23) Jesus immediately challenges the way he is being addressed by saying: "Don't call me good! Only God is good." That was our mistake with Jean Vanier, just as it's our mistake with other persons whom we cloak with divinity in an idealization that's supposed to be reserved for God alone. And whenever we do that, and we did it to Jean Vanier, we cannot not ultimately be disappointed and disillusioned. Nobody, except God, does God well, all the rest of us eventually disappoint.

What Jean Vanier did to us was unfair. We cannot not feel betrayed by his betrayal. Conversely, though, what we did to him was also unfair. We asked him to be God for us and that's also not a fair request.

When I was a twenty-one-year-old seminarian, searching for mentors, one of my seminary teachers came back from a Vanier retreat gushing with superlatives as he described Vanier as the "holiest, most-wonderful, most single-minded, spiritual man" he'd ever met. My critical faculties immediately put me on guard: "No one's that good!" So, I deliberately didn't look to Vanier

for mentorship. However, in the fifty years since, I did look to him for mentorship. Though I never met him personally, I read his books, was much influenced by numerous persons who counted him as a formidable influence in their lives (including Henri Nouwen), I wrote a Preface for one of his last books, and wrote a glowing tribute to him for the newspapers when he died. So, I was also enough besotted by him so that now I too felt dismayed and disillusioned when I learned of his moral lapses.

However, disillusionment is curious phenomenon. After the initial shock, you soon enough realize it's a positive thing. It's the dispelling of an *illusion*, and an illusion is always in the mind of the one who doing the perceiving rather than on the part of the one being perceived. With Jean Vanier, the illusion was on our part, not his. There was, as we now know, a certain falsity in his life – but there was one on our part too.

Yes, the revelations about Jean Vanier shook me deeply, but not to my core because at our core, when we touch it, we know that no one, except God, is good, at least with a goodness that has no imperfections. Once we accept that, we can accept too that nobody's perfect, even a Jean Vanier. At our core we can accept that, despite this betrayal, Jean Vanier did a lot of good and that L'Arche is clearly a graced reality.

JUDGMENT DAY

MARCH 9, 2020

We all fear judgment. We fear being seen with all that's inside us, some of which we don't want exposed to the light. Conversely, we fear being misunderstood, of not being seen in the full light, of not being seen for who we are. And what we fear most perhaps is final judgment, the ultimate revelation of ourselves. Whether we are religious or not, most of us fear having to one day face our Maker, judgment day. We fear standing naked in complete light where nothing's hidden and all that's in the dark inside us is brought to light.

What's curious about these fears is that we fear both being known for who we are, even as we fear not being known for who we really are. We fear judgment, even as we long for it. Perhaps that's because we already intuit what our final judgement will be and how it will take place. Perhaps we already intuit that when we finally stand naked in God's light we will also finally be

understood and that revealing light will not just expose our shortcomings but also make visible our virtues.

That intuition is divinely-placed in us and reflects the reality of our final judgment. When all our secrets are known our secret goodness will also be known. Light exposes everything. For example, here's how the renowned poet and spiritual writer, Wendell Berry, foresees the final judgment: "I might imagine the dead waking, dazed into a shadowless light in which they know themselves altogether for the first time. It is a light that is merciless until they accept its mercy; by it, they are at once condemned and redeemed. *It is Hell until it is Heaven.* Seeing themselves in that light, if they are willing, they see how far they have failed the only justice of loving one another. And yet, in suffering the light's awful clarity, in seeing themselves within it, they see its forgiveness and its beauty and are consoled."

In many ways, this wonderfully captures it: When, one day, we stand in the full light of God, stripped naked in soul, morally defenseless, with everything we have ever done exposed, that light will, I suspect, indeed be a bit of hell before it turns into heaven. It will expose all that's selfish and impure inside us and all the ways we have hurt others in our selfishness, even as it will expose its opposite, namely, all that's selfless and pure inside us. That judgment will bring with it a certain condemnation even as it brings at the same time an understanding, forgiveness, and consolation such as we have never known before. That judgment will be, as Berry suggests, momentarily bitter but ultimately consoling.

The one nuance that I would add to Berry's idea is a something taken from Karl Rahner. Rahner's fantasy of our judgment by God after death is very similar to Berry's, except that, for Rahner, the agent of that judgment will not so much be God's light as it will be God's love. For Rahner, the idea is not so much that we will be standing in an unrelenting light that sears and pierces through us, but rather that we will be embraced by a love so unconditional, so understanding, and so gracious that, inside that, we will know instantly all that's selfish and impure inside us even as we know all that's pure and selfless. Therese of Lisieux used to ask God for forgiveness with these words: "Punish me with a kiss!" Judgment day will be exactly that. We will be "punished" by a kiss, by being loved in a way that will make us painfully aware of the sin within us, even as it lets us know that we are good and loveable.

For those of us who are Roman Catholics, this notion of judgment is also, I believe, what we mean by our concept of purgatory. Purgatory is not a place that's separate from heaven where one goes for a time to do penance for one's sins and to purify one's heart. Our hearts are purified by being embraced by God, not by being separated from God for a time so as to be made worthy of that embrace. As well, as Therese of Lisieux implies, the punishment for our sin is in the embrace itself. Final judgment takes place by being unconditionally embraced by Love. When that happens to the extent that we're sinful and selfish that embrace of pure goodness and love will make us painfully aware of our own sin and that will be *hell until it is heaven*.

As a lyric by Leonard Cohen puts it: *Behold the gates of mercy, in arbitrary space, and none of us deserving the cruelty or the grace*. He's right. None of us deserves either the cruelty or the grace we experience in this world. And only our final judgment, the embrace of unconditional love, God's kiss, will make us aware both of how cruel we've been and how good we really are.

AN ALTERNATE EXPRESSION OF LOVE AND TRUST

MARCH 16, 2020

More tortuous than all else is the human heart, beyond remedy; who can understand it. The Prophet, Jeremiah wrote those words more than 25 hundred years ago and anyone who struggles with the complexities of love and human relationships will soon enough know of what he speaks.

Who indeed can understand the human heart, given some of the curious and cruel ways we sometimes have of expressing love. For instance, Nadia Bolz-Weber shares something we all have a propensity for: "Inevitably, when I can't harm the people who harmed me, I just end up harming the people who love me." How true. When we've been hurt most every instinct in us screams for retaliation; but, most times, it's not possible, nor safe, to retaliate against the persons who hurt us. Or, perhaps we aren't even clear as to who hurt us. So, needing to lash out at someone, we lash out where it's safe to do so, namely, at those whom we trust will absorb it, at those with whom we feel secure enough to do this. We lash out at them because we know they won't retaliate. Simply put, sometimes we need to be really angry at someone and

since we are unable to vent that anger on the person or persons responsible for it we vent on someone whom we unconsciously trust will safely accept it.

If you're a loving parent, a faithful spouse, a trusted friend, a true counsellor, a good minister, or even just someone who with integrity officially represents a moral agency or a church it can be good to know this. Otherwise it's too easy to misread some of the anger and recrimination that will come your way and take it too-personally and not for what it really is. When someone whom you've loved is angry at you it's hard to recognize and accept that you're probably the object of that anger even though you aren't the cause of it, but rather are the one safe place where this person can lash out without fear of retaliation and have his or her bitterness absorbed. If you don't grasp the peculiar dynamics of love that are at play here you will inevitably take this too-personally, be torn up inside, lament its injustice, and struggle to carry it with the love that's unconsciously being asked for.

But this can be very hard to accept, even when we understand why it's happening. This kind of love demands an almost inhuman strength. For example, as Christians we have a special admiration for Jesus' mother as we imagine what she must have felt as she stood beneath the cross, watching her son, goodness and innocence itself, suffer a brute, violent injustice. Not to lessen in any way the pain that she would have been feeling then, standing helplessly as she did in that awful injustice, she did have the consolation of knowing that her son loved her deeply. Her pain would have been excruciating, as would be the pain of any mother in that situation, but her pain had a certain (dare I use the phrase) "cleanliness" about it. She was free to fully and openly empathize with her son, knowing that his love was giving her permission to feel what she felt.

But many is the loving mother, loving father, a faithful spouse, or trusted friend whose heart is breaking at the anger and accusation being directed at them by someone they've loved and to whom they've been faithful. How can they not feel accused, guilty, and responsible for the bitter crucifixion they're experiencing? Their pain will not feel "clean". In effect, what they're feeling is more what Jesus felt as he was being crucified rather than what his mother felt as she witnessed it. They're experiencing what St. Paul refers to in his Second Letter to the Corinthians when he writes that, though innocent himself, *Jesus became sin*. That single expression, unless properly read, can be

one of the most horrifying lines in scripture. Yet, understood within the dynamics of love, it powerfully highlights what love really means beyond fairytales. Real love is the capacity to absorb injustice with understanding, empathy, and with only the other's good in mind.

Of course, sometimes the anger directed at us from persons we love is justified and speaks of our betrayal, our sin, and our breaking of trust. Sometimes the angry accusations directed at us validly accuse us of our own sin. In that case, what we're asked to absorb has a very different meaning. As well, we need to recognize that we also do this to others. When we're hurt and unable to direct our anger and accusations against those who hurt us, then, as Nadia Bolz-Weber so honestly shares, we often end up harming the people who love us most.

Love has many modalities, some warm, kind, and affectionate, some accusatory, bitter, and angry. Yes, sometimes we have strange, anomalous ways of expressing our love and trust. Who can understand our tortuous hearts!

LOVE IN THE TIME OF COVID 19

MARCH 23, 2020

In 1985, Nobel Prize winning author, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, published a novel entitled, *Love in the Time of Cholera*. It tells a colorful story of how life can still be generative, despite an epidemic.

Well what's besetting our world right now is not cholera but the *coronavirus*, Covid 19. Nothing in my lifetime has ever affected the whole world as radically as this virus. Whole countries have shut down, virtually all schools and colleges have sent their students home and are offering classes online, we're discouraged from going out of our houses and from inviting others into them, and we've been asked not to touch each other and to practice "social distancing". Ordinary, normal, time has stopped. We're in a season that no generation, perhaps since the flu of 1918, has had to undergo. Furthermore, we don't foresee an end soon to this situation. No one, neither our government leaders nor our doctors, have an exit strategy. No one knows when this will end or how. Hence, like the inhabitants on *Noah's Arc*, we're locked in and don't know when the flood waters will recede and let us return to our normal lives.

How should we live in this extraordinary time? Well, I had a private tutorial on this some nine years ago. In the summer of 2011, I was diagnosed with colon cancer, underwent surgery for a resection, and then was subjected to twenty-four weeks of chemotherapy. Facing the uncertainty of what the chemotherapy would be doing to my body I was understandably scared. Moreover, twenty-four weeks is basically half a year and contemplating the length of time that I would be undergoing this “abnormal” season in my life, I was also impatient. I wanted this over with, quickly. So I faced it like I face most setbacks in my life, stoically, with the attitude: “*I’ll get through this! I’ll endure it!*”

I keep what might euphemistically be termed a journal, though it’s really more a *Daybook* that simply chronicles what I do each day and who and what enters my life on a given day. Well, when I stoically began my first chemotherapy session I began checking off days in my journal: *Day one*, followed the next day by: *Day two*. I had done the math and knew that it would take 168 days to get through the twelve chemo sessions, spaced two weeks apart. It went on like this for the first seventy days or so, with me checking off a number each day, holding my life and my breath, everything on hold until I could finally write, *Day 168*.

Then one day, about half way through the twenty-four weeks, I had an awakening. I don’t know what specifically triggered it, a grace from above, a gesture of friendship from someone, the feel of the sun on my body, the wonderful feel of a cold drink, perhaps all of these things, but I woke up, I woke up to the fact that I was putting my life on hold, that I wasn’t really living but only enduring each day in order check it off and eventually reach that magical 168th day when I could start living again. I realized that I was wasting a season of my life. Moreover, I realized that what I was living through was sometimes rich precisely because of the impact of chemotherapy in my life. That realization remains one of the special graces in my life. My spirits lifted radically even as the chemotherapy continued to do the same brutal things to my body.

I began to welcome each day for its freshness, its richness, for what it brought into my life. I look back on that now and see those three last months (before day 168) as one of richest seasons of my life. I made some lifelong friends, I learned some lessons in patience that I still try to cling to, and, not least, I learned some long-overdue lessons in gratitude and appreciation, in

not taking life, health, friendship, and work for granted. It was a special joy to return to a normal life after those 168 days of conscripted “sabbatical”; but those “sabbatical” days were special too, albeit in a very different way.

The coronavirus has put us all, in effect, on a conscripted sabbatical and it’s subjecting those who have contracted it to their own type of chemotherapy. And the danger is that we will put our lives on hold as we go through this extraordinary time and will just endure rather than let ourselves be graced by what lies within this uninvited season.

Yes, there will be frustration and pain in living this through, but that’s not incompatible with happiness. Paul Tournier, after he’d lost his wife, did some deep grieving but then integrated that grief into a new life in a way that allowed him to write: “I can truly say that I have a great grief and that I am a happy man.” Words to ponder as we struggle with this coronavirus.

THE DISPELLING OF AN ILLUSION

MARCH 30, 2020

We don’t much like the word *disillusionment*. Normally we think of it as a negative, something pejorative, and not as something that does us a favor. And yet disillusionment is a positive, it means the dispelling of an illusion and illusions, unless we need one as a temporary tonic, are not good for us. They keep us from the truth, from reality.

There are many, many negatives to the current coronavirus that’s wreaking a deadly havoc across the planet. But there’s one positive: Against every form of resistance we can muster, it’s dispelling the illusion that we are in control of our lives and that, by our own efforts, we can make ourselves invulnerable. That lesson has come upon us uninvited. This unforeseen and unwelcome virus is teaching us that, no matter our sophistication, intelligence, wealth, health, or status, we’re all vulnerable, we’re all at the mercy of a thousand contingencies over which we have little control. No amount of denial will change that.

Granted, at one level of our consciousness we’re always aware of our vulnerability. But sometimes after we have walked a dangerous ledge for a long time we forget the peril and are no longer aware of the narrowness of the

plank upon which we're walking. Then too our sense of our vulnerability to a hundred million dangers is, like our sense of mortality, normally pretty abstract and not very real. We all know that like everyone else we are going to die one day; but normally this doesn't weigh very heavily on our consciousness. We live instead with the sense that we're not going to die just yet. Our own deaths aren't really real to us. They are not yet an imminent threat but only a distant, abstract reality.

Generally, such too is the vagueness of our sense of vulnerability. Yes, we know abstractly that we are vulnerable, but generally we feel pretty secure. But as this virus spreads, consumes our newscasts, and brings our normal lives to a halt, our sense of vulnerability is no longer a vague, abstract threat. We're now much more aware that we all live at the mercies of a million contingencies, most over which we have little control.

However, to our defense, our innate sense that we're in control and can safeguard our own safety and security should not be too-hastily and too-harshly judged. We can't help it. It's the way we're built. We're instinctually geared to hate our weaknesses, our vulnerability, our limitations, and our awareness of our own poverty and are instinctually geared to want to feel secure, in control, independent, invulnerable, and self-sufficient. That's a mercy of grace and nature because it helps save us from despondency and helps us to live with a (needed) healthy pride. But it's also an illusion; perhaps one that we need for long periods in our lives but also one that in moments of clarity and lucidity we're meant dispel so as to acknowledge before God and to ourselves that we're interdependent, not self-sufficient, and not ultimately in control. Whatever else about this virus, it's bringing us a moment of clarity and lucidity, even if this is far from welcome.

We were given the same lesson, in effect, with the downing of the Twin Towers in New York City on September 11th, 2001. In witnessing this single tragic incident we went from feeling safe and invulnerable to knowing that we are not able, despite everything we have achieved, to ensure our own safety and safety of our loved ones. A lot of people relearned the meaning of prayer that day. A lot of us are relearning the meaning of prayer as we sit quarantined at home during this coronavirus.

Richard Rohr suggests that the passage from childhood to adulthood requires an initiation into a number of necessary life-truths. One of these can be summarized this way: *You are not in Control!* If that is true, and it is, then this

coronavirus is helping initiate us all into a more mature adulthood. We are becoming more conscious of an important truth. However, we may not see any divine intent in this. Every fundamentalist voice that suggests that God sent this virus to each of us a lesson is dangerously wrong and is an insult to true faith. Still we need to hear God's voice inside of it. God is speaking all the time but mostly we aren't listening; this sort of thing helps serve as God's microphone to a deaf world.

Illusions aren't easy to dispel, and for good reasons. We cling to them by instinct and we generally need them to get through life. For this reason, Socrates, in his wisdom, once wrote that "there is nothing that requires as gentle a treatment as the removal of an illusion". Anything other than gentleness only makes us more resistant.

This coronavirus is anything but gentle. But inside all of its harshness perhaps we might feel a gentle nudge that we help us dispel the illusion that we are in control.

THE MEANING OF JESUS' DEATH

APRIL 6, 2020

Jesus' death washes everything clean, including our ignorance and sin. That's the clear message from Luke's account of his death.

As we know, we have four Gospels, each with its own take on the passion and death of Jesus. As we know too these Gospel accounts are not journalistic reports of what happened on Good Friday but more theological interpretations of what happened then. They're paintings of Jesus' death more so than news reports about it and, like good art, they take liberties to highlight certain forms so as to bring out essence. Each Gospel writer has his own interpretation of what happened on Calvary.

For Luke, what happened in the death of Jesus is the clearest revelation, ever, of the incredible scope of God's understanding, forgiveness, and healing. For him, Jesus' death washes everything clean through an understanding, forgiveness, and healing that belies every notion suggesting anything to the contrary. To make this clear, Luke highlights a number of elements in his narrative.

First, in his account of Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, he tells us that immediately after one of his disciples struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear, Jesus touched the man's ear and healed him. God's healing, Luke intimates, reaches into all situations, even situations of bitterness, betrayal, and violence. God's grace will ultimately heal even what's wounded in hatred.

Then, after Peter denied him three times and Jesus is being led away after his interrogation by the Sanhedrin, Luke tells us that Jesus turned and looked straight at Peter in a look that made Peter weep bitterly. Everything in this text and everything that comes after it suggests that the look from Jesus that caused Peter to weep bitterly was not one of disappointment and accusation, a look that would have caused Peter to weep in shame. No, rather it was a look of such understanding and empathy as Peter had never before seen, causing him to weep in relief, knowing that everything was alright and he was alright.

And when Luke records Jesus' trial before Pilate, he recounts something that's not recorded in the other Gospel accounts of Jesus' trial, namely, Pilate sending Jesus to Herod and how the two of them, bitter enemies until that day, "became friends that same day." As Ray Brown, commenting on this text puts it, "Jesus has a healing effect even on those who mistreat him."

Finally, in Luke's narrative, we arrive at the place where Jesus is crucified and as they are crucifying him, he utters the famous words: *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*. Those words, which Christians forever afterwards have taken as the ultimate criterion as to how we should treat our enemies and those who do us ill, encapsulate the deep revelation contained in Jesus' death. Uttered in that context as God is about to be crucified by human beings, these words reveal how God sees and understands even our worst actions: Not as ill-will, not as something that ultimately turns us against God or God against us, but as ignorance – simple, non-culpable, invincible, understandable, forgivable, akin to the self-destructive actions of an innocent child.

In that context too, Luke narrates Jesus' forgiveness of the "good thief". What Luke wants to highlight here, beyond the obvious, are a number of things: First, that the man is forgiven not because he didn't sin, but in spite of his sin; second, that he is given infinitely more than he actually requests of

Jesus; and finally, that Jesus will not die with any unfinished business, this man's sin must first be wiped clean.

Finally, in Luke's narrative, unlike the narratives of Mark and Matthew, Jesus does not die expressing abandonment, but rather dies expressing complete trust: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit". Luke wants us to see in these words a template for how we can face our own deaths, given our weaknesses. What's the lesson? Leon Bloy once wrote that there is only one true sadness in life, that of not being a saint. At the end of the day when each of us face our own death this will be our biggest regret, that we're not saints. But, as Jesus shows in his death, we can die in (even in weakness) knowing we are dying into safe hands.

Luke's account of the passion and death of Jesus, unlike much of Christian tradition, does not focus on the atoning value of Jesus' death. What it emphasizes instead is this: *Jesus' death washes everything clean, each of us and the whole world. It heals everything, understands everything, and forgives everything – despite every ignorance, weakness, infidelity, and betrayal on our part.* In John's passion narrative, Jesus' dead body is pierced with a lance and immediately "blood and water" (life and cleansing) flow out. In Luke's account, Jesus' body is not pierced. It doesn't need to be. By the time he breathes his last he has forgiven everyone and everything has been washed clean.

HUGE STONES AND LOCKED DOORS

APRIL 13, 2020

Soren Kierkegaard once wrote that the Gospel text he strongly identified with is the account of the disciples, after the death of Jesus, locking themselves into an upper room in fear and then experiencing Jesus coming through the locked doors to bestow peace on them. Kierkegaard wanted Jesus to do that for him, to come through his locked doors, his resistance, and breathe peace inside him.

That image of locked doors is one of two particularly interesting images inside the story of the first Easter. The other is the image of the "large stone" that entombed the buried Jesus. These images remind us of what often separates us from the grace of the resurrection. Sometimes for that grace to

find us, someone must “roll away the stone” that entombs us and sometimes the resurrection must come to us “through locked doors”.

First, about the “stone”:

The Gospels tell us that early on Easter morning three women were on their way to the tomb of Jesus intending to embalm his body with spices but they were anxious about how they would remove the large stone that sealed the entrance of his tomb. They were asking each other: “Who will roll away the stone?”

Well, as we know, the stone had already been rolled away. How? We don’t know. Jesus’ resurrection happened with no one there. Nobody knows exactly how that stone was rolled away. But what Scripture does make clear is this: Jesus didn’t resurrect himself. God raised him. Jesus didn’t roll away the stone, though that’s what we generally assume. However, and for good reason, both scripture and Christian tradition strongly affirm that Jesus didn’t raise himself from the dead, his Father raised him. This might seem like unnecessary point to emphasize; after all, what difference does it make?

It makes a huge difference. Jesus didn’t raise himself from the dead and neither can we. That’s the point. For the power of the resurrection to enter us something from beyond us has to remove the huge, immovable rock of our resistance. This is not to deny that we, ourselves, have goodwill and personal strength; but these, though important, are more a precondition for receiving the grace of the resurrection than the power of the resurrection itself, which always comes to us from beyond. We never roll back the stone ourselves!

Who can roll back the stone? Perhaps that isn’t a question we’re particularly anxious about, but we should be. Jesus was entombed and helpless to raise himself up, all the more so for us. Like the women at that first Easter, we need to be anxious: “Who will roll back the stone?” We can’t open our own tombs.

Second, our “locked doors”:

It’s interesting how the believers at that first Easter experienced the resurrected Christ in their lives. The Gospels tell us that they were huddled in fear and paranoia behind locked doors, wanting only to protect themselves, when Christ came through their locked doors, the doors of their fear and self-

protection, and breathed peace into them. Their huddling in fear wasn't because of ill-will or bad faith. In their hearts they sincerely wished that they weren't afraid, but that good will still didn't unlock their doors. Christ entered and breathed peace into them in spite of their resistance, their fear, and their locked doors.

Things haven't changed much in two thousand years. As a Christian community and as individuals we are still mostly huddling in fear, anxious about ourselves, distrustful, not at peace, our doors locked, even as our hearts desire peace and trust. Perhaps, like Kierkegaard, we might want to privilege that scripture passage where the resurrected Christ comes through the locked doors of human resistance and breathes out peace.

Moreover, this year, given this extraordinary time when the coronavirus, Covid 19, has our cities and communities locked down and we are inside our individual houses, dealing with the various combinations of frustration, impatience, fear, panic, and boredom that assail us there. Right now we need a little extra something to experience the resurrection, a stone needs to be rolled away so that resurrected life can come through our locked doors and breathe peace into us.

At the end of the day, these two images, "the stone that needs to be rolled away" and the "locked doors of our fear", contain within themselves perhaps the most consoling truth in all religion because they reveal this about God's grace: *When we cannot help ourselves we can still be helped and when we are powerless to reach out, grace can still come through the walls of our resistance and breathe peace into us.* We need to cling to this whenever we experience irretrievable brokenness in our lives, when we feel helpless inside our wounds and fears, when we feel spiritually inept, and when we grieve loved ones lost to addictions or suicide. The resurrected Christ can come through locked doors and roll back any stone that entombs us, no matter how hopeless the task is for us.

CHURCHES AS FIELD HOSPITALS

APRIL 20, 2020

Most of us are familiar with Pope Francis' comment that today the church needs to be a *field hospital*. What's implied here?

[Back to the LIST ↗](#)

First, that right now the church is not a field hospital, or at least not much of one. Too many churches of all denominations see the world more as an opponent to be fought than as a battlefield strewn with wounded persons to whom they are called to minister. The churches today, in the words of Pope Francis, have often reversed an image in the *Book of Revelation* where Jesus stands outside the door knocking, trying to come in, to a situation where Jesus is knocking on the door from inside the church, trying to get out.

So how might our churches, our ecclesial communities, become field hospitals?

In a wonderfully provocative article in a recent issue of *America Magazine*, Czech spiritual writer, Tomas Halik, suggests that for our ecclesial communities to become “field hospitals” they must assume three roles: A *Diagnostic one* – wherein they identify the signs of the times; a *Preventive one* – wherein they create an immune system in a world within which malignant viruses of fear, hatred, populism, and nationalism are tearing communities apart; and a *Convalescent one* – wherein they help the world overcome the traumas of the past through forgiveness.

How, concretely, might each of these be envisaged?

Our churches need to be *diagnostic*; they need to name the present moment in a prophetic way. But that calls for a courage that, right now, seems lacking, derailed by fear and ideology. Liberals and conservatives diagnose the present moment in radically different ways, not because the facts aren’t the same for both, but because each of them is seeing things through its own ideology. As well, at the end of the day, both camps seem too frightened to look at the hard issues square on, both afraid of what they might see.

To name just one issue that both seem afraid to look at with unblinking eyes: our rapidly emptying churches and the fact that so many of our own children are no longer going to church or identifying with a church. Conservatives simplistically blame secularism, without ever really being willing to openly debate the various critiques of the churches coming from almost every part of society. Liberals, for their part, tend to simplistically blame conservative rigidity without really being open to courageously look at some of places within secularity where faith in a transcendent God and an incarnate Christ run antithetical to some of the cultural ethos and ideologies within secularity. Both

sides, as is evident from their excessive defensiveness, seem afraid to look at all the issues.

What must we do *preventatively* to turn our churches into field hospitals? The image Halik proposes here is rich but is intelligible only within an understanding of the Body of Christ and an acceptance of the deep connection we have with each other inside the family of humanity. We are all one, one living organism, parts of a single body, so that, as with any living body, what any one part does, for disease or health, affects every other part. And the health of a body is contingent upon its immune system, upon those enzymes that roam throughout the body and kill off cancerous cells. Today our world is beset with cancerous cells of bitterness, hatred, lying, self-protecting fear, and tribalism of every kind. Our world is mortally ill; suffering from a cancer that's destroying community.

Hence our ecclesial communities must become places that generate the healthy enzymes that are needed to kill off those cancer cells. We must create an immune system robust enough to do this. And for that to happen, we must first, ourselves, stop being part of the cancer of hatred, lying, fear, opposition, and tribalism. Too often, we ourselves are the cancerous cells. The single biggest religious challenge facing us as ecclesial communities today is that of creating an immune system that's healthy and vigorous enough to help kill off the cancerous cells of hatred, fear, lying, and tribalism that float freely throughout the world.

Finally, our *convalescent* role: Our ecclesial communities need to help the world come to a deeper reconciliation vis-a-vis the traumas of the past. Happily, this is one of our strengths. Our churches are sanctuaries of forgiveness. In the words of Cardinal Francis George: "In society everything is permitted, but nothing is forgiven; in the church much is prohibited, but everything is forgiven." But where we need to be more proactive as sanctuaries of forgiveness today is in relation to a number of salient "traumas of the past". In brief, a deeper forgiveness, healing, and atonement still needs to take place apposite the world's history with colonization, slavery, the status of women, the torture and disappearance of peoples, the mistreatment of refugees, the perennial support of unjust regimes, and the atonement owed to mother earth herself. Our churches must lead this effort.

GOD AND THE PRINCIPLE OF NON-CONTRADICTION

APRIL 27, 2020

It is funny where the lessons of our classrooms are sometimes understood.

I studied philosophy when I was still a bit too young for it, a nineteen year-old studying the metaphysics of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. But something from a metaphysics course remains indelibly stamped in my mind. We learned that there are four “transcendental” properties to God: Scholastic metaphysics tells us that *God is One, True, Good, and Beautiful*. My young mind then had some grasp of what is meant by *True, Good, and Beautiful* since we have some common sense notions of what these are; but what is *Oneness*? What is divine about being undivided?

The answer to that didn’t come to me in a classroom or in an academic discussion, even though I have often tried to explain its meaning to students in a classroom. It came to me in a grocery store.

I had been buying groceries in the same store for twelve years when a trivial incident helped explain God’s Oneness and its importance to me. The store, a large supermarket, has a fruit isle where you pick up apples, oranges, grapefruits, bananas, and the like and then bag them yourself in plastic bags the store supplies. Alongside the plastic bag dispensers there are small containers holding metal twisters you use to tie up the top of your bag. One day, I picked up some fruit, put it into a bag, but all the containers containing the twisters were empty, every one of them. As I checked out my groceries, suspecting that possibly someone that taken them as a prank, I mentioned to the cashier that all the twisters were gone. Her answer took me aback: “But, Sir, we have never had them in this store!” Thinking she might be new on the job, I said: “I’ve been coming here for more than 10 years and you’ve always had them! You can even see their containers from here!” With an assurance that comes from absolute certitude, she replied: “I’ve been working here for a long time, and I can assure you we’ve never had them!”

I pushed things no further, but, walking out of the store I thought this to myself: “If she’s right, then I’m certifiably insane! If she’s right then I’m completely out of touch with reality, have been for a long time, and I have no idea what sanity is!” I was certain that I had seen the twisters for ten years! Well, they had reappeared by the next time I entered the store and they are there

today, but that little episodic challenge to my sanity taught me something. I now know what it means that *God is One* and why that is important.

That God is One (and not divided) is the very foundation for all rationality and sanity. That God is undivided and consistent within assures you that two plus two will always be four – and that you can anchor your sanity on that. That God is undivided assures you that if you saw package twistlers in a store for twelve years, they were there ... and you are not insane. That God is One is the basis for our sanity. It undergirds the *Principle of Non-contradiction*: Something is or it is not, it cannot be both; and two plus two can never be five – and that allows us to live rational, sane lives. Because God is undivided, we can trust our sanity.

The truth of this was never jeopardized by the great epistemological debates in history. Doubts about rationality and sanity do not come from Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Locke, Hume, Wittgenstein, or Jacques Derrida; these philosophers merely argued about the structure of rationality, never about its existence. What jeopardizes our sanity (and is, no doubt, the greatest moral threat in our world today) is lying, the denial of facts, the changing of facts, and the creation of fake facts. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is as dangerous and pernicious as lying, dishonesty. It is no accident that Christianity names Satan the *Prince of Lies* and teaches that lying is at the root of the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. When facts are no longer facts, then our very sanity is under siege because lying corrupts the basis for rationality.

God is One! That means that there is no internal contradiction within God and that assures us that there is no internal contradiction possible within the structure of reality and within a sane mind. What has happened, has forever happened, and cannot be denied. Two plus two will forever be four and because of that we can remain sane and trust reality enough to live coherent lives.

The single most dangerous thing in the whole world is lying, dishonesty, denying facts. To deny a fact is not only to play fast and loose with your own sanity and the very foundations of rationality; it is also to play fast and loose with God whose consistency undergirds all sanity and all meaning. God is one, undivided, consistent.

Our ecclesial communities as field hospitals can be the Galilee of today.

FEVER

MAY 4, 2020

John Updike, after recovering from a serious illness, wrote a poem he called, *Fever*. It ends this way: *But it is a truth long known that some secrets are hidden from health.*

Deep down we already know this, but as a personal truth this is not something we appropriate in a classroom, from parents or mentors, or even from religious teaching. These just tell us that this is true, but knowing it does not itself impart wisdom. Wisdom is acquired, as Updike says, through a personal experience of serious illness, serious loss, or serious humiliation.

The late James Hillman, writing as an agnostic, came to the same conclusion. I remember hearing him at a large conference where, at point in his talk, he challenged his audience with words to this effect: Think back, honestly and with courage, and ask yourself: What are the experiences in your life that have made you deep, that have given you character? In almost every case, you will have to admit that it was some humiliation or abuse you had to endure, some experience of powerlessness, helplessness, frustration, illness, or exclusion. It is not the things that brought glory or adulation into your life that gave you depth and character, the time you were the valedictorian for your class or the time you were the star athlete. These did not bring you depth. Rather the experience of powerlessness, inferiority, is what made you wise.

I recall too as a graduate student sitting in on a series of lectures by the renowned Polish psychiatrist, Kasmir Dabrowski who had written a number of books around a concept he termed, “positive disintegration”. His essential thesis was that it is only by falling apart that we ever grow to higher levels of maturity and wisdom. Once, during a lecture, he was asked: “Why do we grow through the disintegrating experiences such as falling ill, falling apart, or being humiliated? Would it not be more logical to grow through the positive experiences of being loved, being affirmed, being successful, being healthy, and being admired? Shouldn’t that fire gratitude inside us and, acting out of that gratitude, we should become more generous and wise?”

He gave this response: Ideally, maturity and wisdom should grow out of experiences of strength and success; and maybe in some instances they do.

However, as a psychiatrist, all I can say is that in forty years of clinical practice I have never seen it. I have only seen people transformed to higher levels of maturity through the experience of breaking down.

Jesus, it would seem, agrees. Take, for example, the incident in the Gospels where James and John come and ask whether they might be given the seats at his right hand and left hand when he comes into his glory. It is significant that he takes their question seriously. He does not (in this instance) chide them for seeking their own glory; what he does instead is redefine glory and the route to it. He asks them: “Can you drink the cup?” They, naïve as to what is being asked of them, responded: “Yes, we can!” Jesus then tells them something to which they are even more naïve. He assures them that they will drink the cup, since eventually everyone will, but tells them that they still might not receive the glory because being seated in glory is still contingent upon something else.

What? What is “the cup”? How is drinking it the route to glory? And why might we not receive the glory even if we do drink the cup?

The cup, as is revealed later, is the cup of suffering and humiliation, the one Jesus has to drink during his passion and dying, the cup he asks his Father to spare him from when in Gethsemane he prays in agony: “Let this cup pass from me!”

In essence, what Jesus is telling James and John is this: *There is no route to Easter Sunday except through Good Friday.* There is no route to depth and wisdom except through suffering and humiliation. The connection is intrinsic, like the pain and groans of a woman are necessary to her when giving birth to a child. Further still, Jesus is also saying that deep suffering will not automatically bring wisdom. Why not? Because, while there is an intrinsic connection between deep suffering and greater depth in our lives, the catch is that bitter suffering can make us deep in bitterness, anger, envy, and hatred just as easily as it can make us deep in compassion, forgiveness, empathy, and wisdom. We can have the pain, and not get the wisdom.

Fever! The primary symptom of being infected with the coronavirus, *Covid-19*, is a high fever. Fever has now beset our world. The hope is that, after it so dangerously raises both our bodily and psychic temperatures, it will also reveal to us some of the secrets that are hidden from health. What are they? We don't know yet. They will only be revealed inside the fever.

LEAVING PEACE BEHIND AS OUR FAREWELL GIFT

MAY 11, 2020

There is such a thing as a good death, a clean one, a death that, however sad, leaves behind a sense of peace. I have been witness to it many times. Sometimes this is recognized explicitly when someone dies, sometimes unconsciously. It is known by its fruit.

I remember sitting with a man dying of cancer in his mid-fifties, leaving behind a young family, who said to me: “I don’t believe I have an enemy in the world, at least I don’t know if I do. I’ve no unfinished business.” I heard something similar from a young woman also dying of cancer and also leaving behind a young family. Her words: “I thought that I’d cried all the tears I had, but then yesterday when I saw my youngest daughter I found out that I had a lot more tears still to cry. But I’m at peace. It’s hard, but I’ve nothing left that I haven’t given.” And I’ve been at deathbeds other times when none of this was articulated in words, but all of it was clearly spoken in that loving awkwardness and silence you often witness around deathbeds. There is a way of dying that leaves peace behind.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus gives a long farewell speech at the Last Supper on the night before he dies. His disciples, understandably, are shaken, afraid, and not prepared to accept the brute reality of his impending death. He tries to calm them, reassure them, give them things to cling to, and he ends with these words: *I am going away, but I will leave you a final gift, the gift of my peace.*

I suspect that almost everyone reading this will have had an experience of grieving the death of a loved one, a parent, spouse, child, or friend, and finding, at least after a time, beneath the grief a warm sense of peace whenever the memory of the loved one surfaces or is evoked. I lost both of my parents when I was in my early twenties and, sad as were their farewells, every memory of them now evokes a warmth. Their farewell gift was the gift of peace.

In trying to understanding this, it is important to distinguish between *being wanted* and *being needed*. When I lost my parents at a young age, I still desperately wanted them (and believed that I still needed them), but I came to realize in the peace that eventually settled upon our family after their deaths that our pain was in still wanting them and not in any longer needing them.

In their living and their dying they had already given us what we needed. There was nothing else we needed from them. Now we just missed them and, irrespective of the sadness of their departure, our relationship was complete. We were at peace.

The challenge for all of us now, of course, is on the other side of this equation, namely, the challenge to live in such a way that peace will be our final farewell gift to our families, our loved ones, our faith community, and our world. How do we do that? How do we leave the gift of peace to those we leave behind?

Peace, as we know, is a whole lot more than the simple absence of war and strife. Peace is constituted by two things: harmony and completeness. To be at peace something has to have an inner consistency so that all of its movements are in harmony with each other and it must also have a completeness so that it is not still aching for something it is missing. Peace is the opposite of internal discord or of longing for something we lack. When we are not at peace it is because we are experiencing chaos or sensing some unfinished business inside us.

Positively then, what constitutes peace? When Jesus promises peace as his farewell gift, he identifies it with the Holy Spirit; and, as we know, that is the spirit of *charity, joy, peace, patience, goodness, longsuffering, fidelity, mildness, and chastity.*

How do we leave these behind when we leave? Well, death is no different than life. When some people leave anything, a job, a marriage, a family, or a community, they leave chaos behind, a legacy of disharmony, unfinished business, anger, bitterness, jealousy, and division. Their memory is felt always as a cold pain. They are not missed, even as their memory haunts. Some people on the other hand leave behind a legacy of harmony and completeness, a spirit of understanding, compassion, affirmation, and unity. These people are missed but the ache is a warm one, a nurturing one, one of happy memory.

Going away in death has exactly the same dynamic. By the way we live and die we will leave behind either a spirit that perennially haunts the peace of our loved ones, or we will leave behind a spirit that brings a warmth every time our memory is evoked.

FACING OUR TOUGH HOURS

MAY 18, 2020

Discernment isn't an easy thing. Take this dilemma: When we find ourselves in a situation that's causing us deep interior anguish, do we walk away, assuming that the presence of such pain is an indication that this isn't the right place for us, that something's terminally wrong here? Or, like Jesus, do we accept to stay, saying to ourselves, our loved ones, and our God: "What shall I say, save me from this hour?"

At the very moment that Jesus was facing a humiliating death by crucifixion, the Gospel of John hints that he was offered an opportunity to escape. A delegation of Greeks, through the apostle Philip, offer Jesus an invitation to leave with them, to go to a group that would receive him and his message. So Jesus has a choice: Endure anguish, humiliation, and death inside his own community or abandon that community for one that will accept him. What does he do? He asks himself this question: "What shall I say, save me from this hour?"

Although this is phrased as a question, it's an answer. He is choosing to stay, to face the anguish, humiliation, and pain because he sees it as the precise fidelity he is called to within the very dynamic of the love he is preaching. He came to earth to incarnate and teach what real love is and now, when the cost of that is humiliation and interior anguish, he knows and accepts that this is what's now being asked of him. The pain is not telling him that he's doing something wrong, is at the wrong place, or that this community is not worth this suffering. To the contrary: The pain is understood to be calling him to a deeper fidelity at the very heart of his mission and vocation. Until this moment, only words were asked of him, now he is being asked to back them up in reality; he needs to swallow hard to do it.

What shall I say, save me from this hour? Do we have the wisdom and the generosity to say those words when, inside our own commitments, we are challenged to endure searing interior anguish? When Jesus asks himself this question, what he is facing is a near-perfect mirror for situations we will all find ourselves in sometimes. In most every commitment we make, if we are faithful, an hour will come when we are suffering interior anguish (and often times exterior misunderstanding as well) and are faced with a tough decision: Is this pain and misunderstanding (and even my own immaturity as I

stand inside it) an indication that I'm in the wrong place, should leave, and find someone or some other community that wants me? Or, inside this interior anguish, exterior misunderstanding, and personal immaturity, am I called to say: *What shall I say, save me from this hour? This is what I'm called to! I was born for this!*

I think the question is critical because often anguishing pain can shake our commitments and tempt us to walk away from them. Marriages, consecrated religious vocations, commitments to work for justice, commitments to our church communities, and commitments to family and friends, can be abandoned on the belief that nobody is called to live inside such anguish, desolation, and misunderstanding. Indeed, today the presence of pain, desolation, and misunderstanding is generally taken as a sign to abandon a commitment and find someone else or some other group that will affirm us rather than as an indication that now, just now, in this hour, inside this particular pain and misunderstanding, we have a chance to bring a life-giving grace into this commitment.

I have seen people leave marriages, leave family, leave priesthood, leave religious life, leave their church community, leave long-cherished friendships, and leave commitments to work for justice and peace because, at a point, they experienced a lot of pain and misunderstanding. And, in many of those cases, I also saw that it was in fact a good thing. The situation they were in was not life-giving for them or for others. They needed to be saved from that "hour". In some cases though the opposite was true. They were in excruciating pain, but that pain was an invitation to a deeper, more life-giving place inside their commitment. They left, just when they should have stayed.

Granted, discernment is difficult. It's not always for lack of generosity that people walk away from a commitment. Some of the most generous and unselfish people I know have left a marriage or the priesthood or religious life or their churches. But I write this because, today, so much trusted psychological and spiritual literature does not sufficiently highlight the challenge to, like Jesus, stand inside excruciating pain and humiliating misunderstanding and instead of walking away to someone or some group that offers us the acceptance and understanding we crave, we instead accept that it is more life-giving to say: *What shall I say, save me from this hour?*

FAITHFUL FRIENDSHIP

MAY 25, 2020

I grew up in a close family and one of the hardest things I ever did was to leave home and family at the age of seventeen to enter the novitiate of the *Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate*. That novitiate year wasn't easy. I missed my family intensely and stayed in touch with them insofar as the rules and communication of the day allowed. I wrote a letter home every week and my mother wrote back to me faithfully each week. I still have and cherish those letters. I had left home but stayed in touch, a faithful family member.

But my life became a lot more complex and socially demanding after that. I moved to a seminary and began to live in a community with sixty others, with people entering and leaving constantly throughout my seven years there so that by the time I'd finished my seminary training I had lived in close community with over one hundred different men. That brought its own challenges. People you'd grown close to would leave the community to be replaced by others so that each year there was a new community and new friendships.

In the years following seminary, that pattern began to grow exponentially. Graduate studies took me to other countries and brought a whole series of new persons into my life, many of whom became close friends. In more than forty years of teaching I have met with several thousand students and made many friends among them. Writing and public lectures have brought thousands of people into my life. Though most of them passed through my life without meaningful connection, some became lifelong friends.

I share this not because I think it's unique, but rather because it's typical. Today that's really everyone's story. More and more friends pass through our lives so that at a point the question necessarily arises: how does one remain faithful to one's family, to old friends, former neighbors, former classmates, former students, former colleagues, and to old acquaintances? What does fidelity to them ask for? Occasional visits? Occasional emails, texts, calls? Remembering birthdays and anniversaries? Class reunions? Attending weddings and funerals?

Obviously doing these would be good, though that would also constitute a full-time occupation. Something else must be being asked of us here, namely, a fidelity that's not contingent on emails, texts, calls, and occasional visits.

But what can lie deeper than tangible human contact? What can be more real than that? The answer is fidelity, fidelity as the gift of a shared moral soul, fidelity as the gift of trust, and fidelity as remaining true to who you were when you were in tangible human community and contact with those people who are no longer part of your daily life. That's what it means to be faithful.

It is interesting how the Christian scriptures define community and fidelity. In the *Acts of the Apostles* we read that before Pentecost those in the first Christian community were all "huddled in one room". And here, though physically together, ironically they were not in real community with each other, not really a family, and not really faithful to each other. Then after receiving the Holy Spirit, they literally break out of that one room and scatter all over the earth so that many of them never see each other again and now, geographically at a distance from each other, ironically they become real family, become a genuine community, and live in fidelity to each other.

At the end of the day, fidelity is not about how often you physically connect with someone but about living within a shared spirit. Betrayal is not a question of separation by distance, of forgetting an anniversary or a birthday, or of not being able to stay in touch with someone you cherish. Betrayal is moving away from the truth and virtue you once shared with that person you cherish. *Betrayal is a change of soul.* We are unfaithful to family and friends when we become a different person morally so as to no longer share a common spirit with them.

You can be living in the same house with someone, share daily bread and conversation with him or her, and not be a faithful family member or friend; just as you can be a faithful friend or family member and not see that friend or family member for forty years. Being faithful in remembering birthdays is wonderful, but fidelity is more about remembering who you were when that birth was so special to you. Fidelity is about maintaining moral affinity.

To the best of my abilities, I try to stay in contact with the family, old friends, former neighbors, former classmates, former students, former colleagues, and old acquaintances. Mostly it's a bit beyond me. So I put my trust in moral fidelity. I try as best I can to commit myself to keeping the same soul I had when I left home as a young boy and which characterized and defined me when I met all those wonderful people along the way.

SOME ADVICE ON PRAYER FROM AN OLD MASTER

JUNE 1, 2020

At the risk of being simplistic, I want to say something about prayer in a very simple way.

While doing doctoral studies, I had a professor, an elderly Augustine priest, who in his demeanor, speech, and attitude, radiated wisdom and maturity. Everything about him bespoke integrity. You immediately trusted him, the wise old grandfather of storybooks.

One day in class he spoke of his own prayer life. As with everything else he shared, there were no filters, only honesty and humility. I don't recall his exact words, but I remember well the essence of what he said and it has stayed with me for the nearly forty years since I had the privilege of being in his class.

Here's what he shared: prayer isn't easy because we're always tired, distracted, busy, bored, and caught up in so many things that it's hard to find the time and energy to center ourselves on God for some moments. So, this is what I do: no matter what my day is like, no matter what's on my mind, no matter what my distractions and temptations are, I am faithful to this: *Once a day I pray the Our Father as best I can from where I am at that moment.* Inside of everything that's going on inside me and around me that day, I pray the *Our Father*, asking God to hear me from inside of all the distractions and temptations that are besetting me. It's the best I can do. Maybe it's a bare minimum and I should do more and should try to concentrate harder, but at least I do that. And sometimes it's all I can do, but I do it every day, as best I can. It's the prayer Jesus told us to pray.

His words might sound simplistic and minimalistic. Indeed the church challenges us to make the Eucharist the center of our prayer lives and to make a daily habit of meditation and private prayer. As well, many classical spiritual writers tell us that we should set aside an hour every day for private prayer, and many contemporary spiritual writers challenge us to daily practice centering prayer or some other form of contemplative prayer. Where does that leave our old Augustinian theologian and his counsel that we pray one sincere *Our Father* each day – as best we can?

Well, none of this goes against what he so humbly shared. He would be the first to agree that the Eucharist should be the center of our prayer lives, and he would agree as well with both the classical spiritual writers who advise an hour of private prayer a day, and the contemporary authors who challenge us to do some form of contemplative prayer daily, or at least habitually. But he would say this: at one of those times in the day (ideally at the Eucharist or while praying the Office of the Church but at least sometime during your day) when you're saying the *Our Father*, pray it with as much sincerity and focus as you can muster at the moment ("as best you can") and know that, no matter your distractions at the moment, it's what God is asking from you. And it's enough.

His advice has stayed with me through the years and though I say a number of *Our Fathers* every day, I try, at least in one of them, to pray the *Our Father* as best I can, fully conscious of how badly I am doing it. What a challenge and what a consolation!

The challenge is to pray an *Our Father* each day, as best we can. As we know, that prayer is deeply communitarian. Every petition in it is plural – "our", "we", "us" – there's no "I" in the *Our Father*. Moreover, all of us are priests from our baptism and inherent in the covenant we made then, we are asked daily to pray for others, for the world. For those who cannot participate in the Eucharist daily and for those who do not pray the Office of the Church, praying the *Our Father* is your Eucharistic prayer, your priestly prayer for others.

And this is the consolation: none of us is divine. We're all incurably human which means that many times, perhaps most times, when we're trying to pray we'll find ourselves beset with everything from tiredness, to boredom, to impatience, to planning tomorrow's agenda, to sorting through the hurts of the day, to stewing about who we're angry at, to dealing with erotic fantasies. Our prayer seldom issues forth from a pure heart but normally from a very earthy one. But, and this is the point, its very earthiness is also its real honesty. Our restless, distracted heart is also our existential heart and is the existential heart of the world. When we pray from there, we are (as the classical definition of prayer would have it) *lifting mind and heart to God*.

Try, each day, to pray one sincere *Our Father*! As best you can!

A MAGNIFICENT DEFEAT

JUNE 8, 2020

Where's the fairness in life? Why are some people so undeservedly blessed in this world while others are seemingly cursed? Why are craftiness, self-serving ambition, taking advantage of others, and dishonesty so frequently rewarded? This has no quick answer.

In his book *The Magnificent Defeat*, the renowned novelist and preacher, Frederick Buechner, takes up this question by focusing on the biblical character, Jacob. He, as we know, twice cheated his brother, Esau. Catching him hungry and vulnerable, Jacob buys his birthright from him for a meal. More seriously, he poses as Esau, tricks their father, and steals the blessing and the inheritance that was Esau's by right. Everything about this seems wrong and calls for retribution, yet Jacob's life seemingly teaches the opposite. In contrast to his cheated brother, Jacob lives a very richly blessed life and is favored by God and by others. What's the lesson? Are God and life really on the side of those who do this type of thing?

Buechner builds his answer by moving from the pragmatic and the short-range to the spiritual and the long-range.

First, from a pragmatic point of view, the story of Jacob teaches its own lesson, namely, that as a matter of fact in this life people like Jacob, who are intelligent, crafty, and ambitious often do end up being rewarded in ways that people like Esau, who are slower on the draw, don't. While clearly this isn't the moral teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, other parts of scripture, including some teachings of Jesus, do challenge us to be intelligent, to work hard, and indeed at times to be crafty. God doesn't necessarily help those who help themselves, but God and life seem to reward those who use their talents. But there's a fine moral line here and Buechner draws it out brilliantly.

He asks: when someone who does what Jacob did and it brings him riches in this life, where is the moral consequence? The answer comes to Jacob years later. He is alone one night when a stranger leaps upon him and the two of them end up wrestling silently with each other throughout the entire night. Just as dawn is breaking and it seems Jacob might win, everything is suddenly

reversed. With an infinitely superior strength that he seems to have deliberately held back until now, the stranger touches Jacob's thigh and renders him helpless. Something deeply transformative happens to Jacob in that experience of helplessness. Now that he knows that he is finally defeated, he no longer wants to be free of the stranger's grasp; instead he clings fiercely to his former foe like a drowning man. Why?

Here's Buechner's explanation: "The darkness had faded just enough so that for the first time he can dimly see his opponent's face. And what he sees is something more terrible than the face of death — the face of love. It is vast and strong, half-ruined with suffering and fierce with joy, the face a man flees down all the darkness of his days until at last he cries out, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me!' *Not a blessing that he can have now by the strength of his cunning or the force of his will, but a blessing that he can have only as a gift.*"

There's an entire spirituality here. The blessing for which we are forever wrestling can only come to us as gift, not as something we can snatch through our own talent, cunning, and strength. By his wit and cunning, Jacob became a rich, admired man in this world. But in struggling for all those riches he was wrestling with a force he unconsciously perceived as someone or something to be overcome. Eventually, after many years of struggle, he had an awakening. Light dawned, through a crippling defeat. And in the light of that defeat he finally saw that what he had been struggling with for all that time was not someone or something to be overcome, but the very love he was wrestling for in all his efforts to achieve and get ahead.

For many of us, this will also be the real awakening in our lives, waking up to the fact that in our ambition and in all the schemes we concoct to get ahead, we are not wrestling with a someone or something to be overcome by our strength and wit; we are wrestling with community, love, and with God. And it will undoubtedly take the defeat of our own strength (and a permanent limp) before we realize what we are fighting against. Then we will give up trying to win and instead cling like a drowning man to this face of love, begging for its blessing, *a blessing that we can have only as a gift.*

Believing that our blessing lies in winning, we strive to wrestle our lives away from others until one day, if we are lucky enough to be defeated, we begin to beg others to hang on to us.

DIGNITY

JUNE 15, 2020

The movie *Million Dollar Baby* tells the story of a young woman who becomes a professional boxer. Young, strong, and physically very attractive she captures your heart as, against all odds, she eventually rises to the top in her sport. But then the story turns tragic; she is unfairly hit by an opponent and ends up paralyzed, her body broken and with it her health and attractiveness. And her condition is permanent, there is no cure. She chooses to end her life through euthanasia.

I had gone to this movie with a young couple, both solidly committed to their church and their faith. Yet both of them were in strong sympathy with how this young woman chose to die. Perhaps it was more their emotions than themselves speaking when they justified her manner of death: “But she was so young and beautiful! It wouldn’t have been right for her to spend the rest of her life in that terrible state!” In their young eyes, her debilitated state stripped her of her essential dignity.

What is dignity? When and how is it lost?

Dignity is a promiscuous term, constantly shedding different partners. It is also a sneaky term. Sometimes it no longer means what it used to mean and nowhere is this truer than when the term is applied today to “death with dignity”? What defines death with dignity?

Shortly after Brittany Maynard died by euthanasia in a case that caught wide public attention, Jessica Keating wrote an article in *America* magazine assessing that death from various points of view. At one point she takes up the question of *dignity* and writes: “The use of the term *dignity* to describe this death is deeply problematic, since it masks the reality of fear and equates dignity exclusively with radical autonomy, choice, and cognitive capability. The result is a not-so-subtle implication that the person who chooses diminishment and suffering dies a less dignified death.” (*America*, March 16, 2015)

In much of our talk about death with dignity today there is in fact the not-so-subtle implication that the person who chooses diminishment and suffering over euthanasia dies a less dignified death. That is hard to deny, given the dominant ethos of a culture wherein physical diminishment and suffering are

seen as a very assault on our dignity. This has not always been the case; indeed in former times sometimes the opposite was true, an aged, physically diminished body was seen as something dignified and beautiful. Why is our view of dignity different today?

They are different because of how we conceive of dignity and beauty. For us, these have to do mainly with physical health, physical vitality, and the physical attractiveness of the human body. For us, aesthetics is a house with one room – physical attractiveness. Everything else assaults our dignity. That makes it difficult for us to see any process that diminishes and humbles the human body by robbing it of its vitality and physical attractiveness as being a dignified one. And yet that is normally how the death process works. If you have ever journeyed with someone dying from a terminal disease and been at their bedside when he or she died, you know that physically this is not pretty. Disease can do horrible things to the body. But does this destroy dignity? Does it make one less beautiful?

Well, that depends on one's spirituality and on what one considers as dignified and beautiful. Consider Jesus' death. By today's concept of dignity, his was not a very dignified death. We have always sanitized the crucifixion to shield ourselves from its raw "indignity", but crucifixion was humiliating. When the Romans chose crucifixion as a method of capital punishment they had more in mind than just ending someone's life. Besides wanting to make a person suffer optimally and they also wanted to totally and publicly humiliate him by humiliating his body. Hence the person was stripped naked, with his genitals exposed, and when he went into spasms in the moments before death, his bowels would loosen. What can be more humiliating? What can be less beautiful?

Yet, who would say that Jesus did not die with dignity? The opposite. We are still contemplating the beauty of his death and the dignity displayed in it. But that is within a different aesthetics, one that our culture no longer understands. For us, dignity and beauty are inextricably tied to physical health, physical attractiveness, and lack of humiliating diminishments within our physical body. Within that perspective there is, seemingly, no dignity to Jesus' death.

I am the first to admit that the issue of death with dignity is an extremely complex one that raises legal, medical, psychological, familial, societal, ethical, and spiritual questions for which there are no simple answers. But inside

all of these questions there still lies an aesthetic one: what, ultimately, makes for beauty? How, ultimately, do we see dignity? Does a person with a still attractive, undiminished, physical body who voluntarily chooses to die before that beauty is despoiled by disease die more dignified than did Jesus?

OUR DEEP FAILURE IN CHARITY

JUNE 22, 2020

Saint Eugene de Mazenod, the founder of the *Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate*, the Religious Congregation to which I belong, left us with these last words as he lay dying: “Among yourselves, *charity, charity, charity*”. I don’t always live that, though I wish I could, especially today.

We are in a bitter time. Everywhere there is anger, condemnation of others, and bitter disagreement; so much so that today we are simply unable to have a reasonable discussion on any sensitive political, moral, or doctrinal issue. We demonize each other to the point where any attempt to actually reason with each other (let alone to reach agreement or compromise) mostly just deepens the hostility. If you doubt this, simply watch the newscasts any evening, read any newspaper, or follow the discussion on most moral and religious questions.

The first thing that is evident is the naked hatred inside our energy and how we tend to justify it on moral and religious grounds. This is our protest: *we’re fighting for truth, decency, justice, God, family, church, right dogma, right practice, for Christ himself, so our anger and hatred are justified*. Anger is justified, but hatred is an infallible sign that we are acting in a manner contrary to truth, decency, justice, God, family, church, right dogma, right practice, and Christ. It would be hard to argue that this kind of energy issues forth from God’s spirit and does not source itself elsewhere.

Looking at Jesus we see that all his energies were directed towards unity. Jesus never preached hatred, as is clear from the Sermon on the Mount, as is illustrated in his great priestly prayer for unity in John’s Gospel, and as is evident in his frequent warnings to us to be patient with each other, to not judge each other and to forgive each other.

But one might object: what about Jesus' own (seemingly) bitter judgments? What about him speaking harshly of others? What about him losing his temper and using whips to drive the money-changers out of the temple? Indeed, what about his statement: *I have come to bring fire to this earth?*

These statements are perennially misinterpreted and used falsely to rationalize our lack of genuine Christian love. When Jesus says that he has come to bring fire to this earth and wishes it were already blazing, the fire he is referring to is not the fire of division but the fire of love. Jesus made a vow of love, not of alienation. His message provoked hateful opposition, but he did not self-define as a cultural or ecclesial warrior. He preached and incarnated only love, and that sometimes sparked its antithesis. (It still does.) He sometimes triggered hatred in people, but he never hated in return. Instead, he wept in empathy, understanding that sometimes the message of love and inclusivity triggers hatred inside of those who for whatever reason at that time cannot fully bear the word love. As well, the incident of him driving the money-changers out of the temple, forever falsely cited to justify our anger and judgment of others, has a very different emphasis and meaning. His action as he cleanses the temple of the people who were (legitimately) exchanging Jewish currency for foreign money in order let foreigners buy what they needed to offer sacrifice, has to do with him clearing away an obstacle in the way of universal access to God, not with anger at some particular people.

We frequently ignore the Gospel. Factionalism, tribalism, racism, economic self-interest, historical difference, historical privilege, and fear perennially cause bitter polarization and trigger a hatred that eats away at the very fabric of community; and that hatred perennially justifies itself by appealing to some high moral or religious ground. But the Gospel never allows for that. It never lets us bracket charity and it refuses us permission to justify our bitterness on moral and religious grounds. It calls us to a love, an empathy and a forgiveness that reach across every divide so as to wish good and do good precisely to those who hate us. And it categorically forbids rationalizing hatred in its name or in the name of truth, justice, or right dogma.

The late Michael J. Buckley, looking at the bitter polarization in our churches, suggests that nothing justifies our current bitterness: "The sad fact stands, however, that it is frequently no great trick to get religious men and women to turn on one another in some terrible form of condemnation. Wars, even personal wars, are terrible realities, and the most horrible of these are often

self-righteously religious. For deceived or split off under the guise of good, under the rubrics of orthodoxy or liberality, of community or of personal freedom, even of holiness itself, factions of men and women can slowly disintegrate into pettiness or cynicism or hostility or bitterness. In this way the Christian church becomes divided.”

We need to be careful inside our cultural and religious wars. There is never an excuse for lack of fundamental charity.

PRAYING WHEN WE DON'T KNOW HOW

JUNE 29, 2020

He taught us how to pray while not knowing how to pray. That's a comment sometimes made about Henri Nouwen.

It seems almost contradictory to say that. How can someone teach us to pray when he himself doesn't know how? Well, two complexities conspired together here. Henri Nouwen was a unique mixture of weakness, honesty, complexity, and faith. That also describes prayer, this side of eternity. Nouwen simply shared, humbly and honestly, his own struggles with prayer and in seeing his struggles, the rest of us learned a lot about how prayer is precisely this strange mixture of weakness, honesty, complexity, and faith.

Prayer, as we know, has classically been defined as “the lifting of mind and heart to God”, and given that our minds and hearts are pathologically complex, so too will be our prayer. It will give voice not just to our faith but also to our doubt. Moreover, in the Epistle to the Romans, St. Paul tells us that when we do not know how to pray, God's Spirit, in groans too deep for words, prays through us. I suspect that we don't always recognize all the forms that takes, how God sometimes prays through our groans and our weaknesses.

The renowned preacher Frederick Buechner, speaks of something he calls “crippled prayers that are hidden inside our minor blasphemes” and are uttered through clenched teeth: “God help us!” “Jesus Christ!” “For God's sake!” These are prayers? Why not? If prayer is lifting mind and heart to God, isn't this what's in our mind and heart at that moment? Isn't there a brutal

honesty in this? Jacques Loew, one of the founders of the Worker-Priest movement in France, shares how, while working in a factory, he would sometimes be working with a group men loading heavy bags onto a truck. Occasionally one of the men would accidentally drop one of the bags which would split open leaving a mess and a mini-blaspheme would spring forth from the man's lips. Loew, partly seriously and partly in jest, points out that while the man was not exactly saying the Lord's Prayer, he was invoking the name of God in real honesty.

So, is this in fact a genuine modality of prayer or is this taking the Lord's name in vain? Is this something we should be confessing as a sin rather than claiming as a prayer?

The commandment to not take the name of God in vain has little to do with those mini- blasphememes that slip out between clenched teeth when we drop a bag of groceries, jam a finger painfully, or get caught in a frustrating traffic jam. What we utter then may well be aesthetically offensive, in bad taste, and disrespectful enough of others so that some sin lies within it, but that's not taking the name of God in vain. Indeed, there's nothing false about it at all. In some ways it's the opposite of what the commandment has in mind.

We tend to think of prayer far too piously. It is rarely unadulterated altruistic praise issuing forth from a focused attention that's grounded in gratitude and in an awareness of God. Most of the time our prayer is a very adulterated reality – and all the more honest and powerful because of that.

For instance, one of our great struggles with prayer is that it's not easy to trust that prayer makes a difference. We watch the evening newscasts, see the entrenched polarization, bitterness, hatred, self-interest, and hardness of heart that are seemingly everywhere, and we lose heart. How do we find the heart to pray in the face of this? What, inside of our prayer, is going to change any of this?

While it is normal to feel this way, we need this important reminder: *prayer is most important and most powerful precisely when we feel it is most hopeless – and we are most helpless.*

Why is this true? It's true because it's only when we are finally empty of ourselves, empty of our own plans and our own strength that we're in fact ready to let God's vision and strength flow into the world through us. Prior to feeling this helplessness and hopelessness, we are still identifying God's power

too much with the power of health, politics, and economics that we see in our world; and are identifying hope with the optimism we feel when the news looks a little better on a given night. If the news looks good, we have hope; if not, why pray? But we need to pray because we trust in God's strength and promise, not because the newscasts on a given night offer a bit more promise.

Indeed, the less promise our newscasts offer and the more they make us aware of our personal helplessness, the more urgent and honest is our prayer. We need to pray precisely because we are helpless and precisely because it does seem hopeless. Inside of that we can pray with honesty, perhaps even through clenched teeth.

DEEPER THINGS UNDER THE SURFACE

JULY 6, 2020

Imagine this. You are the dutiful daughter or son and your mother is widowed and living in an assisted living facility. You happen to be living close by while your sister is living across the country, thousands of miles away. So the weight falls on you to be the one to help take care of your mother. You dutifully visit her each day. Every afternoon, on route home from work, you stop and spend an hour with her as she has her early dinner. And you do this faithfully, five times a week, year after year.

As you spend this hour each day with your mother, year after year, how many times during the course of a year will you have a truly stimulating and deep conversation with your mother? Once? Twice? Never? What are you talking about each day? Trivial things: the weather, your favorite sports team, what your kids are doing, the latest show on television, her aches and pains, and the mundane details of your own life. Occasionally you might even doze off for a while as she eats her early dinner. In a good year, perhaps once or twice, the conversation will take on some depth and the two of you will share more deeply about something of importance; but, save for that rare occasion, you will simply be filling in the time each day with superficial conversation.

But, and this is the question, are those daily visits with your mother in fact superficial, merely functionary because your conversations aren't deep? Are

you simply going through the motions of intimate relationship because of duty? Is anything deep happening?

Well, compare this with your sister who is (conveniently) living across the country and comes home once a year to visit your mother. When she visits, both she and your mother are wonderfully animated, they embrace enthusiastically, shed some tears upon seeing each other, and seemingly talk about things beyond the weather, their favorite sports teams, and their own tiredness. And you could kill them both! It seems that in this once-a-year meeting they have something that you, who visit daily, do not have. But is this true? Is what is happening between your sister and your mother in fact deeper than what is occurring each day when you visit your mother?

Absolutely not. What they have is, no doubt, more emotional and more affective, but it is, at the end of day, not particularly deep. When your mother dies, you will know your mother better than anyone else knows her and you will be much closer to her than your sister. Why? Because through all those days when you visited her and seemed to talk about nothing beyond the weather, some deeper things were happening under the surface. When your sister visited your mother things were happening on the surface (though emotionally and affectively the surface can look wonderfully more intriguing than what lies beneath it.) That is why honeymoons look better than marriage.

What your sister had with your mother is what novices experience in prayer and what couples experience on a honeymoon. What you had with your mother is what people experience in prayer and relationships when they are faithful over a long period of time. At a certain level of intimacy in all our relationships, including our relationship with God in prayer, the emotions and the affectivity (wonderful as they are) will become less and less important and simple presence, just being together, will become paramount. Previous to that, the important things were happening on the surface and emotions and affectivity were important; now deep bonding is happening beneath the surface and emotions and affectivity recede in importance. At a certain depth of relationship just being present to each other is what is important.

Too often, both popular psychology and popular spirituality do not really grasp this and consequently confuse the novice for the proficient, the honeymoon for the wedding, and the surface for the depth. In all of our relationships, we cannot make promises as to how we will always feel, but we can make promises to always be faithful, to show up, to be there, even if we are

only talking about the weather, our favorite sports team, the latest television program, or our own tiredness. And it is okay occasionally to fall asleep while there because as Therese of Lisieux once said: a little child is equally pleasing to its parents, awake or asleep, probably more asleep! That also holds true for prayer. God does not mind us occasionally napping while at prayer because we are there and that is enough. The great Spanish doctor of the soul John of the Cross tells us that as we travel deeper into any relationship, be it with God in prayer, with each other in intimacy, or with the community at large in service, eventually the surface will be less emotive and less affective and *the deeper things will begin to happen under the surface.*

SOME SECRETS WORTH KNOWING

JULY 13, 2020

Monks have secrets worth knowing, and these can be invaluable when a coronavirus pandemic is forcing millions of us to live like monks.

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, millions of us have been forced to stay at home, work from home, practice social distancing from everyone except those in our own houses and have minimal social contact with the outside. In a manner of speaking, this has turned many of us into monks, like it or not. What's the secret to thrive there?

Well, I'm not a monk, nor a mental health expert, so what I share here isn't exactly the rule of St. Benedict or a series of professional mental health tips. It's the fruit of what I've learned from monks and from living in the give-and-take of a religious community for fifty years.

Here are *ten counsels* for living when we are, in effect, housebound, that is, living in a situation wherein we don't have a lot of privacy, have to do a lot of living within a very small circle, face long hours wherein we have to struggle to find things that energize us, and wherein we find ourselves for good stretches of time frustrated, bored, impatient, and lethargic. How does one survive and thrive in that situation?

1. *Create a routine.* That's the key. It's what monks do. Create a detailed routine for the hours of your day as you would a financial budget. Make this very practical: list the things you need to do each day and slot them into a

concrete timetable and then stick to that as a discipline, even when it seems rigid and oppressive. Resist the temptation to simply go with the flow of your energy and mood or to lean on entertainment and whatever distractions can be found to get you through your days and nights.

2. *Wash and dress your body each day*, as if you were going out into the world and meeting people. Resist the temptation to cheat on hygiene, dress, and make-up. Don't spend the morning in your pajamas: wash and dress-up. When you don't do this, what are you saying to your family? They aren't worth the effort? And what are you saying to yourself? I'm not worth the effort? Slovenliness invariably becomes lethargy and acedia.

3. *Look beyond yourself and your needs each day* to see others and their hurts and frustrations. You're not in this alone; the others are enduring exactly what you are. Nothing will make your day harder to endure than excessive self-focus and self-pity.

4. *Find a place to be alone for some time every day and offer others that same courtesy*. Don't apologize that you need time away, to be by yourself. That's an imperative for mental health, not a selfish claim. Give others that space. Sometimes you need to be apart, not just for your own sake but for the sake of the others. Monks live an intense community life, but each also has a private cell within which to retreat.

5. *Have a contemplative practice each day that includes prayer*. On the schedule you create for yourself, mark in at least a half hour or an hour each day for some contemplative practice: pray, read scripture, read from a serious book, journal, paint a picture, paint a fence, create an artifact, fix something, garden, write poetry, write a song, begin a memoir, write a long letter to someone you haven't seen for years, whatever; but do some something that's freeing for your soul and have it include some prayer.

6. *Practice "Sabbath" daily*. Sabbath need not be a day; it can be an hour. Give yourself something very particular to look forward to each day, something enjoyable and sensual: a hot bath, a glass of wine, a cigar on the patio, a rerun of a favorite old sitcom, a nap in the shade in a lawn chair, anything – as long as it's done purely for enjoyment. Make this a discipline.

7. *Practice "Sabbath" weekly*. Make sure that only six days of the week are locked into your set routine. Break the routine once a week. Set one day apart for enjoyment, one day when you may eat pancakes for breakfast in your pajamas.

8. *Challenge yourself with something new.* Stretch yourself by trying something new. Learn a new language, take up a new hobby, learn to play an instrument. This is an opportunity you've never had.
9. *Talk through the tensions that arise within your house – though carefully.* Tensions will arise when living in a fishbowl. Monks have community meetings to sort out those tensions. Talk tensions through honestly with each other, but carefully; hurtful remarks sometimes never quite heal.
10. *Take care of your body.* We aren't disembodied spirits. Be attentive to your body. Get enough exercise each day to keep your body energized. Be careful not to use food as a compensation for your enforced monasticism. Monks are careful about their diet – except on feast days.

Monks do have secrets worth knowing!

SACRED PERMISSION TO FEEL HUMAN

JULY 20, 2020

It is normal to feel restless as a child, lonely as a teenager, and frustrated by lack of intimacy as an adult; after all we live with insatiable desires of every kind, none of which will ever find full fulfillment this side of eternity.

Where do these desires come from? Why are they so insatiable? What is their meaning?

As a young boy, the Catholic catechisms I was instructed from and sermons I heard from the pulpit in fact answered those questions, but in a vocabulary far too abstract, theological, and churchy to do much for me existentially. They left me sensing there was an answer, but not one that was of help to me. So I quietly suffered the loneliness and the restlessness. Moreover, I agonized because I felt that it was unholy to feel the way I did. My religious instruction, rich as it was, did not offer any benevolent smile from God on my restlessness and dissatisfaction. Puberty and the conscious stirring of sexuality made things worse. Now not only was I restless and dissatisfied, but the raw feelings and fantasies that were besetting me were considered positively sinful.

That was my state of mind when I entered religious life and the seminary immediately after high school. Of course, the restlessness continued, but my

philosophical and theological studies gave me an understanding of what was so relentlessly stirring inside me and gave me sacred permission to be okay with that.

It started in my novitiate year with a talk one day from a visiting priest. We were novices, most of us in our late teens, and despite our commitment to religious life we were understandably restless, lonely, and fraught with sexual tension. Our visitor began his conference with a question: “Are you guys a little restless? Feeling a bit cooped up here?” We nodded. He went on: “Well you should be! You must be jumping out of your skins! All that young energy, boiling inside you! You must be going crazy! But it’s okay, that’s what you should be feeling if you’re healthy! It’s normal, it’s good. You’re young; this gets better!”

Hearing this, freed up something inside me. For the first time, in a language that genuinely spoke to me, someone had given me sacred permission to be at home inside my own skin.

My studies in literature, theology, and spirituality, continued to give me that permission, even as they helped me form a vision as to why these feelings were inside me, how they took their origins and meaning in God, and how they were far from impure and unholy.

Looking back on my studies, a number of salient persons stand out in helping me understand the wildness, insatiability, meaning, and ultimate goodness of human desire. The first was St. Augustine. The now famous quote with which he begins his *Confessions*: *You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you*, has forever served me as the key to tie everything else together. With that as my secret for synthesis, I met this axiom in Thomas Aquinas: *The adequate object of the intellect and will is all being as such*. That might sound abstract but even as a twenty-year-old, I grasped its meaning: In brief, what would you need to experience to finally say ‘enough’, I am satisfied? Aquinas’ answer: *Everything!* Later in my studies I read Karl Rahner. Like Aquinas, he too can seem hopelessly abstract when, for instance, he defines the human person as *Obediential potency living inside a supernatural existential*. Really? Well, essentially what he means by that can be translated into a single counsel he once offered a friend: *In the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable we ultimately learn that here, in this life, there is no finished symphony*.

Finally, in my studies, I met the person and thought of Henri Nouwen. He continued to teach me what it means to live without ever getting to enjoy the finished symphony, and he articulated this with a unique genius and in a fresh vocabulary. Reading Nouwen is like being introduced to yourself, while still standing inside all your shadows. He also helps give you the sense that it is normal, healthy, and not impure or unholy to feel all those wild stirrings with their concomitant temptations inside yourself.

Each of us is a bundle of much untamed eros, of wild desire, longing, restlessness, loneliness, dissatisfaction, sexuality, and insatiability. We need to be given sacred permission to know this is normal and good because it is what we all feel, unless we are in a clinical depression or have for so long repressed these feelings that now they are expressed only negatively in destructive ways.

We all need to have someone to come visit us inside our particular “novitiate”, ask us if we are painfully restless, and when we nod our heads, say: “Good! You’re supposed to feel like that way! It means you’re healthy! Know too that God is smiling on this!”

ON NOT LOCKING OUR DOORS

JULY 27, 2020

In his book *The Secret*, Rene Fumoleau has a poem entitled *Sins*. Fumoleau, who was a missionary priest with the Dene People in Northern Canada, once asked a group of Elders to name what they considered the worst sin of all. Their answer:

*The ten Dene discussed together,
And after a while Radisca explained to me:
“We talked it over, and we all agree:
The worst sin people can make
is to lock their door.”*

Perhaps at the time this incident took place and in that particular Dene village, you could still safely leave your door unlocked, but that’s hardly sound

advice for most of us who are safe only when we have double locks and electronic security systems securing our doors. Still these Dene Elders are right because at the end of the day, they're speaking of something deeper than a security bolt on our outside door. What does it really mean to lock your door?

As we know, there are many kinds of doors we lock and unlock to let others in and out. Jean-Paul Sartre, the famed French existentialist, once wrote: *Hell is the other person*. While this may feel very true emotionally on a given day, it is the antithesis of any religious truth, particularly Christian truth. In all the great religions of the world, in the end being with others is heaven; ending up eternally alone is hell.

That's a truth built into our very nature. As human persons we are constitutively social; meaning we're built in such a way that while we're always individual, private, and idiosyncratic at the same time we're always social, communitarian, and interdependent. We're built to be with others and there's no ultimate meaning or fulfillment to be found alone. Indeed, we need each other simply to survive and remain sane. Still more, we need each other for love and meaning because without these there's no purpose to us. To end up alone is death of the worst kind.

This needs to be highlighted today because both in society and in our churches too many of us are locking a select number of our doors in ways that are both destructive and genuinely unchristian. What's our issue?

Twenty years ago, Robert Putnam looked at the breakdown of community within our culture and named it with a catchy phrase, *Bowling Alone*. For Putnam, our families, neighborhoods, and wider communities are breaking down because of an excessive individualism within the culture. More and more, we're doing things alone, walking within our own idiosyncratic rhythms rather than within community rhythms. Few would dispute this assessment.

However, what we're struggling with today goes further than the individualism Putnam so playfully names. In the excessive individualism Putnam describes, we end up bowling alone but mostly still inside the same bowling alley, separate from each other but not locked out. Our problem goes deeper. Metaphorically, we're locking each other out of our common bowling alley. What's meant here?

Beyond an isolating individualism, we're struggling today in our families, communities, countries, and churches with a demon of a different sort, that is, with doors locked in bitterness. Politically, in many of our countries we're now so polarized that the various sides are unable to even have a respectful, civil conversation with each other. The other is "hell". This is true too inside our families where conversation at the Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner has to carefully avoid all references to what's going on in the country and we can only be at the same table with each other if we keep our political views locked away.

Sadly, this is now mirrored in our churches where different visions of theology, ecclesiology, and morality have led to a polarization of such intensity that each theological and ecclesial group now stays behind its own solidly locked door. There's no openness to what's other and all real dialogue has been replaced by mutual demonization. This lack of openness is ultimately what the Dene refer to as the worst sin of all, *our locked doors*. Hell then really is the other person. Sartre must be smiling.

It's interesting how evil works. The Gospels give us two separate words for the evil one. Sometimes the evil one is called "the devil" (*Diabolos*) and sometimes the evil one is called "satan" (*Satanas*). Both describe the evil power that works against God, goodness, and love within a community. The "Devil" works by dividing us, one from another, breaking down community through jealousy, pride, and false freedom; whereas "Satan" works in the reverse way. Satan unites us in sick ways so as to have us, as groups, demonize each other, carry out crucifixions, and cling to each other feverishly through sick kinds of hysteria and ideologies that make for scapegoating, racism, sexism, and group-hatred of every kind. Either way, whether it's satan or the devil, we end up behind locked doors where those outside of ourselves are seen as hell.

So it's true, "the worst sin we can make is to lock our doors."

LETTING GO OF FALSE FEAR

AUGUST 3, 2020

Recently in a radio interview, I was asked this question: "If you were on your deathbed, what would you want to leave behind as your parting words?" The

question momentarily took me aback. What would I want to leave behind as my last words? Not having time for much reflection, I settled on this. I would want to say: *Don't be afraid. Live without fear. Don't be afraid of death. Most of all, don't be afraid of God!*"

I'm a cradle Catholic, born to wonderful parents, catechized by some very dedicated teachers, and I've had the privilege of studying theology in some of the best classrooms in the world. Still it took me fifty years to rid myself of a number of crippling religious fears and to realize that God is the one person of whom you need not be afraid. It's taken me most of my life to believe the words that come from God's mouth over three hundred times in scripture and are the initial words out of the mouth of Jesus whenever he meets someone for the first time after his resurrection: *Do not be afraid!*

It has been a fifty-year journey for me to believe that, to trust it. For most of my life I've lived in a false fear of God, and of many other things. As a young boy, I had a particular fear of lightning storms which in my young mind demonstrated how fierce and threatening God could be. Thunder and lightning were portents which warned us, religiously, to be fearful. I nursed the same fears about death, wondering where souls went after they died, sometimes looking at a dark horizon after the sun had set and wondering whether people who had died were out there somewhere, haunted in that endless darkness, still suffering for what they'd had not gotten right in life. I knew that God was love, but that love also held a fierce, frightening, exacting justice.

Those fears went partially underground during my teenage years. I made my decision to enter religious life at the age of seventeen and have sometimes wondered whether that decision was made freely and not out of false fear. Looking back on it now however, with fifty years of hindsight, I know that it wasn't fear that compelled me, but a genuine sense of being called, of knowing from the influence of my parents and the Ursuline nuns who catechized me, that one's life is not one's own, that one is called to serve. But religious fear remained unhealthily strong within me.

So, what helped me let go of that? This doesn't happen in a day or year; it is the cumulative effect of fifty years of bits and pieces conspiring together. It started with my parents' deaths when I was twenty-two. After watching both my mother and father die, I was no longer afraid of death. It was the first time I wasn't afraid of a dead body since these bodies were my mother and

father of whom I was not afraid. My fears of God eased gradually every time I tried to meet God with my soul naked in prayer and came to realize that your hair doesn't turn white when you are completely exposed before God; instead you become unafraid. My fears lessened too as I ministered to others and learned what divine compassion should be, as I studied and taught theology, as two cancer diagnoses forced me to contemplate for real my own mortality, and as a number of colleagues, family, and friends modeled how one can live more freely.

Intellectually, a number of persons particularly helped me: John Shea helped me realize that God is not a law to be obeyed, but an infinitely empathic energy that wants us to be happy; Robert Moore helped me to believe that God is still looking on us with delight; Charles Taylor helped me to understand that God wants us to flourish; the bitter anti-religious criticism of atheists like Frederick Nietzsche helped me see where my own concept of God and religion needed a massive purification; and an older brother, a missionary priest, kept unsettling my theology with irreverent questions like, what kind of God would want us to be frightened of him? A lot of bits and pieces conspired together.

What's the importance of last words? They can mean a lot or a little. My dad's last words to us were "be careful", but he was referring to our drive home from the hospital in snow and ice. Last words aren't always intended to leave a message; they can be focused on saying goodbye or simply be inaudible sighs of pain and exhaustion; but sometimes they can be your legacy.

Given the opportunity to leave family and friends a few last words, I think that after I first tried to say a proper goodbye, I'd say this: ***Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of living or of dying. Especially don't be afraid of God.***

SUICIDE AND MELANCHOLY

AUGUST 10, 2020

We no longer understand melancholy. Today we lump all forms of melancholy together into one indiscriminate bundle and call it "depression". While a lot of good is being done by psychiatrists, psychologists, and the medical profession in terms of treating depression, something important is being lost

at the same time. Melancholy is much more than what we call “depression”. For better and for worse, the ancients saw melancholy as a gift from God.

Prior to modern psychology and psychiatry, melancholy was seen precisely as a gift from the divine. In Greek mythology, it even had its own god, *Saturn*, and it was seen as a rich but mixed gift. On one hand, it could bring soul-crushing emotions such as unbearable loneliness, paralyzing obsessions, inconsolable grief, cosmic sadness, and suicidal despair; on the other hand, it could also bring depth, genius, creativity, poetic inspiration, compassion, mystical insight, and wisdom.

No more. Today melancholy has even lost its name and has become, in the words of Lyn Cowan, a Jungian analyst, “clinicalized, pathologized, and medicalized” so that what poets, philosophers, blues singers, artists, and mystics have forever drawn on for depth is now seen as a “treatable illness” rather than as a painful part of the soul that doesn’t want treatment but wants instead to be listened to because it intuits the unbearable heaviness of things, namely, the torment of human finitude, inadequacy and mortality. For Cowan, modern psychology’s preoccupation with symptoms of depression and its reliance on drugs in treating depression show an “appalling superficiality in the face of real human suffering.” For her, apart from whatever else this might mean, refusing to recognize the depth and meaning of melancholy is demeaning to the sufferer and perpetrates a violence against a soul that is already in torment.

And that is the issue when dealing with suicide. Suicide is normally the result of a soul in torment and in most cases that torment is not the result of a moral failure but of a melancholy which overwhelms a person at a time when he or she is too tender, too weak, too wounded, too stressed, or too biochemically impaired to withstand its pressure. Leo Tolstoy, the Russian novelist, who eventually did die by suicide, had written earlier about the melancholic forces that sometimes threatened to overwhelm him. Here’s one of his diary entries: “the force which drew me away from life was fuller, more powerful, and more general than any mere desire. It was a force like my old aspiration to live, only it impelled me in the opposite direction. It was an aspiration of my whole being to get out of life.”

There’s still a lot we don’t understand about suicide and that misunderstanding isn’t just psychological, it’s also moral. In short, we generally blame the victim: *If your soul is sick, it’s your fault*. For the most part that is how people

who die by suicide are judged. Even though publicly we have come a long way in recent times in understanding suicide and now claim to be more open and less judgmental morally, the stigma remains. We still have not made the same peace with breakdowns in mental health as we have made with breakdowns in physical health. We don't have the same psychological and moral anxieties when someone dies of cancer, stroke, or heart attack as we do when someone dies by suicide. Those who die by suicide are, in effect, our new "lepers".

In former times when there was no solution for leprosy other than isolating the person from everyone else, the victim suffered doubly, once from the disease and then (perhaps even more painfully) from the social isolation and debilitating stigma. He or she was declared "unclean" and had to own that stigma. But the person suffering from leprosy still had the consolation of not being judged psychologically or morally. They were not judged to be "unclean" in those areas. They were pitied.

However, we only feel pity for those whom we haven't ostracized, psychologically and morally. That's why we judge rather than pity someone who dies by suicide. For us, death by suicide still renders persons "unclean" in that it puts them outside of what we deem as morally and psychologically acceptable. Their deaths are not spoken of in the same way as other deaths. They are doubly judged, psychologically (*If your soul is sick, it's your own fault*) and morally (*Your death is a betrayal*). To die by suicide is worse than dying of leprosy.

I'm not sure how we can move past this. As Pascal says, the heart has its reasons. So too does the powerful taboo inside us that militates against suicide. There are good reasons why we spontaneously feel the way we do about suicide. But, perhaps a deeper understanding of the complexity of forces that lie inside of what we naively label "depression" might help us understand that, in most cases, suicide may not be judged as a moral or psychological failure, but as a melancholy that has overpowered a suffering soul.

PORNOGRAPHY AND THE SACRED

AUGUST 17, 2020

The ancient Greeks had gods and goddesses for everything, including a goddess of *Shame* called *Aidos*. Shame for them meant much more than it normally means to us. In their mind, shame brought with it modesty, respect, and a certain needed reticence before things that should remain private and hidden. The goddess of shame instructed you as to when you were supposed to turn your eyes away from things too intimate to be seen. Shame, as they understood it, contained a modesty and reverence you were supposed to feel in the presence anything sacred or when you were receiving a gift or when making love.

They had an intriguing myth undergirding this: *Aphrodite*, the goddess of Love, is born out of the sea; but, as she rises above the waves in her stunning beauty, her nakedness is shielded by three deities: *Aidos*, the goddess of shame; *Eros*, the god of love; and *Horai*, the goddess of propriety. They protect her naked body with love, propriety, and shame. For the ancient Greeks, this was a religious truth, one which taught that without these three deities of protection, the naked body should not be seen. When nakedness (of any kind) is not protected by these deities, it is unfairly exposed and dishonored.

I cite this myth to make a case against pornography, since today it is too naively accepted in the culture and its real harm is mostly unrecognized.

Let me begin this way. First, internet pornography is today, far and away, the biggest addiction in the whole world. No credible analyst or critic will deny that. Like all addictions, it's also deadly. Yet, more and more we see our society become casual and even indifferent to it. Pornography is everywhere, is often seen as harmless, and it's not uncommon to see mainstream sitcoms on television speak of someone's porn collection as they might speak of his collection of toy airplanes. Beyond that, we have more people positively challenging those who speak out against pornography. I've had colleagues, Christian theologians, say: "Why are we so uptight about seeing sex! Sex is the most beautiful thing God left us, why can't it be seen?"

Why can't it be seen? We might begin with Carl Jung's statement that one of our greatest naiveties is that we believe that energy is friendly and is always something we can control. It isn't. Energy is imperialistic, it wants to take us

over and control us. Once it takes hold of us, it can be hard to turn off. That's one of the reasons why pornography is so dangerous. Its energy takes hold like a "demonic" possession.

But pornography is not only dangerous, it's also wrong, badly wrong. Those who protest that sex is beautiful and there should be nothing wrong in seeing it are, in fact, half right; sex is beautiful ... but its energy and nakedness are so powerful that it should not be seen, at least not without the deities of love, propriety, and shame in attendance.

As Christians, we don't believe in a pantheon of gods and goddesses, we believe in only one God; but that God contains all other deities, including *Aphrodite*, *Aidos*, *Eros*, and *Horai* (Beauty, Shame, Love, and Propriety). Moreover that God is always shielded from our look, shrouded, hidden, not to be approached except in reverence, and for a reason. Our faith tells us, *no one can look at God and live*.

That's why pornography is wrong. It isn't wrong because sex isn't beautiful, but rather because sex is so powerful as to carry some of the very energy and power of the divine. That's also why pornography is so powerfully addictive – and so harmful. Sex is beautiful but its naked beauty, like the naked body of Aphrodite arising out of the sea, may only be looked at when it's properly attended by love and propriety and protected by shame.

In the end, all sins are sins of irreverence and that irreverence always contains some impropriety, disrespect and shamelessness. Pornography is a sin of irreverence. Metaphorically, it is standing before the burning bush with our shoes on as we watch Aphrodite arise naked out of the sea without being accompanied by love and propriety without shame shielding our eyes from her nakedness.

There's why the world of art makes a distinction between being naked and being nude, and why the former is degrading while the latter is beautiful. The difference? Being naked is being unhealthily exposed, exhibited, shown, peeked at, in a way that violates intimacy and dignity. Conversely, being seen nude is to have your nakedness properly attended to by love and propriety and shielded by shame so that your very vulnerability helps reveal your beauty.

Pornography degrades both those who indulge in it and those unhealthily exposed in it. It is wrong from both a human view and the view of faith. From

the human view, Aphrodite's naked body needs to have divine shields. From the view of faith, we believe that no one can look at the face of God and live.

THE INVITATION TO COURAGE

AUGUST 24, 2020

Courage isn't one of my strong points, at least not one particular kind of courage.

Scripture tells us that as John the Baptist grew up he *became strong in spirit*. My growing up was somewhat different. Unlike John the Baptist, as I grew up I *became accommodating in spirit*. This had its reasons. I was born with what Ruth Burrows would describe as a "tortured sensitivity", an over-sensitive personality, and have never been able to develop a tough skin. That's not the stuff of which prophets are made. When you're a child on the playground you better have the raw physical strength to challenge a situation that's unfair or you better let things alone so as not to get hurt. You also better develop razor-sharp skills at avoiding confrontation and in the art of peacemaking. As well, when you aren't gifted with superior physical strength and challenging situations arise on the playground, you quickly learn to walk away from confrontation. On the playground the lamb knows better than to lie down with the lion or to confront the lion, irrespective of the prophet Isaiah's eschatological visions.

And that's not all bad. Growing up as I did didn't make for the tough skin and raw courage it takes to be a prophet, but it did give me an acute radar screen, namely, a sensitivity which at its best is a genuine empathy (though at its worst has me avoiding situations of conflict). Either way, it's hasn't particularly gifted me with the qualities that make for prophetic courage. I want, habitually, not to upset people. I dislike confrontation and want peacefulness at almost any cost, though I do draw some lines in the sand. But I'm no John the Baptist and it's taken me many years to learn that, admit it, and understand why – and also to understand that my temperament and history are only an explanation and not an excuse for my cowardice at times.

In the end, the virtue of courage is not contingent upon birth, temperament, or mental toughness, though these can be helpful. Courage is a gift from the

Holy Spirit and that's why one's temperament and background may only serve as an explanation and not as an excuse for a lack of courage.

I highlight this because our situation today demands courage from us, the courage for prophecy. We desperately need prophets today, but they are in short supply and too many of us are not particularly eager to volunteer for the task. Why not?

A recent issue of *Commonweal* magazine featured an article by Bryan Massingale, a strong prophetic voice on the issue of racism. Massingale submits that the reason we see so little real progress in dealing with racial injustice is the absence of prophetic voices where they are most needed, in this case, among the many good white people who see racial injustice, sympathize with those suffering from it, but don't do anything about it. Massingale, who lectures widely across the country, shares how again and again in his lectures and in his classes people ask him: *But how do I address this without upsetting people?* This question aptly expresses our reticence and, I believe, names both the issue and the challenge.

As Shakespeare would say, "Ah, there's the rub!" For me, this question touches a sensitive moral nerve. Had I been in one of his classes I would no doubt have been one of those to ask that question: but how do I challenge racism without upsetting people? Here's my problem: I want to speak out prophetically, but I don't want to upset others; I want to challenge the white privilege which we're so congenitally blind to, but I don't want to alienate the generous, good-hearted people who support our school; I want to speak out more strongly against injustice in my writing, but I don't want multiple newspapers drop my column as a result; I want to be courageous and confront others, but don't want to live with the hatred that ensues; and I want to publicly name injustices and name names, but don't want to alienate myself from those very people. So this leaves me still praying for the courage needed for prophecy.

Several years ago, a visiting professor at our school, an Afro-American man, was sharing with our faculty some of the near daily injustices he experiences simply because of the color of his skin. At one point I asked him: "If I, as a white man, came to you like Nicodemus came to Jesus at night and asked you what I should do, what would you tell me?" His answer: Jesus didn't let Nicodemus off easily just because he confessed his fears. Nicodemus had to

do a public act to bring his faith into the light, he had to claim Jesus' dead body. Hence, his challenge to me: you need to do a public act.

He's right; but I'm still praying for the prophetic courage to do that. And aren't we all?

THE LAST TEMPTATION

AUGUST 31, 2020

The last temptation is the greatest treason:

To do the right deed for the wrong reason.

T.S. Eliot wrote those words to describe how difficult it is to purge our motivation of selfish concerns, to do things for reasons that are not ultimately about ourselves. In Eliot's

Murder in the Cathedral, his main character is Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is martyred for his faith. From every outward appearance, Becket is a saint, unselfish, motivated by faith and love. But as Eliot teases out in *Murder in the Cathedral*, the outward narrative doesn't tell the deeper story, doesn't show what's more radically at issue. It's not that Thomas Becket wasn't a saint or wasn't honest in his motivation for doing good works; rather there's still a "last temptation" that he needed to overcome on the road to becoming a full saint. Beneath the surface narrative there's always a deeper, more-subtle, invisible, moral battle going on, a "last temptation" that must be overcome. What's that temptation?

It's a temptation that comes disguised as a grace and tempts us in this way: be unselfish, be faithful, do good things, never compromise the truth, be about others, carry your solitude at a high level, be above the mediocrity of the crowd, be that exceptional moral person, accept martyrdom if it is asked of you. But why? For what reason?

There are many motives for why we want to be good, but the one that disguises itself as a grace and is really a negative temptation is this one: be good because of the respect, admiration, and permanent good name it will win you, for the genuine glory that this brings. This is the temptation faced

by a good person. Wanting a good name is not a bad thing, but in the end it's still about ourselves.

In my more reflective moments, I'm haunted by this and left with self-doubts. Am I really doing what I am doing for Jesus, for others, for the world, or am I doing it for my own good name and how I can then feel good about that? Am I doing it so that others might lead fuller, less fearful, lives or am I doing it for the respect it garners for me? When I'm teaching is my real motivation to make others fall in love with Jesus or to have them admire me for my insights? When I write books and articles, am I really trying to dispense wisdom or am I trying to show how wise I am? It this about God or about me?

Perhaps we can never really answer these questions since our motivation is always mixed and it's impossible to sort this out exactly. But still, we owe it to others and to ourselves to scrutinize ourselves over this in prayer, in conscience, in spiritual direction, and in discussion with others. How do we overcome that "last temptation", to do the right things and not make it about ourselves?

The struggle to overcome selfishness and motivate ourselves by a clear, honest altruism can be an impossible battle to win. Classically, the churches have told us there are seven deadly sins (*pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, sloth*) that are tied to our very nature and with which we will struggle our whole lives. And the problem is that the more we seem to overcome them, the more they manage to simply disguise themselves in more subtle forms in our lives. For example, take Jesus' counsel to not be proud and take the most prestigious place at table and then be embarrassed by being asked to move to a lower place, but rather humbly taking the lowest seat so as to be invited to move higher. That's sound practical advice, no doubt, but it can also be a recipe for a pride we can really be proud of. Once we have displayed our humility and been publicly recognized for it, then we can feel a truly superior pride in how humble we've been! It's the same for all of the deadly sins. As we succeed in not giving in to crasser temptations, they re-root themselves in subtler forms within us.

Our faults display themselves publicly and crassly when we're immature, but the hard fact is that they generally don't disappear when we are mature. They simply take on more subtle forms. For instance, when I'm immature and wrapped up in my own life and ambitions, I might not give much thought to helping the poor. Then, when I'm older, more mature and more theologically

schooled, I will write articles publicly confessing that we all should be doing more for the poor. Well, challenging myself and others to be more attentive to the poor is in fact a good thing ... and while that might not help the poor very much, it will certainly help me to feel better about myself.

How do we ever get beyond this, this last temptation, to do the right thing for the wrong reason?

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE AND EVERYDAY PEOPLE

SEPTEMBER 7, 2020

What kinds of things help induce mysticism in our lives? I was asked that question recently and this was my immediate, non-reflected, answer: whatever brings tears to your eyes in either genuine sorrow or genuine joy; but that response was predicated on a lot of things.

What is mysticism? What makes for mystical experience?

In the popular mind mysticism is misunderstood badly. We tend to identify mysticism with what's extraordinary and paranormal, and see it as something for the spiritual elite. For most people, mysticism means spiritual visions and ecstatic experiences which take you outside of normal consciousness.

Mysticism can be that sometimes, though normally it has nothing to do with visions, altered states of consciousness, or states of ecstasy. Rather it has to do with a searing clarity of mind and heart. Mystical experiences are experiences that cut through all the things that normally block us from touching our deepest selves, and they are rare because normally our consciousness is cut off from our deep, true, virginal self by the influence of ego, wound, history, social pressure, ideology, false fear, and all the various affectations we don and shed like clothing. Rarely are we ever in touch with our deepest center, without filters, purely; but when we are, that's what makes for a mystical experience.

Mysticism, as Ruth Burrows defines it, *is being touched by God in a way that's beyond words, imagination, and feeling.* God, as we know, is *Oneness, Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.* So any time we are genuinely touched by oneness,

truth, goodness, or beauty, without anything distorting that, we're having a mystical experience. What might that look like?

Ruth Burrows describes a mystical experience which radically changed her life when she was eighteen years old, a senior at a private high school for young women operated by an order of nuns, on a retreat preparing for graduation, and not very mature. She and one of her friends were not taking this retreat very seriously, passing notes to each other and pulling pranks during the conferences. At a point, their antics were disturbing enough that the nuns pulled them out of the group and had them sit in silence in a chapel, chaperoned by a teacher, whenever the rest of the class was at a conference. At first, Burrows confesses, they continued their joking around, but the hours were long and the silence eventually wore her down. Sitting alone, bored and irritated, a mystical experience graced her, uninvited and unexpected. And it came upon her not as a vision or an ecstasy, but as a moment of searing clarity. At a certain moment, sitting alone, she saw herself with absolute clarity for who she really was, in all her immaturity and in all her goodness. It changed her life. From then on she knew who she was – beyond ego, wound, immaturity, peer pressure, ideology, and all affectation. In that moment she knew her deepest self purely (and the only thing that was extraordinary was its extraordinary clarity).

So, what kinds of things might induce mystical experiences in our lives? The short answer: anything that takes you beyond your ego, your wounds, your affectations, and the powerful social pressures within which you breathe, that is, anything that helps put you in touch with who you really are and makes you want to be a better person. And this can be many things. It might be a book you read; it might be the beauty of nature; it might be the sight of a newborn baby, a crying child, a wounded animal, or the face of someone suffering; or it might be what you feel deep down when you receive an expression of love, bless someone, express genuine contrition, or share helplessness. It can be many things.

Several years ago while teaching a course, I assigned the students a number of books to read, among them Christopher de Vinck's, *Only the Heart Knows How to Find them – Precious Memories for Faithless Time*. This is a series of autobiographical essays within which de Vinck simply shares very warmly about his marriage, his children, and his home life. At the end of the semester a young woman, with de Vinck's book in her hand, said to me: "Father, this is

the best book I've ever read. I've always fancied myself a very free, liberated person and I've slept my way through several cities, but now I realize that what I want is what this man has. I want sex to take me home. I want a home. I want the marriage bed. I know now what I need!"

Reading Christopher de Vinck's book had triggered a mystical experience inside her, not unlike the one described by Ruth Burrows. Reading the *Story of a Soul* by Therese of Lisieux generally does that for me.

So, here's my counsel: seek out what does that for you. It doesn't have to bring tears to your eyes, it just has to point you with searing clarity towards home!

MOVING BEYOND MISTAKES AND WEAKNESSES

SEPTEMBER 14, 2020

The excusable doesn't need to be excused and the inexcusable cannot be excused.

Michael Buckley wrote those words and they contain an important challenge. We're forever trying to make excuses for things we need not make excuses for and are forever trying to excuse the inexcusable. Neither is necessary. Or helpful.

We can learn a lesson from how Jesus dealt with those who betrayed him. A prime example is the apostle Peter, specially chosen and named the very rock of the apostolic community. Peter was an honest man with a childlike sincerity, a deep faith, and he, more than most others, grasped the deeper meaning of who Jesus was and what his teaching meant. Indeed, it was he who in response to Jesus' question (Who do you say I am?) replied, "You are the Christ, the son of the Living God." Yet minutes after that confession Jesus had to correct Peter's false conception of what that meant and then rebuke him for trying to deflect him from his very mission. More seriously, it was Peter who, within hours of an arrogant boast that though all others would betray Jesus, he alone would remain faithful, betrayed Jesus three times, and this in Jesus' most needy hour.

Later we are privy to the conversation Jesus has with Peter vis-à-vis those betrayals. What's significant is that he doesn't ask Peter to explain himself,

doesn't excuse Peter, and doesn't say things like: "You weren't really yourself! I can understand how anyone might be very frightened in that situation! I can empathize, I know what fear can do to you!" None of that. The excusable doesn't need to be excused and the inexcusable cannot be excused. In Peter's betrayal, as in our own betrayals, there's invariably some of both, the excusable and the inexcusable.

So what does Jesus do with Peter? He doesn't ask for an explanation, doesn't ask for an apology, doesn't tell Peter that it is okay, doesn't offer excuses for Peter, and doesn't even tell Peter that he loves him. Instead he asks Peter: "Do you love me?" Peter answers yes – *and everything moves forward from there.*

Everything moves forward from there. Everything can move forward following a confession of love, not least an honest confession of love in the wake of a betrayal. Apologies are necessary (because that's taking ownership of the fault and the weakness so as to lift it completely off the soul of the one who was betrayed) but excuses are not helpful. If the action was not a betrayal, no excuse is necessary; if it was, no excuse absolves it. An excuse or an attempt at one serves two purposes, neither of them good. First, it serves to rationalize and justify, none of which is helpful to the betrayed or the betrayer. Second, it weakens the apology and makes it less than clean and full, thus not lifting the betrayal completely off the soul of the one who has been betrayed; and, because of that, is not as helpful an expression of love as is a clear, honest acknowledgement of our betrayal and an apology which attempts no excuse for its weakness and betrayal.

What love asks of us when we are weak is an honest, non-rationalized, admission of our weakness along with a statement from the heart: "I love you!" Things can move forward from there. The past and our betrayal are not expunged, nor excused; but, in love, we can live beyond them. To expunge, excuse, or rationalize is to not live in the truth; it is unfair to the one betrayed since he or she bears the consequences and scars.

Only love can move us beyond weakness and betrayal and this is an important principle not just for those instances in life when we betray and hurt a loved one, but for our understanding of life in general. We're human, not divine, and as such are beset, congenitally, body and mind, with weaknesses and inadequacies of every sort. None of us, as St. Paul graphically says in his Epistle to the Romans, ever quite measure up. The good we want to do, we

end up not doing, and the evil we want to avoid, we habitually end up doing. Some of this, of course, is understandable, excusable, just as some of it is inexcusable, save for the fact that we're humans and partially a mystery to ourselves. Either way, at the end of the day, no justification or excuses are asked for (or helpful). We don't move forward in relationship by telling either God or someone we have hurt: "You have to understand! In that situation, what else was I to do too? I didn't mean to hurt you, I was just too weak to resist!" That's neither helpful, nor called for. Things move forward when we, without excuses, admit weakness, and apologize for betrayal. Like Peter when asked three times by Jesus: "Do you love me?" from our hearts we need to say: "You know everything, you know that I love you."

GOD IS HAPPY

SEPTEMBER 21, 2020

Christianity, Judaism, and Islam ultimately all believe in the same God. Interestingly, too, in the popular mind they also all tend to conceive of God in the same way, namely, as male, celibate, and not being particularly happy.

Well, the gender of God is not something we can ever conceptualize. God is neither male or female, nor some androgynous mix of gender. So how can we conceptualize God's gender? We can't, pure and simple. Classically we've spoken of God as male, even as we know that this isn't exactly true because we affirm, dogmatically, that God is ineffable, incapable of ever being captured in any concept. That also holds true for our notion of God as celibate, as not having a wife. How masculinity and femininity interrelate in God is also ineffable, incapable of being conceived of, but we know God is not simply a male celibate.

But what about that other popular notion, namely, that God is not particularly happy, especially with us?

Here we have a clear answer: *God is happy*. How can God not be? If God is perfect oneness, perfect goodness, perfect truth, perfect beauty, and perfect fullness in every way, how then can God not be perfect happiness? An unhappy God would not be God for such a God would be lacking the power to make Himself (pardon the pronoun) happy. Not a minor inadequacy for God. So a perfect God is also a perfectly happy God. But that's a metaphysical

statement. We can still ask, is God happy emotionally and is God happy with us? Mustn't God frown at times and shake his head in disappointment at our behavior? Surely God can't be happy with a lot that goes on in our world. God can't be happy in the face of sin.

Well, just as in every other thing about God, there are things here we cannot comprehend. However, this much must be affirmed, both from what's deepest in revelation in our scriptures and from the testimony of countless good people: *God is happy!* God is not habitually disappointed with us, frowning at our weaknesses, and sending the majority of us to hell. Rather, God is like the loving parent of a little child, forever luring us forwards, delighting in our energy, wanting us to flourish, saddened when we act in ways that bring unhappiness to others and to ourselves, but understanding of weakness rather than angry and unhappy.

Julian of Norwich, the famed mystic, describes God this way: *God sits in heaven, smiling, completely relaxed, his face looking like a marvelous symphony.* When I first read this passage some years ago, I was taken aback both by the concept of God as smiling and by the image of God as relaxed. I had never thought of God as "relaxed". Surely with all that's happening in our world and surely with all the betrayals, large and small, in our lives, God must be tense, frustrated and anxious. It's difficult but easier to picture God as smiling (at least sometimes), but it's exceedingly difficult to picture God as relaxed, as not being tense about all that's wrong with us and our world.

Here's my journey in grappling with that. I was wonderfully blessed in my religious background. From my parents and family, through the parish community I grew up in, through the Ursuline nuns who taught me in school, you couldn't have ordered a more-ideal faith milieu. I experienced faith and religion being lived out in real life in a way that gave it credibility and made it attractive. My seminary training and theological studies strongly reinforced that. But, all that time, underneath, there was a picture of a God who wasn't very happy and who smiled only when the occasion merited it, which wasn't very often. The consequence of that in my life was an anxious attempt always to measure up, to be good enough, to not make God unhappy, and to earn God's approval and affection. But of course, we can never be good enough, never measure up, and so it's natural to believe that God is never really happy with us and never really happy at all.

In theory, of course, we know better. We tend to have a healthier concept of God theoretically; but the heart is not so easy to bring onside. It's hard to feel inside myself that God is happy, happy with us, happy with me. It has taken me seventy years to realize, accept, take consolation in, and finally bathe in the fact that God is happy. I'm not sure what pulled all the triggers inside me that helped me make that shift, but the fact that God is happy comes to me now whenever I'm praying whole-heartedly, nakedly, and sincerely. It's also what comes to me when I look at the saints in my life, those men and women whom I most look up to in faith, who reflect the face of God for me. They're happy, relaxed, and not perpetually frowning in displeasure.

THE HIDDEN FACE OF EVIL

SEPTEMBER 28, 2020

We tend to be naïve about evil, at least as to what it looks like in everyday life. Our picture of evil has been falsely shaped by images taken from mythology, religious cults, and from books and movies that portray evil as personified in sinister spiritual forces. Demons haunt houses, appear at séances, are summoned up by Ouija boards, contort bodies, and are exorcized by the sprinkling of holy water. Whatever evil does reside inside this concept of demonic forces (and you can believe in them or not) is infinitely eclipsed by the ordinary face of evil which looks out at us from newscasts, is daily manifest in ordinary life, and is manifest too in our own face on a given day.

Mostly we are blind to the hidden evil that fomented inside us, tears communities apart, and eats away at God and goodness. The Gospels can help us understand this.

In the Gospels, the evil one has two names because evil works in two ways. Sometimes the Gospels call the evil force "the Devil" and other times they call it "Satan". What's the difference? In the end they both refer to the same force (or person) but the different names refer to the different ways in which evil works. *Devil*, in Greek, means to slander and to tear things apart. Ironically, *Satan* means almost the exact opposite. It means to unite things, but in a sick and malevolent way.

So evil works in two ways: **the devilish** works by dividing us from each other, tearing us apart, and having us habitually slander each other so that community is forever being torn apart through jealousy and accusation. **The satanic**, on the other hand, does the opposite, with the same result. The satanic unites us in a sick way, that is, through the grip of mob-hysteria, social hype, self-serving ideologies, racism, sexism, envy, hatred and in a myriad of other malevolent ways so as to draw us into mob-hatred, gang-rapes, lynchings, and crucifixions. It was satanic forces that engineered Jesus' crucifixion.

When we look at our world today, from politics to social media to what's happening inside many of our religious circles, we would have to be blind not to see the powers of the "devil" and of "satan" at work (however you personally define and picture these).

Where do we see the devilish at work? Basically everywhere. Today, most everywhere, you see persons sowing division, attributing false motives to others, calling for them to be distrusted and ostracized. Indeed, this is almost the dominant element we see in our politics and in our social media. The result is the breakdown of community, the stalemate in our politics, the breakdown of civility, the loss of trust in the meaning of truth, the smug belief that our own idiosyncratic narrative functions as truth, and the near universal neglect of elemental charity. Today we are witnessing a dangerous breakdown of trust and civility, coupled with a massive erosion of simple honesty. The devil must be smiling.

Where do we see the satanic at work? Everywhere as well. More and more we are retreating into tribes, gangs, with those others who think like us and have the same self-interests to protect. While this can be a good thing, it's not good when we unite in ways that are rooted in self-serving ideologies, economic privilege, racism, sexism, false nationalism, envy, and hatred. When this happens, our group ceases being a community and becomes instead a mob, a sick one, which at the end of the day, whatever its particular idiosyncratic slogan, ends up chanting, as did the crowds on Good Friday, "Crucify him! Crucify him! It's significant that in the Gospels almost every time the word "crowd" is used it's used pejoratively. Commentators tell us that almost without exception every time the word "crowd" appears in the Gospels it could be preceded by the adjective "mindless". Crowds are mindless; worse still, they generally have a sick bent towards crucifixion. The renowned Czech novelist Milan Kundera highlights this when he shares his strong fear

of “the great march”, the sick fever that so generally infects a crowd and, soon enough, has them chanting “Release to us Barabbas! And as for Jesus, crucify him!” This is the face of satan in ordinary life, the actual face of evil.

We need to name this today as we see the ever-intensifying and bitter polarization inside our families, communities, neighborhoods, cities, and countries. Factionalism, anger, bitterness, distrust, accusation, and hatred are intensifying most everywhere, even inside our own families where we are finding it harder and harder to sit down together, be civil with each other, and talk through our political, social, and moral differences. Sadly, even the deadly presence of a pandemic which threatens all of us has worked to divide rather than unite us.

Evil doesn’t ordinarily have the face and feel of the devil in *Rosemary’s Baby*; it has the face and feel of this evening’s newscast.

SPIRITUALITY AND THE SECOND HALF OF LIFE

OCTOBER 5, 2020

One size doesn’t fit everyone. This isn’t just true for clothing, it’s also true for spirituality. Our challenges in life change as we age. Spirituality hasn’t always been fully sensitive to this. True, we’ve always had tailored instruction and activities for children, young people, and for people who are raising children, carrying a job, and paying a mortgage, but we’ve never developed a spirituality for what happens when those years are over.

Why is one needed? Jesus seemingly didn’t have one. He didn’t have one set of teachings for the young, another for those in mid-life, and still another for the elderly. He just taught. The Sermon on the Mount, the parables, and his invitation to take up his cross are intended in the same way for everyone, irrespective of age. But we hear those teaching at very different times in our lives; and it’s one thing to hear the Sermon the Mount when you’re seven years old, another when you’re twenty-seven, and quite another when you’re eighty-seven. Jesus’ teachings don’t change, but we do, and they offer very specific challenges at different times of our lives.

Christian spirituality has generally kept this in mind, with one exception. Except for Jesus and an occasional mystic, it has failed to develop an explicit

spirituality for our later years, for how we are meant to be generative in our senior years and how we are to die in a life-giving way. But there's a good reason for this lacuna. Simply put, it wasn't needed because up until this last century most people never lived into old age. For example, in Palestine, in Jesus' time, the average life expectancy was thirty to thirty-five years. A century ago in the United States, it was still less than fifty years. When most people in the world died before they reached the age of fifty, there was no real need for a spirituality of aging.

There is such a spirituality inside the Gospels. Even though he died at thirty-three, Jesus left us a paradigm of how to age and die. But that paradigm, while healthily infusing and undergirding Christian spirituality in general, was never developed more specifically into a spirituality of aging (with the exception of some of the great Christian mystics).

After Jesus, the Desert fathers and mothers folded the question of how to age and die into the overall framework of their spirituality. For them, spirituality was a quest to "see the face of God" and that, as Jesus makes clear, requires one thing, *purity of heart*. So for them, no matter your age, the challenge was the same, trying to achieve purity of heart. Then in the age of the persecutions and the early Christian martyrs, the idea developed that the ideal way to age and die was through martyrdom. Later, when Christians were no longer physically martyred, the idea took hold that you could take on a voluntary type of martyrdom by living the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. They believed that living these, like the quest for purity of heart, taught you all you needed to know, no matter your age. Eventually this was expanded to mean that anyone who faithfully responded to the duties in his or her life, irrespective of age, would learn everything necessary to come to sanctity through that fidelity. As a famous aphorism put it: *Stay inside your cell and it will teach you all you need to know*. Understood properly, there's a spirituality of aging and dying inside these notions, but until recently there was little need to draw that out more explicitly.

Happily, today the situation is changing and we're developing, more and more, some explicit spiritualities of aging and dying. Perhaps this reflects an aging population, but there's now a burgeoning body of literature, both religious and secular, that's taking up the question of aging and dying. These authors, too numerous to mention, include many names already familiar to

us: Henri Nouwen, Richard Rohr, Kathleen Dowling Singh, David Brooks, Cardinal Bernardin, Michael Paul Gallagher, Joan Chittister, Parker Palmer, Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, Paul Kalanithi, Erica Jong, Kathie Roiphe, and Wilkie and Noreeen Au, among others. Coming from a variety of perspectives, each of these offer insights into what God and nature intend for us in our later years.

In essence, here's the issue: today, we're living longer and healthier late into life. It's common today to retire sometime in our early sixties after having raised our children, superannuated from our jobs, and paid our mortgages. So what's next, given that we probably have twenty or thirty more years of health and energy left? What are these years for? What are we called to now, beyond loving our grandkids? Abraham and Sarah, in their old age, were invited to set out for a new land and conceive a child long after this was biologically impossible for them. That's our call too. What "Isaac" are we called to give birth to in our later years? We need guidance.

POPE FRANCIS' NEW ENCYCLICAL

OCTOBER 12, 2020

On October 4, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis released a new encyclical entitled, *Fratelli Tutti – On Fraternity and Social Friendship*. It can appear a rather depressing read because of its searing realism, except it plays the long game of Christian hope.

Fratelli Tutti lays out reasons why there's so much injustice, inequality, and community breakdown in our world and how in faith and love these might be addressed. The intent here is not to give a synopsis of the encyclical, other than to say it's courageous and speaks truth to power. Rather the intent is to highlight a number of special challenges within the encyclical.

First, it challenges us to see the poor and to see what our present political, economic, and social systems are doing to them. Looking at our world, the encyclical submits that in many ways it is a broken world and it names some reasons for this: the globalization of self-interest, the globalization of superficiality, and the abuse of social media, among other things. This has made for the survival of the fittest. And while the situation is broken for everyone, the poor are ending up suffering the most. The rich are getting richer, the

powerful are getting more powerful, and the poor are growing poorer and losing what little power they had. There's an ever-increasing inequality of wealth and power between the rich and the poor and our world is become ever more calloused vis-à-vis the situation of the poor. Inequality is now accepted as normal and as moral and indeed is often justified in the name of God and religion. The poor are becoming disposable: *"Some parts of our human family, it appears, can be readily sacrificed for the sake of others. Wealth has increased, but together with inequality."* In speaking of inequality, the encyclical twice highlights that this inequality is true of women worldwide: *It is unacceptable that some have fewer rights by virtue of being women."*

The encyclical employs the parable of the Good Samaritan as its ground metaphor. It compares us today, individually and collectively, to the priest and the scribe in that parable who for religious, social, and political reasons walk past the one who is poor, beaten, bleeding and in need of help. Our indifference and our religious failure, like that of the priest and the scribe in the parable, is rooted both in a personal moral blindness as well as in the social and religious ethos of our society that helps spawn that blindness.

The encyclical goes on to warn that in the face of globalization we must resist becoming nationalistic and tribal, taking care of our own and demonizing what's foreign. It goes on to say that in a time of bitterness, hatred, and animosity, we must be tender and gracious, always speaking out of love and not out of hatred: *"Kindness ought to be cultivated; it is no superficial bourgeois virtue."*

The encyclical acknowledges how difficult and counter-cultural it is today to sacrifice our own agenda, comfort, and freedom for community, but invites us to make that sacrifice: *"I would like especially to mention solidarity which is a moral virtue and social attitude born of personal conversion."*

At one point, the encyclical gives a very explicit (and far-reaching) challenge. It states unequivocally (with full ecclesial weight) that Christians must oppose and reject capital punishment and take a stand against war: *"Saint John Paul II stated clearly and firmly that the death penalty is inadequate from a moral standpoint and no longer necessary from that of penal justice. There can be no stepping back from this position. Today we state clearly that 'the death penalty is inadmissible' and the Church is firmly committed to calling for its abolition worldwide. All Christians and people of good will are today called to work*

not only for the abolition of the death penalty, legal or illegal, in all its forms, but also to work for the improvement of prison conditions.”

As for war: *“We can no longer think of war as a solution, because its risks will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits. In view of this, it is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a ‘just war’*

The encyclical has drawn strong criticism from some women’s groups who label it “sexist”, though this criticism is based almost exclusively on the encyclical’s title and on the fact that it never makes reference to any women authors. There’s some fairness, I submit, in the criticism regarding the choice of title. The title, while beautiful in an old classical language, is in the end masculine. That should be forgivable; except I lived long enough in Rome to know that its frequent insensitivity to inclusive language is not an *inculpable* oversight. But the lapse here is a mosquito bite, a small thing, which shouldn’t detract from a big thing, namely, a very prophetic encyclical which has justice and the poor at its heart.

THE PRINCE OF LIES

OCTOBER 19, 2020

Looking at our world today, what frightens and unsettles me more than the threat of the Covid virus, more than the growing inequality between the rich and the poor, more than the dangers of climate change, and even more than the bitter hatred that now separates us from each other, is our loss of any sense of truth, our facile denial of whatever truths we judge to be inconvenient, and our slogans of “fake news”, “alternate facts”, and phantom conspiracies. Social media, for all the good it has brought, has also created a platform for anyone to make up his or her own truth and then work at eroding the truths that bind us together and anchor our sanity. We now live in a world where two plus two often no longer equals four. This plays on our very sanity and has created as certain social insanity. The truths which anchor our common life are becoming unmoored.

This is evil, clearly, and Jesus alerts us to that by telling us that Satan is preeminently the *Prince of Lies*. Lying is the ultimate spiritual, moral, and psychological danger. It lies at the root of what Jesus calls the “unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit”. What’s this sin and why is it unforgivable?

Here’s the context within which Jesus warns us about this sin: He had just cast out a demon. The religious leaders of the time believed as a dogma in their faith that only someone who came from God could cast out a demon. Jesus had just cast out a demon, but their hatred of him made this a very inconvenient truth for them to swallow. So they chose to deny what they knew to be true, to deny reality. They chose to lie, affirming (even as they knew better) that Jesus had done it by the power of Beelzebub. Initially Jesus tried to point out the illogic of their position, but they persisted. It’s then that he issued his warning about the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. At that time he’s not accusing them of committing that sin, but he’s warning them that the path they are on, if not corrected, can lead to that sin. In essence, he’s saying this: if we tell a lie long enough, eventually we will believe it and this so warps our conscience that we begin to see truth as falsehood and falsehood as truth. The sin then becomes unforgivable because we no longer want to be forgiven nor indeed will accept forgiveness. God is willing to forgive the sin but we are unwilling to accept forgiveness because we see sin as good and goodness as sin. Why would we want forgiveness?

It’s possible to end up in this state, a state wherein we judge the gifts of the Holy Spirit (charity, joy, peace, patience, goodness, endurance, fidelity, mildness, and chastity) as false, as being against life, as a malevolent naiveté. And the first step in moving towards this condition is lying, refusing to acknowledge the truth. The subsequent steps also are lying, that is, the continued refusal to accept the truth so that eventually we believe our own lies and we see them as the truth and the truth as a lie. Bluntly put, that’s what constitutes hell.

Hell isn’t a place where one is sorrowful, repentant, and begging God for just one more chance to make things right. Nor is hell ever a nasty surprise waiting for an essentially honest person. If there’s anyone in hell, that person is there in arrogance, pitying people in heaven, seeing heaven as hell, darkness as light, falsehood as truth, evil as goodness, hatred as love, empathy as weakness, arrogance as strength, sanity as insanity, and God as the devil.

One of the central lessons in the gospels is this: lying is dangerous, the most dangerous of all sins. And this doesn't just play out in terms of our relationship with God and the Holy Spirit. When we lie we're not only playing fast and loose with God, we're also playing fast and loose with our own sanity. Our sanity is contingent on what classical theology terms the "Oneness" of God. What this means in lay terms is that God is consistent. There are no contradictions inside of God and because of that, reality can also be trusted to be consistent. Our sanity depends on that trust. For instance, should we ever arrive at a day where two plus two no longer equals four, then the very underpinnings of our sanity will be gone; we'll literally be unmoored. Our personal sanity and our social sanity depend upon the truth, upon us acknowledging the truth, upon us telling the truth, and upon two plus two forever equaling four.

Martin Luther once said: *sin boldly!* He meant a lot of things by that, but one thing he certainly did mean is that the ultimate spiritual and moral danger is to cover our weaknesses with lies because *Satan is the Prince of Lies!*

WHAT KIND OF HOUSE CAN YOU BUILD FOR ME?

OCTOBER 26, 2020

What's right and what's wrong? We fight a lot over moral issues, often with a self-assured righteousness. And mostly we fall into that same self-righteousness whenever we argue about sin. What constitutes a sin and what makes for a serious sin? Different Christian denominations and different schools of thought within them lean on various kinds of biblical and philosophical reasoning in trying to sort this out, often bitterly disagreeing with each other and provoking more anger than consensus.

Partly that's to be expected since moral questions must take into account the mystery of human freedom, the limitations inherent in human contingency, and the bewildering number of existential situations that vary from person to person. It's not easy in any given situation to tell what's right and what's wrong, and even more difficult to tell what's sinful and what's not.

Intending no offense to how our churches and moral thinkers have classically approached moral questions, I believe there's a better way to approach them that, more healthily, takes into account human freedom, human limitations,

and the singular existential situation of every individual. The approach isn't my own, but one voiced by the Prophet Isaiah who offers us this question from God: *What kind of house can you build for me?* (Isaiah 66, 1) That question should undergird our overall discipleship and all of our moral choices.

What kind of house can you build for me? Men and women of faith have generally taken this literally, and so from ancient times to this very day have built magnificent temples, shrines, churches, and cathedrals to show their faith in God. That's wonderful, but the invitation Isaiah voices is, first and foremost, about the kind of house we're meant to build inside ourselves. How do we enshrine the image and likeness of God inside our body, our intellect, our affectivity, our actions? What kind of "church" or "cathedral" is our very person? That's the deeper question in terms of moral living.

Beyond a very elementary level, our moral decision-making should no longer be guided by the question of right or wrong, is this sinful or not? Rather it should be guided and motivated by a higher question: *What kind of house can you build for me?* At what level do I want live out my humanity and my discipleship? Do I want to be more self-serving or more generous? Do I want to be petty or noble? Do I want to be self-pitying or big of heart? Do I want to live out my commitments in a fully honest fidelity or am I comfortable betraying others and myself in hidden ways? Do I want to be a saint or am I okay being mediocre?

At a mature level of discipleship (and human maturity) the question is no longer, is this right wrong? That's not love's question. Love's question is rather, how can I go deeper? At what level can I live out love, truth, light, and fidelity in my life?

Allow me a simple, earthy example to illustrate this. Consider the issue of sexual chastity: is masturbation wrong and sinful? I once heard a moral professor take a perspective on this which reflects the challenge of Isaiah. Here, in a paraphrase, is how he framed the issue: "I don't believe it's helpful to contextualize this question as did the classical moral theology texts, by saying it's a grave disorder and seriously sinful. Nor do I believe that it's helpful to say what our culture and much of contemporary psychology is saying, that it's morally indifferent. I believe that a more helpful way to approach this is not to look at it through the prism of right or wrong, sinful or not. Rather, ask yourself this: at what level do I want to live? At what level do I want to carry my chastity, my fidelity, and my honesty? At what point in my life do I

want to accept carrying more of the tension that both my discipleship and my humanity ask of me? What kind of person do I want to be? Do I want to be someone who is fully transparent or someone who has hidden goods under the counter? Do I want to live in full sobriety?" What kind of "temple" do I want to be? *What kind of house can I build for God?*

This, I believe, is the ideal way we should stand before the moral choices in our lives. Granted, this isn't a spirituality for persons whose moral development is so weak or impaired that they are struggling still with the more fundamental demands of the Ten Commandments. Such persons need remedial and therapeutic help, and that's a different (though needed) task.

And one further point, this moral choice comes to us, as do all the invitations from God, as an invitation, not as a threat. It's through love and not threat that God invites us into life and discipleship, always gently asking us: *what kind of house can you build for me?*

STRUCTURE, RITUAL, AND HABIT AS ANCHORING LOVE, PRAYER AND SERVICE

NOVEMBER 2, 2020

In his book, *The Second Mountain* David Brooks suggests that a key to sustaining fidelity in any vocation is to *build a structure of behavior for those moments when love falters*. He's right.

Anybody who has made a commitment to be faithful for the long haul inside a marriage, a friendship, a faith community, or a vocation to serve others, will need more than initial enthusiasm, bare-footed sincerity, affective energy, and good resolutions to sustain himself or herself on that road. It's one thing to have a honeymoon with someone, it's another to be in a marriage over many years. It's one thing to be an enthusiastic neophyte on a spiritual journey, it's another thing to remain faithful inside that journey for seventy or eighty years. And it's one thing to go out for a season and serve meals to the homeless, it's something else to be Dorothy Day.

So the question is: how do we sustain our initial enthusiasm, sincerity, affective energy, and good resolutions through the boredom, heartbreak, misunderstanding, tiredness, and temptations all of us will undergo in our lives,

whether that be in our marriage, our vocation, our church life, our prayer life, or our service to others?

That question was put to me recently, speaking to a group of young seminarians, I shared that I had just celebrated forty-eight years of ministry. The seminarians peppered me with questions: What's the secret? How do you get through the rough times? How do you sustain good intention, good will, and good energy year after year? How do you sustain your prayer life over forty or fifty years?

I answered with an insight from Dietrich Bonhoeffer who, whenever he officiated at a wedding, would tell the couple: *Today you are very much in love and think your love will sustain your marriage. It can't. But your marriage can sustain your love.* I advised the seminarians in the same way: don't trust your present enthusiasm and good energy to sustain your priesthood; let your priesthood sustain your enthusiasm and energy. What's at stake here?

A genuine commitment in faith, love, or service becomes a ritual container, an ark, like Noah's, that existentially locks you in. And the fact that you're locked in is exactly what makes the commitment work. You enter naïvely, believing that your good feelings and affective energies will sustain you. They won't. Inevitably they will be worn down by time, familiarity, boredom, misunderstanding, tiredness, wound, and new obsessions that emotionally tempt you elsewhere. So how can you sustain yourself in a commitment through periods of dryness? David Brook's answer is a good one – *by building a structure of behavior for exactly those moments.*

How do you do that? Through routine, ritual, and habit. Anchor your person and your commitment in ritual habits that steady and hold you beyond your feelings on any given day. Set rituals for yourself, certain ritual behaviors, which you will do regularly no matter how you feel.

For me, as a priest, some of these are pre-set. As a priest, you are to daily pray the Office of the Church as a prayer for the world, no matter how you feel. You are to celebrate the Eucharist for others regularly, irrespective of whether or not this is personally meaningful to you on any given day. You are to do some private prayer daily, particularly when you don't feel like it. The list goes on. These rituals give you structure and healthy routines, and they are needed because in the priesthood as in every other vocation, there are times of fervor when feelings are enough to sustain you; however there are

also desert times, bitter times, angry times, times when love falters. It's then that a structure of behavior can steady and sustain you.

The same holds true for marriage. Couples have to build a structure of behavior for those times when love falters. To name one such ritual: a wife and husband need to have some ritual expression of affection when they wish each other a good day as they part each morning, no matter their emotions and feelings on a given day. That ritual is a container, an ark, which locks them in and holds them together until a better season and better feelings return. Ritual can sustain love when it falters.

In understanding this, we need beware of "Job's friends", that is, beware of the various books and gurus on spirituality, prayer, and marriage that give you the impression there's something wrong with you if your enthusiasm and emotional affectivity are not the glue that daily sustains you in your commitment. Simply put, these are books written by spiritual novices and marriage manuals written by someone confusing a honeymoon for a marriage. Enthusiasm and good feelings are wonderful, but they can't sustain you through a marathon. For a marathon you need to have long-practiced strategies to carry you through the long tiring miles in the middle and at the end.

THE LAW OF GRAVITY AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

NOVEMBER 9, 2020

God is erotically charged and the world is achingly amorous, hence they caress each other in mutual attraction and filiation.

Jewish philosopher Martin Buber made that assertion, and while it seems to perfectly echo the opening line of St. Augustine's autobiography ("You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.") it hints at something more. St. Augustine was talking about an insatiable ache inside the human heart which keeps us restless and forever aware that everything we experience is not enough because the finite unceasingly aches for the infinite, and the infinite unceasingly lures the finite. But St. Augustine was speaking of the human heart, about the restlessness and pull towards God that's felt there.

Martin Buber is talking about that too, but he's also talking about a restlessness, an incurable pull towards God, that's inside all of nature, inside the universe itself. It isn't just people who are achingly amorous, it's the whole world, all of nature, the universe itself.

What's being said here? In essence, Buber is saying that what's felt inside the human heart is also present inside every element within nature itself, in atoms, molecules, stones, plants, insects, and animals. There's the same ache for God inside everything that exists, from a dead planet, to a black hole, to a redwood tree, to our pet dogs and cats, to the heart of a saint. And in that there's no distinction between the spiritual and the physical. The one God who made both is drawing them both in the same way.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who was both a scientist and a mystic, believed this interplay between the energy flowing from an erotically charged God and that flowing back from an amorous world, is the energy that undergirds the very structure of the universe, physical and spiritual. For Teilhard, the law of gravity, atomic activity, photosynthesis, ecosystems, electromagnetic fields, animal instinct, sexuality, human friendship, creativity, and altruism, all draw on and manifest one and the same energy, an energy that is forever drawing all things towards each other. If that is true, and it is, then ultimately the law of gravity and the Holy Spirit are part of one and the same energy, one and the same law, one and the same interplay of eros and response.

At first glance it may seem rather unorthodox theologically to put people and physical nature on the same plane. Perhaps too, it some might find it offensive to speak of God as "erotically charged". So let me address those concerns.

In terms of God relating to physical nature, orthodox Christian theology and our scriptures affirm that God's coming to us in Christ in the incarnation is an event not just for people, but also for physical creation itself. When Jesus says he has come to save the world he is, in fact, talking about the world and not just the people in the world. Physical creation, no less than humanity, is God's child and God intends to redeem all of his children. Christian theology has never taught that the world will be destroyed at the end of time, but rather (as St. Paul says) physical creation will be transformed and enter into the glorious liberty of the children of God. How will the physical world go to heaven? We don't know; though we can't conceptualize how we will go there either. But we know this: the Christ who took on flesh in the incarnation is

also the Cosmic Christ, that is, the Christ through whom all things were made and who binds all creation together. Hence theologians speak of “deep incarnation”, namely, of the Christ-event as going deeper than simply saving human beings, as saving physical creation itself.

I can appreciate too that there will be some dis-ease in my speaking of God as “erotic”, given that today we generally identify that word with sex. But that’s not the meaning of the word. For the Greek philosophers, from whom we took this word, *eros* was identified with love, and with love in all its aspects. *Eros* did mean sexual attraction and emotional obsession, but it also meant friendship, playfulness, creativity, common sense, and altruism. *Eros*, properly understood, includes all of those elements, so even if we identify *eros* with sexuality, there still should be no discomfort in applying this to God. We are made in the image and likeness of God, and thus our sexuality reflects something inside the nature of God. A God who is generative enough to create billions of galaxies and is continually creating billions of people, clearly is sexual and fertile in ways beyond our conception. Moreover, the relentless ache inside of every element and person in the universe for unity with something beyond itself has one and the same thing in mind, consummation in love with God who is Love.

So, in reality, the law of gravity and the gifts of the Holy Spirit have one and the same aim.

CAN THE GROUND CRY OUT?

NOVEMBER 16, 2020

Does the earth feel pain? Can it groan and cry out to God? Can the earth curse us for our crimes?

It would seem so, and not just because ecologists, moralists, and Pope Francis are saying so. Scripture itself seems to say so.

There are some very revealing lines in the exchange between Cain and God, after Cain had murdered his brother Abel. Asked where his brother was, Cain tells God that he doesn’t know and that he’s not responsible for his brother. But God says to him: *Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are cursed from the ground which has opened its mouth to receive*

your brother's blood from your hand. When you will till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength.

Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground ... and from now on the ground will curse you! Is this a metaphor or a literal truth? Is the ground we walk on, till and plant seeds in, build highways and parking lots over, and call "Mother Earth, nothing other than simple dumb, lifeless, speechless, brute matter which is totally immune to the suffering and pain that humans and other sentient beings feel or indeed to the violence we sometimes inflict on it? Can the earth cry out to God in frustration and pain? Can it curse us?

A recent, wonderfully provocative book by Mark L. Wallace entitled *When God was a Bird – Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the Word* would say, yes, the world can and does feel pain and it can and does curse us for causing that pain. For Wallace, what God says to Cain about the earth crying out because it is soaked in murderous blood is more than a metaphor, more than just a spiritual teaching. It also expresses an ontological truth in that there is a real causal link between moral degeneration and ecological degeneration. We're not the only ones who bear the consequences of sin, so too does the earth.

Here's how Wallace puts it: "The earth is not dumb matter, an inanimate object with no capacity of feeling and sentiment, but a spirited and vulnerable living being who experiences the terrible and catastrophic loss of Abel's death. Its heart is broken and its mouth agape, Earth 'swallows', in the text's startling imagery, mouthfuls of Abel's blood. ... Bubbling up from the red earth, Abel's cries signal not only that Cain had murdered his brother but that he has done lasting, perhaps irreparable, violence to the earth as well. ... [Now] wounded and bloodied, Earth strikes back. Earth has its revenge. Earth does not passively acquiesce to Cain's attacks and stand by and watch his gory rampage proceed with impunity. On the contrary, Earth retaliates and 'inflicts a curse' on Cain by 'withholding its bounty' from this farmer-killer who now must roam the land unprotected and without security." The earth now refuses to give its bounty to Cain.

What Wallace affirms here is predicated on two beliefs, both true. First, everyone and everything on this planet, sentient and non-sentient being alike, are all part of one and the same supreme living organism within which every part ultimately affects all the other parts in a real way. Second, whenever we

treat the earth (or each other) badly, the earth retaliates and withholds its strength and bounty from us, not just metaphorically but in a very real way.

Perhaps no one puts this more poignantly than John Steinbeck did some eighty years ago in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Describing how the soil which produces our food is now worked over by massive steel tractors and huge impersonal machines that, in effect, are the very antithesis of a woman or man lovingly coaxing a garden into growth, he writes: *And when that crop grew, and was harvested, no man had crumpled a hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips. No man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth. And men ate when they had not raised, had no connection with the bread. The land bore under iron, and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had not prayers or curses.*

When Jesus says that the measure we measure out is the measure that will be measured back to us, he's not just speaking of a certain law of karma within human relationships where kindness will be met with kindness, generosity with generosity, pettiness with pettiness, and violence with violence. He's also speaking about our relationship to Mother Earth. The more our houses, cars, and factories continue to breathe out carbon monoxide, the more we will inhale carbon monoxide. And the more we continue to do violence to the earth and to each other, the more the earth will withhold its bounty and strength from us and we will feel the curse of Cain in violent storms, deadly viruses, and cataclysmic upheavals.

AN INVITATION TO MATURITY – WEEPING OVER JERUSALEM

NOVEMBER 23, 2020

Maturity has various levels. Basic maturity is defined as having essentially outgrown the instinctual selfishness with which we were born so that our motivation and actions are now shaped by the needs of others and not just by our own needs. That's the basic minimum, the low bar for maturity. After that there are degrees and levels, contingent upon how much our motivation and actions are altruistic rather than selfish.

In the Gospels, Jesus invites us to ever deeper degrees of maturity, though sometimes we can miss the invitation because it presents itself subtly and not as explicitly worded moral invitation. One such subtle, but very deep, invitation to a higher degree of maturity is given in the incident where Jesus weeps over Jerusalem. What's inside this image?

Here's the image and its setting. Jesus has just been rejected, both in his person and in his message and he sees clearly the pain the people will bring upon themselves by that rejection. What's his reaction? Does he react in the way most of us would: *Well the hell with you! I hope you suffer the full consequences of your own stupidity!* No. He weeps, like a loving parent dealing with a wayward child; he wishes with every fiber in his being that he could save them from the consequences of their own bad choices. He feels their wound rather than gleefully contemplating their suffering.

There's a double challenge here. First, there's a personal one: are we gleeful when people who reject our advice suffer for their wrong-headedness or do we weep inside us for the pain they have brought onto themselves? When we see the consequences in people's lives of their own bad choices, be it with irresponsibility, with laziness, with drugs, with sex, with abortion, with ideology, with anti-religious attitudes, or with bad will, are we gleeful when those choices begin to snake-bite them (*Well, you got what you deserved!*) or do we weep for them, for their misfortune?

Admittedly, it's hard not be gleeful when someone who rejects what we stand for is then snake-bitten by his own stubborn choice. It's the natural way the heart works and so empathy can demand a very high degree of maturity. For example, during this Covid-19 pandemic, medical experts (almost without exception) have been telling us to wear masks to protect others and ourselves. What's our spontaneous reaction when someone defies that warning, thinks he is smarter than the doctors, doesn't wear a mask, and then contracts the virus? Do we secretly bask in the cathartic satisfaction that he got what he deserved or do we, metaphorically, "weep over Jerusalem"?

Beyond the challenge to each of us to move towards a higher level of maturity, this image also contains an important pastoral challenge for the church. How do we, as a church, see a secularized world that has rejected many of our beliefs and values? When we see the consequences the world is paying for this are we gleeful or sympathetic? Do we see the secularized world with all the problems it is bringing onto itself by its rejection of some

Gospel values as an adversary (someone from whom we need to protect ourselves) or as our own suffering child? If you're a parent or grandparent who's suffering over a wayward child or grandchild you probably understand what it means to "weep over Jerusalem".

Moreover the struggle to "weep over" our secularized world (or over anyone who rejects what we stand for) is compounded by yet another dynamic which militates against sympathy. There's a perverse emotional and psychological propensity inside us which works this way. Whenever we are hurting badly we need to blame someone, need to be angry at someone, and need to lash out at someone. And you know who we always pick for that? Someone we feel safe enough to hurt because we know that he or she is mature enough not to hit back!

There's a lot of lashing out at the Church today. Granted, there are a lot of legitimate reasons for this. Given the church's shortcomings, part of that hostility is justified; but some of that hostility often goes beyond what's justified. Along with the legitimate anger there's sometimes a lot of free-floating, gratuitous anger. What's our reaction to that unjustified anger and unfair accusation? Do we react in kind? "*You are way out of line here, go take that anger elsewhere!* Or, like Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, can we meet unfair anger and accusation with tears of empathy and a prayer that a world that's angry with us will be spared the pain of its own bad choices?

Soren Kierkegaard famously wrote: *Jesus wants followers, not admirers!* Wise words. In Jesus' reaction to his own rejection, his weeping over Jerusalem, we see the epitome of human maturity. To this we are called, personally and as an ecclesial community. We also see there that a big heart feels the pain of others, even of those others who reject you.

OUR WOUNDS, OUR GIFTS, AND OUR POWER TO HEAL OTHERS

NOVEMBER 30, 2020

Nearly fifty years ago Henri Nouwen wrote a book entitled, *The Wounded Healer*. Its reception established his reputation as unique spiritual mentor and he went on to become one of the most influential spiritual writers of the

past half-century. What made his writings so powerful? His brilliance? His gift for expression? He was gifted, yes, but so are many others. What set him apart was that he was a deeply wounded man and from that disquieted place inside him issued forth words that were a healing balm to millions.

How does this work? How do our wounds help heal others? They don't. It's not our wounds that help heal others. Rather our wounds can color our gifts and talents in such a way so that they no longer educe resistance and envy in others but instead become what God meant them to be, gifts to grace others.

Sadly, the opposite is often true. Our gifts and talents often become the reason we're disliked and perhaps even hated. There's a curious dynamic here. We don't automatically, nor easily, let the gifts of others grace us. More often, we're reluctant to admit their beauty and power and we resist and envy those who possess them and sometimes even hate them for their gifts. That's one of the reasons we find it hard to simply admire someone.

But this reluctance in us doesn't just say something about us. Often it says something too about the persons who possess those gifts. Talent is an ambiguous thing, it can be used to assert ourselves, to separate ourselves from others, to stand out and to stand above, rather than as a gift to help others. Our talents can be used simply to point to how bright, talented, good-looking, and successful we are. Then they simply become a strength meant to dwarf others and set ourselves apart.

How can we make our talents a gift for others? How can we be loved for our talents rather than hated for them? Here's the difference: we will be loved and admired for our gifts when our gifts are colored by our wounds so that others do not see them as a threat or as something that sets us apart but rather as something that gifts them in their own shortcomings. When shared in a certain way, our gifts can become gifts for everyone else.

Here's how that algebra works: Our gifts are given us not for ourselves but for others. But, to be that, they need to be colored by compassion. We come to compassion by letting our wounds befriend our gifts. Here are two examples.

When Princess Diana died in 1997 there was a massive outpouring of love for her. Both by temperament and as a Catholic priest, I'm normally not given to grieving over celebrities, yet I felt a deep sorrow and love for this woman.

Why? Because she was beautiful and famous? Not that. Many women who are beautiful and famous and are hated for it. Princess Diana was loved by so many because she was a wounded person, someone whose wounds colored her beauty and fame in a way that induced love, not envy.

Henri Nouwen, who popularized the phrase, “the wounded healer” shared a similar trait. He was a brilliant man, the author of more than forty books, one of the most popular religious speakers of his generation, tenured at both Harvard and Yale, a person with friends all over the world; but also a deeply wounded man who, by his own repeated admission, suffered restlessness, anxiety, jealousies, and obsessions that occasionally landed him in a clinic. As well, by his own repeated admission, amidst this success and popularity, for most of his adult life he struggled to simply accept love. His wounds forever got in the way. And this, his wounded self, colors basically every page of every book he wrote. His brilliance was forever colored by his wounds and that’s why it was never self-assertive but always compassionate. No one envied Nouwen’s brilliance; he was too wounded to be envied. Instead, his brilliance always touched us in a healing way. He was a wounded healer.

Those words, wounded and healer, ordain each other. I’m convinced that God calls each of us to a vocation and to a special work here on earth more on the basis of our wounds than on the basis of our gifts. Our gifts are real and important; but they only grace others when they are shaped into a special kind of compassion by the uniqueness of our own wounds. Our unique, special wounds can help make each of us a unique, special healer.

Our world is full of brilliant, talented, highly-successful, and beautiful people. Those gifts are real, come from God, and should never be denigrated in God’s name. However, our gifts don’t automatically help others; but they can if they are colored by our wounds so that they flow out as compassion and not as pride.

FROM SAINT TARCISIUS TO PEOPLE MAGAZINE: OUR EVOLUTION IN ADMIRATION AND IMITATION

DECEMBER 7, 2020

When I was a young boy growing up in a Catholic community, the catechesis of the time tried to inspire the hearts of the young with stories of martyrs, saints, and other people who lived out high ideals in terms of virtue and faith. I remember one story in particular that caught my imagination and inspired me, the story of a third-century Christian martyr, St. Tarcisus.

As legend (or truth) has it, Tarcisus was a twelve-year-old acolyte during the time of the early Christian persecutions. At that time, Christians in Rome were celebrating the Eucharist in secret in the catacombs. After those secret masses someone, a deacon or an acolyte, would carry the Eucharistic species, the Blessed Sacrament, to the sick and to prisoners. One day, after one of those secret masses, young Tarcisus was carrying the Blessed Sacrament on route to a prison when he was accosted by a mob. He refused to hand over the Blessed Sacrament, protected it with his own body, and was beaten to death as a result.

As a twelve-year-old boy that story enflamed my romantic imagination. I wanted to have that kind of high ideal in my life. In my young imagination, Tarcisus was the ultimate hero whom I wanted to be like.

We've come a long way from there, both in our culture and in our churches. We're no longer moved romantically much by either the saints of old or the saints of today. Yes, we still make an official place for them in our churches and in our highest ideals, but now we're moved romantically much more by the lives of the rich, the famous, the beautiful, the pop stars, the professional athletes, the physically gifted, and the intellectually gifted. It's they who now enflame our imaginations, draw our admiration, and who we most like to imitate.

In the early nineteenth century, Alban Butler, an English convert, collected stories of the lives of the saints and eventually set them together in twelve-volume set, famously known as *Butler's Lives of the Saints*. For nearly two hundred years, these books inspired Christians, young and old. No longer. Today, *Butler's Lives of the Saints* has effectively been replaced by *People* magazine,

Sports Illustrated, *Rolling Stone*, *Time* magazine, and the multiple other magazines which chronicle the lives of the rich and famous and stare out at us from every newsstand and grocery-store check-out line.

In effect, we have moved: from St. Tarcisius to Justin Bieber; from Therese of Lisieux to Taylor Swift; from Thomas Aquinas to Tom Brady; from St. Monica to Meryl Streep; from St. Augustine to Mark Zuckerberg; from Julian of Norwich to Marianne Williamson; and from the first African American saint, St. Martin de Porres, to LeBron James. It's these people who are now enflaming our romantic imagination and inviting our imitation.

Don't get me wrong, it's not that these people are bad or that there's anything wrong with admiring them. Indeed, we owe them some admiration because all beauty and talent take their origin in God who is the author of all good things. From a saint's virtue, to a movie star's physical beauty, to an athlete's grace, there's only one author at the origin of all that grace, God. Thomas Aquinas once rightly pointed out that to withhold a compliment from someone who deserves it is a sin because we are withholding food from someone who needs it to live on. Beauty, talent, and grace need to be recognized and acknowledged. Admiration is not the issue. The issue rather is that while we need to admire and acknowledge the gifts of the talented and the beautiful, these are not always the lives we should be imitating, unless they also radiate virtue and saintliness. We shouldn't too easily identify human grace with moral virtue. But that's a problem.

As well, one of the weaknesses in our churches today is that while we have vastly upgraded and refined our intellectual imagination and now have better and healthier theological and biblical studies, we struggle to touch hearts. We struggle to get people to fall in love with their faith and especially with their church. We struggle to enflame their romantic imagination as we once did by invoking the lives of the saints.

Where might we go with all of this? Can we find again saints to enflame our ideals? Can the fine work done today by Robert Ellsberg on hagiography (on the lives of the saints and other moral giants who have passed before us) become the new *Butler's Lives of the Saints*? Can secular biographies of some moral giants in our own age draw our imitation? Is there a St. Tarcisius out there who can inspire the young?

Today, more than ever, we need inspiring stories about women and men, young and old, who have lived out heroic virtue. Without such ideals to emulate, we too quickly identify moral virtue with human grace and deprive ourselves of higher spiritual ideals.

THE ILLUSION OF INVULNERABILITY

DECEMBER 14, 2020

Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. That's a pious axiom that doesn't always hold up. Sometimes the bad time comes and we don't learn anything. Hopefully this present bad time, Covid-19, will teach us something and make us stronger. My hope is that Covid-19 will teach us something that previous generations didn't need to be taught but already knew through their lived experience; namely, that we're not invulnerable, that we aren't exempt from the threat of sickness, debilitation, and death. In short, all that our contemporary world can offer us in terms of technology, medicine, nutrition, and insurance of every kind, doesn't exempt us from fragility and vulnerability. Covid-19 has taught us that. Just like everyone else who has ever walked this earth, we're vulnerable.

I'm old enough to have known a previous generation when most people lived with a lot of fear, not all of it healthy, but all of it real. Life was fragile. Giving birth to a child could mean your death. A flu or virus could kill you and you had little defense against it. You could die young from heart disease, cancer, diabetes, bad sanitation, and dozens of other things. And nature itself could pose a threat. Storms, hurricanes, tornadoes, drought, pestilence, lightning, these were all to be feared because we were mostly helpless against them. People lived with a sense that life and health were fragile, not to be taken for granted.

But then along came vaccinations, penicillin, better hospitals, better medicines, safer childbirth, better nutrition, better housing, better sanitation, better roads, better cars, and better insurance against everything from loss of work, to drought, to storms, to pestilence, to disasters of any kind. And along with that came an ever-increasing sense that we're safe, protected, secure, different than previous generations, able to take care of ourselves, no longer as vulnerable as were the generations before us.

And to a large extent that's true, at least in terms of our physical health and safety. In many ways, we're far less vulnerable than previous generations. But, as Covid-19 has made evident, this is not a fully safe harbor. Despite much denial and protest, we've had to accept that we now live as did everyone before us, that is, as unable to guarantee own health and safety. For all the dreadful things Covid-19 has done to us, it has helped dispel an illusion, the illusion of our own invulnerability. We're fragile, vulnerable, mortal.

At first glance, this seems like a bad thing; it's not. Disillusionment is the dispelling of an illusion and we have for too long (and too glibly) been living an illusion, that is, living under a pall of false enchantment which has us believing that the threats of old no longer have power to touch us. And how wrong we are! As of the time of this writing there are 70.1 million Covid-19 cases reported worldwide and there have been more than 1.6 million reported deaths from this virus. Moreover the highest rates of infection and death have been in those countries we would think most invulnerable, countries that have the best hospitals and highest standards of medicine to protect us. That should be a wake-up call. For all the good things our modern and post-modern world can give us, in the end it can't protect us from everything, even as it gives us the sense that it can.

Covid-19 has been a game-changer; it has dispelled an illusion, that of our own invulnerability. What's to be learned? In short, that our generation must take its place with all other generations, recognizing that we cannot take life, health, family, work, community, travel, recreation, freedom to gather, and freedom to go to church, for granted. Covid-19 has taught us that we're not the Lord of life and that fragility is still the lot of everyone, even in a modern and post-modern world.

Classical Christian theology and philosophy have always taught that as humans we are not self-sufficient. Only God is. Only God is "Self-sufficient Being" (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, in classical philosophy). The rest of us are contingent, dependent, interdependent ... and mortal enough to fear the next appointment with our doctor. Former generations, because they lacked our medical knowledge, our doctors, our hospitals, our standards of hygiene, our medicines, our vaccines, and our antibiotics, existentially felt their contingency. They knew they weren't self-sufficient and that life and health could not be taken for granted. I don't envy them some of the false fear that came with that, but I do envy them not living under a pall of false security. Our

contemporary world, for all the good things it gives us, has lulled us asleep in terms of our fragility, vulnerability, and mortality. Covid-19 is a wake-up call, not just to the fact that we're vulnerable, but especially to the fact that we may not take for granted the precious gifts of health, family, work, community, travel, recreation, freedom to gather, and (yes) even of going to church.

CHRISTMAS AS SHATTERING THE CONTAINERS OF OUR EXPECTATIONS

DECEMBER 21, 2020

Funny how God invariably shatters the containers of our expectations. We have a notion of how God should act and God ends up acting in a way that shatters all of those expectations and yet fulfills our expectations in a deeper way. That's certainly true of what happened in Bethlehem at the first Christmas.

For centuries, men and women of faith, aware of their helplessness to rectify everything that's wrong in life, had been praying for God to come to earth as a Messiah, a Savior, to clean up the earth and right all that's wrong with it. Exactly how this was to happen was perhaps more of an inchoate longing for justice, a hungry hope, than any kind of clear vision, at least until the great Jewish prophets came along. Eventually prophets like Isaiah began to articulate a vision of what would happen when the Messiah came. In these visions, the Messiah would usher in a "Messianic Age", a new time, when everything would be made right. There would be prosperity for the poor, healing for the sick, freedom from every type of enslavement, and justice for all (including punishment for the wicked). The poor and the meek would inherit the earth because the long-sought Messiah would simply overpower all evil, drive the wicked off the face of the earth, and make all things right.

And after all those centuries of waiting, of longing, what did we get? What did we get? A helpless, naked baby, unable to feed himself. That wasn't the way anyone expected this to happen. They had expected a Superhuman, a Superstar, someone whose muscle, intellect, physical stature, invulnerability, and invincibility would simply dwarf all the powers on the planet in a way that there could be no argument, no resistance, no standing against its presence.

That's still the way, mostly, we fantasize how God's power should work in our world. But, as we know from the first Christmas, that's not normally the way God works. What was revealed in Bethlehem is that normally we meet the presence and power of God in our world as a helpless infant lying in the straw, vulnerable, seemingly powerless, touching us subliminally.

Why? Why doesn't the all-powerful Creator of the universe flex more muscle? Why is God normally revealed more in the body of an infant than in that of Superstar? Why? Because the power of God works to melt hearts rather than break them, and that's what vulnerability and helplessness can do. That's what infants can do. God's power, at least God's power to draw us into intimacy with each other, doesn't normally work through might, muscles, and cool (invulnerability). It works through a lot of things, but it works with a special power through vulnerability and helplessness. Intimacy is predicated on vulnerability. You cannot overpower another person so as to make him or her love you, unless you overpower his or her heart the way an infant does. We can seduce each other through attractiveness, draw admiration through our talents, and intimidate each other through superior strength, but none of these will ultimately provide the basis for a shared community of life for long ... but the powerlessness and innocence of a baby can provide that.

God's power, like a baby sleeping in its crib, lies in our world as a quiet invitation, not as a threat or coercion. When Christ took on flesh in our world in Bethlehem two thousand years ago and then died seemingly helpless on a cross in Jerusalem some thirty years later, this is what was revealed: the God who is incarnated in Jesus Christ enters into human suffering rather than stands clear of it, is in solidarity with us rather than standing apart from us, manifests that the route to glory is downward rather than upward, stands with the poor and powerless rather than with the rich and powerful, invites rather than coerces, and is more manifest in a baby than in a superstar.

But that isn't always easy to grasp, nor accept. We are often frustrated and impatient with God who, as scripture tells, can seem slow to act. Jesus promised that the poor and the meek would inherit the earth and this seems forever belied by what's actually happening in the world. The rich are getting richer and the poor don't seem to be inheriting much. What good does a helpless infant do apropos to this? Where do we see messianic power acting?

Well, again the containers of our expectations need to be shattered. What does it mean "to inherit the earth"? To be a superstar? To be rich and famous?

To have power over others? To walk into a room and be instantly recognized and admired as being significant and important? Is that the way we “inherit the earth”? Or, do we “inherit the earth” when a coldness is melted in our hearts and we are brought back to our primal goodness by the smile of a baby?

MY TOP TEN BOOKS FOR 2020

DECEMBER 28, 2020

When St. Augustine said that “concerning taste there can be no dispute”, he was only partially right. Admittedly, taste always has a subjective aspect; but there’s always an objective component as well: objectively, a cheap soda is not a fine wine, millions of musical compositions are not Mozart, and the picture that your kindergarten child drew for your birthday is not a Van Gogh.

With that being said as an apologia, I admit that my selection of these ten books has a strongly subjective factor. These are simply the books that spoke most deeply to me this past year. Perhaps they won’t do the same for you. Nonetheless, I assure you that none of them is a cheap soda or a crayon picture a child drew for your birthday.

Which ten books spoke to me most deeply this past year?

1. Clare Carlisle, *Philosopher of the Heart, The Restless Life of Soren Kierkegaard*. If you’ve never read a good introduction to the life and work of Soren Kierkegaard, this is your book. It’s a unique combination of scholarship, clear writing, criticism of, and sympathy for Kierkegaard.
2. Michael J. Buckley, *What Do You Seek? The Questions of Jesus as Challenge and Promise*. Among the books I read this year, this book challenged me the most personally. Buckley, who died in 2019, shines a light into your soul and shows where the both the challenge and promise of Jesus lie.
3. Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*. First published in 1966, this book only found me this year. An ordained Presbyterian minister, Buechner is theologian, poet, philosopher, novelist, and essayist and always worth the read, particularly this book. Some rare insights.
4. Mark Wallace, *When God was a Bird – Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World*. As Christians we believe that God wrote two

books: the Bible and the world of nature. As Christians, we have both books; animists and pagans have just the one book, the book of nature. Wallace submits that it's time (both for a fuller understanding of our own faith and for a healthier relationship to the natural world) for us as Christians to take the book of nature more seriously and be less afraid of animism. His insights will stretch you but keep you solid doctrinally.

5. Gerhard Lohfink, *Prayer Takes Us Home, The Theology and Practice of Christian Prayer*. Gerhard Lohfink is a German biblical scholar and always worth reading. This is his fourth book in English and, like his others, it as a rare combination of scholarship, personal faith, and good clear writing.

6. Muriel Barbery, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*. This is a novel written in 2006 that's full of insight, wit, and surprise. Not for you if you're looking for action. This is staring at a work of art, but asking yourself repeatedly, how could its creator be that clever?

7. Marilynne Robinson, *Jack*. Time magazine lists her as one of the 100 most influential people in America and that's true, certainly for my own life. Marilynne Robinson is a highly acclaimed novelist and a deeply insightful religious writer. This book, *Jack*, will demand a little patience on your part. Don't give up on it because nothing moves in the first 50 pages. In the end, the book will move you.

8. Helen Prejean, *River of Fire, My Spiritual Journey*. The author of *Dead Man Walking* shares her autobiography. This is the conversion story of an exceptional woman who, it would seem, didn't need a conversion. Candid, honest, deep.

9. Lyn Cowan, *Portrait of the Blue Lady, The Character of Melancholy*. Another book that was written sixteen years ago but only found me this year. It's a book on melancholy written by a brilliant Jungian and mythologist. Here's a taste: "Melancholy has even lost its name: melancholy is now 'depression', clinicalized, pathologized, and undifferentiated from the blue 'melancholy' formerly recognized by poets, philosophers, blues singers and doctors alike, now experienced as a 'treatable illness' rather than a difficult, often painful affliction of the soul that is not an illness and doesn't want treatment." For Cowan, melancholy is your inroad to befriending the deeper parts of your soul.

10. Ira Byock, *The Four Things that Matter Most*. First published in 2004, this is a very popular book that deserves to be popular. Byock gives his whole thesis in the book's opening sentence. The four most important things you will ever say are: *Please forgive me. I forgive you. Thank you. I love you.* These

are words people tend to utter on their deathbeds. However, as Byock urges, it is best to start saying them long before our loved ones gather round our deathbed. The saddest words we say? *“It might have been!”*

Beyond these ten books, I also highly recommend Pope Francis’ new Encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*.

These are the ten books that spoke deeply to me this year. I can’t guarantee they will do that for you. But I can guarantee that none of them is a cheap soda!