

A WORLD LIVES IN ME

The Presbyterian theologian and author, Frederick Buechner, wrote:

“You can kiss your family and friends good-bye and put miles between you, but, at the same time, you carry them with you in your heart, your mind, your stomach, because you do not just live in a world, but the world lives in you.”¹

How true that has been for me! I did kiss my family good-bye in Chicago and put miles between them and myself. I went off to the Vincentian seminary in Missouri where we were not allowed to return home until after ordination to the priesthood: nine years! Yes, the family could come and visit us for one week a year, but we could not leave the seminary grounds, not even to go and have a hamburger with them. Ed, my sister Jeanne’s husband, said that it was a “concentration camp.” Although the first time I heard his remark, I did not like it; but he had a point.

During those nine years, I missed a lot of family activities, but especially my brother and five sisters growing up. And I missed my mom and stepdad! I waited for letters from my mom which were not as frequent as I would have liked.

I must say, in defense of the seminary, during the first two years -- our novitiate (two-year spiritual boot camp) -- we had to write home once a week. My mom said that she had to have my sisters to translate my poor handwriting! She wrote very clearly.

My priestly assignments also put miles between the family and myself. In the early years of priesthood, we were not allowed to go home for family celebrations, except a funeral of our parents or siblings. My oldest sister, Rosemary, used to haunt me for not being able to witness her marriage. Of course, there was also another problem...little money was available. During my first assignment, I received ten dollars a month for

¹ Telling the Truth by Frederick Buechner

my own use. Two dollars of that money went for my monthly haircut; I could get a flattop for that price. The next assignment brought me twenty dollars a month.

What I discovered over the years is: I did carry my family and friends in my heart and mind. I do not just live in a world, but a world lives in me.

I have been blessed over the years. I have lived in different cities of this great world. I have met so many people and made friends in numerous locations. These form the world that lives in me. It is a world to be thankful for. Amazingly, that world keeps expanding.

My family lives from the Bronx to Orange, from Phoenix to Atlanta to Charlotte, from Nashville to Chicago to Milwaukee to Fort Worth.

The world lives in me. People live in me.

What about your world? Does it live in you?

THE SABBATH

I like what the late Pope Benedict XVI said about the Sabbath. I think the insights are thought-provoking and worthy of our reflection.

“We read in the Book of Genesis that God rested on the seventh day.”

As Rabbi Jacob Neusner says:

“On that day we celebrate creation.”

“Not working on the Sabbath stands for more than nit-picking ritual. It is a way of imitating God.”

Those are two positive ways of understanding the Sabbath and celebrating it. The Sabbath is a way of resting. It is not enough merely not to work, but also to rest. Resting means more than just sitting in our favorite chair and munching on chips and dip; it means re-forming family life one day a week: The Sabbath.

The Sabbath is more than a matter of personal piety; it has a social dimension. As Rabbi Neusner says:

“This day...
makes eternal Israel what it is, the people that, like
God in creating the world, rest from creation on the
Seventh Day.”

Pope Benedict explored how salutary it would be for our society today if families designated one day a week to stay together and make their home the dwelling place and the fulfillment of communion in God’s rest.

Do you agree?

Is the Sabbath just a free day for the mail person or more heavy work?

Does your family enjoy each other’s activity on the Sabbath?

Do you have a sit-down special meal together?

HOLY INDIFFERENCE

One day, while in seminary formation, I told Father Dan Martin that I was “holy indifferent” and he shot back, “Then you are a “spiritual coward.” Is holy indifference the same as spiritual cowardice? There is a big difference between the two. For one thing, one is positive, the other, negative.

Whether it is “holy” or “wholly” indifference, it involves genuine concern. The concern is to conform as perfectly as possible our will with God’s will and be willing to follow that will unconditionally and wholeheartedly. The desired outcome? That our will and God’s will coincide. According to Saint Vincent de Paul, that is holiness.

A story from the life of Saint Martin of Tours exemplifies holy indifference.

Saint Martin called for his brother priests and followers and told them that he was dying. After all, he was 81 years old, and life in rural France had not been easy. They reacted immediately. They had a bunch of reasons: You cannot desert us; who will care for us? There are wolves out there that will attack us.

And their clincher (they thought):

We know that you long to be with Christ, but your reward is certain and will not be any less for being delayed. This touched Saint Martin’s heart. He looked to God: “Lord, if your people still need me, I am ready for the task; your will be done.”

Death could not defeat him, nor toil dismay him.

He was quite without a preference of his own; he neither feared to die nor refused to live.”²

Living or Dying – Which One?

² Epist. 14-17, 21: SC 133, 336-344.

Saint Paul was at that point in his life where he knew in the recesses of his heart that “for to me living is Christ and dying is gain.”³

Saint Paul had this incredible, personal relationship with the risen Christ. And, besides, he had had a vision of heaven.⁴ He knew what was in store for him; there was never any doubt.

The dilemma: which to choose? For Saint Paul, death meant being with Christ Jesus. It meant the end of hardships, pain and suffering, difficulties, and disappointments. Life meant staying alive and continuing his ministry, the mission of Jesus.

A question...Can death be a type of selfishness? Can wanting to die be our desire to escape pain and suffering, hardships, and problems?

I walked into the ICU Unit at Mercy Hospital in St. Louis, MO to see Father Bob Coerver. As soon as he saw me, he said, “Ramson, my bags are packed; I’m ready to go.”

“Where are you going? What do you mean, ‘Your bags are packed?’ Of course, I knew what he meant”.

“I am tired of fighting these physical problems; I don’t want to go through all this anymore.” Bob died shortly after I saw him.

Is the desire to die a type of selfishness? Or does our motive transcend that desire?

“I want to be with Jesus.”

Was that Saint Paul’s main reason for wanting death?

Is death gain?

³ Philippians 1:21

⁴ 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

HUMILITY

When I was a novice, we occasionally had a spiritual exercise called “humiliations” appropriated from our old French rule. It was known among us as “humps.”

The idea was to submit ourselves to humiliation. Several of us were chosen by our novice master, Father Jimmy McOwen, to go around and kiss the feet of the other novices arranged in a large semi-circle. Some of the less pious in the bunch would wiggle their toes or move their feet when you came up to kiss their shoes. Novices don’t do “humps” anymore and neither do the French.

Humility is not one of the favorite virtues of the modern non-Christian or Christian world. In fact, humility is often considered as a negative virtue rather than a positive one, certainly repressive rather than liberating. The accusation: humility is for wimps! Not many like to eat “humble pie” either.

Why is it that so many shun the very concept of humility, yet are open to humiliation? This is especially true when there is money or minutes of fame involved, e.g., the reality shows or the sitcoms on television. People do not mind being humiliated if it means making a buck or getting their face recognized by millions or getting a few laughs.

There is a big difference between humility and humiliation. What is your choice? I’ll take humility.

Yet we hear Jesus tell us, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Lk 14:11)

We read in Saint Augustine:

“Humility is so necessary for Christian perfection that among all the ways to reach perfection, humility is first, humility is second, and humility is third.”

What am I hearing? Humility is a *sine qua non* (essential requirement) for anyone serious about the spiritual life.

Thomas Merton says in his classic *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

“It is almost impossible to overestimate the value of true humility and its power in the spiritual life...humility contains in itself the answer to all the great problems of the life of the soul.”

The words of Merton that have captivated me for years:

“Humility consists in being precisely the person you actually are before God.”

Why is that? I think because humility is the acknowledgement of truth. That is what the saints, like Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Teresa of Avila, tell us. A humble person dwells in the truth. And the truth sets us free.

BEATITUDES

Thirteen years before Pope John Paul beatified Pier Giorgio Frassati, he said:

“Behold the man of the eight Beatitudes who bears in himself the grace of the gospel, the Good News, the joy of salvation offered to us by Christ.”⁵

When he died, Luciana, Pier Giorgio’s sister, wrote his biography. In the book, she wrote a chapter on each of the Beatitudes and showed how her brother lived and practiced each one of them. I doubt if any one of my sisters would call me a “Man of the Beatitudes” nor write a biography of me.

Saint Matthew starts off Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes – the “Be-s.” They have everything to do with being. They are attitudes of being. They speak to the inner life of us that is manifested externally.

As one of my now deceased Superior Generals, Father Richard McCullen, C.M. said:

“Beatitudes are an invasion of God’s madness into the world of what humanity considers to be good sense.”

Beatitudes are a scale of values. The contemporary world has a difficult time accepting the eight of them. Why would anyone want to label as “blessed” those that are poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those men and women who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, the pure of heart, and the peacemakers? Well, maybe, we might concede, and call “peacemakers” blessed in light of the world’s confrontations.

The Beatitudes have been called the “Gospel of the Gospel.” I read somewhere years ago that some scholars believed if the entire New

⁵ Cracoviam March 27, 1977

Testament was lost and the only fragment left for humanity was the Beatitudes, the world would have a clear and precise idea of who Jesus Christ was.

The Beatitudes also have been described as a self-portrait of Jesus. The Beatitudes have been described as the Charter, the Constitutions of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Another deceased Vincentian, the great scripture scholar, Father Bruce Vawter, wrote:

“The Sermon of the Mount is not a collection of idealistic poetry but a proclamation of Christian values and a realistic exhortation to a standard virtue that is possible only through the power given by the Spirit of God.”

What would you list as your eight Beatitudes? Can you come up with eight?