

PASTORAL COUNSELING A PLURALISTIC ENVIRONMENT

COMMON ENCOUNTERS DIVINE GROUNDS

FR. KHOI V. TRAN



IN THANKSGIVING
FOR THE OPPORTUNITY
TO ACCOMPANY AND SERVE
OUR AIRMEN AND GUARDIANS

FOR THE GREATER
GLORY OF GOD



COMMON ENCOUNTERS HOLY GROUNDS

**A BRIEF GUIDE TO
PASTORAL COUNSELING IN A PLURALISTIC ENVIRONMENT**

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INTRODUCTION

The military defines spirituality as an individual's ability to find meaning, purpose, and strength through life experience, drawing on personal values, sincerely held beliefs, and ethical frameworks. It is an inner set of foundations that helps a person remain resilient to endure, overcome, and persevere through adversity while maintaining a sense of hope and purpose. It broadly defines spirituality beyond religion and morality because, especially in a pluralistic environment, not everyone has a defined and firm set of religious beliefs and outlooks in life, but everyone has an understanding of purpose, connection, and meaning that points beyond themselves. It often ties spirituality to a set of core values like integrity, excellence, and service for the Air Force, or character, connection, commitment, and courage for the Space Force, in order to unite each individual to serve a greater good or cause, especially in defense of the nation and to protect our American way of life.

It seems very secularistic and vague from the Christian perspective, but this is the mission field we are entering each day as military chaplains. Even though one might be a priest, minister, or a religious leader, they are called to be a chaplain for all, in serving all! Of course, the person cannot compromise their own religious beliefs, faith values, or go against what our endorsing organization has defined for them; they are called and challenged to care for others who might be different than them because they are chaplains.

As chaplains, we are called to be present to our troops, counsel individuals, and advise leadership on how to advocate for and protect people's religious liberty, even when it means not forcing them to worship or participate in something that contradicts their sincerely and deeply held beliefs. We get an awesome opportunity to walk alongside our

servicemembers, even those who might have no concept of God, the spiritual life, or anything higher than themselves! Sometimes, too, we are called to find creative ways to care for those who might be reserved, resistant, or reactive against religion that was caused by something that happened in the past, because of their particular lifestyle, or simply because they have their particular perception or viewpoint.

It is a creative and challenging environment to learn, adapt, and find new ways to be present to all while holding on to our true selves! We have to find new words and ways to convey our message so everyone can understand and appreciate it, because not everyone has the same or a similar set of vocabulary as us. We learn to cooperate and work with others without compromising our true values, loving God and faithful to our vocation, while learning new ways to lovingly care for people who might have nothing to hold on to or believe at all! We learn to lead and appreciate the wonderful privilege to accompany our troops while treasuring the diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and thoughts.

Therefore, I would like to invite you to take this moment to join me in seeing eight different steps that a military chaplain can engage in pastoral care and counseling in a pluralistic environment. Even though I am writing this in a general military context, I hope other chaplains who work in a hospital, hospice, or penitentiary setting might find it helpful as well. Thus, being true to myself and who I am, many of my experiences will be viewed through my Catholic faith and understanding, trying to find God's presence and radiate His love in my own ministry.

I hope other Christian and religious ministers can find consolation and encouragement in their proper ministerial setting. My own writing style tends to be more personal and informal, far from the theologically-packed or academically-centered approach, sharing from my own pastoral and

ministerial experiences that taught me many valuable lessons along the way. I hope it will be a lighter read with some food for thought and reflection for you. May all that we do lead people beyond ourselves and help them to see a higher purpose, self-worth, meaning, and mission beyond what the military, society, other people, and the world can noisily impose at times.

KVT

14 August 2025

*Memorial of St. Maximilian Kolbe
and the Eve of the Assumption
of the Blessed Virgin Mary*

FIRST STEP: A HOLY REMINDER AND AWARENESS

My favorite series in the whole Marvel Cinematic Universe is *Captain America*. I like his character not because he is a super soldier but because of his integrity and willingness to do the right thing, even at the expense of himself! He has a strong moral compass as well as compassion for others. He chooses to do what is right and just, even when he is misunderstood and his choice is being twisted by others. Steve Rogers was chosen for the Super Soldier Serum, not because of his physical capabilities, but because of his good nature and character by Abraham Erskine. Captain America, for me, has and will always be Steve Rogers because his character reminds us of who we are as Americans... not based on our strength, wealth, or influence in the world, but because we are able to be morally grounded in the midst of many evils.

Dr. Erskine saw Steve and believed in him beyond his physical appearance and qualifications. He saw in this weak and scrawny kid a desire to serve his country and to give his life for a greater cause that everyone else missed because they only wanted to choose a physically fit candidate to be the super soldier. His story is almost like how David was chosen by the Lord in comparison to the rest of his brothers! (cf. 1 Samuel 16) When the creator of the Super Soldier Serum was asked about his decision regarding Steve Rogers, he also shared about his (past) failed candidate who wanted the serum to glorify himself. That evil candidate was Johan Schmidt, the head of HYDRA! He sadly said, "The serum was not ready. But more important, the man. The serum amplifies everything that is inside. So, good becomes great. Bad becomes worse. This is why you were chosen. Because a strong man, who has known power all his life, will lose respect for that power. But a weak man knows the value of strength and knows compassion." He ended the evening conversation by encouraging Steve not to be afraid and be true to himself: "Whatever

happens tomorrow, you must promise me one thing... that you will stay who you are... not a perfect soldier, but a good man!"

I believe we can all relate to Steve Rogers because we are chaplains, not because we are perfectly fit or better than others! We are not some random or coincidental outcomes but intentionally loved by the One who knows us even before we were knitted in our mother's womb. As a matter of fact, we are taught that when God calls us to a special mission or particular vocation, He has already been well aware of our brokenness and imperfections. All our messiness and weaknesses have already been known by Him, yet He still calls us because it is He who qualifies the call! We, therefore, must learn to remain humble, attentive, and instrumental in how we choose to be aware and be present to the person in front of us. We should remain genuine, calm, and caring so we can be a visible reminder and invitation of love to the one who might be lost, confused, frustrated, or hopeless at the moment.

Especially as military chaplains, we should remember that one of our original mottoes is to be the "visible reminder of the Holy." We are tasked by the military to provide religious accommodation and advocate for religious liberty in different echelons of planning, policy, operation, strategy, and decision-making. We are called to be advisors regarding religious, spiritual, moral, and ethical matters. We are called to care for the wounded and remember the fallen. We have awesome opportunities that also come with a sobering reminder to be readily available to care for our military members and their dependents. Simply put, to be the visible reminder of the Holy is to help our people to find and understand their ultimate meaning and purpose in life by radiating, loving, and caring for those who are around us in a personal, intentional, and life-giving way – even if they do not have any religious or spiritual foundations. Our mission is based on the very essence of what makes us human beings, especially

sharing a common mission as brothers and sisters in arms, treating one another with dignity and respect.

This reminds us not to give in to our self-created presuppositions that could keep us from seeing our people as they are, instead of what they should be for us. We have a unique set of challenges that a typical pastor would not face while ministering to their local civilian congregation! Think about this... People who come to their pastors come with an understanding of God and some type of spiritual foundation. Many of our military personnel come to us because of our 100% privileged, confidential communication assurance. Most of them come to us without any religious or spiritual understanding. As a matter of fact, 90% of my counseling sessions do not involve any spiritual discussion. I try to listen and meet people where they are. Listen to what they have to say, be present to them, empathize, and hopefully provide them some slender of hope or calm in their struggle or chaos. Even though they might have no spiritual understanding, I silently pray for them and ask God to grant me the patience, compassion, and wisdom to understand the person and help them as best as I am able while respecting their particular limitations and holdbacks in their life journey.

Being a visible reminder of the Holy also means avoiding despair, cynicism, or negativity that naturally arise from our limited hindrances and presuppositions. While it is very easy to give up hope, stop caring for others, and turn within ourselves because we see that they have nothing in common with us, our faith reassures us that our present moment (even in all its brokenness and messiness) is touched and transformed by divine providence. Our faith teaches, our love guides, and our hope affirms our destiny and where we shall be in the Lord. It is, therefore, important to allow that founded understanding of the end to transform and be at work in the present moment by allowing ourselves to be instrumental conduits of grace to those who are around us. We are called to gently give witness

to the power of divine providence and God's loving grace at work in the present moment as He brings all things to fulfillment in His own timing.

What I am proposing to you is still challenging for me! I still struggle with being loving, charitable, forgiving, kind, respectful, and compassionate toward others. On top of being overworked and constantly tired because of many things pulling us all over, I have been questioned by those who have no faith, thinking that I am here to impose my faith on them, and attacked by those who seem to have faith because I am not as I should be in their eyes. At the end of the day, I cannot please everyone, nor is it my job to change them because I am not God, but I can choose to let my faith radiate through me without having to use conventional means and wording. All I can do is to live my faith and allow my imperfect, broken, but genuine love to be the unspoken and personal sign of who I am as a Christian and believer. My brothers and sisters in arms, this world is so in need of you, especially your genuine faithfulness and truthfulness, because this is our special, supernatural, and faith-centered power, so we can all dare to live what we believe instead of wasting time with vain, shallow, temporary, and passing matters of this world.

Letting go and trusting in God is not easy! It is one of the most personally humbling actions that we can ever choose, because it is hard not to be in control and to trust in Someone out of love. As human beings, we want things to make sense and the world to center around us, because we want to be able to put our hands and wrap our heads around everything that is in life. It is hard to let go and allow ourselves to stay in the midst of life's ups and downs and all its creative tensions. But, we must let go, decrease so that His love can increase in us!

The hardest part for any of us to admit is that we are ordinary, limited, and finite. We do not want to admit our limitations and ordinariness because we want to feel that we are in control, and as if we work hard enough, we will be able to attain and achieve our heart's desires.

We dislike being told, "NO," because it makes us feel like we are not capable or somehow lacking. We like to analyze, fix, and control matters and hate it when we feel insufficient to not have things the way they should be or how we want them to be for us! Nonetheless, everything in this world is a sad reminder that life is messy and we are really not in control.

I think I have lost count of the times when I felt helpless and helpful to someone going through a particular crisis. I felt helpless because there was little that I could do to help, but also helpful because I knew I was God's instrument to be with the person at that moment. Thus, I learned very quickly in my own priesthood to be humble and stop making everything dependent on me when I counsel people in crisis. Why!?! First, I am not the Savior and Redeemer. I cannot save, fix, or resolve people's problems. I am not God... and I am so happy that I am not Him, too. It is not my job, place, or ability to do so. Nonetheless, I do have an opportunity to care for and be present with them in their times of need.

It is not up to me to fix the problems. I am not there to somehow make bad things go away! I am there to tell the person that he or she is not alone. I am there to affirm that, no matter what happened or will happen, I will not abandon them. I had so many "awkward," tense, quiet, critical, or not-able-to-put-into-words moments, but I still showed up because people are worth it. I often prayed silently in my heart for the person in front of me and for wisdom, patience, and trust in God's tender love and gentle guidance during those hard situations. It does suck to feel helpless, but it is humbling to know that I am not in control and not just there to fix things. I am there because God has put us together in His infinite wisdom and providence.

There is a sense of freedom, knowing I am not in control or the end-all-in-all person. There is also a sense of humility in not making everything dependent on myself. There is a sense of trust because not every situation

will go according to what I hoped, planned, or desired. There is a sense of abandonment because I can only give myself and trust in Him, but I cannot make other people do the same, especially if they are not ready or willing. There is a sense of the self-giving gift of care, especially in following up, finding ways to be present, and accompanying them beyond the crisis moments. There is a sense of perseverance because I have to learn to let go and move on without letting every situation affect or eat me alive, or else I will end up being insane, burnt out, and resentful.

You see? Being a spiritual caregiver requires me to be still and find quiet moments to find the Lord in the midst of chaos. Sometimes, I have to humble myself in finding Him even in those hard, trying, and critical situations. I had to learn to talk less, listen more, seek Him, and allow Him to speak and guide me and the other side in unexpected ways (even in silence and nothingness). I had to learn to do my best, trust, and let go when needed. Each and every one of us will have to be in similar situations like the disciples... Sometimes, as people in chaos and facing the immense storms that are battering and shattering our faith, other times, as someone who is there when people are going through their crisis and trying moments.

We turn our human ordinariness and all its struggles by how we unite ourselves to the Lord in prayer. He is able to take our limited and finite understanding and transform our horizons into a bigger, greater, and deeper sight of the transcendental, eternal, and never-changing reality. It is so easy for us to see our cup of water being half-filled, less than desired, or empty in comparison to others, but only He can turn that ordinariness into fine, God-given wine that gives joy to the heart and peace to the soul. There will be days when we will run out of energy and things to share and give, but do not be afraid to come to the Lord at those moments.

SECOND STEP: MEETING THE PERSON

I have learned through my ministry as a military chaplain that not all wounds are visible. Many carry the hurts that were inflicted on them as they go through life. Most of those wounds go undealt with, thus affecting them in how they view themselves and others.

As a matter of fact, many of our troops are bearing the invisible wounds that come from their family of origin and past journeys. Not everyone joined the military to serve the nation! Many times, people join to get away from what hurts them, to find new opportunities, or to find a fresh start in life. Not everyone has a perfect past or rosy history that makes them into a perfect Hollywood version of a cinematic movie hero! So many people came from broken homes, impoverished settings, drug-infested or gang-ridden backgrounds, so they subconsciously carry all that baggage, brokenness, and survival instincts with them.

So many of our young servicemembers come from broken families or joined the military to escape their past. Therefore, they often seek a life of freedom from all those previous hurts, pains, or measures that they resented and replace their new lives with their own self-centered definitions of happiness. They work hard to remain professional but tend to live a personal life that is not always ethically or morally sound, beneficial, or proper. They maintain military bearing with all its standards and disciplines but act in a very different way when they take off their uniform. They engage in many toxic, shallow, and carnal relationships to fill the void, create a distraction, and give them some type of pleasure to escape the redundancy and hard expectations of their professional military lifestyle. Many naturally end up getting divorced, separated, and make very poor choices that leave them scarred and hurt for life.

Most of the time, they will continue to perpetuate the vicious cycle of hurts within themselves because they cannot recognize or come to terms with those effects yet. Or they try to swing to the other extreme in rejecting and letting go of everything they have known to find new “freedom” in doing whatever they like. Unfortunately, that escapism mentality will only lead them so far before they realize how much emptiness and hurt still remain until we learn to recognize, understand, and reconcile with them.

It is OK to meet them as they are and listen to their story without judgment or desire to fix them as we would have liked them to be. This is where we can allow an ordinary and common encounter to become a holy ground by practicing compassion and mercy. We must practice patience and kindness, letting go of our very own presuppositions and personal expectations, to meet them where they are in the hope of perhaps connecting, understanding, and gently guiding them to a little something greater than their perceived, myopic, or chaotic reality at the moment.

Many of the greatest encounters and heartfelt gifts that we have received are not extravagant by any means! The ones that hold the most value for us are invaluable because they come from the heart and are received with love -- sincerely given and gratefully received! When we begin to put our own expectations, presuppositions, and values on things, they become limited and ordinary, and can be bought, measured, and quantifiable by humanistic measures. Some things can be so ordinary, useless, or meaningless in the eyes of some, but valuable, treasured, and appreciated in the eyes of others! Everything in this life, no matter how insignificant or expensive, simple or extravagant, is dependent on the disposition of the giver and receiver.

Our attitude, especially sincerity and gratitude, defines and colors the lenses of our lives. We can live very self-centered and pitiful ones, painting everything and everyone as not fair and against us; or ones that are filled with hope, seeing everything as they are, holistically and deeply from within, in all of our blessings and challenges. In each and every instance, encounter, person, or relationship, we can personally choose to be genuine, sincere, and grateful in giving our very own selves and seeing him or her as they truly are – or at least to see the world from their perspective. We do this not because we want to prove ourselves or gain the favor, admiration, or recognition from others, but because we want to be mindful, grateful, and in thanksgiving to the gifts received, to be given and shared with others, too.

And, of course, even with our best intentions, our genuine, sincere, and self-giving gifts might not be appreciated by other people! At those moments, things could get very discouraging and disheartened by unresponsiveness, ignorance, or insincerity, but we are called to be grateful and sincere, not because of what others will come to recognize or praise us, but because it is a heartfelt and personal response to the blessings given to us by our loving God. I know this is hard, and I struggle with this personally, too! However, we trust and understand that God knows our hearts and sees our real intentions; therefore, we have to desire, choose, and put into action the right choices that come from a heart of gratitude, sincerity, and genuine desire to love Him with everything that we have -- not just for the praise or recognition of others.

Compassion comes from the Latin words, "cum passio," which challenges us to truly care as to will and to know the other person in order to have the desire to love, even if it means to suffer with him or her. Talk is cheap if we are not willing to invest and give ourselves generously, genuinely, and wholeheartedly as to care and will their goods. Words

become nonsubstantial if we are only willing to do things as long as they are beneficial for us instead of denying, giving, and offering ourselves for the common good of society and the greater good of all. Hence, in order to do all of these things, we have to learn to be merciful to others. Mercy, again, comes from the Latin word "misericordia," which means to have the heart to feel the miseries, pains, and sufferings of the other.

Both compassion and mercy demand that we go outside of ourselves and our preconceptions, prejudices, and reservations to know the person as he or she is. Only when we have that basic human connection (preferably personal) can we truly treat him or her as he or she is, a child of God -- a brother and sister, with proper respect and dignity. Only when we get to know the person with whom we are conversing and loving can we be able to will their greater good and gently guide them with respect. Only when we know and love the other in our common bond of charity and humanity can we be moved to truly care and love them with the heart, even if it means to suffer with them because they are not ready to make the radical change yet. All of these invitations require that we know the person in front of us, treat them with respect as children of God, and cherish their dignity as human beings.

THIRD STEP: THE GIFT OF THE PRESENT MOMENT

The spiritual guide needs to listen to see the connecting dots and any potential resistances, reservations, obstacles, ignorance, or dismissals, so the person can open their horizons and see what is beyond themselves, instead of their own humanistic, immediate, or limited myopic. The guide is not God and is therefore still limited in his or her understanding, so they should not be controlling or overly demanding and must allow the person to prudentially learn and find new ways to see, understand, and grow (unless they are morally or ethically wrong or spiritually detrimental). The counselor is not there to hijack God's role or muffle His voice. He or she is not there to be in control or tell the person the grand, majestic, and wonderful plan, set of instructions, or roadmap because it is not their place to make the client dependent on them. In short, the counselor is there to listen, discern, and empower instead of enabling, controlling, and wanting to be liked, loved, or be like God. A good spiritual guide speaks as necessary, so the session requires the person to muster enough courage to let go, learn new things, and be fine with making mistakes, thus be humble enough to reflect, grow, and learn from them.

There are three points I often encourage people on their spiritual journey: small, manageable, and personal.

First, do not rush oneself and be patient by understanding how God speaks and invites us to row through small, manageable, and personal manifestations, lessons, and life-changing moments. He will rarely give us what St. Paul experienced on the road to Damascus; even then, the saint still had to take the time to unpack, understand, and grow in his new, heartfelt moment of conversion before he began to preach the Gospel. Therefore, we should become more attentive to how God gently, persistently, and personally speaks to us! As a matter of fact, I can assure

you that He speaks to us often, but we are too preoccupied, busy, controlling, demanding, or myopic to see and appreciate His gentle, intimate, personal, and heartfelt invitations.

Second, be gentle, persistent, intentional, and patient with oneself in making small, manageable, and personal goals to grow in holiness and greater love of Him and for others. Too many of us have become too initially pious, religious, or zealous that we want things to change immediately or as quickly as possible. Nonetheless, that is nothing less than our desire to be in control and have things our way. We easily forget that our spiritual life is a lifelong journey and continual process of maturation, understanding, and stretching ourselves to better love as He loves, instead of how we want, demand, or desire. We need to stop comparing ourselves, looking at others, or somehow unrealistically wanting more than what we can handle, given, or providentially permitted to us at the moment. Real, life-giving, and transformative growth is consistently small, manageable, and personal because it comes from the heart that loves, perseveres, and chooses to love in the simplest, unpretentious, intimate, and self-giving ways.

Third and last of all, we must remember that each journey is personal – not individualistic! Therefore, we cannot compare ourselves with others but choose to learn how to acknowledge, recognize, receive, and respond to growth in our own selves. True growth does not make us think less of ourselves, but to think of our egotistical self less so we can shed our crustiness and see ourselves as we are. This transformative journey takes a lot of letting go in order to love and be loved.

We have to recognize that we cannot simply live life fully. We cannot worry about not having the ability to do everything that we desire. We cannot be resentful about what we did not get to do or could have

done. Reality reminds us that we do not always have what we want, nor will all dreams be lived out, nor will all desires be fulfilled. If we only judge our lives according to what we can or are able to do, how free we are to pave our own path and draw our own self-centered identity, then we will forever be unhappy. Why? The short answer is that happiness is not simply a euphoric sense of joy. The real pursuit of happiness is much more than our feelings and emotions, and how we are dictated by them. Happiness goes much more than that! It is deeper than that. Happiness is ultimately knowing who we are, where we belong, and who loves us. Happiness is found in and with love.

Regrets happen when we do not know who we are; hence, always afraid of what we are missing out and not able to do. Regrets exist because the fears and anxieties of our insecurities and greed motivate us, making us question whether we are able to get what we have. Nonetheless, greed is like an endless, bottomless bag of nothingness that leads us to nowhere but more envy, jealousy, and more insecurities because we are too worried about what we do not have while comparing ourselves with people around us who seem to have things better than us. We spend much of our time worrying about how to be happier and more fulfilled, yet always end up feeling less happy and unfulfilled. This is where the paradoxical reality of "in giving of ourselves that we receive" teaches us much about the real meaning of life and happiness. The more we worry about ourselves and what we want, the more unhappy and unfulfilled we become; yet, when we know who we are and are able to give ourselves wholeheartedly, we become more fulfilled, content, and at peace on a deeper level.

Nevertheless, we also have to recognize that even with timely discernment and proper decision-making skills, we can still make mistakes or get hurt. There are always too many moving and unknown factors and complexities that we cannot see, so to live life is to accept

reality as it is instead of trying to control everything or having things particularly our way. That is why St. Mother Teresa once said: "I prefer to make a mistake because I am too kind than to perform miracles without any kindness." She invited us not to be scared to continue to give ourselves, even if we might get hurt. The saint invited us to live life theocentrically (God-centered) instead of being egocentric (self-centered), to be selfless instead of being crippled by our own self-conscious insecurities and worries. She asked us to seek the divine presence and to radiate His love through our kindness and care for one another, instead of what is only beneficial for us.

While regrets make us become myopic, close-minded, self-centered, and narrow-visioned as we become darkened to the larger reality around us, the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love widen our vision so we can see the full spectrum of blessings instead of only focusing on what is wrong or not there. To be grounded and centered in God helps us to see things as they are, not only in the temporal clause but in the light of eternity, not only in a hedonistic sense but in the salvific understanding of life. Egocentricity makes us look at the world in monotone colors, either for us or against us, beneficial or a nuisance for us. Yet, by focusing on God and seeing everything through Him, allow us to see the richness of life, all the grandeur and hidden beauties as they are and should be. Just like in order to have mountains, hills have to exist, and valleys have to be present. Just like in order for the atmosphere to work properly, there have to be different types of weather, ranging from favorable and beautiful ones to stormy and dangerous ones. Therefore, we understand that even in our trials and hardships, even if we have to endure wrongs and injustices, even if we do not get what we want, life is still beautiful and worth living no matter what!

Letting go and trusting in God is not easy! It is one of the most personally humbling actions that we can ever choose, because it is hard not to be in control and to trust in Someone out of love. As human beings, we want things to make sense and the world to center around us, because we want to be able to put our hands and wrap our heads around everything that is in life. It is hard to let go and allow ourselves to stay in the midst of life's ups and downs and all its creative tensions. But, we must let go, decrease so that His love can increase in us.

When we are in a conversation, it becomes very easy to listen in order to respond instead of truly being present to the other person. We are there, but we are very guilty of not being all there for the other person. I am guilty of this many times because of the numerous appointments or meetings in my own priestly ministry. There were days that I was too tired or overwhelmed with my ministerial schedule that I did not give people who were around me my fullest attention. I know that I am guilty from time to time, yet I also have to make myself aware and try to condition my mind every single day to be present to people. I remember an older priest that I respect once said: "The greatest present that you can give to the people of God is being present to them."

Behind that small quote is an immense amount of treasured wisdom. I learn every day that the people of God do not really need me, and most of the time, they do not need me to solve their problems. They just need someone who is able to listen and be present to them. In a rat race world, people yearn for genuine care and friendship. They want to be able to share from their hearts, to be loved, and to relate to someone from the bottom of their heart.

If we can recognize and understand the presence of God in one another, I believe our world would be more compassionate, our society

would become more understanding, and our friendships and relationships would be more treasured as we love and challenge one another to grow in what we individually and communally are called to be. We build a real society when we can be genuinely present and give the gift of ourselves without pretension and worrying about nonsense fears and reservations. We can and are able to love one another in the truth and challenge each other with patience and love when we are able to recognize, understand, pray, reflect, and discern the will of God who is present in our midst. True love is hard, but it is possible when we allow ourselves to be humble, genuine, and loving in and through the love of Him who loves us first. Simply put, to truly care is to give the gift of ourselves in all its genuineness as a present, in the present moment, to the other person.

FOURTH STEP: ZOOMING OUT

Usually, graduation speeches seem to be generic, canned, or typically predictable. I have been to so many military and civilian graduation ceremonies that I can tend to guess what the speech is going to be about. Occasionally, some speakers go above and beyond the typical and share from the heart the experiences that make their message personal and relatable. I believe a heartfelt message is more memorable and relatable, and this particular speech really left an imprint on me.

While taking out a small metal toy truck from his child, the commander shared that it made him change his speech. He shared that it was left in his uniform pockets by his child when he was heading out on a short duty tour. That small, innocent, but thoughtful gesture made him reflect much on what is important in his own life. He shared his thoughts with the graduates as an "old-timer" who made a career in the military, as a commander, and as someone who had seen a lot.

He asked the graduates, "What does success look like for you?"

As young enlisted and commissioned members, success often looks like making more money, earning more ranks, titles, duties, and influences. As young people, many are worried and occupied with earning and making a name for themselves. Nonetheless, a life that chases after those things often leaves them empty-handed, sad, frustrated, bitter, resentful, or alone because many relationships have been burnt, forgotten, abandoned, manipulated, objectified, or sacrificed for the sake of their career.

Unfortunately, many who became so career-focused that they burned through relationships and marriages that they oftentimes end up alone. At times, too, they are respected and loved by their peers and colleagues, but their home life ended up in shambles because their

spouse and children never get any meaningful time with them. There are so many people who could never walk away from work that they never know or have a life beyond their work and professional life. Nonetheless, at the end of the day, none of that matters.

I have seen people who want to live their whole life being perfect in the eyes of their peers, colleagues, and those who are around them. I have seen so many parents who are willing to spend their whole lives so that their children can be successful and achieve whatever they have their minds set on. Unfortunately, chasing after earthly vanities, achievements, and glories does not really help us or our children at all. If we spend our whole life trying to make a name for ourselves, we will never be happy because we will never know our self-worth, dignity, purpose, and mission that are beyond anything that the world could ever give or afford to us.

A few years ago, I asked a couple from my parish to lead our Advent Day of Reflection, and they shared a very good story on how to survive the world's strong currents and make it through life together. I thought it was very well thought out and presented, as well as personally prepared and genuinely shared with the audience, that it became one of my prayer sessions as well. I thought I would share with you a snippet of their message and my prayerful thoughts for this reflection.

The couple genuinely shared their struggles to make time to be with one another, especially in the midst of their busy career and parenting obligations. They often feel overwhelmed and tired with work and trying to be the best parents for their children, so their own spiritual life, personal wellbeing, and marital relationships often end up on the back burner. They used an image of making it alive while whitewater rafting. Life and its violent currents often keep us stressed out trying to survive, not drowning or capsizing! Some people get caught up and become super worried about

logistical issues, trying to make sure that things are orderly, organized, and things are in place, while others are focused on the practical matters of just trying to make it here and now.

It is so easy to focus on the secondary matters that preoccupy a lot of time and effort, and leave the most important priorities in the background. Our brains are naturally wired to identify problems and obstacles and remove them as soon as possible. We often get so focused on the how and what to resolve things that we lose sight of the really important factors of who and why! We let the daily chaos take the best out of us, and we often end up having little to give to the people who matter the most, and remember the reason why we have to choose to rise above the daily grinds to live and survive at times. We love to let the voices that we have created for ourselves, either from the past or in the present moment, to let us get caught up in the could, should, or would have's instead of the present reality.

So many hurts arise when we start to focus on lesser things instead of the people who are right in front of us! So many misunderstandings and miscommunications begin to appear when we choose to focus on the chaos instead of loving the ones who are deserving of our time and attention. We, and the people around us, get hurt when we feel rejected, ignored, abandoned, not being heard, seen, or valued. We might be living in the same house, working in the same environment, and sharing a lot of life's experiences together, but that does not mean that we are intentionally present, listening, and genuinely, transparently, and humbly opening up ourselves and caring for people who are around us. Relationship suffers when we stop spending meaningful time with one another and choose to care in personal ways.

We must not forget that we are here to help each other get to heaven and lift one another along the way. It requires frequent recalibration of priorities from things, events, problems, and possible causes to people, values, eternally focused mission and purpose. Life will continuously throw obstacles at us, and it is so easy to go from one problem to the next without focusing on being who we are called to be and doing things with personal and faith-centered meaning, purpose, and intentionality.

As a matter of fact, in Spanish and many Romance languages, the word for hope, "Esperanza," shares the same epistemological root as the verb "Espera," which means to wait. It, therefore, reminds us that our hope is strengthened, deepened, matured, and grown when we learn to wait and grow through the different seasons in life. It is hard for us to slow down, be attentive, and allow ourselves to be mindful and see the bigger picture of reality than what we think would make us happy.

At the end of the day, we give ourselves and come together to love, serve, and be available for one another, not just for selfish reasons or hedonistic benefits but truly as a self-giving response to the love we have first experienced and received from Him. We love others, not based on what we can accept or gain in return or whether we will be recognized, praised, or acknowledged by others, but because we know He knows our hearts. Our ultimate judgment is not based on the quantity of how much it has been accepted by others, but how much quality, genuineness, humility, perseverance, and willingness we have desired to continue to go beyond ourselves, to come together, and to give our very own selves (in all of our shortcomings, limitations, and brokenness) in loving, caring, and serving others who are around us. If no one wills, cares, or wants to do what is right, just, and asked of us for the good of others, society will fail, the Church will die, and we will continue to remain pitiful, miserable, and

unhappy in our own hellish existence. But, if we choose to give and to offer from the genuineness of our hearts, we will find that life is worth living because God is love, and we are made in His image and likeness.

Without a doubt, life is meaningful because of the people, relationships, and faithfulness that are in it -- not simply because we have what we want. Therefore, recognizing the hidden blessings takes patience, silence, and humility. Sometimes, less essential things have to be broken down to remind us that we just cannot go our same path -- we cannot live this way anymore -- because whatever we have right now is not real, life-giving, or meaningful. It takes patience and humility to not try to scapegoat and put the blame on God or others, but to recognize that what we are doing was not meant to be! Perhaps the necessary obstacles presented themselves so we can see the opportunities to take the time and create the space for God to intervene, re-prioritize, and recognize what we need to change for the better.

If we never reflect on what gives life, we will always let this world dictate and manipulate us with the constant bombardment of vain nothingness. Success means different things to different people. Inheritance, the things that matter to us the most, is not something that can be quantified or measured with worldly means. As a matter of fact, the people who make the most impact in our lives leave us little to nothing in quantifiable means but a treasure trove of qualitative values and riches that this world can never rob, steal, or manipulate us.

One of my role models was my paternal grandfather. Even though he was not a perfect man (because he was too proud and fixed in his way at times), he was a faithful and devoted man. He was faithful to his duties and responsibilities to his Catholic faith and devoted to his country and family. Because of his beliefs, he ended up losing a lot after the fall of

South Viet Nam. He also lost his own siblings due to the war, including ones who were murdered by the communists. Nonetheless, the one thing that he never lost and never gave up was his Catholic faith. No matter what happened in life, he remained faithful until the end.

If there is one thing that can be remembered about us, how will we be remembered? How would we define our success? What would be our inheritance to our children and the future generations? If I have learned one thing, having many opportunities to listen to many different people and try to help them through the different challenges, obstacles, and trials of life, it is that the little personal, invaluable, intangible, and heartfelt gifts will be remembered and treasured. Therefore, let us not be too worried about secondary matters but share everything that will give life and help our young people find their dignity, self-worth, mission, and purpose that are deeply rooted and grounded in God.

FIFTH STEP: A SHIFT IN PERCEPTION

For many people, especially those who are serving in the military, failure is a hard reality to accept. When we fail, we beat ourselves up a lot, and our failure eats us alive deep from within. We tend to blame ourselves, thinking we must be stupid, ineffective, idiotic, or dumb to fail. Failure eats us alive, and I have seen people who bring themselves into depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts and tendencies when they do not get what they hoped, wanted, or worked so hard to attain. This is sadly becoming more common and usual nowadays. It boggles my mind to see how many people turn to self-medication methods, substance abuse, or contemplation of suicide to numb the self-measured and egocentric pains of failure or imperfection.

I have seen so many young people who are very excellent in their words and actions, pushing themselves 100% and doing what is asked of them to achieve their own standards of perfectionism or professionalism. As a matter of fact, we have been taught and inspired by many motivational speakers to pursue our aspirations and dreams, and if we work hard enough, we should get what we have worked hard for. Unfortunately, that is not how life works most of the time! There are a lot of failures and imperfections, and they are very relevant parts of life itself. Even with our best intentions, we can and will fail at times.

Therefore, one of the earliest and hardest lessons to learn as adults is to accept imperfections in life, society, and relationships. Our young people find this set of lessons hard to bear because they have so many aspirations and passions, but this sets reality apart from false, unrealistic, and infatuated dreams and hopes. It requires every one of us to understand and seek something deeper than we have hoped for, meet the eyes, appealing, gratifying, or hedonistic. Suppose we live a life only to get

what we want. In that case, we will be disappointed, burnt out, and ultimately bitter, resentful, angry, and frustrated at ourselves and others because we will never get everything we want. It is, therefore, very important to begin a deeper and holistic search of our very own self in order to know who we are and what we are called to be beyond what this world and manipulative people are asking of us.

I often jokingly said that I am a recovering perfectionist. Just like anyone who knows or has gone through the Twelve Steps, or an addiction recovery program, can tell you, our brokenness does not go away, but we can choose sobriety to rise above the negative enslavement and hellish existence that we have created for ourselves. As a recovering person who tries to embrace his brokenness and its struggles each day, I have to choose not to let my own self-pity, egocentric, or medicative solutions take the best of me to numb, blind, neglect, or ignore the reality that is there. It is hard, but it is important not to let oneself be stuck in the vicious cycle of negativity and self-created hell. One can never be content when one thinks that he or she does not have enough. Gratitude, humility, tenacity, and perseverance keep us moving, focused, and motivated in fighting the good fight and putting one foot ahead of the other on days when it seems challenging.

Yes, there are still days that I struggle, but I tend to be more content when I choose to focus on what I have in and through the love of God (instead of the things that have to be to be happy). Only the peace of the Lord and His love are really enough for us! Nothing else in this world can ever promise or give this to us. I have learned through many past failures and my own created hell of what it means to belong. I might not be accepted in all circles or be loved by all, and that is perfectly fine. I have given up trying to be someone important and learn to be a child of God so as to live in His love. As Saint Therese of Lisieux once said, "All is grace."

Hence, within the heart of God and Mother Church, I am loved, and that is more than enough. The more I tried to get what I wanted in the past, the more miserable I became because I was never happy with what I had. Yet, when I learned to let go (and continue to learn to let go) and seek God, I knew that I do not need to be what I think I have to be to be loved by Him. He loves me, not because I am perfect, but because He has made me out of love -- for He is love. I have to learn to love myself in Him and allow Him to work in and through my daily struggles and personal brokenness.

I have to remind myself to allow God to love me in my brokenness, to remain in His love instead of simply looking for temporary satisfactions elsewhere. I tend to be very hard on myself, beating myself up when someone is not happy with what I am doing. I know it, and I am still struggling with the endless possibilities of rejection, but I have learned in my own priesthood that I cannot please everyone. Every time I make a decision, someone is not going to be happy. Nevertheless, I cannot -- for the sake of my sanity -- try to do everything to make everyone happy. I struggle with this brokenness every day, but I choose not to be controlled by it, but instead, desire and choose to embrace reality in all its messiness so that the grace of God can be at work!

When talking to young people, especially young servicemembers, college students, and recent high school graduates, the one common struggle that they seem to have is the realization that the world is not perfect and not what they expected it to be, and many times, not fair. Some will go into depression, stuck behind the veil of cynicism, or try their hardest to change the system to what they think will be a perfect world or what it should be. Nevertheless, many have missed the exact reality of what our world actually is -- it is imperfect. While I am not saying that we should give up or try our best to make a better world, the greatest lesson to learn in life is to embrace imperfections. Spiritually speaking, too, every

Christian needs to understand the interplay between sin and grace, our imperfections, and the need for conversion.

The world is not perfect, nor are we. Perhaps we have tried too much to shelter our young people from the imperfections of this world. We have tried very hard to make their childhood perfect and positive for them. We have done our best to encourage and make all things work for them. Many of them had perhaps grown up in a rosy and protective environment where everything is possible if I want and set my heart to it, because their parents made a lot of sacrifices to make those things possible behind the scenes for them. Nevertheless, the world is not perfect.

Of course, we should all try our best to better our society with proper discernment, patience, and growth in the wisdom that is able to respond to what is going on instead of simply reacting or trying to sell our particular ideologies. We need to make decisions that are grounded in history and common wisdom, and for the generations to come, instead of what is beneficial for us right now. It is important for us to have a sense of inter-generational solidarity, accountability, and responsibility instead of immediate, particular, or contemporaneous benefits alone.

Throughout my priestly and military ministry, I have had numerous talks with people who want to be healed but were so scared of finding healing. I have had to affirm their worthiness and encourage them to find help instead of living in misery with self-inflicted pain and suffering, but at times, they were not just ready. It could take years for that to happen, and they remained miserable, oftentimes angry, resentful, frustrated, and filled with self-loathing until they chose to be vulnerable, transparent, genuine, and humble in receiving help. It is not easy to look back at the past and face the lifeless shadows of hopelessness, manipulations, abuses, pains, and suffering because we have done so "well" to cover up,

ignore, medicate, or numb ourselves from what made us helpless. Without allowing ourselves to get help and be helped to truly love ourselves in all of our brokenness and imperfections, there will never be true reconciliation, forgiveness, and transformation.

I have had people who showed up to addiction recovery group meetings and sat outside in their vehicles, but they could not bring themselves to go in for a long time. It does indeed take a lot of courage to push oneself to open up, to share, to listen, and especially to receive affirmation, support, and admonition from those who have insights and are on the same journey. It is indeed hard to no longer be victims but truly choose to love oneself in all woundedness, brokenness, and imperfections. Hence, the first step to any healing is to truly see that, "I need help... and I cannot do this alone! I want to help, but I need to let God and other people in as well."

Hence, to be able to open up, find help, and know that it is not something that can be done overnight, but a lifelong journey, is the essential key to the road to healing and recovery. It will be extremely hard in the beginning, and there could be relapses and failures as well, but one has to continue to be honest, find people who can hold them accountable, and keep on fighting the good fight no matter what! Therefore, it is important to be kind and patient with ourselves at times when we might be feeling overwhelmed, tempted, falling short, or even relapsing. Tenacity and its essential foundation of perseverance and patience are the keys to what makes a lifelong road to healing or recovery possible.

We have all been hurt and affected by life many times; however, it is important to know that it does take a lifetime of small letting go, healing, and recovery to forgive and love ourselves in all of our brokenness and imperfections as to embrace the past pains but do not allow them to

define and dictate us. We will do well at times but struggle a lot at other times; nonetheless, each day needs to be willed and filled with our personal decision not to be controlled but to choose sobriety and joy -- no matter how insignificant or hard they can be at times. We have to be very honest, real, and humble in asking for help, checking in, and willing to do what is needed at all costs to live beyond what seems to be easier and normal to cope with at the moment. That is why we often find the popular motto, "To thine own self, be true," embossed in each Alcoholics Anonymous coin given out to members. Without a doubt, sobriety is a daily, personal, and intimate decision not to let our lies, false facade, addiction, brokenness, or whatever is holding us back dictate and tell us who we are.

Indeed, we all have to learn to choose to want, desire, and live a life above our self-imposed brokenness and its outrageous loathing, demand, and expectation. If we cannot be genuine, humble, and transparent with our very own selves, seeing who we are as beloved sons and daughters of God, we cannot love others as they are and help them to become what He called them to be! Grace-filled, God-centered, and humility-led love of one's self, dependent on the grace of His love for us, helps us to sympathize with others in their own brokenness, especially to practice empathy with them. In this way, we are able to become instrumental, and with His providential grace, encourage and help others to realize their God-given gifts, mission, and purpose in this life, too.

This understanding of our very own selves, acknowledging and accepting our brokenness and blessings, allows us to be genuine, transparent, and vulnerable to others without having to worry much about proving or making something for ourselves. It requires us to be humble and trust others, too. We need to allow ourselves to be loved by God and others who care and love us more than we can at times! We check in with them

and be honest and real with them about our current state and situation so they can give us honest guidance and love beyond what we can see, especially when we are struggling or clouded by our blind spots or present storms.

No matter the situation, let us not give up or lose hope, for He is in the storm with us. Perhaps we just need to step back a little bit, quiet ourselves, and be still to know that He is with us. The outcomes might not be as we liked. The situations might be way beyond our control. Life might be messier than what we anticipated. The storms might be longer than what we expected or desired. The pains and suffering might seem too much to bear at times. Nonetheless, let us not isolate ourselves or simply give up and go into hopelessness and despair, but seek, find, and trust in Him who is in the storm with us. No matter what it might seem like, let us do our best to find help and take life one step at a time...

SIXTH STEP: REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE

In one of my favorite Disney movies, *The Lion King*, lies a very deep and moving conversation between father and son. It was the conversation between the spirit of Mufasa and Simba when the young lion king was lost in his exile, abandoning hope to live life day by day. Here is the conversation:

Mufasa: Simba.

Simba: Father?

Mufasa: Simba, you have forgotten me.

Simba: No! How could I?

Mufasa: You have forgotten who you are, and so forgotten me. Look inside yourself, Simba! You are more than what you have become.

Simba: How can I go back? I'm not who I used to be.

Mufasa: Remember who you are. You are my son, and the one true king. Remember who you are.

Simba forgot who he was, trying to run as far away as he could from his past and his rightfully given identity, right, and responsibilities, as king of the pride. The past was too hurtful, and he did not want to think about it. He could not face himself, nor could he reflect on what really happened, just living through life meaninglessly. Even though he used the Hakuna Matata motto as his excuse and motto for the lifestyle, it was just an escape from what was really tugging at his heart as he chose to ignore and deny who he is. He forgot who he was! Yet, a transformation happened when he looked into the water and found the reflection of his own murdered father, Mufasa. He founds his true self through the reflection of his father -- the son of the king, the rightful heir, hence king of the pride.

I think each and every one of us can relate to this particular episode. One time or another in our own lives, we have been lost. We also know people who are lost or have given up on life or anything that is higher, just allowing themselves to drift away by the ever-changing winds of life because it is easier to comply or go along than to fight. Perhaps even we ourselves are somewhat confused about what the world is telling us by its ridiculous demands. It is so easy to just live life from one moment to the next, sometimes we even excuse ourselves by saying that 'it is for the best not to be worried and just go with it' instead of trying to fight the good fight to abide with God. It is easy to give up on who we truly are in order to simply live life and 'enjoy' its momentary or temporary satisfaction.

Military members are issued dog tags when they are going downrange or involved in a serious mission. One is worn over our neck and the other is strapped to our boots... just in case the body gets separated, they can still at least find one to identify the person. The dog tags are simply made with just four simple sets of information: our name, identification number, blood type, and declared faith. That information is important, so the chain of command knows who to identify and notify in case of an emergency. Nonetheless, for me as a military chaplain and service member, that last line is the most important of all, because it shows who the person is spiritually and how to take care of their family if the hard moment has to come. It also shows me that person's ultimate priority because he or she has declared to the government what he or she sincerely believes.

Too often, people tend to get stuck in their hurts and want to remain there. We like to point fingers, shift our blame, and expect other people to own up to their failures and mistakes instead of reconciling -- or at least try to figure it out as best as we are able. I have been personally involved, and pastorally guided too many tense situations to know that it is

extremely hard for people not to know to stand underneath their reactionary measures, egoistical standards, and self-righteous attitudes to seek reconciliation. Without a doubt, forgiveness is one of the hardest things we can do as people, especially as people of faith.

Life is not about running fast, checking things on the list, and achieving more stuff. It should not only be filled with envy, jealousy, and finding ways to go against others and get our way at all costs. If that is the case, why do so many people have midlife crises and become more depressed, anxious, and worried each day? Why do we, especially as Americans, have so much more than many people around the world still feel like we do not have enough? Why are we living in such a blessed and prosperous country still feel miserable when so many people are willing to trade our places for just a moment in life? Why do we have more things but do not have any real understanding of our purpose, meaning, and quality of life?

We have to be OK to know that things will not be perfect, but that does not mean we do not have to love and forgive people. We have to be fine in knowing that people will never be as we want them to be, but that does not mean we are to ignore and push them out of our lives forever. As a matter of fact, many saints have taught us that God often uses people to make us holier. One of my spiritual directors used to say that there are two different types of people in this world: saints and saint-makers. Interestingly, we can be both for different people or situations. Nonetheless, that does not mean that we retreat, isolate, or cut off people just because we do not have things our way!

The hardest reality is to accept that life is imperfect, and we cannot do everything nor be able to have everything we have desired or wanted, but there is GRACE there! Our life, mission, identity, and self-worth are not

dependent on our objective effectiveness but on knowing who we are in Him and allowing ourselves to be His very own children, disciples, and instruments of grace. Other people's salvation is not dependent on us, for it is dependent on their very own way of life and choices as well. We can never be perfect or make things perfect, but we can allow ourselves to be His instruments of love through our very own life and deeds, words, and actions. To save a soul takes a personal and creative discernment, approach, response, and action plan that is dependent on God and the other side's cooperation with grace! We can only do our best to guide, assist, and plant the seeds of faith until the other person is willing to drink from the fullness of His love.

We are much more than our words, social media posts, short video clips, audio messages, billboards, propaganda, or political campaigns. There are things that cannot be put into words and certain events that cannot be shared or expressed by human means, especially ones that are so personal and intimate to us that only God knows and understands! Our very soul remembers those moments of loving grace and mercy; therefore, we must rejoice in His never-failing, ever-faithful, everlasting love. If we are able to give personal witness and testimony for what He has done for us, our lives become great testimonies and witnesses of His mercy beyond mere verbal words or human-based means because our whole life is one of gratitude.

No matter what might or can happen, even if we fail at times, it is important to personally will and choose to stand up again, to move forward, and to continue with the journey no matter what the current situation might seem to be! It is also very important to check in and be honest, genuine, transparent, and real with our support circles or friends who can keep us accountable. I cannot stress enough that we cannot and will never be able to heal our very own selves! We are never meant to be

alone and do things by ourselves just because we computed, calculated, and thought that it is possible. We are not some types of machines that just run equations and processes to achieve optimal outcomes; we are communal beings that give and receive life from being a part of a greater community, relationship, genuine self-giving, and reciprocal love. It is indeed hard to be vulnerable and real with those who love us more than we do ourselves at times!

We often let the matters of this world blind us and turn us away from genuine gratitude. We often let our agendas and worries create distrust and plant doubts against God's goodness and faithfulness. We often let our failures and limitations, control issues, and egocentric understanding limit us from truly trusting in Him who loves us more than we can ever know or love ourselves. In order to overcome all these limitations and holdbacks, we need to simplify our lives by seeking to find our rest in Him. Gratitude and simplicity of heart uncomplicated things so we can see life as it is — beyond ourselves — in order to understand and share how great He is and how faithful His love is for us!

As a matter of fact, for us to sympathize with other people's sufferings, trials, hardships, and struggles, we need to be able to see them for who they are instead of what they have to be for us. Sympathy leads to empathy, and empathy leads to simplicity and respect because things do not have to be perfect or our ways to be good. If we understand that none of us is perfect, but all of us have something to offer in our own limited and unique ways, we can embrace, appreciate, sympathize, and be patient with one another instead of demanding humanistic perfection or unrealistic absolute terms. The humble love and acceptance of one's self in all of our strengths and imperfections allow us to love and be more understanding of others' limitations and blessings.

SEVENTH STEP: YOU ARE NOT ALONE

The good Lord has allowed me to encounter many people in my very own personal and ministerial life who had preached the Gospel truth without using words. I have learned many valuable lessons from unexpected encounters and relationships that enriched and affirmed my own journey of faith. Sometimes, He used random exchanges to open my eyes to something that I need to bring to a particular, seasonal, or daily prayer session, too.

One of those people who had enriched my own faith journey was Deacon Vincent. The good Lord had allowed me to minister to Him, but also allowed him to teach me many valuable lessons of what it means to be faithful until the end. Vincent taught me how to be obedient to God's will, both as a person and as a deacon, through the different seasons of his very own life.

I got the honor of meeting Vincent and his wife, Patricia, when I was a parish priest. They went to one of my parishes for the Saturday evening Mass. Even though I was not his registered parish priest, they told me that they would like to go to Mass with me since we are closer to them, and they said that I made it feel more like home for them. As a matter of fact, most of the people who went to Mass did not know that he was a permanent deacon since they kept a low profile and never asked for any special treatment or recognition. Both of them were elderly when I met them. Both of them had limited mobility. However, Vincent was very caring toward his wife. He spent much time caring for her since she had many health problems. One could see his gentle devotion and commitment to her!

I remembered when he approached me one day, asking if I could grant him a special favor. Of course, I told him that I would do my best to do so. Hence, he asked if I would be able to assist him up the steps of our

sanctuary space (since they were steep) so he could kiss the altar one last time. He asked his “favor” after Mass one day... and, I mean, how can I deny this humble man’s request?!? I remembered assisting him up the steps so he could gently kiss and reverence the altar as a deacon. I do not know if he had a premonition or not, but his health began to decrease after that moment.

He was bedridden for a good while. I had the honor to administer the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick to him several times, too. I tried my best to visit him as often as my schedule permitted. Thus, one day, I got a notification from his hospice nurse and close family friends requesting the Last Rites since they felt like his time was close...

Vincent was not lucid when I arrived. Nonetheless, I did what was necessary in giving him the Anointing of the Sick, absolved him from his sins, and gave him the Apostolic Pardon. As I was praying the Our Father and prayers of commendation, he began to open his eyes and gently called out to me, “Father.” I held his hand and asked him, “Deacon, are you ready?” To which, he answered, “Yes, Father.”

That was a very grace-filled moment for me, even though the conversation was very short. In a few words, the good Lord taught me so much through the simple deacon’s own life and humility. As a matter of fact, that moment is one of the precious memories that I still hold dear today. Even though it seems very easy and simple to put into words the short exchange, the lesson, and the grace that came from that encounter, I believe, cannot be captured in words because I do not know how to describe its immeasurable value. My heart swells when I recall the memory. It was holy ground. I still hold it to be sacred and dear to me to this day! Hence, that was the valuable lesson that was taught to me through the simple, humble, and committed life of Deacon Vincent.

The family asked if I could be the presider for his Funeral Mass, and of course, I agreed to do it — with great honor! I began to receive many insights and testimonies from the faithful who had come to know the good deacon. They all attested and affirmed his humility, genuine care, and commitment to service of the Church, on top of his devotion to his wife and family. All of those testimonies gave light to a life well lived in persona Christi Servi — in the person of Christ the Servant — for Deacon Vincent. People encountered a life of genuine care, commitment, and service through him. He “spoke” life to them with how he humbly served the Church and cared for the people who needed him. Vincent did not need a pulpit to preach, a channel for followers to followers, a podium to let the whole world know of his opinions and viewpoints, or a stage to voice his thoughts. He remained faithful to his calling as a husband, father, and deacon of the Church, doing his best to care for others in a personal and ministerial way.

I believe the world will be a much better place if we humbly serve like Deacon Vincent. Many times, we just have to humbly accept that it is not up to us to solve everyone’s problems or to save them, for all we can do is to love and be present to them when needed. We can be the calming and hope-filled presence in their hardest days and darkest storms, so they know that they are not alone! Each and every one of us has to learn and choose to be simple, loving, and serving in small and unpretentious ways. We have to be content and seek joy in small matters, too! I believe we can let theocentric, purposeful, purpose-filled, and eternally-focused way of life be radiated and shared with others who are around us. Commitment and devotion to daily life and its ups and downs are not always glorious, appreciative, and euphoric, but we can choose to preach, share, and radiate our faith and its values and beliefs in how we intentionally put meanings into our words and actions. Imagine what we can do if we seek

to share our joy and loving faith in each and every encounter, relationship, and act of service! I think the world would be a much better place if we went beyond the mundane redundancy of life in order to preach, share, and radiate our faith beyond words. Perhaps not everyone will do it or we are able to make a big impact, but if we at least try ourselves, I believe this world, or at least the people that we get to encounter, will see in us as His disciples. It does begin with us... one person at a time.

I want you to do some retrospective reflection today. Look back at all your failures, imperfections, hardships, and trials and see if you can identify only the wrongdoings or sufferings, or do you also see the grace-filled moments that come along with them? God never abandoned us! He always sent the right people to assist and allow the right moments to teach us, even when we were too hurt or myopically looking at the problems themselves. We are not alone, even in our toughest trials! Therefore, let us take some time to reflect on what is important and how God is constantly asking us to learn to love and depend on Him. If human love is already hard and trying at times, imagine the greatness that comes from the divine love that sometimes requires us to go beyond what our feeble understanding can comprehend, feelings, or emotions can analyze or know at the time! Therefore, I hope our lens of faith will color and help us understand the richness of the faith and life journey in, through, and with the Lord. May our prayer be, "Lord, even when my life is filled with inconveniences and what I do not like, help me to seek your loving presence there, too," even at times we might not understand why.

Our faith teaches us that God is actively working to draw us to Himself. He desires and requires our collaboration and participation. It is our willingness to let go and conform ourselves to His loving will. It has to begin with us to allow Him to be the Savior and Redeemer, the Lord and Almighty! It is a twofold letting go of our desires and wants, even if they

might seem to be with the best of intentions, to know, understand, and be willing to be who we truly are deep from within, as well as to empower people to become who they are called to be, too. By turning ourselves to God and leading people to Him, by knowing our limitations and letting people know to depend on Him, and by not worrying about doing everything right and letting people know that reality empowers them to seek Him instead of us. Therefore, true spiritual discernment requires us to know ourselves first and foremost as well as to be honest, genuine, and real in how to care, draw boundaries, encourage, and empower people to die to themselves, their own blind spots or lies, and humbly seek God.

That is why we need to remember that we cannot just live for ourselves, worried only about our own particular goods, but are called to embrace, love, care, and intercede for all. We are called to live beyond ourselves through a life of prayer, worship, and service as a response of love to Him who first loved us. We are not just called to worry and care only for those we like, for a few are in our own circles, but to those entrusted to us. From the smallest village in the middle of nowhere to the most desired or decadent part of the world, from the poorest church to the grandest basilica, we are all one people united in Christ Jesus. We are united in our diversity because of His love for us. We are Catholics because we are universally united in Him, who called us together as the Church. Even though we might be different in our cultural expressions and social constructs, we share the same faith that Christ died for all of us -- those who are worthy and the unworthy, those who yearn for Him and those who do not know Him, the just and unjust, sinners and holy people. It is important for us to know that we are not alone and should try our best to help one another along the way.

EIGHTH STEP: LET IT GO AND OFFER IT UP

To be honest, it can get hard at times, and working for the government, the structural bureaucracy, and red tape can get frustratingly tiring and discouraging. On top of that, we are all human beings with our own physical and mental limitations, even though we desire to do all that we can to spiritually and pastorally care for those who are entrusted to us.

At times, natural thought process leads me to believe that I am not doing enough... No matter how much I try, it seems like I do not have enough time or energy to care for everyone... Reality reminds me that I am a human person who is getting older every day, so I do not have the stamina I used to have as a younger man! Without a doubt, this is a question that arises in my mind and keeps me up some nights, especially when a hard situation gets too personal or too close to my heart. I often sit down and reflect on other possibilities that I could have done better to stop the person from hurting themselves, being too lost in their own self-created way of life, or simply giving in to personal despair, hopelessness, and darkness. Nonetheless, I have learned from being a recovered perfectionist that I cannot do everything except for doing my best with all that I am in genuine, caring, and gentle love for others in the present moment. Also, I have to constantly remind myself that things will never be perfect, but they do not have to be in order for life to be full of goodness. Even in the midst of many shortcomings, limitations, and failures, there is GRACE there!

I get rejected a lot as a military chaplain. Even though I get called on by leadership teams when they feel that a member is in trouble, or if there is a situation that is uncomfortable, hard, or challenging to handle, not

everyone is open to having me there to be present with them. There were times when a member specifically said that they do not want me there! Perhaps the rejection happens because they do not like someone who represents religion or some types of moral standards. Perhaps they do not want me there because they had bad experiences with a chaplain or clergy member in the past. Perhaps they just shut down and close themselves off from others because they do not want help!

Whatever the case might be, I have learned to be persistent when I get rejected, dismissed, or if I feel like I have done my best, but it is not being received well. I find a way to care and pray to the person who is struggling, even though he or she does not want me there. Believe me, it is not easy! I have been given bad treatments, but I have learned to let go and choose to care for the person who is struggling in new, unique, and sometimes unconventional ways. I have learned to grow a thicker skin and endure rejection and mistreatment because the person is worth loving, even when they are not lovable.

Let me be the first to tell you that it is very uncomfortable and very hard to choose to continue to be with people who do not want us there! It takes a lot of willingness to be present in those hard situations when it seems easier to dismiss, forget, or walk away from those who we deem as undeserving. One has to choose to embrace the apparent uncomfortableness and allow God to be in the silence and its creative tension. One has to choose to pray for the other side and say, “Your will be done,” instead of our own feeble standards. One has to let go of control and allow His grace to be at work in unknown ways and unexpected outcomes, even if we do not get what we hoped for.

I had to learn that there is a very fine line between empowering people to grow, mature, and become what God wants them to be, instead of letting ourselves enable people to continue to depend on us, glancing over or simply excusing their bad behaviors, or somehow thinking that we are dependent on them and they on us. Both the caregiver and receiver have to trust in the Lord instead of seeking the desire to be in control or somehow seeking an occasion, reason, or desire to prove a point. Both sides have to depend on the Lord through prayer by becoming prayer-ers. Both have to be genuine and honest in their prayer life to ensure they have no self-centered intentions in proving, justifying, blaming, or making themselves into someone else that they are not. Honestly, it took a long time for me to learn those wise words and guidance points through my own years of receiving and practicing how to provide spiritual direction and guidance. I had to learn to leave my presumptions, desire to be in control, and wanting to "save" people behind in order to depend on the Lord instead of my own ability.

Some people are still impatient, demanding, insecure, or not ready at this moment to allow any substantial discernment and growth. Those instances can become uncomfortable and hard as we have to learn to set proper boundaries and expectations and pace ourselves according to God's time instead of our humanistic desire to be in control or prove ourselves in one way or another. I had to close some doors and let some people go because they were not ready for a real spiritual conversation, deeper dialogue, or able to receive any life-changing discernment. They might have good intentions, pious thoughts, or devout religiosity, but no one is able to grow unless he or she is humble enough to talk, worry, demand, and blame (others) less. Eternal, transcendental, theocentric, and spiritual matters cannot take fruition until we become less focused on ourselves or want to use other people to affirm our needs. The spiritual life

requires that we let go and seek a genuine, personal, intimate, humble, and contrite conversion of heart.

Change has to begin with us. We cannot expect people, conditions, and situations to go our way before we grow and mature according to what God is asking of us. Faith, hope, and charity have to begin with us in how we choose to become more Christlike in words and actions, life and deeds. Is our self-worth and happiness based on other people's opinions, perspectives, and reactions to us, or can we choose to love them when it gets challenging? Can we continue to live our faith to trust in God's goodness, to grow in charity, and mature in hope instead of allowing our lives to be dictated by the things of this world?

A few years ago, on one of my downtime and restful leaves, I did a prayerful and meditative reflection on what I would like to tell my younger self. Even though there were a lot of thoughts that popped and and grace received through prayer and His grace, I came to the conclusion that I would tell my younger self to love and trust God more instead of worrying about how to please others and what they might think of me. I wished I would trust Him more instead of what other people wanted from me and tried to tell me how to be in order to fit in, be accepted, not be condemned, put down, or manipulated by toxic people. It was hard to learn that life lesson, and I am still struggling now; however, my skin has grown "thicker," my understanding of my self-worth and identity have matured, and I have become more courageous in standing my ground and being true to myself as He wants me to be (instead of what others want from me). It is a life-long journey of growth, and I hope each and every one of us is able to do the same in trusting and loving Him more than what other people or even our very own ego wants us to be.

That maturity came in two different ways for me. The first came in understanding and accepting that I cannot please everyone. I believe many people who discern the priesthood and consecrated life have a similar personality trait. We want to care for and love people, even to the point of wanting to “please” or make them happy. We also tend to be leery of confrontation and upsetting people. That is perhaps why you might see a lot more passive-aggressive aggressive amongst clergy and religious because of those factors. Nonetheless, that was where spiritual maturity had to come for me.

I learned so many lessons as a young priest from parishioners who were very outspoken and harsh about how things should be. I was under someone very kind and loving, but also at the same time not confrontational and direct, so those bad behaviors were perpetuated because they knew that they could push and pressure their way through things. I had to personally come to terms that I cannot please those people. Some are just too bitter and angry with a deep-seated unhappiness that causes them to lash out, react, and just mistreat people in unkind ways. I had to learn that sometimes I just have to be the punching bag because of my role as a priest, and should not take things too personally, as if they are personally attacking me. I had to learn to set healthy boundaries and differentiate myself from those toxic surroundings instead of trying to blame and beat myself down at all costs.

Chaplains, ministers, and spiritual caregivers are “customer-oriented” people who want to love, care, and serve. We tend to be more gullible, naive, too trusting, and too “different” according to worldly standards. Too many of us tend to have tender hearts because that often makes us more compassionate, merciful, and caring... but that also is our downfall because we let other people’s opinions, perceptions, and reactions become personal attacks. It takes genuine humility to let go and

to grow from that mentality and to be able to embrace the creative tensions and challenges in our own ministerial life. It was also personally hard for me, especially as a recovering perfectionist, to embrace imperfections and be OK with things as they are. It was humbling to go beyond my “fixer” mentality, embrace the tensions and challenges instead of trying to make them better as I would like or hope for them to be.

Furthermore, I believe my hardest lesson was to learn how to not be gaslighted, blamed, or manipulated by toxic, narcissistic, and manipulative people. There are those people out there in society, as well as in the Church, seeking power, attention, and a careerist path to glorify themselves. Many times, these people will say the right thing, know the right people, play the right cards, and portray themselves in some false way to gain, pertain, and remain in control. When things do not go their way, they will shift blame to others or expect others to be completely obedient or attentive to their egocentric needs. I had to learn those truths the hard way because I took people’s opinions and thoughts of me personally. I wanted to be better to be liked, pleased, or not be on their blacklists. Nonetheless, those hard moments helped me to be more humble, wiser, simpler, and honest with myself in understanding who I am instead of who I want to be for others.

I learned to speak less and only say what is necessary to those who are egocentric, narcissistic, manipulative, and toxic because I recognized that they really do not care about me. They do not really listen but only hear things... and immediately hearing information, they are already formulating ways to twist, turn, or use things for their own benefit. That was another way to learn to accept that I might not always please those who do not like me or have a different perception of who I am. I cannot change other people’s judgment, nor can I change how they will treat me

negatively, but I can choose to step back, differentiate their perception and who I really am, and find wise and prudential responses to those characters, situations, and relationships.

I had to learn in many ways that we might please some people some of the time, but we can never please everyone all the time! Furthermore, I have to step out of my own desire of being liked and wanting to “save” or “fix” things and just allow the creative tensions to be present. I wished that I would spend more energy, time, and effort in loving Him more and being at peace with myself instead of allowing those interpersonal factors to take the best out of me. I had times when I was filled with so many anxieties and worries, almost had nervous breakdowns, PTSD-like experiences, and loss of sleep because I allowed those matters to dictate, control, and overwhelm me.

Humility helps us to be unpretentious, persistent, and genuine when we do not seem to have things going our way. We choose to love even when we get rejected. We choose to care even when we do not receive fair treatment. We choose to continue to be present when we get dismissed. As a matter of fact, we can learn to be genuine through rejection! It takes some humility and proper spiritual guidance in order to grow to better handle rejection and not have things go our way all the time. Simply put, rejection teaches us that we must continue to choose to love the other side, and when things do not go as we planned or desired, because life does not have to be perfect in order to be good.

It is not easy, but it does get easier when we choose to let go of our very own standards and expectations. It gets less “detrimental” when we recognize that people are imperfect and things do not always go our way. It becomes a little bit more positive when we choose to invite Him to be in

the uncomfortable situations and let ourselves grow, mature, and choose to better love as He has shown us. Simply put, we choose to love because He has first loved us. We choose to be present because He has never abandoned us, always pursuing us and calling us back even when we strayed away. We choose to pray because we recognize that He is with us and we cannot do anything without His grace. We choose to embrace rejection and continue to persist in love since He has shown us an example of what it means to love and be loved by Him.

CONCLUSION

If each one of us were willingly doing our parts to live and share His love in our very own state of life and vocation, this world would be set on fire, our parishes would be filled, and we would be able to find our true happiness beyond our own pitiful, myopic, and apparent version of pleasure, satisfaction, achievement, or self-worth. Nonetheless, we have given in to cynicism, let our lives be defined by worldly values, and be enslaved by the lifeless cycle of valueless redundancy. We have become complacent and lost our zeal. We have lost focus on what we are called to be as His disciples! We have bought into the institutional model, defend it at all costs, and do our best to keep our places where it is most comfortable. In all of these things, we have lost our love for Christ, and we have become a lifeless shell instead of being the Church that is missionary in her very own nature.

Our words and actions are the extensions of who we are deep from within; they are the reflections of our true values, beliefs, and faith because we give to others what we have! We lack charity in our society because we have lacked the true, personal, and genuine practice of faith, hope, and charity in our very own lives. Hence, if we really want to change our society and others, to truly be social and communicate effectively with one another, we need to learn genuine respect and practice civil discourse that is based on charity. And, without a doubt, to be charitable does not cost anything at all! It is not and will never be based on quantity or worldly values because it is based on the intentional, qualitative, and genuine gift of ourselves in loving and willing the good of our neighbors as ourselves.

You see? We give ourselves and come together to love, serve, and be available for one another, not just for selfish reasons or hedonistic benefits, but truly as a self-giving response to the love we have first experienced and received from Him. We love others, not based on what we can receive or gain back in return, or whether we will be recognized, praised, or acknowledged by others, but because we know that He knows our hearts. Our ultimate judgment is not based on the quantity of how much it has been accepted by others, but how much quality, genuineness, humility, perseverance, and willingness we have desired to continue to go beyond ourselves, to come together, and to give our very own gifts (in all of our shortcomings, limitations, and brokenness) to truly love, care, and serve others who are around us. If no one wills, cares, or wants to do what is right, just, and asked of us for the good of others, the Church and society will slowly die out, and we will continue to remain pitiful, miserable, and unhappy in our own hellish existence. But, if we choose to give and to offer from the genuineness of our hearts, we will find that life is worth living because God is love, and we are made in His image and likeness.

I honestly believe that we speak louder than our words and reactions, because who we are speaks louder because of how we live. We do not give life by trying to put down others in order to prove how much better we are! When we truly live our lives with genuine charity, when we do not have to prove ourselves but simply live what we believe, our lives will speak louder than what we believe and profess. Therefore, I ask that we try not to overcomplicate matters but to keep everything simple and genuine by how we dare to live what we believe in words and actions. May our words and actions, life and deeds, shine forth the love of God that is dear, personal, and important for each one of us so we can live our faith at each and every moment. May our neighbors see what we believe and trust what we profess, not by what we say but by how we act with personal and

genuine charity so that everyone will come to know that the Kingdom of God is among us.

I know there are better-written books and resources out there, and I am not a spiritual master or educated theologian. I simply hope to give you a brief and personal guide (on what works for me) as we pastorally care and gently counsel people in a pluralistic environment like the military. No matter what, let us always remember that we are the visible reminder of the Holy. May we be aware, present, and able to meet the person where he or she is at the moment. By listening and being attentive to their story and struggles, we are able to invite them to zoom out from their present perceived chaos, have a shift in their perception, and remember who they are. Even if we cannot change anything, we can always care and let them know that they are not alone and we are there to accompany them. Nonetheless, may each one of us remember that we are not the Savior, and it is perfectly fine to let it go and offer it up to the One who is in control and is always with us on this long journey of life. May we not be too hard on ourselves but do our best to be present, trust, and invite Him into each of our common encounters and make them into God-centered holy grounds.

ABOUT FATHER KHOI

I was born in the Southeast Asian country of Viet Nam.

When I was young, we had very little as a result of the Viet Nam War, especially under the strict and oppressive post-war Communist rule. By the (unimaginable) grace of God, our family was given the opportunity to immigrate to the United States. We settled in Kansas, where most of my father's side of the family resided at the time. After graduating from high school, I went to Texas to begin my priestly formation.

I joined a religious order and stayed with them for five years until, under the guidance and encouragement of my Novice Master, I discerned to transition from religious life to diocesan seminary formation. I was ordained to the priesthood on June 29.

After years of diocesan ministry as a parish priest, I am now serving our military personnel and their families in the United States Air and Space Forces as an active-duty Chaplain. It is my hope to repay America for giving me and my family a newfound freedom that was not afforded under the Communist regime in Viet Nam.

For more information, please visit frkhai.info or ithirst.us. My reflection blog and homily podcast channel are both named "I Thirst" (John 19:28), after Saint Mother Teresa of Kolkata's motto for her life and the Missionaries of Charity sisters. I love her simple and heartfelt charism, which is founded on love of Christ in the Eucharist and service of the poorest of the poor. You can also find me on popular social media platforms (@padrekhai).