

FR. KHOI V. TRAN

OVERCOMING
PERFECTION

MY FIVE LIFE LESSONS



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

FOR THE GREATER
GLORY OF GOD



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PERFECTION**

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INTRODUCTION

The good Lord has made my life an interesting one! He has a very BIG sense of humor by overturning every single big plan I made for myself. He has a unique way of having the last laugh and pulling me into the ride. Stability and comfort have not been the name of the game, but He has blessed me more than I could ever have imagined. The journey gets trying and hard at times, but He has always been giving me what I need to overcome the obstacles and trials. Simply put, my God, who knows me so well, has a special way to help me overcome my own (false) desire for perfectionism so I can love Him with simplicity of heart.

I have been dealt with many interesting cards that uprooted, overturned, or shook up my life on so many different levels that there were times I wanted to give up on myself. I had been challenged and questioned my own self on why I should remain in my own priestly vocation instead of simply walking away from it all at times. I am definitely not perfect and have made many mistakes, but the good Lord has been so good, forgiving, merciful, and patient with me that I cannot walk away from His love. He permitted me to make mistakes, question, doubt, and at times be angry, frustrated, and lose hope in His providential timing, but He never gave up on me in any way, shape, or form! He permitted me to face many imperfections and failures in life so I can learn to overcome them and deepen my love for Him through them all because He is truly that faithful to you and to me.

I shared my bits and pieces of my vocational and healing journey through my weekly reflections and homilies. Many of my parishioners encouraged me to put into writing the story of my life, because they thought it would be encouraging toward others, especially those who are struggling with perfectionism or doubting in God's divine providence in

their lives. Of course, I hesitated for many years... but looking back at all my written reflections throughout the years, I recognized that I had shared a lot already, and all I have to do is to compose them all together. Thus, this is the end result of the composition to share with you how God has patiently and lovingly helped me to overcome my false notion of perfection and control as to free me from my own self-created enslavement and comfort zone, to follow Him more faithfully each day.

People often think that I am joking when I tell them that I am a recovering perfectionist. Some people might laugh, but I struggle with perfectionism each day. I believe perfectionism crept into my life and took control of me for the longest time because I was afraid to fail. Growing up poor and without many things, I can recall many moments when I envied other people's good fortunes and pitied myself because I did not have what I thought I deserved. I worked hard and tried not to screw up so I could perhaps be more "liked," in control, or at least somehow be more "successful" than the little me who felt like the world was not in my favor. Of course, my parents and upbringing kind of intensified and added some additional factors.

Through His providence, I went on a spiritual renewal journey, and my spiritual directors at those programs and retreats helped me to love myself as it is. To be honest, it was very hard because I made a lot of excuses not to do so! Yet, through their wisdom, patience, prudence, and persistence, they called me out and helped me dig deep into my past to see my true self, hidden and buried underneath all the lesser things and false security layers that I had built over the years. I had to strip and let go of all of my insecurities and made-up stuff in order to look at myself as it is. It was scary! I was vulnerable. I had nothing to hold on to. For the first time in my life, I had to stand naked and genuine before God without trying to make up any excuses or trying to be in control. I was helpless. It was

hard! Yet, I finally found who I am, all broken and hurt by life, in need of healing. I finally found who I am, and I was not pretty, but I found out that God loves me.

True love is real, and I can give you many personal examples of it. Those who have freely given up the possibility of having a family and consecrating themselves for the sake of the Kingdom of God can also attest to this same truth. It might not be logically appealing or attractive, but it is a real, truthful, passionate, personal, and intimate commitment to love that only the heart can fully understand. If God is not real, our hearts would not be able to fall in love and remain in love with Him! Yet, because He is real and His love is everlasting, we are willing to let go of everything to give our all to Him.

My answer might not satisfy the quantifiable and empirical mind that only limits itself within the sensual or calculative — often duped "scientific" — understanding. We have impoverished ourselves to the (limited) physical or sensual levels of information instead of trying to understand the complete metaphysical and holistic reality. We want things to make logical and empirical sense, yet many of the most sacred and most respected matters in this world are grounded on the basis of faith and goodwill, for the empirical or calculative senses cannot comprehend their full richness. Honestly speaking, I went to undergraduate and graduate schools for 11 years and have many degrees as paperweights, but they themselves never really made a personal difference in how I trust in God. While I can comprehend many things logically and metaphysically, scientific, empirical, philosophical, and theological information and writings have never changed my heart or been able to tell it why it needs to love God.

Perhaps Blessed John Henry Newman's motto is able to shed some light on what I am talking about: "Cor ad cor loquitur." His motto comes from a phrase that propped up at the end of the first chapter of Book VI of Saint Francis' Treatise on the Love of God, describing mystical theology and prayer. The short expression serves as a description of the personal relationship between God and man achieved through prayer. Only through a personal, intimate relationship that is grounded in prayer can our hearts truly understand what it means to love as it receives love from Love Himself. Only in a loving, reflective, and prayerful relationship with the Lord can we understand what it means when heart speaks unto heart.

We can only understand what it means to love when we personally, intimately, and holistically fall in love with the Lord instead of simply seeking information to prove that He exists and is worthy of our love. Knowing everything about a person will not make us love the person! We might develop some feelings for them, but love does not happen until we open our hearts to get to know, endear, and love the person for who he or she is. The same thing applies to God, but on a deeper level, as He knows us more than we know ourselves and loves us more than we love ourselves. Here is our Christian paradox on love: Love Himself has formed and given us life out of love, and to truly know how to love is to be loved by Him.

Honestly speaking, if God is not real and if I am not in love with Him, there is no way in this world that I would have been a priest! As an Asian person, we were taught to focus on success and achievement to bring honor to our family and loved ones. We tend to be very focused on quantifiable achievements, as success is expected and demanded from young people, especially since their parents have sacrificed a lot for them. I will admit to you that I used to have those thoughts in the past as I tried my best to seek and attain a successful future, hoping to repay and give a

better life to my parents after witnessing the hard work, mistreatments, and many sacrifices they endured so we could have a better future than they did. Nevertheless, God is a relentless Lover and He never lets me go. I knew I just had to give Him a chance.

I left my family with many uncertainties to pursue His will for me. Yet, through all the ups and downs of life, the many trials and hardships, I could never shake Him off. I had cried many tears of anger, had many doubts, "Why did you allow that to happen?" and endured many hurts and betrayals, but He was always there with me. I am a human being, and I have a lot of weaknesses and have hurt many people, too, but I desire and try to become a better priest and lover of God because I truly love Him. Throughout my life, with all its blessings and challenges, I had given God many reasons not to love me, yet He never let me go. If I were the Almighty, I would have done it a long time ago, but this passionate and relentless Lover has always been there for me and with me...and that is why I am still with Him and am the person I am today. Am I worthy to be a priest? The answer is no! He called and made me a priest so I can share, through my life, this relentless, faithful, and everlasting love of God.

Do I have my doubts? Yes! Am I tempted to give up or walk away? Definitely, yes. Do I miss being with my family or having to grieve with the personal choice of not having a family? TOTALLY, YES. Yet, I cannot let Him go because I know how much He loves me. I can feel it in my soul, from the bottom of my heart, and in the depth of my being. I know that He is real because I love Him. I am who I am today because He loves me!

I, then, had to unapologetically love myself as I was meant to be. With that unpretentious self-love, I began to let go, forgive, and love those who were and are in my life, too. My spiritual directors taught me to love those who are also hurt because each and every one of us has our own

core wound that we bear and carry. I was taught to love the person beyond the words and actions they could subconsciously or defensively do in order to protect their fragile ego. This does not mean that everything is going to be rosy and all nice! I still struggle in trying to love others, yet I have learned that there is a big difference between love and like. While I might not like or find this person's attitudes or actions, sometimes to a high degree, I have learned not to let my raw emotions and feelings dictate and turn me into a vengeful person. While I might struggle to respond and be kind in the presence of such people and to love them humanly speaking, my true love for them never stopped, since it never ends. I have to personally and intentionally choose to love, even though the natural temptations and tendencies are to seek retribution, beginning in prayers and small creative steps to embrace (the person) and let go (the hurts or things beyond control).

I had to learn to accept reality and try to embrace the creative tensions that exist in my own life and faith journey. I had to be fine and embrace the truth that life does not have to be perfect to be good! As a matter of fact, it is He who makes it good, and it is His love that gives me the strength to endure and continue with the journey. By removing a lot of my natural human desires, plans, wants, and comforts, He has given me real opportunities to overcome my (fake) perfectionism to learn from others who are on the journey, especially the wise, simple, and pure-hearted heroes of faith. He has given me many chances to learn from life as to be grateful, to let go, to forgive, and to humbly start over again.

KVT

15 September 2025

St. Mother Teresa of Kolkata

FIRST LESSON: LEARN FROM OTHERS

When I shared my life stories, people often told me that it must be wonderful growing up with many examples of faith and blessings from family members. Please let me assure you that it is NOT! Who would like to be poor, mistreated, looked down upon, given no opportunities in life, discriminated against, and told that you must do more to prove yourself because you are in a different class? Those things all happened in my life in one way or another, and repeatedly throughout my life, too. We are all human beings, and those moments of trial and hardship were challenging, disheartening, and filled with doubts and self-defeating thoughts.

PART 1: MY PARENTS AFTER THE WAR

Without going into too much detail about my life, and also recognizing that my own parents have not told me the whole story of their trials and hardships after the Viet Nam War. As a matter of fact, I did not know that my own father bore the invisible scars of war and its mistreatments for many years. I did not know anything about those psychological matters when I was young, and that was why I often resented or questioned him a lot, but I failed to have a better understanding and compassion in accepting that there are certain things that are too painful for him to speak about.

My parents were married a few months before the invasion of Saigon and the Fall of South Viet Nam on April 30th of 1975. That tragic war and unfortunate event shook the lives of many South Vietnamese, and initiated many long years of escape to find freedom. Many souls were lost at sea and on land as they tried to leave Viet Nam after the Communists

came in, because it was a horrible and trying time, especially for those who had family members or any involvement with the war.

My parents never gave me a full detail of what happened between the time that they were married until I was born, except for bits and pieces of how hard life was for both of them as my father was put into prison wrongly by the communist government. He was kept there for a long time, especially when they knew that he was a mechanic. Being a young woman at that time, my mother was very discouraged and struggled a lot to survive. She often told the story of how my paternal grandmother was one of God's loving examples in her life.

At the time when she felt alone and was going through a hard time living in the world as a married young woman while my father was in a Communist prison, she felt that my paternal grandmother cared enough to be a mother to her. After the Viet Nam War, she made little money as an accountant. The little extra that she had gone to purchase train or bus tickets and buy my father small portions of food when she went to visit him in prison (since the Communists did not care much about their prisoners). She was literally living month by month while trying to care for her husband, who was incarcerated.

She felt lonely and abandoned since not a lot of people were willing to help her. Nevertheless, my grandmother always told her to pay a visit before she went to visit my father. Since my grandmother was blind, she would ask my mother to look around to see if there was anyone around first. After that, she would slowly unroll a little amount of money hidden in her simple set of elastic-band Vietnamese-style pants. Even though she had little, she saved up a little bit so my mother could have a little something to buy my father some sweets.

My mother was so touched by those caring gestures, and that is why she told me she lovingly called my grandmother, "Mother." The amount of money was probably nothing, but it meant everything to my

mother because she found in my grandmother a loving mother and a great example of Christian charity and kindness. My grandmother was one of the motivations that helped my mother to personally seek to become a Catholic while waiting for my father.

When my father was released, my mother told me that she had to teach him how to write again because that was not something afforded to him in prison. He told me and my brother (here and there) of some of the horrible treatments that were inflicted upon them by the guards. They were locked in a small box for days with water dripping as a way to physically and mentally torture those who were labeled as resistant to the reeducation process. They had to secretly dig up root vegetables when they were doing field labor because they were very hungry from being fed spoiled and inedible portions (since the guards and officials got the good ones first). They were beaten, moved to another camp without any notice, or unjustly got their time extended if the officials felt like they were not “cooperative” enough. Life was definitely very hard and long for my father during his wrongful imprisonment.

When he was released, he was blacklisted and was not given any real opportunities to be reintegrated into society. He really tried his best, but the Communist government was (and still is) not a fair, just, or caring one! Nonetheless, my parents did their best to provide for us even though we had very little. Without a doubt, growing up poor and with little means in Viet Nam after the war made me very envious of those who were getting special treatment and were better off because of their communist ties. As a child, there were times I asked myself why my life could not be like theirs, and why I was treated differently under the Communist regime, even though they were supposed to be about workers’ equality and rights.

That reality, added on top of the memories of being helpless, poor, and insignificant due to our social status and the corrupted nature of the Communist Viet Nam, made me feel like I had to prove myself so those

things would not happen again. I hated being treated unfairly because we were blacklisted by the government for not being patriotic enough (since our family had close ties with the old regime), nor did we have enough money to buy our way into desirable positions. The corrupted nature of Communist Viet Nam made people either give up their integrity and beliefs in order to sell themselves to the government, bribe their way up the chain, or be fine with playing the fake and vicious rat race game.

PART 2: TIME WITH MY GRANDPARENTS

There was a time when I had to live with my paternal grandparents because my parents could not take care of my brother and me. We lived very simply because they were taking care of some of my cousins as well, because their father left Viet Nam to find freedom, and their mother remarried. It was a simple time, but it was a very important and formative period in my life, because the time spent with my grandparents built a set of strong spiritual foundations that helped me cherish and love my Catholic faith even more!

My paternal grandparents lost a lot of their livelihood to the Viet Nam War. They left their hometowns, moved several times because of the escalations from the war, and lost almost everything after the Communists came in. They only had their faith to rely on in times of little to nothing. While they lost much materially, they had learned much endurance and perseverance, too, especially the necessity to ground their lives in faith. They learned to depend on God in tough times and instilled that within us. When they passed away, they did not leave much except the many religious statues and articles, but most important of all, the

spiritual treasures that cannot be destroyed or taken away by the changing things of this world.

My grandmother would always save a little bit of money each day, even though we did not have a lot. At first, I did not understand why, especially when that small amount can sum up to a nice meat dinner once in a while (since we can only afford rice and vegetables most of the time, and meat was only eaten on big festivities). She always tried to cut back from our weekly spending budget in order to hire a poor man who lived near our neighborhood to take us to church with his humble *xích lô* (Vietnamese-style front-bucket cycle). She tried to share what we had with him so he could take care of his little family, even though we ourselves had little. She always helped others as she could. She told him to take her, myself, and my aunt to church every Sunday and holy days; and in return, she paid him for his service from the money that she saved. I remembered that he did not want to take the money in the beginning, but my grandma would always find ways to make him accept it. Furthermore, every New Year's, she would buy a little something for his family, and he, in return, also gave us something back as a sign of gratitude.

I miss my paternal grandparents a lot. I miss their tenderness, their loving affection, their simplicity, their laughs, but most important of all, their examples of a humble and strong faith in the Lord. My grandmother was an example, for me, of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. As you can tell from the candid picture taken by our family without her knowing, visiting the Blessed Mother was always the first thing she did when we took her to church. She would always ask us to take her to the Marian shrine (since she was blind and could not go by herself) so she could visit the Blessed Virgin. She would always spend a good amount of time there, in silence — on her knees, as she gave thanks and prayed for us. She prayed for her children, grandchildren, and family, that we would care for one

another and that we would keep the faith. How do I know it? I was often "chosen" by my family, especially the older cousins (since I was the youngest), to guide and be with her at the Marian Shrine. When I was young, I always grinned at the opportunity but slowly began to appreciate the visits as they became a habit. Perhaps this was my grandmother's gentle, habit-forming invitation that led me to a great devotion to the Blessed Mother. I began to appreciate her time in prayer when I realized why and who she was praying for. For me, this picture beautifully captured her prayerful spirit as it reminds and challenges me of what it means to be a Christian.

My grandmother's simple faith taught me more about the faithful love of God than any seminary professors or theologians could explain in lectures. She impacted my life and showed me the beauty of faith because she spoke from the heart and dared to live it first. It was more than knowledge or information because it came from a personal example of a committed heart that is based on the faithful, real, hopeful love for God. My grandmother never forced her faith upon anyone, but she was very sure to let her faith be enlivened in her everyday interactions with others.

My mother told me that when my father was in political imprisonment, my grandmother hid the little extra that she had and gave it to my mother so she could have some money to buy a bus or train ticket to visit my father or get him something nutritious. My mother was not a Christian at that time, but because of my grandmother's constant care, she found a personal example of Christian love that enlightened her own conversion journey. It was a hard time; many of my cousins lived with my grandparents as their parents left the country to seek freedom as boat refugees. After my father was released, my parents struggled financially at the time due to the tough political atmosphere and few available opportunities; therefore, I had to live with my grandparents, too.

I will admit to you that I did not like my life when I realized that we were poor. I felt ashamed and envious of others who had more than me. Sometimes people like to romanticize poverty or idealize it, but it was never easy. Nevertheless, when we were home, my grandparents always made sure to make us feel that we were cared for. We ate simply, and grandmother would always eat little, leaving us grandchildren the good portions. She lived with very little, always sacrificed her goods for others. Yet, there was always a deep sense of joy that radiated from her. When she spoke, we listened because we knew she cared and that she deserved our respect. Grandmother taught me a very important lesson of always being grateful for what we have instead of letting ourselves be stuck behind the veil of self-pity, envy, and jealousy.

My grandmother had a couple of nice dresses, for most of her clothes were old and often patched, but she always wore her best to church. She had two special traditional Vietnamese áo dài (long dresses) that she wore to Mass and special occasions. The one made out of red velvet material was very special, and she wore it for Solemnities, Sunday Masses, and weddings. Even though she was blind, she would always call me over to check and pat me down, make sure that I was tucked in and dressed properly for Mass. I did not like it at the time, but I now appreciate her habit-forming attentiveness as I try to dress my best for Mass, especially on Sunday and high holy days. I remember my grandmother's loving attention when I dress now, knowing that she still expects me to give my best to the Lord.

Little did I know that my own mother offered me up to Mother Mary's protection, fearing for my life since I was born with malnutrition and with many infant illnesses. My grandmother loved to have me with her at the Marian shrine as she prayed for me when I was young, and with me when I was older. My parents, later in my life, showed me the picture taken at the

favorite church that my grandmother loved to attend, Nhà Thờ Ba Chuông (nicknamed "The Three Bells Church"). This picture shows me that, from of young age, she began to entrust, offer, and guide me to the Blessed Mother.

Little did I know that she offered and slowly taught me to fall in love with the saint that she loved the most. From of young age, she began to hand on to me what was important to her — her faith. As you might have figured by now, my grandmother is very good with her patient, attentive, gentle habit-forming initiatives.

She taught us how to be good, how to be a caring person, how to pray, and all the like by practicing the good deeds herself and inviting us to do the same. She taught me that the greatest and most important lessons in life are taught by real examples — not lectures — when the adult or teacher is genuinely and humbly putting into practice what they believe and want to pass on to the younger generations. Second, through gentle persistence and patience, one can form good habits in young children — even though they might resist and not understand them at first. The faith that I have today was given to me by her in that way. The way that I look at life and deal with people today was formed by her through those methods.

Some might call me naive when I put too much trust in people, when I put too much hope in conversion of heart, or when I believe that that good can come out of something bad, but I learn all of them from my blind grandmother who was able to see people's hidden goodness even though they might still be stuck in their present struggles. Even though she was blinded and was mistreated by others who took advantage of her disability and goodness, she believed in divine justice that God would deal with those people fairly as they deserve. We were taught to treat them with compassion and forgiveness and let God do His part. What was beautiful

about my grandmother was that she was able to see more in a person and into life than many others around her because her spiritual senses are connected with God, even though her physical ones were limited.

One of the earliest faith-centered memories I had as a child was of my paternal grandmother, who helped me do the Sign of the Cross and taught me the meaning behind each action. She taught me that when I put my hand over my forehead (doing the Sign of the Cross), I should ask God the Father to open my mind and intellect to know and to seek Him. When I put my hand over my chest, I should ask the Son to open my heart to be more in touch and able to tenderly love Him. When I put my hand over my shoulders, I should ask the Holy Spirit to grant me the strength to bear all wrongs, evils, and hardships in life for the lifelong journey.

Even though I did not appreciate the significance of such an important faith lesson as a child, it has become one of the most impactful memories for me as a Catholic in my own personal faith journey. How beautiful it is to hand on and instill our faith to future generations by teaching them from of young of WHY we believe and who God is for us! Each and every one of us has the ability to leave an everlasting imprint on our young people when we are intentional in sharing our precious beliefs with those who are entrusted to us.

Of course, my grandmother was not a theologian. She was a poor, simple, and blind woman, but her faith was genuine, sincere, and personally attested through the many hard trials of life. She went through many hardships because of the Viet Nam War. She later lost her eyesight and never regained it (because of the poor medical conditions throughout and after the war, and because we did not have enough money to afford treatment anyway). Nonetheless, I believe she saw God and was closer to Him than many people who have full eyesight.

As the household's youngest member, I was assigned to be my grandmother's escort and helper when I was living with my paternal grandparents. Even though I was living with three older cousins and my aunt in the same household as my grandparents, each person had different duties and responsibilities, and mine was to be of assistance to my grandmother, who was blind. Even though I did not like my assigned duties at times, I loved my grandmother, which made spending time around her more enjoyable. As a young child, I wanted to just enjoy life and do my own things, so having to be my grandmother's assistant often made me grouchy and irritable. Still, her patience, kindness, and love helped me to better focus on being present to her.

Being blind meant that my grandmother could not move freely by herself. Even though she was comfortable in the house since she remembered every inch of our dwelling, she needed assistance when we went out and about, especially at church. As a young child, I got impatient when I had to stay by her side when she spent time praying at the Marian Grotto before Mass. In Viet Nam's hot and humid weather, I was definitely not enticed or wanted to be under the sun, but my grandmother kept me close to her.

I grew closer to my grandmother because I was often by her side. I sat close to her at the dining table and at our nightly family prayer time with the Rosary. Even though there were times that I only worried about myself as a young child or did not care much when she woke me up when I fell asleep while praying the Rosary, being close to someone who was so devout and faithful helped me in my faith journey, too. She gave me the invaluable gift of faith through her life's examples and devotion. Even though what she taught me meant nothing in the eyes of the world, it meant everything to her because she experienced in her own life what it took to lose people and everything dear and important to her because of

the war. Through her simple but firm trust and unwavering faith in God and His faithfulness, she instilled in me an unwavering commitment to Him, no matter what might seem to be the cost! Simply put, she handed me what was sacred, eternal, transcendental, and invaluable for her, the treasure that cannot be robbed or taken away by any governments, organizations, groups, entities, people, or forces.

I guess this is my homage to my paternal grandmother. There are many more things to say, and those who listen to my homilies will hear me tell stories and mention a lot about her. Even though I might not always appreciate and stray away from what she has taught me from time to time, I am grateful to have someone so real, simple, and foundational to come back to. My grandmother, in her simple and profound faith and character, taught me much about life, and for that, I am so grateful. I pray for her and my grandfather every day, and I ask them to pray for me and the rest of our family at every prayer. I keep and make her prayer intentions my own as I pray that her children, grandchildren, and family would care for one another and that we would keep the faith.

I hear many people who tell me wonderful stories of their parents or grandparents' faiths and virtuous lives. Yet, the stories always kind of ended short because it is often sad to see that the present and younger generations seldom continue what has been handed on to them, as to carry on the legacy of their loved ones. I pray that the ones whom we loved, their rich legacies of faith and moral characters, would not be forgotten or ignored because we are too focused or busy with our own lives and agendas, but that we honor them by living out what they have taught us. We are who we are today because of the people who were with us! No matter how beautiful or challenging each of those stories can be, we can learn much from our roots and where we come from. I hope you can discover that sacred bond in your own lives as we live the faith that has

been given to us, the human character formation endowed and handed on to us, and to enrich and deepen them with our own personal commitment and living of what has been shared by our loved ones.

PART 3: RETURNING TO MY PARENTS

Right after my paternal grandparents left Viet Nam, my parents were permitted to move into their residence to watch over the house. It was one of those moments when we were unsure if they would return sometime in the future or not, because, like many people who felt like they had to leave their homelands, we all had the initial hope of returning when it became a better place to live. My parents were grateful for the opportunity because we were living in very poor conditions, at times jumping from place to place, living in cramped spaces or unsanitary conditions, and having very little, trying to make it through life.

It was hard and challenging for my parents, and I could recall many sacrifices they made so my brother and I could have what they were giving up. It was a very challenging chapter of life for my parents because they could not seem to catch a break! I could definitely remember the tiredness, anxiety, stress, and related (raw) emotional outbursts and tensions in their relationship, as well as in our general family atmosphere. It was definitely a time of leanness... just trying to make it through day by day with the little that we had.

One of their ventures was to open a Pho/noodle shop close to the old train station. They used all of their savings to open a small shop, and it was doing well at first. Nonetheless, running a shop meant that they would have to leave early and return home late each day. Even at a young age, I remembered my mother asking me to step up to take care of my brother

so they could try to make a living, so we could have a better life. I learned to take care of my brother, walking him to and from school, feeding him when we got back, and getting him ready for bed each night. One of my parents would go back to the house to check up on us for a short time, but I was put in charge of him for most of the time.

Before we go to sleep, I would tie a string to my foot and run it to the front door (since we would sleep close to the main room anyway). My parents would pull on the string when they got home around midnight to wake me up and open the door for them, since we did not want to disturb and wake up the neighbors. It was one of those old-style doors that only had one key. My dad refurbished and fitted it so we would have a better and secure door than the very old and weak one that my grandparents had.

I remember there were times when the string got loose or removed from my foot, since I like to roll around when I sleep. I remembered my parents having to sleep outside because they could not wake me up and get inside. Instead of being angry at me for failing them, I remembered them simply going inside, just trying to rest, wash up, and get ready to go out to the shop again. Those memories, even when I was very young, helped me to understand that I must push through life because my parents were trying their best. They endured many hard days with the noodle shop until my mother's health was greatly affected. And like that, their many ventures often ended up getting cut short due to various reasons. I remembered my parents tried so hard to get ahead in those days, but nothing seemed to work in their favor. We indeed struggled, and it was hard at times, but we never gave up.

I admit that I did not like being poor and being mistreated at school (and in life) because we did not have enough money to bribe/buy favor from teachers so they could take "better care" of us. I remembered being

treated like dirt just by my teacher because my parents struggled to make ends meet, and we were not in the special Communist Party circle that gets special treatment. I did resent, get angry, and became bitter many times, but I could not because I see how much my parents had to endure. This all happened at a very young age for me, and that is why I often tell people that I never had a childhood. I had to grow up fast since life was hard. It seemed like that moment in time in Viet Nam and our early years in the United States was one chapter of hardship and trial after another, but we all learned to overcome; we all had to make sacrifices to live and survive at times.

Those moments and chapters in life were not easy. I struggled a lot. However, I was not the only one who struggled. My parents were making greater sacrifices for my brother and me. There were other people who struggled like us in the post-war era as well. We were not the only ones who had opportunities taken from us, pushed away, and isolated by the unjust regime because we were not part of the Communist circle, and did our best to survive through the lean and hard times. The post-war era brought many hurts, pains, sufferings, and trials. There were so many mistreatments, abuses, and corruption, which caused many people to leave everything behind to escape the miserable reality. Those were the hard times, but God was always with us, and we learned to be resilient, push forward, and rely on our faith instead of the government.

PART 4: LIFE WAS NOT EASY

People who had to leave their motherland to seek freedom struggled at first, but they adapted and grew where they were planted. Many succeeded and built better lives for themselves, and their children

have, in turn, contributed greatly to those nations that accepted them. Those who could not leave or stayed behind adapted and continued to live as they were able. Life is always imperfect, and many times filled with many sacrifices, but the journey makes us stronger and more trusting in God's goodness, and we find blessings along the way. Life is far from perfect and as we would have liked it to be, but that does not mean that it is not good, worthwhile, and there are moments that we can be grateful for the grace bestowed upon us in hard times and the people who are with us along the way.

Therefore, I would like to invite you and me to take a moment to give thanks for the journey and let that gratitude bear life by how we help others along the way, especially those who are struggling on the journey at the moment. It was not easy when I was growing up in the motherland, and it was challenging when we arrived in America. Even though I am grateful for our country and her generosity in giving us a new future, I believe no immigrant had an easy beginning because we all had to figure things out, be inculturated, and learn to fit into a new way of life, thinking, and operating. Many people were encouraging, but there were also people who questioned why we should be here and treated us like we were not "American enough."

Of course, my family and I experienced racism, discrimination, prejudices, and injustices like many other immigrants — even when they were not spoken out loud. However, Asian people tend to take everything in, and instead of reacting or resisting, we just work harder to prove ourselves and earn our place in society. Thus, that led to another factor why I became a perfectionist! For the longest time, I felt like I did not want to fail my parents or my self-imposed standards to prove to others that I belong and can make it in the world.

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, so as 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 to live in His love. As Saint Therese of Lisieux once said, "All is grace."

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 did not really need to be what I thought I had 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!

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 oneself, 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.

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 oneself in all of our strengths and imperfections allows us to love and be more understanding of others' limitations and blessings.

Many who know me know how all of that ended and how it led me to my own personal conversion and healing journey to let go of perfectionism and to be loved by God. It was not an easy journey to accept who I am and allow myself to be loved by God instead of what I think I need to be or try to prove myself to be in order to feel worthy, needed, stand out, or be like everyone else. One of my spiritual directors (who helped me to seek a better understanding of myself in light of God's love) once told me, "Your past, even your experiences of poverty, injustices, and imperfections, made you who you are today, so do not deny or be ashamed of them. Do not try to twist and pervert them, but be grateful for them that you now understand who you are in God's loving, patient, and infinite goodness."

As I reflected my own life in light of our Savior's love and His decisions to become one of us, to live like us in all things but sin, and to choose to love us until the very end, I recognized that none of my trials, pains, sufferings, injustices, doubts, weaknesses, and the likes were meaningless. I can learn from them and learn how to be more like Him each and every day! Our Savior taught us through His very own life that He chose to be simple because He desires the simplicity of heart and love. He could have chosen to come into this world as someone powerful, rich, influential, or the like, but He chose to be born poor to poor parents and grew up with little.

Through His own life, He taught us that He is not in the pretentious or worldly game, thus inviting us to embrace simplicity so we can have the poverty of heart to depend, love, and give ourselves totally and completely to Him. The Lord took no shortcuts in showing us that He was willing to live like us in all things but sin! He, therefore, understands what we are going through in our very own earthly journey with the struggles of feeling like we do not have enough, facing injustices, and enduring the storms of life. Nonetheless, He taught us with His very own life not to give up or give in to the world but to rise above the envy, jealousy, resentment, or pitiful moments to better love others as He did.

The life of Jesus before His public ministry, which was mostly in silence and as part of the Holy Family, is not just subject to our piety and works of art but a real family who, despite their unique calling, had similar joys and struggles as we do. The heartfelt, personal, and communal faith foundation helped them to weather many storms, challenges, and hardships. They trusted in God the Father's plan for humanity through the messages sent to them by the Archangel Gabriel and how He was faithful to His chosen people throughout salvation history. The Blessed Mother and St. Joseph taught Jesus how to pray and brought Him to the synagogue

for the Shabbat every week and the Temple for important pilgrimages. Our good Lord taught us that, even though He was the Son of God, He respected the authority His Heavenly Father had given to the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph in their roles as His parents.

Our life journey is filled with many unseen curves, bumps, obstacles, and stormy weather, but we can learn from the Lord what it means to embrace and be grateful for the foundations received from our past, especially the seeds of love planted by our family. Who we are today is largely impacted by all the challenges and blessings that we must learn to reconcile, forgive, overcome, and be grateful for from the past! We can grow from them instead of being resentful and bitter about them. This is not easy, and it can only be done with His grace; therefore, let us take the time to be humble, reflect, and be able to accept who we truly are in His love.

Our past might not be perfect, nor were the people from our past perfect as we hoped for them to be. As a matter of fact, our present and future are not guaranteed to be perfect either, but that does not mean there is no goodness here! Love and gratitude help us expand our hearts to be more patient and simple like God and His faithfulness. He loves us even in our weaknesses! Thus, in accepting who we are in the light of His loving grace, we can be more like Him in choosing to love one another.

SECOND LESSON: LEARN FROM LIFE

I think many of us struggle with patience, learning how to be patient with ourselves and with God. Living in such a consumeristic society, we get everything delivered, prepared, and ready for us in a short time. We complain when we cannot get our packages delivered within one or two days of ordering. We groan when the internet or wireless network is not fast enough. We get displeased when the line is too long or when someone is slow. We have become very impatient people, and we have failed to recognize the loving patience of God, who is still at work in us just as He is working on others. However, many valuable lessons are learned through patiently waiting, reflecting, and maturing through what life gives to us.

PART 1: COMING TO AMERICA

First, I can attest that English is a very hard language to learn as a foreigner, especially from a non-Western Asian tongue. Not only are the alphabet sounds confusing and change all the time, but the vowels are also "messed up" and all over the place! Hence, it is a language that one just has to learn by memory and through regular conversational acquisition, not simply with a book or set of instructions. That was why I was so discouraged and felt uneasy when I was younger and was trying to find a new life in America... I wanted to give up, and that was why the temptation to leave and go back to Viet Nam was so real, too. On top of all the linguistic obstacles and challenges, I had no one to rely on, and it felt so lonely and hard. I just wanted to give up and leave...

As a matter of fact, I planned a speech and waited for my parents to come home. One evening, I put my brother to bed early and waited for

them in our little room. When I saw them enter through our apartment's back door, I wanted to come out right away, but I gave it some time for them to settle, too. I saw my mother washing the plastic tupperware containers and my father sitting close to the kitchen table we got from a charitable thrift store. I wanted to come out and talk with them, but then I saw my father caressing his hands from a hard day of work.

At that moment, I knew I was not going through the hard times in life alone! I knew that my parents were bearing much more pain and suffering for my brother and me. Even though they did not say it out loud, I understood the sacrifices they had to make to leave everything behind so we could have a better future and opportunities that were never afforded to them because of the Viet Nam War. At that moment, I knew there was no turning back, only moving forward with all its present challenges, because this is our God-given chance and opportunity. From that day on, I pushed myself hard to learn English as best as possible to take care of my family. I tried to assist and help my parents as I was able because I knew they had to endure many more hardships than I did.

When I was growing up as a teenager, I really wanted to fit in and be like an "American" so much. I wanted to be like "everyone else" instead of being labeled as an outcast or different-than-us look. I was filled with many typical teenage insecurities, and they get intensified by not feeling like I am fitting in with other people. I looked at my American friends and became jealous of what I thought they had. I watched television and wished that my parents would be the same as what I saw on shows. I was self-aware and very insecure... I kept looking for things that I did not have and wanted for myself. They were unrealistic, but they were the vain shadows and daydream stuff I wished for myself. It was draining and tiring, always wishing and wanting something I did not have, and it took a long

time for me to realize that I do not have to fit in to be who I am and understand who I am as a beloved child of God.

When I looked at what I did not have, I became so envious of others around me. I became frustrated with my own life's situation because things were not perfect or as I would have liked them to be. I enveloped myself in my own self-pity and moped in it. It was miserable because I got so centered on myself as I tried to blame others for my own problems, especially my parents, as a teenager. I wished so much that they would be like my American friends' parents. There were times I foolishly wished I could have run away to have a better life!

As I was growing up, the baggy pants were very popular and in style, but they were expensive, too. We did not have much, so I could not buy any of those cool clothes like my friends. We did not have any really nice clothes since most of our stuff came from thrift stores, garage sales, and low-cost stores. My father wanted my brother and me to go to a school that used a uniform — standardized dress code, but not because we were prestigious or better than other people. It was in a rougher, poorer, and more challenging part of town, so it was a way to make sure gang signs, affiliations, and expressions are not easily expressed at school. I did not want to go there at all because most of my middle school friends ended up at another high school. There were very few Asian people at the school, which caused more isolation because it was very hard to fit in. I often got made fun of because of my name and my Vietnamese accent. I felt like a fish out of water most of the time, and even though it has gotten better, I never felt like I belonged there.

Nonetheless, I have learned much when I left home to begin my religious life and formation. When I had time to reflect on the reality of life that is much bigger than me, I began to see how much I really have and

how many blessings God has given me! I began to appreciate the numerous sacrifices that my parents made so my brother and I could have a life that they never had — a life that was robbed from them because of the Viet Nam War. They endured many hardships, from discrimination to racism, from having little to nothing to not having anything for themselves, so that the little extras are saved and spent on building a better life for us in America.

My father used to be a heavy smoker in Viet Nam, but he gave that up when we came to America. I did not understand why at first, but I understood that it was a sacrifice so that the extra money could be saved to make the mortgage payment, so we could have a house of our own. My father ate one of the cheapest instant noodles available at our local Vietnamese supermarkets for the longest time — day in and day out, every single day — so money could be saved. My mother began to take the second (night) shift so that the pay would be a little bit better. Even though we did not see her until the weekend, she prepared and cooked for us every day, and we could taste and see her love through those dishes. Those were just some of the numerous sacrifices that my parents made so that my brother and I would have freedom, better education, and better opportunities than they had!

As a teenager, I wanted to fit in so much. Nonetheless, as I grow older in years and in my own faith, I realize that I can never fully fit into the general population and popular opinion part of society. Who I am, my own particular journey of life and faith, and where I am today, is unique and should not be denied because all of that makes up my very own identity! Much more than what society tells me, who I am as a beloved child of God, disciple of Christ Jesus, and loving instrument of the Holy Spirit gives me life, much more than what other worldly opinions or humanistic voices. Who I am as a Catholic will make me stand apart and different than the

rest of this secularistic world. I will not fully fit in... and that is OK! I will be at odds with the world, and that is fine. I will be rejected, ridiculed, looked down on, and attacked at times, but that is the price of discipleship, faith, and obedience to the truth.

I am sharing with you a lot from my past, hoping that you can reflect on your own stories, too. Where you and I are today is not just of our own making! Where we are today has been a work of grace, interwoven and at work even when we do not recognize how much He has been present to care for us beyond what we could comprehend. God was showing how much He loves us through other people around us, especially the manifestation of His grace to help us in our times of trial, hardship, challenge, and failure. I do not know about you, but I have learned that where I am today has been a product of His loving grace. Even though I am hurt and scarred by life and people, life is worth living because I know who I am and where I am ultimately going. Hence, because of Him and the people He has given me in my own life, I have come to realize that life does not have to be perfect to be good.

When we have the time to look back, reflect, and pray, everything begins to connect and make more sense. It might be hard and challenging when we are in the very storms and trials of life! Even though we might not always get what we want or be able to fit in as we would have liked, that does not mean that life is not worth living and miserable. My brothers and sisters, let us not lose sight of who is there for us and what gives us life. Let us be grateful for where we are today and give thanks to those who made so many sacrifices for us. I hope and pray that each and every one of us will understand our true identity, self-worth, and what we are called to do as people of faith, so this world will not rob us of the joy we have in Him! It is OK not to fit in and fine not to be accepted by all because we are not defined by this world or dictated by its values alone. Therefore, let us open

our eyes to the greater reality and find in ourselves the greater strength of His loving grace to sustain us in our very own journey.

PART 2: RECEIVING THE CALL

Some of us had a loving and happy childhood; some of us did not. Some of us had great memories, some of us are still trying to work through our pains and sufferings, resentments and hurts, and the baggage of our past. Even those who had a great childhood could remember times when they were hurt, and those who had a hard past could remember the moments of blessing. Without a doubt, our pasts are complicated, and they make us who we are today. To deny or run away from our past is the denial of ourselves and who we are deep within, and that tends to bring more problems for us in the long run. Nonetheless, the hardest part is to reconcile, embrace, accept, and learn from what made us who we are today, so we can let go and learn from our past.

For the longest time ever, I tried not to remember the not-so-beautiful parts of my past. I tried to forget the times filled with many struggles and hardships. Nonetheless, one of the priests that I respected and trusted once told me something that I still remember today: “Who you are today is the result of the grace of God at work when you had little.” That simple statement was eye-opening for me! Who we are today, with all its blessings and struggles, is the result of how God's grace brought us over the hurts, trials, hardships, and sufferings of the past. Even though we are not perfect, we are real, living testaments of His loving grace at work.

When I was young, after the time when my paternal grandparents left Viet Nam, I was living with my parents again. In order to find a way to make a living in a limited and closed society, they ventured into

entrepreneurship. It was a hard time since you did not have many opportunities unless you belonged to the Communist Party or knew someone who could "pave the way" with bribery or other illicit means. Since my father and our paternal family were blacklisted by the communist government, we were looked at and treated with much suspicion. It was a hard time for my parents, but they tried their best to make it through in many different ways. One time, they used their savings and borrowed money from family members to open a pho shop (Vietnamese noodles). However, having your own business took a lot of time, so I had to learn how to care for my younger brother while they attended the shop.

As a child of around 7 years old, I was scared at times, but I had to learn to push through my feelings to take care of the house while my parents were gone. I walked my younger brother to and from school, prepared dinner that my mother cooked, and made sure he went to sleep. As shared earlier, I would have to make sure that I tied a rope around one of my feet before I went to sleep. That rope would then be tied around the old metal front door that pulled shut. Since it was an old door, we only had the option to either lock from the inside or from the outside with one key. Therefore, before I went to sleep, I would lock up and wait for my parents' signal (by pulling my foot using the string) to open the door for them when they got home early in the morning. We were living in a poor, small, close-together neighborhood, so you could not be loud because you would wake everyone up. Unfortunately, a few times, the rope fell apart because I was sleepy or did not tie it well enough... so my parents ended up sleeping outside. That part of life was hard.

Another part of life around that time was my first cognition of being poor! I remembered having a nice neighbor who went to the same elementary school as I did. However, since his family was connected to

the Communist Party, their residence was much nicer than ours. They literally were just a wall away from us, but his house was much nicer — two (later, three) stories tall. He invited me to play chess with him many times, but I was never invited to go inside. We sat near the main entrance door to play chess, and while I was grateful for his generosity, I felt inferior and sad.

I received my vocation from a very young age. It came in a dream. I never saw who the priest was, but the good Lord and the Blessed Mother appeared in that dream. I saw them talking to a priest facing them, and I could only see his back as he was kneeling down in front of them. I heard the Lord told him, “My child, do not be afraid for I will be with you until the end!” The priest never said anything except putting his head down as a sign of obedience and trust. Of course, I initially dismissed it at first, but finally came to recognize that it was a vision and a calling from God when it kept being repeated for many days. I guess that was the beginning of my religious calling, but to be honest with you, I was not always faithful to that calling because life was hard and I just focused on trying to survive.

Furthermore, there were many reasons that made me push away my priestly vocation when we came to America! I tried so hard to integrate and be a part of our American society like everyone else. When we first arrived, I wanted to make sure I worked hard on my English, hoping to get a better education so my family and I would never have to endure poverty again, especially to repay my parents for their sacrifices in giving us new freedom and opportunities that they never had.

Yet, God never gave up on me... He never let go of His calling! I could not explain why the vocation to the priesthood was always lingering in my mind. I finally gave God a "chance," telling Him that I would give it six months, "If it meant to be, I'll stay. If not, I'll return home and do like what

other Asians would do: be a doctor, engineer, or something in the I.T. field." For some reason, I stayed through all the ups and downs, and after eleven years of formation, I was ordained a priest in 2013.

I had reservations about answering the call because I graduated from high school in 2002. Many could still remember many tragic events that happened around that time! First, of course, was the tragedy of 9/11/2001 that shook our nation. Furthermore, around 2001, too was also the outbreak of many sex abuse scandals. I remembered some of my school friends and teachers questioned my choice of a "career" when I was thinking about the priesthood. Some of them even said, "You're sure you want to be with those child rapists or pedophiles? You're sure that you're not one of them?" Hence, I quickly learned to simply say, "I'm still thinking about what's next (after high school)." It was hard to make a commitment at that time with so many things going on, but God never stopped pursuing me.

Throughout my priestly formation, I learned much to let go, to accept, and to learn from my past. I had to learn to let go of the things that hurt me and the things that I tried so hard to become someone I thought I needed to be to be accepted by others. I had to learn to accept who I am as a child of God in all my blessings and brokenness. Furthermore, I learned to appreciate and embrace all that had happened because they made me who I am today. Even though life was hard at times, all the trials, ups and downs, lessons and blessings made me who I am as a person. They taught me perseverance and endurance, especially to learn how to adapt and not give up too easily. Furthermore, they reminded me that the loving grace of God brought me to where I am today because He lifted me up at times when I wanted to give up or thought I could not make it anymore. Who you and I are today are the results of His loving grace that never gave up and never stopped pursuing us!

Our God is the wonderful God of the journey. He was, is, and will always be in all of our ups and downs — every part of our lives. We are forgiven because He had mercy on us when we were lost, rebelled, or acted against Him. We are here because He led us back to where we need to be. We are loved even though we were scarred by many things that destroyed our souls in the past. We are free because He lifted us up from the mundane shallowness and liberated us from the bondage of sins, manipulations, and lies of this world. If we recognize the extraordinary grace at work in our lives, we would recognize that we would not be here today, love ourselves as we are, able to continue to struggle and have the strength to move forward if it were not for His grace.

All that we have today, all of our hurts and failures, sufferings and blessings, hardships and victories, trials, battles, and scars have made us stronger and more resilient. Our past might hurt us at times, but if we take the time to sift through the negatives, we can see many hidden lessons behind them. All these valuable lessons were taught and given at times when we did not expect, thought we could handle them, or were about to give up! Therefore, we should be mindful of how we are called to lift one another in prayer as well. Perhaps we might not notice, but the times we were saved, spared, or rescued from our miseries or perditions were the result of someone's heartfelt prayers. At times when we thought we could not make it, someone offered his or her sufferings, trials, pains, or hardships as prayers for those who are in need and struggling, and those efficacious sacrifices were accepted by God and put into use to answer our prayers. This is what we call the communion of saints, for we are not in this alone. Through our prayers and struggles, we have the personal and genuine power to pray and offer what we have for one another.

Therefore, I ask you not to give up just yet. Invite God to be in your journey! It is life-giving if we can take some time to pray and lift one

another, offer what we are going through in a simple and heartfelt way, so He can listen and lovingly use our humble petitions to lift those who are in need. We can choose to remain in our doom-and-gloom mindset and self-inflicted pities, or we can allow our very own lives to become invaluable lessons and reminders of His loving grace! May we learn and be able to see the efficacious result of grace at work so we can, in turn, pray for others who are struggling, too.

Not everything has to be perfect for life to be meaningful, beautiful, and life-giving! There are so many lessons that can be learned and grace received from them because they have made us who we are today. Grace is at work when we allow ourselves to become students of the school of life, especially in the light of His love. God is with us, and that makes our journey providential, meaningful, and worthwhile in its totality! Our loving Lord wills our good, now and for eternity; therefore, let us not lose sight of the short moments and set our eyes on the grand scope of things. Let us recognize His blessings and become blessings for one another.

PART 3: NOW... TO MY GRANDFATHER

In the first lesson, I highlighted a lot about my grandmother. Now I would like to spend the time to write about my paternal grandfather and how he taught me how to pray for others. And as many of you can tell, I miss them terribly because they were great examples of faith for me. They showed me what it means to believe by their own lives of faith and how to pray by the way that they prayed genuinely and humbly before God.

I remembered when I was living with my paternal grandparents, I disliked our nightly Rosary sessions — and in the same way, going to Mass. I would always fall asleep at some points, and at times, I thought that I

could find something better to do. Yet, because I was not given a choice except to follow the family's spiritual disciplines, I later learned much about prayers. My grandparents' choices and lifestyle taught me that we do not stop believing or praying just because we do not feel like it. We learn to persevere, keep on trying, and remain faithful with the best that we can! The life of faith is not just for us when we feel like it; it is based on our consistent, faithful, and disciplined spiritual exercises and will to seek God at all times. I have learned through my grandparents, and later through spiritual direction, "If you keep your prayers, your prayers will keep you!" They taught me spiritual tenacity and perseverance.

Growing up, my grandfather used to be so strict. He had the respect of his children, grandchildren, and families. As a way of comparing and contrasting, my grandfather was different than my grandmother because he was the head of the family and tried to uphold his patriarchal role as the head of the family. We respected and obeyed him because filial duties, responsibilities, and obedience are important in our culture, but I think our grandmother won the true heartfelt respect of her children and grandchildren. Both did the right things, to walk the straight and narrow, to be ethical and moral, to be faithful and obedient to the Lord's commandments, but in different ways. Sometimes, it was easier to relate to my grandmother's style because of her gentle kindness and small, considerate charity. Nonetheless, as my grandfather got older in his life, especially near the end of his life, he became more gentle and less strict. He did not have to talk as much because we all knew the values he held. I remembered both of my paternal grandparents by how they lived their lives and let their faith be enlivened in their very own lives.

While my paternal grandfather was still alive, he would often call to check up on me. He would ask how my studies were going and how the seminary was treating me. We would always joke and talk for a while, even

though there were times that I had to cut him short due to other obligations. Nevertheless, each time before hanging up the phone, he would always ask if there was anything that I would like him to pray for me. Almost without fail, he would always remind me to persevere and be faithful to the call I have received from God.

In similar words, he often said: "This earthly life is not easy, nor is it perfect. All we can do is to fix our eyes on God and remember that no one else in this world is more faithful and just than He. Nothing in this life is easy, but each of us has been given a vocation, and you particular, the vocation to the priesthood. Be faithful to Him and persevere! He will never abandon you." The reminder came from his heart, from a man who had lost everything due to the Viet Nam War, who had seen his siblings killed by the enemy, who had been betrayed, and who had witnessed many injustices. His faithfulness to God was not just empty words, for his faith was tested and tried.

Even after I got ordained as a priest, he would continue to call me often to check up on me. He always made sure that I kept up with my prayer times, was humble and faithful to my priestly duties toward the People of God. He had instilled in me a great sense of responsibility and duty, not to look at them as something imposed upon or obligatory, but as a personal response and fulfillment of what God and the Church have entrusted to me. For him, it is important for a priest to be faithful to his duties and to pray for the people entrusted to me. He would also ask me, as a grandson who is a priest, to remember to pray for my extended family, that all would keep the faith, and to offer Masses for the ancestors. My grandfather would always remind me "to remember those who have given you life and pray for those who have passed away." He taught me well about the understanding of communion, that we did not just come from someone or somewhere random, but that we have roots and people who

have chosen to give us life. Therefore, it is important to remember, give thanks, and pray for those who have gone before us — for the repose of their souls.

After my grandfather passed away, I received a letter from an aunt who is dear to me. She asked me to offer Masses to pray for and in remembrance of our ancestors. In the letter, she said that my grandfather would be proud that I remember those who have gone home to the Lord often because "you are continuing what is truly dear and near to your grandfather's heart." That letter really touches my heart as she reminds me what was important for my grandfather — as his legacy and hope for the future generations — and to be able to keep his legacy alive with what I do as a priest and as a member of the family.

My grandfather would always remind me very often: "Always remember those who have given you life and pray for those who have passed away." As a Vietnamese, family is very important. Moreover, for my grandfather, the remembrance of those who have given us life and prayers for those who have died is crucial because they remind us of the deeper spiritual communion with one another. Death cannot separate us from one another because we are always connected through and in the Lord, even if we are no longer present to each other physically. This sense of communion reminds us that we are not born of someone or from somewhere randomly. Our parents have given us life, and for the most part, we are tied and connected to a family tree of many people who have chosen that gift of life as well. Where we are today is grounded in and through the people that had gone before us. Where we are today is a gift from the people who were part of our family and our lives. Where we are today is not a coincidence, for God had providentially given us a place where we belong that is deeply rooted in the gift of life.

Often, we are very guilty of coming to prayers with only the petitionary part: asking the Lord for what we want or need. We might give thanks and meditate on what He is asking of us for the moment, but for most of the time, we tend to be too focused on asking for our own needs. My grandfather taught and constantly reminded me of the importance of intercessory prayer, praying for others and their needs or struggles.

In his old age, my grandfather dedicated a lot of time to praying the Rosary for the Holy Father and the Church, for the world at large, for his family, for the poor souls, and for those in need. Through his personal examples and teachings, I have found myself enjoying praying for those who have asked me to pray for them. As a matter of fact, I have a list of people and intentions that I pray for daily as I try to lift the petitions of those who have asked me. There were and still are times that I cannot remember everything that everyone told me, but I always ask the Lord to listen to those who have asked me to pray for them, for their needs. I pray that no matter where we are in life, each one of us can feel the providential and comforting care of the Lord along the way. I guess I have learned that from my grandfather, as he taught me to remember to pray for others in our own prayer times.

PART 4: RECOVERING FROM THE LIES

When we want something, we often want it now! Not only that, we want it our way, too. Nevertheless, things do not always come as perfectly as we would like them to be. Much more than things, human beings are imperfect, limited, and messy at times. Therefore, to recognize that each and every one of us is a work in progress, for the grace of God is still at work in forming us, is the most basic but hardest thing to learn and relearn

throughout our lives. One of my good priest friends and personal confidant in spiritual matters often likes to remind me, "Be patient with yourself and with God!" As someone who is still struggling with the imperfections of life, I try to remind myself that God loves me even in my own imperfections.

As shared earlier, I am a recovering perfectionist. Due to my cultural and personal upbringings, I learned to cope and live with a false sense of perfectionism. As the first child and an immigrant, a lot was expected and needed to be done. I did not want to get disciplined for making mistakes, so I sought to become a perfectionist simply to avoid getting in trouble. There were times that I was borderline scrupulous and OCD, double, and triple-checking myself and my every action, worrying about how things need to be to have them perfect (or so they will not be screwed up). I lived with this self-created image of myself for the longest time ever, but I could never understand why I was never happy. I was so critical of others, too.

However, I knew deep down from within that this was not the solution because I was not happy. There needed to be something more! I sought help through years of spiritual direction and formation. The Lord was patient with me as I was working through my own problems, failures, false self-images, and fears of not being in control. He showed me, time after time, what it meant to simply be loved by God without having to prove myself. He taught me to be kind, patient, and forgiving of myself and others, too.

Furthermore, as a recovering perfectionist and workaholic, I struggle every day and constantly have to check myself from overworking. I often go through sporadic periods of weight gain because I do not watch what I eat and how much time I need to exercise. When I begin to get too busy, not only is my physical health affected, but my spiritual awareness

gets dull. When I get distracted and filled with numerous worries about what needs to be done, both my physical and spiritual health decline. When I forget to take care of my physical health with proper exercise and eating habits, I often end up shorter on the fuse, more anxious, worried, irritated, and tired. Even though I do not show my irritations and anxieties (around my parishioners for their own sake), I can sense the daily stress and pressure build-up. Hence, when I get too tired and worried, I tend to slack off, get half-hearted, and distracted in my prayer time with God. Even though I always try to be faithful to my prayer, those things caused me to be so distracted that my heart is sometimes not fully immersed in it.

I pray even when I am worried, anxious, and tired because I know I have to be faithful to what I have promised on the day of ordination, which is to be faithful in prayer for the people of God. My spiritual director also told me to never skip prayer because he said, "The day that you stop worrying and praying for your vocation is the day that you lose it." I always kept his words at heart and prayed for the grace of perseverance and faithfulness to my vocation because I know how weak and vulnerable I can get without the grace of God. Yet, distractions and worries can get the best of us when we come to prayer. When we are too filled with many things to do or are too tired to pray, our spiritual senses cannot comprehend and recognize the divine presence in front of us and all around us. Therefore, it is important to calm oneself down and be attentive to what is going on so we can truly know what is going on with us holistically.

Many of us have lost the ability to rest and be recharged holistically because we have not taken the proper time to care for our bodies and spirits. As typical post-modern people, our body and spirit are in a constant state of flux, never having enough space to rest! Relationships break down because we have lost the needed communication and personal touch that comes from the heart. Many break down

psychologically and physically because they have forgotten to care for themselves and be attentive to what their psyche and body are telling them. We cannot pray and hear what God has to say if we never have enough time to open and to use our spiritual senses to listen, see, feel, and touch God and the working of His grace in our lives. We often are too tired when we come to relationships and prayer; therefore, both sides of the human and spiritual relationships suffer greatly. Therefore, it is important to know that perhaps what our soul and our body are trying to tell us is that something has to change! We cannot simply go on as we had before if whatever we have been doing is slowly breaking us down, destroying us from all sides, and unhappily bringing us to where we are today.

In learning that relationship takes time, people are messy, and it is important to be patient with ourselves and others, we become instrumental in God's loving plan instead of trying to be in control, frustrated, resentful, or angry when things do not go our ways. Perhaps other people will seem to have everything together or able to handle whatever is going in our lives while we are still messy and struggling with many repetitive failures and shortcomings, each and every one of us have our own struggles, hardships, and trials to embrace that perhaps no one else will know except our very own selves and the Almighty. Therefore, let us be attentive, patient, trusting, and humbly receiving God's grace in our very own lives, and let that loving joy change us deep from within.

Peace begins with us because we know that faith is not a one-time, short-term, or temporary thing to attain but a lifelong journey of transformation. God never gives up on us, even when we cannot love ourselves and others; therefore, let us also be gentle, kind, and supportive of those who are still struggling with their own faith journeys and transformative discipleship. Just as God has been forgiving, patient, and loving toward us, let us be kind and loving toward others who are genuinely

seeking the truth. Anger, impatience, and frustrations are oftentimes signs of a reminder that we need to be more prayerful, grounded, and loving with our words and actions, life and deeds. While the emotional or sentimental ups and downs are parts of our normal daily struggles, we should not operate consistently — day in and day out — with those negative factors and attitudes because we are the instruments instead of the controllers of His loving grace.

May our imperfections lead us to greater humility in recognizing that God's infinite love is so powerful that He loves us even when we could not love ourselves. May our human weaknesses and struggles remind us that grace is still at work even though we would like to be perfect, in control, or have things handled as we would have liked. May we recognize our finitude and its limitations as to trust in the Creator and His continual sanctifying grace at work for those who are simple, trusting, humble, and perseverant enough to stay the course. Indeed, it is not the perfect, fitted, or whoever seems to have it all who will win the race in the short term, but those who persevered, trusting, and humbly walking with God until the end who win the everlasting crown of Heaven. Therefore, let us be patient with ourselves and let God be at work in each one of us so He can bring into fulfillment what He has begun in us with His loving grace.

A few years back, I was helping a person who was struggling with suicidal tendencies and self-harm measures (on top of substance abuse habits). After this person checked into a professional rehabilitation facility, and I was able to find the time to talk and journey with the individual throughout the recovery time, this person told me two words in our conversation that spoke life into my own prayer and reflection times. They helped give comfort to the acceptance and resignation part of the process. The two words this person shared with me were redemption and surviving.

Indeed, we do believe in redemption as Catholics! We believe in second chances, that God forgives and gives us sufficient grace to overcome our failures, hurts, pains, sufferings, and tormenting past. Our sins, failures, and whatever we have done in the past do not define or enslave us for eternity if we are humble enough to confess our sins, ask for forgiveness, seek conversion, and truly repent our faults. We might be scarred by them or have to answer for the crimes or faults we have committed in a just way.

We are given the grace to overcome and seek new beginnings if we truly resign to Him, seek His forgiveness, and especially new lives of faith through genuine conversion, repentance, atonement, and freedom. If we are truly sorry for our failures, He will forgive us, give us sufficient grace to amend our lives, and seek a new future in His loving grace and with His providential care through various means and people. No one will be forgotten if he or she returns to God, be reconciled with Him through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and do his or her best to change. Of course, we will relapse and fail sometimes, but this is where perseverance and tenacity come in and help us not lose focus, give up on hope, and abandon the course when things get hard.

Hence, this leads us toward the second word, which is surviving. If you think about it... We do not and will not see every day as the best, optimal, and nicest day of life! There will be storms, showers, rains, and unexpected curveballs, even when the weather says otherwise, when we have done our best to eliminate the odds, double-check to ensure things are right and proper, or when we try our hardest. Life is imperfect, and many unplanned outcomes or changes will occur. We will fail or have to deal with our own or other people's failures, even if we do our best to avoid them. Nonetheless, our failures are not the end and the very definition of our lives! Perhaps they were given opportunities for us to learn, grow, and

mature beyond our self-centeredness and egocentric demands, expectations, and desires.

Some days, we might just have to survive, living above the storms, failures, hurts, pains, and sufferings, even though they might get hard. Some days, we might have to anchor ourselves and weather the battering storms. Some days, things will fall apart, resulting in messiness and fallout. Some days, we are just tired and want to give up... but the storms are not the end points, no matter how long they seem, for they will always end, and the sun will always return. Things do not have to be perfect and go our way to be good!

We are survivors. We have always been and will continue to be with God's grace. There will be hard days, and there will be times when we might think we might not survive or see another day. But, we are still here... not because of our abilities and efforts, but because of God's grace. There were moments when we thought we could not make it or it was too hard, but we are still here because of His grace. When things were thought impossible, and we were about to give up or give in, there seemed to be some unexplainable source of strength that pushed us through... and that was His grace. Therefore, we continue moving forward, pushing on day, too, one step at a time. We stay the course because life is worth living and full of grace, even though it might be full of trials and hardships. There will be stormy days just as there are sunny ones. Some days will be discouraging and hard, but do not give up; we are survivors, and He has redeemed us. We are given second chances and opportunities to improve, no matter how hard or challenging life is in certain periods. Therefore, let us not give up hope yet! Let us not be defined and enslaved in our own hellish reality because of our failures, but push forward to desire, will, seek, and embrace change for the better with all humility and genuineness of heart. My brothers and sisters, let us try to keep the course.

THIRD LESSON: LEARN TO BE GRATEFUL

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 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 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.

PART 1: I THOUGHT I WAS RIGHT

I left home after high school to join the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. What began as an uncertain commitment later became a personal invested interest because I thought it was God’s will for me! I dreamed of being a missionary preaching the Gospel like the great saints and priests we had in the congregation. I fixed my hope and planned my future around that idea!

I was devastated and went into a dark period of desolation when I left the Redemptorists. I knew it had to be done because there were signs that it was not the vocation meant for me, but I, like many other pious but controlling people, had made many pious plans for myself. I remember being angry at God a lot! There were times when I could not pray because I kept crying. I asked Him constantly for answers and guidance on what to do next. Nevertheless, all I ever heard as a response to my prayer was: "I love you, Khoi, is that not enough?"

In my own life, through many different trials, this same question-answer from God kept appearing when I came to prayer in times of need and wanted to know or be in control. Of course, I have doubted His plan for me many times, especially when His plan differed from what I had piously drawn out for myself. Nonetheless, all of those frustrations came from MY ideas of holiness and personal plans for my own life. They were often filled with false, pious thoughts that were not His will. It actually took me a long time to finally understand who I am called to be and let go of what I want to be. I know that I am slow and hard-headed!

I resisted a lot.

Nonetheless, I slowly understood through those closed doors and trials of life that my vocation is to listen and be where I am meant to be, where He has planted me, and where I need to grow with devotion, hope, trust, and perseverance...even amid the trials and things that hurt my heart and make me frustrated because they are out of my control.

Through many failed plans, divine interventions, and deviations from my desires, I have learned that my foundational and ultimate calling is to be a child of God. My vocation as a priest, whether in a diocesan, parish, or military setting, is not of my own accord, wanting, or desire. My vocation is to live and make choices for the greater good of the people in

my life, particularly those who have been entrusted to me! It oftentimes requires me to bite my tongue, embrace the creative tensions and hurts, and put my head down so I can care for my people instead of trying to be a false hero.

I am slow, but I finally understood through many divine interventions and loving lessons what it means to live for the people, especially how the priests I used to know when growing up in Viet Nam learned to minister and care for the people in the midst of an oppressive, totalitarian, dictatorial Communist regime. More than ever, I have learned and greatly respect them because I understand their shepherd's heart in living for the people and trying to find creative ways to care for the Church amid many trials, sufferings, fear tactics, and oppressions. That took a lot of perseverance, grit, and resiliency.

The Second Letter of St. Paul to St. Timothy is crucial in reminding us to be faithful and not lose hope in trials and oppositions, to be grounded in the Gospel and the ministry of preaching through the courageous example of our lives. The Apostle commanded and charged his close collaborator and disciple to proclaim the Word of God, be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; to convince people, reprimand them when needed; but most important of all, to encourage the Church through patience and sound teaching of the truth. As a good Apostle, St. Paul reminded us of our necessary disposition of heart to remain steadfast in proclaiming the Word of God through faithful perseverance, by maturing and growing where He has planted us.

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-aggression amongst clergy and religious because of those factors. Nonetheless, that was where spiritual maturity had to come for me.

Failures are hard. No matter how much we try to do our best, we cannot avoid failures. Even if we try to eliminate our negative odds, possibilities, or chances, we can still make mistakes or face things that do not go our way. Many have lost hope, given up, and want to end everything when things fall apart or do not get their way, as if the world is ending; nonetheless, they are just parts of life. I do not want to sound insensitive or inconsiderate because it is not easy to embrace failures, especially if we have tried so hard or invested so much time and effort into specific matters. Personally, I have faced failures many times in life, and I am learning to move on even though it gets hard and challenging. I am grateful that our life of faith is not determined by how much we have succeeded or how we seem to be the best, but by how faithful we are in persevering and staying the course.

As a priest, I deal with a lot of failures. Not only do I have to face and come to terms with my own personal failures and shortcomings, especially to let go and keep in check my own unrealistic high expectations and demands as a recovering perfectionist, but I also have to deal with other people's failures. People come to me when things fall apart, when they get hurt, or when they fail to meet society, other people, or their own expectations and goals. Failures hurt us deeply because we try our best to fit in and be accepted, loved, recognized, valued, and welcomed. Therefore, when we feel like we have been rejected, abandoned, ignored, forgotten, or pushed out by others because we are not good enough for them. We feel like we did not do enough to be like what they wanted us to

be; we let ourselves be eaten alive by our own self-imposed or magnified sense of guilt and shame.

When we see that we have failed, we tend to give up, want revenge, or just lock ourselves up from within. We let ourselves be locked up, condemned, judged, and eaten alive by our failures. Hence, sooner or later, we will burn out, causing harm to ourselves or finding unhealthy ways to attack, nitpick, or pick on the wrongs of others, so we do not have to deal with our own selves because we have not dealt with it in a humble, genuine, transparent, and honest way.

Now, as a military priest and chaplain, I deal with a lot of spiritual and invisible wounds that our military personnel bear deep from within. Sometimes, it is the survivor's guilt; other times, past baggage, undealt problems, unhealthy coping mechanisms and habits, post-traumatic disorder, and its triggers, or poor decisions made that negatively enslaved, controlled, or hurt the person deep from within. Like many of us who are recovering perfectionists or have had to deal with our failures in the past, we do not like to acknowledge or accept them.

It gets hard in a world where everyone tries to show positive, self-centered, fabricated portraits, pictures, clips, and even fake personas so others can look at them, stand out, and be objects of talk and envy. So many people would rather fake things because they dislike and hate to deal with the truth. We tend to push away what we do not like to deal with, the hurts that affect us, the imperfections that we bear, and pains that scar us, the sufferings that no one else knows but plague us, and the brokenness that we all have with all its limitations and shortcomings. Until we are honest enough to accept, understand, embrace, and try to find healing for our woundedness, we will remain unwell in harming ourselves and others because we are miserable.

It is so easy to attack, be petty, and push people away when we are hurt, so that the attentions are not focused on us. Nonetheless, these miserable actions and choices further isolate us from the people who can support and love us in our time of need. Many of them, especially military people, think they are weak, damaged, ineffective, not good enough, and to be thrown away, but I always tell them, "Thank you for being courageous in being here with me today!" It is true courage to embrace our imperfections and to acknowledge that we need help. Even though it is hard, the greatest freedom is recognizing that we cannot save ourselves. It is perfectly fine and commendable to seek help... There is no shame or failure in that! As a matter of fact, it is very courageous to be honest, real, transparent, and true to ourselves.

One can easily go on a lifetime of hiding the core and deep pains, sufferings, hurts, and wounds, and end up hurting oneself or others. Nonetheless, it takes a lot of courage to say, "I need help because I am broken, and I cannot save or help myself. I need help because of the pains I have caused and inflicted upon myself and others... and I am sick and tired of being sick and tired of doing the same thing." It is truly courageous to recognize that we need help and we cannot help ourselves, especially opening up, owning up to our mistakes, looking at our past hurts and pains, and being committed to the lifelong process of recovery and living above the brokenness or disease that plagued us in the past.

Whatever you are going through, please ensure that you are not pushing people out and isolating yourself from God and His love for you, which is often through other people! Whatever you think you are or cannot be, I want to give you permission to find help. As a matter of fact, I give you permission to not be enslaved by the lies, manipulations, and falsehoods given to us. I give you permission to ask for help and receive help without feeling like you are useless, weak, or no good. I give you permission to be

courageous in admitting your woundedness and ask for support and assistance from those who are able and willing to help you. I give you permission to no longer be defined by your failures but by the humility, strength, and loving grace that flows out from God's heart and through the help of others in your life.

PART 2: LEARNING TO PRAYERFULLY TRUST

To be honest with you, I struggled for the longest time to understand what it means to be loved by God. Like many, I know that He loves me through His loving acts of creation, redemption, and continual sanctification. Nevertheless, this love of God was always "out there" because He was Someone I grasped to be present, but also, many times, nebulous and distanced from my own personal life. I tried my best to obey the teachings of the Church, read the Sacred Scriptures, and pray, but I really never had a personal relationship with Him. I kept hearing my Protestant friends telling me that I need to have a personal relationship with God, but they never could tell me what that really means... so rationale never convinced me.

I knew that God exists, but I did not understand why this personal, intimate, and loving relationship was really needed! I thought that if I obey the commandments, live a good life, and "pray" as much as I can, that was a good enough life as a Catholic. God was, then, an important part of my life, but remained far away because I did not understand my relationship with Him.

In all honesty, I struggled with my relationship with God because I was struggling with my relationship with myself, my family, and those who were close to me. A lot of my fears and insecurities made me close myself

off from being vulnerable, transparent, and open to love and receiving the needed love from others. Furthermore, this personal and intimate relationship that is supposed to be open was not a part of my upbringing and culture. Therefore, I struggled to find a way to relate to the people around me, as well as trying to understand, accept, and love myself.

Since our Vietnamese culture places a lot on duty and responsibility, I, for the longest time ever, defined my faith as how I fulfilled my duties as a Christian and kept up with my responsibilities as a believer. I kept all the commandments and teachings as much as I could, and I frequented the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but there was never a personal or intimate relationship with God. I kept up with all of my filial duties and responsibilities, but never really understood and embraced matters out of love. I, too, struggled as a teenager trying to understand my faith because I also struggled with my own relationship with my parents. For the most part, I was transferring my own relationship struggles with myself and my parents toward my relationship with God.

Like many young Vietnamese immigrants, I never had a close relationship with my parents, as is often portrayed on television. I know they loved me and sacrificed a lot for my brother and me, but I was never able to have a heart-to-heart relationship with them as a child and teenager. As a firstborn son, a lot was expected of me, so I always tried to live up to my parents' expectations with steadfast commitment and responsibility. On top of that, I struggled with scrupulosity and perfectionism for the longest time ever because I was afraid to make a mistake. I became afraid to make mistakes because I did not want to disappoint my parents or be scolded by them. Hence, I even set for myself a very high set of standards that I, myself, could never meet.

That mentality affected me in a very negative way because I was never happy with myself or others. No one seems to ever live up to my ridiculous expectations and standards, myself included! I lived like this for a very long time... until 2008, when I went to a required spirituality enrichment and formation program hosted by the Institute for Priestly Formation in Omaha, Nebraska. I was skeptical but went along with it because I did not want to show any resistance. I thought I knew about prayer, especially because of my time as a religious. I thought I learned all about the consecrated life and different styles of prayer throughout my novitiate year as a Redemptorist. Nonetheless, that summer changed my whole life on a dime.

I was assigned to Monsignor John Esseff as his spiritual directee. I heard many rumors about him and his gift of soul reading. To be honest, I thought it was gossip and a made-up thing. I remembered coming to him for confession one day, and after I finished confessing my sins, he told me that he felt I still had something heavy in my heart that I had not confessed. I was sweating bullets and thought to myself, "What is he talking about? How can he know?" I was confused at first, but all of a sudden, I began to cry uncontrollably. I could not control it... Then, I told him, "I hate myself." I could not believe that I said it either!

That moment changed my life forever. I finally voiced up what I did not want to recognize and acknowledge personally. Throughout that summer, through the wonderful guidance of my spiritual director and the program, I learned how to be transparent, vulnerable, and honest with God. I learned how to listen, acknowledge, respond, and receive His love for me. I learned to personally open myself up to Him in prayers and allow myself to receive His love without personal expectations, demands, and conditions. It was hard to let go of all of my own preconceived conditions, understandings, projections, demands, and expectations that I had for

God and just to allow Him to love me as I am instead of what I thought, think, or would like to be.

To love God and love ourselves seems to be a simple thing to say, but it is the hardest thing to learn and put into practice! To personally love Him and allow Him to love us in all of our blessings and imperfections, to accept ourselves as we are in all of our brokenness, is the hardest action and desire to will and desire. It is hard because we have to let go and shed ourselves from all that we have come to know and be conditioned for ourselves to simply love and receive love from the heart. This is what God desires of us, for He is love.

God is love because within Himself is pure, unconditional, and equal love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God the Father is the Lover, the Son is the Beloved, and the Holy Spirit is that love that unites and makes them distinctive. Love is not just a character or quality of God; it is His very existence! Therefore, this love within God Himself outpours and gives life through the acts of creation, redemption, and continual sanctification and transformation. Through the power and working of the Holy Spirit, we are reformed and transformed each day to be more Christlike as to love others and our Heavenly Father. The love of God changes us because we are changed by the love that is so pure, perfect, and life-giving... if we really understand it, there is nothing else that we can do except to receive and give ourselves totally and completely in return to this wondrous, personal, and intimate love that comes from Him who loves, knows our hearts, cares for us, and wills our eternal good.

To love is to allow ourselves to be more Christlike so that we can receive and respond, as well as acknowledge and reveal the love of God to others who are struggling and in need of Him. If the love of God is not with us, we have not really given anyone anything substantial or life-giving. It

cannot happen until we have truly, personally, and intimately received, understood, and embraced the Creator and His love for us deep within our heart of hearts. It is important for us to remember that the desire to change hearts has to begin with us. Once our hearts are changed and conformed to His loving will, we are able to radiate and shed His life-giving love to others without many words, excuses, demands, expectations, and other typical human causes. Simply put, true love begins with us in how we love God and allow ourselves to be loved by Him.

When we try to change our lives and ask for help, the Devil will dismiss us, filling us with negative falsehoods and despairing manipulations, making us lose heart and want to give up. This is the truth! Look back on your own lives and see when the Liar, Manipulator, and Coward attacked us?!? He and his minions have all the time in the world to study our habits and actions, waiting for us to be weak and attack when we are least expected and unprepared. He pounded us with what seemed to be devastating and knock-out blows. Nonetheless, he is no good and simply is a coward. He is petty, small-minded, miserable, and desperate to attack and hurt others, so he and his minions are not the only ones who are egocentrically miserable. Therefore, we can fight against his cheap attacks by using the only weapon that he does not possess, which is humility to know who we are, to depend on God, and to seek help from others because we have recognized that we cannot help ourselves.

PART 3: TO ACCEPT MY LIMITS

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 who was 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.

As I stated earlier, most consecrated people 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 black lists. 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, 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 benefits. 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 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 much anxiety and worries, almost had nervous breakdowns, PTSD-like experiences, and loss of sleep because I allowed those matters to dictate, control, and overwhelm me.

I will admit that those times were hard, and they helped me to grow in my faith, my personal understanding of who I am as a person, as a believer, and as a priest. I will admit that I cried and beat myself up many times. Nonetheless, I am also grateful that the good Lord gave me good people who cared, loved, guided, and held me accountable in those challenging moments. That is why I said, especially in retrospect, how I wish I would seek Him, listen to Him, and allow Him to speak to me through those who genuinely care and love me instead of the negative, destructive, and toxic ones.

We might have the right or proper profession of faith, but we tend to fall short on really committing ourselves to loving and following Him, especially when things do not go our way, when pains and sufferings come into the picture, when we get hurt by others, or when things fall apart and chaos is all around us. We love Him, but our love for Him wavered; we let the world and others speak lies to us, and we lose our focus on our very own mission and identity. Nonetheless, let us not be discouraged but again profess our faith in Him, return to Him if we strayed away, choose to carry our cross to be with Him, and become more like Him each day. I will end this reflection by asking you the same questions I asked myself: “Who does God say I am? And, what would I like to tell my younger self?”

PART 4: BEING A GOOD STEWARD

I still remember when one of my priest-mentors gave me a box of stewardship envelopes at our first meeting. He told me, “Welcome to the parish. I have registered you as a parishioner. Here are your contribution opportunities. If we are to preach stewardship, we have to first live it ourselves, else no one would believe us!” Those words have stuck with me

ever since, and I try my best to pray about how I give back to my parish, community, and the Church as a priest. I have a monthly budget of what I think I need to spend each month. I prioritize my spending according to the descending order of priorities, with charitable and stewardship contributions first.

I often joke that even though I do not have a family to feed, I have many children and elderly destitutes that I try to support through the Missionaries of Christ's Charity. They are my joy because I know that God has given me a family — the Church — to belong to, and the Sacred Scriptures have taught us to take care of the parts of the Mystical Body of Christ that are the weakest and in the most need. I know that there are a lot of charitable organizations out there, but I choose to give my most to the sisters because I have worked with them and trust them in how they genuinely care for the poorest of the poor, according to the charism given to them by Mother Teresa of Kolkata. The greatest gift that we can give to others depends on how much we have prayed and responded to His generosity that has first been given to us! If we, especially as priests, only worry about money, wealth, glory, power, prestige, and success, we will not be able to preach the Gospel and be free to live in persona Christi.

However, that is not to say that I do not struggle in trying to keep myself straight and focused on the necessity instead of purchasing things that I want. Therefore, I try my best to have a cleaning day when I search the nooks and crannies of my dwelling in order to see the things that I can let go in order not to overwhelm myself with more stuff. I try to live in a small place so I do not have to fill it with things that I do not need, because everything that is there has to make sense, or else the walls come in closer when I have more stuff. I know my weaknesses, and that is why I have to pray, discern, and put into practice the things that seem to be easily pursued, purchased, or attained that are not good or necessary for my own

state of life. Hence, our leftovers and extras can then become opportunities for us to bless others or participate in greater efforts to care for our brothers and sisters who have little to nothing. Think about it... we can never take any of the things we possess when we leave this earth so it is important that we give, share, and leave what is appropriate because the good Lord knows our intentions and He sees our desires.

The search for truth and the things that are eternal has to be the central part of our Christian journey and the foundation of our desire as believers! If we give up our desire for the truth and matters that come from God, we will end up becoming rootless and spineless because we become people who are easily swayed by popular opinions, pressures, trends, and hearsay instead of what pertains and gives us life. If we never spend time to pray, reflect, and read up about the teachings of our faith and what the wise saints have written, we will surely end up scrolling through short videos, sound bites, clickbait articles, and manipulated versions of the news that only exist to incur sensationalistic reactions. We argue that we have become more pragmatic and practical as post-modern people, but we have nothing more than become objectified means and chess pieces in the game of the manipulative rat race for influence, power, recognition, and other worldly means.

We see this vain, joyless, and hopeless culture and way of life in how much time and effort people spend on things that occupy their minds, keep them busy and on the move, and become reactionary and attracted to what is in front of them or are being fed to them at the moment. Sadly, all those sensationalistic reactions are only easy, apparent, and obvious facades of the deeper resentment, anger, and frustration that are caused by not knowing who we are and where we are going. It is easier to react and talk about the things that do not matter than to take the time to focus, reflect, search, and understand matters of the heart, mind, and soul.

Ultimately, I believe we end up with people who are spiritually immature and childish because they do not know who they are, like to blame others, instigate, and talk about useless things instead of taking time to search for the truth of who they are, the person they are called to be, and where they are going. It is hard to be mature, reflective, calm, able to discern and seek the presence of God, and level-headed, but also have, at the same time, a childlike faith to trust in God instead of being childishly controlling, reactionary, and constantly throwing tantrums when we do not get what we want! It seems contradictory at first, but paradoxically, childlikeness is required to achieve greater maturity in our very own life of faith.

We cannot and are not called to change the whole world or to become who we are not. We cannot think that somehow things will be better through politics, ideological, or social changes, or revolutions. Those things really do not leave lasting results because they do not affect and change the hearts of people. If we really want our society and the world at large to be genuinely loving, caring, respecting, defending, and treasuring life from the moment of conception until natural death, from each and every person of every step of life, we should choose to invest our time, give ourselves, and choose to love in personal, intimate, and loving ways because real change begins with us.

When we really know who we are and are able to live in freedom as children of God, we are able to keep our attention on what is truly life-giving, deter from empty promises and vain glories, come back to the Lord if we get distracted or lose our attention, and able to purify, transform, and detach ourselves from the hopeless lies of this passing world. The life of discipleship and pursuit of the truth is not something we would naturally want to seek because the allurements and temptations of this world are real; therefore, we have to personally choose to discipline, conform, and

be changed by His loving grace. We have to choose to open ourselves up to His loving grace deep from within, finding the opportunities to rest, pray, reflect, pray, discern, and receive Him in silence, docility, transparency, and genuineness of heart. Only when we order our lives in His truth can true peace come and give us rest deep from within the innermost being, the most intimate and loving heart of hearts, the meeting ground of our soul with God who loved us into being and the One who we truly desire.

Over and over again, spiritual masters reminded us that the hardest part of the spiritual journey and real growth comes when we die to ourselves, be humble, and are willing to be conformed to His will through proper discernment. Therefore, let us not lose heart but try our best to choose and desire holiness, the truth, and to love God above all things every day. There will be days when we are weak, when we fail or lose heart, but no matter what, let us seek, desire, and give our lives to Him totally and completely. Truly, to love Him, to be loved by Him, to embrace His commandments, and live in His eternal truths are our mission, purpose, and self-worth. So, I am asking you to take some time to see what occupies your life at the moment. I would like for you to reflect on what you can cut back (matters of this world) and increase (eternal and spiritual matters) to simplify and keep your life more focused on the things that really matter!

FOURTH LESSON: LEARN TO LET GO AND FORGIVE

Peace is not the absence of war, violence, or persecution. It is not simply found in a man-made or ideological utopia. It is much deeper than something sentimental or emotional. Our true peace is found in God and His faithful love for us. Even when life gets hard, we can still seek, desire, and live in His loving peace when we choose to do what is right and just. As a matter of fact, peace is the fruit of justice, to be able to choose to do what is proper and good when we do not get what we want, and things do not go our way. Therefore, we find peace when we are able to find rest in Him, to ground ourselves in His faithfulness, and to receive from Him what this world can never promise or able to fill.

PART 1: HOLD ON TO HIM

There was a time in my life when I was struggling a lot in my own faith journey, questioning my self-worth, my identity, my future, and God's goodness, because a person who was in a position of authority was set out to harm me. I was so worried that I was crippling deep from within. I let the fears and threats control me because the person was using something that I held dear to dictate their will and narrative toward me. In the midst of my desolation, I went to ask for help from my spiritual director. It took a good while for me to let go of my fears and reservations to really trust that God is in control, and that He wills my good.

His advice saved me from my despair, doubt, and hopelessness caused by the situation and relationship. I wanted to give up, leave, and just abandon everything at that time. That person made me question and doubt whether I am a good priest or not, because anything and everything

that I did was a cause of frustration, anger, irritation, or agitation. That person threatened me with the thing I value the most in this life and used it to make my life worse. I lost many nights of sleep, was so worried and distracted in my prayers because of anxiety and frustration, and I could not be happy because I allowed that person's judgment and portrayal of my character to define me instead of who I truly am in front of God. At that moment in life, I have allowed human voices and dictations to control, manipulate, and lie to me instead of listening to His voice. I let the vocal and threatening voices to silent and muffle the only voice that gives me peace and rest. I have allowed humanity and its selfishness, no matter how good the intention, to dictate and control my life, hence shutting out God's love when I needed it the most.

Even in the midst of a very dark and challenging time, there was a deep sense of peace, for He affirmed that I am where I need to be, and the things that are going on now are simply parts of life. He affirmed what my heart yearns for, to be a priest serving His people, and let go of the things that I cannot change or are beyond my control. It was both comforting and hard because it was what I needed to hear, but at the same time, it invited me to embrace what I would not necessarily like to accept at the moment. I still struggle with what the Lord said that day, knowing that what He said is true, yet to embrace the creative tensions that still exist in life. This is where my humanity comes in and where questions arise because I so want things to be my way or easier to handle. Yet, the Lord asked me to be in the storm, prioritizing my focus by remembering what I am called to do instead of worrying about the things that are beyond my control. Hearing God speak is both satisfactory and challenging because it is the loving truth that is hard to swallow, since He always leaves the conversation, inviting me to grow where He would like me to be!

He continued to love me through the people who cared for and loved me more than myself. He gave me life through those who were around me when I thought there was nothing really to live for! God allowed me to receive and be loved when I was so shortsighted and blinded by the mountains of problems and heavy storms of life. He was always present and loving me even when I was so occupied, worried, frustrated, scared, angry, and doubtful of whatever was going on. He was always present and never left, even when I was questioning Him and His providential loving care for me. He kept on loving me even when I failed to recognize and doubt His goodness.

Life will not be easy, and choosing a life in God means conforming ourselves to the truth, and what He calls us to be is extremely hard. The evil ones know it, and they will do all that they can to discourage and deter us from giving ourselves totally and completely to Him who loves us so much! That is why, no matter what is going on in your own lives right now, no matter how hard it can be at times, do not give up and give in. Every one of us will have to remind ourselves of the ultimate price that we are willing to pay, endure, and willing to bear to truly be free, honest, true, and simple as He wants of us and desires for us. It will not be easy, and we will waiver, question, or doubt His goodness and plan, but no one can ever rob us away from the love that we have in Him who truly loves, will, and desires our ultimate good beyond any and every one of our imaginations! At times, all we can do is cry or feel overwhelmed when things get hard, and all we can ever say is, "Lord, why...?!?" Nevertheless, do not give up and keep on fighting for He is with you and me. We might not be loved, understood, and appreciated by all, but if our conscience is honest and true, keeping our way straight and narrow with people who love us and keep us accountable, we can continue to humbly walk with the Lord, who is the One who will justify, vindicate, and save us from all evils.

PART 2: PRACTICING KINDNESS

When I first went to Wichita West High School in the late 90s and early 2000s, I felt very out of place because many of my middle school friends were at another school. It was hard because I did not know a lot of people, and it was a rougher school; however, the head football coach looked out for me and brought me on to help with the team. He took me to games and introduced me to the game of football. The coaches even offered to give me a varsity football letter if I could purchase a letterman jacket, but I could not because I knew firsthand that my parents were struggling financially at that time. Even though I never got what was offered, the coaches' care for me gave me much more than a jacket! The memories ingrained what I always treasured and valued as the most important American value — kindness. In the midst of many things that are going on in our nation and the world right now, I pray that we never lose sight of kindness for one another, for this is what makes us real humans and Americans.

I think kindness, respect, and tolerance are overused words nowadays. I have seen so many political and social advances, initiatives, agendas, movements, and advertisements using these words, but few people really put them into real practice. We tend to want these things, but not many people are willing to live the integral values with how we actually treat one another. At best, we live in a politically correct world that pushes the truth aside, forces false integration and conformity, and simply keeps things quiet and hushed up, but does not deal with them on a real, personal, and integral level. We demand empty political actions and feel-good laws, thinking that they somehow reflect that we have become a

more understanding, tolerant, and respectful society on the outside; nonetheless, the hearts of people have become much more oppressive, judgmental, and negative behind the false labels.

Too many people want all things to be nicely packaged on the outside, but deep from within, they still harbor hatred, selfishness, and condemnation for those who do not share their particular views. We see this reality very often when people hide behind their screens to attack, yell, and become vocal at each other, making sure they outdo their opponents, but no one listens and cares. We have become a society of words that say much but do little about how we can personally choose to care for one another. As a matter of fact, when it comes to truly caring and being kind to people, we often want charities, nonprofit organizations, or the government to do the dirty work for us.

We think that we do enough because we give donations to some charities from time to time, pay our taxes, share some politically correct stances on social media, or do something nice to someone once in a while. However, that is just shallow charity based on feel-good, sporadic, or inconsistent actions, but not true charity out of love.

There is really a difference!

True charity cares and wills the good of the other side, even when we do not agree or like them, and challenges us to go out of our way to love our neighbors in personal ways. It is easy to preach about love, but it is really hard to truly love someone. Why? Because to truly love requires that we make real, personal, and intimate sacrificial acts to embrace the person and unknown or uncontrollable possibilities, not only at our convenience.

As a Catholic priest, I often get calls for financial assistance from people who are in need of help. Sometimes, I really do not want to answer

the phone, especially after a long day, at an odd hour, or just being tired from many daily commitments. Honestly, there were many times that I just wanted to rest and not have to worry about someone needing me for something. However, I have also found that many of God's teaching moments for me come through those times of inconvenience! I am not saying that it was naturally easy to answer those requests or calls when I just wanted to rest. It really took extra effort to be present, meet the people where they were, and personally answer, provide, or assist them as best as I am able.

Dealing with people who are needy and want things a certain way, as they would have liked, can be very challenging. People who have been roughing it a while are rough around the edges, and sometimes they can be very demanding, hard to love, and demeaning at times, too. However, the real and personal challenge lay in my ability to meet them where they are, going beyond what I would like for them to be, and doing the best that I can to assist or be present to them as a person. The real challenge for me is that I have to personally desire, will, and push myself to truly be kind, loving, caring, and respectful even when I am tested, pushed to my limit, and expected much of me. Even though I know that I am called to love others, it really takes a personal and extra effort to will to love, embrace, and be present to each person as best as I am able without demanding, expecting, or reacting to what they are not doing, how they do not fit my standards or liking, or how they are not as I hoped them to be.

Truly loving people is personally challenging, to say the least, because it is not easy to genuinely be present and give the best self to the other side. It becomes even harder when the other side is challenging, off-putting, offensive, vocal, or in any way that does not fit our model or liking. And while it is easy to react and give the least of ourselves if we do not like another person, this is when real Christian love has to be willed, chosen,

and personally embraced out of love for the other, just as Christ has done for us. It is also important to recognize that we do not have to like each and every person to truly care, be present, and lift them up with our very own personal and genuine love, because kindness is a gift that we can give to one another. Respect is the foundation of who we are, made in the image and likeness of God. The ability to will the good of others is our vocation, mission, and purpose as disciples of Christ who have been given a real example of what it means to love until the end.

PART 3: SEEKING PEACE

We can only have peace with ourselves, be able to love others genuinely, and learn to live in true harmony when we know what is important in life, why we believe, who is the source of our trust, and where we are going. When we know the essential foundations of our identity, we will be able to discern through both prayer and virtue what is necessary to put our faith values to work in the here and now of our world. Without genuine faith, we become a self-centered, hypersensitive, fragile, and vocal world, where everyone only cares about themselves, uses others as needed, and tries their best to be known. Our relationships will suffer, as well as our true identity, because we have been trying too hard to be someone else than our very own self, created in the image and likeness of God, willed into being, and loved by Him.

Therefore, let us remember the promise of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are not orphans, for we are not alone. He will never abandon us, and even in our hardest trials, we will not be forgotten! Through the power and working of the Holy Spirit, may we become more Christlike in our words and actions to give ourselves, share our gifts, and serve those who

are seeking Him and those who are put in our lives. May we also recognize the beautiful, unpretentious, and loving care of God who embraces, leads, and guides us in ways that we cannot comprehend at the moment, so we can humbly trust, give ourselves, and open our hearts up to His works in us. May the love of God change you and me so we can, in turn, become the life-giving love for others.

As a pastoral minister and caregiver, there has always been a lingering thought and question that pervades my mind... "Am I doing enough?" This is a dangerous question, especially as a recovering perfectionist and someone who constantly second-guesses myself about how I can do better to care for the people who are entrusted to me or have been sent my way through His divine providence. I think I am doing better each day to accept my limitations and simply let matters that are beyond my control go instead of letting them linger and begin to make me doubt myself or how I should, could, or would have done better. I learned over the years that there is a fine line between enabling and empowering, especially through my own failures and their valuable life lessons, so I know that I cannot do everything for everyone, and I have to rely on God instead of myself to effectively care, minister, guide, and shepherd others.

An airman asked a very good question in one of our question-and-answer sessions: "Chaplain, what was your greatest lesson or failure?" To which, I answered: "I had to learn that I am not the savior. I cannot save everyone." This was, indeed, a hard lesson that I had to learn throughout my seminary formation years as well as my younger years as a priest. I had to learn to embrace my humanity and its limitations, especially my subconscious desire to make everything all "right" and "good" instead of embracing the messiness and inability to resolve every problem. Letting go of my self-imposed desires was only the first part. The second part was knowing when to step back or walk away when necessary.

There are some people who are really manipulative, toxic, or overly dependent on us. They want us to always be there for them and answer to their every need, and when we want to step away from them, they begin to create dramatic ways to keep us close to them. They either use guilt or shame to keep us reeled in, even to the point of making us feel like their life or well-being is in our hands. They can throw tantrums, go into an unhealthy or depressive state, talk about self-harm, or possibly take negative action if we do not help them! Those people are out there, and, better or worse, they tend to be more in number in the Church. I am trying my best not to generalize, but these people oftentimes come from the overly pious, scrupulous, or traditional crowd. Perhaps they tend to be more dependent on priests or religious figures, even to the point of blurring or crossing personal boundaries, but these people tend to find somehow think that we need to be there for them at all costs.

I had been in situations when people shifted the blame to me or overly shamed and guilted me for now being there for them as a priest. I was labeled as not caring or not being a good spiritual father, priest, pastor, or shepherd because I was not available when they needed me. Some people tend to think that we have nothing to do and just sit there close to the phone, hovering and waiting for their calls. So many expect us to be available and ready to serve their needs at a moment's notice. I struggled a lot with these negative and outrageous demands as a seminarian and young priest! I felt like I was not doing enough if people did not think I was caring enough for them. Nonetheless, I quickly found out that I can only give so much, and I cannot do everything for everyone.

I had to stand firm for myself by letting negative and manipulative people know that they do not own me! I had to tell them that I was not there as their servant and butler, because I am a priest for all, not just for some. I had to learn to say no to toxic, manipulative, or overly dependent people,

draw clear boundaries, and cut them off if they cross the lines. I had to prioritize my schedule and save my energy to not burn out because other priestly duties are also important priorities and deserve my attention.

This honest and genuine understanding of self came with both courage and humility to let go of what others might think or say of me to focus and mature into what He wants of me as a person and a priest. I had to learn to let people make mistakes and face their consequences instead of trying to fix, save, or help them, so I could tell myself that I kept them from getting hurt. It makes me dependent on God as His instrument instead of trying to make myself responsible or somehow be needed for everything or everyone. I learned that God gives us freedom for that very reason and allows us to make mistakes without having to do everything for us. I embrace His willingness to speak truth and life to us, but also at the same time allow us to cooperate with His loving grace through humility and honesty instead of forcing Himself on us. I had to accept my false sense of care by accepting that if God can do that, so should I, too!

I had to learn to be OK with being a human who happens to be a priest in persona Christi. It is not a failure of faith or duty if I cannot do everything. St. Paul reminded us that we are strong when we are weak, and God works in and through our weaknesses (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:9), and we must learn to rest and find help when needed. I had to learn to be OK to say no, OK to struggle with my own insufficiencies, OK to rest, and OK to seek help. I had to learn that He knows my heart and knows that I am doing my best instead of letting my self-worth and identity be of people's unreasonable expectations of me. I am a human person with my own personal life, human limits, and daily struggles, and not many people will know what I am going through, and it is fine not to try to let them define or tell me who I am or who I am not!

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 to depend on the Lord instead of my own ability.

Some people are very impatient, demanding, or too insecure 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 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.

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.

Let each and every one of us ask ourselves, are we enabling or empowering people around us? Are we seeking to make people depend on us, or want to ensure that we are importantly needed in their lives, or do we encourage them to seek maturation in the Lord? Are we letting go of our self-imposed standards and worries and trusting in the Lord? Are we too scared of letting Him be God, who is more than able to save and redeem His people beyond our understanding? It does begin with us and how we look at ourselves and others in the light of His loving grace...

PART 4: BEING OK

My understanding of the priesthood has changed over the years. When I was younger, I thought being a priest meant offering Mass reverently and correctly. Even though that is VERY IMPORTANT, I also learned that that is not everything that is required of being a priest. Even though the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is our wellspring and summit of worship, and administering the sacraments with due respect is very important, that is not the only thing that the Lord and Holy Mother Church are asking of priests. I learned through seminary formation and my priestly journey that to be a good priest requires us to learn to lead and shepherd the flock that has been entrusted to us. It requires much more than the sacramental administration side of our vocation because it requires a lot of patience, trust, listening, forgiveness, and humility to learn to lead and care for those who have been given to us as priests.

When I was young, I thought that being a priest would be the coolest job ever because he got to do Mass and get invited to parties, dinners, and events all the time! I mean, who would ever turn down free food (I thought as a young child)?!? However, when I went to seminary, I began to understand that being a priest requires one to know God and what the Church teaches about Him as to faithfully teach and hand on the faith. I was taught not only philosophy and theology, but also to be reverent and liturgically proper because the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is sacred and is not something that is mine to create, innovate, and do whatever I want with it.

After my ordination, I had to learn to truly be a spiritual father by learning to grow where I was planted so I could truly care for the people

who were entrusted to me. That required me to actively and personally be invested in learning Spanish so I can minister to a big part of our parish community. When I was assigned to my three parishes as a parish priest, I had to learn to adapt and learn to become a pastor to them. Not only do I have to learn to understand my parishioners' needs and struggles, but also find new ways to stretch and challenge them to grow in their own spiritual journeys. As I was contemplating how to lead people toward God, He was also stretching me to grow in my role as a shepherd. He placed within my heart an opportunity to minister to our incarcerated population.

Within one of my parishes' boundaries lies a big state prison that has more than 10,000 souls incarcerated there. I was quickly approached by the deacon who was serving there for pastoral assistance. I promised him that I would give him an answer after some time to settle in and get to know my own battle rhythm before I commit to more duties and responsibilities. Nonetheless, God always has a unique way to tug my heart that I ultimately answered his invitation to make time to offer the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Mass for the intimates on Fridays, as well as starting up OCIA and spiritual enrichment programs to encourage those men on their own spiritual walks. Without a doubt, that God-centered decision was one of the biggest blessings in my life (and will take another reflection to unpack).

Furthermore, He also tugged my heart to take care of the local Catholic school and university campus center. Even though it was supposed to be a shared pastoral responsibility amongst our local parish priests, not a lot of them were invested in guiding and caring for them beyond just offering the scheduled Sunday Masses. It was tiring at times, because the campus' scheduled Mass was later on Sunday evening, and I had to make time throughout the week to visit the school as well as the campus ministry center to be with the students. Nonetheless, God again

proved that His plan was better than mine, and was able to multiply His blessing through me if I choose to generously give myself to Him and the people He stretched me to care for. They brought me so many blessings and joys, and at times, consolations outside of my own inner-parish stresses and challenges.

One of the most enlightening moments, one that taught me how to simply care for people instead of expecting any result of conversion, happened when I was a parish priest. This person was the husband of a dear parishioner. At first, I thought he was a Catholic because he would go to Mass often (without receiving communion). However, I later found out that he was never baptized, even though he said that he believed in God. This person, even though not a Catholic, was faithful in his promise to his wife to support her and raise their children as Catholics.

To be honest, I was at first wanting to help him become a Catholic, but after much prayer, I came to realize that was not my place to do so. I tried my best to be present and love Him just as I try to care for my own parishioners. For me, he was a part of our parish family! Hence, when his health began to fail, I continued to visit him at home and call to check on him. A few days before passing away, I received a phone call from his wife that he would like to talk to me. I asked her if there was any particular reason (just in case I need to prepare for any emergency sacramental celebration), and she just said, "He would like to see you because you are his priest."

That really touched my heart. This person saw in me and called me his priest. I was honored and humbled.

I went over to spend time and pray with him. He passed away a few days later. He never asked to be baptized or expressed a desire to become

a Catholic. As a matter of fact, he did not have any religious funeral service except for a graveside gathering with his family and town friends.

In the eyes of the world, perhaps this person remained the same, and I did not do anything much as a priest to bring him to Christ. However, I prayed for him and with him. I just hope that in his last moment, he might give himself (personally) to the One who loves him. Even though I will never know what happened in his last moment between life and death, or his personal decision whether he gave himself to the Lord or not, I did my best to love him just as Christ would have loved those who were around Him.

I had many awesome opportunities to accompany them through their lives' ups and downs, crises, and moments of joyful celebration. Without me knowing, my personal priorities of taking care of the youth and young adults and the exposure to their struggles, empowered me to be a better military priest and chaplain, taking care of the young troops who are similar in age, crises, thoughts, and ways of life. Just like I was challenged to serve those who were beyond my typical parish settings and those who are my regular Mass attendees, I learned to care for the airmen who are not Catholics, do not have any faith or spirituality, and even at times, are resentful or negative against religions. I am reminded that even though I might be a Catholic priest for some (those who have the faith), I am a Chaplain for all (of my airmen, even if they have no faith or any spiritual concept). I must push myself to make time, energy, and effort to go out and engage so I can be present, know, and care for those who might never venture by themselves to see our Chapel or anything that might be remotely spiritual, religious, or faith-centered.

Perhaps we will never bring a large number of people to Christ Jesus like the missionaries of the past. Perhaps we can only become witnesses of faith because we do not have the skillset or personality to preach the

Gospel. Perhaps we feel like we do not have much to offer because we are still struggling in our own faith journey. Whatever the case might be, I think it is important for us to be genuine as ourselves so we can share His love for us in a personal, intimate, and heartfelt way. As a matter of fact, my brothers and sisters, those who have made a big impact in my life have been people of simple faith who are very faithful, genuine, humble, and caring. I had learned from them how to live my life as a Catholic more than any theological textbooks, especially how to persevere and remain faithful when life gets hard.

We are called to share our faith in different ways, according to our own particular vocations, especially our own unique states and stages of life. Not everyone is endowed with gift of eloquent preaching and apologetic teaching. Not everyone is able to express and put into words the different tenets of our belief or able to defend our faith from criticisms and attacks. However, I have also seen people who have those eloquent talents who are not living according to what they preach and the words that they speak. On the other hand, I have been given many moments where God has used simple expressions of faith through people that I did not even know to show me His wondrous presence and love. I believe, therefore, it is important that ALL of us are genuine, attentive, and reflective to be able to seek, know, learn, and love Him in the different people, occasions, and encounters.

Most of what we can do is to learn to radiate His love in our everyday interactions with one another. If we truly let God be the center of our lives, we can allow that merciful love to be shared with others so they can come to know Him, too. Furthermore, we can choose to pray for the people around us, and if the occasion arises, pray with them, too. I believe that prayer is a powerful opportunity that we can uplift, intercede, and choose to love people who are around us. If we do not care for them enough to pray

for them, I believe we will run the risk of using evangelization as a way to prove ourselves.

I am sharing with you my spiritual journey so you can hopefully relate to how God loves to personally invite us to grow beyond our own understanding, comfort zone, and priorities. Those challenges are not always easy, but they have always been sources of grace and growth for me. He definitely stretched me in many ways to lead and shepherd beyond what I think I should be, tend to be, or would like to be. All those challenges helped me to become more compassionate, caring, and willing to do things that are beyond my comfort zone, want, desire, or liking. I hope you can reflect and see how God is working in your own lives to see how, when, what, where, and who He is stretching each and every one of us to grow in our very own spiritual journeys. Through the power and working of the Holy Spirit, may we become more Christlike in our words and actions so as to give ourselves, share our gifts, and serve those who are seeking Him and those who are put in our lives. May we also recognize the beautiful, unpretentious, and loving care of God who embraces, leads, and guides us in ways that we cannot comprehend at the moment, so we can humbly trust, give ourselves, and open our hearts up to His works in us. May the love of God change you and me so we can, in turn, become the life-giving love for others.

FIFTH LESSON: LEARN TO START OVER AGAIN

One of life and faith's hardest lessons is learning to start over. I do not know about you, but I dread having to change because I prefer stability, comfort, support, and having people I know. Nonetheless, the lesson of learning to let go and starting over has been the one that I have been learning over and over again throughout my own life, spiritual, and priestly journey. As a matter of fact, I dread that I am talking about this subject with you in this reflection because I know this is something that I have to learn to grow where God wants me instead of having things go my way alone.

PART 1: LEAVING THE PARISHES

My life literally changed when I joined the United States Air Force a few years back. I had to change my way of life from being a civilian parish priest to a military chaplain. I had to undergo officer training school, trying to survive while feeling like a fish out of water because everything was radically different. I was there with many others who worked hard in trying to get themselves there and were doing everything that they could to ensure that they passed the training. They seemed more prepared and determined to prove themselves at all costs, while I was just trying my best to survive and make it day by day. I was constantly being yelled at because I was not good at marching, giving proper commands, or having good military bearing in the beginning. I did not enjoy the whole process, but dug deep to pass through because there were no other options! I learned to be humble and courageous in a new way because this new life required it.

When I was at the Officer Training School, we were told specifically that we were not able to bring our own personal Mass kit to offer private

Masses throughout the training. Since our class was in the middle of the country opening up after many strict COVID-19 restrictions, many things were in the grey and uncertain areas because the administration could not make clear decisions on keeping the current pandemic protocols, opening, or relaxing them a little bit more. Even though religious accommodation time was granted, I yearned to attend Mass on base because I missed the Eucharist. There were many times when we were on ROM (restriction of movement) for two and a half weeks that I truly yearned and desired to receive the Eucharist, but could not because we were not allowed to go to public religious services.

I know you will probably make fun of me or feel perplexed as to why I would miss the Eucharist as a priest. It seems like an unusual (or even insignificant) thing to desire! Nonetheless, I love Christ Jesus, and the Eucharist is the only way for me to receive His Body and Blood. Therefore, not being able to have Him with me in a real and personal way really made me miss Him even more. There were days I said, "Lord, I miss you so much... but I know you are with me. Please give me the strength to endure my present hardships and trials. You know my heart, and you know that I love you, Lord!" My heart, body, and soul missed Him, and even though I could make acts of spiritual communion, it was not the same for me. Even though it gave me a lot of spiritual comfort to spiritually receive Him, nothing can compare to receiving Him for real.

It happened during a time when I could not offer Mass privately or was given permission to attend one while I was in initial military training. Perhaps people just think I was being too emotional or sentimental for a little, insignificant thing. Perhaps people just think that I overreact or make a big deal out of something that seems so ordinary. Nonetheless, what seemed so small and often taken for granted could never be put into words because nothing in this world can ever describe how much I love Him!

Nothing in this world can ever express how much I yearn for Him... and that was why I cried when I received the Eucharist.

I cried because I really missed Him.

I remember that tears just came gushing out, and I could not control them. I was not prepared for the moment or expected it. I could not control it, either! I was overtaken, and my soul cried out. Perhaps I will never fully be able to put into words what I experienced on that day, and maybe not many will understand what I am trying to convey. Still, all I can say is that I believe it was a providential moment of His loving grace... and for that, I am genuinely grateful.

First, let me be honest with you... I am not always fully attentive when I offer Daily Masses. When I was the parish priest, I was often distracted by many problems, schedules, and worries that I could not fully unite myself to the Holy Sacrifice. While I am grateful to be able to offer Mass every day, I have to be honest that I have not always been truly appreciative and fully united because of lesser things that creep in and distract me from Him. I am a human, and I admit that I, at times, have taken the Mass and the Eucharist for granted.

Perhaps this will sound like a cliché, but we will never know how important someone is to us until we lose them! Hence, being unable to receive my Love while going through some major life changes pushed me to the edge. There were days that I cried out, "Lord, I do not know how to do this, but I trust in you. I love you, my Lord!" Nonetheless, I learned through many life changes that I must persevere. Thus, as the challenges of military training racked up, I began to trust in Him more, which made my heart yearn for Him in a very real, personal, and intimate way.

I think He permitted everything that happened at that time, so I can experience a personal, needed, and heartfelt grace of what I really desire

in my own personal life! Even though it was hard to go through the trials then, He gave me enough grace to bear all of them. There were times when I thought that I could not make it through the training. He did not remove the obstacles but gave me enough strength to endure the hardships. When life got hard, things fell apart, and I felt pulled out of my comfort zone; His love permitted them so I could feel deep from within what I was missing.

I remembered communicating with a priest who was going through the same training as me, and we both affirmed to each other how much we missed Him! We comforted each other in our general and particular trials to conform to the new military standards. Yet, the one thing that was clear was that nothing satisfied us, and we both yearned and desired Him! Unlike many of our classmates who joined the military to advance their income or career, we only wanted to be priests to serve those who are now part of our flock.

PART 2: CHANGING PERSPECTIVE

Even though I was coming in as a Chaplain, I had to complete the full eight-week Total Force Officer Training School with the rest of the direct commissioned and officer trainees preparing for active duty, their Air National Guard, or Reserve units. I can say for many that it was a challenging time because it was not easy to get acquainted with the new infrastructure, acclimate to the new environment, and learn many new things quickly. While it might be easier for those with prior (enlisted) service, it was hard and stressful for those without any military experience.

We marched a lot and got yelled at a lot, too. We were expected to learn and memorize many things. If we do not get something right, we will be verbally reprimanded by the military training instructors and staff

members on the spot and in front of everyone. Due to the lack of sleep and constant movement, many of us were tired and overwhelmed at times. I know I did! There were times when I could not focus enough to do well on drills. When doing complex movements, I lost track of my cadence, step, or turn on the wrong foot when the different commands were given. We were also expected to have our room organized and fixed in certain ways, dictated and regulated by standard operating procedures. It was very frustrating and tiring — sometimes, both, too — when I felt my own personal ineffectiveness and inability.

Many of my flight mates felt similar sentiments and emotions. At times, there were tensions and frustrations expressed through body language and verbal language. Even though we were trying to be respectful and mindful of each other, sometimes things came out unintended. I knew my flight leader and our element leaders and guide-on were frustrated at some of us who could not seem to get it right. Even though I did not say anything much, I did feel my frustrations that arose from my own limitations. On top of trying to hold things together and not mess up too much for the flight, I was doing my best to care and be mindful in affirming others. I know I was not supposed to minister while in training, but they cannot stop me from being a minister (it is just who I am by nature now)!

Even though it got tough at times, we just pushed through and did the best that we could at the moment. Being able to see, taste, and feel ineffectiveness is not easy for us to accept. Especially in the military, where we are expected to attain "excellence in all we do," it can get hard for many of us as we feel like we are not doing enough or should have been better. It is hard to see that perhaps we sometimes simply cannot do "enough." We all have deficiencies and limitations that we cannot overcome. Even when we try our hardest, some other people or elements will also affect the overall picture and outcome. Hence, this affirms what

the virtue of patience really means and challenges each and every one of us to grow where and when it gets hard at times.

One day, an MTI (military training instructor) gave us a meaningful lecture when we were lined up after dinner. Instead of being like other MTIs who typically tend to yell at us when we do something wrong, he conversed with us. He asked us many questions, ranging from our AFSC (job code) to where we would be stationed after the training. He asked what we hope to become as United States Air Force officers and how we would like to change the current situation. He inspired us to become the change, not just with words, but with true servant leadership, true integrity, service, and excellence for the common and greater good. That conversation stuck with me because he spent the time teaching and explaining matters to us instead of simply yelling at us.

Another day, when I was standing in line with my flight mates, he, in turn, asked me (because he saw my chaplaincy cross insignia on my OCP uniform and patrol hat) this question: "Chaplain, how many people are you hoping to help?" I answered him, "I hope to help as many people as possible — whoever will cross my life." To which he answered, "Millions, sir, millions!" He then told us to keep the course and be focused on finishing the training so we can be out there in the operational Air Force to help those who will come into our lives.

Even though it might sound like the conversation particularly applies to priests, I believe we can apply it to a wider, general audience as well. We often think that missionary works are reserved or particular to priests and religious, but we often forget that each and every one of us is called to be witnesses of faith by how we live. Too often, we will not be allowed the opportunity to defend or preach our faith in the traditional sense because the situation, relationship, or people around us are not

open to that dialogue or conversation. A lot of people nowadays do not want to talk about faith because they have experienced some types of religious or fanatical hypocrisy in the past.

I can personally see why religion and faith can be an off-putting matter for many because I have experienced similar situations many times. I tend to be very reserved and uncomfortable when someone approaches me, trying to talk about matters of faith. Too oftentimes, they tend to sound very condemnatory, self-righteous, and stereotypically negative and presumptive of people. Those people who tend to set out to convert and change people do not want to want to dialogue and converse with respect, dignity, and openness. It is too easy to try to change people instead of trying to change ourselves, and that tends to lead people nowhere except being more resentful, negative, and shut off from real, personal, respectful, and life-giving conversations.

How effective are we if we only preach to instill or prove our righteousness instead of bringing people to the Lord? How genuine are we if we only want to instill fear, guilt, and shame in people but do not empower them to seek conversion and be disciples? I believe we have approached evangelization and missionary efforts in the wrong ways. Nowadays, people do not care about how religion is preached or believed. They tend to believe those whom they trust, and that will lead to a dialogue that might take a long (or even lifetime) process of planting seeds, cultivating the ground, and waiting for the Lord's providential timing to bring matters to fruition. This takes a lot of time and patience, especially to really hope and wait in the Lord instead of expecting or depending on ourselves to see the results as we would have liked or wished things to be.

When I was in initial military training, I did not talk much about faith to my flight mates. Even though they could tell I was a chaplain, many did

not care much about religion. While many say that they believe in God, many do not have any religious affiliations or a deeper sense of faith, hope, and trust. Many of them depend on their ability, thinking that they will achieve whatever they have worked very hard for if they just try hard enough. Nonetheless, that is not always the desired outcome in life!

I never forced anyone to attend faith-sharing sessions when we were on ROM (restriction of movement) for the first two weeks. The first gathering was with a few people, and only a few more joined us in subsequent weeks. Some never chose to join... but that is perfectly fine, too! I never forced anyone to believe or guilted a person to have faith because I know that method will never work in my personal and ministerial life. Nonetheless, I never stopped reaching out to people and checking up on them.

I chose to be kind, respectful, and genuine to people. I chose to be myself and care for them as the Lord has been caring for me! As a priest, I have always chosen to believe and allow what the Lord has given me to be enlivened in my own life. I know some people who accused me in the past of being rigid, but I had to defend and teach the faith as a priest. Nonetheless, even when I had to be firm, I always tried my best to ensure I was kind, respectful, and compassionate as much as possible. As a human being, I know I am not perfect, but I always try to make people know I will NEVER abandon them!

Going back to failures, those who try their best to achieve matters through their efforts will sooner or later face shortcomings, limitations, and imperfections that are natural and unavoidable parts of life. Those who try hard to achieve excellence and perfection will have to face failures. Hence, at those moments, it will seem easy to beat oneself and give up. When we feel like everything we have worked so hard for is falling

apart, we tend to give up and give in to hopelessness and despair. Nonetheless, those are moments of grace and faith-filled opportunities.

When we put a lot of trust in ourselves, and things fall apart, we will end up by ourselves. Hence, those moments will be great opportunities to care for, sympathize with, and assist those who are alone by themselves. If we choose to be genuinely loving and empathically compassionate, we might have an opportunity to save those who are stuck and lift them to higher ground. Perhaps we can even help them lift their hearts to God, who is present and loving when everything else fails! I know that I have been surprised over and over again by how a small moment of genuine care can change a life.

When I hear people, even priests, too, asking me what I hope or want in life, I always respond in all honesty that I have lived as I wanted. For all my life, I only wanted to live to the age of thirty-three, like the Lord, so everything else is (now) just icing on the cake for me. I have lived as I wanted because I only wanted to be a priest, so nothing else really matters — whether I live or die. If He calls me to Himself tonight or tomorrow, it will be the greatest moment of my life because I get to be with the One who loves me!

Even though I know that I am not perfect and I will have to spend time in purgatory to purge and work on the things that I am still struggling with, falling short, or have not taken the time here on earth to fully let go, I look forward to that loving stage when I can grow and mature in pure and intense love for Him. Purgatory is fire, but unlike Hell, it is burned by love of and for Him instead of selfish and destructive perversion of love. Why am I talking about this matter? I really believe that deep within my heart, nothing else in this world really matters or is that important except Him and Him alone.

Everything in this world is temporary and passing away. Even though they are instrumental to our salvation, they can become distracting to our ultimate goal of unity and complete love for Him. That is why it is important for us not to take our faith and our personal relationship with Him for granted. If we have strayed or lost our way, it is important to return to Him to feel deep within our very own selves what it means to be loved by Him and to love Him with every fiber of our being. For someone who understands and knows what true love is, all I can say is that faith is much more than a set of doctrines or intellectual understanding. True faith leads us to a deeper love of Him and what it means to be loved by Him.

PART 3: PRACTICING COURAGE

I learned in a new light that courage is a great virtue that is often used in the military. Even in the philosophical world, it is labeled and valued as a cardinal virtue because it is so important in our development and growth as human beings. Courage is a virtue because it has to be learned, practiced, and continuously cultivated. A courageous person understands their humanity and all its associated fears, reservations, and holdbacks, but still chooses to be courageous in facing those obstacles! We are taught to be consistent in our daily discipline, developing good habits and healthy routines so we can continue to grow in small, daily, and intentional actions.

We often get discouraged when we make mistakes and lose heart when things do not go our way. Nonetheless, it is important to have a growth mentality, turning mistakes from stumbling blocks to stepping stones. There are many opportunities to improve because life is a long journey and it always has a unique way to teach us meaningful lessons if

we are open to learn to growing, else we become too arrogant, self-dependent, or complacent where we are. It requires that we embrace constructive criticism and feedback as a way to learn and grow, even though they can be hard to accept at times. We can choose to reflect on them in order to have greater self-awareness, thus being able to reprioritize and be mindful of WHO we are and WHY we are able to overcome the ups and downs of life. Most important of all, let us do our best not to be afraid to ask for help and surround ourselves with the right people who care, can hold us accountable, and encourage growth.

This is what we must do at the basic human level... imagine much more on the spiritual side of the house as well! How are we intentionally choosing to let go, die to ourselves, and choose to give ourselves genuinely, wholeheartedly, and without reservation out of love in loving the Lord and those who are around us? Love is not just a word; it is a decision, so we must learn to grow in love by willing and desiring the good of others, even though they can be challenging at times. It requires us to choose to love them even when they can be unlovable at the moment or have not been dealing with us in ways that we think the relationship deserves.

Courageous love also requires a dying to ourselves so we can personally prioritize and intentionally make space and time for God. Instead of making excuses for ourselves, we must humbly and genuinely look at ourselves deep from within to make the necessary changes to put Him first. This is hard because life gets busy and things begin to creep in to occupy, deter, and distract us from the One who really matters and the things that give us life. It requires us to be genuine, vulnerable, and transparent with ourselves so see things as God sees them and how we can better cooperate with His will instead of getting what we want or desire in life. It invites us to move from quantifiable metrics to qualitative

measures to see deeper meaning and purpose in the simple things that we do each giving day.

The disciples had to choose courage when they received the commission from the Lord. They were then called apostles when they responded to His invitation to go forth and preach the Gospel to all the nations! We, too, are apostolic because our faith comes from those very courageous people who chose to preach Christ at all costs, and we are also being sent forth to preach the Good News through our very lives and deeds. We are being sent forth into the world to radiate His love without being enveloped, deterred, distracted, or enslaved by it. As Christians, we are people who live in the world but not of the world because our hearts belong to Him who loves us! We are encouraged each day, and we remain humble because we know who we are in Him.

Each and every prayer time is a letting go of our world to go into the desert of our very nothingness to encounter God. Of course, there will be the initial voices of our egocentric fears and reservations, as well as the Devil's temptations and deceptions, that will try to call us back to our walled kingdom and pitiful existence. They will be very noisy in the forefront because they do not want us to let go and trust in God! That exterior and personal silence is important, but just do not stop there... continue to slow things down, seek the silence of the heart, and allow ourselves to be childlike in trusting Him who wants to spend time with us.

Just like parish priests, per Canon Law, are entrusted to care for all souls under their proper physical parish territories, military priests are entrusted to care for all those who are assigned to their proper installations. In fact, we are responsible for caring for all — not just the Catholic faithful — because we are named pastors to shepherd all and for the salvation of souls. While it is easy to only focus on the usual Mass

attendees and familiar faces, we are challenged to go beyond our typical settings to better meet, know, and care for those who are without a shepherd. We are challenged to go beyond the typical mindset because we are called to pastor and care, not just act as hirelings and people who are doing a job and fulfilling our duties. We are called to care for souls, including the lost, abandoned, and those who might not fit the typical constructs, labels, and boundaries, so they come to know God as well.

Even though we might not always have the luxury (and encouragement) to always talk about the particular Catholic matters and faith-centered conversations, it is important to allow our religious beliefs and values to speak life beyond words. We must ask ourselves how we are challenging ourselves to share our faith in unique, challenging, and limited environments and capacities. Much more than that, how can we let our faith be nurtured at home, at the parish, as well as at the larger community? How are we spending the time to truly listen and respond to the Good Shepherd's invitation and challenge to reach out and care for those who might be outside of our horizons, scopes, and boundaries?

We can only have peace with ourselves, be able to love others genuinely, and learn to live in true harmony when we know what is important in life, why we believe, who is the source of our trust, and where we are going. When we know the essential foundations of our identity, we will be able to discern through both prayer and virtue what is necessary to put our faith values to work in the here and now of our world. Without genuine faith, we become a self-centered, hypersensitive, fragile, and vocal world, where everyone only cares about themselves, uses others as needed, and tries their best to be known. Our relationships will suffer, as well as our true identity, because we have been trying too hard to be someone else than our very own self, created in the image and likeness of God, willed into being, and loved by Him.

PART 4: BEGIN ANEW EACH DAY

Starting over can work in two senses: first, through reconciliation and forgiveness, and second, through a life of discipleship and obedience. Even though both seem different, both elements call us to seek and trust the Lord, which we would naturally and humanistically try to avoid. Both choices require that we be humble and courageous. The first part requires that we be honest in naming the sin, relationship, situation, or people who have hurt us, even if they make us feel embarrassed or uncomfortable, believing that the Lord will respond with mercy, comfort, and healing where the hurt is done. Those forgiven by the Lord in the Sacred Scriptures humbled themselves, put their faith in Him, and asked Him for His forgiveness. Therefore, we should focus our attention and faith on God, knowing that we are sinners in need of grace, looking to God, and asking Him for His loving mercy.

He does not want us to wallow in guilt or be burdened with shame because He wants to set us free to live as we are called to be. When we come to pray, the Lord wants us neither to brag about our efforts and achievements, our vanities or glories, our self-importance or egocentric criteria, nor to wallow in our failures and shortcomings, self-pity and victimization, false piety and fake humility. Both types of attitudes fix our attention on ourselves rather than on God, the One we approach in prayer. We can all simply acknowledge our sins and profound need for His mercy and then move forward confidently, counting on His grace to seek the true conversion of heart, the forgiveness of wrongdoings, and finding ways to let go, reconcile, or pray for those trying situations. Faith reminds us that we must focus on God and be willing to start over, begin again, and seek

newness of thought, way of life, and reconciliation rather than our self-imposed, egocentric, finite, and feeble perceptions.

The faith journey requires a lot of starting over! Faith is a free gift from God, which is much more than an intellectual assent or act of the will because it is a personal and self-giving response to God's invitation of love. His grace opens our minds to the truth and moves us to place our lives in His hands, and that is why genuine belief is not possible without His initial intervention and invitation. Accepting our faults, failures, and weaknesses is hard and humbling, but it is a continual, crucial, and necessary part of the life of discipleship so we can receive His forgiving grace to start again. Each time we go to confession is another opportunity to humble ourselves, confess our sins, receive His forgiveness, stand up, and start again.

One of my favorite scriptural passages is John 14:18, where the Lord Jesus Christ promised His disciples — and us — that He will not leave us as orphans. It gives much joy to my heart to hear such loving words from our Lord because there are times in our lives where we feel like we are being abandoned, rejected, ignored, or forgotten by the world — even those in the Church, too. To be honest, the hardest thing that we often do as human beings is trying to fit in and not be rejected. This is also the source of many hurts and the result of many lost souls, because many have let themselves be dictated by others, or forgotten who they truly are in order to be someone else they think would be accepted by the masses, or whatever circles they want to belong to.

When I was young, my mother would often threaten me, "I found you in the dump and will put you back there if you don't listen to me!" I would be scared and listen to her right away with a fearful response, "No, mom! Not the dumpster!" However, that outgrew itself fast as I found ways

to talk back to my mother... so she moved toward "whooping" as I got older. Even though she did that to scare me, my own mother would often remind my brother and me that "Even a tiger will not eat its offspring." Indeed, she has always been a caring mother for me and my brother.

My mother and father never said the usual, "I love you," or "I'm proud of you," like what I have seen in other parents, but I know that they care for me. Throughout my own life, my parents cared for us beyond what words can express. Their actions in how they provided and sacrificed for us spoke louder than short-term sentimental, emotional, or Hollywood-like movies can ever capture!

My father is a retired mechanic, so every time I go home, he checks my vehicle to make sure nothing is wrong with it. My mother loves to cook my favorite dishes when I go home, and it is a joy for her to see me enjoy them. My father does things behind the scenes to make sure my room at the house is tidy and functional; as well as when I have technical difficulties, he would readily offer his help (because he is very good with hands-on matters). My mother calls me often to check up on me. She often asked me how well I sleep, what I eat, if I have any headaches from stress or allergies, and if my health is fine. These are the ordinary, seemingly insignificant, often forgotten, or not appreciated things that my parents do to show how much they love and care for me.

In similar — but much more providential and intimate — ways, God cares for our daily needs beyond our comprehension and understanding. He knows what we truly need and looks out for us beyond our blind spots and short-sighted temptations. He loves us in ways beyond our imagination and our shallow desires for immediate gratification. He is misunderstood at times because we do not think that He loves us enough. We will think that He is unfair because He seems to "favor" others over us.

At times, we will be like the two sons in “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” in Luke 15:1-32. We will leave because we cannot stand living with Him anymore, thinking that we will get what we want if we have the freedom to do what we want as we like for ourselves. Or, we will simply stay close to Him but wrapped up in our own resentment because we think that we are not His favorites or that He does not care for us. It is, therefore, important to know that we will not always get what we want or think that we deserve, but that does not mean that God hates us.

God loves us personally and as we are able to receive!

Thus, it is so crucial to understand Who we belong to, Who loves us, and how much His love means for us. We all have to learn (and relearn) at times how to love Him and others by meeting them where they are instead of what they have to be for us! It does take a lot to walk with one another with patience and in charity. We are all reminded to focus on the quality of relationships and cultivate them instead of simply objectifying or quantifying things that need to happen just to make us happy.

We are called to declare in faith, over and over again, that we belong to Him, His life flows through us, and we get to taste and share His love, no matter how much life and its storms can seem dark, hard, and trying at times. Just as the Lord, in His human nature, kept His eyes fixed on His Father, how much more should we if we want to bear spiritual fruit that will last. We must imitate His faithfulness, obedience, and simplicity of heart because we are His disciples. This means that we must learn to look to God for guidance and let Him lead us instead of trying to rush and have things go our way. It will sometimes require us to become more peaceful to endure the stormy seasons, be patient in waiting for Him, and be courageous in facing our challenges. We are not pressured to be perfect and get everything right because this is a lifelong journey of

discipleship, learning to seek and follow the Lord, who is always by our side. It is, indeed, humbling to do our best and leave results in His hands, even when they do not exactly what we had hoped for.

Of course, sometimes, our pride and desire to be in control can coax even the best of us into doing what we want without seeking God's wisdom or guidance first. Following our own will instead of His may seem like the easier path. Still, in the long run, it only makes our lives more difficult, empty, and vain because they are filled with temporary satisfactions, pleasures, and glories, but away from His eternal love. We do not have to be great saints to approach God and pray for His mercy. As a matter of fact, He desires that we become childlike in bringing to Him all the concerns that make us powerless or tempt us to despair. We can also pray for those difficult situations we see in the world or the Church and ask that God be merciful on them just as He is on us. I hope and pray that you and I learn that it is OK to start over and let go of control so we can turn from fear and resignation toward hope and trust.

Being deeply rooted in our identity as God's sons and daughters will change us. It frees us to let go and begin again — over and over again — so we can grow where He will lead us. It will affect what we choose to do with our time and energy. It will move us to pray and seek Him through the sacramental life. It will influence the way we relate to people and the way we speak to them. It will make us more aware of the needs of the poor, forgotten, and abandoned — even the ones we do not like. And it will give our lives purpose and meaning — because, like Jesus, we have been sent to go into the world and proclaim the Good News. We will be plucked up from our comfort zones and asked to embark on new journeys, beginning again, over and over, so we can grow where He planted us at different moments in life.

To be honest with you, my journey as a military priest has been a very interesting one. I have seen the extreme polarity of people who are scrupulous and always afraid of offending God, to people who have abandoned their faith because they think it is stupid, outdated, and not worthwhile. I believe this extreme reality comes back to our very own failure in forming disciples, teaching them with love and patience, and especially continuing to encourage them to grow in their faith. Much more than that, we have to rise above the guilt and shame levels to creatively, lovingly, and genuinely share our faith with others. Think about it... If someone asks you today why you are a Catholic, would you be able to share your faith with enthusiasm, joy, and simplicity of heart?

Secondly, I would like to address the issue that many people are stuck with the basic levels of shame and guilt. Please let me be the first to affirm that God is not the boogeyman who is sitting there waiting for us to fail and enjoy punishing us. He has always been loving, faithful, and merciful in pursuing us, calling us back, and forgiving us when we have failed to love Him. None of us would be here if He were not merciful and patient with us! Therefore, we must rise above the technical levels of asking ourselves whether it is a sin or not, trying so hard to prove ourselves that we can be sinless and perfect, or defending our actions and ways of life by pointing fingers at others. All three scenarios are of childish, transactional, and self-centered faith instead of a childlike trust, love, and simplicity of heart.

We are all imperfect. This is our fallen human condition. We will fail and have our breaking points, no matter how hard we try! We will have to face disappointments and fall short of our hopes, aspirations, and desires because life is not perfect nor is it fair. Nonetheless, there is grace there! God is with us in the thick of things. He has never abandoned us and will not abandon us, so we must ask ourselves how we are growing and

maturing each and every day to be His disciples and joyfully invite others to discover, fall in love, and follow Him as well. We must not give up or give in to our very own humanistic, pitiful, and limited standards, so shake things off and move on if people do not respond with kindness or interest. The good Lord taught us, His disciples, that very own truth with His life and actions.

Therefore, let us be disciples of Christ Jesus and share the joy of following Him with others in a meaningful, positive, and life-giving way. We can and have the ability to preach beyond words through our very own lives and actions. Others can come to know Him by how they see us live our faith, as well as letting His loving mercy and simple joy radiate in and through us. We are not all fit to have an elaborate or eloquent vocabulary to defend our faith like some apologists, but we are all disciples who can evangelize, share, and invite others to come to Him. Let us rise above our humanity and all its typical disappointments to find the joy in Him and lovingly share His love as Christians.

CONCLUSION

As shared in the introduction, the good Lord has made my life an interesting one! He has a very BIG sense of humor by overturning every single big plan I made for myself. He has a unique way of having the last laugh and pulling me into the ride. Stability and comfort have not been the name of the game, but He has blessed me more than I could ever have imagined. The journey gets trying and hard at times, but He has always been giving me what I need to overcome the obstacles and trials. I am definitely not perfect and have made many mistakes, but the good Lord has been so good, forgiving, merciful, and patient with me that I cannot walk away from His love. He permitted me to make mistakes, question, doubt, and at times be angry, frustrated, and lose hope in His providential timing, but He never gave up on me in any way, shape, or form! He permitted me to face many imperfections and failures in life so I could learn to overcome them and deepen my love for Him through them.

Being a Catholic priest in the military can be challenging at times. Unlike a parish priest who is set in a faith-centered environment, surrounded by people who share and adhere to Catholic values and teachings, the military is a very non-religious and pluralistic environment. The cultures of the military and the parish are, of course, way different, too! Therefore, to be a Catholic priest in the military carries a set of unique challenges. Nonetheless, when I asked our brother priests who have been serving for a long time, they all seemed to say, “Be a good priest!” I was amazed to keep hearing the same thing being emphasized, so it begs the question, “Why!?!”

First, we, as priests, have to wear two hats in the military. We are, of course, priests for the Catholic faithful, but we also have to be chaplains for those who do not share our faith (and those who do not have faith at all). We serve everyone who seeks 100% full, privileged, and confidential

communication and pastoral counseling. Chaplains and their assistants are the only ones in the whole military structure given the time-honored and trusted privilege. Even though there have been people who questioned such privileged means of confidentiality, the military understands the need for people to receive spiritual assistance and care without worrying about what is being said or communicated. NOTHING that is shared with us in confidence can ever be repeated or used against people in any disciplinary or legal means. Hence, it is a very sacred and revered honor to uphold and protect as chaplains.

Yes, we have to be chaplains for the greater and non-Catholic audience. Most of the time, too, they tend not to have any religious or spiritual backgrounds at all. That is why many chaplains, as well as Catholic priests, are encouraged to seek professional means to educate and better themselves in counseling and chaplaincy skills. That is great and well-intended advice and effort, but too many have made it into something very career-focused. I was advised the same thing, too, and I consulted with other senior long-serving priests to hear their opinions. To my surprise, all of them told me, “Do not worry about pursuing more professional degrees... just be a good priest!” One after another, they all told me to learn from life’s experiences and its valuable lessons instead of worrying about pursuing more abbreviations after one’s name or having another diploma to be framed.

Careerism exists in the military and its chaplains, as well as the Church and her priests. Perhaps in a secular and pluralistic environment, it is often more emphasized and focused. Too many times, we are asked to be good, efficient, and effective officers first. Hence, many chaplains take that to heart and try their best to be good in the career field and its objective, professional, quantifiable, and metric-based system. Nonetheless, this is where many have missed the (true) mark as well. If we look at people in a careerist kind of way, they become means to serve our

goals and ends. If that is the case, we risk the danger of using what is in front of us for our purposes and likings. If we are only to be good officers and managers, we can be good in the objective sense but miss the true purpose and meaning of why we are much more than other (typical) professionals.

All things are well-intended, but the Devil is often (hidden) in the (humanistic) details. He knows and can use best-intended desires as a way for us to turn toward ourselves and forget what we are truly called to be. All intentions are good on the outside, but if they become obstacles on our faith journey or impediments to stop us from trusting in God, they are then manipulated, vain, and false goods. Over and over again, we have seen the Devil and his minions manipulate the fine details in salvation and human histories to turn us against God and one another. The evil ones often twist the truth and make us serve ourselves instead of following God's will. What began as good intentions can become very egocentric, mundane, and career-centered instead of true ministry and service.

Yes, I know, and it has been drilled in our heads that, as chaplains, we are supposed to be non-line officers who execute the commander's intentions and programs for the spiritual well-being and resiliency of the total force. Nonetheless, priests were never called to be officers first. We were called to the priesthood, to discern, follow, and give ourselves in service of the Church in persona Christi capitis. We were called to leave our family, friends, and loved ones to learn and be formed as priests after Christ's own heart. Therefore, we are called to be priests first and foremost, and anything that would impede or deter us from truly living our priesthood in total service, humility, and dedication should be rejected. If we are good officers with distinctions and praises from others but have failed to be gentle, kind, loving, and faithful priests who celebrate the sacraments worthily, offer the Holy Sacrifice with humility, and willingly conform ourselves to His will, we are nothing but quacks and liars.

If we are successful in our military, professional, and earthly career choices and paths but do not have love and lose focus on who we are, we end up losing our very selves and identity in Him. Therefore, I am joyfully surprised to hear the Archbishop and senior priests telling me and my brother priests to be good priests in celebrating the sacraments worthily. To be honest with you, the temptations are very real because the whole military structure, culture, and environment thrive on these calculable, quantifiable, and metric-based measurements of things getting done. People love to be praised, lifted, and magnified for their good works and achievements. So many are chasing after projects and things that sound very good and nice on the outside. So many have vainly chased after busy work as their performance report bullets, but have not made any real, personal, and caring impacts on those who are around them.

We are all tempted by vanities, including chaplains and priests. Even as people who are supposed to care and serve, we can get bogged down by earthly goods, vain temptations, and self-building desires as well. Even if we check ourselves to stay away from these temporal and false goods, they will always creep in and hide themselves behind good intentions. Therefore, we have to be honest, transparent, and vulnerable in checking ourselves in the light of Christ and of the Gospel. We have to be very real in asking ourselves whether we are too busy building up a kingdom or name for ourselves, or whether we are trying to humbly serve and love God!

When I was advised to better myself through more quantifiable professional developments so I could make myself more presentable and credible as a subject matter expert, I was really tempted at first. As a matter of fact, I spent some time looking into terminal degree options because those advertisements do make sense. However, there was something off... I was not feeling at peace. I lost sleep over it because it was a struggle between my humanistic wants and desires in comparison

to what I am truly called to do in Christ Jesus. I took it to prayer many days, trying to do the pros and cons between the two decisions (trying to tell myself that the decision makes sense). Nonetheless, to avoid turning and making everything about myself, I sought advice from those whom I respect and admire.

Hence, in a kind and gentle way, the Holy Spirit led me to the truth that sets me free from my own internal struggles and worries. I was able to hear from other senior priests what my heart and spirit were telling me all along, even though I was trying too hard to make sense of it in my mind. At the end, I found my peace in knowing that none of the saints that I admire has a terminal, advanced, or professional degree in the eyes of the world. The ones that I respect and want to emulate are the simple ones who dared to live their lives in service of the poor, forgotten, and abandoned.

Therefore, if I simply live as a priest with true devotion, dedication, and service of His people, I will attain the true freedom and joy that this world can never offer me! None of my academic or professional degrees will help with my salvation or help me to become a better priest. In the past, I studied for different programs and degrees out of obedience to those who were put in charge of me (because they wanted me to attain them). But since I have been a priest, I am not asked for anything more, so I should not personally choose something that will not ultimately serve what I have already learned and can learn through the school of life. If I am faithful and genuine to what He has called me to do, I will achieve my mission and purpose in answering my vocation and following His will.

I am sharing this with you so you can, too, reflect on your own personal faith journey. There are many temptations and well-intended desires that we can spend our whole life trying to chase and pursue... but if we spend our days always trying to attain “more,” we will never be at peace and find the time to find, understand, discern, and rest in the presence of God. If you and I are content with what we have and have been

given, faithful in serving and growing where He has planted us, we will surely radiate His joy to those who are around us. If we are faithful in small things and do them with great love, we will set the world on fire with genuine faith, hope, and charity. Therefore, let us not seek mundane, worldly, and vain goods but choose to simply be great (in being faithful and loving Him) in small things. Simply put, whatever vocation, state of life, or situation that He has called us to be, let us be that well with genuine devotion, humility, commitment, perseverance, and love. This is the way to overcome false perfection, our self-centered comfort zone, and humanistic desire for control so we can personally, humbly, and wholeheartedly embrace the journey of love with Him.

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).