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GLORY OF GOD



UNDERSTANDING AND LIVING
OUR TRUE CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

BELOVED

FR. KHOI V. TRAN

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INTRODUCTION

I remembered spending my first Christmas on deployment with many troops who were away from their family and support systems. When I asked people what they were planning to do after Mass, many simply said that they would go back to their dorm and watch a movie or something similar. How sad! Therefore, I invited everyone to bring a dish, whether something from the dining facilities or whatever they could order or gather, so we can partake in a parish's Christmas potluck. I personally asked a favor from a couple more parishioners who lived outside in the local community if they could bring in some local dishes, too, so we can have varieties and feel like a more local celebration -- a homey Christmas away from home. I had to do it because it was needed for my parishioners and their well-being. We all came together at one of those conxes and to break bread and spend Christmas together as a parish family. Indeed, community is not always given; it has to be willed and put into action by those who desire deeper, personal, and meaningful connections! We were away from our loved ones, but we were brought together by His love -- first at the Eucharist and as a parish family.

Without a doubt, we all want love. We all seek love. Nonetheless, many people seek in the wrong places or misunderstand what it means to be loved. As a matter of fact, many of us struggle to love ourselves as we truly are. We tend to want to love an idolized, personified, or altered version of ourselves because we think we have to be like that in order to be accepted, seen, recognized, welcomed, or loved by others. We oftentimes forget or forgo who we truly are, hide behind shallow self-help or psychological tools to make ourselves feel good, but never take the time to embrace our true belovedness as God sees, knows, and loves us from eternity to eternity. One of my favorite spiritual writers, **Fr. Henri Nouwen**, once said in his book, ***Discernment:***

“The truth about ourselves is that we are more than ourselves, more than what we think or express, more than our physical presence, more than our personality and character. The problem with the excessive reliance on psychology today (and I am a psychologist) is that we tend to give it the last word. But the beauty of psychological awareness is that it can point beyond the character qualities it describes to the person it reveals. Beneath any diagnosis or mental health problem, there is a person who carries God inside. Psychology can give us helpful language for the varied parts of who we are, but we need theology to remind us that we can never be defined by personality or any disorder. We are defined by something deeper and wider than those aspects. This is what is meant when we speak about the soul -- that identity where we are most personal and most Godlike.”

Indeed, we oftentimes are our own worst enemies because we think we need to be successful, popular, or powerful in order to be loved. We all have the deceptive tendency to live or view ourselves selectively, choosing to see only those experiences we can identify with as our real experiences and rejecting or pushing the rest aside. By bringing our true and whole selves to proper prayer and discernment, we not only claim our egocentric side but also change our ego ideal, the personal or idealized self that is only part of who we are, to reject the dark manipulation, enslavement, and control to be free to stand as we truly are before God and transcended our limited view of ourselves. Who we are in Him is much more than the dark side we want to deny or the ego ideal we want to act like we are!

Many Christians were taught that they have to be perfect or think that they are to be without sin to be loved by God, thus oftentimes ended up rejecting the unhealthy perfectionistic, false pious, and superstitious religiosity mindset, or think that they are unworthy and can never merit His love. However, once we know our true identity and accept His unconditional love, we are free to live in the world but not of the world,

to truly be free without being owned by it. Thus, we can forgive those who hurt or disappoint us without letting bitterness, jealousy, or resentment enter our hearts. When we start believing this, this spiritual knowledge will grow until it transforms our daily lives. Knowing our belovedness helps us to will the good of others and be able to speak well of what He is doing in our lives, not in a self-centered, self-gratifying, self-righteous, or self-congratulatory way but with humble awareness of the work of grace at work in us and through us.

It was He who knitted us together in our mothers' wombs. He has inscribed us on the palm of His hand. We belong to Him from eternity to eternity. We will still have to face rejections, and there will still be pains and losses, but we will live with them through the genuine, life-giving love that transformed us deep from within. We will still live with our pain and anguish, our successes and failures, but not feeling defeated or despairing with them, but as one who knows we are God's beloved.

That is hard because we are oftentimes worried and impatient with who we are, where we are going, and His will for us. We are impatient because we want to keep on moving from one thing to the next. Nonetheless, impatience robs us of the very experience of the present moment, while active waiting in prayer and discernment helps us to find and see the signs of the One we are waiting for and His love for us. A waiting person is a patient person because that person is able to slow things down and expand their horizons to see what is hidden or easily missed in life. Our daily actions are aligned with the eternal scope that is grounded in gratitude, a constant act of thanksgiving to God that flows from our awareness of His presence in the world. True discernment helps us to patiently wait and grow where God has planted us, so we call the society and world at large to a greater and deeper transformation of love, through love, for love, with love, and by love.

We oftentimes lose focus on this eternal loving presence and life-giving love, thinking that we are alone, abandoned, forgotten, rejected,

or smitten by God and others when trials and tribulations, hardships and challenges, doubts and questions begin to arise. By recognizing the divine presence and our true identity in the midst of our life's struggles, we can discern and see that the victory has already been won! We already possess that for which we strive -- our true worth and belovedness in God. We already taste that for which we hunger -- eternal life and its deeply rooted peace. Therefore, we simply aim to make fully visible the victory that has already been accomplished in Christ Jesus.

This reality makes a possible community characterized by true love, joy, and peace revealed in the Lord, who constantly invites us to let go and to come and follow Him, to see what He continues to do in our midst. Of course, following Jesus is not as easy as it seems, especially as we have to learn to love one another in Him and through Him. Some Christian brothers and sisters tend to overly focus on the moral dimension of discipleship -- that is, learning to behave according to the values and ethical principles that the Lord espoused, primarily to love God and neighbor, including one's enemies, with a focus on what actions we must do or do not take. Other Christians emphasize the subjective dimension of spirituality, focusing less on external behavior and more on the interior feelings, thoughts, intentions, and overall awareness throughout the day. Thus, both sides are important and cannot be isolated or seen as the only and absolute way to live out our Christian calling and discipleship! We must learn to listen and act, pray and put into practice the objective truth and subjective discernment so our inner and outer experiences help us to listen and respond -- correcting our course as needed -- to His gentle but firm guidance grounded in the liberating truth.

Discernment is hard because what can seem like objectively feasible and doable is not always what He is asking of us, or what seems like good and natural to us is what He is inviting us to be in the present moment. So oftentimes, we end up letting politics, ideologies, pressures, trends, desires, and wants drive our passion and decision-

making process instead of discerning if these things draw attention to ourselves or make us feel good at the moment, but draw attention away from God and make Him the center of our lives. Are we willing to only be Christian by name when it fits our mold and agenda, or are we committed to walking with Him no matter what the cost might be? There are certain things that seem feasible and doable, and perhaps at times become enticing and desirable, but we must ask ourselves the honest question of whether those matters would inevitably shift people's attention from Him to us or lesser things or not. We might not always get what we want or hope for, but we must keep our eyes focused on Him in the midst of life's ups and downs, crosswinds and stormy seasons.

That is why this life of faith, discipleship, and discernment is personal and must be done with a humble, attentive, and willing heart to let go of everything in order to choose Him first and foremost. It is not always a clear-cut or easy decision, especially when we have to wrestle between choosing what is of God and what we want, or what we think is good for us and what is necessary in our spiritual growth. True discipleship and discernment is not individualistic but personal because each has to decide to let go, follow, and learn to correct the course or stand up to walk with Him again if we have fallen or strayed away. Nonetheless, we learn -- over and over again -- that nothing in this world is ever satisfying and fulfilling... We might feel accomplished or happy for the moment, but that in itself is ever fleeting and changing, because our heart desires more and only the infinite, everlasting, and never-changing love of God can fulfill that desire deep from within. Therefore, let us remember that we are His beloved and do our best to affirm, encourage, and assist others to find, understand, and embrace their true belovedness as well.

KVT

21 September 2026

Saint Matthew

CHOOSING TO COME HOME

As an immigrant, especially 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 (just like they are coming back into style now), but they were expensive and more than what my parents could afford. 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 standardized dress code because it was closer to his workplace and more economical for us at

the time. We wore uniform 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. Personally speaking, 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 was going better, I never felt like I belonged there.

Nonetheless, I only learned much when I left home to begin my religious life and seminary 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 them!

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 secular 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 as we begin this journey, 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 is not 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.

To drive this important point of remembering who we are and not forgetting the call to come home, I would like to invite you to be with me walking the grounds of Christ Cathedral in Garden Grove, California. When one begins to pay attention, they would not be able to miss a bronze life-size statue depicting the return of the prodigal son... However, there is something different and unique about it (if you would allow me to explain).

For many people, especially cradle Catholics, this wonderful parable has lost its meaning due to it being overused at retreats, reconciliation services, and throughout the Lenten season. When this story is being told, many of us immediately connect the father's love in the parable to the Heavenly Father's love for us. That is not wrong, for I believe that is what the Lord wanted to portray to us and what we can rightly come to conclude from our own prayer of the scriptural passage.

Nonetheless, I believe that the artist of this particular statue portrayed the father's gratitude to God as his son returns home – and vice versa. We can see the beautiful details of the father's passion and tender love as he embraces the son. However, if you and I take a look closely, both father and son's eyes are fixed to heaven, as if both of them

are saying, "Thank you, Lord." Perhaps it is the gratitude from the father, thanking God for bringing his son safely home, as well as the son for changing his heart to return to his father. The son is thanking God for being graciously accepted after a time of abandoning his father.

I can relate to the artist's depiction here because I have heard many prayers from parents and family members for the return of their children or loved ones back to God's grace. I have heard many people's pains and hurts as they pray for the ones they love. I have cried and prayed with them and for them. These encounters are not easy, and often times, there are no perfect answers. Yet, even in the anguishes of one's pains, prayers ground hope and strengthen faith as they offer their loved ones to divine providence. While there are many reasons in these cases to lose hope and be cynical, many people continue to entrust the journey of their loved ones to the Lord, that He cares for them and guides them on the path needed. Perhaps these types of prayer will only make sense when we care about someone enough...enough to continue to love and pray for them even though they might ignore or reject this love in order to live their own lives.

I also have found myself in similar situations before, praying for a friend or family member to return to the faith. As a matter of fact, I have a list of people who have entered my life that I pray for each night. Some of these people are currently struggling in their faith, some have now become lost in life, some have been out of touch or no longer in communication with me. Yet, all of them are significant and hold special places in my heart. I pray for those that I know, the ones that I love and the ones that are hard to love, the ones that entered my life and the ones who are no longer there due to one reason or another. Sometimes I have to battle with the what if's: what I could have done so that these friendships would not be lost or so that we would not lose touch with each other. Yet, departures are a painful and natural part of life. No matter how short or long that relationship, how wonderful or hard to love that person can be, I believe we can always pray for them and with them.

So, I ask you today...

Who are you praying for?

Who is God inviting you to pray for?

Do you know who is praying for you?

Who could you pray for more?

These are hard questions. Nonetheless, we are not alone nor are made to be alone. Even in our hard struggles and doubts, we know that there is someone who is praying for us. Do not lose hope! Reach out for help if needed for we are made for one another and God has given us the Church to journey and care for us. Do not let the Devil's usual tactics of despair and hopelessness turn you and me away from the truth. Fight the good fight and ask the real (hard) questions deep within your soul. Listen, be humble and courageous as we seek to understand true love and where our heart belongs. Do not be afraid of returning home for we all come from somewhere and are given life by those who love us -- no matter how imperfect it might be. True joy and love are found at home. We just have to learn to love it as it is and as we are instead of what needs to be in order for it to be picture perfect. Home is home because of the people and the relationships that nurture it, no matter how messy they might look many times. Our hearts will forever be lost and restless unless we are able to come home and embrace the homeliness of all the people and relationships that made it as it is. Truly, there is no place right home.

Most important of all, I would like to encourage you to really give thanks to the people who are in our lives. No matter how they might seem hard to love, they are special and God-given for some reasons. We are who we are today because of what has been given to us. If those things are not perfect, sift through the hurts and learn from the blessings. If they have hurt us, forgive. We did not come from somewhere random. We came from home, and even though our home and its past were not perfect, we do have a loving home with our Heavenly Father. He has loved us into being, and He continues to guide

us with His love. I have learned the hard way to run away from what I am meant to be, only to find out the hard truth that I am not happy until I come back to the spiritual abode made by Him. I had to look at my unhappiness and its own lies. Even though it was hard, I had to look deep inside to understand why I had been so restless when I am away from home with Him. I had to learn to let God be the Father for me, and in that relationship, forgive, embrace, and love those who are around me with the same love He has for me. Our true home is to be with Him.

For me, it was a long, circling journey to finally come to know that I was trying too hard to make myself unhappy. I shared many of those stories in ***Overcoming Perfection*** because God was very patient and gracious in helping me to overcome my own self-imposed and false sense of perfectionism and all its baggage. I was trying too hard to run away and trying to make something unreal happen and satisfying. I thought that I could make a life for myself by forgetting what had hurt me by building lofty and unrealistic goals of personal achievements and self-defined happiness. I thought I was happy, but I was just ignoring myself and denying the past and its baggage.

Nonetheless, my own journey of happiness, by whatever standards that I had set for myself at different times of life, always made me feel empty and unfulfilled. I had to learn to go back to the past in order to understand, reconcile, embrace, and love everything, especially the people and relationships as they are. I had to return home in order to truly find that this is where I need to be. Home makes me into who I am today by the grace of God. I can now love my home -- of the past, in the present, and for the future -- because it is filled with people and relationships that are special and important to me. This home is loved into being because I have come to understand that this home was made for me by God who loves me. It is always good to be home. It is good to be with Him who has loved and shown me how to love.

Fr. Henri Nouwen wrote in his book on Christian identity, ***Who We Are***, about the five lies about our personal identity according to the world:

1. I am what I have
2. I am what I do
3. I am what other people say or think of me
4. I am nothing more than my worst moment
5. I am nothing less than my best moment

Please take a moment to re-read the five lies again and see if we have bought into the lies or have lied to ourselves into thinking we have to be someone else than who we are truly in His eyes. Over and over again, we are reminded that what we are looking for from God might not what we are expecting at times. What He wants to show us will be much simpler, personal, intimate, heartfelt, and at times, feel more ordinary than what we thought it will be! Nevertheless, if we stay, be faithful and humble, mindful and aware, He will show us what our heart truly desires and seek... that God is with us -- He is truly with us -- we are not alone -- and that He is enough! There is no other way to say this, but our true peace is found in the ability to smile at God and see Him smiles at us.

Today, I would like to pray for those who are far away from home as well as those who are at home waiting for those who have gone away. I pray for reunion and reconciliation. I pray for forgiveness and the true embrace of love. I pray that those who wait will find the joy of reunion one day, and those who are trying to find their way home will find it soon enough, so that all can say when they embrace each other: "Thank you, Lord." I also hope that you and I, especially those whom we are praying for, will find the welcoming voice from our Heavenly Father and our loved ones, saying: "I am glad you are home."

FREEDOM FROM FEAR AND TRUTH INSTEAD OF SHAME

Those who dislike religion that we are nothing than some sheepish group of blind believers who do not know what is right and wrong. Furthermore, they often say that the Church is using nothing more than fear, guilt, and shame to control the faithful and there is no real truth or freedom found in being Catholics. They often portray organized religions as corrupt and up to no good, only manipulating and enslaving people with nonsense rubbish instead of allowing them to be free to become who they are. Those seem to be valid arguments when we first look at some of the failures caused by some portions of the Church's leadership and historical mistakes; nonetheless, that is far from the truth! When one truly understands what it means to believe and live the life of faith, there is no humanistic manipulations of fear and shame, but true freedom found in Christ Jesus and His Bridesmaid. There are so much blessings and consolations found in His Church, and those who live in the truth are free to live as children of God instead of being enslaved, manipulated, and lied by the powers of this world.

As a matter of fact, fear and shame are often used in a social and cultural context than theological setting. In many cases, they could, and have been used extensively in the Church, too, when the cultural expectations and demands are transferred into the ecclesiastical and parochial settings. In high cultures where honor is important, where the rituals, contexts, and roles are emphasized, we will naturally see shame and guilt being used extensively to save face, protect a family's name, or one's dignity. Even in low-culture societies like ours, we use guilt and shame to pressure others into doing what we want of them! We see them being used everywhere, at every level. From politicians to organizations, from celebrities to influencers, from revolutionaries to activists, guilt and shame are frequently used to put down the opposition and lift a particular worldview higher than others. Therefore, to say that guilt and

shame are products created by and used for religious purposes is an ignorant claim and false lie!

It is so easy for our post-modern world to ignore the perennial principle that is taught by many saints: "You should not put God to the test." Yet, we as consumeristic people have no problem of testing Him in order to find the versions of the divine that we want. We shop around and have no problem of creating new *mélanges* of spiritual realities that fit our lifestyle. Instead of tuning ourselves to God and His loving truth, we demand that God changes to fit our wants. We make God become what we want if He is to have our attention. We expect God to become a version of we want Him to be in order to have our love. We make God loyal to us and serves our wants -- a butler, a provider, a sugar daddy, or a vending machine version of the divine -- instead of someone who deserves our loving loyalty. We put God to the test and make Him 'jump through hoops' as to win the heart of us consumers.

Nonetheless, when the storms of life were hitting me from all sides, I found guidance, solace, and support from the Church, especially through her leaders and faithful. Even though we might not always agree on everything, they were there for me spiritually and humanly speaking when I felt that I had no place else to go. Even at times when I do not recognize the work of grace, I know that I am lifted by many prayers of the people who might not know me but offered their sacrifices for those who are in need. As a Catholic, I always find more blessings, received more than what I could imagine, and find myself at home in the Church in good times and in bad. Even though there have been people who hurt or misunderstood me in the Church, there are also many people who journey with me every day as my brothers and sisters, lifting me up spiritually and fraternally each day.

Of course, there are times when our conscience needs to be pricked, challenged, pruned, and put back into its place, especially when we have strayed away from His loving truth. There will be times

when the truth will hurt, because being disciplined is like being pruned and trimmed, but it will never leave us think less of ourselves, especially to be enslaved by unhealthy guilt and shame. The truth will set us free because it will make us worry less about our very own selves, think less about what is only good for us, and less centered about our own particular goods to truly live for that everlasting, transformative, and intimate love of God -- with and for one another, too. We are truly free when we know who we are as sons and daughters of the Most High, joyfully content in being disciples of Christ, and instruments of the Holy Spirit with our very own words and actions of transparent, intimate, and genuine self-giving love.

The saints never judged the imperfections in the Church or allow the ineffectiveness of her members to let them leave! They stayed and chose to personally give themselves out of love, seeking greater love and holiness in how to they live the Gospel and the evangelical counsels. They never left; they stayed and transformed the Church with real life-giving service, charity, and love that are grounded in true faith in Christ and real hope in His promise to be with us always. It is very easy to find the problems and dwell on them, or to point out what is wrong but remain indifference, judgmental, and self-justified without any real action and effort to make a personal difference through humble service and love.

I heard from a retreat that every time we do the Sign of the Cross, we begin with the "I" but cross that "I" with the Cross itself. The Cross is the sign of love and salvation because the Lord Jesus chose to be hung, suffered, and died for the sake of love. Therefore, every time we do the Sign of the Cross, we cross our own desires of the "I" as we embrace the "we" of the Trinitarian love given by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This personal and intimate communion with God nourishes and strengthens our communion and love for others as we choose to live for the greater love as we learn to make more sacrifice for the greater good of all.

Only in the love of God that we learn how to truly be free without having to worry too much about what we have to be to appeal and gain the recognition of others. Our "I" will learn to let go of itself in order to meet the "thou" of God as we become renewed, transformed, reformed by the grace of this transcendental encounter and everlasting love. This intimate and heartfelt encounter grounds us in the new sense of communion of "we" with God and with those who are around us. Through the love of God, we no longer need to worry about doing something but being who we truly are -- children of God the Father, disciples of the Jesus Christ, and instruments of the Holy Spirit. In our communion and relationship with the God of truth, we become free from the things of this world that held us down by manipulations, deceptions, and codependency so we can truly love as we are. This is something that cannot be explained or understood right away, it has to be experienced and learned in a new way as we will and desire the everlasting relationship with God that is beyond the fluxes and noises of this world.

I am not here to say that the human side of the Church is perfect! At times, we have caused harms to others, scandals among the faithful, and hurts between ourselves. However, to focus on the errors and mistakes without the commitment to give our lives to transform, sanctify, and plant holiness with our life of true loving service is simply hypocrisy. It is easy to look at the problem without being a part of the solution! For me, the Church has always been my place of refuge and rest in times of troubles and trials.

Let us be reminded of the spiritual reality, recognizing that the Devil and his minions are advantageous manipulators and liars. They wait for the weakest moments to attack us, filling us with warped versions of lies, and making us question God, others, and/or our very own selves. Like a good general, he studies us night and day, lurking in the shadows and waiting for the right moments when things do not go right to make us doubt, despair, and lose trust in God's goodness, faithfulness, and loving grace even more. It is humbling to remember

that we are not in control or is everything depends on us... However, it is the most liberating, freeing, and genuine knowledge that makes us become more dependent on God.

Here is the greatest paradox in our life of Christian discipleship... As we grow and become more mature in our faith, we become more childlike and simple in knowing that He is enough and we are loved by Him -- and that is enough!

I want you to re-read the sentence again and let the words soak in. The words might seem simple, but it is the hardest lesson to learn and re-learn throughout our spiritual journey. There will be times when we have to endure desolations. Sometimes those discouraging trials come in like big storms that shake us deep from within or like deserted moments that make our life dry and barren. We will feel at times that God has abandoned or forgotten about us. Other times, we might feel we must have done something wrong or not good enough to deserve it. However, do not lose heart when we are spiritually in a storm or feeling dried up in the desert for God is present even there.

As a matter of fact, the saints taught us to not give up and be committed to our spiritual practices when we feel dried up, desolated, attacked, and have nothing to give or draw from! We must not let the current trials and hardships deter us from God's goodness and our spiritual habits that have been constant, life-giving, and transformative in our lives. Even in the driest of deserts or the darkest of storms, God is present as our nourishment, strength, and anchor. It is important to recall what He had done for us in the past to find the strength to endure the trials and hardships with Him in the present moment, especially knowing that these times will also pass soon.

The Savior taught us how to pray and that prayer is very important! Even though He was constantly busy in His very own public ministry, with many sick, ill, possessed, and unwell people asking Him

to heal them, teaching at the local synagogues, and caring for the less fortunate, abandoned, and forgotten, Christ never forget how to pray and made times to be with His Heavenly Father. The works He did were not simply to make things better, to glorify Himself, or concerning the physical healing of people alone! They were all done to restore people back to their original dignity, image, and likeness made by God. In many of His healings and miracles, He asked the petitioners for their faith and trust in Him! He wanted to heal and restore them deep from within, not just on the outside alone. His miracles and actions were works of prayers and of love, received, given, and shared with others.

Our Lord prayed at all times. Even before His Passion, He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that His cup be taken away, if possible, but not as He willed but as the Father willed for Him. Even on the Cross, the Lord recited and prayed the Psalm when He uttered in pain the famous line, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Over and over again, our Savior taught us that prayer is not just an option, a convenience, or something to do when everything else failed. Prayer, for us, needs to be the utmost priority in order to strengthen, anchor, and lovingly receive from God the gift of grace, peace, and joy to be shared and be the necessary nourishment for our very own lives.

There will be days when we are unable to pray well or as we would have liked. There will be times when we are filled with many worries, distractions, anxieties, or matters that occupy our minds; but no matter what is going on, we can always come to prayer as we are able. I know personally that there are times in my life that I just have to come to the Lord and simply say to him, "Lord, you know my heart... You know that I love you!" And what is so beautiful about our God is that He knows and understands the deepest secrets and desires of our hearts! Even when we cannot put into words what we are going through, He knows and is present with us. All He ever desires is that we come to Him, be genuine, transparent, and present to Him as we are able!

When those healed and freed by the Lord wanted to follow Him, He often asked them to return to where they were to proclaim what God had done for them! He desires that we share with others what God has done for us in our very own lives, especially the true liberation and freedom we have in Him. If each and every one of us understands that true, genuine, and immense freedom and joy we have, this world would be filled with people who are less anxious about the changing matters of life and more joyful in their love of God. To have faith is not to mean that everything will be perfect, but to simply accept that there will be challenges (and they can be hard at times), but His loving grace will give us enough strength and joy to truly live as we are able. This is the real secret and result of faith, the key to allowing us to always be joyful in the Lord, even in the midst of many life's ups and downs! Therefore, let us not be afraid to embark on the journey with our faith grounded in Him and to seek its eternal reward of being forever united with Him who loves us beyond all measures.

If we want to others to believe what we really profess, we should put it into practice. Much more, if we want others to know the truth, especially the freedom to live in loving mercy of God, we should try our best to put into practice the merciful love of God, so others are not being manipulated by guilt and shame. Let us give to one another not just what is on the outside or what can be seen by others, but to truly give to those who are around us the same love that God has given to us through His Son, Jesus Christ, and continues to live on through the power and working of the Holy Spirit. Let us care for one another, especially for those who have little or no one to care for them, so they can truly understand what it means to truly live a holy, loving, just, and mercy-filled life as His children. In imitating God, we become His loving presence and conduits of divine mercy and transformative grace in each and every encounter with one another. Truly, when we practice mercy and compassion, loving and forgiving each other, we love as God loves!

GOD DOES NOT NEED US... HE WANTS US!

So many times, we get discouraged when attacked and questioned by nonbelievers as to why we should believe in a figment of human imagination to make sense of the unknown. Nonbelievers would attack, dismiss, and put down our faith as unintelligible, archaic, oppressive, and anti-progress because religions are tools to control the simple, uneducated, and uncritical mass, who cannot think for themselves and blindly follow superstitious inventions that enslave, control, and manipulate them. Let us be honest... How many of us have heard those points from people who tend to think that they are superior because they are progressive, scientific, and free thinkers? As a matter of fact, just like the radical right, which thinks it is morally superior because of a false Americanistic theology and nationalistic outlook, the radical left thinks that it is intellectually superior because of their pursuit of progress, freedom, and scientific advances instead of religiosity. Nonetheless, both extremes miss the point because they only focus on themselves and their own little feeble understanding and fragile ego by dismissing the whole truth to make themselves feel superior to the rest.

Pride comes in many different ways, both in the intellectual and religious worlds, because it desires to make the ego feel good at the cost of others. It treats God and science as secondary means to serve its desire to be in control. Nonetheless, prideful people are the most miserable because they let their insecurities rule their thoughts and ways of life, always envious, jealous, and worried about not being relevant or important. It is also dangerous because prideful people are willing to objectify, manipulate, and use other people as means to their ends! Think about it... It has always been pride that has led us to the most horrible historical, social, and personal sins.

So, what should we do, or how can we overcome these self-created egocentric miseries? Thus, I believe our genuine Christian faith teaches us the truth and has given us a way out of our own miseries by

remembering who we are in the One who created us out of love, for love, and never stops pursuing us even when we had rejected, abandoned, ignored, forgotten, denied, and even when we hated Him. We have God who loved us into being and never abandoned His creation when they strayed away from Him. As a matter of fact, He never gave up on us, and ultimately did something so radical and unimaginable that only someone who is madly, deeply, and personally in love could ever thought of... He freely chose to die for us!

One of the most sobering and humbling things I heard in formation was that God, who is infinitely perfect and blessed in Himself, does not need us in any way, shape, or form. It was shocking to hear at first, but that statement was consoling to continue to hear that even though He did not need us, He wants to share His love with us. He created us to share in His own blessed life out of love -- for He is love, and true love cannot be contained. Time and time again, He has shown us that He wants and desires our love, even when we have fallen into sin and forgotten Him. (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1-25) He is the highest good, infinite truth, and wondrous beauty that nothing and no one in this created world can ever fulfill or satisfy. As a matter of fact, this love He has for us is written deep within our hearts because there is an unexplainable desire for goodness, truth, and beauty, which is God Himself.

Words defy the humbling feelings and sentiments when I recognized that we are not a product or end result of need! God wants us; His love for us is indescribable and escapes every human understanding, comprehension, and knowledge. How can the Creator of the universe want ME and love ME? How can He who is infinitely perfect, beautiful, and wonderful in Himself love me who is a sinner and imperfect in so MANY ways? He knows that there are times when I cannot even love myself or others around me, but somehow, He desires, wants, cares, and loves each and every one of us. That is definitely mind-boggling and humbling in every respect! It is, indeed, true love because

only the One who knows and loves us into being can ever love us enough to put up with our continual prodigality.

I do not think any politicians, rulers, influencers, or powerful people would do the same thing that our Savior and Redeemer did if they possessed the power to pardon, reconcile, or make things right simply. Nonetheless, the unimaginable happened when the only begotten Son of God chose to die for us, and it proved to us that God is never about manipulating, controlling, objectifying, enslaving, or playing games with us! In union with the Father and the Holy Spirit, He endured the passion and cruel death on the Cross as expiation for our sin. He took upon Himself all the things that none of us in our right minds would ever want to go through: betrayal, abandonment, rejection, pain, suffering, and a public, shameful, and slow death. Thus, showing us in a very personal and real way that each and every one of us is worthy of His love and worth dying for!

As a matter of fact, St. Paul said it best throughout this letter to the Romans, but in a very particular way, he affirmed that hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to guide, purify, sanctify, and transform us from our own self-created miseries so we can know by faith the love that God has for us. Furthermore, he confirmed that God proves His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us so we can gain access to this undeserving outpouring of faith, hope, and love. He gave us the real example of love so we can find the courage to die to ourselves and to live in Him, through Him, for Him, with Him. That is why our hope is not something made up or wishy washy because God has always taken the first initiative to pursue, reconcile, and pour out His love for us while we were still rejecting Him. (cf. Romans 5:1-8)

The Lord Jesus Christ spent time with prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners because many of them were willing to listen to Him and seek conversion. They might be rough around the edges and looked down on

by others, but at least they were honest enough to recognize that they were not perfect. Nonetheless, He could not dialogue with the ruling class because they were too full of themselves and were blinded by their own ego and self-righteousness. Both extremes of narcissism and hypocrisy, abuse of His mercy, and over-reliance on ourselves need to be avoided.

We are all reminded that salvation is not dependent on us, for we are simply children of God, disciples of the Lord, and instruments of the Holy Spirit. The salvation of the world is not dependent on us, because His grace is able to bring into fulfillment what we ourselves can never do or ever imagine! It is a humbling experience, but a sober reality, for us to remember our place and not be too hard on ourselves, for there is only ONE Savior and Redeemer. We cannot save everyone or do everything, for we can only do what is able, and He will work in and through our shortcomings and limitations if we unite everything that we have said and done through our very own life of prayerful discernment, reflection, self-giving abandonment, and complete trust in His goodness. It is a liberation to recognize that God is not dependent on us for His salvific work or to save others, even though we can, at times, play an important and instrumental part! We offer Him our talents, blessings, and gifts, as well as our brokenness and its limitations, so that He can work in and through us.

Therefore, we must ask ourselves how we can better respond to this unimaginable, undeserving, and unforgettable pouring of divine love?!? It is too easy to continue to complain, quarrel amongst ourselves, and doubt in His goodness because we are very good at that on many (historical, social, and personal) levels. Nonetheless, how many of us can open our eyes up to see and ask the genuine questions, "Is the Lord in our midst or not?" (cf. Exodus 17:3-7) Imagine how our lives will change when we recognize how He had nourished His people when they constantly doubted and questioned Him in the Old and New

Testaments, as well as how we continue to be blinded by how He loves and cares for us in this present time.

We often forget this reality when we read human history and even ancient mythologies that rulers and made-up deities did not care much for their subjects. They worried more about their own power and influence, quarreling, bickering, complaining, and fighting among themselves instead of patiently caring for humanity. Even in today's day and age, where we think we are better than the past, look around and see how many world leaders, politicians, or social elites, rich people, or influential figureheads are willing to pursue genuine service and exchange their lives for others? Even the most magnanimous of them would only use their influence, power, or money instead of actually offering themselves as sacrificial offerings. Furthermore, how many are that patient, merciful, compassionate, and relentless in pursuing others so they might not be lost and going down the road of perdition? Yet, our God did that throughout salvation history and even in our own personal lives when we were lost, rejected, abandoned, ignored, or even hated Him.

As our Savior and Redeemer hung upon the Cross, He said, "I Thirst" (John 19:28), not because He was thirsty for water but for our love. Thus, those two words can be found at each and every chapel that follows St. Mother Teresa's sisters and those who love her charism. Her sisters are called to gaze upon that very self-giving act as an invitation to give themselves in service of the poorest of the poor as a way to satiate His thirst for humanity. Thus, in a very imperfect way, this is why I chose this blog with the same name as well, because I hope that what I am trying to convey through my imperfect efforts to share with others how much He thirsts for us and how we can reciprocate and respond to this unimaginable love! As we reflect upon that outpouring, undeserving, self-donating, and sacrificial love, may we learn that God loves each and every one of us and that we are worth saving! The Lord gave His life for us, enduring all the unimaginable pains and sufferings, never taking any

shortcuts, or acting like any powerful rulers or people of His age, but personally embracing everything to show us how much He loved us until the very end.

The life of faith is not about knowing and controlling everything, but lovingly putting ourselves in the hands of the loving God who created, saved, and redeemed, and continues to sanctify and lead us on our journey back to Him. Childlike faith is a simple faith — but hard to put into practice — that trusts in the One who cares for our good because we have a personal, loving, and intimate relationship with Him, and we should strive for that each day so we are able to embrace the creative tensions that exist in our daily ups and downs. Truly, each day gives us the opportunity to begin with a simple, humble, and loving trust, willing to walk, abandon ourselves, and take each step with the Lord.

Each and every one of us should ask ourselves the personal questions of what we can do in order to live a life of humble service, loving charity, genuine kindness, and gentle teaching to bring souls back to Christ! Many saints had said in the past, and St. Pope John Paul II, too, has affirmed that we need more witnesses of faith in this third millennium! We indeed preach louder when we desire to live our Christian discipleship in genuine faith, hope, and charity. If we do not live in humble service and choose to be His instruments in collaborating with others in His vineyards, we will burn ourselves out with bitterness, resentment, and destructive control issues.

The Lord did not come to die for angels; He came to give His life to set us free from slavery to sin and bondage from this world. Many saints have attested that the angels are jealous of us in a way because the Almighty took flesh, lived like us, and chose to die for us as both God and man. Therefore, we are rightly called to be Christlike by seeking holiness, sanctifying ourselves to become more united with Him in words and actions. Simply put, we are called to be saints in reflecting

His light to the world by how we live, for our words and actions are the manifestations of our hearts and souls that belong to God.

We do not have a home where we can genuinely belong because we have spent a lot of our time building sandcastles that look nice on the outside but do not have any real depth or foundations. We no longer want to be true guides, teachers, and anything that carries responsibility from the traditional roles and duties to hand on, protect, treasure, and teach our future generations. The nucleus of our society has been broken and fallen apart because we have lost the desire to create a home and family where we can grow and mature as what God calls us to be! We have built up many skyscrapers that are so appalling and amazing, but they also crumble and fall very often. As a matter of fact, things come and go so fast that progress keeps us constantly on the move and change, but we really have nothing that gives us rest, surety, and depth.

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 have been hurt in the past, 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.

Our faith is not dependent on what God has to do for us, nor is our happiness based on what we want or desire for ourselves. How wonderful it is to know that even though He did not need us, He wants, desires, and loves us! We are not simply a product of need but of love.

The Lord has come to show us who we truly are and invites us into a deeper communion with Him and with one another. Our true joy is not self-centered but grounded in the real, personal, and intimate faith, hope, and love for the Savior who had given Himself up for us. It is not just about what we can get out of the relationship, but in obedience to His words and by imitating His own sacrificial examples of love for the greater good of all. We are to become like Him by the dying of ourselves to love, trust, and believe beyond the materialistic or quantifiable goods, especially through our own personal gifts of service to others.

I know that I am not perfect, and I am still struggling on my journey of life and faith, but I cannot not respond to His relentless outpouring of love and pursuit of my love. I know that there were so many times in the past when I could not love myself due to my own insecurities and false perfectionism, and there are still many times today when I still fall short in loving those who are around me because my patience is not as where it needs to be and my humanity still gets the best of me when it comes to see my brothers and sisters as God sees them in His infinite love. I failed many times and many ways, but I continue to stand up and walk with Him again because I know that He never gave up on me. It is His love that compels me because I have experienced it in my own life; therefore, I will continue to do my best to love and pursue others so they can know His love as well.

EMBRACING OUR POVERTY

When a young eager priest wanted to meet St. Mother Teresa of Kolkata at all costs, even flying to India and showed up at the motherhouse, insisting an audience with her; after much persistence, she agreed to meet with him. After a short cordial exchange, she asked him, how much time he spends to pray each day! He told her he celebrates Mass, pray the Breviary, and the Rosary, to which she answered: “That is not enough my son! That is not enough, because love cannot be reduced to the indispensable minimum; love demands the maximum!” That statement humbled him. That priest was Angelo Comastri, who later became the cardinal archpriest of St. Peter’s Basilica.

The saint of the slum told him, “Do you think that I could practice charity if I did not ask Jesus every day to fill my heart with His love? Do you think that I could go through the streets looking for the poor if Jesus did not communicate the fire of His charity to my heart?” She ended the conversation by reminding the young priest, “Without God, we are too poor to be able to help the poor!”

I think it is important for us to remember that without God, we are nothing, and that has to be understood through a life of prayer. In such a noisy and self-centered world, we have become too busy to live our lives, chasing our dreams, constantly catching up on our busy schedule, or trying hard to be somebody that we have lost focus on the value and necessity of silence and prayer.

Our postmodern world likes to praise, exalt, and give focus to those who are vocal, think highly of themselves, attention seeking, and noisy. Yet, these types of people often spend their whole entire lives living with their lips, spilling out floods of words that carry only the increasingly meager fruits of their insecurities and fragile ego. We have, sadly, allowed ourselves to buy into this lifestyle, too, because we no

longer have the time or the inclination to recollect ourselves, to think and to live profoundly in who we are as God’s children. We have ended up enabling one another through pressures, agitations, and popular opinions, thinking that life without “more” and “new” things are not worth living. Nonetheless, what we ended up being superficial and vain, interfering and muffling the invitations of God at every turn. We have become dangerous to ourselves because we have built our lives on lies, pressures, vanities, and false approvals without knowing who we are deep from within!

Our postmodern world is capable of all sorts of noise, wars, many false statements and fake news — doing a good job of making things act, look, feel, taste, and sound good — yet all chaotic because we have excluded God from our lives, from our struggles and battles, and especially from our egocentric ambition to transform this world for our own personal and selfish benefits alone. We have become so dependent on the noisy and empty approval of others that we are scared, resentful, and many times, avoid prayers and silent moments with God. As a matter of fact, this noisy life is choking the divine life out of us, because we have chosen to accustom ourselves with permanent background noise. This life sickens us, but we have become so dependent on it because it helps to distract us from what hurt the most.

Think about it... Without our usual noise, we become anxious, depressed, feverish, and lost. This meaningless and empty noise gives us false security, like a drug which we have become dependent to suppress, ignore, and deter us from our very own selves. Without a doubt, this noisiness is just simply a false appearance, a denial of our very need to face, understand, and know ourselves. We have seen people — perhaps ourselves, too — who become depressed and suicidal when they have to face their brokenness because they cannot face their interior emptiness that has been filled with meaningless noise, egocentric deceptions, and dangerous lies that tell us that we are someone that we are not. The awakening is brutal because we have

been busying ourselves trying to be someone else but do not know who we are!

Perhaps, facing such challenges, we can only say, “Here I am, Lord; I come to do you will.” (Psalm 40:8-9) This invites us to be humble to stand silently and honestly before God to tell Him that we need Him, not having Him do things our ways, but to surrender to Him. We have to stop asking for what we want and ask Him to perfect us in love, to love Him more and more, to allow Him to model and form us as clay in His hands, and to bring to fulfillment what He has begun in us. Without our docile surrendering to Him we will remain as hardened clay that cannot be formed. The easiest — but hardest — thing is that we have to let go, little by little, of our miserable sentiments and self-pities as to become more capable of having the same sentiments as those of Jesus. It is necessary to die to ourselves in order to become like the Son of God with simple, childlike, and trusting faith, hope, and love.

St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthian community reminded them, just as he is reminding us today, that we are not Christians because we are wise, powerful, or of noble birth by human standards. (cf. 1:26-31) As a matter of fact, we are often looked at as foolish, weak, lowly, and despised by the world, so that we do not boast in ourselves but in Him who loved, called, and gave us a mission and purpose as His very own. We must look at how we are looking at ourselves and how we actually are as Christians! Indeed, we are being reminded each day that He chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, the weak of the world to shame the strong, and the lowly and despised of the world so no one might boast in and of themselves, but to seek true righteousness, sanctification, and understand the loving value of our redemption in Christ Jesus.

When everybody wants to be a somebody in this world, how many of us are willing to be nobodies? How many of us are content with who we are as His beloved and not worrying about what other people think or

want from us? How many are willing simply be who we are called to be instead of what we think we need to be to someone in this world? This will be a topic of reflection as we look into the Beatitudes, as well as what the Lord is inviting us to be as His disciples.

In a world where it looks like there are a lot of people having attitudes, frustrations, or opinions on anything and everything, it is important to have the right attitude and mindset as Christians. St. Matthew was very intentional in how he set the scene... Jesus went up the mountain, sat down, and His disciples came to Him, which is an image of a Teacher, Master, and One who is with authority, giving a new set of teachings and laws for those who are to follow Him. As a matter of fact, the Beatitudes were given to us as His disciples so we can have the foundational standards and guideposts of how to genuinely be the ones who listen to Him! (cf. Matthew 5:1-12)

Nonetheless, the Beatitudes cannot be understood or appreciated by mundane, egocentric, and worldly people because they go against all their wants and desires. These teachings were meant to invoke a generous response by asking the disciples to put into practice a radical dependency and trust in God. Imagine two bookends: the first Beatitude addressed to those who are poor in spirit, and the last one encouraged those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness to rejoice and be glad, for their true reward will be great in heaven! The first gives the true disposition of heart, to embrace that radical spiritual poverty of spirit, so we have no one else to rely on except for God Himself. The last reminds us of the true priority and reward according to transcendental, eternal, and everlasting values -- even when they are struggling to choose to abide by Him and love those who persecute them.

If we understand the two bookend beatitudes, then every other beatitudes were meant to enrich and complement this generous poverty of spirit and encourage those who are going through trials and hardship,

reminding them that God will comfort those who mourn; that their true inheritance will be one that is measured by genuine meekness; that their satisfaction will not be with the things of this world but in God who is their righteousness; that they will see Him in their daily walk if they keep their hearts cleaned and cleared from the mundane things of this world; and most important of all, that all God's children are called to be peacemakers with the true peace that begins in their hearts.

St. Mother Teresa of Kolkata reminded us that peace begins with a smile! Nonetheless, the peace she was talking about is not a worldly or human understanding of a utopian vision or world. True peace comes from the heart because it is grounded in a genuine relationship with God, Who is our true resting place, source of strength, place of refuge, and consoling love. If we look at our world, society, and nation, we can quickly see that we are not at peace with ourselves and with one another because we are quick to react, condemn, point fingers, shift blame, and make ourselves superior. Our world is not at peace because we first do not have peace within ourselves!

Peace must begin with us in how we choose to prioritize and spend time to first receive it from the Lord through prayer and worship. Peace begins with a smile because we have to be intentional and personal in how we choose to radiate His loving peace toward others! We must choose to love and to smile at others, even the ones who are different, not lovable, and hard to like at the moment. Peace begins with a smile, which means that we have to intentionally put love into practice even at times when we do not want to smile or like the person in front of us at the moment. Peace begins with a smile, which means that we must remember that we are called to be the faces of God to others! So, will others at least see caring, loving, or respectful God-centered faces, or will they see a self-centered, noisy, and puffed-up version of ourselves?

She once said: "In the presence of hope, faith is born. In the presence of faith, love becomes a possibility. In the presence of love,

miracles happen." Perhaps our world is becoming more polarized, vocal, but indifferent, because we have not chosen to love and allow ourselves to be instruments of His loving miracles for those who are in need. Faith is lacking within our homes and society because we have not put love into action -- only talking about this with empty words. Hence, hope is lost, and the world is becoming darker when we lack genuine faith to lay down our lives, follow, and love the Lord with all of our hearts. Please let me affirm this again: works of charity and mercy are works of love that are motivated by faith! Without the same faith that we professed on our lips, enlivened with real works of mercy, we end up being cymbals and gongs of empty noise.

Let us remember the words that St. Mother Teresa of Kolkata gave to that young priest who later became a Cardinal, "Read the Gospel attentively, and you will see that Jesus sacrificed even charity for prayer. Do you know why? To teach us that, without God, we are too poor to help the poor!" The advice of the saint is an important reminder for each and every one of us! Without God, we are nothing. Without knowing who we are and living out our baptismal vocation in prayer, we have nothing to give this world except empty, selfish, and at times, detrimental words and actions. Therefore, let us choose to give Christ — Him and nothing else. We do all things because we truly believe that the Lord is with us. We do not have to be rich, powerful, prestigious, popular, good-looking, influential, or anything of the earthly kind to be disciples of Christ. Indeed, our greatest strength and power are not based on worldly measures but on that which is grounded in His love for us. We can do all things with the Lord who strengthens us!

OVERCOMING ALL FOR LOVE

One of the awesome benefits of being a military chaplain is to listen, counsel, and guide people beyond their traumatic or challenging moments, whether from the past or in the present, so they can be truly free from the enslavement of their own self-created hell. It is a wonderful blessing to help them connect the dots, expand their horizons, and get over the obstacles that are holding them back. The most ironic, and oftentimes funniest and sobering, realization for an individual to accept that they oftentimes become very similar to the person they disliked or tried to avoid becoming! Nonetheless, finally knowing and understanding that reality is the most eye-opening and freeing moment for them to seek liberation and transformation.

A few years ago, a member came to share about their struggle with loneliness and lack of motivation to continue on with their military career. They struggled with going to work as a maintainer because it was not the career they wanted, the environment they desired, or the culture they liked to be in, especially being surrounded by so many colleagues who do not share their values. They felt uncomfortable in having a conversation with their teammates who only talked about getting drunk, sleeping around, or partying. They also shared some sad and disturbing news about a dear family member who struggled with heroin addiction for a long time, and how it negatively affected everyone around them! On top of that, they were still going through the grieving process with another dear family member who committed suicide in the past. Thus, it seemed like this person was personally going through a lot, and they could not catch a break at work.

It took some time to let the individual get everything off their chest and cry it out. We, then, slowly unpacked and reorganized things into simple, small, bite-sized categories so those things would become less overwhelming and easier to bear. As we reviewed the person's past hurts and struggles in light of what they were doing to isolate themselves

at this moment, we finally came to the agreement that they were unhealthily coping with grief, stress, and chaos in a very unproductive, pessimistic, and myopic way. It was, indeed, sad to hear that the person who was dealing with a member in their family struggling with heroin addiction also had to witness the suicide of a family member's death by suicide.

The grieving process was so hard to bear that some family members chose to numb and escape from it by turning to substance abuse. It costs them a lot of relationship hurts and ultimately prison time, too. To complicate it a bit more, another family member was guilt-tripping and shaming the military member, falsely blaming them for the cause of the suicide, which caused them to feel so miserable! On top of that, the addicts threatened to kill themselves, too, which added another layer of guilt, shame, and stress on the person. I felt bad for the individual because they were losing sleep, could not focus, and had to take a day off from work because of the overwhelming burden put on them by their own family.

I had to step in to let the person know of the manipulative behaviors that are typical of those who struggle with substance abuse or addiction. I had to explain to the person that "misery loves company." It was easier for the addicts to manipulate, guilt, shame, and drag other people down to make their lives less miserable.

We had to learn to differentiate between loving the person and continuing to enable their destructive behaviors -- loving the sinner but hating the sin! I had to encourage the person to draw clear boundaries, to hold the addicts accountable, and take care of themselves instead of letting the toxic manipulations control them. I had to encourage the person to learn to grow where they have been planted, else they are withering and succumbing to their own problem-centric mindset and present chaos.

The member and their loved ones had to go through the painful experience of losing someone to suicide and had to live with survivor's guilt. They dealt with the painful past differently; the member continued to struggle with depression and sadness, while their dear family members chose to escape reality and numb the pain with substance abuse. That traumatic event changed their lives, and neither chose to really live for a long time! While we hoped that the family members' imprisonment would become a new opportunity to seek sobriety and conversion of life, I encouraged and empowered the person to personally make changes so they can learn to take root, grow, and live where they were at the moment. They could not go on withering deep from within with a pessimistic mindset and depression-plagued way of thinking. Life might not be perfect and can be hard at times, but that does not mean that there is no goodness and blessings there!

Providentially, God also permitted me to accompany another very hard case that very same day. I was trying to catch up with work after that long and intensive counseling session when my enlisted counterpart told me that there was a couple who specifically requested to talk to me! Indeed, it was another tough case that took almost all my afternoon because the military member was caught repeatedly cheating by their spouse. One was scared to death, because they knew their actions had finally caught up to them, and their marriage was now on the line, and one was extremely mad, because they felt betrayed, forgotten, and abandoned by their very own spouse!

It is never good when the first thing coming out of their mouth is, "Chaplain, I hate to bring you into this situation and come without an appointment... but if we were not here, I would not know what will happen to both of us at home!" So we took a deep breath, and I told them that I am here to listen by facilitating the conversation so both sides got to tell their stories and what they were really going deep from within. Thus, after hearing the military member's stupid reasoning for infidelity, they had to humbly admit that they had a pornography and sex

addiction! I asked them to admit and say, "My name is _____, and I am a sex addict." Without promising any reconciliation, I encouraged the member to seek professional help so these matters can be officially diagnosed, recorded, and properly corrected. I also asked them to join a Sexaholics Anonymous support group because recovery is a lifelong journey, and they will have to have accountability and support along the way!

Of course, the individual was fearful at first because they did not want to be known as such, especially worrying about hurting their military career. However, we came to an understanding that words are cheap, and they continuously betrayed their spouse with empty words, so real, life-changing, and genuine actions needed to be done! They needed help, else they would end up being all alone, pushing their spouse away, and continue to go down that destructive path because of that addiction. Indeed, it would be sad to have a good military career, but all alone because of one's cowardice and selfishness... so that choice had to be made, so they changed their life instead of only worrying about looking good on the outside!

I had to teach the individual to recognize the destructive patterns that addiction had on a person, especially as a sex addict in their case. They were constantly looking for temporary excitement and false satisfaction from their pornography addiction, thus treating their spouse and others as objects of desire and means to their warped, selfish, and destructive ends that have no truth or real end. I had to help the person understand that a real person cannot love someone and give themselves to a person who only thinks of themselves, objectifies others, and only looks for one thing. Intimacy is much more than sexuality, and their spouse deserved to be loved more than what pornography and sex addiction had made reality into a transactional, cheapened, and warped fantasy!

It was important for the person to recognize their destructive pattern and come to the realization of how this addiction had cost them everything, and they have to humbly accept and admit that, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired of doing the same thing, chasing after false companionship, but still empty, lonely, and enslaved to my addiction... and I need to change!" That person had to embark on a journey of healing and recovery on their own before real relationships could be established and meaningful again. I was also very grateful that the spouse understood the member's broken and warped way of thinking. I allowed them to express their pains and disappointments and empowered them as the decision makers of what might be possible in moving forward.

I simply asked the spouse if they were OK of treating the person as a friend at the moment. I cannot tell them how their living arrangements were going to be, because that was something they had to figure out themselves. I asked if both of them go back to the basics by being friends and learn to care, love, and see each other as they were, and see where it could lead next! I asked if they would learn each other's love languages and put that into action each and every day with personal, genuine, and intentional desire to care and will the good of the other side, and see if basic trust can be rebuilt. I did not know how things were going to go, but I knew that they still both loved each other... I just guided, hoped, and prayed that they could find ways to reconcile and work through that big obstacle caused by the member's addiction and stupid decisions! We walked out of that counseling session not knowing what would happen next, but the member had a lot of work to do to seek personal healing and recovery, and both of them could go back to the basics by being genuine, caring, and loving friends to each other again.

Life and its challenging moments are hard. We all had to find our ways to cope and deal with them, and we often made mistakes along the way! We oftentimes end up hurting others by cheapening relationships, pushing our loved ones away, turning to a dependency or addiction

lifestyle, or being in a constant state of being enslaved by sadness, despair, depression, and the like. Nonetheless, it is important for us to step back and ask for help when needed, because we cannot overcome some things that have crippled, manipulated, and enslaved us for so long! This darkness can envelop and make us into hypocritical, manipulative, and controlling people because it is easier to excuse, scapegoat, and shift the focus on others instead of looking at ourselves for real change.

When will each and every one of us take notice and heed the call of conversion? When will we recognize that it is we who have to change our way of life instead of expecting others? When will we choose to truly be free from the enslavement of sin and let go of our selfish desire to be in control, and let God be in control and take possession of us? Indeed, overcoming past trauma, hurt, pain, and suffering is hard. Not many are ready or willing, but all of us have to choose to do it, not by ourselves but by His grace and by inviting others to help us along the way. We cannot overcome things by ourselves because we are weak, limited, and finite, and good intentions can only go so far before we lose focus and become disheartened. We must find good people who can hold us accountable and help us along the way. We must lean on God and learn to genuinely love, care, and choose to be present to those around us, seeing them as gifts and blessings instead of simply objectifying or cheapening them as means to our ends. I pray that each and every one of us, no matter how much we have fallen, gotten hurt, or worried about what is holding us back, learn to stand up and walk with Him as we overcome all life's trials, hardships, pains, sufferings, obstacles, and imperfections.

Change is, indeed, possible... one step at a time... with His grace and with good friends along the way.

EMBARKING ON THE ADVENTURE

"Your will be done" is said every time we pray the ***Our Father***; however, it is one the hardest things that can be said in life. As a matter of fact, we embark on a journey of faith when we choose to seek and follow His will. It is adventurous because it leads us to many unknowns that will require us to let go of our desire to be in control and to trust Him.

From the beginning of time, the creatures that He gave free will have often used that freedom against His love. From Lucifer and his minions to Adam and Eve, from the people in the Sacred Scriptures to our very own day and age, from salvation to secular and human history, we have the tendency to choose to do whatever we like and put our own personal and egocentric goods first. As our post-modern world becomes more individualistic and self-centered, we risk the danger of having many vocal, expressive, manipulative, and offensive manifestations of different wills and egos but no one really cares about anyone else.

We risk the danger of only allowing people to be with us as long as they are like-minded, tolerable, and do not offend us. Nonetheless, once we face and experience differences, we take things personally and begin to become vocal in order to express our will and control over their versions. At the end of the day, we live in a fake world without any real, deep, understanding, and self-giving care and love that comes from the heart. That is only possible when we are able to respect and choose to love the other person who is made in the image and likeness of God.

Written many centuries ago, St. Augustine shared with us that, "To fall in love with God is the greatest of romances; to seek Him the greatest adventure; to find Him, the greatest human achievement."

To embark on the journey of faith is letting go of our comfort zone and desire to be in control and allowing God to form us. Like clay, we

must be humble and tender enough to be formed by him. Through the Prophet Jeremiah, the Lord reminds us that He will not easily give up on us. He used an image of a potter, “Whenever the object of clay which he was making turned out badly in his hand, he tried again, making of the clay another object of whatever sort he pleased.” Hence, the Lord concluded, “Indeed like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, house of Israel.” (cf. 18:1-6)

Our journey of faith is filled with grace; however, the amount of grace that can be received depends on how much one is willing to be honest and humble to receive. It is important to remember that God gives to each person differently and appropriately, so it is proper not to be demanding and get frustrated with what could have been, should have been, or would have been for us. God gives; we give thanks. If God does not give as we hope, we trust in knowing that His gift is appropriate at this time and that His love is enough for us. We have to peel off all the things that we had built for ourselves in order to see ourselves as we truly are deep from within. It then leads to the healing and cathartic step of loving oneself in all its brokenness and imperfections as God loves us. The journey will lead us to, then, better discern, reflect, and pray about what is going on in our own lives as to live a childlike faith that trusts and loves instead of being childish with demanding or selfish expectations.

I am glad that God is patient and does not give up on me when I make mistakes. He has been so merciful and gracious in forming and reforming me, even when I was like hardened clay because of this world. So, let us ask ourselves if we are willing to humble ourselves enough so that our souls are tender enough for Him to form us? Furthermore, are we patient and trusting (in Him) enough to preach the Good News without having everything become dependent and focused on us?

We all begin small, but with perseverance, courage, and humility -- as well as time and patience, God is able to bring into fulfillment what He has begun in us if we trust in Him. We will definitely go through many

blessings and struggles, trials and hardships as well as moments of loving grace, but God is always with us. Just as we need to train ourselves physically to tone and strengthen our muscles, our soul and its spirit have to be holistically exercised in conjunction with our humanity in order to truly mature and be rounded with what God wants us to be. We have to be willing, yet patient, as to activate the gifts and understand the lessons that God has for us at each stage of the journey as to overcome the obstacles that are present or had presented themselves to us.

In Matthew 13:47-53, the Lord reminds us that His Kingdom is like a net thrown into the sea, which collects fish of every kind. As His disciples, our job is to let the Good News be preached and shared through our own way of life. He reminded us that it is His angels' duties to sort the good and the bad — not ours — at the end of the age. We, as disciples, instruments, and collaborators in His vineyards with the saints are called to share the Gospel and let everyone who comes to contact with us see His loving presence radiating through us.

Just as He has been patient in forming and reforming us, we should also be patient in allowing Him to form others with His grace. Too oftentimes, we demand and expect others to fit our standards and wants instead of being faithful to what we are called to do in making known the Kingdom of God. Too many times, we have remained on our own personal thrones and sit back on our comfortable armchairs to commentate and point fingers at others. We tend to expect much of people but do little to give ourselves completely to Him. Hence, we have become spectators and bystanders instead of true believers and disciples who dare to let go and follow Him.

Do we dare to leave everything behind to give ourselves to Him? (cf. Matthew 13:44-46) Do we dare to truly believe and be committed to that faith with the way we live in humility and genuine service before we open our mouths to speak of others? If we truly believe and live what we

profess, our words will speak life to others so that they may know the joy of being free to live in His love. In other words, are we willing to drink the chalice of His passion in following His will? It is easy to want to share in the table of plenty and banquet of earthly goods when things go right and as we like, but the Sacred Scriptures remind us that we got to embrace the Cross of Calvary in order to reach the glory of the Resurrection. What begun at the Last Supper was not just simple words and symbolic gestures! When He instituted the means and taught us what to do, He really meant what He said, “My body... My blood... given up for you!” He gave His very self on the Cross as expiation for our sin! What begun on Maundy Thursday was selflessly expressed on Good Friday so that Easter and its hard-won freedom become the greatest testament that He loves us. In giving His very self to us, He personally teaches us that we are worth saving and He has not given up on us yet!

Hence, just like the potter who forms his clay, God continues to form and reform us. It is important, therefore, for us to let go of our own selfish desire to control and have our will be done our way so we conform our life to His will.

DISCIPLES AND NOT SPECTATORS

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 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 in order to fit in, be accepted, not be condemned, put down, or manipulated by toxic people. It was hard to learn that life lesson, and I am still struggling now; however, my skin has grown “thicker,” my understanding of my self-worth and identity have matured, and I have become more courageous in standing my ground and being true to myself as He wants me to be (instead of what others want from me). It is a life-long journey of growth, and I hope each and every one of us are able to do the same in trusting and loving Him more than what other people or even our very own ego wants us to be.

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

I learned so many lessons as a young priest from parishioners who were very outspoken and harsh about how things should be. I was under someone 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 ways through things. I had to personally come to term that I cannot please those people. Some are just too bitter and angry with a deep-seated unhappiness that caused them to lash, 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 personal 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 being 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 blames on others or expect others to be completely

obedient or attentive to their egocentric needs. I had to learn those truths the hard way because I took people's opinions and thoughts of me personally. I wanted to be better to be liked, pleased, or not be on their blacklists. Nonetheless, those hard moments helped me to be more humble, wiser, simpler, and honest with myself in understanding who I am instead of who I want to be for others.

I learned to speak less and only say what is necessary 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, 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 anxieties and worries, almost had nervous breakdowns, PTSD-like experiences, and loss of sleep because I allowed those matters to dictate, control, and overwhelm me.

I will admit that those times were hard and they helped me to grow in my faith, my personal understand 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 also 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.

It is interesting to analyze and understand the reason why the good Lord chose fishermen and lesser-known people instead of learned scholars and influential people as His disciples. It made no sense, especially if one is to build a big and influential fanbase like any political, popular, or ideological figures would have done! For example, if someone wants to run for an important office or role, get people to buy into their thoughts, theories, schemes, or systems, or simply to gain greater power, prestige, control, and influence, they would have researched and tried to find those who would have the preferred means to support and better advance their desires. Nonetheless, he chose simple and imperfect people, not to be anti-intellectual or secularistically avant-garde in any way, shape, or form, but as an intentional act that carried a lot of deeper meanings once we understand His true desire for the Kingdom. Thus, we will dive deeper into this subject matter in today's reflection and see how we stand in our response to His call to come and follow Him as disciples.

We can see from multiple accounts that the good Lord had dialogues and oftentimes corrected scholars of His age on the true understanding of Sacred Scriptures. Many scholars and teachers of His time knew the Law, but they often loved status, titles, and control more than using the Law to lead people to the truth. He was not anti-intellectual. He wanted them to go beyond their own feeble comfort zones to see the real spirit and intention of the Law! Sadly, but very true, I have seen many university and seminary professors who think that they are gods because they have advanced degrees, tenured careers, and published works. They were often full of themselves and oftentimes

lacked humility. Pride was often well disguised and hidden behind information-based knowledge.

One of my favorite saintly heroes has been St. Thomas Aquinas. Even though he was very smart, it was his humility and love for the Lord that made him into a saint! A story was told by Br. Dominic of Caserta, OP, who caught the saint in prayer before the crucifix in tears. All the sudden, even he heard the voice of Christ from the crucifix call out, "You have written well of me, Thomas. What reward will you receive from me for your labor?" However, to his surprise, especially for a man who -- even in his own time and age -- was regarded as the greatest theologian of the Middle Ages, said, "Domine, non nisi Te -- Lord, nothing except you."

Wow... just wow! St. Thomas did not ask for success or personal desires. He loved the Lord, and that was enough. He knew of God's love for Him, and that was more than anything that this world could offer! I think we are all guilty of forgetting this wondrous and unimaginable reality many times. It is so easy to think we do not have enough or somehow feel like we deserve more than what we have. Some of us even think that we are not good enough for our family, friends, ourselves, or even God, dwelling in our own self-created pities instead of growing closer to Him. Nonetheless, true freedom is found in Him, which sanctifies all desires and fulfills human nature by ordering our lives to God. It requires a lot of humility, self-abandonment, and love to truly give ourselves to the One who first loves us instead of demanding or expecting things to be centered around us alone.

The Lord chose fishermen because they know how to be flexible and understand their dependence on nature and their places in the world. Things like the weather and its unknown elements can change their whole plan in a quick moment! They can plan their days to the best that they can, but they know that they are not in complete control, while educated scholars often think that they know everything. Furthermore,

He asked them to follow Him, which required a lot of radical trust, obedience, and humility, and that is not often found in the educated class because they would like to analyze and understand things on their own terms first. In many ways, the people who opposed the genuine teachings of the Lord were those who relied on their own intellect and desire to control because they were too full of themselves with rigidity, defensiveness, blindness, and pettiness to hold on to their own feeble powers.

The Savior and Redeemer chose fishermen, ordinary people, not because they were ignorant and gullible, but because they were willing to follow, learn, obey, and be readily available to be formed. They did not like each other and often clashed with one another, but it was the Lord who kept them together and united because He loved them and taught them to love one another beyond their own differences. The disciples were willing to follow and allow Him to lead, teach, and form them, while the learned and controlling classes were too afraid of losing their influence, control, and power. God can only fill the spaces that are personally available for His loving grace, and unfortunately, too many learned people were too full of themselves to receive what cannot be known and understood by human capabilities alone.

In the same way today, those who are the most vocal are oftentimes the most arrogant and loathsome because they worry more about their own selves and voices than following the truth! Nonetheless, we must ask ourselves these three important questions:

1. Are we too proud to learn and be formed by Him?
2. Are we too occupied and full of ourselves that we are willing to drop the nets and follow Him?
3. Are we willing to be disciples or simply remain bystanders and spectators, commentators and scholars, who only look at the faith as something intellectual, or somehow, to only fit us and our standards?

That was the reason why the good Lord rebuked St. Peter when he tried to persuade and deterred Him from His salvific mission. Even though he had good intentions, but he was thinking as the world and human beings do instead as God does! Jesus, thus, invited the crowd and His disciples to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Him because whoever is too worried about their life will lose grip of reality. Whoever trusts and gives themselves totally and completely in following God's will, especially in genuine, humble, and loving service of the Gospel will gain eternal life. (cf. Mark 8:27-35)

Like St. Peter, most of us will have no problem of professing our faith in Christ. We might have no problem of saying that we believe and have the right answer. However, we tend to fall short on giving ourselves totally, completely, and genuinely in loving, following, and initiating His love in words and actions, life and deeds. We might have the right or proper profession of faith but we tend to fall short on really committing ourselves in 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 gets 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 like to tell my younger self?"

The Kingdom belongs to those who are willing to follow and become more Christlike each day! God can only reign in hearts that are willing to be filled by His loving grace, not just minds and egos who are too full of themselves and the world. In a similar line of thought, St. Paul reminded the Corinthian community not to be proud or boast according to worldly standards. As a matter of fact, he said that Christians are not wise, powerful, or of noble birth by human standards, but He chose the

foolish of the world to shame the wise, weak of the world to shame the strong, lowly and despised of the world so that no one might boast before God. True wisdom is found by seeking true righteousness, sanctification, and the value of redemption in Christ Jesus. (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26-31)

Trust me, I would not be where I am today without Him! There were so many times when I knew deep within my heart that I could not have done what I did without His grace. I had been put into very hard, challenging, and tough situations, and I knew it was Him who led me through them. I might not always know how things were going to turn out, but I knew WHO was with me, WHO was leading me, WHO was working through me, and WHO was in control. The results were not always how I imagined them to be but I knew that I had to resign in letting things be, knowing that I was not able to fix everything or save everyone as I would have liked, but that does not mean that He is not in control and able to bring goodness, healing, reconciliation, conversion, or hope out of those situations. I am far from being perfect in my own faith journey because I still struggle in my everyday walk, but my heart loves Him and helps me to trust in Him each and every moment in life.

Therefore, let us remember who we are -- not because we are perfect -- but especially WHO we are called to follow! I pray that we are able to leave our nets behind and follow Him each and every day instead of expecting Him to only please and provide for us and what we think should happen for us. May we learn we might seem foolish and nobodies in the eyes of the world, but we know we know WHY and WHO we believe, so our praise, glory, and service are rendered to Him. We might not be perfect but we seek what is right and just, choose to die to ourselves and seek to become a little holier each day, and embrace His redemptive love in our every moment so can genuinely be fishers of men who no longer catch and capture things for our own benefits and wants, but casting nets for the Kingdom and bring others to Him.

LOVE LIKE A VIETNAMESE IMPRISONED CARDINAL

The late **Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan** is on track to sainthood because of his extraordinary faith and love in the midst of many suffering and mistreatments after the Viet Nam War. He was imprisoned by the Vietnamese Communists for many years, most of that in solitary confinement, because he was the nephew of the late South Vietnamese president, Ngo Dinh Diem. They put him in prison without any real reason, except with the lame excuse of making sure that he was to be "re-educated" in the new Marx-Lenin socialist system. He underwent many sufferings, but from that experience, the Servant of God learned to live his faith, love the Lord and his captors in the midst of trials.

In the beginning, he questioned and asked God why He would permit something like this to happen. He thought he could be of better help to his people as a shepherd in their times of trial than being imprisoned. He thought he could be of a better asset to the suffering and oppressed Church than being isolated and imprisoned. Yet, little by little, he began to embrace reality and tried to live his priesthood where the Almighty has planted him!

In the darkest time of his life, the late Cardinal learned how to love those who disliked him. He found strength and nourishment with the Mass, at times only with a few drops of wine and a little bit of water on one hand and a piece of the host on the other. He offered Mass for his people with the wine and hosts smuggled in as medicines for his weak stomach. In his memoirs and talks, he mentioned that there were times that he was so tired, sick, or beaten down that he could not pray, yet in those moments, he simply offered his sufferings as personal, loving sacrifices for his Diocese and the people that he was appointed to shepherd but could not due to imprisonment. He learned much through silent suffering and to unite his hardships with the redemptive love of

Jesus Christ for the welfare and goods of his people. He wrote in his famous collection of thoughts while imprisoned, ***The Road of Hope***:

"In a solemn pilgrimage with thousands of people, everyone wants to carry the cross at the head of the procession. But in the pilgrimage of our daily lives, how many people are prepared to carry their own crosses? Indeed, it is difficult to be an unsung hero."

Because of his kindness and love, the wardens of the different places where he was at had to keep changing guards because he kept winning over the hearts of his captors. Those who were sent to watch him wanted to learn about the faith because they saw in him the genuine devotion and love. The higher-ups did not like it, hence further labeled him as a rebel who tried to indoctrinate the people with superstitious lies. For his loving testimony of faith and courage, St. Pope John Paul II gave him the honor of the red hat in 2001. He was made a prince of the Church for the love worth suffering for, one that moves hearts of even hardest people!

The Cardinal in many of his talks often said that the Lord Jesus Christ is really bad at mathematics, and even worst with economic skills! How can the Almighty ever do something so humanly irrational, unwise, or unproductive to seek out the unimportant, sinners, abandoned, or forgotten? Someone who is humanistic would focus on the more important and influential people, a productive or beneficial choice! Yet, perhaps only the loving God who is merciful and gentle of heart could imagine and do such a thing for us who are His beloved.

In one of his talks, he laid down ten typical diseases that destroy our inner peace and relationship with the Lord. It was in Vietnamese, so I am summarizing it (and adding some personal thoughts) in English for you. His points are accurate and I hope you will spend some time to

reflect on which ones are heavy in your heart right now, which ones that are lingering and destroying His peace from your own spiritual journey.

1. Living in the Past --- We are all guilty of this. We like to either get stuck in our own self-created pities or the past glory days. It is so hard for many of us to get past the things that hurt us or the days when we thought "we had it all." Oftentimes, we are so stuck with the shadows of the past that we cannot see the present moment. We are so occupied with what had happened, hence end up missing out what is right in front of us. We are so preoccupied with all the "should've," "could've," or "would've" that we forget that God gives us many wonderful opportunities in the present moment.
2. Pessimism --- This happens when we choose to live without faith, hope, and charity. Everything around us is filled with the typical "doom and gloom" cynicism. We cannot find joy the present moment, missing the sense of childlike wonder and awe to embrace the small moments of grace and beauty, because nothing is good enough. We end up isolating ourselves from many people because we do not allow joy to permeate within us, be recognized and enlivened, nor shared among us. We live as if there is no divine goodness, providential love, or eternal life; hence, faith, hope, and love become meaningless. We cannot be happy for others or by ourselves because we do not know how to be simple and joyful in the present moment since we are too stuck in how things are not the way they are supposed to be while losing sight on how things are.
3. Focusing on Glamor and Successes --- Too many of us spend too much time and effort in making a name for ourselves that we have no time to breathe and enjoy the simplicity of life, the quality of relationships, forget to embrace what is important

for us and gives us life. We become objective people and have no problems in objectifying people like chess pieces in our little game of manipulation and advances, just as long as we get what we want. We think that the things that will make us glamorous and successful will make us happy, as if money, prestige, wealth, and power will somehow give us true joy. We turn materialistic things from instruments into ends themselves, and that is why we are not happy.

4. Individualism --- We think that the whole world revolves around us and we are the sole criterion of truth, judgment, and happiness. We only think about ourselves and our own goods instead of others. Nevertheless, individualism often turns us against our own self-created standards of happiness, and in turn, quickly help us to create our version of hell. We are never satisfied because we are tough and demanding on others, thinking that no one understands, meets the standards set by us, or cannot get what we try to pervade. We end up isolating others and living in our own hellish reality of dissatisfactions and despite others; nevertheless, we are complete ignorance of our own mistakes and failures.
5. Sloth and Cowardice --- While it is easy to be demanding of others, we often end up slothful and cowardice with our own self. We are too afraid of looking at our spiritual priorities and lack the courage to change to become what Christ wants of us as His disciples. It is easier to make the excuses that we are busy or to put the blame on others instead of letting go and conforming our lives to what the Lord has set out for those who believe. This slothful and cowardice attitude affects how we avoid doing what is right as well since we are too worried about our own self and what is only beneficial for us. Justice and truth are not important because we do not

care about anything outside of ourselves and higher than what meets the eye or our own calculated benefits.

6. **Secularistic Expectations on Faith ---** It is humanly easy and tempting to boil down faith to a calculative, manageable, transactional, and objective matter. We often look at God like a provider of our materialistic needs, a genie to grant us our wish, a vending machine of favors, or in an "I scratch your back, you scratch mine" mentality. We boil down everything to a demanding, immediate, worldly, and objectifying mentality, totally different from what faith truly is supposed to be. We end up losing scope of the beatific vision and eternity because we demand the materialistic and earthly goods here and now. We have become too obsessed, addicted, and possessive of what is here and now that we lose focus on what is truly good. We forget to lift up our hearts and demand that God stoops down to provide for all of our earthly wanting. We often stop short but want much from Him.
7. **Miracle Mongering --** There are also many of us who often like to demand or wait on miracles to happen in order for God to prove that He loves us or that, "He still got it!" These are often people who like to pray for miracles and tend to look for wowing, extraordinary, spectacular works of grace to be done to capture their breath away in order to feel the presence of God or to know that He loves them. When we think along these lines, we tend to objectify and base our measurement of His love for us on a quantifiable or human scale instead of focusing on the quality of the relationship. Contrary to the secularistic expectations of faith, we (over)spiritualize matters and falsely create a very unstable, sentimental, and shallow version of our faith relationship, not based on love or of self-giving but on seeing what God can do. Faith becomes benefits-based, too, since miracle-mongers spiritualized

these benefits in quantifiable and humanistic terms as reasons, conditions, expectations, and sometimes as demands to believe.

8. **Pleasure Seeking**-- When we only care about what is satisfying or pleasurable at the moment, we become focused on our own self and our egoistical needs. We measure life based on hedonistic happiness and not eternal joy. We become demanding, and even at times depressing, because we do not get what we want as we specifically want them. This can almost be compared to an addiction where one searches for a sentimental high as to escape what is really going on instead of allowing themselves to see reality with feet on the ground and with real hope. This is dangerous because we think being sentimentally satisfied or emotionally pleasurable will make us happy, but it really does not. We lose focus on the real meaning in life because we chase after the things that are false, ejaculatory, and short-term in nature without knowing what truly is nourishing and satisfying. Whoever chooses to run after short-term high's always end up dry and empty after its momentary effects wear out.
9. **Irresponsibility** --- When we choose to live life without responsibility, we stop to care about the consequences of our actions, words, and deeds and how they affect others. When we become self-centered, we only worry about how things will benefit us instead of thinking about the good of others or the greater good of all. Irresponsibility destroys relationships and plagues society because it eliminates trust and the desire to work together for a greater goal. When we stop caring and considering about people as part of our decision-making process with proper dignity and respect, we end up objectifying, manipulating, and controlling other people less than who they are and what they deserve. It gets dangerous

when we are willing to count other people as if they are simply chess pieces to be played and used, as if we have the right to do so and know better than others. It gets detrimental when we think of others less than us and somehow our own good or happiness is more than important than others', especially when we are willing to risk everyone's goods to get what we want at all costs.

10. Division -- There are many people who like to feed on gossips, hearsays, or create divisions and enjoy doing so. There are also people who like to save their face and keep their pride up by making reconciliation hard, forgiveness impossible, mercy or compassion nonexistence. We expect and demand people to meet us on our own terms without learning to discern, listen, and willing to meet others in the middle. Divisions hurt, but some people are willing to risk it all to have things their ways. Some will use their version of the truth to defend their points without willing to discern together with others to seek what is good for the rest in the light of the Gospel and its value. Yet, division is often the act of pride, caused and influenced by the Devil to keep us from coming together as one, brothers and sisters, members of the Lord Jesus Christ's Mystical Body.

Over and over again, the Sacred Scriptures remind us of God's relentless love and His compassion for us, even at times when we did not deserve it. He forgave us at times when we could not even forgive ourselves. He gave His life for us even though we, at times in our lives, did not think that life is worth living. He pursued us when we wanted to rebel and stray away from Him in order to find our self-created happiness and ego-centered freedom. Please spend some time to reflect on which one of these things are keeping you and me from seeking the peace that comes from God. If we have more than one, it is important we be humble, honest, and genuine in owning up to our

reservations, fears, or unrealistic expectations and demands as to seek unity, reconciliation, and to live in the fullness of His love for us and one another. This is not a one-time purge or working of ourselves but a constant journey of prioritizing our lives as to truly live in the fullness of His grace with faith, hope, and love. Let us learn to let go of our own self as to rest and live in His loving peace and to extend that peace to those around us.

I think our society talks much about love and belief in God. It seems to be a trend now to simply say that one is a Christian or a believer, but some have become so vocal and critical of others. People often allow their frustrations, resentment, or anger to get the best out of them on social media and other public venues that there seems to be no more common courtesy, respect, or the desire for civil discourse. Many seem to have no problem using the Sacred Scriptures for their own self-righteous or personal agendas, but not many people allow the divine truth to transform them. It seems to be easier to attack others or demonize them instead of truly listening, caring, and loving others as Christ Jesus loves us. If that was the case, the Lord's teachings and death on the Cross for sinners and those who hated Him would be in vain. If that is the case, the late Cardinal Francis Xavier's own life experience would be in vain and would bear no value for our Christian call to holiness, because it would be easier to be self-righteous, condemn, and point the fingers at others without genuinely and humbly leading others to the Lord.

We are reminded that hatred, self-righteousness, tragedy, division, or any lesser human factors are never of God. They are not the endpoints of our Christian vocation and call to holiness. We might not always agree with the people around us. We might have been dealt with the wrong card. We might have been mistreated and hurt by others. We might not always get what we hoped for or wanted in life. However, if we truly believe in His divine providence and trust in His faithful love, we have to believe that God can make all things good for those who love

Him. (cf. Romans 8:28) Perhaps right in the storms, trials, or sufferings of our faith journey, He is using it to deepen, transform, and strengthen our love! We are never without Him and cannot do anything without Him. He is in the midst of it all, so we are invited to open up our hearts and invite Him into whatever is going on in our lives now. No matter what is going on, we are reminded that He has not given up on us, seeking, pursuing, calling us back, and using all things to make us stronger in our Christian vocation, mission and purpose, especially our call to holiness.

I think those who have loved someone can sympathize with God's own love -- to pursue, embrace, and love someone even when that person pushes us away. We only hope that when the person recognizes it, he or she will return with genuine self-giving love, too. That is all we can ever wish for in giving our everything to the person or people who are precious to us! And if we feel this sense of pursuing and faithful love as human beings, I think that is what God wants, too, from each and every one of us who, at one time or another in our lives to love Him back with our everything instead of taking for granted His mercy and love for us.

Therefore, let us not be worried and held back from answering His love for us. Even though it is not always easy, it is so worth it! Even though our society loves to talk about love as if it is so attractive and easy, we learn to put into practice by how faithful we are called to be at times. It is hard but to love is to pursue, seek, call, care, be patient, and give ourselves totally and completely to those around us so the divine love of God can shine in and through us.

LOVE LIKE AN AMERICAN JESUIT

Many years ago, I was given the **Fr. Walter Ciszek, S.J.'s** book, ***He Leadeth Me***, for Christmas by a good parishioner friend. I read it over the course of my own annual canonical retreat at Montserrat Jesuit Retreat House in Lake Dallas. In God's own loving providence, the talks of the retreat and what Fr. Ciszek wrote really touched my heart and spoke to me throughout the retreat as well as what was happening in my life.

At that moment in life, I was in the process of applying for military chaplaincy, to transition from the parish to military life to serve our military personnel and their family members as a Catholic priest and Chaplain in the United States Air Force. What brought me to the decision itself was a long time of God's divine providence in the making, as well as many ministerial and personal factors that caused things to fall into place. Personally, I was somewhat scared and hesitant about the decision, because it meant that I would have to let go of what I am so used to and what I am comfortable with. It would also mean that I am being taken away from the environment that I have come to know and identified myself as -- a parish priest -- and to let go all of that, all the relationships that I have known and built, and to put myself into an unknown journey of many hardships.

I am the type of person who do not like bureaucracy. I like to keep things straightforward, easy to understand, direct, and communicative, so to enter a world full of red tapes, political correctness, and bureaucracy did not really appeal to me. Nevertheless, God always has a good way of leading me down the path that I would not personally seek or prefer. Throughout my time in my parish assignment at St. Jude Thaddeus in Burkburnett, Christ the King in Iowa Park, and St. Paul in Electra, He began to send a lot of military families into my life. Perhaps I was close to Sheppard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Texas, but I began to assist and counsel many people who were at the Base as part of their

training or assignment. God led me to deal with many complex, relational, family and military-related issues. I began to slowly open up to this reality, for these were my people, and they were in need of a priest who can just listen and perhaps help them see that life is worth living in the midst of many chaos.

As I began to understand a little bit more about military life, I began to see that so many people who are in need of priests who can journey with them throughout the ups and downs, chaotic uncertainties of life that requires a lot of constant changes and adjustments. Not only was I introduced to many complex emotional and psychological issues that stemmed from wars, past hurts and traumas, but also many fears that come from having to move all the time, worries and reservations about how to engage in genuine friendship and relationship issues, so I was given many opportunities to learn from what I was so ignorant about. You see? God has a funny way of slowly easing someone into what He needed, even when we were resisting or did not like what we have prejudged or preconceived initially.

Reading Fr. Ciszek's book gave me more assurance as I bored through the tedious process of endless forms, questionnaires, surveys, and paperwork. I was very discouraged at times with my own weight loss journey, too! In order to be eligible to be in the military, I needed to lose a lot of weight and to be fit according to their physical standards. I personally do not like to exercise and run, but I had to push myself to be on a diet, run and exercise daily. I love carbohydrates, so having had to cut down on that was really a big struggle, but I felt that I needed to do it in order to be where I need to be for the next chapter of my life! I had to be faithful, pushed myself through the temptations and hardships, and continue to persevere with the application and bureaucratic process in order to apply for military chaplaincy. There were a lot of unique challenges and hardships in trying to work and reconcile with both of my diocesan and military superiors' different agendas, priorities, and timelines. It was very frustrating at times, and I wanted to give up at

times, too, but God somehow continued to open doors for me. I knew that I just need to let go of my desire to understand, be in control, and have things as I would have liked in order to seek Him and His will.

Fr. Ciszek did just that with his own life, too! Even though he knew deep within his own heart that he was called to go into Russia, his journey into Russia was filled with many more surprises and unexpected outcomes than he could have ever imagined. Even though he knew that it was going to be hard and challenging ministry, he never knew how much hardships, pains, and sufferings he would have to endure mentally, physically, and spiritually for this mission. Nothing that he ever imagined could ever prepare him for his own existence in Russia! He struggled a lot when he was physically and mentally tortured by the Communists under interrogation, solitary confinement, and hard labor camp. There were times when he actually feared for his life, wanted to give up, or thought that God had abandoned Him.

There were times when he gave in because it was just too much! The Communists did all that they could to extract information from him, threatened, forced, and hurt him so they could get what they wanted to hear. When he failed and gave in, he thought he was betraying God and his mission because that failure really shook and went against his personal core values, especially his mission, purpose, and identity as a priest. There were times when he was too tired to even pray, too desperate to see God's presence, too stuck in his own pities and failures that he thought that God abandoned him! Even in his darkest moments when he could not see the divine presence, he continued to seek God and His will.

It was hard for him to do, and hard for the readers like me to read and imitate! I knew what he meant, and his words were so powerful, but I know deep within my heart that to simply be with God and to seek His presence in the simplest moment of life is the hardest thing to do. What seems to make the simplest sense is often the hardest because it

requires something that is so personal, intimate, and childlike from us! To trust in God like a child trust in his or her parent, without questions or having to know what is going on, is hard, especially when we are facing many uncertainties, failures, chaos, being tried and tested. Yet, this was what Fr. Cizek did and that what gave him peace, that he tried his best to seek God in the present moment and to live out His will for him. Even though everything around him was out of control, filled with desolations, self-doubts, pains, and sufferings, he tried his best to hold on to the One who was in control, loved him, and he loved dearly.

Hence, this leads me toward the second powerful lesson that I have learned from the holy priest, which is loving God at all times. He tried to love God in his persecutors, guards, interrogators, spies, informants, and the people who were living with him. In solitary confinement, he had to learn those who were treating him with little dignity, whose sole purpose was to extract information at all costs and forced him to say what they wanted him to say. He had to love God in solitary confinement with no one to talk to, nobody to confide, and no one who would sympathize and listen to him as a human being. When he was in forced, hard labor camps, he had to learn to love the people who cared little about religion, the life of faith, and were very suspicious of priests from years of communistic propaganda. He had to learn to love people who had little to no moral values, just trying to survive, did things that were not right, and lived like beasts at times. He had to learn to minister to those who were seeking God but fearful of the informants and officials in secretive and discrete ways.

His stories of how he and other fellow priests tried their best to listen to confessions, prayed and offered Mass together, and lived their priesthood as best as they can really touched me. Having had to live in constant fear and doing Mass in the most discrete way so they can receive and give the Eucharist to those who were desiring the Lord was so touching to read! Since camp officials and their informants know that priests tend to preach the Gospel, they were often watched and

reported, withheld food and nourishment, treated harsher than other prisoners and workers, as to make them tired, pressured, deterred, and lose their fervor in ministering and worrying about spiritual matters. They did not have everything they need like in a parish setting, but they did their best and used what they had, risked their safety and livelihood in order to support and affirm the little faith that people had in such a godless society. To live in such constant pressures, fears, and potential exposures but to try their best to love God spoke so powerfully to me! I know that I myself would be challenged to the core if I am found in similar situations, too. For me, those who sought God and tried to love Him in those situations spoke loudly with their lives than any human words could ever preached.

Hence, the simplest and most powerful lesson that I have learned from reading Fr. Cizek's book and studying about his life was his desire to be God's loving instrument in the present moment. He called it his own "little way" like St. Therese of Lisieux! He tried his best to love God and seek His presence in every moment of his existence, even when he was tortured, beaten, interrogated, solitarily confined, mistreated, threatened, and had little. He tried his best to live his faith and his priesthood in the midst of many challenges. There were days when he was too tired or too hurt to pray, too caught up in his own weaknesses and failures, too desolated to trust that God can love or be with him, but he continued to do the best that he can to love Him in the simplest of way. At times, he prayed with his sufferings, with his little to nothingness, and to the best of his ability because he trusted that God knew his heart with all its simplest intention and desire to love Him. He tried his best to pray and to love the people around him, especially the guards, interrogators, informants, officials, and those who distrusted his presence as a priest. He simply allowed the love of God to be enlivened in his own life and let his faith spoke more than his words! Hence, that to me, is the greatest lesson that speak loudly and taught me much about letting go and let God be the center of our lives by how we live, act, and let His light shine in and through us.

The missionary field is filled with many opportunities to care for souls and to seek the greater glory of God, but each of those opportunities has to be personally chosen, discerned, and put into action with true sacrifices. Fr. Walter shared similar sentiments in his last book, ***With God in America***, about his worries when seeing many of his Jesuits living lives of leisure, seeking their own self-glorification, staying within their own comfort zones, or simply giving lip service without making personal choices to die to themselves and seek the Lord and His will for them. He came back to America during a period of many social changes and theological progress after years of imprisonment by the Soviets. He came back having had to endure many years of physical hardships in exchange for similar ones when he saw many of his Society of Jesus confreres making decisions or living lives that were not of St. Ignatius' original intent and older generations of Jesuits for the greater glory of God. He was scandalized and disheartened that the vows, especially one of complete obedience to the Holy Father, were only kept on the outside, but many hearts had lost the true and original intent of loving God at all costs.

In one of the chapters, he shared how he struggled throughout his imprisonment to stay faithful to the priesthood even though there were many temptations around him! He turned down many lucrative offers and tempting appeals to abandon the priesthood and underwent many trials and tribulations because he was deemed a spy for the Vatican. Furthermore, the people who he lived with could not understand why he would do such a thing... and he himself questioned the reason why many times, too, but it was his honesty, humility, faithfulness, and perseverance that kept him focused on Christ. He said,

“I persisted in my belief in the priesthood and the infinite value of Mass, in spite of my incapacity to explain it all or of the lack of others’ interest. I said Mass in spite of not seeing any immediate value, profit, or satisfaction. I held on to the priesthood in spite of disadvantages: being deprived of an

apartment, being looked upon as physically impotent. I did not respond to the love of women and was thus considered a man without a heart, cold—I was offended by this, suffered, for I knew my physical capacities, my violent character.

I firmly believed that if I forsook saying Mass, I would succumb and be unfaithful. I felt I did not belong to that society, I felt out of place with my spiritual conviction—they did not understand it, yet they respected me. I said Mass, though unworthy, so as not to lose faith. I prayed to the Blessed Mother and complained, for I have made mistakes. I never, however, depreciated the priesthood, Mass, the spiritual life, religion. I suffered, yet I felt something superior in me that elevated me above it all—atheism, hatred for religion; the system could not satisfy me, not enough. [. . .] I feared being unfaithful and saw no hope for the future, yet I believed in God’s Providence.”

I can sympathize with what Father went through with my own (limited) years of priestly ministry. I am not fully perfect in any way, shape, or form, but it has been the Mass and my sense of duty and responsibility that kept me focused on Him and helped me persevere in my own faith journey. I had seen many of my own diocesan and seminary classmates, as well as other priests I had come to know along the way, who left priestly ministry because they could no longer endure the pains and sufferings, trials and tribulations, or because the priesthood no longer fit their agenda or lifestyle. I had mourned for them and for their parishioners who were affected by the news. I had cried many tears. I had questioned God why I am still here. Nonetheless, I continue to persevere because this priesthood is not mine, but His, and He tested me through those trying times so I can keep things simple in loving Him. I am also very grateful for the wonderful guides and friends who patiently loved, wisely directed, and gently steered me on the right path so I can continue to be faithful to what He has called me to be as His priest. It, indeed, takes good friends to keep us along the way!

Father said in a sermon to a group of sisters on the virtue of generosity:

“He and he alone is our reward exceedingly great; no physical comfort, no thing, no person can ever truly fill our lives. The emptiness we often feel in our lives, the just hunger and longing, can be filled only by him. He made us especially for himself, and our hearts and minds must be restless until they rest in him. Your vocation is to give: Your life in your work, Your heart in your love, Your soul in your prayer, Your hopes, Your fears, Your joys, Your little loves, Your little pleasures, To give everything to Him. Take the one great leap in the dark. Give everything all over again, and you will find yourself once more the generous, loving, eager, happy woman who once threw her life with complete abandon into the deep, deep sea of Christ’s love.”

Fr. Walter not only endured the harsh conditions and long years of imprisonment by the Communists, but he was also tested and tried by the Lord when his physical mobility and strength were affected by his own health failures:

“On September 23, 1976, Walter Ciszek suffered, for the second time in a month, a major heart attack and cardiac arrest, which he miraculously survived. A registered nurse who was present remarked later how amazed she was that he had no residual effects at all; she added, ‘[It was] incredible, because he was not in good health to begin with.’

During the five hours he was unconscious, Walter Ciszek had a near-death experience that would determine the remaining years of his life; he had ‘come back’ for a reason, and he firmly believed God’s providence made it happen.

I really wanted to get over to the other side, but nothing happened, [even though] I tried and tried. I was going into a deep depression when I saw I couldn't get over, and my willful efforts were getting weaker and weaker. Then, when I became kind of frustrated, from nowhere it just happened that I felt infinite peace and, right after that, perfect reconciliation. The infinite peace I understood, but the perfect reconciliation I didn't understand. Then, out of that [sensation], again I heard a voice speaking as if from eternity. It was a loud voice that filled the whole world with the splendorous light of eternity as it said, 'I am going to cure you, and, at the same time, I am going to teach you how to live.'

'I am going to teach you how to be pure, how to be simple, how to be modest, how to be poor, obedient, prayerful, and believing. I am going to purify you, and, after that purification, I am going to enlighten and elevate you through compunction, sorrow, and repentance, by uniting you with me in my passion, in my suffering, sacrifice, reparation, and hope in the resurrection; all these together will be your act of love for me.'"

The Lord again tested and tried him. Nonetheless, instead of self-pity and bitterness, he chose to live his life to the best as he was able! He refused to be angry and give in to hopelessness but chose to be God's simple presence by how he practices and lives the present moment to those whom he sent to serve. All who came to know him respected him, not only because of the stories they heard about him, but also because of the holiness, humility, patience, kindness, and care he gave to them. Indeed, Fr. Walter chose to live the little way like St. Therese of Lisieux by choosing simplicity, humility, and purity of heart by giving himself totally and completely to those who were around him.

It was not what he wanted, but He did not give up on loving and following the Lord. It was not what he desired, but the Lord used his physical failure to purify, sanctify, and transform him into a simple -- but

genuine -- instrument of His love to all. Thus, Fr. Walter and his whole life became a great example of self-donation and sacrificial abandonment for the greater glory of God! He chose a way that was totally different than many of his Jesuit confreres at the time by living a hidden, simple, and faithful life instead of using his name and story to gain glory for himself. As a matter of fact, he taught a group of sisters a valuable lesson on the virtue of humility:

"You see, only the humble man or woman can teach Christ, can give him and his love to others, because the proud man or woman just can't really have Christ. The proud person is so filled with himself that there is no room for Christ. And I can't in any way give what I do not have. I can't give Christ if I don't have him myself. The wonder of humility is that it teaches us that we are nothing: that we have nothing of ourselves to give to others; that no matter how brilliant or holy we are, all this is from God. If we try to think that we are giving ourselves, we are sounding brass and tinkling cymbals. But when we know that we are nothing, then Christ comes into our lives and fills us with himself, and we have the indescribably wonderful grace of giving Christ to other men and women, no matter what we are saying to them or what we are teaching."

He was that humble man, faithful priest, and powerful witness of love for Christ! Life continued to throw him many "lemons," but he kept persevering, let go, and made room for the Lord, so his life was not for his own glory, but for the greater glory of God. He was countercultural because he dared not be noisy, attention-seeking, or self-serving but dared to preach the truth with his very own life of faithful and simple service. He chose a life of a nobody even though he had all the opportunities to be a somebody in the eyes of the world; yet all those who came to know and love him experienced genuine love through him because he emptied himself so Christ could live in him and work through him.

Indeed, Fr. Walter sought the greater glory of God by dying to himself. That is why he is on the way to sainthood! It was never the path he chose for himself, but he chose Christ with every fiber of his being, abandoned his will to the One who loved Him, and was able to radiate that genuine, life-giving, and transformative love through his humility, purity, and simplicity of heart. I know this simple American Jesuit made a bigger impact on my life than all those who are popularly sought out by the mainstream media, treated like gods in the academic world, or who think very highly of themselves. Father impacted my life even though I never knew him personally... just like all those who guided me through their humble discernment of God's will and gentle spiritual guidance to Him in my very own life as well. Without a doubt, I pray that we all might imitate him and those who made a big impact in our lives, who might seem like nobodies in this world because they emptied themselves so Christ can live and possess everything of them.

Therefore, I would like to invite you to take some moment to reflect, pray, and discern in your very own lives, too, following the example of Fr. Ciszek's faith, of how you and I can seek God and His will for us, to love Him, and to personally choose to be His instrument in the present moment for those who are around us. Perhaps we have complicated our lives of faith too much, we overthink and overjudge what we think we need to do in order to love and serve Him. At times, I think we are our own obstacles in how we think we need to be, but stuck behind our own kingdoms and comfort zones so God cannot lead us into places that are beyond our understanding as to love, serve, and live as His sons and daughters. May we not be afraid but try our best to truly give ourselves, perhaps very little and insignificant in the eyes of the world, but we do our best to give our little to nothingness to Him who sees our hearts -- one step at a time, in the present moment, as best as we can, in simplicity and genuineness of heart.

LOVE LIKE A GRIEVING SAINT

Every time St. Monica and her life story come across my life of ministry, I always recall of her motherly love and persistence in praying for the conversion of her son, St. Augustine. I see her struggles in many present-day Monicas who are waiting and praying for the conversion of their loved ones, as I get the chance to meet and listen to many people who share a similar fate to hers. Their worries and tears for their loved ones, as well as the accompanying emotional and spiritual pains and sufferings, move even the hardest of hearts. I, myself, also personally sympathize and empathize with her story and many people's stories, as I have a list of people that I am praying for in particular. Nevertheless, I invite you to pray the Collect -- Introductory Prayer -- for her Memorial Mass with me, which beautifully sums many of our sentiments in a very loving way:

*O God,
who console the sorrowful
and who mercifully accepted
the motherly tears of Saint Monica
for the conversion of her son Augustine,
grant us, through the intercession of them both,
that we may bitterly regret our sins and find the grace of your pardon.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, forever and ever.*

I believe the first lesson that we can learn from the saint is her persistent trust. She never gave up even though things were not developing in her own timing. She spent a lot of her life in prayer for her husband and children. Her husband took a good while before he converted, as well as her children (especially the spiritually stubborn

and hard-headed Augustine), yet the loving saint never gave up in prayer. It is so easy for us to give up right away when we do not get the result that we want. It is so easy for us to walk away from God when we are hurt or do not understand why He would grant something else instead of what we asked for. Too often, we come to prayer with an exact, immediate, or near-future demand instead of putting our trust in the Lord. We blame God when things do not go our way and try to find things to remediate and fix our problems instead of staying with God in and through the problem, trial, suffering, or obstacle. Do we truly believe that no matter what happened or will happen, He will never abandon us? Can we trust that He hears our prayers, understands our hearts, and cares for us more than we can comprehend or see for ourselves? Are we willing to stay faithful even though we do not get what we want? Those are hard questions to answer, especially when things do not go our way. Yet, faith teaches us that our relationship with God is not dependent on what we can get out of Him, but on His faithful love for us. A real relationship is based on loving trust, not what we can quantitatively objectify or benefit ourselves. St. Monica did that when she persisted, stayed faithful, and continued to pray for her family and their spiritual well-being for many years.

Second, I believe we can learn from her that we can continue to pray and love those who are lost. This is a hard challenge, especially when we do not feel like our prayers are answered or when the people who are lost have hurt us in the past. Perhaps due to my strict Vietnamese culture, I had seen family members and those who call themselves Christians shun someone because he or she does not live up to their expectations or has done something to "smear" or "dishonor" the family's name. We have to remind this important understanding and principle: the Church always teaches that we do not -- ever -- hate the person for he or she is made in the image and likeness of God! We preach, call out, and hate the sins, wrongdoings, and evils that were done, but we never hate, despite, and condemn the person to the point of keeping him or her outside of our prayers and stopping praying for his

or her own conversion and eternal salvation. I would like to encourage each and every one of us to never let our humanity and ego stop us from loving and praying for someone spiritually. Why? So that the Lord can work in his or her own life just as He does in our own's!

Furthermore, we are called to love and never forget to bring the person to the Lord spiritually through prayer and through our own sacrificial offering at Mass, even if he or she might not be interested or far away from the faith at the moment. One of my spiritual directors once said in his homily on St. Monica that we can learn from her example to bring that special someone to Mass with us, as we unite and offer our own sacrifices, uniting them to the Holy Sacrifice of Christ, even when he or she is far away, lost, or does not care anything about the spiritual life of faith right now. It is a beautiful sacrifice and offering when we are able to offer the ones that we care about and love the most to the Lord when we come to Mass! Just as the Lord Jesus Christ offered Himself for us on the Cross and gave His Body and Blood in the Eucharist as the nourishment for our body and soul, we can unite our love and its pains, sufferings, and sorrows to the Lord as we firmly trust and put our hope in the infinite love of Christ. It is a radical, hope-filled, and faith-founded act of trust in divine providence, believing that He knows, understands, and cares for each and every one of us even more than we can understand ourselves. If we truly believe and trust in the ultimate sacrifice of the Mass, why not unite what is dearest to our heart to Christ's own loving sacrifice for our salvation and redemption? It is always a beautiful gesture to see people offering a Mass intention for their loved ones or listing their prayer needs in our parish's prayer book. As a matter of fact, one of my favorite activities to do as a priest is to check, unite, and lift prayer needs written in the book or when someone emailed me their petitions.

St. Monica teaches us through her life that we can and need to trust in God even though we might not see the results right away. St. Augustine wrote beautifully in his Confessions of her last moment,

attributing her efficacious prayers and persistent trust in the Lord to his own conversion and love of God:

“Forgetting what lay in the past, and stretching out to what was ahead, we enquired between ourselves, in the light of present truth, into what you are and what the eternal life of the saints would be like, for Eye has not seen nor ear heard nor human heart conceived it. And yet, with the mouth of our hearts wide open we panted thirstily for the celestial streams of your fountain, the fount of life which is with you.

This was the substance of our talk, though not the exact words. Yet you know, O Lord, how on that very day, amid this talk of ours that seemed to make the world with all its charms grow cheap, she said, ‘For my part, my son, I no longer find pleasure in anything that this life holds. What I am doing here still, or why I am still here, I do not know, for worldly hope has withered away for me. One thing only there was for which I desired to linger in this life: to see you a Catholic Christian before I died. And my God has granted this to me more lavishly than I could have hoped, letting me see even you spurning earthly happiness to be his servant. What am I still doing here?’”

Her life and faith remind us that nothing else is more important and worthwhile than our trust in the Lord and our prayers for the conversion and salvation of souls. While our society can entice us with many things, the saintly woman teaches us that the greatest gift we can give to our loved ones is that they come to know the truth and experience the personal and intimate love of God in their own lives. What greater gift can we give to our future generations if it is not the love of God? What could be more satisfying than to give what is eternally important and redemptive to the ones we care for the most? May we learn from the motherly and loving saint, who through her persistent prayers moved the heart of God and of her son, St. Augustine, to conversion. May we learn

to let go of what is destructive and deceptive in our lives to grab on to the ultimate and everlasting love of God that satisfies and fills our true desires of the heart. May we also have the same love for the lost and trust in divine providence as her so that our love for the Lord motivates and moves us to live in our own lives His own loving compassion and infinite mercy for humanity.

LOVE LIKE A SAINT WITH A SINFUL PAST

As a priest, I often deal with situations and people who are struggling with an addiction, problem, situation, or person. These matters are hard at times because they affect the people sitting in front of me in a very personal way. Even though we all know that it is healthy to seek help, it is very hard for one to find the proper way to accept the truth, learn from the situation, forgive others, or to embrace God's will for each and every one of us. It is not easy because it requires us to oftentimes embrace the tensions, things, or people that are personally or intimately affecting us. Many times, the greatest act of acceptance has to come from our very own self. While some have a shorter journey to reach an in-depth, personal, and intimate faith, many of us struggle throughout our lives to find a sense of belonging, believing, and trusting in the love of God for us. It is, therefore, to first and foremost know that we are not alone. Some saints struggled for a long time to find their faith! Some personally resisted the truth and divine invitation for a while before their heartfelt conversions. One of those is the great St. Augustine of Hippo, a Doctor of the Church and great theologian! His own story, recorded in his own autobiography named **Confessions**, is a classical piece of our human struggle to seek the truth, find ourselves, to understand our mission and purpose in life, and to fall in love with God.

I would like to invite you to read his autobiography yourself. You can easily find it on the internet on many public domain eBook sites since it is an essential and integral part of our Western history of thoughts and understanding of humanity (or using the link provided). It is a wonderful story of one trying to understand himself, finding happiness and self-acceptance in many places, experimenting with many ideologies, thoughts, and ways of life before coming to understand that what he has been searching for his life has always been with him. His journey from trying to search the "what" and "how" of life and its truths led him to the personal "who" of truth, which is God Himself.

The prodigal believer felt a deep sense of belonging and love in knowing God who has always been there from the beginning, even when he was trying to ignore Him and trying to find other lesser, immediate, and appealing goods to satisfy his eagerness and attraction to worldly pleasures, goods, and ideologies. It took him a good while to finally recognize that the journey of running away from the Truth led him back to the only One who loves him into being; and in loving God, he found his "why" for life, the purpose and mission of who he is called to be in response to this immense love.

Many of us often end up in similar roads like the saint, where we think we need to know, understand, and be in control of everything before we can trust something higher or beyond ourselves. We often want to be clear of everything and anything that we proposed before we can give ourselves to God. We often use the excuses of needing to have everything makes sense and knowing everything beforehand before we can make the commitment. Yet, this is not how a relationship works! Faith is not just a simple set of doctrines to be studied, reviewed, and intellectually ascended to, it is a personal and loving relationship where we grow, mature, and get to know the One who loved us into being and continues to love us every day. We think we will be at peace when we are in control, know what is going on, and have our lives in order, but we will always remain restless and continually searching for something new to fill the void until we learn to rest in the love of God. There is a deep, intimate, and unfillable spot deep within us that only the One who created us can fill. That spot can only be filled with the infinite love of the Creator, not some finite beings, created things, or temporary goods. The saint who struggled to find the truth for the large part of his early life later attested to this deep, personal, and intimate yearning for the Infinite: "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You."

In the world motivated by consumerism and its objective sense of worthiness, success, and achievement that often leads us to become

objectified and manipulated as instruments and means to be traded, exchanged, and be used. The consumeristic and objectified world often makes us lose heart and trust in other people, hence making us hold ourselves back from giving ourselves to others. We are often scared of getting hurt, and the relevant self-centered individualism feeds into that fear, which leads us to distrust people around us, become defensive, worried, locked in, and focused on our own selves. Yet, the saint reminds us that, "God loves each one of us as if there is only one of us to love!" Therefore, we should not be afraid to love for each and every one of us are made to love and love so passionately. Just as God has formed us out of love, with love, and for love, we should not be afraid to love as He does. If He has instilled within us the life and light of His divine love, only in His love can we find meaning and purpose, the intimate and deep understanding of who we are and who we are called to be in service. Love is our both our identity and mission, both in a very unique and personal, intimately and communally bound. Each and every one of us are uniquely made by God in His image and likeness; therefore, each one of us carries within us the ability to radiate, participate, and share that love in our very unique (and even imperfect) ways. To be loved by God and to love as He does give us true fulfillment and contentment, peace as well as purpose in the midst of many ups and downs of life's trials. It is never too late to learn to love!

Simply put, it is never too late to seek God, to learn and discover who we are, what we are made for, how we find solace and consolation in the midst of many different things, and why life is worth living. It is never too late to seek Him, to return to His love, and to rest in the midst of many changing things that pull us all over. Conversion is never a "too late" thing. The only saddest thing in life is to live one going through the motions, unreflected, undiscerned, unsought, and self-centered! The saddest life is one unlived to its fullness in the truth. I have seen many people who are content with what society feeds them and how to be recognized according to materialistic riches and worldly successes but never spend enough time to reach deep from within to know who they

are in the eyes of God. I have seen many people who are so preoccupied and worried about not having enough freedom, money, power, prestige, or the likes, always comparing themselves with others. A life that is only worried about what one does not have or what one wanted to have but never had is a life narrowly visioned and fill with pettiness. A life that is occupied and worrying about what one should be doing to push the limit and to make sure that one does not miss out on anything is a life that chases after "more" without knowing what is really satisfactory and gives peace.

There are two lovely expressions in Spanish that calm the nerve when one is faced with uncertainties. The first one is the word, "Tranquilo!" I love hearing the expression used when someone is nervous or anxious, asking another person questions after questions, cannot sit still, or filled with many things. That one-word answer reminds the person to be at peace and to seek the much-needed tranquility. The second one is a common expression and phrase when one is asked how things are going in his or her life. "Estoy contento!" is such a great expression, in my honest opinion! While one could say that he or she is happy, this or that, to say that one is content speaks much volume. Especially in a day and age where we often define happiness with euphoric sentiments and emotions, contentment is a very important reminder that we do not have to be euphorically high and fulfilled to be happy and at peace with ourselves and with our lives. Think about it! The greatest discovery in life, especially for us as the people of faith, is not having everything and being able to do everything. True peace comes when we are at peace and content with what we have, blessings, challenges, and all.

Therefore, do not be afraid to seek what is higher than what we think we want or deserve in the now. Do not be afraid to give ourselves in love to the One who created us out of love and for love! Let us not be afraid to hold back, worrying about what we are missing out or what we do not have, or how others are having it better than us and that we are

pitiful. The greatest joy has always been found on the journey, to walk humbly, honestly, genuinely, and faithfully in love, especially in the love that God has for us. It is never too late to return, to begin, to fall in love, to seek, and to find Him in our lives. He is always there waiting and is only a prayer away. If we would take that one moment to be vulnerable, genuine, transparent, and to really love, we will discover that to really love God and our neighbors are who we are and what we are called to be. Truly, love is both our mission and identity so let us not be afraid to love as He loves.

LOVE LIKE A POOR SAINT

Many Perhaps many people do not know this, especially since I use my Vietnamese name a lot of the time... Nonetheless, when I became a U.S. citizen, I did ask to "also be known as" Martin. Even though I rarely used this American name, it holds a dear place within my heart because it reminds me of St. Martin de Porres and what he did for me.

There was a time in my life when I was going through a tough time with an ear infection that would not go away. Unfortunately, we were too poor to afford real medical care. Every few weeks, especially when it hurts a lot, my parents would save up the little money they had and take me to a local hospital to get the infected puss sucked out of my ear. It temporarily helped relieve the pressure and provided some respite, but the pain would soon come back.

I endured this pain for a good while. It became a big distraction at school, too, because I could not fully pay attention to my teachers. There were times that I got in trouble because I could not sit still and behave like my teachers would like me to behave because the pain was too much to bear. I kept being distracted by the pain, trying to hold myself together but could not because of how much it hurt. There was one teacher who was not the kindest... One time, she tried to discipline me by slapping me to sense. However, she slapped me right at my infected ear and it hurt so much! I remember sitting in the hallway, after being dismissed by her, just crying a lot -- from both the pain and the shame...

Since our family was poor and did not have enough money to hire that teacher to tutor, the person could not care less about what I was going through and treated me like I was a burden. (She had a different attitude and special treatment to those who could afford her service.) As a young child, that made me feel really bad and ashamed. I wanted to give up and blamed God a lot, too! I wished that the pain would go away,

that we could have some money to get some decent respect or afford a cure, or simply have life to be a little bit better. Nonetheless, my paternal grandmother told me not to distrust God. She told me to come to St. Martin de Porres to pray for his healing intercession. As a matter of fact, the saint was very popular amongst the Vietnamese Catholics, not only because of the many healings that were granted through his intercession but because the sick and poor could relate with him.

I still remember it today, but my grandmother took me to his little shrine in the parish church when we went to Mass. She was by me and prayed for my healing; and as a child, I simply asked him, "Please help me so I do not have to be in pain anymore." Sometimes, the prayers were genuine; other times, it was just saying words, perhaps something might happen. And, somehow, through God's merciful providence and intercession of the saint, that infection went away when I least expected it.

Even though my hearing with that ear remains far from perfect, I no longer had to go through the constant burden of bearing its pains. Even though I still bear the scar tissues from the infection that destroyed my hearing, I am grateful that I no longer have to struggle to feel like wearing a heavy brick over my head and the constant headache from it. You see, God listened and healed me through the intercession of St. Martin de Porres, but he did not make everything as "perfect" as I would have liked so the scars and results of that infection can be a good reminder for me of His loving grace... and, for that, I am eternally grateful.

Even though I first knew and fell in love with St. Martin de Porres because of his healing for me, I began to love him more because of how he lived his life with personal, genuine, and self-giving love. Being the illegitimate son of a Spanish nobleman and ex-slave, he was shunned by both the ruling Spaniards as well as the enslaved people. They looked at him with suspicion and pushed him away because he was caught in

between. His mother tried her best to love him and give him a proper Christian education, but imagine the unkindness that he had to endure from others! He was educated to become a pharmacist and a nurse, and those skill sets became providentially beneficial in his vocation as a lay Dominican brother.

Despite his father's opposition, he desired to give himself totally and completely to Christ in serving the sick and poor. Instead of being bitter, resentful, and angry at other people and how he was treated, he chose to live a life that was grounded in genuine charity and love. He found the strength to endure all injustices, doubts, and hardships because of his love for the Eucharist. Through his genuine acts of loving charity, many people of all ranks would come to him for advice because they saw in him that Christocentric love.

In a day and age of advanced information and communication technologies, it is very easy for us, at the push of a few key clicks and buttons, to voice our opinions for the whole wide world to see and hear. We have a lot of people who are calling for revolutions, changes, and destruction of the current society. We also have a lot of people who are standing at both (extreme) sides of the political spectrum, yelling, blaming, and putting down other people for the sake of their version of righteousness. We have a lot of people who speak so loud, bitter, resentful, and angry at the whole world and at others, all for the sake of proving themselves right and better than others! Nonetheless, so few are willing to give themselves to practice personal and radical charity in loving their neighbors.

In a recent episode of a popular YouTube channel that I follow, the host was trying to have a gathering of popular and influential YouTubers come together to clean the city and its rivers. Even though there were a lot of supportive comments and praises for the effort on the platform, no one showed up to the event except for the host's personal friend. We see this a lot nowadays! Everyone tries to be vocal and "make

a difference," but I think only when it serves their agenda, purpose, or benefits their ego. Everyone talks so much about changes and revolutions, but no one really wants to come together to care for others. We have seen many events where people gather together for pictures, media coverage, and to make themselves feel good for a little bit, but so few are willing to step outside of themselves to care for the people who are around them.

Perhaps what we have seen in a "me, myself, and I" world, we have weaponized charity and used social injustices as platforms to make ourselves stand out and feel good. Those who are vocal and influential really do not care about others unless it serves to highlight and make them look good! We lack a lot of people who want to be at the forefront of change, wanting to be chiefs and engineers of differences made, but not many people who are willing to be the backbones of genuine, personal, and daily acts of self-giving love and charity.

St. Martin de Porres made a big impact on my life, not just because of my healing through his intercession, but also by how he chose to love others. My brothers and sisters, in a world where we see so many self-centeredness glorification, as well as bitter, resentful, and angry reactions to many injustices and hurts in this world, we need more Martin de Porres who choose to live and embody that Christocentric, radical, genuine, and self-giving love for our neighbors. Instead of being or following vocal people, who, most of the time, only care about themselves, let us dare to live that loving charity in how we choose to care and love those who are around us, especially those who are living on the very fringes of our society. May our love for Christ lead us to the very gift of self-giving charity through our everyday interactions, words, and actions so that others might come to know His love as well. Therefore, dare to be Martin de Porres instead of typical vocal, influential, political, or agenda-driven people!

LOVE LIKE A “NOBODY” SAINT

I came across a very beautiful and inspiring story about St. Bernadette while re-reading the Servant of God Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan's book (written in Vietnamese) named ***Those Who Journey on the Road of Hope***. He highlighted this story and tied it to the virtue of humility, reminding us that those who live in the presence of God cannot be prideful because everything belongs to Him. (cf. *The Road of Hope*, no. 513) The Blessed Mother became more pure and brilliant as she remained humble because it clearly pointed (to others) to what God had done for her, like sunlight radiating through a glass without any specks. (cf. no. 512)

The story was told in this way (please excuse my transliteration from Vietnamese):

“After her great blessing of having the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to her at Lourdes in France, Bernadette asked to join a cloistered convent in Nevers. On one Sunday morning, around 1876, a fellow nun gave Bernadette a picture people taken of her at the Lourdes grotto to see her reaction.

After carefully looking at the picture, Bernadette asked the sister:

- What do you think people use a broom for?
- To clean the floors.
- Where do they place the broom after they are done with it?
- In a corner of the house, behind a door, or a typical place where it belongs.

- My life is like that (broom), Sister. The Blessed Mother used me and now places me where I belong. I am overfilled with joy, and I want to be where she placed me forever.”

Wow! What a simple but profound expression of humility and intimate knowledge that she belonged to God. I do not know about you but I still struggle each day to not let people's perception and opinion affect me! I know who I am as a child of God, as a priest of Christ, and as an instrument of the Holy Spirit. I know my strengths and weaknesses, and I have come to a real peace to embrace all things with His love. However, I still struggle with letting what the military, its bureaucratic ratings, and noisy voices to deter, distract, discourage, or fill me with doubts. I am doing better to recollect, reflect, and return to the Lord as I get older, but I still struggle when those things initially present themselves to me. Furthermore, the Devil and his minions do have a good way of pulling the heartstrings and use the opportunities to tempt and discourage me.

I will be honest and vulnerable with you right now, and I believe all my brother priests who are serving in the military can agree to this assessment as well. Even though we are often busy taking care of the Catholic community, those hours and ministerial efforts mean nothing to the military. Other non-Catholic chaplains can spend more time doing things that are more appealing to the general public. This often comes out when we receive our yearly performance brief/report, because what we do means very little in the eyes of the military. After all, we do not have the big quantifiable and metric-based data like line officers and those who are tasked to do the actual mission-based work. Even when I have already prepared myself and know it will happen, it is always heart-throbbing and discouraging at first sight when I see the stratification. We often get together as chaplains to console one another when those results come out and push forward in taking care of people instead of letting the military and bureaucratic process get the best out of us.

It is weird... No matter how one prepares oneself for disappointment and the obvious truth, it still hurts when we first have to encounter it. We are all humans, and we oftentimes let human voices tell us who we think we should be instead of who we truly are in His eyes. In his second letter to St. Timothy, St. Paul beautifully expressed his trust in the Lord, knowing that his time on earth was coming to an end. He looked at his life as a gift and sacrifice, poured out like a libation for the Lord and the Church. He recognized that, even though he had been abandoned, rejected, forgotten, or pushed out by the world and others, he was never abandoned by the Lord. It was the Lord who stood by Him and gave him strength in his times of trial and hardship. That was why he yearned to be with the Lord and wait for his true crown of righteousness -- not the righteousness of the world, his ego, but from the Lord Himself. How beautiful it is for him to say that he competed well, finished the race, and has kept the faith! (cf. 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18)

We, therefore, must ask ourselves, too, how we are personally doing our best to compete well on the way to the Lord. How are we fighting against the lies, manipulations, and temptations that try to deter, distract, and discourage us from loving the Lord and giving our all to Him? How are we pacing ourselves for the race, not just beginning well and strong, but losing the perseverance to keep on in the long run? How are we choosing to keep our faith through all the ups and downs, messiness, and chaotic moments of life? How are we glorifying God in what we do and how we serve, or are we still worried and held back by earthly glories, wants, and desires?

Those are all hard questions to answer, but they remind us that we must choose the good Lord through the good and bad times in life. The choices we make, the decisions that we choose, and the competing goods that are out there, even the discouragements, disappointments, trials, hardships, pains, and sufferings, are great reminders that our lives are gifts and sacrifices offered to Him in return for His love for us. St. Paul has shown us that the good Lord, indeed, has always been with us and

given us the strength needed, even when we are forgotten, rejected, abandoned, or seem to be pushed out by others.

I saw a post a few years back that was very thought-provoking when the parable of the proud Pharisee and repentant tax collector is read, heard, or proclaimed at Mass! (cf. Luke 18:9-14) The author asked how many people immediately thought, "Thank God that I am not like the Pharisee!" Nonetheless, this is the attitude that the good Lord was trying to teach those who were too convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else. Perhaps we must spend time to reflect and ask ourselves if we have humbled ourselves or if we are still too full of whatever is puffed up inside!?!

Please bear with me as I try to bring in the foolishness of this world to highlight a point, especially as I see a lot of us doing a good job of bringing politics into the Church and our life of faith instead of humbly and genuinely integrating our faith into everyday life. I see the conservative side of the Church positively seeking and loving the truth, but they often lack humility and charity. They desire to know more and seek ways to defend the faith, but it is easy for them to think that they are the only ones who are right because they are orthodox and faithful, while those who do not think like them are heretical, lukewarm, or not good enough. I see the progressive side of the Church caring a lot about social justice and equality, but they oftentimes lack courage and hope. They worry too much about acceptance and tolerance that they tend to be scared about upsetting, not caring enough, or appearing to exclude people. Nonetheless, I believe each and every one of us lacks the virtues of patience of temperance.

Lourdes holds a special place in my heart. St. Bernadette, a simple, uneducated young girl, endured so much to share the Blessed Mother's apparitions with all. A place of nowhere in France has now become a popular pilgrimage destination because of a simple girl and her willingness to become instrumental in sharing the Marian message.

Nonetheless, Lourdes is a holy place because of the numerous miracles and its wondrous message and because of the Christocentric and charity-centered culture it promotes, nurtures, and encourages visitors and pilgrims. There, everyone is reminded to treat everyone with dignity and respect. There, those who would be dismissed, ignored, abandoned, looked down, or forgotten by this world are treated as guests of honor. There, people are invited to slow down, pray, reflect, and become more attentive to their interior life and spiritual relationship with God.

People might come to Lourdes with a mirage of different reasons and purposes, but I think many will leave it with more peace or understanding that God loves them and there is peace even when things might not always be as we expected them to be. I first came to Lourdes on a pilgrimage and kept coming back because it had an unexplainable way of drawing me back. Each time I came back to visit gave me different consolations and opportunities to thank God for His wondrous love. For me, what is happening at Lourdes is not just the recognized miracles or miraculous attributions, even though I am grateful for those who received them because it is a place of prayer for me.

It is a foretaste of heaven on earth for me. I know it is so easy to ask the Almighty to fix our problems, remove our pains and sufferings, or alleviate whatever troubles, trials, or hardships we are going through. I wonder how many of us have taken the time to see His gentle, faithful, and considerate love for us. I know that we always think that we deserve better, want more from Him, expect more of Him, and things to be well, but how many of us are simply grateful for His goodness and faithful love in good times and trying moments? How are we treating God and understanding His love for us?

It is so easy to fall back to the shallow, typical, and hedonistic version of deism where we tend to treat Him simply as a provider, caretaker, butler, or some magical genie whose existence to fix our

problems and make our lives smooth and better. He is not simply there to be a therapeutic answer or relativistic moralistic insurance policy. He is not just there to be used just in case we do not think our way to use His name as a way to ensure some type of equity, justice, ethical, or moral goods. The God of faith wants much more than the transactional, hedonistic, satisfying, or quid pro quo relationship. He does not want to just impress, captivate, or do things to please us so we can keep Him around or in our pockets. This wondrous, loving, faithful, and generous God desires a self-giving, reciprocal, intimate, heartfelt relationship that endures through the ups and downs of this life and desires our ultimate, eternal, and everlasting good to be with Him.

Every time I go to Lourdes, I always try to make it a top priority to attend the daily candlelight procession in the evening. For some reasons, it always brings me to tears! I cannot explain why, but I know they are not tears of sorrow or despair, but ones of joy and being loved. As a priest, it moves me to see the beautiful universality of the Church, when people of different languages and cultures coming together to worship and pray as brothers and sisters in the faith. When the refrain part of the "Ave Maria" is being sung, all candles are lifted high and everyone sings the beautiful hymn together. How wonderful it is! This is how I imagine heaven would be, when we are able to come together, not worrying about our own needs or likings, not divided by nationalities or languages, not stoning each other with political differences, but all choose to come to praise what God has done in their lives and in the lives of His saints. Perhaps this is why Lourdes is special for me because it is filled with God's presence and His caring love for us through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is, therefore, important that we do not forget who we truly are and what we are called to be! We are powerful not because of our earthly possessions or powers but how we choose to die to ourselves, look, care, and give the gifts of love to one another. Without a doubt, to care and to love one another as God has loved us is our first and foremost, the most important and crucial, mission and purpose as children of the Almighty.

One time when I was there, I walked behind a very old couple. Both of them were hunchbacks. He perhaps was a little bit reluctant to come. Yet, she held his fingers and pulled him along. He walked with her, just a little bit behind her, looking and checking things out. She held two candles to be lit, one for each of them. As he walked along the pilgrimage route, he became more relaxed and attentive to the surroundings because of her initial gentle, persevering push. This particular episode moved me deeply! The couple taught me two small but important lessons. First, of course, is the lesson of old, genuine love. They care for one another in a very unpretentious, common, but loving way with small gestures of affection. They care for one another, not just in human terms, but worrying about one another's spiritual welfare as well.

A lot of times, we need people around us to give us small, gentle, and loving pushes on our journey of faith. Oftentimes, we need to know that we are not alone and that we have people who walk alongside us, praying, supporting, and motivating us spiritually. Look back at our own lives and we will see the many times that we were lifted by others in the faith; or times when we never thought how we could overcome such trials, yet we did because of God's grace and other people's prayers! This is why He gives us the Church. We were never meant to be alone. We belong to one another and are called to help each other in our spiritual journey toward heaven. Even when we feel lonely, we are never alone because we are always lifted by the communion of saints who pray and care for us holistically, making sure that we are guided back and will not be lost eternally. It is, therefore, important to recognize this precious relationship and communion of love.

We might not always agree with or like people at times, but we can still choose to love, forgive, or treat them with Christ-centered charity. It is not always easy, but kindness goes a long way! It is not always advantageous to take the high road or be charitable to someone who has wronged us, but what we do out of love -- individually and collectively -- can change the whole world. It is not always given to see

how we can be gifts for one another; we can still choose to recognize His presence in each and every person. Christian charity is hard to practice, and it can seem rare nowadays, but I think we can still practice what we have first received from Him. There will continue to be people who do not appreciate, tend to dismiss, misunderstand, or perhaps even want to do us harm. Still, we can choose to see the miracles of His love for us through simple, faithful, and heartfelt recognition and giving of ourselves to Him. Simply put, the greatest "miracle" and gift I have experienced in my life is not always the blessings or things I wanted but the loving grace I needed.

At Lourdes, I am reminded that everyone should be loved and treated with dignity and respect. Looking back at my life's different periods and trials, I somehow ended up in Lourdes, where I took away many valuable lessons, consolations, and healings that were needed. Those blessings were not necessarily for me, but I was able to experience and witness through others, seeing how hearts were changed, people were loved and cared for, peace was found, and reconciliation happened. I came with many different emotions, even with doubts, hurts, and unanswered prayers at times, and I found peace, contentment, and the simple knowledge that things will be OK (even though they might not be what I expected) because we are not alone and are loved by God and the Blessed Mother through the Church. I came to Lourdes looking for answers or to provide spiritual support for those who were hurting, but I came away with the gift of simplicity of heart even though some of the issues were not taken away at that moment because God is in control and He is enough for each and every one of us. Lourdes has somehow been that place of peace, healing, reconciliation, and rest for me and for many pilgrims... and for that, I am eternally grateful for such a place that gathers us together as people of faith.

Do we have enough humility and hope in Him, or are we too dependent on ourselves and egocentric righteousness? Do we have enough courage to choose Him instead of what is politically, socially, or

generally popular and correct, especially the charity to continue to love and serve those who are different and do not share the same priorities as us? Most of all, do we have enough prudence, temperance, and patience to endure, persevere, and keep our eyes on the Lord and on the Way to Him? Going back to what St. Bernadette said and what St. Paul affirmed, may we not lose sight of the Lord, knowing that we belong to Him because we are loved by Him, and we are only His instruments instead of trying to control or have things our way. It is, indeed, hard to be humble, remain faithful, and persevere until the very end when the world and evil ones are constantly telling us otherwise. I know that I am struggling on days, but I pray each and every day that I might be a broom, too...

LOVE LIKE SAINT JOSEPH

Many things that been written about St. Joseph by the many saints and spiritual writers in the past. Yet, for such a dear and important saint in the life of the Church, we find little to nothing significant about the life of the foster-father of the Lord Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospel accounts. Many titles have been given to him by the faithful throughout the years, but nothing was really known about him except that he was from the Davidic lineage and was a poor carpenter. Many honors and devotions of the saint have had a special place amongst the faithful, but his life was nothing more than a simple, common, and unknown one when he was alive. Nonetheless, this is where the paradoxical "secret" of his sanctity and power seems to lie! Even though St. Joseph seems to be a small instrumental part in the plan of salvation, he has made a big impact on the life of our Savior and Redeemer. Perhaps we will not know much about him from a historical and literary standpoint, but to the ones who knew and loved him, he was the genuine, life-giving, and humble expression of perfect spousal, fatherly, and neighborly love. In the life and silent example of a simple and poor carpenter, we learn the important lesson of nothingness.

First and foremost, the very life of St. Joseph and his nothingness is counter-cultural and contradictory to our post-modern struggle to make ourselves known at all costs, but his genuineness made a deep ingrain to the ones who loved him. He really offered nothing to this world according to our objective, effectiveness, and utilitarian standards, but for our Lord, he made an unimaginable impact that He was proud to be known as the son of the carpenter from Nazareth in Galilee. Why and how, you might ask? I believe the true lessons that he taught and gave to the Lord (and to us) are hidden behind his nothingness. He said nothing, but through his genuine life and deeds, loving words and actions, caring attentiveness and faithfulness have spoken and taught the Lord special lessons of what it meant to be loved and love one another as oneself.

We often hear the phrase, "Like father, like son," being said in our very own culture. I believe this can, too, be applied to St. Joseph because we can see the products and fruits of the saint's love through the Lord's own genuine, humble, and loving examples of true charity. Our Savior is both divine and human -- in the fullest understanding and reality; so, His knowledge and understanding of reality is both perfect according to His divine nature, but also down-to-earth and personal because of His human nature. He had both an intimate and loving relationship with His Heavenly Father, which was expressed numerous times through the Gospel accounts; but let us remember, too, that when He understood what it meant to be loved by a father, it was through the caring words and actions of St. Joseph. The simple and poor carpenter was the real and personal expression of a father to the Lord Jesus Christ. He received love and protection from the saint just as any child would have from His own father.

Lest we forget this unspoken reality, that Jesus Christ lived like us in all things but sin... He experienced everything that we would have personally felt in our very own humanity! Just like each and every one of us, He had to grow up, mature, and learn life's own experiences and lessons. And, as we so well know that life and the people who are around us are not always easy, loving, and perfect. Things are messy and we get hurt! The child and young Jesus had to be taught, comforted and cared for by both his foster-father and mother, too. Hence, for our Lord, St. Joseph was that personal, human, real, and genuine fatherly love that He first received, hence grew and strengthened by His own experience with the Heavenly Father's love. When the child and young Jesus looked at St. Joseph, he was that caring and loving father figure who silently tried his best to care for the One entrusted to him. In a symbolic (but very real) way, the saint was the human face of the Heavenly Father for the Lord. For all practical, human, legalistic, and common knowledge and understanding, especially for the people of Nazareth and the surrounding regions of Galilee, Jesus was known to be the son of Mary and Joseph of Nazareth.

Being a carpenter, they probably did not have much. They probably went without many comforts and conveniences, and there were probably numerous moments of financial hardships and struggles. This simple life must have impacted the Lord very much, because we can see that He sympathized with those who had little, including the poor, forgotten, ignored, abandoned, and those who were living on the fringes of society. Those who grew up and had little, but were given much loving care, are able to relate and understand with those who had nothing, pushed away, abandoned, ignored, or looked down by the elitists, upper classes, self-righteous, or general populace. The King of the universe taught us, through His very own life of simplicity and nothingness, that He desired nothing more than genuine love. The One who could have chosen to live and be anything or anyone that He would like, chose to be a simple son of a poor carpenter who had little to nothing, so that true treasures and riches are measured by the quality of faith and love, not just humanistic or secularistic quantities.

By growing up poor, Jesus had little on the materialistic and humanistic sides; nevertheless, He must have received much care from His mother and foster-father because we can see the fruits of their love in how He treated those who were typically looked down on and ignored by His very own contemporaneous society. We can see this from many family-oriented cultures and newcoming immigrants in our very own materialistic and humanistic society, too. Those who came to this new land of opportunities with little to nothing are very much grateful for the new-found freedom. They tend to care for one another, too, because they know they have to depend on each other since they have little. My paternal grandmother would always say, "Those who possess little of this world are rich in spirit. Those who hunger and want to fill themselves with the riches of this world are stingy with others and poor with never-ending wants."

Indeed, we become so poor and impoverished when we focus only on the materialistic riches and humanistic desires of "more" since

we end up never having enough, except to be more bitter, resentful, and envious of others who seem to have more than us. Those who only worry about themselves and judge their self-worth based on what they have according to worldly standards will always remain enveloped, centered, and constantly worried about their own little, pitiful, and hellish selves. Yet, those who have received much loving care and are able to give the genuine gift of themselves to others will always give the best, heartfelt, and valuable gifts that cannot simply be measured with earthly goods or materialistic means. The Lord was that way because He had little grown up but received much love from His own earthly parents! Our Savior and Redeemer always chose relationship and people before political, financial, or humanistic standards and measurements. He desired genuine trust, love, and faith because He learned and received that from of young. The Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph, even though had little, cared and loved Him in the best and simplest way that they were able to, and that was why our Lord always desired genuine and invaluable gifts of self from people.

We hear much about the poor in Sacred Scriptures, but we often only equate them to being materialistic without anything. Even though that is the literal meaning of the term, "anawim," the poor begin to take a deeper theological understanding throughout salvation history. They are understood as those who have nothing else to depend on but God Himself. In this way, we are invited to become the poor spiritually, living our lives with total dependency on the Almighty. Mother Mary and St. Joseph were the borderline anawim in many different senses, especially because they had little; nevertheless, at the same time, they always had the radical dependency and trust in God's providential goodness and loving care.

We have seen people who are materialistically poor but very full of themselves while there are people who have much but very humble and trusting in God. Our disposition, therefore, is very important in the faith journey. We have to desire to let go of our ego, especially its desire

to be in control and its full load of pride, to truly be instruments of divine peace through the personal, self-giving service of our brethren. It is very easy to be dependent on wealth and its enticement or be stuck in resentment for the things we do not have and think that we deserve; however, when we know who we are and where our blessings come from, we are able to be at peace with being good stewards of God's gifts. When we are able to know that what we have is not to be used only for our own goods and benefits, but can be in turn used for the greater good of all, we can bless others with what we have out of love.

Since St. Joseph was a nobody and had nothing really to offer in the eyes of the world and those who are materialistically focused or worldly obsessed, he was able to offer his genuine, personal, intimate, and loving whole to this very own family. The gift of himself to those who knew him was something personal, intimate, and heartfelt. The gift of St. Joseph was invaluable because it came from the heart, of his very self and sacrificial love for the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Lord Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, the gift of himself was so personal, genuine, and loving that it was ingrained and impactful in the very own human identity and life of the Savior. He taught us how to have pure, chaste, and self-giving love without being held back by cheap, shallow, selfish, objectifying, and sexualized post-modern versions of intimacy.

The most chaste spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary was able to love her with his very own self by offering her his personal, intimate, and loving being without downplaying or depending on carnal lusts, objectivities, and desires. The relationship between St. Joseph and the Blessed Mother was one of true friendship and love, restoring and really living out what was experienced by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden but was lost after the Fall. This is something that is very hard for us to understand and comprehend in this overly sexualized, sensational, and objectifying world, but true, intimate, and chaste friendship is possible!

When a spouse said that they married their best friend, they express in a small way to have that chaste intimacy without having to depend and turn to dependency on carnal and sexual satisfaction. We most feel loved when we are able to be genuine and loved by someone who understands, accepts, receives, responds, and gives his or herself to us totally and completely without asking for something back in return! In the presence of someone who truly loves us, we feel at home and at peace because we are able to be our very unpretentious, genuine, vulnerable, and transparent selves. That deep, personal, and genuine intimacy does not require sexual or carnal measurements because it comes deep within our very being and expresses the genuineness of our soul's deepest desire to love and be loved. As a matter of fact, most people tend to forget that there is to be chastity practiced even within marriage!

Without chastity, people will end up using and objectifying others, even within marriage. Without chastity, there would be no real respect and vulnerability because each person would be too scared to be real, genuine, and transparent. Without chastity, we will end up judging one another with selfish and pitiful demands and expectations instead of truly loving and caring for each other with honesty, simplicity, and vulnerability. In our current day and age, we doubted and questioned the chaste spousal love between St. Joseph and Mother Mary because we have sexualized and carnalized almost everything, not really knowing and understanding true intimacy and love. Sadly, we have ended up shallowly judging love based on physical, objectifying, and humanistic measurements. Yet, their love for one another was the inspiration, model, and just the beginning of many other similar saintly, Christ-centered love between many saints through the history of the Church. Chastity for many is hard because our world has cheapened what it means to love! Nevertheless, love is only real, personal, transparent, genuine, and vulnerable when it is protected, grounded, and measured by true intimacy and chastity.

The Holy Spirit, the real and personalized love between the Father and Son, the true Spouse of the Blessed Virgin, chose St. Joseph to be His human expression of chaste spousal love for Mary. It was through the power and working of the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus Christ was conceived; but knowing that the Child Jesus would need an earthly fatherly figure and a protecting spouse for Mary, God the Father and Holy Spirit chose a just, loving, and faithful man to be the humble human expression and presence of their love. St. Joseph manifested in his very own life the silent fatherly and chaste spousal love for both Jesus and Mary. He cared and protected them, and in silent nothingness and faithful love, He gave them His purest, simplest, and most genuine expression of life-giving, sacrificial, and qualitative intimacy and love that speaks louder than mere, vocal, and noisy words and more valuable than any objectified, humanistic, and materialistic standards.

Last, but not least, St. Joseph is rarely known under the title, "Terror of Demons." Nevertheless, this devotion has been invoked and popularly used in recent times among the faithful, especially with his other popular titles as Patron and Protector of the Church. Even though it sounds a bit terrifying and somewhat fear-centered, but it actually goes back to the very essence of who he is -- simple and humble! Since the Devil and his minions are known for self-centered pride and arrogance, humility and simplicity of heart expressed through the great saint are something that they hated, despised, but powerless against. When one knows his or her nothingness, total dependency, transparency, genuineness, and humility are enlivened since there is no need to be pretentious or prove oneself. Pride is the unfortunate downfall for those who think too much, occupied, or overly worried about themselves. Hence, pride often leads to arrogance, pities, hatred, jealousy, and all down-spiraled evil desires, especially the willingness to do harm to others to get whatever one wants. Humility, on the other hand, seeks the truth and reflects genuineness because it has nothing to prove except total dependency on God and the simple acceptance of our nothingness. When we are humble and simple, the truth will reveal

itself, for our words and actions will be proven and tested with time -- not simply with manipulations, falsehoods, lies, deceptions, or empty noises.

The Devil and his minions hate the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph because they cannot stand their humility and genuineness! They cannot deceive, lie, or manipulate the great saints because they know who they are deep from within, with nothing to prove or worry about their own goods. In all of their simplicity and simplicity, they have nothing to fear or hold back anything, hence able to reflect and shine forth the self-giving gift of love and providential grace of God at work. Lies, deceptions, and manipulations can win people's attention for short moments, but the truth will always come out. People can even hide behind sweet, pious, or religious words, but the truth will always be known with time. It does take a lot of patience, wisdom, and discernment to truly see things as they are by how they bear fruits and be tested with time.

Self-serving, condemnatory, egotistical, manipulative, or deceptive people will be known by their fruits and empty words, just like the Devil and his minions' usual shadow of deception tactics. One stands strong when one is deeply grounded, firm, and strong in the Lord! Evil might seem strong and persuasive at first or for a short time, but it is all deceptive smoke and mirror manipulations because it has nothing real and everlasting to offer. At the end of the day, the Devil and his minions are nothing but pitiful creations who go out, seeking to ruin souls and lead people astray because they are miserable beings who hate themselves. They make life miserable for others because they themselves are miserable, locked up in their own arrogance and prideful pities. Nonetheless, St. Joseph, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the saints were able to withstand them because they knew who they were and they were able to be humble, simple, and dependent on God at all times.

In a world that is so constantly filled with many vocal and opinionated voices, silence speaks loudly. We respect wise people

because they possess the wisdom that does not need to draw attention to themselves but radiates a sense of peace and calmness to those who encounter them. Silence and calmness speak loudly because they are unpretentious and truly from the heart instead of typical noisy opinions and words. Silence reminds us that we need to think, reflect, and pray before we speak and that we do not need to prove or attract attention to ourselves to truly be who we are called to be. Great saints did not try to stand out but live their lives full of love for God and their neighbors with the intimate, personal and sacrificial gift of themselves in love. Silence speaks loudly for those who truly want to listen because it reveals the true heart and points us to the transcendental truth that is beyond ourselves.

Saint Joseph also teaches us the importance of faithfulness and perseverance as well. He was faithful to his God-given mission to care for the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Lord Jesus Christ with everything that he had. He had little to nothing being a carpenter, being it was and still a trade that has had its own seasons and struggles, yet the saint still tried his best to provide and care for them. The thirty years of silence before the Lord's public ministry teaches us much. Perhaps because they had little to nothing and were poor that the Lord was able to understand and relate to the poor and abandoned well. He understood them because He shared a similar setting in His own life. He embraced and valued people more than materialistic possessions because He grew up with little and knew love from the people who were around Him.

In his perseverance and faithfulness to his vocation, Saint Joseph teaches us the great lesson that all of us can apply in our own family life. As families get busy with all the things that need to be done, when was the last time that we can enjoy each other's presence without worrying about what needs to be done next? How are we cherishing one another's value and dignity without being too focused on all the secondary and apparent how's and what's of life? Many things have been said about the Lord Jesus' own three years of public ministry, but we forget that the

thirty years of silence shaped and made Him into who He was. As He was truly God and fully man, His humanity was enriched by the formative years in Nazareth with the Blessed Mother and Saint Joseph. This reminds us that we cannot overlook the importance of what is being taught and formed in silence, else we would become too anxious and worried by the unnecessary noises of this secularistic and materialistic world. If we do not have the patience and silence to reflect, pray, and meditate on what is important and life-giving, we will lose focus and be drifted by the apparent and secondary temptations and distractions. Only when we learn to pray and fix our eyes on what is important by being faithful to what we are called to be and persevere in that vocation with the grace of God can we truly rise above the fluxes, destructive tendencies, and divisiveness of this world.

While it is easy to let go and chase after the ever-changing and trendy stuff for the sake of relevancy, true love, real relationships, and valuable matters are preserved by personal faithfulness and real sacrifices. We understand and value the real treasures around us when we take the time in silence to reflect and pray about what is truly important. Hence, when we know what is really valuable and crucial for our lives, we learn to let go of unimportant matters and secondary distractions as we make important life decisions and sacrifices for the sake of things everlasting. Saint Joseph reminds us of what is important by teaching us the important lessons of silence, faithfulness, and perseverance.

There are much more that I can say about this wonderful saint, but perhaps the greatest thing that I can do now is to ask you to reflect on his wonderful virtues and life examples in prayer. I would like to leave you with a short excerpt from Blessed Pope Paul VI who wrote a beautiful piece of reflection from the school of Nazareth:

“First, we learn from its silence. If only we could once again appreciate its great value. We need this wonderful state of mind,

beset as we are by the cacophony of strident protests and conflicting claims so characteristic of these turbulent times. The silence of Nazareth should teach us how to meditate in peace and quiet, to reflect on the deeply spiritual, and to be open to the voice of God's inner wisdom and the counsel of his true teachers. Nazareth can teach us the value of study and preparation, of meditation, of a well-ordered personal spiritual life, and of silent prayer that is known only to God.

Second, we learn about family life. May Nazareth serve as a model of what the family should be. May it show us the family's holy and enduring character and exemplifying its basic function in society: a community of love and sharing, beautiful for the problems it poses and the rewards it brings; in sum, the perfect setting for rearing children—and for this there is no substitute.

Finally, in Nazareth, the home of a craftsman's son, we learn about work and the discipline it entails. I would especially like to recognize its value—demanding yet redeeming—and to give it proper respect. I would remind everyone that work has its own dignity. On the other hand, it is not an end in itself. Its value and free character, however, derive not only from its place in the economic system, as they say, but rather from the purpose it serves.”

When we recognize our nothingness or poverty in God, we are able to depend on Him as well as others. When we think of ourselves higher than others, we demand and expect everything to go our way. Yet, none of us were created to be alone or to be put on a higher pedestal than others. We are all instrumental to God's will for the greater good of society and the evangelical mission of the Church so that the Good News is being preached and all are being cared for with dignity, value, and love. If we really think about it, there can only be one true master of our hearts. If it is not God, it will end up being our ego, something, or

someone else! Even though we have our fair share of struggles in loving Him, we should never give up! If we give up or lose focus too easily, lesser things will begin to creep in to fill our hearts. Therefore, it is important to do regular spiritual checkups and cleansings to identify the sources of distraction and reorganize our priorities in alignment with the greatest good, which God and His will for us. Only when we are able to seek and desire what is good from Him can we learn to rest in His everlasting peace. May we, then, able to learn, imitate, and put into practice the example of humility and simplicity of St. Joseph so our nothingness expresses our genuine love and able to radiate God's love in our very own lives.

IT IS GOOD THAT WE ARE HERE...

I received a lot of concerned, worried, and scared phone calls, texts, and messages from my own friends and family members, as well as from servicemembers' loved ones, trying to make sense of what was going as Operation Epic Fury begun to be reported by news agencies. I prepared another homily for that Sunday, but it quickly became "outdated" because the message failed to address, connect, and strengthen the faith of my people at the moment. I came to prayer and asked the good Lord to know what to say to those who are seeking Him at the moment... and all of a sudden, the Mass readings began to make sense in a personal, communal, liturgical, and providential way. He spoke clarity, calmness, and peace to my heart first. He consoled me in prayer so I could use what He revealed to speak life to others who were struggling to make sense of the situation!

The Gospel reading that day told us that St. Peter said, "Lord, it is good that we are here..." when he witnessed the transfiguration. (cf. Matthew 17:1-9) Just as St. Peter was shocked by the transfiguration of the Lord, we can also say to God that it is indeed good that we are here with Him when things are out of control!

We are reminded by the Gospel that He transfigured, not for His own sake, but to reveal to His disciples His divine nature (as a sign of consolation and preparation) as He was one step closer to fulfilling His mission and purpose. He manifested to them His glory, after He told them of His coming death, so they know that the passion with all its pains and sufferings is not the end-all-in-all but the resurrection itself. (cf. Preface of the Second Sunday of Lent) We, too, can know that we are not alone in our worries, anxieties, pains, or whatever we are going through at this moment! It is, indeed, good that we are where we need to be with Him when the news broke about what happened in Iran and the Middle East.

It is, indeed, good that we are here with Him in how we pray and how we come to worship. He is especially present with us when we come together for the Holy Eucharist as the Church! As a matter of fact, the Entrance Antiphon from the Second Sunday of Lent beautifully puts into words what our heart is yearning for this moment, "Of you my heart has spoken, seek His face. It is your face, O Lord, that I seek; hide your face not from me." Furthermore, the Collect reminded us that: "O God, who have commanded us to listen to your beloved Son, be pleased, we pray, to nourish us inwardly by your word, that, with spiritual sight made pure, we may rejoice to behold your glory."

In uncertain, scary, and unknown times of life, may we not give in to hopelessness and despair, or let our own minds and the noisiness of this world make us lose focus on Him. It is important to turn off the sensationalistic news media that constantly bombard us with more breaking news toward the point of us breaking apart because we can no longer take it anymore! Step back from those noises and learn to listen to Him because the Heavenly Father affirmed to us, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him." It is so important that we learn to listen to the Lord in the midst of what is going on, so we are not being crippled by our own internal conflict as well as exterior noise. I know that listening to Him is not what we want to do at this moment, but it is what we must do!

Listening to Him is hard, but it is necessary, else we will let the world rob that very peace that can only be found in Him and through Him. We must learn to step away and silence ourselves from all the noisiness to be able say to Him, "Lord, it is indeed good that we are here with you!" When we step back from the chaos and immerse ourselves in His loving presence, we are able to slow things down in order to see the bigger reality than the myopic tendency.

Listening to Him is important and must be the first thing that we do in order to learn prudentially, calmly, and wisely discern all things

and humbly, courageously, and resolutely take action when needed. We see reality in a more theocentric, transcendental, wider, and eternal way when we learn to listen to what He says to us through the Sacred Scriptures, saintly wisdom, wise Church teachings, and the loving people who are around us. The first reading this Sunday reminded us that God called Abraham to leave his father's house and the land of his people to an unknown land that was to be revealed in time!

Abraham was far from being perfect, but he trusted in the Almighty. He was willing to embark on a journey that stretched and tested his faith. There were times when he failed. Times when he doubted and questioned God's goodness. Times when he was pushed to his limit. Nonetheless, Abraham continued to follow His will for him. It was not easy, but he grew in his own faith journey by learning to trust in the Lord.

Thus, St. Paul in his second letter to St. Timothy urged him to bear all hardship, especially ones for the Gospel, with the strength that comes from God! (cf. 1:8-10) Are we willing to do the same? He continued by inviting us to live a holy life, not according to our own ability nor human measurement of works, but according to God's design, will, and grace bestowed on us in Christ Jesus.

Times like these will challenge and test us in many different ways! It will not be easy, but the Lord is with us. Furthermore, we are never alone because we have the Church with us. He has given people around us to walk alongside and help us through our ups and downs in life, but it is up to us to open up and ask for help when needed because we cannot go through life alone. Furthermore, we are being reminded of how much He loves us when we receive His Body and Blood at each and every Mass! Indeed, we are not alone, abandoned, forgotten, ignored, or rejected by God, for He has personally shown us that we are His beloved by the very giving of Himself to us. What began at the Last Supper is

perpetuated at each Mass... the same love shown on the Cross is re-presented in an unbloodied way every Eucharistic Sacrifice!

Therefore, it is, indeed, good that we choose to be here with Him through prayer and in worship. It is indeed good that we are present with Him and recognize His love for us at Mass. It is indeed good that we are here for one another as brothers and sisters in the faith. It is indeed good that we can lean on our faith and on one another through the trials and hardships of faith, knowing that we are never alone and He can use all things to sanctify, purify, and call us to greater holiness. It is not easy, nor do we really want it, but we all can embark on that journey of faith to the final destination of the heavenly homeland.

Just as the Father reminded us that, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him," may we learn to listen to Him in personal prayer time as well as how we come together to worship as the Church. May we learn to not be noisy and reactive or give into hopelessness and despair, but to learn from Him how to embrace all things out of courageous, faithful, self-donating, and sacrificial love. May we learn to invite the Holy Spirit, the very love between the Father and the Son, to come to guide, sanctify, purify, and transform us deep from within so we can become more Christlike each day.

The Savior and Redeemer did not have to reveal Himself through the transfiguration, but He did it to affirm the faith of His disciples in preparing them for the passion. He did not have to undergo suffering, but willingly did so because He genuinely loved us and freely gave Himself up for us as expiation for our sin! His love is the strength that helps us to bear all hardships for the Gospel, because it is the GOOD NEWS that sets us free, conquered death, and overcame sin. We rejoice in this good news, knowing that He already won the world and we will overcome all evils, trials, and hardships, too, with His grace. Truly, it is indeed good that we are here in this place and time in history because He is here with us.

Furthermore, it is a well-known fact that America wins quick, decisive battles but loses a long, dragged-out war. Our military is very capable and well-trained to handle tough situations, but it is often public opinion and politics that complicate a longer conflict or war. While fighting and winning a hard battle can be challenging, it is doable because human will and power can push through a lot of immediate, short-term obstacles to neutralize or overcome the enemies. Nonetheless, we have learned from repeated history that our commanders, leaders, and troops get disheartened when they are trying to fight the war from afar but losing the war at home by being scapegoated, attacked, questioned, doubted, or simply becoming spectacles that get pulled into the public opinion realm. Those who have been deployed before knowing that it is already hard to be away from one's family and support system, physically and mentally tiring working long hours and in challenging conditions, and especially trying to do the things that are needed day in and day out to get the mission objectives completed. It does take a lot, so having to deal with other people's two-cent thoughts on anything and everything does affect morale, well-being, and needed focus for the long fight! Our adversaries know this fact well, which is why they oftentimes invest a lot of money to influence opinions and feed the vocal voices to dissuade, discourage, and divide us against one another. Furthermore, it does not help since social media feeds into this instantaneous and noisy chamber because everyone is trying to outdo others and to ensure they have their say on anything and everything.

Sadly, our news media feeds on this frenzy because of the loss of journalistic integrity and the desire to sell quick, cheap, and sensationalistic news! If you do not believe me, we keep seeing "breaking news" every time we turn on a popular news channel. These so-called breaking news stories are often snatched from social media feeds and fed to the general population as long as there are enough "bites" and trending enough to get people's attention. These so-called news stations are simply yapping most of the time because we can mute

them for a while and still do not miss a thing, because they keep on repeating things with the same old BREAKING NEWS headlines. As a matter of fact, I have to tell many people to stop watching the news because the breaking news robs them of peace and begins to break them apart.

It is, indeed, sad to see what journalism has turned into! Truth is cheapened as long as it sounds "true" enough, and integrity is no longer practiced. Everything is simply ignored for the sake of views, advertisements, and influences! I believe we have already lost as a nation and as people because we forget that information can easily be manipulated, agenda driven, slyly crafted, and falsely presented in the day and age of instant information access. As a matter of fact, we quickly go to war on the internet, in politics, and within our society with one another from information warfare instead of actual military warfare itself!

It is very scary to see the result of what information manipulation can do and how many people quickly buy into whatever is being fed to them instead of learning to step back, discern, reflect, and respond as real adults with respect, dialogue, and common sense.

Furthermore, it is sad to see so many inconsiderate, self-centered, shallow, empty, and sad keyboard warriors who do more harm because they simply want to say what they want to say for the sake of making themselves feel good! Even before going into the real subject of this reflection, I wonder what will happen if we all learn to step back and invite God into our own discernment and learn to respond?!?

Not everything warrants a reaction. Not everything needs an opinion or comment. However, everything deserves a time of prayer and discernment so we can find real ways to respond and offer it up to God or unite it with Him when needed.

I am not here trying to get into politics or dissuade public opinions like many others are already doing day in and day out. I often tell people that they do not have enough money to get me to share what I really think! Furthermore, as a priest and military chaplain, I do not have the time to sit there to comment, pontificate, or waste time to make myself feel good or put down others. There are so many people who are hurting out there who just need us to be decent human beings to care, be present, and love them instead of being busybodies and noisy yappers of useless nothingness. Furthermore, I refrain from sharing because I want to protect the well-being of our troops and their families. They do not need more unneeded discouragements, anxieties, and dramas because they are already sacrificing enough to protect our nation and her allies, as well as having our freedom to have our voices and opinions heard in the public forums.

I want to take what seems to be so natural and human and elevate it to the spiritual level so you and I can see how the Devil and his minions are discouraging us from listening and responding to God! As a matter of fact, we can see in our own lives that it is easy for us to overcome short-term spiritual attacks and obstacles, but we lose heart and become unfocused in the long run. Unfortunately, our enemies know that too, so they have all the time in the world to wait for us when we get weak, discouraged, tired, being tested, and are being fed on those negativities. They manipulate, agitate, and magnify our desolation so we lose heart, want to give up, and give into hopeless and despair. They are very good at twisting things to create a false narrative, perception, understanding, feeling, or emotion, so we feel despondent and get stuck in that self-created hellish reality. Why, you asked?!? Just like they use shallow pleasure, satisfaction, addiction, and dependency for those who are going from sin to sin, they can also use desolation, despair, and negativity to keep us enslaved in our own miserable existence because they do not want us to be free or see the truth in God.

So, we must ask ourselves on both the basic human and deeper spiritual levels if we are truly free and at peace in the truth or not? Is God truly with us and we are in Him, or are we easily letting other people, things, or noises agitate, occupy, manipulate, enslave, and control us? We are looking for Him and resting in Him, or are we constantly moving from one thing to the next, looking for problems, or worrying about our own little fragile egos and their desire to be in control? Indeed, we can see the truth and respond with love if we can all humbly step back and see the bigger picture, turn off all the noisy distractions, and focus on Him.

We live in a very wonderful, grace-filled, and blessed but also fallen, imperfect, and broken world. There is a fine interplay of His grace strengthening us along the journey, as well as evil ones who try to discourage, deter, and fill our minds with lies and falsehoods. Sometimes, these struggles are created by us because we have forgotten to take care of our humanity and be attentive to our natural well-being. Our prayer life will not be conducive and productive if we ignore and do not pay attention to our physical, emotional, and psychological blessings. Not being attentive to our own humanity can create avoidable discouragements because we forget to care for our hearts with the attached emotions, feelings, and psychological baggage.

Therefore, we must learn to be patient with ourselves and others. It is hard, but we must learn to bear our faults with humility and confidence in God, which will help us to be more merciful and forgiving of others when we see theirs. In all circumstances, we are reminded to bear the spirit of interior renunciation and gentleness toward ourselves and others. I know it is very hard to accept this reality, especially when we are struggling and questioning what is going around us, but true freedom consists of allowing ourselves to accept that we are providentially permitted to be here, in all these circumstances, with these people, through these tasks and matters, to seek God and allow

Him to come to us and allow ourselves to love and serve Him in the present moment.

Life is a long journey with both human and spiritual warfare factors that need to be taken into account. It will take a lot of patience, humility, perseverance, and trust in Him. We will begin again A LOT of times! Life is full of stops, obstacles, and struggles that will hold us back, deter or distract us away from His love, but we must choose to begin again — over and over again — when we recognize our failure and brokenness. Instead of giving into false manifestation of pride, often expressed through our unwillingness to confess our sins, blame other people, or be held back by discouragement and despair, we should instead be humble, genuine, and receive His loving grace through the life of prayer and worship, especially in frequenting the Sacrament of Reconciliation and going to Mass, so that the sacramental graces received there will provide us the necessary strength to stand up and begin again. Just as in life, we will have many failures and moments when things fall apart, but we must not give up or give in to despair. Instead, we should choose to repent, try our best to amend our lives, trust in Him, and humbly choose to begin over again. Let us not give up but learn to stand up, reevaluate, reprioritize, and be reinvigorated to fight the good war with Him!

I know it is worrisome and scary. I know it is discouraging and frustrating. I know that the never-ending chaos is tiring and draining. Nonetheless, may we not lose hope but seek His face, choosing to live in His presence in prayer and in worship. May we learn to walk with Him each and every day on the journey of faith. May we be consoled in knowing that we can overcome all things through the grace bestowed on us in Christ Jesus, who destroyed death and sin so we can have eternal life through the Gospel. I know it is not easy, but it is indeed good that we are here with Him, as those who went before us were there with Him in their trials and hardships.

“JESUS”

When I was still doing my theology studies at St. Mary's Seminary in Houston, Texas, I volunteered my Saturdays at Our Lady of Lourdes parish to teach Vietnamese and Religious Education classes. It was a way for me to do something that I am passionate about instead of only worrying about my academic and assigned ministerial duties at the seminary. It was a way for me to give back to my Vietnamese heritage by teaching Vietnamese lessons to young students who were born in the United States, as well as handing on the faith to future generations of the Church. The first two years were fine because I had taught those types of programs before. However, it was in my third year of theology that God gave me a valuable lesson that still left a big imprint in my heart. It forever (re)shaped me as a catechist, priest, and shepherd in the Church.

I will be the first to admit that the Vietnamese culture still struggles to know how to care for and support special needs people. One year, we were given two special needs students because the parish's Religious Education program was not prepared, and the parents genuinely desired that their children receive the sacraments. I have to admit that I learned and matured a lot in my own understanding as a person who is called to hand on the faith through that formative year. They challenged me to find new ways to connect and communicate the foundational understanding of faith without overcomplicating it. It kept me grounded from all of my "heady" graduate theological studies because we have to teach in ways that our students could understand instead of what we would like for them to know.

We took on two students to teach (outside of our class time) on top of our regular Religious Education program. One was almost borderline autistic, and the other one was slower to comprehend things than normal. Each class time was unique because we had to adjust our lesson and timing to their ability to receive that day. Some days, the

autistic student did not want to be in class. He would act out in emotional and frustrating ways, even at times using his pencil to stab up just to tell us that he did not want to learn. It was frustrating, discouraging, and humbling at the same time.

I learned to be more patient, gentle, simple, creative, and especially more prayerful. I reached out to friends for their advice and help in finding resources and ways to teach the students. I learned to accept my own limitations and keep things simple so we can relate and teach in ways that can be understood by our students (instead of how we like things to be). I learned to adjust my expectations, simply do my best each time, and leave the rest to God. That "best" changes each time, not according to my standards but according to His will at the present moment, and that is what made it the best because it is filled with His grace.

To say the least, teaching them was really challenging because there were days that they did not want to learn and would throw tantrums. There were days that they were not interested in anything and we had to learn to let go of our plans to accompany them as best as we can. Many days just consisted of walking around the grounds, trying to teach them a few lines of the common prayers, or doing repeated activities so they can understand about the Real Presence. We were doubtful at times how much they comprehended and whether they were somewhat ready, at least able to minimally understand and receive the Sacraments. There was a lot of trusts and letting go in the process!

However, I was also nervous because I really wanted them to know the basic foundations of faith, especially as we prepared them to receive First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion. I prayed that they would come to know Him, whom they would receive! Thus, we used a lot of repetitive and reinforced lessons to teach the simple truth that Jesus is truly present behind the bread and wine and that they are going to receive His Precious Body and Blood.

One day at Mass, at the moment of the consecration, the autistic student pointed and said, "Jesus!" It caught me off guard and brought me to tears. That moment was a consolation from God and filled me with grace. Everything that we underwent was worth it for that exact moment! In that one simple word, he encapsulated our Catholic's foundational understanding and belief in the Real Presence.

On the day when they received their Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Eucharist, I began to realize and noticed that they were the ones who taught me all along. I learned so much about loving and forming disciples instead of trying to pervade information and completing the required lessons. I learned to trust in God and His love for the children instead of what they need to know in order to pass the preparation course. I learned so much about letting the children's genuine desire and love for the Sacraments be the gauge of our efforts instead of what they needed to learn. I learned that the Lord is able to reach out, speak to, and transform hearts in His divine providence -- in His own way and time -- and all He ever needs from us was to be present as His instruments of loving care. I learned in those two years teaching those students about what it means and takes to hand on the faith more than I learned in my own regular assigned classes and my graduate courses in theology and ministry at the seminary. I learned that those children taught me more than I taught them, for they introduced, formed, and allowed me to see, understand, and embrace what it meant to teach the faith.

In the same way, I want to first encourage those who are struggling when you and I feel that we are inadequate, unprepared, or overwhelmed at how to hand on the faith to our young people. We should do our best to prepare ourselves, be creative in how we connect and teach our students, and make the message relatable and substantial in faithfully teaching what the Church teaches; but, also at the same time, know that we can only do so much and have to trust in God and His goodness. We can only toil the grounds and plant the

seeds, but it is up to each individual person to receive His grace and ultimately up to Him to bring all things to completion according to His infinite wisdom and providential goodness. We might be able to do everything, but I think we do the best we can teach and remind our young people who Jesus is and how He is present in their lives, especially at each and every Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Second, I was to invite you to remember how you and I felt when we first received Him for the time. Not counting the nervousness of having so many eyes fixated on us, but the actual joy and love we experienced in receiving the One who truly loves us! Who stole our joy? What robbed us of that simplicity of heart? Why did we lose our peace? When did we stray away? How did we become so bogged down, distracted, worrisome, and pulled apart by the things of this world? Where did we place our self-worth and priorities in life? If we have somehow lost our focus and strayed away because of life, let us do our best to return to that first moment of love and come back to Him who gave Himself out of love for us.

There have been many talks by many famous and influential experts on how to better form our children and young people in the faith, to captivate their attention, and to have a better retention rate. Nevertheless, this particular experience taught me that it is not about what we do but how we can be present, genuinely form and hand on the faith to our children by being there for them. At the end of the day, knowing more is important so they can be prepared for the future and be grounded in their relationship with God, more knowledgeable of their faith as to better discern the right from wrong, and love their Catholic faith in all its richness; however, we cannot forget that it is God who is at work in them just as He is at work in us in His own divine providence. We desire result and control, to gauge our effectiveness in catechesis and religious education, the formation of moral and faith-centered values, but many of life's natural elements are out of our control. We can only do our best to instill within our own children the desire to seek God,

teach them to love Him, instill in them at best as we can to desire His will for them, but we have to allow God to be God in His own way and time. All we can ever do as educators, catechists, the faithful, or clergy in the Church is to genuinely give the gift of ourselves to others, share with them what we believe in a loving and caring way, and create an environment for them to grow and mature as they are able.

Some will lose their ways, others might not understand, and many will not get it all, but that is fine! The Church will always be here for them just as she has been here for us. We might be smaller in size. We might be rejected by more people. We will be abandoned by our younger people because they do not see us as being appealing, attractive, or an essential part of their lives...and that is fine! We can only try our best to form and hand on the faith as we are able and we leave it to them to receive as they are able. This requires radical trust and a lot of letting go of what we are so used to in a corporate, structure, goals-centered, agenda-driven society. We are called to be the Church, the refuge of sinners, field hospital and help for Christians in times of hurt, rehabilitation point for those who want to change their lives, and the holy, loving, genuine place where people come to seek and worship God.

We teach our children and young people much more than what we can in religious education classes. We can teach them by offering Masses well, pray together as a parish and individual families, and how we care for one another. There will be rejections, people who will sometimes be lost and do not appreciate what we do, but that is fine. The Lord Jesus Christ experienced that in His own days, too! We can only be genuine, transparent, and humble, but most important of all, trusting that God is in control. He will lead everyone to Him in His own providential time and plan. We, as the Church, can only be here for those who seek Him, living out our baptismal and particular vocations, trusting in Him, and never cease to care and pray for one another. May the Lord bless us and our children, and let us try our best to lead everyone to Him

with genuine care and love, especially the least of our brothers and sisters.

How blessed we are when we simply recognize that it is Jesus who loves us so much, and we get to receive Him at Mass! That love should motivate us to live in the state of grace to worthily receive Him, to seek holiness so we can become more like Him each day, and to share that joyful love with everyone we encounter because we want them to experience that love, too. You see? By knowing WHY and WHO we receive at Mass, we become Eucharistic in offering our sacrifices in union with His, thankful for the wondrous love He gives us, and radiating the grace received in our very own life and deeds.

Knowing our belovedness is knowing Jesus and sharing this love with others as best as we are able and as they are able to receive. It might not be perfect, and we might fail at times, but faith is not just about knowing in an informational or methodological way, but the understanding of the heart in embracing and loving the One who first loved us. Therefore, I encourage you to reflect on how to you and I can better share this wondrous love in our daily interactions and relationships. Most important of all, please take some time to tenderly gaze upon Him when we are at Mass and simply say, "Jesus, I love you!" "My Lord and my God!" or simply, "Jesus," with everything we have.

TO PERSEVERE WHEN THINGS FALL APART

A few years ago, I led a group of my active-duty parishioners to a pilgrimage to Rome and Assisi. Little did we know that the pilgrimage would providentially coincide with the passing of Pope Francis, so the chaos began to unfold as Rome went into full mourning mode. Everything began to fall apart in order to fall into place as God intended it to be! There were a lot of hiccups, delays, and mishaps with the trip, but being military, many of our people were willing to pivot, adapt, and overcome the obstacles as best as possible, so as to make it into a spiritual experience. Thus, I would like to share with you some of those experiences as a way to reflect on how God can use things that do not go our way to bring greater goodness and love as He planned for us.

Our flight to Rome was very interesting and unexpected. An elderly father of one of our parishioners was joining us from the US for the pilgrimage, and he was fine throughout his stay with us beforehand. However, as I was sitting in my seat, my former Parish Life Coordinator ran up the aisle and told me in a distressed voice and in tears, "Father, can you please come? My father-in-law is not breathing, and they are working on him." I quickly made my way down to the aisle as the flight attendant asked for help from any passenger who had a medical background. I quickly saw his family members, who were in tears out of shock, but I stood back so he could be medically assisted first. I kept my eyes on him, making sure to step in if anything was to happen.

For some reason, he stopped breathing for a while, and the Apple Watch notified them... they had to give him oxygen, especially due to the thinner air in the plane. Once they stabilized him, I sat down with him (while he still had the oxygen mask on) to check up on him. He told me he had a dream of being uplifted to heaven and felt so at peace that he was not aware of where he was...

I believe it was a near-death experience, or a kind of free gift and consolation that the Lord gave him. Nonetheless, it definitely scared his family and many people on that plane! I told him that I am going to give him a "get out of jail free" card, just in case anything escalates (in giving him a general absolution). His son went back to sit close to him for the rest of the flight. We checked into the airport's medical facility once we landed, and we kept an eye on him throughout the trip... but he was himself again afterward. Whatever happened was definitely something we did not expect, but I am grateful to be there.

As shared earlier, our trip was changed when Pope Francis passed away, and Rome went into full mourning mode. Our Vatican Museums time was significantly delayed, and we had to persistently tell the staff that things were properly booked and scheduled. They kept demanding new documents that were not communicated to us beforehand. It was frustrating, but I am not the type of person who is known to give up easily, nor was my Parish Life Coordinator, so we stuck to our guns so our group could get to the beautiful artworks and the Sistine Chapel before it gets closed down for the conclave. They finally made it work after an almost hour delay!

Because of that delay, we later found out that the main and surrounding streets to St. Peter's Basilica were blocked due to state officials and dignitaries coming in to pay respect to the Holy Father. We had a Mass scheduled at Santa Maria in Traspontina, but the police and security officials would not let us through, even when I showed them the confirmation. Furthermore, our group was being diverted elsewhere because they were trying to move the crowd away from the Via della Conciliazione. I asked my assistant to keep the group together as I tried to find my way in. I was able to find the Benedictine monks (the community in charge of the parish) to come with me to vouch for the group, but they said that I was fine to come in as a priest, but not the rest of the people, due to security restrictions. Out of desperation, I asked the monk if there was another way...

Praise God, the pastor of the parish was around, and he was very understanding. By that time, we were way past our scheduled time, and there was another group in the main sanctuary for their next scheduled Mass. I asked him a favor, if we could find just a small chapel or room to celebrate Mass, because it would mean a lot to the pilgrims. Out of their kindness and compassion, the priests and brothers set up a space for us to offer Mass in the sacristy space. I was asked to return the favor by consecrating the hosts for the Holy Father's Funeral Mass tomorrow, which I was surprisingly but honored to supply. In that sacristy space, we were literally surrounded by the Eucharist in all the ciboria (after the consecration). That sacristy became a big tabernacle. What fell apart came together as He intended, and it was a great surprise and honor to consecrate the Eucharist to be used to honor the life of a humble pope.

I explained that reality to our pilgrims to remind them that God gave us an unexpected but wonderful gift on that day! We did not get to go through the Holy Door as desired or have Mass where we were scheduled, but we were led to where we were needed, as well as to humble us in recognizing that He was indeed truly present with us throughout the journey. Our Mass was definitely different as we took time to soak in His goodness and give thanks for what we were given an opportunity to do. I took the time to thank the priests and brothers for being so merciful and accommodating, and gave thanks to the Lord after Mass for another example of letting things fall apart as I planned for things to be in order to fall into place as He willed them to be in His infinite goodness, wisdom, and love.

On another occasion that particularly and personally affected me in many ways, things fell apart when I was asked to lead the Military Council of Catholic Women's European Retreat at Santiago de Compostela a few years ago. The Devil began to throw hiccups along the way, starting small at first, but they began to intensify as the trip got closer. I knew deep from my heart that those events were not coincidental or accidental, and even though I got frustrated at times, I

was able to be at peace with the grace of God. I knew from my own life's experiences that the evil one always likes to throw obstacles and discouragements when an important event is to happen or if it is going to yield great salvation of souls. I was praying throughout the trip and believe I have enough time now to put into words the graces that came from those blessed opportunities.

First, I had come to accept that there is a price to pay if one is seeking to do the will of God. There is suffering involved for those who are instrumental in bringing people back to Him because the Devil and his minions hate those who "steal" souls from them. Suffering for the sake of the Kingdom comes in different ways because we are being challenged, stretched, and tried when we try to become more humble, trusting, simple, childlike, and trusting in Him. Furthermore, the evil ones hate the truth and like to make life difficult for those who bring people to the truth! Therefore, one must accept the consequences of choosing Christ and letting Him be our first and foremost priority.

This one particular episode highlights how things had to fall apart to come together according to His plan. I began to lose sleep a few days ahead. There was nothing wrong physically or mentally, but I began to not sleep well. Perhaps it was the anticipation or worries... but I am used to that typical occurrence because it happens often as I prepare for a retreat or anything that might be spiritually impactful. I know that doing something that brings people back to God will have a price to pay, and I was willing and prepared myself for it. It is a "weird" anticipation of knowing that it will be good, but there will be challenges along the way as well.

To be honest, I was really looking forward to visiting Santiago de Compostela because I heard so much about it. I never walked the Camino, but heard how it had changed many people's lives. I heard it is beautiful and should be on my priority list during my tour here in Europe. Therefore, I was mentally hyped up and spiritually looking forward to this

wonderful experience! I was praying for the retreatants as well as myself so I can be a vessel of His grace and an instrument of His peace.

On the day of the trip, my bus route got delayed due to the typical London traffic, but we made it right just in time to make the next connection (because the other bus was held up by traffic as well). There was a bit of an initial delay with the flight, but it got pushed through... However, as soon as the plane was taxiing toward the runway, a constant loud noise began to take over. Even though I am not a mechanic in any way, shape, or mean, I could tell that something was not right with the landing gears (from my experience being the maintenance group chaplain). I was glad the captain made the right choice to take a look at the problem, either we will take off with the landing gears not closing properly or not having them work when we land. Nonetheless, that added almost seven hours of delay to the trip as we hung out at the airport waiting for the problem to be rectified. It was a little bit frustrating not knowing when we would head out, and the airplane company was very poor in communicating with us. I took the earlier flight in order to make it in time for the team dinner, but ended up there much later than our parish group, which headed out after me.

It was a very long evening and early day as our flight arrived in the local area around 1 AM! It took a good while to get all the border crossing paperwork done since there was only one customs officer late at night. It was almost 2 AM when everyone on our flight was standing in line trying to get a taxi to town (since Uber and other rideshare services do not operate there). It took almost another two hours to get to the place where the retreat was taking place, so I got settled in my room around 3:30 AM or so. As I was trying to lie down, I received a frantic message from a parishioner about a work situation, asking me for intercessory prayer. I tried my best to calm the person down and assure them of my prayers for the situation. I was tired, so I did not sleep well, only ended up with only about 2 plus hours of rest before the next scheduled event for the retreat. It was definitely a very long day, but I was grateful that I

made it... It was definitely a challenge to get to Santiago... and coffee helped!

It was a weird feeling as I walked around the town because it felt like I was here before... or at least seen these places in a dream! As a matter of fact, I dreamt about that experience a while back, remembering that I was running frantically, trying to find my way in a very new place (that I had not been to before) that looked like an ancient town. It was weird, but it began to make sense! In a very unexplainable and unique way, I began to understand that I was meant to be there. I took the time to reflect and began to see how God was connecting the dots together to get me there.

However, if you think that was the end of the hiccups... Oh, boy... that was just the first act! On the day of my actual talk, the Devil intensified his attack even more. There was a crisis at my parish, and so many people frantically messaged me trying to find a solution. Our Catholic staff team was on retreat, so no one was home to handle things except for the volunteers who were put in place to cover for us. That was the first curveball, and I tried to calm people down, come up with Plan B, and coordinate things from afar while trying to prepare for the main talk itself. Nonetheless, things did not get easier but got more intense.

Right after Mass, we found out that the regular room that was used for our presentation was double-booked for a diocesan event. We were pushed to a smaller classroom upstairs without audio and visual supports (because I had a PowerPoint presentation prepared for the talk). The coordinator was very apologetic, and I knew it stressed her out. I tried to console her and said it would work out with or without what I called "first-world amenities" because God is with us. However, one of the participants was very insistent and used her Spanish to work behind the scenes to make things happen. I was in the room prepared for my talk without the computer and projector access, but they got things

going at the last minute. Thus, I knew that this was another obstacle put up by the Devil and his minions, but His grace ultimately prevailed.

Throughout that whole retreat, there were a few inconveniences and roadblocks along the way, but there were also many people who came to confession and wanted to talk. I knew deep within my heart that the Holy Spirit was at work, and that was why the evil ones kept throwing out obstacles to impede His transformative grace. Even though I was frustrated at times, I was never lost peace. There was an abiding and deep sense of peace because I knew this was where He wanted me to be; it was good for both my soul and for those who were there, and His grace was definitely at work! Even though there were some worrying moments, but I knew that God was there and everything would be alright. True peace is not just a false understanding and expectation that things need to be perfect to be good, but to know that He is with us and we will overcome all things through perseverance, patience, courage, and humility.

I am sharing with you this one particular experience as an encouragement because I believe we often get discouraged in our faith journey, especially as we are about to make important choices that impact our lives or are able to help others. The evil ones know our desire and always like to throw in obstacles, roadblocks, and discouragements to make us lose heart and lose focus on God. That has always been and will be the tactics of the Devil and his minions! We can be frustrated, sad, and perhaps angry at times, but we must not lose hope, become negative, reactive, resentful, and let doubts creep in and cripple us from within. Life is not always filled with sunshine, favorable weather, and blessings because it naturally needs rain, storms, and trials for it to be real. We do not always want to accept that reality, but it is the truth, and we just have to do our best in order to embrace our challenges as best as we are able without losing our peace in Him. Therefore, let us not be discouraged but invite God into each and every moment to handle them with grace.

Life is very much like a pilgrimage. It is messy, frustrating, and discouraging at times. Things do not always go our way, even when we work hard, plan things out, and do our best to mitigate issues. As a matter of fact, reality and life are way bigger than what we can see, understand, and comprehend, and there are so many things that are outside of our control. Thus, we can either choose to always be negative, resentful, bitter, angry, or cynical or allow ourselves to be pilgrims on the Way toward Him, never forgetting the challenging and joyful moments of the adventure instead of fixating on one thing after the next. Furthermore, it is important for us to open our eyes to see who is around us and on the Way with us, always remembering and recalling why we persevere, remain faithful, and choose to love. Things will get challenging and disheartening at times, and we love to fixate ourselves on what we should do and how to overcome them, even toward the detriment of ourselves and others by allowing them to become the only things that we focus on instead of the people who matter and the reason why we live.

Every time we embark on a pilgrimage, I remind our people that we are pilgrims and not tourists! A typical tourist focuses on the itinerary and expects to do things to check off their list. A typical tourist oftentimes expects things to be catered to or adapted to their needs. They see objects and things based on historical, architectural, or social media interests. A tourist sees sights, discovers new places, learns interesting facts, takes photographs, and accumulates souvenirs. A tourist may be hasty and impatient, mentally checking off things because they want to show others or to themselves that they had done this or that thing, like everyone else! The tourist travels to have a break from their daily life and wants an enticing experience to escape who they normally are. The tourist returns home the same person as the one who left, save perhaps for a broadened mind.

However, a pilgrim sets out to discover themselves. The pilgrim gains insights and discerns new truths about oneself. The pilgrim travels

with the expectation that the one who returns will not be the same person as the one who set out. The pilgrim opens his or her mind to see the signs, learn the lessons, and embrace the journey. He or she will not become a slave to a timetable or be distracted by gift shops. The pilgrim is open to the possibility of being challenged by God on the journey. Thus, the outcome of the pilgrimage will be the transformation that has taken place inside the person. Therefore, the pilgrim will return with an impression imprinted on the soul because they focus on the journey and travel to find out who they truly are. Simply put, a pilgrim on the Way grows in love of Jesus.

Much more, a pilgrim does not expect everything to go smoothly. They do not get stressed over delays, itinerary changes, bad weather, or when things do not go their way. They are respectful of others, especially of the local customs, cultures, and the people on the Way with them. The pilgrim is open to encounters with others that build community and relationships. The pilgrim is open to sharing their personal faith stories and to appreciating and learning from the faith of others. The pilgrim learns to be patient and forgiving of those who are trying to make a living (even with less-than-desirable tactics because of the presence of tourists). The pilgrim even accepts the presence of beggars and the ubiquitous expectation of tips, realizing that the locals' pay rates are low or the practices could have been perpetuated by other tourism. Simply put, a pilgrim has an open mind and places themselves in God's loving providence to learn from the journey and on the journey.

If you and I really think about it, we can learn much from the attitude we should have when we are on a pilgrimage and expand it toward our very own lives as we embark on the spiritual journey toward our final destination of the heavenly homeland. Things will not go our way and are, many times, out of control! However, may we not lose the sense of wonder and awe, simplicity and joy, as well as hope and trust in the God of the journey who is with us. As a matter of fact, we are being reminded that the Lord walked with His disciples everywhere in His

public ministry, and He taught them along the way, and took time to gently guide them when they did not get it right. Therefore, we also learn to embrace our life as a journey toward Him, learning, abiding, persevering, and remaining faithful to Him even when it gets challenging. So, will we choose to be typical and busy tourists, or will we be mindful and faith-filled pilgrims walking alongside the Lord and one another on the Way toward our final destination?

ACCEPTING THE WILL OF GOD

We all have our own particular comfort zones that we like to stay within because they give us the feeling of being in control and knowing what is in there. However, we remain inside our own center of an egocentric universe when we do not will to grow bigger ourselves. In a day and age where we have been told that self-empowerment is the most powerful and life-freeing choice that one can have, a self-centered world can be very miserable, pitiful, and toxic because we have never been truly free to live as we are called to be. The greatest liberation that we can attain is not the freedom to live as we would have liked and for things to be our way, but the true freedom to know and be who God wants us to be without fears of being judged by the opinions of this world. Accepting His will is, indeed, hard because it requires us to go outside of our very own reservations and fears in order to grow where He has nudged and led us.

A few years ago, I was asked to accept an assignment that I particularly did not care for. First, it was hard because I like to take my role seriously in caring for my parishioners and the people who are entrusted to me. After many rough starts and hurdles with my transition into the military and being in a new environment, especially having to deal with many fallouts, changes, and challenges after our civilian priest left his duty, I wanted to enjoy some type of stability. I wanted to simply be at home and not have to travel so much for training and other duties while having to deal with constant changes on top of the busy daily rhythm.

I was mentally tired and resisting anything that would remotely equate to "more" and "changes" in any conversation. So, when I received news that I was going to be assigned to support a remote location, I hesitantly did not want to accept it at first. Second, it was a place in the Arctic Circle, and I do NOT like the cold. It did not help when I began to look at the daily and average temperatures, and they were all in the

negative Fahrenheit readings. Therefore, I felt all the normal human reasons to not like the assignment.

However, no matter how much I was feeling, I could not find the real reasons to say no. I knew that they were all based on my particular situations and personal likes, desires, and preferences. I never felt the real conviction to reject the request. I made the decision to pray and was struggling with coming to a personal commitment or liking. In a way, I kept putting everything on the back burner, thinking that, if it was truly His will and this was what He wanted for me, things would somehow work out. Even though I did my due diligence to make sure that the paperwork was proper and going as needed, I never put any personal investment or any extra proactiveness to make sure that it was something that I was looking forward to.

To be honest with you, I was negatively indifferent about the whole thing. Nonetheless, things just fell into place, and I found myself getting closer to the trip. As a matter of fact, I did not even take the extra effort to pack ahead. I procrastinated. Even though I did not want to fail my leadership and the other people who were depending on me to fulfill the duty, I somehow felt like I was personally and spiritually lacking. Trust me, I was on the edge of wavering back and forth because I was confused. On one side, I was praying that I would gain the zeal to accept it with true love and devotion; on the other side, I was somehow spiritually afraid and reserved in accepting His will for me.

Nonetheless, there came a time when I began to step back and go beyond my own little ruckus in order to see the bigger picture, and I began to notice how His hands were working to bring things together. He was at work, and I was humbled at how wonderfully He allowed things to come to fruition, even though I had my doubts and reservations. At that moment, I began to pray that His will be done, and I will not be an impediment to His work. I prayed that I would become His loving

instrument for the people who only had a chance to see a priest TWICE a year -- for Christmas and Easter.

I recognized that I was ordained as a priest in persona Christi for the Church -- His people. When I allowed my fears and reservations to hold me back, I was not able to be who I truly am called to be. I was enslaved and held back by my own self-created little bubble and comfort zone. I had to die to myself in order to Him to truly be at work in and through me. When I finally understood that this particular assignment helped me to be a priest for His people, and that is what I am called to do through my own ordination and personal free will to answer His call. That particular assignment was another opportunity for me to accept His will for me and to be His presence for the people who yearned for Him. To be able to be a priest in offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and the sacraments to His people was what I was called to do, and to deny that would be running away from who I am and what gives me life!

I had to adjust to the environment and pace of life when I was there. They are definitely different than a regular (bigger) operational base. As a matter of fact, I am on a very busy schedule at my permanent station. On top of being a priest, ministering to the Catholic community and its administrative works, I also have to take care of other duties in being a chaplain to the squadrons that I am assigned to support.

Within a short transition timeframe, having to learn a new culture and environment of the military that is totally different than the civilian world, I also have to deal with a lot of problems caused by the changes and transitions that were happening in our own Catholic community. Those issues caused a lot of headaches and extra efforts to examine and address on the pastoral and professional levels. I basically had to both build relationship with parishioners while having to be the bad guy in tightening matters that were let go and left by the wayside. Since I was new to the military, I had to undergo a lot of initial training classes and

technical courses, so I was busily occupied and mentally tired since July of 2021. So, getting this support mission was a surprised, unexpected, and different change of atmosphere and pace for me.

The first day was tiring because I did not have much sleep due to the long flights all the way from the West Coast. Once we hit the ground, our day was filled with many scheduled visitations since we had Archbishop Broglio, the Ordinary of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, with us. I think all of us — the Archbishop, another brother priest, and myself — were all tired at the end of the day. However, it was a joyful occasion because we had the opportunity to celebrate Mass with the faithful.

I was proud to witness the Archbishop conferred the Sacrament of Confirmation on a service member that we were remotely forming (via an online platform). The small community enjoyed spending time with the Archbishop after Mass with an intimate dinner. Even though it was long, it was a blessing for many people, especially for the faithful here to spend time with their shepherd. With that Mass, I am reminded that we truly are a global Archdiocese that “the sun never sets” (because we are present all around the world to serve and support our military personnel and their families).

After the busy first day, the next few days were personally rough because my body and psyche needed the time to adapt and recalibrate with the time and light differences since the sun is up for the majority of the day here. Unlike the winter when it gets dark the majority of the day; springtime brings a completely different experience. For most days, the sun never sets until midnight or so (even then, there is no complete darkness), and it quickly rises around 4:00 AM. There are only a few twilight hours each day, and that phenomenon is in itself something unique and takes a good while for my body and mind to adjust. Even though I was knocked out the first night because I was so tired, the next

few nights were rough with the time difference and because the outside light kept creeping in behind the blacked-out curtains.

The air was fresh and clean there, and it feels nice to breathe it outside. Nonetheless, the buildings there are old and filled with a lot of (recycled) dusts. My allergies acted up being inside most of the time. My eyes kept watering and I sneezed more frequently up there. Ironically, while it felt good to be inside where it was warm and toasty, the respiratory system felt much better being outside with the cleaner air. I thought I do not have to use my allergy medicines when I am up there, but my body tells me otherwise.

Please know that it was not all doom and gloom. There were so many blessings and lessons learned along the way.

I am fortunate to be around the time for the annual Greenlandic Heritage Week, when the Base hosted and welcomed many of our local villagers. There were many cultural events and experiences in collaboration with the indigenous population. As a matter of fact, I learned that the Base is doing many projects and events throughout the year to connect, support, and build relationship with our local partners and allies. It was also good to see other NATO service members and civilians who are working side by side so we can have the strategic presence in such a remote place. That was, definitely, one of the more unique experiences that my military ministry has afforded me.

Nonetheless, the greatest blessing for me was to experience the power of the Eucharist with our very small community there. Coming from a larger base and with a faith community that is way bigger and with more things to do, the small chapel and its modest size of the faithful was definitely a change of pace and perspective. Daily life was much slower there and people take time to talk to one another. On top of that, the Base community there was much closer to one another because people see and hang out with their peers more often. People ran into

each other at least several times a week at the main Dining Facility, Base Exchange, or other events. For me, that sense of camaraderie was a blessing and gift, because it is often not seen in a normal operational base with thousands of people at different places.

That sense of community followed through when we gathered for religious events as well. Of course, the numbers of participants for different events are much smaller in comparison to larger bases; but, if one takes the ratio and percentage of the total population, their participation to different morale and religious events were very commendable. For me, that in itself is a great lesson and reminder that our ministry and care for people cannot and should not be measured with mere numbers and quantifiable means alone. Without a doubt, to be able to gather with the faithful and to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in such a remote and extreme area was itself a very great personal blessing for me!

In such a small and seem-to-be forgotten place, the Lord is there with His people in and through the Eucharist! Every time we offered the Holy Sacrifice, we were united with the universal Church, as well with all holy ones in Heaven and the souls in Purgatory. In that small corner of the world, we were not and will never be alone! The good Lord is present with His people, and even when Mass is not able to be offered throughout the year, He is still there in and through the Eucharist preserved in the Tabernacle. It boggled my mind and warms my heart to know that He is never not present with His people in a very real and personal way — Body, Soul, and Divinity — in the Most Blessed Sacrament.

To offer the Holy Sacrifice and to be with His people, no matter how big or small the size of the community might be, is the greatest blessing for me as a priest. To be able to confect and make presence the Eucharist for His people through my own unworthy offering of the Mass in a small remote chapel, for me, is the same being in a grand and

beautiful basilica because the Lord is there with us. No matter how big or small the venue might be, where one or two gathered with faith, in His name, He is there with us!

For me, this whole mission support experience was a faith-affirming trip because it reminded me of the universality of the Church. It afforded me the opportunity to see how wonderful it is to be a part of the universal Church, united in prayer, connected with one another and the greater communion of saints through the Eucharist, even if we were in a very remote and desolate location. Who would have thought that He is present there in a very real way with His people in the Arctic Circle? While many take Mass and the life of faith for granted, seeing it as a choice and convenience, our brothers and sisters there only get to attend and participate in the Mass for two short periods of time in a year.

What I have witnessed there (like what I have witnessed in other missionary lands in the past), those who choose to come to Mass in remote places, their life of faith has to be intentional and personal. Nonetheless, for those who seek Him, the Lord is never far from His people. With Him, we are never abandoned, forgotten, or alone because we are all connected with one another in and through the Eucharist. Hence, even though this was not something that I was looking forward in the beginning, it was a personally valuable and well cherished experience to be with Christ and to bring Him to His people in the Arctic Circle.

When I was able to step back and recognize how God was at work, I was able to receive His love and really live what I am called to do. As a matter of fact, I was beginning to be afraid, but for a different reason, because I was worried about whether there were going to be obstacles that would stop me from going on the mission. I was really worried and dreading when I had to take the COVID PCR test the day before my departure. Even though I know that I am well and possess no symptoms, I was worried that I was somehow ignorant of my own well-

being and was going to fail. Doubts and fears again entered, but I stepped back and prayed. I told myself, "If God had led me here this far, He would lead me to where I need to be because this is His will for me." In all of these events, I had to learn to let go, listen, receive, and trust in His goodness instead of being enveloped in my own little world.

Each and every one of us is called by God to a life that is much bigger than our own little egocentric worlds! Faith is that very lifelong adventure in following His will for us, because it is a life of discipleship. True faith will require us to seek continual conversion, to let go of what is holding us back, to return when we have strayed away, to live out what He has called us to do in firm hope even though doubts and fears might creep in at times, and to choose to love the One who first loves us by loving one another. Accepting the will of God is hard because it requires us to let go of our very own will to be in control and to be comfortable where we are! Even though we might live our lives comfortably where we are, we remain afraid, reserved, controlled, or dictated by lesser goods or other people until we willingly humble ourselves to embark on the journey that calls us outside of our very own little world in order to trust in Him. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, do not be afraid but take the time to listen and allow God's will to be at work in us and through us.

TO BE FAITHFUL UNTIL THE END

As a city dweller and person who was not very exposed to agricultural life, I did not know much about the art of winemaking. I did not know much about the different types of grapes, their complexities, or how the soil types and the mix ratio all play into how different wines and numerous vineyards are able to stand out from one another. Perhaps some will like a stronger, darker, bolder, and more noted wine, while others enjoy a lighter type of wine. However, each winery has its own unique character, just as a different batch of wine has its own unique taste and complexity. Therefore, I would like to reflect on a spiritual lesson that I have learned from the simple grapes.

First, it is important to note that our typical, modern table grapes are engineered to be more appealing, but they actually have less juice than grapes that are grown for winemaking. They are more eye-catching and plumped up, and have more pulp but less juice, so the consumers can enjoy biting into them. However, they tend to be more on the bland and typical side because they are engineered to give more neutral flavorings and geared for mass production. As a matter of fact, since many consumers want their grapes to be conveniently eaten, many table grapes are seedless, too. They will definitely lack depth and flavor if they are to be used for winemaking.

If you walk through a winery's vineyards, you will see that wine grapes are much smaller, have very thick skins, and contain more seeds. All those factors impart more flavor and depth to the wine. Furthermore, if you look at the soil types that are being used for vineyards, you will quickly find that they are chosen to be near hillsides and more mountainous areas. Harsher conditions and environments force the vines and their roots to go deeper to find nourishment and nutrients. The same type of grapes can be used, but each vineyard will produce a totally different set of products because the unique compositions of the weather, soils, grape qualities, and wine masters' skillsets all play big

parts in the end product. When we drink wine, we are able to taste the different complexities and distinctive notes because of each vineyard's unique conditions and factors. It is, therefore, an art for wine masters to know the particular characters of their grapes and vines in order to properly mix and highlight their notes.

We can use this lesson from the grapes and apply it to the uniqueness of the universal Church. I believe too many of us expect the Church to be like a uniform, commercialized, and consumer-driven version of table grapes instead of recognizing the complexity and uniqueness of local dioceses and regions. We oftentimes demand and expect smaller, poorer, or lesser-known areas of the Church to comply and become like what we are used to in our own consumeristic, busy, developed, comfortable, institutional, and western version of our liking. We love to impose our particular demands and expectations of American standards on other parts of the universal Church because we think we are right, or this is how we think reality should be for all. Nonetheless, this cookie-cutter and uniform mindset rob the richness of the Lord's vineyards and subconsciously dismisses the Holy Spirit's power and working through the People of God. Perhaps we need to remember that the Sanctifier and Paraclete endows us with different gifts and charisms for His greater glory and effective preaching of the Good News to all. Not all of us are the same... we are a universal Church of many people and cultures!

The Sacred Scriptures teach us that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches! We are all connected to Him and in Him. Because of Him, we find our universal identity as His Mystical Body. In the Church, we find our catholicity and common identity. However, we are also unique because we are different parts of the one Body. Our uniqueness does not make us turn against one another, or should it make us turn things into a game of who gets what or can influence more with what they have, but they are there for us to complement each other. As a matter of fact,

the most "productive" and "effective" parts of the Church are found in the developing, poorer, or more challenging parts of the world.

There are so many of our brothers and sisters who are suffering for their faith. There are so many who have to make daily and personal choices of letting go of worldly riches, social statuses, or political influences to be believers. Many of our spiritual siblings are choosing to make the Church's mission their own by letting their faith be lived out loud and in service of their neighbors. The parts of the Church that are flourishing are those that allow the Good News to set them free and allow themselves to be empowered by their faith instead of the secularistic, consumeristic, or political voices.

On the contrary, we also recognize the more comfortable, institutionalized, and developed parts of the Church where evangelization, service, and personal commitment to the life of faith have ceased. We have seen strong centers of Catholicism in the past, now sadly become vocal but service-less and secular regions. In those local areas, people tend to like their life of faith being catered to them and served in ways that they like, instead of being challenged, drawn out, and pushed to grow in discipleship. Too many in those areas want to be armchair, free-thinking, vocal, and criticizing people, but never proactive in letting the Gospel values change and form them. It is sad when former strong parts of the Church only keep a skeletal and pseudo-Christian-like ethos but no longer desire to take on the call of discipleship to live out their real commitment to be Christians.

Perhaps too many of us have missed the mark! We have bought into the consumeristic version and become table grapes that might look plump but taste bland and typical without any uniqueness, finesse, depth, substance, complexity, or strength. We stop growing when we become more worried about what is comfortable and good for us instead of dying to ourselves so that the life of Christ grows stronger and more in depth with us. If we stop letting ourselves be humble and open

in order to be conformed to Christ Jesus, our roots will remain shallow, and branches will dwindle by the slightest changes of the season and life.

If we want to be good grapes in the Lord's vineyards, we need to allow our unique situations and states of life to push us to find a deeper source of nourishment and nutrients through a life of prayer and worship. Our life of discipleship needs to make us develop more maturity and substance to respond to the different complexities of life. We draw life from Him, but that is not to be held back only for our own because we are to share it with others as well. We are unique as individuals, as well as members of the larger local church, with our own characters and depth. The gifts that have been bestowed on each and every one of us are endowed by the Holy Spirit to complement and help the Church grow, and the Gospel gets preached. Our particular charisms are not just for our own self-glorification or to become something that divides and separates us from one another. Our different gifts, charisms, and life journeys help us to complement each other so that, through the power and working of the Holy Spirit, we can make the Kingdom known throughout the whole world.

We are Christ's own disciples, instruments of the Holy Spirit, and the Father's children by grace and the sacraments. Therefore, let us act no longer for ourselves or for our own particular likings and goods, but to grow and learn to be where He has planted us. We are Catholics, belonging to the greater and universal Church, sharing one common life of faith, but we are also unique in how we can respond and make the Kingdom known in our very own parishes, deaneries, dioceses, areas, regions, nations, and larger parts of the world. May we find the balance in loving our catholicity in the universal Church, as well as growing and enriching others where we have been planted. May we have the humility to trust in Him and the courage to push through our own comfort zones, barriers, and humanity to find true nourishment so we can, in turn, nourish others as well.

The good Lord has allowed me to encounter many people in my very own personal and ministerial life who have preached the Gospel truth without using words. I have learned many valuable lessons from unexpected encounters and relationships that enriched and affirmed my own journey of faith. Sometimes He used random exchanges to open my eyes to something that I need to bring to a particular, seasonal, or daily prayer session, too. I believe we speak much more than our words, and we all have the power to preach the Gospel and its liberating truth without having to resort to typical wording and vocal manifestations. As a matter of fact, in a world that is full of so many needless words, viewpoints, and arguments, it is important that we impart the truth with our very own way of life instead of turning to typical egocentric “social” media means.

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

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

I remembered when he approached me one day, asking if I could grant him a special favor. Of course, I told him that I would do my best to do so. Hence, he asked if I would be able to assist him up the steps of our sanctuary space (since they were steep) so he could kiss the altar one last time. He asked his “favor” after Mass one day... and, I mean, how can I deny this humble man’s request?!? I remembered assisting him up the steps so he could gently kiss and reverence the altar as a deacon. I do not know if he had a premonition or not, but his health began to decrease after that moment.

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

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

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

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

As we reflect upon life and how our year has been going so far, I would like to invite you to take a moment to step back from your own busyness to see how you and I can speak life and preach the Gospel without the necessity of using typical social media means. It gets so easy for us to lose focus on what gives us life in a day and age when we are constantly on the move and busy ourselves with so many things. Hence, if we lose focus on what really gives us life and does not make time in order to spiritually connect and get recharged with the One who loves us, how can we give life to others who are constantly on the go and busy themselves with the mundaneness of this world?

Our so-called popular social media means have made many of us become narcissistic and egocentric because they cheapened social exchange, interaction, and dialogue into quantifiable approval, acceptance, popularity, and manipulative influence. These so-called social media influencers have become so worried about branding themselves, selling their sponsored products, lifestyle choices, or making themselves more popular instead of looking beyond themselves

toward a life of genuine service and care. Too many people have bought into this fake, shallow, and self-satisfying lifestyle where we do things to make us feel good instead of living, giving, and making sacrifices for a higher purpose and calling! So many people have become so worried about making themselves more appealing, popular, and wanted instead of truly being humbled, devoted, and committed to doing small things with great love.

Perhaps that is why we see people easily falling into depression, having more anxiety attacks, and losing purpose, joy, and hope because they have put them elsewhere, in places and people that have no depth, substance, and genuineness. If we spend so much time trying to quantitatively define ourselves with “more” stuff, I believe we will always end up not having enough because nothing satisfies and makes us happy in the end. Simplicity, humility, and contentment are hard to achieve, but they are very necessary for us as we search for deeper meaning, purpose, identity, and mission than the daily, worldly, shallow, hedonistic, and consumeristic version of happiness. Perhaps in the midst of all these things, we need to step back and ask ourselves that there needs to be something more!

If each and every one of us learns to be content and seek joy in small matters, I believe we can let that theocentric, purposeful, purpose-filled, and eternally focused way of life be radiated and shared with others who are around us. Commitment and devotion to daily life and its ups and downs are not always glorious, appreciative, and euphoric, but we can choose to preach, share, and radiate our faith and its values and beliefs in how we intentionally put meaning into our words and actions. Imagine what we can do if we seek to share our joy and loving faith in each and every encounter, relationship, and act of service! I think the world would be a much better place if we go beyond the mundane redundancy of life in order to preach, share, and radiate our faith beyond words. Perhaps not everyone will do it, or we ourselves are able to make a big impact; but if we at least try ourselves, I believe this

world, or at least the people that we get to encounter, will see in us as His disciples. It does begin with us... one person at a time. Let us be real grapes that make fine wine instead of the typical, commercialized, cheapened, and generic versions of the real thing.

CONCLUSION

When I first joined the Air Force, I was eager to pursue a doctorate in marriage and family counseling to enhance my skills and better serve in a pluralistic environment. I know how to conduct pastoral counseling based on faith, having received training in spiritual direction and formation. However, not everyone in the military shares the common Christian understanding, perspective, and foundation. As a matter of fact, many people who come to see us do not have any real, substantial understanding of faith or morality, except for what is expected of them on a professional level by the military. That was the reason why I wanted to hone my skill set to better serve the airmen and guardians. Nonetheless, even though that was my desire, it was not really where God was leading me, and I had to learn to let go in order to accept His will for me.

First, I have to say that the desire was legitimate and valid because there is a need for chaplains to be better counselors and guides in the military. We have to learn a new set of vocabulary as well as to understand the ever-changing mindsets, perspectives, and life outlooks of the young people we are serving. Nonetheless, my particular discernment leads me to really question whether an academic terminal degree was needed. If I put all that time, money, and effort into securing an advanced doctorate, will I be able to actually put it to good use, or will it be another degree that I earned to be put on the shelves? I am not saying that my past degrees were useless, but I attained them out of obedience because they were part of my priestly formation, and I was asked to attain them. However, this particular one was my own initiative, and I was really discerning whether I needed another diploma in order to be a good chaplain or pastoral counselor.

If I go through the effort to attain that degree, which was a doctorate in education, will I be able to use it in an academic or educational setting? I really want to do it, because I thought I would

benefit from it, but it would not serve a real purpose and mission for which the degree was meant to do. I struggled for a good while to find the real purpose in the midst of my own personal desire and want. To be honest with you, I was really intrigued and attracted by the program, especially when the school quickly accepted me after reviewing my past graduate degrees and transcripts (especially the flexibility and scholarship opportunities offered to military members).

Even though the intention was good, I had to ask myself if its existence would really help me be a better priest, servant, and minister for the Kingdom of God. When I thought of the saints in the past, especially the ones who made great impact in my life, they did not hold any advanced degrees or had a lot of education in the eyes of the world; therefore, do I really need to have all these “extra” credentials or studies in order to preach the Good News and care for people as a shepherd? I earned my different degrees in the past because they were part of the formation process, and because my superiors wanted me to pursue them. Now, nothing in the academic world is really keeping me from being an effective minister. Furthermore, what I have learned through my pastoral ministry and experience does not always equate to the classroom setting. I came to the conclusion that I personally appreciated the qualitative wisdom and lessons learned through the school of life more than the typical school setting.

What makes discernment hard is that we have to constantly decide and align our wants and apparent goods to the eternal and ultimate good of knowing Christ. St. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians (3:8), said that he considered all things as rubbish or loss in light of knowing and following Christ! Human or earthly goods are appealing and sound good on the surface or in the short run, but they really add nothing more to our ultimate and final good in loving and following the One who loves us. Therefore, anything and everything that is not needed for our faith journey, asked of us by those who are in charge of us, or imposed on us out of obedience, should be considered as secondary and not as

necessary so that we may grow, mature, and find the depth of loving Him above all things.

I took the matter to prayer as well as to make sure that my decision-making process was not rushed. I solicited advice from friends and brother priests whom I respect. I weighed the pros and cons of its appeal as well as its overall impact in my own vocation as a priest and my ministry. Even though it seemed to be appealing at first, its attractiveness created unneeded attention in my life. I kept thinking too much about it, and it became a distraction in my own prayer life. While it was an attractive option, I ultimately just want to be a priest and shepherd in the midst of His people — not a professor or someone who teaches in an academic setting. At the end, the truth was revealed when I asked myself the real question, “WHY do I need this degree and WHAT do I plan to do with it?” Furthermore, I ponder on the road that this journey might lead me, and I personally do not want to be in an academic, university, or seminary setting. I believe my calling has always been in the midst of His people as a shepherd to care for the flock. I want to have the freedom to go where He sends me and to be a priest for the Church in caring, guiding, and serving those who are seeking Him. While there are wonderful priests who are needed to be professors and teach in the seminary or university setting, that particular degree did not ultimately fit the calling and lifestyle that I believe the good Lord has called me to be in my own priesthood.

I am sharing with you a personal experience that I can finally put into writing without worrying about what people might think (that I am pretentious or have an agenda). I can share it now because it was something from the distant past. Nonetheless, as I was praying about my own life, this particular episode and its discernment process were on my mind in the last few weeks. I struggled with it for a good while, but the answer remains the same. I thought I would share the experience with you now so if you feel tempted or attracted to what seems to be good, you yourself might not be discouraged or feel like it is not right to

struggle with different, strong, and appealing goods pulling us from many sides and in many different ways.

It is perfectly fine to be tempted. It is fine to struggle. When we feel like we do not have the answer and there are so many goods pulling us from all sides, let us remember that nothing else is more important than humbly recognizing how our choices are in alignment with our eternal destiny. If we go on chasing our dreams, wants, and passions, we will be spent, tired, and burnt out because they never seem to be enough for us. If we chase after what seems to be good, we risk going down the slippery and dangerous route of pursuing and living with vanities. These matters tend to deceptively, slyly, or wittingly mask themselves as desirable, immediate, flashy, or gratifying goods, but they do not give us real life or feed us deep from within.

Therefore, do not be discouraged from staying in the struggle when an appealing, good, or enticing desire, decision, or opportunity arises in life. As human beings, we will be so tempted to jump the gun and make a quick decision, especially when everything seems to work, but take a moment to pray and discern our desire and good in comparison to the eternal and ultimate good. Learn, my brothers and sisters, to be courageous in loving Christ Jesus, humble in following His own life examples of meekness and genuine love, and above all, try to seek Him above all else that is in front of us or seems to be good for us. I hope and pray that we can consider all things as loss or rubbish in comparison to knowing and loving Him who first loves us.

I would like to conclude this work with the same author I began with! In his book, ***The Return of the Prodigal Son***, Fr. Henri Nouwen stated the short, simple, but profound truth: "I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found." Hence, our faith shows us that to love is to reflect the loving heart of God who waits for us to return back to His love, whether we are the younger son who went away or the older one who never knew of his father's heart.

Later in the book, Fr. Nouwen also invited us who were once prodigal to make a leap of faith with our own heart of gratitude to extend that same loving forgiveness toward those who are dear to us: "To write a gentle letter to someone who will not forgive me, make a call to someone who has rejected me, speak a word of healing to someone who cannot do the same."

In a similar way, the second half of the Book of Genesis tells us the story of Abraham and his divine calling from the Almighty. He had to learn what it meant to be chosen and received the call from the Lord. Yes, he was not perfect, and he did many cowardice and unkind things to preserve himself at times, but throughout his journey, he had to learn to trust the Lord who directed him from his own homeland to a land that he did not know. That is radical trust, but it is also the most basic foundation of our Judeo-Christian monotheistic faith!

Furthermore, St. Paul in his letters often asked the early believers -- as well as us -- to mindfully bear our share of hardship for the Gospel with the strength that comes from God. He called us to live a holy life according to the pattern and way of life of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, it is important for us to remember that the word "grace" in the New Testament is not just a thing, independent and by itself, for it is the manifestation of God's love to strengthen us so we can properly and fully engage in our relationship with Him. To be full of grace is to be full of God's love, which in turn makes us lovable and able to radiate His love through our relationship with the divine.

Jesus' own Transfiguration gives us the twofold reminder of who He is as God's beloved Son and who we are (by grace and through the redemptive and salvific adoption) as members of Christ's Mystical Body, the Church. We can only be true children of God in words and actions, life and deeds, when we learn, imitate, and emulate as to become more like the Son of God.

Hence, in order for us to learn how to be true sons and daughters of God, our Heavenly Father, we have to become like Christ in all things. His Transfiguration is historically and providentially planned to happen before the Paschal Mystery -- the Suffering, Death, and Resurrection of Christ -- to affirm to us, as well as the original disciples, that we, too, have to undergo the Way of the Cross before realizing our true glory, just as the Savior has shown us the way through His own personal embrace of the Cross and its sufferings.

We have become prodigals and unhappy people when we search for the false goods, idols, and short-lived pleasures of this world. We are homeless when we try to find temporary lodging and resting places other than our true home with the Father who loves us, the Savior who redeemed us, and the Holy Spirit who guides us back when we are lost. We are prodigal sons and daughters when we try to search for false, conditional, shallow, and humanistic love instead of the everlasting, life-giving, and eternal love of God.

According to Holy Tradition, as St. Peter flees from crucifixion in Rome at the hands of the government, he meets the risen Lord along the road outside the city. In the Latin translation, Peter asks Jesus, "Quo vadis, Domine?" ("Where are you going, Lord?") Jesus replies, "Romam eo iterum crucifigi" ("I am going to Rome to be crucified again"). Peter then gains the courage to continue his ministry and returns to the city, where he is martyred by being crucified upside down.

I think it is easier for us to ask the Lord to walk with us, making sure that things go our way and we get what we want, instead of us trying to follow Him with our whole heart. Furthermore, the world has unique ways of trying to get us distracted, disheartened, and deterred from the Way because it wants to control, manipulate, and dictate its ways upon us. When was the last time we truly asked Him, "Lord, where are you going? I want to follow you." There will be times when we will be discouraged by the trials and hardships like St. Peter to the point that we

want to walk away, but the Lord reminds us that we are not alone on our journey. We are all humans, and it is natural to get scared and discouraged by persecution and challenges. Thus, it is at those times when we must seek Him and ask Him to give us the proper guidance to truly follow where He trod.

We get so worked up, curious, or anxious about what would or could happen when the world ends but have not taken the time to prepare for our very own ends. Humanity gets worked up every time there is a new prophecy or talk about when the world is going to end... and yet we make those people rich, ourselves hopeless and cynical, while never remember to learn the lesson that no one knows how and when it will happen! If I dare to say, if we live each and every day as it is our last, full of faith, hope, and love with meaning and purpose, then we would not be surprised if it is our last day. If we spiritually prepare ourselves with prayer, worship, and service, then we would not be scared about any apocalyptic stuff because our focus is to prepare ourselves each and every day for the end.

Furthermore, we must ask ourselves if we have been focused on being laborers and collaborators in the Lord's vineyards or have been busybodies minding anything or everything else?!? If we say that we are busy, are we truly busy for the things of God or are we occupied with things of this world and everybody else's businesses? Indeed, it is easy to remain spectators, commentators, and bystanders instead of following the Lord and labor for His Kingdom.

We get drained and tired ourselves with the world that we have little left for the spiritual things that really matter and life-giving. We come to the Lord with our leftover or rushed mindset because we spent ourselves with everything else. We easily get agitated, reactive, and quickly to lose our peace because our hearts are not in the right place, our roots are too shallow, or our minds are too easily distracted and pulled by everything else. We keep on running but we do not where we

are going! We keep on burning ourselves, but we do not find true fulfillment and meaning. We keep on questioning because we are too impatient, childish, too quick, or too demanding in wanting things our ways instead of listening to what the Lord wants for us.

To truly live 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 His love 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 belief and life begin with us in how we love God and allow ourselves to be loved by Him.

Perhaps exterior silence might be a little bit easier for introverts and harder for extroverts. However, interior silence is a spiritual lesson that has to be learned and a skill that has to be taught! We have to be willing to learn, as well as gently and properly guided by spiritual directors, teachers, or formators, so we are not scared or hold back by our own egocentric fears, reservations, or interior noises. Those things can be scary at first, but they are all things that need to be willingly let go and sacrificed, saying “no” to them at times in order to say “yes” to greater things that only the Lord can show us. Personal fears and reservations can be irrationally powerful at times, and they can and will definitely hold us back because they make us feel like we are losing control if we let go of what we know! Nonetheless, each and every one of us has to humble ourselves and be willing to let go of our own self-built comfort zones in order to meet Him who is waiting for us outside of our egocentric walls.

Each and every prayer time is a letting go of our world in order 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.

Simply put, silence is counter-cultural, hard, challenging, and humbling for us as busy post-modern people. It is often ignored and dismissed because it seems not to be important! Nonetheless, without exterior silence, we simply remain chatterbots, run our mouths, talk about others, but remain vain, pitiful, and empty deep from within because we really have no depth or substance. Furthermore, without interior silence through prayerful time spent with God, we really have nothing to offer or give to others. Therefore, what seems to be uncomfortable and unnatural in the beginning has to be learned, willed, and desired through humility, sincerity, and simplicity of heart so we can be childlike in spending time with Him who loves us. Once we are able to spend time and be fine in wasting time with Him, we are able to know that being present and spending time in silence with Him is enough, because our souls know that we need those moments. Without a doubt, silence is needed and I hope we can all find time to spend silent time and prayerful moments with the One who there waiting to spend time with us.

We are called to follow and be with Him even though there might seem to be better alternatives, appealing temptations, or overwhelming doubts at times. Love requires a lot of trust and self-giving commitment by having faith in the One who loves us, especially in the midst of many uncertainties and trials. Therefore, our relationship with the One who

loves us requires that we stay committed to Him even when things get hard and our life's trials arise. That is not always easy, but it is worthwhile because those moments are moments when we grow the most personally, spiritually, and lovingly. I do not know about you, but there were numerous times when I kicked and screamed because I did not like what was going on; but for some reason, His loving grace continues to nourish me and keeps me where I am today. Just like St. Peter, I wanted to walk away, but I always see the Lord inviting me to where I need to go... I was hesitant, scared, reserved, or worried at times, but I learned to ask Him, "Where are you going, Lord? I want to follow You!"

To know our true identity and belovedness is to be free from what the world and others want of us. They can oftentimes lead us astray, even with the best of their intentions, if we do not know who we are, Who loves us, who are important in our lives and surrounding us, as well as our true worth, mission, purpose, and vocation as beloved sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father, disciples of Christ Jesus, and instruments of the Holy Spirit. We can easily burn ourselves out trying to be everything for everyone but forgetting who we truly are and where we are going in the light of faith. For better or worse, we are oftentimes lost, go astray, get confused, or become distracted on our faith journey. Nonetheless, we can always recalibrate, reprioritize, and remember our true meaning and purpose as to simplify, purify, and conform our hearts to His own heart.

It is not always easy, but it is worthwhile. It is not always glorious, but it is truly freeing. It is not always the most advantageous or popular, but it is the most genuine, transformative, and heartfelt experience to know, understand, and live our true Christian identity.

May each and every one of us, just like St. Peter and many great saints who went before us, do our best to follow Him as well.

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).