

REFLECTIONS OF A PARISHIONER

Booklet 5



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I have been asked a number of times, “How do you write your reflections? Where do they come from?” I cannot answer because I do not know. Whenever I reread one myself, I ask the same question, “Where did that come from?” Perhaps the thoughts and feelings have been deep within me for many years, long before I started writing. So my gratitude goes to The Holy Spirit for giving me the ability, the courage and the opportunity to write and present them now.

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Most of all I thank all of you who have taken the time to read my humble offerings. I hope they may add just a little to your spiritual life.

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WHY ME?

The Lord is my light and my help

Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here?

During lent I read a booklet published by the Catholic Truth Society entitled "Do it yourself Retreat". It began by asking me to reflect on the above questions. The answer to the second question seemed obvious and the easiest to answer.. Of course, I came from my mother's womb but prior to that, billions of years of evolution brought us to that point in time. Everything that exists or has existed was created by God. The Moon, the Sun, the stars and the universe are all part of God's creation. This Earth and everything on it, on land and in the seas, all belong to God. I do not find it difficult to believe in God for without him nothing makes sense. I believe that his creation is ongoing; evolution is still taking place.

When I looked back over my life, I realised that I too am evolving. As I reflected on the various stages of my life, I could see how much I had changed from one stage to another. Various events, such as deaths of loved ones, my marriage, becoming a parent, my occupation, all had a hand in bringing about a change in me. I know that God did not make them happen in order to teach me but he gave me the grace to accept and learn from these events. My body has aged but my spirit has evolved. My body parts are still functioning in the same way, although not as efficiently, as when I was younger but the person I am is not the person I was in middle age; the person I was in middle age was different from the person I was in my youth.

So, who am I now? I think that I am a pilgrim who has come a long way but who has a long and perhaps a difficult road ahead. I do not claim to be a better man for only God can judge and I know that I am still a sinner but one who is more aware of his weaknesses and who is trying hard to overcome them. I am also more aware of my strengths and the talents that God endowed me with and am trying to use them for the benefit of others. These talents I have always

MUSICIANS' PRAYER

Oh Lord, please bless this music that it might glorify your name.

May the talent that you have bestowed upon us
be used only to serve you.

Let this music be a witness to your majesty and love,
and remind us that you are always watching, and listening,
from your throne above.

May your presence and beauty be found in every note,
and may the words that are sung
reach the hearts of your people, so they will draw closer to you.

May your Spirit guide us through every measure
so that we might be the instruments of your peace,
and proclaim your glory with glad voices.

Amen

MUSIC

I love music. I came from a musical family. My mum had a lovely singing voice and my dad was a brilliant musician. He could play a number of instruments but his chief love was for the trombone and he was very accomplished. He encouraged us all to learn to play an instrument. I was given a cornet when I was six and taught to read music. By the time I was twelve, I was playing in two brass bands. When I won the scholarship to St Anselm's I began lessons on the violin but it was discovered that I played the cornet and was immediately transferred to the school orchestra. I was also chosen to sing in the school choir and sang at a number of functions such as the opening of a new church in Liverpool and a concert in the philharmonic hall.

In the house I grew up in, we had a wind-up gramophone and various records, some by Joseph Lock, a popular Irish tenor. I played them a lot and still remember all the words to "The old bog road" which, in time, became a kind of party piece. Then along came Dickie Valentine, Dean Martin, Nat King Cole, Elvis Presley and the Beatles and many more, so I think I have an eclectic taste in music. However, I do not care for the modern trend where an artist takes a lovely melody and tries to make it "his/her own" by performing vocal gymnastics and turning a lovely song into a shouting, screaming tirade.

When I first came to St Win's, the choir sang from the choir loft where the organ was situated. The musical director was Ada Knox. Her daughter, Bernadette, and her granddaughter, Charlotte are members of the present day choir. I did not join Ada's choir because then I was a bit shy. When the church was extended a new organ was acquired and placed, not in the loft but in the church where it is now and of course the choir moved with it.

I joined the choir just a couple of years ago and I'm so glad I did. I cannot express sufficiently how much joy it has given to me. They say that singing in a choir can add an extra ten years to one's lifespan and I can believe that. Even rehearsals on a Sunday afternoon are happy occasions and what a wonderful way to participate in the mass and to serve the parish family. St Augustine said that those who sang prayed twice.

We do not claim to be a great choir but our MD, Louise, continues to challenge us by teaching us new hymns and new harmonies. We hope that the family of St Winefride's enjoy singing something other than the same old hymns although we do like to occasionally sing some of the old favourites. I have always loved singing and pray that the Lord will allow me to continue until I have no breath left.

had but have often lacked the courage to use them but now I know that God loves me and therefore I am not insignificant; but then the baby girl cradled in her mother's arms and painfully dying from malnutrition is not insignificant: the addict who has become a slave to his habit is not insignificant. We all matter!

Then why am I here? The bible tells us that God made us in his own image and likeness. St John, the evangelist, informs us that God is love (Jn 4:16). Jesus said that we must love God with all our being and our neighbour as ourselves. If God is love then I too must love. I must love God and all that he has created. To do otherwise would be a betrayal of my humanity. I do not know why God put me here in this place at this time but I am sure he has given me some small part to play in his eternal plan. I may never fully understand. I can only follow my conscience and pray with a sincere heart that he will guide me along the right path.

*Deep within I will plant my law
Not on stone, but in your heart.
Follow me, I will bring you back,
You will be my own/
And I will be your God. (David Haas)*

*The love that asks not anything,
Love like thy own love free,
Jesus, I give who art my king,
Who art my God, to thee.*

WHO, ME?

*How can I repay the Lord
For his goodness to me?
The cup of salvation I will raise;
I will call on the Lord's name.*

What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?

When I look back on my life I am inclined to think that I have done very little. When I was a boy I thought that I might become a priest and my parents must have seen something in me for they seemed to think that I might have a vocation for the priesthood. However, as I progressed through my teenage years, I realised that it was not what I wanted. At the time I felt guilty about not answering Gods call but I realise now that he was leading me to a different vocation, that of being a husband and a father. I know that I have not always been the most considerate of husbands and nor have I always been there for my children. My job and my struggle to provide a home and security for them sometimes got in the way, but I have always loved them and been faithful to them. I hope that I have been as good a role model to my family as my dad was to me. I hope that I have fulfilled that vocation by teaching my children to be good, responsible and caring citizens. Throughout those middle years, I have tried to show my gratitude to God for all his gifts by serving the parish in various ministries. Now that I am at a more advanced age, I have more time but not so much energy or stamina. I try to be helpful and supportive to those younger people who do so much to keep our parish so vibrant.

When I think about what Jesus has done for me, how he suffered and died to expiate my sins and how he died and rose again so that I might live, I know that there is nothing I can do to match his sacrifice. Even if I died an agonising death for his sake, in comparison it would be like comparing a tiny spark to the Sun. I try to spend time with him each morning as I sit before him in the Blessed Sacrament, but I am like the apostles who accompanied him to the Garden of Gethsemane. I do not fall asleep but I am so easily distracted and my mind keeps wandering.

I do not pretend to know the answers to these difficult questions. I do know that we live in a violent world. We have only to watch the news to see and hear of wars between countries; hatred and violence between one religion and another; civil wars between one tribe and another. And all the time it is the innocent who are suffering. Indiscriminate bombing kills innocent men, women and children who have no means of escape. Hospitals where the injured are being treated are being deliberately targeted. Women and children are being raped and killed by soldiers of opposing armies. Suicide bombers kill and maim people of all religions and none. Even in this our own country there are reports of people trafficking; Young women brought illegally into the country and forced to work as prostitutes. If we switch on the television for an evenings entertainment, we are confronted with violent programmes. Even the early evening soaps have violent story lines. Young people are exposed to very violent video games. Is it any wonder that our youths are confused and turn to self-harming; become anorexic and bulimic?

Throughout the history of man there has always been violence. Jesus taught us that we should be meek and mild; kind and generous; non-violent peacemakers. Yet 2000 years later we still have not learned.

When, oh when will we give peace a chance!

I pray that the God of peace who brought our lord Jesus back from the dead to become the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood that sealed an eternal covenant, may make you ready to do his will in any kind of good action; and turn us all into whatever is acceptable to himself through Jesus Christ to whom be glory for ever and ever, amen. Heb. 13: 20-21



GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

Jesus said to his disciples: "you have learnt how it was said: Eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But I say this to you: offer the wicked man no resistance. On the contrary, if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well: If a man takes you to law and would have your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone orders you to go one mile, go two miles with him. Give to anyone who asks, and if anyone wants to borrow, do not turn away.

You have learnt how it was said: You must love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you; love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Matthew 5:38-45

I believe it is better to be the abused rather than the abuser. I detest violence both verbal and physical and I hate confrontation. The one who is abused has a unique opportunity to receive grace by not retaliating and by offering the abuse up to God. It would take a great deal of courage to invite more abuse by offering the other cheek and it is very hard to accept the humiliation of verbal abuse and not respond. When someone passes a hurtful remark, I often do not retaliate simply because my brain cannot think fast enough to come up with an equally cutting reply. Later, when I think about it, I am glad I was not able to respond. I do not hold grudges and I do not find it difficult to forgive. St Francis of Assisi said, "We can glory in the cross of tribulation and afflictions..." But then I have had an easy life. I have never endured serious abuse. How can I advise those who have been seriously abused either sexually or physically? I can only try to offer love, understanding and support.

But what of the abuser, how should I feel about him? Will turning the other cheek help him? I can try to love him: try to forgive him and I can certainly pray for him, but should he not be brought to justice? Should he not be punished for his crime and made to see the error of his ways? I ask these questions not with a feeling of anger and revenge but one of concern for the soul of one who has turned away from God. If he is tried, convicted and given a custodial sentence will he then not be in the company of other violent men? Will that make him better or worse? Should he be given a second chance and helped to control his anger? Of course that would depend on the seriousness of the abuse. I believe that we are the products of the circumstances of our lives, Perhaps there is something in his past that made him the way he is. Should he be helped to confront it in the hope that he will change his ways. Will sending him to gaol help his victim to feel better?

When the rich man approached and asked Jesus what he must do to gain eternal life, Jesus told him to keep the commandments. When the man told Jesus that he had done that all his life and asked what more must he do, the gospel tells us that Jesus looked at him and loved him. Jesus told the man to sell all he had and give the money to the poor and come follow me. The man went away sad because he was a very rich man. I have no gold or silver to sell nor have I money to give away but I do have something which is much more precious than any of these things. I have time. Time to give to the sick and the housebound. I can visit them and spend time with them. When we do our weekly shop, I can buy a little extra and donate it to the foodbank to help those less fortunate than me: and I can pray for all those in need. I can pray for peace throughout the world: for the refugees, the migrants and the asylum seekers that they may be granted peace, shelter and security.

Your servant, Lord, your servant am I;

You have loosened my bonds.

A thanksgiving sacrifice I make;

I will call on the Lord's name.

(Psalm 115)



FOR ME?

Cry out with joy to the Lord, all the Earth.

Serve the Lord with gladness,

Come before him, singing for joy

Know that he the Lord is God.

He made us, we belong to him,

We are his people, the sheep of his flock.

I believe in an impossible God. A God that has no beginning and no end. One who is omnipresent; who has always been, who is and who always will be; an eternal God. There is nothing else in this vast universe that does not have a beginning and will not end; nothing that could have come into existence of its own volition; nothing that could create itself. Therefore, there must be a supreme creator. one who is beyond human comprehension; one who is beyond explanation; One who cannot be but who is; a god of love, love beyond all human understanding; a mystery impossible to fully appreciate.

Because he loves us, he has revealed himself to us not only in the scriptures but has physically appeared to us here on Earth. He became one of us so that we could become one with him and he did it in such a humble way by being born to a woman in a stable. Jesus, the almighty, eternal god “being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped at. But he emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are” (Phil. 2: 6-7). The word was made flesh and dwelt among us. While he was still a child, he and his parents became refugees. When they finally returned home to their homeland, Jesus lived most of his life in obscurity until he began his ministry. But then “being in every way like a human being he was humbler yet, even being obedient to death, death on a cross” (Phil 2: 7-8). He allowed himself to be tortured and executed. A further mystery, this almighty, eternal God died a human death: a humiliating and painful death. St. Paul writes “We are preaching a crucified Christ; to the Jews an obstacle they cannot get over, to the gentiles’ foolishness, but to those who have been called.....a Christ who is both power and the wisdom of God” (1 cor: 23).

Breathe on me, breath of God,

Fill me with life anew,

That I may love what thou dost love,

And do what thou wouldst do.

Breathe on me, breath of God,

Until my heart is pure:

Until with thee I have one will

To do and to endure.

Breathe on me, breath of God,

Till I am wholly thine,

Until this earthly part of me

Glows with thy fire divine.

Breathe on me, breath of God,

So shall I never die,

But live with thee the perfect life

Of time Eternity. (Edwin Hatch)



SILENT PRAYER

I think that I am a fairly tactile person. I believe that a hand on the arm of someone in need, holding her or his hand or giving a hug can say much more than words. It tells the other that you care and that you want to share with them their misfortune. Many great statesmen have used words to win the hearts and minds of people in order to change the course of history, sometimes for good and sometimes to bring about heartache and sorrow. Words can be used to manipulate and to tell untruths, to uplift or depress, to encourage or to demoralise. Words were created by man and can be used for good or misused.

Recently, I started reading about silent prayer and I realised that God knows my every thought and senses every feeling that my body experiences. Therefore, I do not need to use words when I pray. Each morning when I sit before The Blessed Sacrament, exposed on the altar, I try to sit silently and still knowing that God is before me and all around me and also deep within me. I try to empty my mind of everything, all my worries; all my needs; the past and the future, and try to think only of God. It is not easy, there are so many distractions. Apart from the fact that my mind wanders, there is the sound of the traffic passing outside, the creaking of the benches inside and the sound of others coming into church. At first I became disheartened until I read the following passage:-

“The biggest misunderstanding is the thought that your distractions are a sign that you are unable to pray. What does it mean if you have hundred and one distractions during your half hour of prayer? It means that each time you turn your back on your distractions, you are turning to God. It means that a hundred and one times, you say NO to yourself and say YES to God; a hundred and one times, you act with unselfish love, helping “the old self” to die in order for the “new self” to be born in you.” D.Tolkington:
The inner meaning of prayer

Now I keep trying to empty myself and surrender to God’s will. I think at first I expected something to happen, to feel different perhaps more devout, but I then realised that if I am expecting or even wanting something to come from my prayers, then I am still thinking of me and not surrendering completely to God. Perhaps He does not want me to feel any change so I will just keep trying, struggling to submit to his will asking for nothing, expecting nothing and wanting nothing but his will to be done.

How could this eternal god who promised life everlasting die? For those who have faith the resurrection is the proof that God is eternal. The question I must ask myself then is, why did he sacrifice himself?

Obviously, Jesus did not die just for me, he died for all mankind. I was not born until nearly two thousand years after his death, but God does not live within the confines of time. Jesus said that the Father has counted every hair on my head. Being divine, Jesus knows everyone who has ever lived and everyone who will ever live. I am confident therefore that as he hung dying on the cross, Jesus knew me intimately and died to expiate my sins. His dying prayer “father forgive them” was for all including me.

*Go within his gates giving thanks,
Enter his courts with songs of praise.
Give thanks to him and bless his name.
Indeed, how good is the Lord,
Eternal his merciful love.
He is faithful from age to age. (Psalm 99)*



CONTRITION

Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness.

In your compassion blot out my offence.

O wash me more and more from my guilt

And cleanse me from my sin.

This psalm is a wonderful act of contrition pleading with God to be merciful. Knowing that God is kind and compassionate, we can ask him to erase our offences against him and make us clean again. It confesses our sinfulness and recognises that whatever wrong we do is a sin against God; and that God is justified in judging us for we were born with that potential to sin. But we know that God loves us and we pray that he will give us pure hearts and steadfast spirits and the strength to overcome our weaknesses.

Throughout the Old Testament, the people of Israel repeatedly turned away from God. They abandoned his laws and decrees and ignored his prophets. Each time things went wrong for them and they suffered many hardships until, once more, they returned to God. We are inclined to think that God was punishing them for their wrongdoing but I don't think it is as simple as that. I do not think that God punishes us every time we do something wrong. When we turn away from God and go our own way we turn away from his guidance and protection.

The decisions we make, because we are making them on our own and not listening to God, are often wrong and bring about pain and misery for which we blame God. God does not start wars. They are brought about by man's greed and lust for power. Suffering and pain are often caused by man's inhumanity to man. I know that often bad things happen to good people and their suffering is unmerited but evil entered this world through man's rebellion against God and because of it we are all effected, but it has been my experience that when a person who is close to God suffers pain and tragedy he is much more able to bear it. God gives him the grace, the courage and the strength to accept his suffering and through faith he in turn is able to offer it back to God. We are all born innocent but with the potential to sin, yet we also have the potential to become saints. When we strive for something which we think will fulfil our selfish desires, attainment never satisfies.. There is always something more to yearn for. The selfish man can never be happy for he never has enough.

The unselfish man cannot ever be unhappy for he accepts and appreciates all that he has and thanks God for all that he is given.

I think it is a shame that the Sacrament of Reconciliation nowadays seems to be neglected by so many. I don't think that it is necessary to go to confession as often as we were made to go when we were young, for then it becomes a kind of boring routine. The sacrament should be a new experience each time we receive it. We do not have to wait until we have committed a serious sin nor do we need to count and to list all the less serious offences. I try to prepare myself by thinking about what is happening in my life at the present time; how am I reacting to it? Could I be more understanding? Could I be deserving of whatever criticism has been thrown at me?

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a celebration of God's love and mercy. We must approach it with a "contrite heart" a sacrifice that God "will not spurn", and a firm intention to serve God fervently and with integrity and try to be, with God's help, a shining example to others.

Give me again the joy of your help;

With a spirit of fervour sustain me.

That I may teach transgressors your ways

And sinners may return to you. (Psalm)

