

## Come Follow Me

- Happy New Year, brothers! The start of a new year often has the feeling of a new start in life. Maybe this New Year is an opportunity for us to experience a new start to our prayer life.
- Father Kelly's homily this past Sunday has prompted my presentation to you tonight. He had a lot of good things to tell us about the readings for the Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God.
- Near the end of his homily, he pointed out how Mother Mary reflected on her experiences and contemplated her life with God, specifically with her son Jesus. He implored us to do the same.
- That advice really resonated with me. When I discovered contemplative prayer, I came on fire with my faith in God. I wanted to know God more personally. I wanted to know more about his church. I wanted to be more involved with people I worship with.
- All of these desires became manifest in my life. I owe the initiation of all these gifts to a decision to contemplate my life in prayer with God. So I was looking forward to sharing my thoughts and maybe an experience of contemplative prayer tonight.
- But it almost didn't happen. When I sat down to think of what I would tell you, nothing came to mind with clarity. I thought back to the last time I had a soul-filling contemplative prayer session. It has been too long.
- I realized just how much my prayer life has evolved in the last year or so. I now pray a lot more frequently--dozens of times a day, but in quick, short bursts usually prompted by what I am encountering in the moment. My occasional contemplative prayer sessions have been more topical in nature--and my relationship with Jesus has not been the topic of late.
- I am often praying about events depicted in scripture or specific experiences in my life, but not much about the purpose of my life as Jesus desires for me. I have also fallen away from the discipline of journaling about my contemplative prayer sessions.
- So, I started paging through my past prayer journals looking for something that might inspire my talk tonight. My few entries over the past year are not very inspiring. I went all the way back to the prayer sessions during my last directed silent retreat a year and a half ago.
- I quickly thumbed through and dismissed several of my journal entries from that retreat. But then I came to one that stopped me in my tracks. My eyes fell on the scripture passage I prayed with at that time. It was the exact Gospel passage I had just read for one of this week's daily Mass readings.
- I read through my journal entry and was amazed at how relevant it seemed for what I was feeling that very moment. It was as if I had written that journal entry in July 2021 for what I was realizing about myself today in January 2023. I felt certain this was no coincidence and thought maybe it should be shared for anyone else who needs to hear it.

- Before I jump into my contemplative prayer reflection, let me explain some concepts that are important to know about the Spiritual Exercises developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola, which are used in the directed silent retreats I attend.
  - The entire retreat is lived in interior and exterior silence to enable one to experience the voice of God during prayer and reflection. The retreat center campus is quiet and peaceful as it is surrounded by 700 acres of beautiful meadows and farmlands.
  - The prayer sessions normally involve meditation on scripture passages specifically recommended by a spiritual director for each retreatant.
  - One of the prayer methods is imaginative contemplation, where the retreatant prays by imagining himself in the scripture setting to hopefully initiate an encounter with God. The words heard during prayer are usually a departure from the scripture passage so God can convey a personal experience to the person praying. This method is most effective with the Gospels.
- This is the prayer technique I used with the Gospel of John 1:35-39. Let me first read it to familiarize you with this well known passage.
 

*<sup>35</sup>The next day John (the Baptist) was there again with two of his disciples, <sup>36</sup>and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." <sup>37</sup>The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. <sup>38</sup>Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" <sup>39</sup>He said to them, "Come and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day.*
- Let me now read you my journal entry on this prayer.

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10 Jul 2021: Imaginative Contemplation on John 1:35-39, The First Disciples

*After slowly reading through this passage a few times, I closed my eyes and imagined myself as one of John the Baptist's disciples following behind Jesus as he walked down a well worn path.*

*Jesus turned around, looked at me, and asked "What are you looking for?" I was actually a little surprised by his question and I didn't have a ready answer. I simply and honestly answered him by telling him what I was feeling.*

*I said, "I don't need anything in particular right now. I am in a beautiful place and I feel content. I am on this beautiful path that is easy to walk. I am surrounded by the wonders of nature and a small group of people who are at peace and are comfortable. We are happily selecting each step in front of us with deliberation and appreciation for all that we have right now."*

While the scriptural setting was desert-like near the Jordan River in Israel, I was referring to the beautiful setting of the Jesuit Spirituality Center in Grand Coteau, LA and the small community of people on retreat with me.

I continued speaking to Jesus. *"While I am content now, this path I am on will eventually return me to the busy and chaotic place I came from. It is filled with an overwhelming number of people who have no appreciation for the beauty of this path that cuts through our community. Most of the people don't seem to know or care about it. They just want what they want now and do not care about moving forward on the path."*

I was referring to the secular world, specifically the area of Northwest Florida where we live and all the other people living here. Most of them have no regard for the spiritual path I am traveling on.

I continued sharing my concerns with Jesus. *"What I want is to be able to hold onto the peace and serenity that I feel now. I want to be able to convince people to slow down their frenetic activities and appreciate the beauty we have on this path that I am on. I want people to take a moment to see, hear, taste, smell, and feel what I have been able to experience. I want people to be in harmony with one another and with the beauty that surrounds us. I want everyone to have what I have, far beyond the material aspects of life.*

*I want everyone to know what is right and to do what is right so that we can minimize the harm we do to ourselves and to our world. And mostly, what I want is to be able to pass through this place and then pick up this peaceful, tranquil, easy trail immersed in your beauty on the other side of this place. I want to be able to look backwards on the trail and see it full of many people following me."*

*After considering all that I had just told him, I looked at Jesus with pleading eyes and told him "I cannot do this by myself. I need you and the other disciples to help me and encourage me when I feel like I have stepped off the path into the thick of chaos."*

*Jesus gave me an easy smile and just said **"Okay. Come follow me."***

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- My imaginative contemplation ended at this point and I didn't have any more written in my journal on this prayer session. But I reflected on what I clearly saw as a concern back then.
  - While on retreat, the path I walk with Jesus is very distinct, beautiful, and easy to traverse at the time. But on returning home to normal life activities, the path becomes less distinct and is crowded with so many other people from our communities at large.
  - Some of these people want to follow Jesus, but they don't really know him. There are others who really don't care to know him, much less follow him.
  - But we know that Jesus desires all of these people to know him, so we try to model a Christian life while living among them so maybe they will come to know him and understand the need to follow him.
  - The path to Jesus seems to widen as we live among the people of this world. We can fool ourselves into thinking we are still on the path to him. But if we don't stay focused on him directly, it is so easy to unwarily step off the narrow path and begin walking in circles for a while.

- This makes Father Kelly's advice to periodically stop and contemplate our lives in relation to Jesus all so important.
- It is a little tougher to do this while living in the world as compared to doing this while on retreat. But if we all do this while living in the world, the narrow path is sure to be illuminated for all to walk on, if they choose to.
- As for me, I eventually become aware when I have stepped off the path. However, it is not always easy to get back on it unless I have you, my brothers and fellow disciples, also walking that beautiful path. Let's keep that path illuminated for each other and anyone else who dares to follow.

Amen & Peace Be With You

Marc Barrett