

Faith For Living. . . not just dying

With all of the emphasis on the Resurrection of the Lord, and Heaven, and the merely “relative” good this life is compared to the life to come, it is understandable that one would think that our Gospel message only concerns departure from this life. But, of course, the Gospel is for living this life too: And this is not just as a moral code.

When, for example, we speak of the beauty of creation and the gifts of wonder and awe we are celebrating the gift of the life that has been given us. Sin, evil and disorder have deeply penetrated the reality into which we have been born, but this does not blot out the good work of our good God. The constant acknowledgement of sin and evil is in service of preventing us from becoming naïve.

As I compose this reflection I am looking at a dogwood tree in full blossom in the back yard. Further off in the distance is Long Pond, and all around are various trees and plants “proclaiming the Glory of God.” Of course, I am not saying that these features of nature have minds and wills by which they can choose to glorify God: It is just a character of their being to do so. Every spring the character of their simple “souls” bursts forth into full view. They are beautiful. And this quality of beauty is not purely subjective. It is, according the philosophers and the best theologians, a real quality of “being.” More than that, we could say that it is a participation in God’s glory, and maybe even a sort of sacrament.

Modern science and industry, for all the good they have achieved for us, have tended to render everything in terms of “usefulness” to us; the question being “*What can we extract from this resource that is useful and profitable?*” If this attitude were to be absolutized we would probably go insane. Even atheists give flowers on Valentine’s Day. For most everyone, the red rose symbolizes romantic love. But, what if the gift of a rose were more than merely that symbol? What if it is actually a sacramental participation in the glory of God which is, substantially, Love?

These words may seem overly sentimental or even saccharine to you but consider the following words of the great theologian of “beauty,” Hans urs Von Balthasar:

“Whoever, at its mention [of beauty], wrinkles his lips in a smile, judging it the exotic plaything of a bourgeois past, of him one can be sure that - secretly or openly - he is no longer capable of praying and, before long, not even of loving.”

My point is that faith is not just a preparation for dying but it is also a way of seeing and living. What if all of these spectacular flowers and trees and animals and rivers and mountains and babies and lovers we see every day are a preparation and conditioning to behold God face to face? It sounds fanciful but I’m never going to walk by another flower-in-bloom with indifference ever again if I can help it! And I say this not as one who is particularly interested in gardening or horticulture. This is a theological reflection on seeing God in His splendiferous Creation.

Now there seems to be a contradiction in the preceding paragraph: I spoke of the spectacle of creation in terms of its utility to prepare us for the vision of God. That “vision” is the ultimate goal of life. But, what I meant is that we can see what awaits us in the glory of Created things as long as our gaze is intentional. It leads to a contemplative life, and more peaceful life and a life, truly, worth living.



Consider the song of the three young men in Daniel chapter 3: It is always recited in the Church’s “Liturgy of the Hours” on Sunday’s and Holy Days and is an attempt to help us see the whole cosmos as constantly praising God just simply by “being.” Jesus’ parables frequently appeal to the things of the created cosmos as bearing a message from God.

Finally, this intentional seeing is directly connected to Christ by the apostolic father of the Church, St. Irenaeus of Lyon: *For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God. For if the manifestation of God which is made by means of the creation, affords life to all living in the earth, much more does that revelation of the Father which comes through the Word, give life to those who see God.*”