The Wonder and Meaning of Life

In my previous two articles, I have addressed the mystery of life (September) and the sanctity of life (October). This month, I would like to reflect upon the meaning of life. Often times we are so caught up in the rush of life that we overlook the deeper questions of its meaning. This is especially important for women and men of faith who bring to our common human project a wealth of wonder that is uniquely found in religious language. Words born of believing hearts open us to new vistas of greater wonder. This is why I believe that all life, but especially human life, must be the critical lens by which we see and know and understand our purpose.

This even more important today when so many feel lost, confused, angry, and afraid. I believe this self-alienation is the culprit behind much of our enmity, division, and loneliness. It is part of our tragic age that social media seems to have made us feel more isolated, more alone. A 2018 Pew Research survey found that one-in-ten U.S. adults say they frequently feel lonely. This condition is repugnant to human flourishing for it isolates and alienates. We find our meaning and purpose not in isolation but in community. Sadly, recent studies have told us of the increasing number of those who are religiously “unaffiliated”, people who no longer self-identify with any religion. How tragic. They no longer see religion as relevant or they disagree with the teachings of religion. But I believe that what they are really struggling with is a profound alienation from the genuine self. I believe this is tied to the chaos and confusion plaguing society today -- political intolerance, criminal violence and social alienation spew the mistrust and doubt that eats away at common life.

Perhaps an illustration will help. I enjoy times when I am able to play the piano, but it has been a learned skill over time. Anyone who begins to learn to play a piano must first discover that each note on the song sheet is not isolated, but must be appreciated and understood in relation to all the other notes, rests, tempo markings, and the like. It is not a matter of randomly hitting any old key in a cacophony of harsh discordant sounds. If that were the case no one would ever discover the symphonic beauty of music. Nor is it one note hit time and time again; such droning on is a tortuous monotony with no meaning. No, in order to play the piano, one must enter into the melody and the various notes struck together to form a chord. The same is true of religion: one must enter into the meaning of life. Selfishness isolates and alienation limits the meaningfulness of life reducing it to the annoying repetition of one note struck time and time again with no meaning, no measure, no melody.

Similarly, the meaning of life, one’s moral life, is found as we enter into the melody being played in all creation. Religious people call the composer God and the melody is a virtuous life. Without such understanding, life is difficult to appreciate. The artistry of living, void of this religious melody of meaning, is the drudgery of a lonely world of selfish isolation, a Johnny-one-note all alone. The so-called “nones” abandon the melody and settle for a monotonous hum to life. But the divine melody teaches us that the world is bigger. Its composer is bigger. Its creator is bigger. And ultimately, we each are bigger. The moral life of faith is a symphony but we must be played as part of its orchestration. This is why
when people tell me they are leaving the Church, it is as though they have abandoned their song; they are giving up on something that each of us most needs. God has placed a song in every creature and we are incomplete when it is unsung.

Soon we will end the Church’s liturgical year, our Christian melody of times and seasons. The Feast of Christ the King presents us with the Gospel of Matthew. It is the ultimate realization of life’s meaning. We are confronted by our willingness or our inability to join in the melody of a moral life. The phrase uttered time and time again in that reading is this, “When did we see you?” For those condemned, it is their futile excuse and for those redeemed, it is their wondrous. The meaning of life is only discovered in the rhythm of faith. Believers, like musicians, join in a heavenly chorus where they are drawn into the melody of life’s meaning. No one will ever find happiness in isolation, no one will ever discover the meaning of life without wonder and no one will ever see the face of God without being lost in the divine melody.

To every person who feels lost, to every person who feels unhappy and alone, I say to you there is hope. You cannot find the way alone, you cannot behold the vision if you hide in the dark, and you will never hear God's song shouting and yelling at the world. No. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, care for the widow and the orphan, love your neighbor and walk humbly with your God. Only then will you enter the wonder of this world, only then will you hear the sacred song, only then will you find true happiness. It is only in living the moral life wherein our life begins to find its real meaning. As we remember our beloved deceased during this month of memorial, may we strive to live lives worthy of our calling in Christ. May we be inspired by those loved ones who have gone before us, for whom we pray and make suffrage. May we joyously sing a new song to the Lord in the life we live and in our works of mercy.

Sincerely yours in the Risen Lord,

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