

MOTIVATIONS

Very Reverend Glenn Jones

Vicar General, Vicar for Clergy, Vicar for Religious

Well, another year has begun ... this one beginning a little bit ... ummm ... “differently” than most. What’s that old curse ... “*May you live in interesting times?*” As we get older, we start to appreciate the “uninteresting” and predictable times a heck of a lot more. Well ... different each to his own—we all have our motivations.

Speaking of motivations, I was watching a series on the TV the other night in which a powerful politician was requesting assistance of a very socially-minded minister in accomplishing a certain goal. Because that task would have necessarily taken the minister away from her charitable work, she was none too eager. But, during negotiations, the minister sought not money or wealth, power or prestige for herself (though she could have “named her price”), but rather simply for funding for her free clinic for the poor, asking nothing for herself.

On a bit of a flip side (there I go with the antiquated analogies again), the same day an acquaintance had been complaining about the day’s unexpected and sharp drop in the stock market, bemoaning his losses—one the largest he’d had due to his risky style of trading—in a “Woe is me!” report. While usually/generally a religious sort, he can get a bit obsessed about *the* (particularly *his*) daily market doings. I could not help but think: “*Now you may understand better what Jesus says about not being able to love both God and mammon.*” Hmmm ... I’d better keep an eye on that lad lest he lose focus on the truly important and devote too much effort in chasing material butterflies—our ever-present temptation. Danger, Will Robinson.

But these two events provided food for thought, and not just a little introspection. What IS it that drives us in our daily lives?

It’s easy to take the “lower road,” so to speak—the earthly, wide and easy road—pursuing pride and fame, power and wealth in self-absorption, dismissing other persons as more-or-less extraneous “support staff” for one’s own advancement: “They’re only useful if they help ME.” For instance, I remember who fit that description fairly well, and whose Christmas soliloquy of many years ago to a small group I still remember vividly: “You know what the meaning of life is? Money! Make as much money as you can!” ... much to the evident—and yet either unnoticed or unregarded—disgust and disbelief of his listeners. Hmmm ... on Christmas eve, no less.

Or ... one might look to taking the “high road”—the heavenly, narrow and difficult road—of philanthropy and charity, caring for—and seeking—the good of others before—or even to the exclusion of—material benefit for oneself ... either consciously or unconsciously following St. Paul’s admonition: “*See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.*” (1 Thessalonians 5:15). We have all likely known and admired persons such as this in our own experience, very often someone who may have helped *us* in hard times.

And so ... what keeps us from trying to imitate them ever more closely? After all, we often laud the saints—officially recognized or no—for such qualities, which are essential for Christian virtue, but many non-Christians also live it to the highest degree. If something is so universally admirable, what is holding us back?

Most of us fall in-between those two positions to varying degrees—seeking benefit for self while recognizing need, as well as the danger of becoming too terribly self-centered. As St. John tells us: “...those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” (1 John 4:20). This is the whole purpose of “society”, after all: contributing for mutual benefit. But while this is the theoretical ideal behind socialism, the reality of human nature tends to insert itself, and motivation falters when one is *forced* to contribute the fruits of his labor. Even in monasteries and convents in which members voluntarily take vows of poverty and all material things are to be shared, possessiveness and resentment can be—often is—present nonetheless. After all, monks and nuns come from the same pool of humanity as us, and are thus subject to the same foibles and weaknesses as the rest of us. Yet they all know that they are, like all humans, “works in progress”.

Now, we do have our responsibilities for those who depend upon us—children, our elderly, our sick, etc., and yet we fulfill that charitable goal when we care for any in need. St. Thomas Aquinas writes that the greatest such responsibility is caring for our relatives because they are closest to us—something that St. Paul echoes when he writes: “...*whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*” (1 Timothy 5:8)

As a bit of an aside, notice that the “*Honor thy father and thy mother*” commandment says nothing about whether one’s parents are good or bad, ill or not, demanding or not, likeable or not; filial responsibility remains regardless. As we read in another place: “...*the Lord honors a father above his children, and he confirms a mother’s right over her children. Those who honor their father atone for sins, and those who respect their mother are like those who lay up treasure...Those who respect their father will have long life, and those who honor their mother obey the Lord; they will serve their parents as their masters.*” (Sirach 3:2-4, 6-7).

Yes, each of us has his own motivation, but what we value plants the seeds of our motivations. We can let our seeds fall futilely onto rocky ground to produce no fruit, in thorns to be choked by the world’s attractions, in the shallow soil of vacillation and lack of commitment ... or, we can let them fall onto the good soil of charity, and thereby reap a hundredfold of God’s love and grace. What we try to hoard we’ll lose, because the goods we are given—whether material or spiritual—are meant to be shared.