THE FOOLISHNESS OF LIFE APART FROM GOD

In the early hours of Friday morning, during his participation in the World Youth Day in Krakow, Poland, Pope Francis walked in the footsteps of his two predecessors, Popes John Paul and Benedict, as he visited the former extermination camp at Auschwitz. He paid silent homage to the more than one million victims, mostly Jews, who perished there during the Holocaust. He went there as a solitary pilgrim. Right before his visit, Francis said he “would like to go to that place of horror without speeches, without crowds.” He said he intended to go “alone, to enter, and pray,” adding, “And may the Lord give me the grace to cry.”

I couldn’t help but recall my own visit to Auschwitz over twenty years ago. There, the Lord “gave me the grace to cry” and brought me to a realization of what the prophet says in our first reading – those famous but terrifying words: Vanity of vanities, says Qoheleth, vanity of vanities! All things are vanity! I recall walking into the camp through the visitors center. I was traveling alone, but there were many people in the group of tourists that day. No one spoke, or, if they did, it was in hushed tones. After watching an introductory video explaining the history of this concentration camp and enumerating the many atrocities that occurred – over 1.1 million men, women and children lost their lives there – visitors roamed the camp from one building to the next, trying to imagine -- although that’s certainly impossible to do -- how these human horrors could have taken place.

Cell Blocks 4, 5, 6, and 7 at the former Auschwitz concentration camp have been converted from barracks into museum rooms with glass display cases. These exhibit buildings stand as silent testimonies, after you enter through the iron gate with the words over it: “Arbeit Macht Frei” (“Work Sets You Free”). In Block 5, there are displays devoted to the “Material Evidence of Crime.”

One of the saddest sights at Auschwitz is the display of shoes in a huge glass case that takes up half a barracks room. The shoes are deteriorating and are mostly the same dark gray color, except for a few women's or children's shoes that are made of red leather. The red shoes stand out like the red coat worn by the little girl in the black and white movie, Schindler's List. When the Soviet Union liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau on January 27, 1945, there were 43,000 pairs of shoes in the camp found in a warehouse.

There is also a large display case, taking up half of another barracks room, which contains the suitcases brought by Jewish victims to the camp. The Jews were instructed to mark their suitcases for later identification; you can still see the names written on the leather cases in large letters. On some of the suitcases is the word
Waisenkind, which means orphan -- proof that there were children among the victims at Auschwitz. The leather suitcases weren’t deteriorated like the shoes, which probably means that the shoes were disinfected with Zyklon-B in preparation for sending them back to Germany, but the suitcases weren’t.

Another display was filled with the artificial legs and crutches which were brought to the camp by incoming prisoners. Wounded Polish war veterans from World War I accounted for most of that huge collection. Then a display holding thousands of pairs of reading glasses taken from prisoners; another display -- thousands of pots and pans confiscated from people which they had smuggled in with their luggage. In Block 4, there is a display case, about the size of a walk-in closet, filled with hair cut from the heads of an estimated 140,000 victims. The hair, badly deteriorated, has turned the same shade of dark gray. This was a truly disgusting sight and one that any visitor, including myself, wouldn't soon forget. Finally, at the end of my overwhelming experience I came to the room that housed the ovens which burned the bodies of those who died at Auschwitz. In overwhelming sadness and grief at what fellow human beings are capable of, I went to a corner of that room and turned to face the wall so I could weep alone, with no one there observing me -- although I would rather have invited all in the room to join our tears together.

The pope concluded his visit to Auschwitz— what is now the Polish town known as Oswiecim, about 30 miles west of Krakow — by meeting twelve survivors of the camp. He greeted them one by one, mostly in silence, expressing his sorrow and respect by clutching their hands, looking into their eyes and kissing them tenderly, once on each cheek – these survivors who had faced their own mortality.

The fool in the parable of today’s gospel speaks out of a greed that allows him to ignore his own mortality. The rich man doesn’t realize that he lives locked up inside himself, prisoner of a logic that dehumanizes him, lacking in empathy for the needs of others -- empty of all dignity. He only lives to accumulate, store and add to his material wellbeing. Such foolishness is only possible when the voice of God is ignored for some other voice -- be it the voice of self-righteousness, the voice of the fear of change, of closed-mindedness, of pride or the voice of greed.

The gospel today addresses a specific case of a person caught up in the constantly shrinking world of his own comfort, his own convenience. When we become so obsessed with one thing – the successful career, the beautiful house, the flourishing stock portfolio, we are easily crushed when those things fail us – and sooner or later, they will. As wonderful as those things may be, God has given us this precious, wonderful life in order to embrace and be embraced by His selfless and affirming love, to discover how to love one another as God loves us -- totally and completely, without condition or limit. In his World Youth Day visit to the city of Czestochowa, Pope Francis’ words echo today’s scriptures: “To be attracted by power, by grandeur, by appearances, is tragically human.... It is a great temptation that tries to insert itself everywhere. But to give oneself to others, eliminating distances,
dwelling in littleness and living the reality of one’s everyday life: This is exquisitely divine.”

Human life apart from God renders all of us foolish; every aspect of our identity is futile if viewed apart from God. It might be wealth that makes us forget God and our ultimate goal. Or, it might be the need for security and for protecting ourselves against whatever closes our minds and hearts to “the things that are above.” Our challenge is to re-evaluate ourselves, before it’s too late, in terms of the new way of life that Christ holds out to us. We take our ‘stage directions’ from the example of Jesus. Here was the person whose view of life showed him that all is not vanity, but rather all can be sign and sacrament of the divine presence when placed at the service of God’s Kingdom.

"Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."
~Luke 12:15

The most important and valuable things in our lives don’t have price tags; they aren’t stored in our already bulging closets and stuffed attics and garages. The real treasure of life is the selfless and affirming love that is of God, love that creates and embraces, affirms and consoles, enriches and lifts up. The fullness of life is to seek that unique, simple but profound love that is centered in gratitude to our Creator, and then to share that love with those with whom we are privileged to

journey through this life. I learned that lesson so many years ago at Auschwitz. It’s a lesson you’ve all learned throughout your lives. It’s a lesson I hope we will never forget.

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