



Bishop Guy's Chronicle

The Parable of the Cats

It is interesting to note how Jesus, the most intelligent of the intelligent, the wisest of the wise, chose to instruct us using simple parables through which he always succeeds in conveying an important spiritual message. These allegorical stories or comparisons of astonishing simplicity are always intended to make us understand more fully the mysterious reality of the Kingdom of Heaven already in our midst. Better still, the kingdom within us! (Lk 17:21)

Any teacher or preacher who has the mandate to evangelize explicitly knows that inventing a modern parable that is simple and rooted in people's daily lives is quite a challenge. The first step in preparing a lesson or homily often consists of collecting intellectual information (theological, historical, sociological, etc.) to place ourselves in the context of the biblical narrative. And this is a good way to begin when we prepare a biblical teaching. But the road is not supposed to end there! It will also take a lot of prayer and reflection after collecting all this information, to extract the essential message from it and to be able to present its content in a simple and comprehensive way.

Unfortunately, and more often than not, when the time comes to deliver the teaching or homily, simplicity is no longer part of the menu. And this is to the great detriment of the listeners who feel overwhelmed by the overly intellectual, emotionless, inaccessible, and spiritually arid content. The discourse is thus deprived of its capacity to nourish the listener's soul. Rather, it becomes a display of knowledge of the preacher, seeking to impress the gallery. Imagine if Jesus had chosen to take this path! He could have displayed to us how his intelligence, his science, and his wisdom are infinite and incomparable to ours. And that would have humbled us in so many ways! But instead, he chose the way of humility and simplicity to teach us the greatest mysteries.

Let me introduce you to a modern parable. It is not the result of personal reflection, nor is it plagiarized from readings or media sources. It is simply the result of divine intervention in my life. I like to call it "The Parable of the Cats." In my humble opinion, this experience has become for me and for many listeners one of my most popular sermons. Over the years, many testimonies from friends have confirmed to me how deeply it has become ingrained in the memory of the listeners. Like a sword, its simplicity and depth have touched people's hearts and minds. Proof that this preaching did not come from me, but from God.

In 1984, during my novitiate with the Redemptorists in Ste-Anne-de-Beaupré, my fellow novice and I left for Quebec City in the morning at the beginning of the week. We went to a large religious monastery located on the shores of the St. Lawrence River, in the middle of a large wooded area and somewhat secluded from the city noise. Several other young men and women religious from different communities participated with us in this formation session—one of many—on religious life and aimed at helping us to better discern our vocation to religious or priestly life.

During this particular week, the session focused on our personal relationship with God. A religious sister was assigned to give this instruction. On the second day of the session, I thought it was a fairly good session. I said “fairly good” because my first impression was that we talked more about psychology than about spirituality. But hey! I listened and offered everything to the good Lord. After lunch, the religious sister invited us to go outside for an hour and to find a place where we would be alone somewhere in the middle of the forest. The purpose of the exercise? To stay there, and to identify ourselves with something, anything, and to reflect on this during that time.

I must admit that I was very disappointed in this exercise. I left the room muttering to myself, “Waste of time! What is the point of such a futile exercise?” And I left with the group, and each one of us parted so that we could be alone in this great area blessed by the hand of God.

After walking for a while in this beautiful wooded area and exploring the shoreline of the St. Lawrence River, I discovered a good size rock in the middle of this forest. So I sat on it and admired the landscape that presented itself to me. Suddenly, I said to myself, “Oh! I forgot! I have an exercise to do. So let’s get rid of this futile exercise as soon as possible.” I saw a branch above my head and I said to it, “O little branch, do I identify with you? No, I don’t.” Then I stared at a dead leaf on the ground and asked: “O little leaf, do I identify with you? No, I don’t. Voila! I’ve now completed the exercise and I found nothing to identify myself with!” And so I continued to observe and admire the beautiful landscape all around me.

Suddenly, about 50 metres away from me, I saw a cat coming out of nowhere. What a wonderful distraction! But then I was amazed by the beauty of this cat. “Oh, what a lovely and beautiful cat.” Truth is, I hate cats! But this one is so beautiful. I don’t remember ever seeing such a pretty cat in my life. Well, let’s make the most of it, I thought. I’ve got an hour left, so I might as well spend it in a pleasant way. So I called it from the rock where I was sitting, “Come, my beautiful kitty. Don’t be afraid, come closer!” But the friggin’ cat wouldn’t move! He just stared at me. He seemed wild, independent, like all cats. So I decided to speak in a gentler and more charming voice, “Come, my beautiful little kitty. You are so beautiful. I won’t hurt you! Come, come closer.”

After a few minutes, the cat approached cautiously, one small step at a time. And then another one, and another one. It paused, watched me, and examined me; it then made another step. It took forever! But I persevered and the magnificent wild kitty slowly but surely came closer. And I kept telling it, "How beautiful you are! Come closer. Don't be afraid!" I am not lying when I say this, the cat took at least 45 minutes of my time to finally get within three feet of me. And I was still talking to it very gently with a friendly smile and careful gestures so as not to frighten it away. Now it was so close to me! My hard work had paid off. It was now there in front of me, rubbing and purring on the edge of the rock where I had been sitting for an hour.

An intense joy overwhelmed me at that moment. I said to myself, "I have finally succeeded in taming it after this long period of time. I have charmed it and I can finally take it in my arms." So I opened my arms slowly, with a blissful smile, and I said, "Come into my arms my beautiful kitty!" When I was just a few inches away from it, I bent down to take it in my arms, and... it ran away like a lightning bolt and disappeared into the woods. I was so disappointed. I said to myself, "Stupid cats! They're all alike!"

Sitting on the rock in silence and with a pitiful look on my face, with about ten more minutes to go before going back to class, I heard a discreet voice talking to me inside. It said, "You were in my place on the rock, and the cat was you!" At first, I was shocked and confused. Then I said, "Am I talking to myself?" But then I figured the Lord could be talking to me. "What exactly do you mean, Lord? The wild, independent cat was me? But how is that possible?" And I began to relive the whole scenario again, from the moment I saw the beautiful cat from afar until he ran off.

And I continued to dialogue with God, "Do you really think I am beautiful, Lord? Really? And you took so much time and patience to attract me and to tame me. And I was so apprehensive or independent at first. And you used such a gentle voice to call me, inviting me to come closer and closer to you. And I eventually allowed myself to accept your words and your presence without fear, to the point of purring as I brushed against the rock. But then, Lord, why did I suddenly leave when you stretched out your arms to me with so much affection?"

And I kept thinking, "Maybe I have not yet understood how much you love me in a deep and infinite way? Do I feel too unworthy of your love, despite my conversion at the age of 24? Do I still lack confidence in you and in myself, despite my journey over the past four years? Perhaps you are telling me that I do not sufficiently recognize that my talents and my whole being have been given to me freely by you and that I do not have enough confidence and appreciation of the fact that you are the author of all of the gifts that you have entrusted to me?"

And I went back to class feeling a bit sad, not understanding fully what the Lord was trying to tell me. And the religious sister then said to us, "Alright. Now you will take turns expressing what you have identified with in nature." And then it was my turn to say something. So I recounted everything to my brothers and sisters, not to mention my resistance and my lack of faith in the exercise that the teacher had recommended to us. But when I was finished, I was surprised by the reaction of the other novices. Some of them said, "Wow! You really had a profound spiritual experience in the woods."

The next afternoon, it was still a lovely day, with its beautiful sunshine and mild temperature, and the religious sister told us again, "For the next hour, you will go back to the forest by yourself, but you will find a different place this time. During this hour, you will praise God as you have never done before. I want you to shout out loudly to God your gratitude. Praise Him aloud, without fear and without hesitation. Bless Him for all the graces He has given you up to this day. Raise your arms high. Go on, then. I'll see you in an hour."

So I went back into the woods and found a different place. But this time, I was very skeptical and I wondered how this exercise could really help us in our religious formation. Basically, I told myself that I didn't need to shout to God. He hears my voice even when I whisper. I don't need to raise my arms high: my open hands are enough to show him my open heart and mind.

Then I began to praise God very softly, without shouting, standing up straight and with my eyes closed. But to be honest, I hardly felt anything inwardly. It was rather dry and done with very little affection. So I decided to do as the teacher advised. I looked around. No one in sight! Ok, let's do it! And I shouted out loud, "Blessed are you, Lord, for this wonderful gift that you have given me!" I looked around... nobody in sight! That's comforting. I won't look like a fool! Then I raised my arms high and continued to praise, as I shouted, "Blessed are you for this other gift, Lord, and for the grace of my own creation, and for bringing me back to faith; for my parents, for this and for that..."

At that very moment, I suddenly began to feel a great freedom deep within me. I no longer cared about the people around me. I felt like I was alone with God, alone in the whole world. What an extraordinary feeling of freedom! And guess what I suddenly saw in front of me? No, it wasn't yesterday's beautiful cat. It was a different cat! An ugly, muddy cat, full of burrs, looking at me from a distance.

Please believe me: I did not call it or invite it over! But it came by itself. It was hovering around me. It was meowing and wanted me to embrace it in my arms. And it also stank! So I looked up to the sky, and I started crying and said to the good

Lord, "Alright Lord. I now understand. Despite all my mud, my burrs, and my stench, I finally dared to come to you as I am. And this time, I did not run away but rather begged you to hold me, and then you had the pleasure of taking me in your arms, exactly as I am."

And the ugly cat was purring in my arms. It was so happy. Seeing its numerous burrs stuck to the hairs, I decided to remove them one by one. I cautiously grabbed one of them and placed my fingers underneath the burr, and with the other fingers, I pulled on the burr without hurting it. The cat was still purring! Once I had removed the burr, I held it in my hands and suddenly realized, "Well! This burr represents my sins, Lord, doesn't it? You don't pull them all out at once by plucking out the hair at the same time! You slowly remove them, one by one, until I will one day be completely free of their hold."

What a lesson I learned that day. It was as if the Lord was saying to me, "Do not wait until you are a saint to give yourself up to Me! Come to Me as you are, and I will set you free and make you holy!"

Can you imagine the reaction of the other novices when I once again recounted my experience? Some were so astonished, that they were almost sceptical. But the life lesson was so edifying that it touched the hearts of each one of them and encouraged them to never again despair of God's love and mercy, despite the deep indignity that we can sometimes feel when faced with our failures, sins, and lack of trust. Thank you, Lord, for giving to all of us this wonderful parable of the cats.