

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

January 1, 2017

Spiritual Ponderings

As we begin a new year, I would like to share a reflection with you that I wrote last year during a time of prayer and titled "Where is the Faith?" I hope that it will inspire you to appreciate and take your Catholic faith a little more serious this year.

I truly believe that Saint Louis is one of the greatest cities in the United States to live. I often talk about "Saint Louis being the biggest small town and the smallest big town." Saint Louis is big enough to have professional sports team like the Saint Louis Cardinals and Blues but we are small enough that our traffic is not as bad as the larger cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, or Atlanta.

Growing up in Saint Louis it was almost impossible not to be a Saint Louis Cardinal Fan. There is a special relationship between the Cardinals and the city. Opening day is almost considered a holiday and almost every school has a "Cardinals Day" where they encourage their students and teachers to wear their Cardinal fan gear.

Personally, growing up I loved watching the Cardinals with my grandmother and mom on the television. My grandmother loved listening to Jack Buck and Mike Shannon on the radio while watching the television on mute. As a young adult, I enjoyed going to Cardinals game with friends and family. I also believe that it safe to say that at any St. Louis Cardinal game in St. Louis, you could find at least five priests at the game. About the time I was transferring from my first parish to my second parish, I began to realize that my devotion to the St. Louis Cardinals had begun to falter. I had stopped going to Cardinal games and I could not tell you where the Cardinals were in the standings. My lack of interest in the Cardinals had nothing to do with any incident that had upset me or their playing but rather small choices that I had made almost without knowing it.

At the end of one of his parable's concerning prayer, Jesus ends with the question "when the Son of Man comes will He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). There are sometimes after reading the local newspaper or watching the new, I wonder the same thing. How is it that there are so many people falling away from God? It is my firm belief that many people are wandering away from their Catholic faith in the same way that I lost my Cardinal Fandom, one small, almost unnoticeable, choice at a time. The good news is that once we notice these small choices, we can address them and rebuild our faith life like I did with my love for the St. Louis Cardinals. Here are ten choices that I am going to try to correct this year as I try to grow in my faith.

1. Practicing Paganism instead of Living a Life of Grace

I believe most people, at least subconsciously, fall into the habit of practicing paganism instead of living their faith life in the light of what Jesus reveals to us about God. The main idea behind paganism was that there were supreme beings that had different powers to control different aspects of nature. Human beings worshipped and offered sacrifices to these gods or goddesses in order to appease them or keep in a good mood. If the gods or goddesses were in a good mood they might if they felt like it look favorably upon a person and bless them but if they were in a bad mood they might curse you. For example the story of Odysseus in the Greek myth *The Odyssey* is punished by Athena for not offering to her a sacrifice of thanksgiving and the story of Homer's *Iliad* was about a great war in which different gods and goddesses took sides depending upon who worshipped them.

One of the great things Jesus reveals to us is that God was not like the pagan gods and goddesses that people had known up until that time. Jesus reveals to us that the Father's favor and love did not have to be earned because God freely bestowed it to people who believed in Him. All we had to do was receive it or remain in it by not sinning. This was also the center of the great conflicts between Jesus and the Jewish Authorities. The Jewish Authorities thought that they had to practice their faith and perform their rituals with as few errors as possible because they did not want to anger God. This is part of the reason why they limited the number of people who could practice their faith. They were trying to hide these "unclean" people from God in order not to have God mad at them. Jesus revealed to them and to us that it is not perfectly forming rituals but rather love that matters. It was not about excluding people but rather about including people.

I discover a lot of people today stop practicing their faith simply because they feel that they have messed up too much or are simply not capable of making God happy. This is sad because ultimately our God is not like the pagan gods

and goddesses. He is more like the kind and loving father in the story of the prodigal son, the good shepherd in search of his lost sheep, and the sower who gives generously to the good and the bad.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

January 8, 2017

Spiritual Ponderings

As I continue to share with you from my reflection called “Where is the Faith?” I invite you to examine your hearts to find the areas of faith that you need to strengthen. May we all be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

2. Half-Hearted Secularism

“Secularism” is a word that we often hear when talking about religion but for me it was a word that for much of my life was vaguely defined. Finally, I heard someone define it as “treating religion as recreational.” When a person treats his or her faith recreational then it is not a priority in their life. It is something they do if they have the extra time in the week or they feel like it. People who practice secularism do not go to Mass when they are on vacation, fail to attend holy days of Obligation and finally only practice their faith when they feel it will make them look good before others.

One day I was listening to a secular radio program in which the disc jockeys were discussing whether or not they could have the thing that they had given up for Lent on Sunday. I found this conversation so confusing and amusing because two of the disc jockeys have confessed in the past that they were Catholics. One of the two was living with her boyfriend and was avid about the fact that she never planned to get married and both of the Catholic disc jockeys made it clear that they did not go to Church on Sunday. I found it fascinating and sad that they were worried about what they had given up for Lent instead of trying to address the more important issues that were keeping them from developing a deeper personal relationship with the Lord.

3. Ego Based Faith

I have been known many good people over the years that practice their faith with great fervor only to walk away from their faith later on because they never allowed their faith to take root in their heart. People who were once active members of the Parish Council, Parish Home and School Association, and even liturgical ministers, can end up walking away from their faith if they do not take the time for prayer and study.

Most people who practice their faith without devoting themselves to prayer and study are doing so because they enjoy the attention they receive from others. This was pretty much me for many of my high school years. I practiced my faith, went to Mass in order to make my mother happy and receive the bonus of others telling me what a great guy I was for still attending Mass when so many of my classmates did not.

The problem with Ego Based faith is that the roots do not go very deep because Jesus himself promises that we will experience persecution if we follow Him because like Him we are not made for this world. People who practice their faith for show and attention often fall quickly away during times of persecution. Going back to the baseball analogy it is easy to be a St. Louis Cardinals fan in St. Louis than in Chicago or New York.

4. Wanting a Perfect Church

When I was still an associate pastor, I would sometimes be invited to sit in on interviews my pastor was holding to find a new staff person. Somewhere within the many questions he would ask the applicant if his or her faith was strong enough to work for the Church. One of the great mysteries in our faith is that God chose twelve very flawed men and a few women to begin his Church. The God who has literally an army of angels at His beck and call chose not to use them but rather to use human beings as his ministers. As I ponder this great mystery, I cannot help but think that part of God’s reasoning behind this decision is because one gets to know another person better when they work alongside that person.

As a priest, I will often hear someone tell me that they don’t go to Church anymore because another person in the Church was mean to them or said something that they did not like and part of me wants to respond with “what did you expect?” The Church is made up of human beings and human beings by their very definitions are flawed creatures who make mistakes.

The first demoniac Jesus encounters in Mark Gospel was found in a synagogue - a church. A close reading of this passage allows us to assume that the man possessed by the unclean spirit could be anyone in the synagogue including the cantor or rabbi. Jesus of course heals the man by driving out the spirit. How many times did the apostles argue about who was the greatest? We come to Church not because we are perfect but rather because we are in need of a savior.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

January 15, 2017

Spiritual Ponderings

As I continue sharing my thoughts with you I pray and hope that they will help you develop a deeper faith life.

5. Anti-Authority

I have mentioned a few times already my love for baseball, and I know this love for baseball started off as a kid playing Wiffle ball with some of the other children in the neighborhood. If you would go to my mother's house today, you could probably find four patches of dirt in the front yard where the grass was not given a chance to grow because that was where we placed our bases. Sadly most of these games ended not after nine innings but rather after a fight where one player thought the runner was safe and another player thought the runner was out or where the pitcher thought he had thrown strike three and the batter thought the pitch was a ball.

Playing baseball in my parents' front yard and later playing baseball for a CYC team taught me the importance of having umpires and referees. Many people today leave the Church because they do not see the value of structure or rules. They think in some way these rules limit our freedom but the truth of the matter it is the rules and the people that enforce them fairly that allow us to interact with one another in a loving and free way.

The Church has always taught individual that they have a duty to follow their conscience but more importantly the Church has taught that we have an obligation to inform our consciousness. While we can determine whether an act is morally good or evil, we cannot make an act morally good or evil. In addition evil acts or often at least momentarily pleasurable and thus at least slightly addictive and therefore we cannot say whether something is morally good or evil by how it feels. While a parent may enjoy physically abusing a child because it allows the parent to release his or her frustration, we know that it is not morally good for a parent to physically abuse their child because a child is a person who has certain rights. Morality therefore cannot be left up to what people feel otherwise there would be no way to hold rapists and murders accountable.

Many people today leave the Church because they choose to see the Church's teaching as being restrictive instead of loving. They are like children who become frustrated with the parents because their parents will let them touch the fire or put a fork in an electric socket.

6. Karma

I am amazed at the number of Catholics that I encounter that believe in karma. Many of them would deny but at least subconsciously their actions and expectations seem to show that deep down they do believe in karma. The idea behind karma is simple. Good things are supposed to happen to good people and bad things are supposed to happen to bad people. In other words the more good things you do the more good things God will give to you and the more bad things you do the more bad things that will happen to you.

While I think life would be much easier if this was true we know deep down that it is not true and that sometimes bad things happen to good people and good things seem to happen to bad people. This mostly manifests itself when we believe that God is punishing us for something despite having done everything right. For example, I might get a speeding ticket on the way home from helping the homeless and feel that God should have somehow prevented the officer from seeing the fact that I was speeding because I had been doing nothing but good today. On a more serious level we may assume that God is displeased with us because we have been diagnosed with Cancer and we ask ourselves what did I do to deserve this illness? The truth of the matter is that bad things do happen to good people and no one ever does anything to deserve an illness. Our world because of sin is in chaos. God does not leave the world in Chaos though but enters into it in Jesus Christ and suffers right alongside. God's ultimate answer to suffering in the world is not karma but rather the Resurrection

As I continue to reflect on you ways that we can improve our faith life, I leave you with number 7 and St. Ignatius's rules for thinking with the Church.

7. Intellectual Arrogance

Another reason, people leave the Church is that they have come to the conclusion that they know better than the Church and thus better than God. They see religion as something that only foolish and superstitious would dive into. These people like to dissect religions and focus on the negative instead of the positive.

I use the word "arrogance" because I think it takes a certain amount of arrogance to say that an ordinary person knows better than God the creator of the Universe. I can still remembering getting my first Blue Ray Player and thinking how stupid it was to have so many buttons on the remote. Only after reading the instruction manual and using the remote did I discover the purpose behind each button and how it made my life easier. In the same way there are certain things about the way life is or I have to practice my faith that makes me wonder why God designed the world this way but normally after some studying, prayer, and discussion with others, I come to discover God's great wisdom. So I can think of no other word than "arrogance" when it comes to thinking we human beings think we know better than God and his Church.

The following are St. Ignatius's Rules for Thinking with the Church.

1. Always to be ready to obey with mind and heart, setting aside all judgment of one's own, the true spouse of Jesus Christ, our holy mother, our infallible and orthodox mistress, the Catholic Church, whose authority is exercised over us by the hierarchy. **2.** To commend the confession of sins to a priest as it is practiced in the Church; the reception of the Holy Eucharist once a year, or better still every week, or at least every month, with the necessary preparation. **3.** To commend to the faithful frequent and devout assistance at the holy sacrifice of the Mass, the ecclesiastical hymns, the divine office, and in general the prayers and devotions practiced at stated times, whether in public in the churches or in private. **4.** To have a great esteem for the religious orders, and to give the preference to celibacy or virginity over the married state. **5.** To approve of the religious vows of chastity, poverty, perpetual obedience, as well as to the other works of perfection and supererogation. Let us remark in passing, that we must never engage by vow to take a state (such e.g. as marriage) that would be an impediment to one more perfect... **6.** To praise relics, the veneration and invocation of Saints: also the stations, and pious pilgrimages, indulgences, jubilees, the custom of lighting candles in the churches, and other such aids to piety and devotion. **7.** To praise the use of abstinence and fasts as those of Lent, of Ember Days, of Vigils, of Friday, Saturday, and of others undertaken out of pure devotion: also voluntary mortifications, which we call penances, not merely interior, but exterior also. **8.** To commend moreover the construction of churches, and ornaments; also images, to be venerated with the fullest right, for the sake of what they represent. **9.** To uphold especially all the precepts of the Church, and not censure them in any manner; but, on the contrary, to defend them promptly, with reasons drawn from all sources, against those who criticize them. **10.** To be eager to commend the decrees, mandates, traditions, rites and customs of the Fathers in the Faith or our superiors. As to their conduct; although there may not always be the uprightness of conduct that there ought to be, yet to attack or revile them in private or in public tends to scandal and disorder. Such attacks set the people against their princes and pastors; we must avoid such reproaches and never attack superiors before inferiors. The best course is to make private approach to those who have power to remedy the evil. **11.** To value most highly the sacred teaching, both the Positive and the Scholastic, as they are commonly called... **12.** It is a thing to be blamed and avoided to compare men who are living on the earth (however worthy of praise) with the Saints and Blessed, saying: This man is more learned than St. Augustine, etc... **13.** That we may be altogether of the same mind and in conformity with the Church herself, if she shall have defined anything to be black which to our eyes appears to be white, we ought in like manner to pronounce it to be black. For we must undoubtedly believe, that the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Spirit of the Orthodox Church His Spouse, by which Spirit we are governed and directed to Salvation, is the same;... **14.** It must also be borne in mind, that although it be most true, that no one is saved but he that is predestinated, yet we must speak with circumspection

concerning this matter, lest perchance, stressing too much the grace or predestination of God, we should seem to wish to shut out the force of free will and the merits of good works; or on the other hand, attributing to these latter more than belongs to them, we derogate meanwhile from the power of grace. **15.** For the like reason we should not speak on the subject of predestination frequently; if by chance we do so speak, we ought so to temper what we say as to give the people who hear no occasion of erring and saying, 'If my salvation or damnation is already decreed, my good or evil actions are predetermined'; whence many are wont to neglect good works, and the means of salvation. **16.** It also happens not infrequently, that from immoderate, preaching and praise of faith, without distinction or explanation added, the people seize a pretext for being lazy with regard to any good works, which precede faith, or follow it when it has been formed by the bond of charity. **17.** Not any more must we push to such a point when the preaching and inculcating of the grace of God, as that there may creep thence into the minds of the hearers the deadly error of denying our faculty of free will. We must speak of it as the glory of God requires... that we may not raise doubts as to liberty and the efficacy of good works. **18.** Although it is very praiseworthy and useful to serve God through the motive of pure charity, yet we must also recommend the fear of God; and not only filial fear, but servile fear, which is very useful and often even necessary to raise man from sin... Once risen from the state, and free from the affection of mortal sin, we may then speak of that filial fear which is truly worthy of God, and which gives and preserves the union of pure love.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

January 29, 2017

Spiritual Ponderings

Here are the last three points of my reflection. I hope that they have helped deepen your faith life..

8. Doubts

At the end of St. Matthew's Gospel we hear "When they (the apostles) saw Him (the resurrected Jesus) they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful (Matthew 28: 17)." The apostles had seen the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, the Transfiguration, the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection and still they had doubts. This is Good News for us because we know that Jesus did not give up on them and we can therefore trust that he will not give up on us. The most important thing we can do with our doubts is to take them to the Lord in prayer and share them with others. In moments of doubt it is important to be reminded of all those times that we did not doubt. Doubting is fine but allowing our doubts to pile up on top of each other is not only not fine it can lead us to walk away from our faith therefore to strengthen our faith we must take the time to address any doubts one at a time as they come up.

If we do not address the problems we have with another person when they arise we can store these problems up and then dump them on the other individual. While holding these conflicts inside instead of dealing with them, we allow our negative feelings to grow stronger as well. Addressing the doubts directly by talking to others can help stop this negative build up. Do not be afraid to really find out what the Church teaches about a subject by talking to one or more people who are in the know about a topic. For example, if I do not understand things, I have at least three priests I consult before I make up my mind. Each of them normally gives me a different perspective upon my problem.

9. Confusing Self-Help For Religion

Another reason why people end up leaving the Church is that they confuse Church with being a sort of self-help organization. While the Church does desire you to be the best person you can be. St Irenaeus of Lyon said "The glory of God is a person fully alive." Catholic faith is above all about building a relationship with God and others and if we are concern solely with our own advancement and not a relationship with God or others we become self-centered and self-absorbed. Self-help turns directs our vision inwards and creates selfishness. Faith helps us develop relationships with others and the ultimate other. Self-improvement does play a role in all religions but it is not the end all in the Catholic faith. If we are not careful confusing self-help with faith can lead us into seeing God as a life coach holding a clipboard with a checklist on it instead of the loving Divine Being, Jesus reveals God to be.

10. Wrong Image of God

I have yet to meet a true atheist. Most people, I know that call themselves atheists are “anti-theists.” It is not that they do not believe in God but rather they want to rebel against God. A true atheist would spend his time pitying and not caring about what people or faith are doing verses trying to convert them to their way of thinking. A true atheist would not be upset about the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance. He might not recite it but he has no reason to feel attacked with others use the phrase.

Instead most atheists in the world today see God not in the way Jesus revealed Him to us as a loving and caring Father but as a super divine creature who is in competition with us. They carry with them the mindset that if God is winning then they must be losing and so they refuse to give into God even if the battle is useless or at least very lopsided.

They imagine God to be like Augustus Caesar who would crush anyone who disobeyed him instead of seeing God as the loving Father in the story of the Prodigal Son who forgave his son even after his son wished him dead. They imagine God to be like Hitler moving forward with force to get his way instead of like the Good Samaritan who stops to take care of the vulnerable and the needy. Finally they imagine God to be like a merciless judge just waiting for the time we end up in his court instead of a loving Father who did not send his son into the world to condemn it but to save it (John 3:16).

How is your faith life? Are you consciously or subconsciously making these bad decisions as you live your daily life? How can you change the tide? I know that I am a bigger Cardinal fan now because I do not take my fandom for granted. I go to ball games, listen to the games on the radio, learn about the players, read about the team’s history and so much more. I hope that your faith will grow stronger each and every day.