

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
August 2, 2015
Spiritual Ponderings
Helping Fallen Away Catholics

Let us begin this month's Spiritual Ponderings by reflecting on the following passage from the Gospel of Luke: *The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to him, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." So to them he addressed this parable. "What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it? And when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders with great joy and, upon his arrival home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance. (Luke 15:1-7).*

As we reflect on this passage about God's love for those that have wandered away from Him and the lost today there are sometimes I wonder if Jesus would reverse the numbers and talk about a shepherd who had ninety-nine sheep wander away while one stayed. It is no secret that there are many more people leaving the Catholic Church than that are being converted. I have heard it said over and over again that surveys say that the largest denomination in the world is Catholics and the second is "fallen away" Catholics. I therefore would like to reflect and ponder with you this month what is it that we can do to help God's lost sheep find their way back to God and his flock (The Catholic Church).

Sr. Theresa Aletheia Nobel FSP recently authored a book on the subject of fallen away Catholics that she titled *The Prodigal You Love: Inviting Love Ones Back to the Church*. In her book Sr. Theresa shares with her readers her experience of going from being a cradle Catholic to a fallen away Catholic and finally finding her way back to the Catholic Church. Throughout her story she shares with us some of the things that made it difficult and sometimes even presented for her to return to the Catholic Church and she shares with us some of the things that ultimately led her to return to her Catholic Home. Quotes from her book will be in bold and my commentary will be in regular font.

Even Jesus had a hard time getting through to his friends and family.

It does not do you any good to have unrealistic expectations when interacting with others especially family members. For we either get mad at others for not cooperating, we get mad ourselves for not being good enough, or both. All we can do is do our best. When we do poorly we ask for forgiveness and try again. If the other person does not respond the way that we would like them to all we can do is pray. Either way is better than us beating them or ourselves up.

Humility is absolutely essential in our relationships with loved ones who are away from the Church. If we do not understand the importance of humility, then chances are we will hurt rather than help the likelihood of our loved ones' return to the Church.

Why is humility particularly important in interactions with loved ones who are not practicing their faith? First of all, because humility is the virtue our loved ones need in order to return. Faith begins with humility. In the encyclical Light of Faith (Lumen Fidei,) Pope Francis writes: "Faith is God's free gift, which calls for humility." The journey of faith is a process in which one's perspective in live increasingly shifts away from self and toward God. If we do not model humility, then we do little to encourage an attitude of faith in our loved ones.

If a person is going to return to the Catholic Church they are going to have to be humble enough to admit that they had made a mistake and only people who are humble can do that. If we model the virtue of humility by admitting our mistakes we can become a great resource to them. Remember the purpose is to enter into dialogue with them and not conflict. Dialogue is where both people desire to find the truth or the best way to do something. In conflict one or both parties are not interested in the truth but rather are interested in "winning" the argument. It is also debate things with kindness and not to criticize (attack) them.

Secondly, humility is also important because if we are not humble, we can easily fall into the trap of thinking that we are responsible for another person's return to the Church. This attitude is perhaps among the most dangerous and can be lead to serious missteps that push people away. In order to really live in a compelling way that leads others to faith; we have to give up any savior-complex we might have. What we say and do is not going to save anyone. We

have a Savior and his name is Jesus. In order to make any difference in our loved ones' lives, we have to let go of any self-centeredness in our desire for someone to the Church.

God has the whole view of the chessboard/puzzle and we can only see a part of the board or only a few of the pieces. Take for example the story of Moses. Moses not only left his Jewish faith behind but ran off to a distant country. God though found Him through the Burning Bush and commissioned Moses to be the great deliver of Israel.

People are also more willing to approach a humble person for help than people they find intimidating.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

August 9, 2015

Spiritual Ponderings

Helping Fallen Away Catholics

One of the great concerns that unite most Catholics is a deep apprehension over the number of relatives and friends who have wandered, fallen, or just plain left the Catholic Church. I recently had the privilege of reading Sr. Theresa Aletheia Nobel FSP book: *The Prodigal You Love: Inviting Love Ones Back to the Church*. In her book Sr. Theresa shares with her readers her experience of going from being a cradle Catholic to a fallen away Catholic and finally finding her way back to the Catholic Church. Quotes from her book will be in bold and my commentary will be in regular font.

We all have moments when we feel a nudge from the Holy Spirit. But often we want to push it away because, frankly, we desire to control our own lives and are afraid to take risks we have not initiated ourselves.

The virtue is always in the middle of two vices. If we constantly invite a love one back to the Church that can be considered "hounding" and this may result in a defense position in the other person that is counterproductive to your desire to bring them back to the Church. On the other hand if you never invite a person back then they could think that your faith is really not that important to you and thus wonder why it should be important to them. From time to time though God will provide opportunities to invite people back to the Church; one must be open to the Holy Spirit so that you can be ready to seize these moments.

But it is important to understand and respect that people who no longer believe in God or have left the Church are in a delicate spiritual position, often with serious wounds at the source of their feeling about God. Even if the person we are concerned about is a close family member or our own child, we cannot assume we know what a person needs. Only the Holy Spirit knows and fully understands the hearts of our loved ones.

Often the issue is not the issue but rather "a safe statement" that the person feels they can tell everyone as the reason for them leaving the Church. Sometime the issues that caused them to leave the Church is much lighter (they simply got busy and Church stopped being a priority for them) on the other hand it could be that the issue are much deeper (may be they were hurt by someone in authority in the Church). We must be really careful when inviting someone back. Our role model for inviting people back to the faith should be the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son. As our love one returns to the Church we want to be the one that embraces them and let them know how much God loves them. Imagine though how different the story of the Prodigal Son would be if instead of the loving Father the younger son ran into the judgmental older brother on his way home.

The fruit of our actions often show us whether or not we are walking the path of inspiration. It may be helpful to note that the affirmation of the Holy Spirit is not to be confused with our own self-congratulatory feeling of smugness and self-righteousness when we choose to say something harsh without the Holy Spirit's inspiration.

Take time to reflect on your behavior around someone you wish to bring back to the Church. Are your actions bringing them back and pushing them further away? If we are becoming an obstacle to a person coming back to the Church then we need to change the way we act.

A sense of urgency is perhaps one of the most common emotions, and potentially the most damaging, that can negatively impact our interactions with loved ones. If we feel an urgent need to say something to someone as soon as possible, this is usually a sign that we are not in a good place emotionally. Of course, it is beautiful to feel a strong

desire to bring someone back to communion with God in the Church. However, when this holy sense of imperative develops an unholy sense of fear and urgency, it will most likely cause us to do and say things that will be ineffective and most likely cause us to do and say things that will be ineffective and hurtful.

I have discovered in my life anytime I act out of a sense of fear that 99% if not 100% of the time, I will end up sinning. Faith is all about trusting in God and therefore there should be no fear. Adam and Eve sinned because of fear that God was not going to do what was best for them. If they would have trusted in God then they would not have disobeyed God. When you feel a sense of urgency take time to pray for guidance.

It always makes sense to pause and take time to be sure our actions are founded in and inspired by the love of God. In other words we should always pray before we act. Open your heart to God and honestly examine your reasoning behind the action that you desire to take. God is a friend who will not steer us wrong. He is truly the Father who knows what is best.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

August 16, 2015

Spiritual Ponderings

Helping Fallen Away Catholics

Sr. Theresa Aletheia Nobel FSP book: *The Prodigal You Love: Inviting Love Ones Back to the Church*. Quotes from her book will be in bold and my commentary will be in regular font.

Too often when interacting with our loved ones, we simply adopt ways we are comfortable with rather than ways that are actually most helpful. Two common approaches can be found among friends and family of fallen away Catholics. On the one hand, some people say very little. Although they hope their loved one will return to the Church they never say anything to indicate they are even aware the person no longer attends Mass. On the other hand, however, some people say too much, too often, and too harshly. Their aggressive style of communication can cause rifts in relationships or, at best, lead to tension-filled encounters with those they love.

Our friends and family members are not likely to come back to the Church if we never express our desire for them to return, but if we express our desire in a way that turns them off, chances are they will not return either. As mentioned in a previous Spiritual Ponderings, it is important to remember that the virtue is in the middle of two vices. We are sometimes called to stretch ourselves and make ourselves uncomfortable in order to provide an open and welcoming environment that will foster the other person's openness. Sometimes it is also important to realize that not everything has to be done at once. Sometimes you are called to just plant the seeds of a return to the Church, or you may be called to nurture the seed. Once again trust in God is all important here.

As you may know, tax collectors in the time of Jesus were social pariahs. They were in collaboration with Gentile Roman occupiers and were known to exact more than was required. Their very work was considered sinful, making tax collectors immoral and unclean in the eyes of the people. For this reason, they were often ostracized from the Jewish community. Yet, Jesus ate at the home the tax collector Matthew. And Scripture tells us that "many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples" (Mt9:10). Note that Jesus did not go and sit with sinners, but they "came and sat" with him. That they would dare to sit at the table of a virtuous Jew demonstrated the radical acceptance that Jesus must have shown them. They could sense that Jesus accepted and affirmed who they were and who they could be, unlike the self-righteous people who disdained them and avoided their company.

Jesus is of course our role model. His mission was to bring back the lost children of Israel. When trying to invite someone back to the Church you can begin by asking this simple question "What would Jesus do?" Another way of looking at it may be to see that the person who has fallen away from the faith has a lot of growing up to do. They have to learn that God does not want us to go to Mass on Sunday so that He can entertain us, they have to learn that true happiness comes from serving others, and much more. The best environment for them to grow is an environment in which family and friends support them instead of spending their time condemning them.

What did these sinners experience at the Lord's table? It is unlikely that Jesus spent mealtimes focusing on his companions' sin. Rather, sinners, most likely wanted to be in his company because they could recognize someone who loved them. Jesus did not judge them, yet at the same time he effectively urged people to change their behaviors through genuine love and respect for their human dignity.

Would you stay at a house where people were pointing out your faults all the time? I know that I would not. Yes, it is important for a person to face one's sins and to ask God for forgiveness but that is stage two. People are like turtles in the sense that they will only come out of their hard protective shell when they feel safe. Overtime Jesus' love and respect elicited change in those who followed him: Mathew, Zacchaeus, and Mary Magdalene to name but three examples from Scripture.

God's love has no limits or conditions. The First Letter of John tells us that "we love because he first loved us" (1 Jn4:19). In other words, God's love precedes our love. We do not have to love God in order for him to love us. He loves us before we even have the chance to reject his love. He loves and then invites us to experience his love. For a person away from the Church, God's unconditional love is a very important reality to understand. By modeling this love, we can help others to understand the nature of God. God doesn't love us on the condition that we love him or that we stop sinning. His love has no contingencies, qualifications, or contracts. God loves us now, as we are. We do not have to change before God loves us, and it is precisely this kind of love that does change us.

**Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
August 23, 2015
Spiritual Ponderings
Helping Fallen Away Catholics**

We have been exploring the idea of Fallen Away Catholics and how to bring them back to the Church with the help of Sr. Theresa Aletheia Nobel FSP book: *The Prodigal You Love: Inviting Love Ones Back to the Church*. This week though would like to do something a little different. I found an old handout that a counselor gave me entitled "How approachable are you?" I would like to share it with you today because I think it can help us be more approachable to people especially our loved ones who have left the Church.

1. Smile. A warm, inviting smile can put anyone at ease, and it also makes you look like you're having a great time. Smiling makes people want to be around you and get in on the fun.

- a. If you catch someone's eye, be sure to give a little smile, and be sure to smile often during small talk. It lets people know you appreciate talking to them.
- b. Smile with your eyes. When you do make eye contact, don't stare or glare. Instead, soften your eye expression and make your eyes "smile" or "twinkle" to show that you're friendly and interested in talking to the other person.
- c. If you're not sure how to smile with your eyes, get in front of a mirror and practice smiling without using your mouth. For most people, the eyes are actually more important than the mouth in considering whether or not a smile is genuine.

2. Open up. When people are uncomfortable in a situation they have a tendency to close off from others and display closed body language. If you'd rather not be left alone, live it and show it.

- a. Be curious about the people around you. Don't be afraid to ask people questions and start conversations.
- b. Be ready for conversation. If someone starts a conversation with you, be receptive.
- c. Make sure you're displaying your openness by angling yourself toward other people, sitting or standing with an upright (but not stiff) posture, and uncrossing your arms.
- d. Observe in what ways other are open to you, or have been in the past. Try to get into their mindset and learn from their openness.

3. Use your eyes. Your eyes are not only your window to the world, they're also other people's window into you. If you bury your head in a book, stare at the floor, or look up at the ceiling, you close that window.

- a. Scan your environment with your eyes, and don't be afraid to make eye contact with people.
- b. You want to give direct eye contact, but not too much. The key to great eye contact is knowing when to look away and when to return to someone's eyes - like after you finish a sentence or when they are beginning to speak.

4. Consider what your body is projecting. We all speak with body language, and you don't have to actually say anything to communicate a message to others. Unfortunately, your body may not always say what you want it to.

- a. If you are saying "I'm too busy" or "Leave me alone" with gestures like crossed arms or downward eye contact, it's likely people will not interact. Other people watch your body for cues, so it's important to pay attention to what cues you're displaying.
 - b. Hold yourself with a tall, open stance. Smile when you make eye contact with someone. Hold your body in a relaxed and easy and others will flock to you.
 - c. Avoid your phone. We all need to send a text once and while, but if you consistently check your phone no one will want to interfere with your busy self. To look approachable you must be accessible.
- 5. Beware of self-comfort gestures. It's okay to feel nervous, bored or unhappy, but if you really want to socialize and meet people you should be careful not to appear to have any of these negative emotions.**
- a. If you pay attention to what your body is saying, you can avoid putting up these barriers.
 - b. Avoid touching your hand to your face, especially putting it over your mouth. If you have a drink, holding your glass by your mouth can give people the impression that you're not interested in talking to them.
 - c. Metronomic gestures, such as foot tapping, can signal impatience or boredom, so people may think you don't have time to talk or aren't interested in conversation.
 - d. Don't cross your arms, as it may make you appear cold and distant.
 - e. Other nervous habits — picking at your cuticles or biting your fingernails for instance — can also make you appear distant or lost in thought.
- 6. Approach others. If people aren't approaching you, why not go to them? Nothing makes you look more outgoing and approachable than actively seeking out people and talking to them.**
- a. Be open minded. A lot of times the reason why we don't approach anyone is because we're being overly judgmental of our surroundings as a defense mechanism. Let yourself appreciate others and truly believe that you can have a great conversation with anyone.
 - b. Talk about whatever. Although no one likes a babbler, when you're engaging in a conversation, the act is more important than the content. Don't worry about whether or not you're saying the right things.
 - c. Focus on using your language clearly and talking about things that you think are interesting and the rest will follow.
 - d. If you're in an environment where you don't know anybody, the longer you wait alone, the more uncomfortable you're bound to feel. See how to talk to strangers for more advice on swiftly joining in the social cheer.
- 7. Address any deeper issues. The best way to look approachable is to actually enjoy yourself in social interactions. If you always feel anxious in social settings, you need to get over your anxiety.**
- a. Talk to friends and family about your social anxiety. Sometimes just letting it all out helps you understand your problems more.
 - b. Ask someone you trust to give you advice about overcoming anxiety. Maybe you have a friend that's really come out her shell recently - try to learn what worked for her and what may work for you.
 - c. Seek out social situations. The only way to get to know yourself better and to reduce anxiety for the long term is to put yourself in situations that are outside of your comfort zone. Maybe make a few daily goals, like talking to a welcoming stranger in the coffee shop, or starting a conversation with someone you feel attracted to.
 - d. Consider professional help. If you feel overwhelmed by improving your social skills, it's not a bad reflection on you to seek professional help - you should be proud of yourself for taking a step. Everyone needs a little extra sometime, and professionals have a wealth of advice and experience to offer.

Other Tips

1. Don't immediately turn away if someone looks at you. Look into their eyes for a brief second then look away. It will make the other person more interested in you.
2. In a social situation, offer to help out in some way. Sometimes having a specific task may help you feel more focused than just standing around feeling awkward. It's a great way to meet others and be sociable without having to feel like you don't know what to do. Excellent tasks: cutting vegetables, washing dishes, keeping the music going, picking up used plates, etc. At the same time, don't over-focus and use the task as an excuse for not engaging in conversation.
3. If you're in a social situation with someone you have a crush on, just be a little extra careful not to come across as 'hot on their heels'. Talk to others and look at everyone.
4. Aside from body language, other elements of your appearance can affect how approachable you look. Dressing in clothing in light/bright colors with textures that look soft to the touch (think velvet, cashmere, angora, corduroy) will make you stand out more in a crowd and look more approachable.

5. Position yourself for conversation. If you're standing up, but everybody else is sitting down (or vice versa) people will find it difficult and somewhat awkward to talk to you. If you want to talk to someone, or if you are interacting with someone, position yourself so you can comfortably speak.
6. When you talk to a person don't tilt your face away from them. It makes things more awkward than if you were looking them in the eye.
7. Reading a newspaper, using your phone or listening to music with headphones can ease the monotony of a long train ride, but in situations where you want to look approachable lose these props.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

August 30, 2015

Spiritual Ponderings

Helping Fallen Away Catholics

We have been exploring the idea of Fallen Away Catholics and how to bring them back to the Church with the help of Sr. Theresa Aletheia Nobel FSP book: *The Prodigal You Love: Inviting Love Ones Back to the Church*. There is so much more that could be said on this topic but I hope that this past month has started you ponderings on how you may invite others back to the Church, how you make the Church a more welcoming place, and what you can do to prevent others from leaving the Church. Quotes from Sr. Theresa Nobel FSP book are in bold and my commentary is in normal font.

The story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) demonstrates the nature of God's unconditional love. Before Zacchaeus even met Jesus, he "was trying to see who Jesus was" (19:3). His curiosity prompted him to disregard social propriety and, like a carefree child, to climb a sycamore tree. Saint John Paul II described Zaccheus's curiosity as the fruit of the mercy of God which preceded Zacchaeus and drew him to Jesus. The desire to know Jesus is part of the dynamic of God's love; it is a grace that prepared the heart of Zacchaeus for conversion and change, and it is a grace that God can make available to all of our loved ones. The grace that prepared the heat of Zacchaeus for conversion came from the very overflow of love that God had for him and for each one of us. Zacchaeus does not waste this grace of desire but rather searches Jesus out and is rewarded. Jesus stops in front of Zacchaeus and asks the infamous town tax collector if he can stay at his house. Of all the people in town, Jesus knowingly chooses to stay at the house of a public sinner. In fact, he not only chooses to stay with Zacchaeus, Jesus seems to urgently desire to spend time with him. He says, "I must stay at your house" (19:5,). Jesus is not afraid to show Zacchaeus his great desire to be in his company. The words and actions of Jesus show that God's love for us is urgent and palpable.

If Jesus was the captain of the dodge ball team at recess He would pick you first (no matter what your skill level is) so much does he desire to be with you. It would be a miracle of sorts though because He is God and everyone would end up on His team. I think you get the picture though.

While it is never risky to be judgmental, it is almost always risky to be merciful.

God calls us to get out of the boat and to walk on the waters of the Chaos of this world to bring others His mercy. Nowhere does God call us to be timid or to bury our talents.

Unfortunately, many people claim to disagree with Church teaching on the basis of reason. However, their concept of reason is highly individualistic and relativistic. They limit their assent only to those things that they personally can understand and bring themselves to agree with... When we separate our faith from our reason, we damage our ability to reason.

I have stated this many times before, I do not believe that I have every met a "true atheist." I have met a lot of "anti-theists". In my book an anti-theist is someone who claims that there is no God because they do not want to obligate themselves to the rules of being in a relationship with God, or they have the wrong image of who God is, or they feel that they have been hurt by God and thus try to get back at God by pretending He does not exist - giving God the silent treatment. We must help them meet the God that Jesus Christ reveals to us. The God who is Love.

First of all, realize that giving the right answer is not the most important thing. If we know the answer to a loved one's question, that's great. But knowing the answer can often play only a small part in bringing someone closer to God. How we answer a question is much more important.

You are in many ways an ambassador of God. As people see you so they will see God. If you are mean they will think God is mean. If you are joyful, they will see God as joyful.

When loved ones ask us questions about the faith, they are making themselves vulnerable and, in some way, are unlocking the mystery of who they are before us. Because they may try to protect themselves in their vulnerability, questions can come across as challenging and angry. If someone comes across this way, we can still choose to respect that person's dignity by responding in a respectful way. Even if a person's question is so clearly off base that we cannot answer it, we can still take the person seriously. It helps to remember that no matter how or why a person asks a question, we can give thanks that he or she is asking a question because this provides an opportunity for dialogue. Their approach may be off-putting or downright rude, but with the help of the Holy Spirit we can respond without taking such things personally. It helps to remember that a person's aggressive approach may be coming from a place of hurt, the source of which we may not know, but the person deserves a compassionate response nevertheless. If we remain calm, and do not take personally the way a question is asked, we will be more likely to respond in a way that will be heard.