

Recently someone sent me a copy of an article titled: "Five Signs of a Modern-Day Pharisee." The article was written by Sr. Aletheia Noble. She is the author of the book: *The Prodigal You Love: Inviting Loved Ones Back to the Church*. I would like to share with you some thoughts on her very insightful article. Quotes from her article will be in bold and my commentary will be in the normal font.

Jesus came to put a harlot above a Pharisee, a penitent robber above a high priest, and a prodigal son above his exemplary brother. To all the phonies and fakers who would say that they could not join the Church because his Church was not holy enough, he would ask, "How holy must the Church be before you will enter into it?" —Fulton J. Sheen

I think it is important to point out that the Pharisees did not start off desiring to be in opposition of God's plan for salvation. It is a sort of divine irony that those who wanted to do God's will the most were the ones who became the greatest obstacle to God's plan of salvation.

I am assuming that the Pharisees were a lot like the pagans of their day who had the belief that the gods were divine beings who had to be placated. If they made the gods happy then the gods would bless them. If they upset the gods then they could expect the gods to punish them. The story of the Odyssey is a great example of this thinking.

The problem arises is that the Pharisees assume that the way to please God is to be absolutely perfect in their worship and this is done by keeping the imperfect (sinners) out of God's sight by keeping them out of public worship. Jesus reveals to us that God is made happy not by animal sacrifices and perfect rituals but by us loving Him and others.

I find it frustrating when people speak about the Pharisees as if they were just a historical example of what not to do. Something outside of us. In fact, most often when people speak of Pharisees, they are really speaking Pharisaiically: "Thank goodness I am not like those people!"

So often, when I am pointing out others faults, I am doing so because I am trying to direct attention away from me. When I am happy with who I am (knowing that I am loved by God) I am less likely to spend my time pointing out the faults of others.

1. A Leaven of Unrest

Jesus tells us to "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees" (Mk 8:15). It is interesting to consider the role of leaven or fermentation in the making of bread. It starts small but it infects the entire loaf. In fact, one of the definitions of the word ferment is to "incite or stir up (trouble or disorder)."

Jesus entered into the world so calmly that most people missed it. He lived his life simply. The devil came to scatter. Jesus had an angelic army invaded the world and offered peace. The devil scatters

When we behave like the Pharisees, we stir up trouble among the faithful. Often, our intentions are good. But our actions cause great unrest, an unhealthy and unholy "leavening" of the greater faithful. We can discern whether unrest is unhealthy by analyzing its fruits.

If the fruit of a person's "leaven" is often fear, anger and unrest, rather than peace, love, joy and the rest of the fruits of the Spirit, then one must beware. The Lord is not at work where the fruits of the Spirit are not present. He is particularly not at work where the fruit of a person's actions is fear: "There is no fear in love" (Jn 4:18). When our behavior is a *holy* leavening, it pushes others to desire holiness, to draw closer to God and to act in charity. *Jesus, help my actions and words lead others to holiness and to an experience of God and the fruits of the Spirit.*

Would people around you describe you as a life-giving person? Would they tell others that they want to be a better person because you inspire them? Or would they describe you as someone who sucks the life out of others? Are you constantly putting people down? The Pharisees were constantly putting other people down instead of seeing them as brother and sisters.

The Pharisees seem to assume that there is a competition for God's love and they therefore must do whatever they can to get ahead. This is sad because there is no competition for God's love because God's love is unconditional and limitless. Love when divided and nurtured appropriately grows.

 **Jesus, help my actions and words lead others to holiness and to an experience of God and the fruits of the Spirit.**

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
September 9, 2018
Spiritual Ponderings
Five Signs of a Modern-Day Pharisee

We will continue to reflect on Sr. Aletheia Noble's article "Five Signs of a Modern-Day Pharisee." Quotes from her article will be in bold and my commentary will be in the normal font.

2. Surveillance Experts

There is one Gospel passage that makes me laugh out loud every time I read it. Jesus is walking through a field with his disciples on the Sabbath, and the disciples are picking wheat because they are hungry. The Pharisees (who must have been hiding in the fields!) pop up and immediately challenge Jesus because his disciples are breaking the Sabbath (Mk 2:23–24).

The lengths to which the Pharisees went to find something wrong with Jesus and his followers were truly absurd. Some variation of the phrase "they were watching him" can be found over and over in the Gospels. While Jesus is busy healing, performing miracles and preaching the kingdom of God, *the Pharisees' eyes were always on him*, not in order to learn from him but to find something he was doing wrong.

Since all human beings are imperfect, it is really not hard to discover other people's faults. It is harder to point out the goodness in others because we have become so conditioned to looking for the faults of others. We seem also to take the good things other do for us for granted.

There is rarely a comment on the Internet that is not basically, "Yes but ..." We love to plow right through all the good things and narrow right in on the one part that didn't seem quite right. We become Pharisees when we are always focused outward with an eye toward criticism. Nothing is ever good enough for a Pharisee. And nothing merits rejoicing, unless it is the downfall of others.

How much time do we spend praising others? How much time do we spend tearing others down?

 **Jesus, help me to focus on you, not like the Pharisees but like a child who wants nothing more than to imitate his or her Father. Help me see the dignity of others as you see them, and to treat others with respect and great love.**

3. Thank God I'm Not Like (Insert Label Here)

We all remember the Pharisee in Scripture who stood up and prayed by saying, "I thank you God that I am not like so-and-so!" (Lk 18:11). This Pharisee genuinely believed that proper prayer involved taking credit for everything one did right. This is the danger in being close to right; we begin to take credit for it. We look at others who are doing much worse things, and assume we escaped that path because something about us makes us better.

Reading Sr. Aletheia's words made me think of St. Philip Neri's quote: "Except for the grace of God there go I." Everything I have is a gift from God. I did not choose my parents or the time period I would be born in. Everything I have is from God. Thank you God.

We think, *My sins may be bad, but thank God they are not as bad as that person's sins!* Thank God I'm not like that loosey-goosey liberal, uptight rad trad, heretic progressive, zany charismatic, stick-in-the-mud ultraconservative or ignorant cafeteria Catholic. Or you may even be reading this and thinking, *Thank God I am not a Pharisee!* The problem with this way of thinking, and it is evident in the behavior of the saints, is that true holiness focuses on what needs improvement in oneself. And if the saints could find a lot of things in need of improvement, then that is probably the same attitude we should have!

Any sin we commit – no matter how large or how small – hurts God because it is a sign to Him of our ingratitude.

As I think about how hurt I am when others do not show me gratitude, I can imagine only slightly how God hurts. It is important though that God does not hurt because we somehow physically wound us but because we hurt Him only because He chooses to care what we think because He loves us.

 *Jesus, help me thank you for all the graces you have given me in my life. Help me to be a source of light for others and to be open to what others have to teach me.*

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
September 15, 2018
Spiritual Ponderings
Five Signs of a Modern-Day Pharisee

We will continue to reflect on Sr. Aletheia Noble's article "Five Signs of a Modern-Day Pharisee." Quotes from her article will be in bold and my commentary will be in the normal font.

4. Unhealthy Relationship with Authority

It is interesting to note that Jesus tells the people to submit to the authority of the Pharisees. He tells them to "Do everything they tell you" even though he warns that their example is not to be followed (Mt 23:3). When I first thought about this, I was astounded. Here is the Son of God, *submitting to the authority* of the Pharisees, because their earthly authority represented his Father's authority.

The Church has always placed a high importance on obedience to legitimate authority as long as it does not go against our informed conscience because sin entered the world through Adam and Eve's disobedience. There is also never excuse for a person to commit sin. Poor leadership is never a reason that allows a person to do evil.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were incensed when they saw Jesus acting with authority. Jesus demonstrated his power by showing which practices were dispensable and which were essential to the meaning of the law. In response to Jesus' show of his divine authority, the Pharisees plot his death. Jesus recognizes legitimate authority, but the Pharisees, while they are aware of an aspect of it, are blind to the *source* of authority itself.

As sinful human beings, we have an ambiguous relationship with authority from the start. It is hard for us to recognize the authority of God, let alone that of his mediators on earth. It's true that healthy rebellion and questioning can be a good thing. But we abuse this truth when we disobey because we think we know better than God or when criticism of others becomes an obsession that leads us to a lifestyle of disobedience.

We have to be careful that we do not allow an arrogance of intellect to blind us. Sometimes pilots will get target fixation where they will focus so much on their target that they do not see other dangers coming their way. Some people are so convinced in a person's guiltiness that they do not see other possible suspects.

 *Jesus, help me develop the virtue of obedience in my heart so that I may recognize your authority here on earth and become more gentle, docile and full of charity.*

5. Unmerciful Exactness

In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, while the Pharisee pats himself on the back, the tax collector begs God for mercy. This is an interesting dynamic. The Pharisee believes he is well and does not see himself in need of mercy. But the tax collector knows he is sick and in need of God.

This inner dynamic in oneself often extends to others. If we see ourselves as in little need of mercy, we do not give mercy to others. If we know that we need copious amounts of God's mercy, then we extend that mercy to others. Why is this? Because when we know we are in need of mercy, we reach out to God and he scoops us up in his arms. When we have experienced this absolute and unconditional love of the Father, we hesitate less in giving that same love to others. We know it, we've experienced it, and we are overflowing with it.

One of the reasons, why it is important to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation often is because it helps us grow in our awareness of our sins. The more we are aware of God's mercy the easier it is to forgive others. If we think that having our sins forgiven is impossible then we are more likely to live in denial of our sins. If we deny our sins, we will find it hard to forgive others.

Everyone's heart grows cold sometimes like that of the Pharisee. We all have difficulty feeling compassion for certain people. When this happens, it helps to ask the Lord to help us see our own sin more clearly, not so that we can become lost in guilt, but so that we can see our own need to accept God's mercy and extend it to others.

 ***Jesus, welcome me into your merciful heart. I want to be a beacon of mercy and love for others; help me to become more like you.***

**Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
September 23, 2018
Spiritual Ponderings
Listening**

For today's spiritual reflection, I thought I would reflect on the art of listening. To guide our reflections, I will be commenting on an article from Forbes magazine entitled "10 Steps to Effective Listening" by Dianne Schilling. Quotes from her article will be in bold and my commentary will be in the normal font.

Step 1: Face the speaker and maintain eye contact.

Talking to someone while they scan the room, study a computer screen, or gaze out the window is like trying to hit a moving target. How much of the person's divided attention you are actually getting? Fifty percent? Five percent? If the person were your child you might demand, "Look at me when I'm talking to you," but that's not the sort of thing we say to a lover, friend or colleague.

In most Western cultures, eye contact is considered a basic ingredient of effective communication. When we talk, we look each other in the eye. That doesn't mean that you can't carry on a conversation from across the room, or from another room, but if the conversation continues for any length of time, you (or the other person) will get up and move. The desire for better communication pulls you together.

Do your conversational partners the courtesy of turning to face them. Put aside papers, books, the phone and other distractions. Look at them, even if they don't look at you. Shyness, uncertainty, shame, guilt, or other emotions, along with cultural taboos, can inhibit eye contact in some people under some circumstances. Excuse the other guy, but stay focused yourself.

The same is important with prayer. This is why setting aside a spot to pray in one's house or going to Eucharistic Adoration can enhance one's prayer life tremendously.

Step 2: Be attentive, but relaxed.

Now that you've made eye contact, relax. You don't have to stare fixedly at the other person. You can look away now and then and carry on like a normal person. The important thing is to be attentive. The dictionary says that to "attend" another person means to: 1) be present 2) give attention 3) apply or direct yourself 4) pay attention 5) remain ready to serve. Mentally screen out distractions, like background activity and noise. In addition, try not to focus on the speaker's accent or speech mannerisms to the point where they become distractions. Finally, don't be distracted by your own thoughts, feelings, or biases.

Distractions will come and there is nothing you can do about it but while you cannot stop distractions, you can avoid fixating on them.

Step 3: Keep an open mind.

Listen without judging the other person or mentally criticizing the things she tells you. If what she says alarms you, go ahead and feel alarmed, but don't say to yourself, "Well, that was a stupid move." As soon as you indulge in judgmental bemusements, you've compromised your effectiveness as a listener. Listen without jumping to

conclusions. Remember that the speaker is using language to represent the thoughts and feelings inside her brain. You don't know what those thoughts and feelings are and the only way you'll find out is by listening.

Sometimes people just need to express things out loud. They do not need you to fix their problem. Sometimes they simply want to know that you love and respect them even if they are not perfect. It can be painful when people try to "fix us" instead of listen to us because it feels like they only want to be around a perfect you. There is something comforting and reassuring to me when I can express a problem to a friend and he or she assures me that they understand or that they believe I will come up with the right answer if given enough time.

Step 4: Listen to the words and try to picture what the speaker is saying.

Allow your mind to create a mental model of the information being communicated. Whether a literal picture, or an arrangement of abstract concepts, your brain will do the necessary work if you stay focused, with senses fully alert. When listening for long stretches, concentrate on, and remember, key words and phrases. When it's your turn to listen, don't spend the time planning what to say next. You can't rehearse and listen at the same time. Think only about what the other person is saying. Finally, concentrate on what is being said, even if it bores you. If your thoughts start to wander, immediately force yourself to refocus.

Try your best to understand where the other person is coming from and don't assume that they had the same experience you have had.

Step 5: Don't interrupt and don't impose your "solutions."

"This isn't a conversation, it's a contest, and I'm going to win." We all think and speak at different rates. If you are a quick thinker and an agile talker, the burden is on *you* to relax your pace for the slower, more thoughtful communicator—or for the guy who has trouble expressing himself. When listening to someone talk about a problem, refrain from suggesting solutions. Most of us don't want your advice anyway. If we do, we'll ask for it. Most of us prefer to figure out our own solutions. We need you to listen and help us do that. Somewhere way down the line, if you are absolutely bursting with a brilliant solution, at least get the speaker's permission. Ask, "Would you like to hear my ideas?"

Remember the goal is always to discover the truth and not to get one's ways.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

September 29, 2018

Spiritual Ponderings

Listening

For today's spiritual reflection, I thought I would reflect on the art of listening. To guide our reflections, I will be commenting on an article from Forbes magazine entitled "10 Steps to Effective Listening" by Dianne Schilling. Quotes from her article will be in bold and my commentary will be in the normal font.

Step 6: Wait for the speaker to pause to ask clarifying questions.

When you don't understand something, of course you should ask the speaker to explain it to you. But rather than interrupt, wait until the speaker pauses. Then say something like, "Back up a second. I didn't understand what you just said about..."

It is important to treat others with courtesy because a lack of courtesy breeds defensiveness which can damage a relationship permanently.

Step 7: Ask questions only to ensure understanding.

At lunch, a colleague is excitedly telling you about her trip to Vermont and all the wonderful things she did and saw. In the course of this chronicle, she mentions that she spent some time with a mutual friend. You jump in with, "Oh, I haven't heard from Alice in ages. How is she?" and, just like that, discussion shifts to Alice and her divorce, and the poor kids, which leads to a comparison of custody laws, and before you know it an hour is gone and Vermont is a distant memory. This particular conversational affront happens all the time. Our questions lead people

in directions that have nothing to do with where *they* thought they were going. Sometimes we work our way back to the original topic, but very often we don't. When you notice that your question has led the speaker astray, take responsibility for getting the conversation back on track by saying something like, "It was great to hear about Alice, but tell me more about your adventure in Vermont."

Try to avoid being like the student who tries to keep the teacher off topic so he or she does not get any homework.

Step 8: Try to feel what the speaker is feeling.

If you feel sad when the person with whom you are talking expresses sadness, joyful when she expresses joy, fearful when she describes her fears—and convey those feelings through your facial expressions and words—then your effectiveness as a listener is assured. Empathy is the heart and soul of good listening. To experience empathy, you have to put yourself in the other person's place and allow yourself to feel what it is like to *be her* at that moment. This is not an easy thing to do. It takes energy and concentration. But it is a generous and helpful thing to do, and it facilitates communication like nothing else does.

The more you can understand how the speaker is feeling the better you will be at spotting faulty logic.

Step 9: Give the speaker regular feedback.

Show that you understand where the speaker is coming from by reflecting the speaker's feelings. "You must be thrilled!" "What a terrible ordeal for you." "I can see that you are confused." If the speaker's feelings are hidden or unclear, then occasionally paraphrase the content of the message. Or just nod and show your understanding through appropriate facial expressions and an occasional well-timed "hmmm" or "uh huh." The idea is to give the speaker some proof that you are listening, and that you are following her train of thought—not off indulging in your own fantasies while she talks to the ether. In task situations, regardless of whether at work or home, always restate instructions and messages to be sure you understand correctly.

Asking questions can help the person clarify what they are saying helps them know that you are still paying attention and that you have not drifted off.

Step 10: Pay attention to what *isn't* said—to nonverbal cues.

If you exclude email, the majority of direct communication is probably nonverbal. We glean a great deal of information about each other without saying a word. Even over the telephone, you can learn almost as much about a person from the tone and cadence of her voice than from anything she says. When I talk to my best friend, it doesn't matter what we chat about, if I hear a lilt and laughter in her voice, I feel reassured that she's doing well. Face to face with a person, you can detect enthusiasm, boredom, or irritation very quickly in the expression around the eyes, the set of the mouth, the slope of the shoulders. These are clues you can't ignore. When listening, remember that words convey only a fraction of the message.

Never underestimate the power of body language.

