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—Tom Baldwin
Attorney
Dublin, Ireland

Musings

A Benedictine on Christian Life

Don Talafous, OSB



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To Adam Herbst

Preface

*I muse on what your hand has wrought,
and to you I stretch out my hands.*

Psalm 143:5-6

I present these brief reflections as hopeful and encouraging for the reader in the face of the sadness and suffering of our world. Most gratifying among the responses I get to the reflections on the internet is that they are (1) inspiring; they help the reader face life with hope, even joy. And (2), I'm consistently told, "They make me think." While these reflections come from the mind, heart, and computer of a Catholic Benedictine, readers further tell me they speak to many people, Christian and otherwise, e.g., some of a skeptical bent or minimal relation to organized religion, many from a variety of religious backgrounds, and believers of differing degrees of fervor. The reflections do not quote Benedictine sources regularly but to some degree reflect several decades of life as a Benedictine.

These reflections are not organized according to subject. They appear here as they do in their original internet setting, each day offering a different subject or a different slant on a subject. We've made them identifiable by making bold the first few words of each; in this way readers who would like to find their favorite reflections easily can make their own index on a blank page at the end of the book (e.g., Saint Benedict in his Rule, p. 21).

I must thank Joe Wentzell and Cody Lynch in particular. Joe vigorously promoted the idea of a book, and he and Cody did much of the groundwork for this collection. Their time and work were invaluable. I must thank Brother Richard Oliver, OSB, who, a couple of decades ago, suggested that I put such reflections on the internet. Thanks also to Josie Stang, who has been in effect the archivist for the reflections as well as a helpful critic and “cheerleader.” Her organization makes their daily appearance possible. Finally, my colleagues in Alumni Relations at Saint John’s University (Collegeville, Minnesota) and the support staff have been generous in support and encouragement. I thank and bless them.

Pivotal suggestions or admonitions made to me over the decades may be thought-provoking for you. Most of them were made once only and with some impact.

The first of them, however, was made often, going back to my childhood. It came from my mother. My behavior brought it out of her enough times that you hope it had some lasting effect. By way of reproach she repeated a saying seemingly of Irish provenance: “Smile and the whole world smiles with you; cry and you cry alone.” As she used it on me, pout or complain could be substituted for cry.

The second shows some continuity with the first. A confrère in seminary with me, who was several years younger, in some exasperation threw this at me one day: “Quit the complaining.” It touched a nerve and, no matter how poorly I may have followed the injunction, it has remained an ideal.

The athletic director at this university gave me this next one shortly after I became university chaplain. Though I had been ordained about four years, I was still terrified of public speaking. After one Sunday Mass where I had preached, he caught me and said: “Slow down; we can’t understand you.” I was attacking my fear of public speaking by rushing the homily to get it over with! After that I began to record my homilies as I practiced them and made a great effort to slow down.

As chaplain in the pre-electronic age, I published a weekly newsletter. A revered English professor told me: “Shorter items get more attention; people are put off by long paragraphs and don’t read them.” This I have been very conscious of and, I hope, is to your benefit.



The optimism and hope of Vatican II's documents expressed a view of what the church should be. For example, "The church . . . is held, as a matter of faith, to be unfailingly holy"; the church is "the spotless spouse of the spotless lamb."¹ It would be a brave or out-of-touch commentator who would push those terms in today's media climate. Some disenchanted hearers would laugh; others might say, Are you kidding? Victims of clerical abuse would not be able to forget the trauma and lasting pain. Laypeople, victims of sexual abuse or not, likely are asking themselves: Should I stay in the church? Why stay a Catholic? At least one article, by Drew Magary, states a harsh negative: "The Catholic Church Doesn't Deserve Your Forgiveness" and the text includes lines like this: "The Catholic Church deserved to run out of second chances a long time ago."²

Some must ask themselves: Why stay with such a corrupt and untrustworthy organization? Many thoughtful Catholics have probably pondered that. Others of us, hearing of the suffering and anguish of victims of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, think also of its effect on the young. One group at the church meeting (Synod on Youth, October 2018) puts it this way: "A Church that cannot be trusted is simply incapable of reaching out to young people in an effective way."

Cardinal Cupich (of Chicago) picks up a "good" in all this: "The pain such publicity causes the church 'is a small price to pay if it liberates people [the abused] who came forward.'"

Can troubled Catholics separate belief in the church as the body of Christ from the institution pictured daily in our media? Can we find, see, meet Christ in the same place where all this abuse has happened? What reasons are there to stay with it? Can the church still point to Jesus Christ, its true center and reason for existence? Each of us may need to think and pray about this. Those of us who see some or much good in the church need to ponder these issues, discuss them, and pray about them. Finally, Cupich

says: “Beneath that anger is also a sadness in the hearts of many people that they know we can do better.”³



Our working years are often spent managing, taking charge. But eventually there comes a time to “let go.” Preparing for this or even thinking of it is often difficult enough. Happily, life itself has been training us for “letting go.” We move from the breast to bottle, from basketball to bingo. Time, circumstances, and growth involve letting go of a position, letting go of nights out with the boys or the gals. Some of this has been smooth, natural-seeming; other elements only happen “kicking and screaming.” Forty-five-year-old Brett says one of the toughest was getting rid of those slacks with the 34-inch waist that had been hanging in the closet for years. Any one of us with a little reflection can think of many times when we’ve had to let go of some practice or position. Politicians pondering whether to run for reelection after thirty years in the same office get the publicity, but you and I face similar decisions.

With age and experience there comes the inevitable need to leave some work, some position, some happy, even cushy spot. Letting go of our control and direction, of our enterprise, our position, our children, our mobility, our independence. The words of Jesus to Peter toward the end of John’s Gospel (21:18)—no matter the context—seem an apt description of the human trajectory: “When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”⁴

Letting go of our driver’s license likely sums up the trials and terrors of letting go for many of us. No matter our age, perhaps *now*

is the appropriate time to do some thinking and praying about taking up, taking on—and leaving behind and letting go.



The scene is semi-rural central Minnesota. Ruth, a clerical worker at the local university, is driving the ten miles from home to her work with her college-age daughter sitting beside her. She comes upon a young black man, no hat or gloves on this cold 15-degree morning, standing on the side of the road trying to flag down some help. Near him is a car with the flashers on.

Ruth stops and finds out that the young man has been delivering the local newspaper to residences; his motor has died; his cell phone is not charged. Several cars have passed him unwilling to stop and he has gone to a number of homes where he has just recently delivered newspapers, but no one answers the door. He explains all this once Ruth has taken him into the warm car and as he enters, he says, “You must be good Christians.” Ruth admits that she and her daughter are Christians, descendants of German Catholic immigrants who populated the area in the mid-nineteenth century. Like her recent forebears, she comes from a large farm family of eleven children.

Once in the car, the young man called EJ, Nigerian by birth, phones his Ohio-born wife, the mother of their three children. It will take her about a half-hour to meet him. Ruth must get her daughter to the college by 8 a.m. and all three drive there. Then, she takes EJ back to the site of his dead car and they wait a few minutes for his wife to arrive. Recounting it, Ruth says, “I didn’t think of anything but that somebody in trouble was standing out in the cold. They must’ve thanked me about thirty times.” In the office, coworkers hearing Ruth’s story admiringly congratulate her.



Commencement: Unless one knows the graduating senior, questions and answers can be tricky. What do you say? “What will you be doing after graduation?” “What happens next?” “Where will you be?” “Do you have a job?” “Are you going to college/graduate school?” “Have you had any job interviews?” “Do you have any job offers?” “Were you accepted at that engineering school?” Depending on the person and your relationship, these can be embarrassing or a happy opportunity to tell you some wonderful news.

Answers may or may not come easily. “I’m going for my master’s/PhD at the university.” “I’ve had three job offers; not sure which one to take.” “I got that job at Target.” “I’ve had several offers, but I’m waiting for a better fit.” “I’m excited; I’ve been accepted at Saint Benedict’s.” “I’m waiting to hear from the Peace Corps.” “No idea right now.” “I’ll be living at home for now.” “I’ve been accepted to med school.” “I’m going to law school after a year volunteering.” “I’ve got applications in at a number of companies.” “I’m waiting to hear from a graduate program in biomedical studies.” “Oh, I’ll find something.”

Those of us who have found our niche might be thankful we don’t have to go through that search again. Or, we simply marvel at such an open future. Too, we may be in a position to provide the graduates with the “experience” they need. Let’s pray that the young have and keep high hopes and face a future full of welcome surprises. For the graduates and for all of us—some words from Francis, Bishop of Rome: “Look to the past with gratitude.” “Live the present with passion.” “Embrace the future with hope.”⁵ (Others say similar things but quoting Francis reminds us of the hope and joy he disseminates.)



One of my sunnier reflections prompted a demur or challenge from a reader of another faith tradition. The reflection he referred

to dealt with fear and the Christian's response of confidence and trust in the Lord. In part the writer, Ron, wrote: "On trusting God—while I appreciate the sentiment, it is still coming from someone whose material existence is secure, who lives in a lovely place and has no worry of not having a place to sleep, clothes to wear, food to eat, access to toilets and showers—with no threat of violence. This is not true for 99 percent of the world." Possibly this is the only one of these reflections that Ron had ever come across. I say this because I think that these reflections *do* face war, crime, poverty, oppression, racism, etc. Most readers, I gather from the feedback I get, expect some hope and encouragement from these couple paragraphs in the face of the truly tortured world around us. Reflections in which I gave illustrations of civility on the streets of San Francisco have been welcomed by readers who find it reassuring to hear of such humanity in an urban area.

One very fundamental premise of these reflections is the Christian's faith or trust in Jesus Christ whom we believe has surmounted death and evil not only in himself by resurrection but for all who put their hope in him. Ron closes by identifying himself as a follower of a faith tradition that does not give Jesus Christ this central position. Other faith traditions in their own way face the problem of evil and the concomitant one for us earthlings of despair and discouragement. I think that believing in Jesus Christ does "make all the difference."



Meeting Erich and Andy, twins returning to college late in August, I correctly guessed it was their senior year. "Yup," Andy said as Erich chimed in, "Where has the time gone!" Clearly more astonished than questioning. Somewhat insensitively, I added: "And it only accelerates!" Precious, precious time! So cherished in retrospect and so slippery in the present. What can we do? Time only

seems to stop when we're (1) bored and/or wasting it or (2) forgetting time and maybe space in some wonderful moment. Hearing a young person say that he or she is bored or that something is boring plunges a knife in the heart of many an older person. "Yesterday when I was young / So many happy songs were waiting to be sung."⁶ Older people are even more conscious of how the years run away. Being bored, of course, at times is the result of an economic situation that doesn't allow escape from a numbing or stultifying situation. Some of the blame goes on our economic system. At other times it is at least partially our fault; there is much we can do about it. Curiosity, for example, is not simply for two-year-olds. A little imagination can suggest something we can inquire about, do, should do: turning our attention to someone less fortunate, volunteering, simply getting out of ourselves.

To be brutally realistic, of course, most of us have wasted or will at some time waste time. Edith Piaf may not have had any regrets but we may. Someone (in *Maryknoll* magazine) has put it almost tearfully: "Oh would that I had but an extra day or even hour to set things right or make up for so much wasted time. I'd live each precious moment to the full and share with all this miracle called life."



The marriage ritual sees the love of bride and groom as a reflection of God's love for us. We hear less, however, about extending that to all human love. But isn't all love (in less demonstrative cultures, "friendship") the way God's love for us is made flesh, something we can experience? Catholic life presumes that God's grace—God's love—ordinarily comes to us through earthly signs or material elements. If oil, water, words, gestures, bread and wine make God's love present to us, then the touch, the words, the loving presence of another person belong there too; for instance, other friends besides the spouse. To expect everything from a spouse or

any one person would be a crushing burden; we need to recognize God's love in other friends.

We need the love or friendship, apart from gender or sexuality, that makes us say things like "How did I ever deserve this?" or "My whole life is changed because Mary loves me" or "Just thinking of Hank fills me with joy and gratitude." An Italian might say, "A day without Ben is like a dinner without wine."

For most of us, God's love needs to be seen or felt. Certain types of spirituality try to contradict this, saying things like this: You should not be concerned about whether anyone loves you.—If you love God, you don't need human love.—Expecting human love is egotism. No, love is as necessary as food. And there are degrees in human love. We may have many people kindly disposed toward us, willing to help us, but very few with whom we can share our thoughts, desires, and griefs. Such persons are bound to be a rarity. More casual friends stay on the surface. Given all that, God's love comes to us through some earthly means, and what is a more powerful assurance of that love than the bliss or joy we have when another's love is clearly shown or a human voice says "I love you"?



Here is a practice any of us might think about for Lent (and beyond) that does a lot of good for others and demands something of ourselves. Susan writes: "This is a Lenten idea I enjoyed that got away from me. A woman, now ninety-three, used to have me to dinner quite frequently; she has been in a nursing home now for some years. I started writing her once a week twelve years ago." (We're talking here about a letter, sent in a stamped envelope to a street address, maybe even handwritten! Typed, of course, is better than nothing.) Similarly, she began writing to some nuns who shared her interest in making greeting cards. "I sent each a box at Easter with candy, rubber stamps, and card-making supplies. One

was ninety-eight and had never gotten a package before. It made her cry. So I sent the package yearly and wrote once a week.”

The particular practice might suggest any number of variations in frequency or to whom. For example, to some homebound friend, family member, or neglected old man or woman, a prisoner, a service person in the Middle East, a disabled person, someone who did us a great favor once upon a time, a parent(!), etc., etc. Or a call, an email, a text message. Or a visit with some regularity, a card, a letter, a gift. With a little imagination, we could all think of something similar that would mean so much to someone or brighten his or her life, surprise them. A phone call to a friend from years ago or far away. Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew will suggest some other possibilities.



Early in this new semester an admissions counselor introduced me to a new student and his mother, both from Sweden. The student bowed deeply from the waist. (I doubt that this is going to catch on among our first-year students.) The student and his mother were not your stereotypical blue-eyed, blond Nordics, nor was their name Nordic. The counselor explained that the family had emigrated to Sweden from Iran a couple of decades ago. If the “Father” part of the introduction triggered the bow, it was more likely of Iranian origin than Swedish. Subsequent elegant manners on the part of the student added to my impression that I was witnessing another example of multiculturalism on our campus.

Vard is one instance of a much more diverse student body than twenty, even ten years ago. Current students have the advantage of sharing dorms, classes, activities, and social life with students of Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu backgrounds, from Communist countries, students of color, students from inner-city Los Angeles and Dallas, students themselves immigrants or of immigrant parentage

(of course, in a way, that's been true for several centuries), etc. The student directory now includes beside names like Peterson, O'Brien, Kowalski, Winthrop, Schmidt, Onofrio, and Coulumbe, new names to master such as Cheung, Cortez, Duong, Fujita, Gao, Jayasooriya, Zhang, and Kimeu. If we, students and staff of the university, are open, this new reality can build bridges and decrease racism, intolerance, and discrimination. Francis (aka the Pope) told the young people in Kraków on the 2016 World Youth Day, "We adults need you to teach us how to live in diversity, in dialogue, to experience multiculturalism not as a threat but an opportunity. Have the courage to teach us that it is easier to build bridges than walls! You will be our accusers if we choose the life of walls, of enmity, of war."



In his book *Road to Daybreak*,⁷ Henri Nouwen writes of preachers and writers on religious matters: "Occasionally the main fruit of speaking (or writing) is the conversion of the speaker!" Occasionally? Well, maybe the conversion itself is not always effective. But *normally*, I think, the preacher *is* preaching to himself as well as to his hearers or readers. Otherwise, how would he or she know "our" weaknesses, etc.? A few centuries ago Luther made the same point and many writers, preachers, realize that what they are saying to an audience inevitably is also aimed at their own reformation. "We" and "us," therefore, are more appropriate in such material than "you." "You" is appropriate for Jesus, not for me.

If, for instance, the readers of these reflections thought that the writer had perfectly realized the ideals and way of following Christ that he writes about, they would be pretty disappointed by meeting and observing the writer! When he urges the readers to be positive, generous, joyful, and full of trust because of the resurrection, when he sets patience with a fourteen-year-old as an ideal (the writer

may not have teenagers but there are other targets!), when he discusses boredom at religious services, he probably knows what he's talking about; in any of these he's trying to prod himself. As "you" pray, hope, trust, and try to be loving and non-judgmental, as you pray for patience and gentleness in your daily dealings with others, pray that this writer does the same, acts with patience and gentleness, is full of trust, free of judging, sympathetic, alert, and focused at worship, etc. Include him in your prayers.



"I was born and grew up in Asia and was taken to a non-Christian service by a nanny. My parents never went to church, not even once, but after returning to the US, made me go to church by myself." That helped kill any interest the writer might've had in religion. At eighty, he has no part in organized religion or faith. But he says: "Your daily messages help me a lot even though I am not sure what I can believe in." He does agree, for instance, that religion should be *a way through* life, *not an escape* from it. Many of these messages resonate with him, he says, but the ones on faith "not so much." Lacking faith, he aims to "be nice, do meaningful work, and have the courage to face each new day as I age." A retired professor touches on related issues. She writes that her beloved daughter is somewhere between atheist and agnostic. This is "one of my biggest sorrows/regrets . . . My own sense of God's love and support are so important to me that I grieve that she does not have this consolation." On the other hand, this daughter is "a lawyer for the indigent, a public defender (on the West Coast). My belief is that she meets God every day in his broken, human children." Many of us must have a similar experience with immediate family or close friends who don't share our faith but fulfill the words of Jesus in Matthew 25. (Google it!)

Wise and eloquent David Brooks wrote of similar issues in *The New York Times* when he mused about how seemingly rudderless young people deal with grief, pain, disappointment, or sadness. Avoiding explicit mention of religion, he says they are best prepared when there is “a fervent commitment to some cause, some ideal or some relationship.” He quotes Friedrich Nietzsche: “‘He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.’” People can endure and do much if they are “idealistic for some cause, . . . tender for some other person, . . . committed to some worldview that puts today’s temporary pain in the context of a larger hope.”⁸ Much to pray about and think about!



At a local coffee shop in San Francisco’s North Beach at 8 a.m. one sees the “regulars.” They greet each other with well-worn words:

Good morning. / How are you? / What ya’ doing? / Well, the rain has stopped and the sun is out. / Hi, Vince. / Where yuh been? / We missed you yesterday.

Such “small talk” seems nearly universal. Of course, it differs from culture to culture, gender to gender, even neighborhood to neighborhood, etc. Among some and in different venues this may all be more demonstrative, accompanied by a whoop and a big hug. On a college campus I’m familiar with, the most frequent bit of such small talk is a slurred “howzigoin?” No detailed answer expected. Small talk in itself is not full of content or significant material about North Korea or even the local BB team. It’s simply friendly. The words are a verbal equivalent of or an accompaniment to a touch, a pat on the back, a handshake, an arm around the shoulder. They are reassuring, friendly, without being heavily weighted. With them we reassure people in our little part of the world that despite

the horrors of our world, there remain some solid and comforting things like friends, acquaintances, good neighbors, and even love.

No matter what preoccupations—money, business, worries, the stock market, that teenager—small talk points to our basic, decent, and non-threatening solidarity with others. There are, of course, those who simply plunge into: “About that Olson contract.” Or, “I think George was completely off track.” A friend tells of jumping right away into serious matters and being brought down to earth after a few minutes of heavy stuff by the friend saying, “Good morning.”



Some words are charged with feeling, vibes, associations: lone, lonely, loneliness, alone, lonesome. One or the other is the engine behind many a song or poem. For example, “None but the lonely heart / Can know my sadness / Alone and parted / Far from joy and gladness” (Goethe/Tchaikovsky).⁹ Or, “I’m so lonesome I could cry” (Hank Williams Sr.).¹⁰ After saying that God has taken away friend and neighbor, the last verse of Psalm 88 shocks with: “My one companion is darkness.” A Peace Corps volunteer deposited among villagers speaking a unique dialect says, “I was so lonely I cried myself to sleep for days.” These few examples barely touch the depth of pain these words can evoke. Many of us have experienced this almost indescribable pain. It could be the sadness of “empty nester” parents; the longing ache for love mixed with sexual desire of an adolescent; the heartbreak of a broken relationship; the disorientation and shock of the widowed; the isolation of an older person bereft of peers and forgotten in a nursing home; the dazed and unsure feeling of a new student away from home.

Is there some meaning in this for the life of a Christian? Is it like physical pain, illness, sin, betrayal, disappointment where at least in retrospect we can find something resembling purpose? Is it a

setback in our life or a step toward something better? How does loneliness relate to our life in Christ? Is it our equivalent of the cry of Jesus from the cross: “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Let’s end this foray into the subject with a little hope and light. (More on this subject another time.) Can we, presuming we are not ourselves in the throes of loneliness, can we do or be something for others caught in this misery? (*Sensitivity and caution required!*) “I was lonely, emotionally crushed, etc. You came to my help? You comforted me? You befriended me? You consoled me? You joined me in the cafeteria? You . . . ?”



“Wow, what an experience!” Or, “I wouldn’t want to go through that again!” When we use the term *experience of personal events*, we usually refer to something difficult or tragic like the death of someone close to us, our daughter’s cancer, or the narrow escape we had in a car accident. Or we refer to some delightful and memorable event in our life like the completion of grad school, the birth of a first child, or a particularly satisfying evening with a friend. But in between these highs and lows are the more humdrum and routine times that may predominate. The days and weeks that go by so uneventfully. To stick with less than satisfying work or daily visits with the love of our life when, because of dementia, she no longer recognizes us takes a less newsworthy kind of courage.

It has been said that the real test of any good action or virtue, the real proof that we have some good habit, is *perseverance* in it. Even spending a week or two in a poverty-stricken venue repairing houses, while clearly a good thing, is not the same as living one’s life in a decaying neighborhood. It’s the staying with something when it’s boring, even painful at times, that deserves the medal. The commonplace, the humdrum, the tedious, the repetitive, the useful but irritating action, these are the unsung aspects of human

life. The work of farmers and vine growers, the patience day in and day out of day-care persons, of nurses, of office workers, of a spouse coping with the chronic illness of her partner, or of parents dealing with the cancer of a two-year-old or with the ups and downs of an adolescent, etc.—don't these point to a generous heart, which is not material for an exciting film or the evening news? As we look back at this soon-to-be-over year, faithfulness might be a good lens through which to review it. Ignoring our culture's criterion of success, Mother Teresa put it this way: "God has *not* called me to be *successful*; God has called me to be *faithful*."



Some years ago, after arriving in the Bahamas for a two-year stint, I was so pleasantly surprised by what turned out to be a regular sight. Almost daily, you saw the local bishop, Leonard Hagarty, OSB, dressed in clerical suit, riding his motorcycle (as did all of us Benedictines). But there was always this: his face lit up by a wide, genuinely happy smile, one of his hands almost always off a handle (!) waving to someone on the street, somehow dodging potholes, chickens, and other challenges. In a letter written by him to the people of the Bahamas, he spoke about how much more effective preaching or teaching was when it was accompanied by witnessing. People listen best to preachers and teachers, he said, when their lives match their words. Further, he said that he always felt very strongly that you witness best to the good news of the Gospel when it really *sounds* like good news. On his motorcycle, radiant as he kept waving greetings, he made it really *look like* good news too.

Bishop Hagarty's *words and bearing* are echoed in Pope Francis who says Christians should not "have a funeral face" because "pessimism" is not for Christians.¹¹ A severe critic of Christian faith, Friedrich Nietzsche, made the same point from his stance. I para-

phrase his words: Christians would have to sing with more conviction to persuade me to faith in their redeemer and they'd have to show that faith in happier faces. Our faces should be those of redeemed people, of those who know the joy that comes from the forgiveness of our sins, a closeness to God, and trust in God.



Being grateful is one thing. It is an especially rich and gracious attitude toward life, a way of living. But what moves gratitude out of ourselves to make a positive impact on others is our expression of that gratitude in some way. A former student of the university who graduated in 1973 with a major in chemistry models such expression. Retired after some thirty-plus years as a physician, he wrote to his professor of analytical chemistry whom he credits for his happiness in the medical profession. (This was a letter sent via the US Post Office, pen on paper, in an envelope with a stamp!)

Jeff's message to the professor, also retired, was this: "Dr. RF, I don't feel I have ever had a chance to fully express my gratitude to you for your encouragement when I was applying for medical school. I was grappling with doubts and uncertainty. You strongly encouraged me to continue with my medical school applications. You instilled in me a sense of self-confidence. In my mind, I can still picture meeting with you in your office and can still feel the sense of gratitude that I felt after our meeting. I cannot possibly expect you to remember me, but I do want you to know how positively you affected my life at that point." At the end of his letter to Dr. RF, which he copied to me, Jeff wrote: "I read some time ago, that if the only prayer we ever say is 'Thank you' and if we truly mean it, then we are right up there with the saints."

So often in many of us, a sense of gratitude may well up at times, but to get to the point of actually thanking individuals who have done or meant so much to us is where we falter. We put it off till

it finally becomes material for the eulogy. Besides, of course, family members whom we so easily take for granted and owe so much, there are individuals such as the one cited above. In his thank-you note, Dr. RF said what a pleasant surprise it was. I imagine there are many such people—teachers, coaches, mentors, counselors, advisors—who would be happily surprised by such a letter.

(The repetition of this topic among these reflections is partly due to the need of the writer to express it, and atone for his failures.)



Elsewhere I may have mentioned my theory, now my conviction, that the age of two is the peak in the human trajectory. Sure, I used to think it was around twenty-six or twenty-seven but I've changed my mind. The enthusiasm, curiosity, and energy of a two-year-old are never matched again! It's to be hoped that we are often able to muster enthusiasm as life goes on. We may keep or develop a probing and ever-questioning mind. But, even granted that, the *energy* will certainly diminish. My adulation of two-year-olds got a boost recently upon hearing on public radio that the favorite music of a particular two-year-old was Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" from his Ninth Symphony. (If you don't know it as such, you very likely have heard the melody used for a joyous hymn.) Don't underestimate the little dears! A friend has a four-year-old whose favorite food is Gorgonzola gnocchi! He probably can't pronounce or spell it any more than the other young child can say Beethoven, but it lights up his eyes and whets his appetite!

What more appropriate music for two-year-olds than the "Ode to Joy": they never walk! They always run! They can go, jump, climb, crawl till they finally fall asleep. It's as if they had some conviction about the brevity of human life and are out to soak it up! Do they perhaps think to themselves: "This elasticity and agility, they tell me, won't last. Why waste time just walking—you don't see as

much that way. You will never find a table covering to pull off or a lotion to spill if you just stay put! My random movements and undignified waddle will inevitably have to be exchanged for something more sedate, my diaper for a dress or a suit. Laughing might get a bit strained at times. Responsibility and life's setbacks can make it hard to be so carefree and joyful." If you are in the vicinity of a two-year-old or have one or see one, stop and enjoy the joy! And hope that it is contagious! (PS: Especially to you worn-out parents of the little dears: I do know there's a lot of very high, messy, and expensive maintenance involved. Your patience and resilience are my reasons for thinking you deserve canonization—and a bonus too!)



Some readers enjoy my reflections/blogs recounting visits to San Francisco that seem to revolve around coffee shops and Uber drivers! Back in semi-rural Minnesota, one has fewer options. But about five miles from this university is a town of around seven thousand. There one doesn't have to get one's coffee from a gas station since the town is home to a unique coffee shop with its own bakery. An assortment of seven booths, large and small tables, and four or five spots at a bar make for a capacity of around forty or fifty. Throughout the day a steady stream of patrons comes through the door. The clientele? Local card-players seem to meet daily at 10:30 a.m.; people coming from Mass at the church across the street (lots of jay-walking); profs from either of the two local colleges; retired teachers and attorneys; students (not too early however); active or retired businesspeople; members of the two (male and female) Benedictine monasteries.

Many patrons stop in to pick up their latte or Americano and then head out the door; others sit and enjoy coffee, freshly baked pastry, conversation, and greeting familiar faces. Parents have fond

memories of good conversations with their college daughter or son over coffee or tea in this user-friendly atmosphere. Lots of small talk and also serious meetings. For example, a retired monk-professor (Ger) stopped briefly at a booth to visit with two college students from China, call her Ying, him Ben. (Incidentally, neither is Christian.) Ben is non-stop exuberant, always smiling, very light-hearted, verging on a laugh. He was trying to build a closer relationship with somewhat reluctant Ying. The three sat and had some light conversation. After Ger left, Ying said to Ben: "Well, if Father Ger thinks you're a good man, then I'll be your girlfriend." Happy Ben says: "What happened? We were talking about math and all of a sudden she's willing to be my girlfriend!"

For those enjoying a coffee on site, their drink can be served in locally made pottery. Greeting cards, also by a local artist, are available from a rack; their originality and wit can hold their own with San Franciscan counterparts. Daily soups, sandwiches, and specials are written on a large blackboard. San Francisco coffee shops will have their regulars but there's always room for anonymity; in this setting, anonymity is hard to come by. They say that it's pretty difficult to get noticed in San Francisco; in this coffee shop you're bound to be noticed and greeted by a buddy, an acquaintance, or a friendly stranger.



The college chaplain remembers how fearful and uncertain he felt while talking with a student at a time when the expansive work of Vatican II had not yet germinated. A student named Bob had come into the college chaplain's office. Attending Mass on Sundays, he said, left him so unmoved and bored that he couldn't "stand it." The possibilities for variety introduced after Vatican II had not yet become a reality. To make matters worse, the Mass at the time was still in Latin. After more discussion, the chaplain finally said to

Bob: “Well, Bob, why don’t you skip it for a month or so and see if that helps?” Trained in a moral theology that had little time for conscience, the chaplain thought to himself: “What have I done? Did I go too far? What right did I have to cancel the ‘Sunday obligation?’” The teaching and rules of the church were presented in such a way that *they were your conscience*; you didn’t have to worry about any personal decisions (God forbid!).

How refreshing it has been to hear Pope Francis: “We [pope, bishops, priests] have been called *to form consciences, not to replace them*.”¹² By thinking that everything is black and white (that is, by *telling people* what their conscience is), he says, we discourage people who are doing their best as Christians but cannot at the present reach the ideal in every situation. (They are in the gray area.) Most of us, you and I, know in conscience that we should love all our fellow humans, but some of them (including me, for example) make that pretty tough to do.

Under several previous popes, we have had examples of bishops claiming to decide for laypeople what their conscience is on particular issues. But most Catholic Christians have recovered some trust in their own conscience. Francis supports this when he says that conscience is the most “secret core” and “sanctuary” of a person. There each one is “alone with God.”¹³ To the annoyance of some Christian churches, this exercise of conscience has often led to walking away from the church. Almut Furchert has put it this way: “Søren Kierkegaard used to say: you first have to reflect yourself *out* of Christianity in order to come back to it anew.”¹⁴ Possibly this leads to more convinced and committed Christians, people who experience trust in Jesus Christ and his loving embrace as the heart of belief, of faith.



Psalm 119 is the longest Psalm in Scripture. It is made usable for public prayer by dividing it into some twenty-two sections. Verse 67 (among others) suggests some fruitful reflection on a very basic subject: “Before I was afflicted I strayed, but now I keep your word.” Another translation reads: “I used to wander off until you disciplined me; but now I closely follow your word.” We hate to think of this, that the only way to a fuller life in Christ is through affliction or something else which “disciplines” us. It’s that same lack of relish with which we look forward to any cross. We resist seeing any good in a real and present affliction—for instance, an illness, chronic pain, an emotional torment, a severe loss—and so, of course, fear it.

Sometimes the pain is softened for us: it creeps up under some other guise and before we realize it, we are already being “improved.” At other times, our trouble may accompany something else that we really desire and enjoy—pleasing work, good company, etc. It’s a bit like a parent giving a small child some unpleasant oral remedy by disguising it with some sweet. Events seen as so contrary at the time become the unexpected door to a happy and fruitful life we might never have imagined otherwise. One door closes, another opens, goes an old saying. Adversity and even misery are often good teachers. In baptism the pattern of our Lord’s suffering, death, and resurrection becomes ours also. “Before I was afflicted I strayed, but now I keep your word.” Loving God, may your strengthening grace be with us, in us, no matter what pleasant or unpleasant happenings may come!



Saint Benedict in his Rule is no exception to the frightening (to some, disgusting) conviction that spiritual growth requires that the serious Christian regard herself or himself as “poor and worthless” and “that a man not only admits with his tongue but is also

convinced in his heart that he is inferior to all and of less value” (Chapter 7: Humility).¹⁵ Personal experience tells me that such a conviction can only come with a great deal of self-knowledge and the latter only with a great number of years! Rightly, I think, loving and thoughtful adults don’t crush the exuberance and spirits of the young by telling them they are worthless. (How would you phrase that on a résumé!) Another side of the issue is the advice St. Francis de Sales writes to a young correspondent: “While we must have patience with others, we must also have it with ourselves.” In fact, if we are really serious about developing our love of God, he says we need to be *more patient with ourselves* than with others!

When and if we get to the point of seeing ourselves as “inferior to all,” it will not be a depressing squelching of all self-worth. It will be a liberation from stress and straining, freedom to surrender ourselves fully to trust in God’s love, forgiveness, and initiative. We are not masters of the universe—or even masters of everything in our little lives. We can relax: finally, it’s up to God. Further on in the same letter, St. Francis de Sales says: “Our imperfections are going to accompany us to the grave.”¹⁶ The goal of Christian life is not to sculpt some interior equivalent of a Greek god but to embrace the truth in the words of the hymn that God “calls and claims us as His friends / And loves us as we are.”¹⁷



As we begin any Lent, many of us could do better than “I will give up my daily beer/desserts/watching *How I Met Your Mother*/etc.” How about enlivening my life in Christ with some daily and personal—that is, *unique to me*—prayer? Public prayers, like those in the Mass, become mechanical and remain formal unless they have the daily accompaniment of personal, private prayer. More often than not, it’s you or me who is standoffish in our relation with

Jesus. He demonstrated real neighborliness by taking on our flesh and life and even more than “his” share of suffering. The Lord Jesus is easily available in the Eucharist, in Scripture, in our fellow human beings, and in all of nature. Everything else we might think of for Lent is, I think, fairly petty compared to developing a genuinely personal prayer life. (If yours is blazing ahead and well advanced, find something else to read!)

If Lent is about restoring and renewing my relationship with God, that can only be done using some of *my* language, with some daily communication about *my* needs, *my* hopes, *my* worries, *my* failures. The kind of communication—and even silence—that exists between friends. No one else is going to renew *my* baptismal promises at Easter. The prayers of the Mass are for a gathering of individuals, purposely applicable to *everyone present*, while being *unique to no one*. They are somewhat like our “How do you do?” “How are things going?” or “Good morning.” Only a prayer like that of writer Anne Lamott, “Lord, help me not to be such a jerk,” can come from my unique self-knowledge and experience. With such frankness and familiarity, we’re on the way to genuine and liberating trust in the Lord.



Elsewhere in these reflections I have made a point about how ideal it is if, in our prayers of petition, instead of spelling out for God what God must do, we are able simply to trust God’s loving care for us. More reflection on my experience and that of others tells me to modify that. My remarks about simply trusting God still, I think, describe the ideal situation, are still something we should aim for. But . . .

When we’re in any difficulty or pain, large or small, any terror, fear, great concern for others, worry about others or ourselves, etc., we

will almost automatically pray for specific help. It can go all the way from praying as we watch a wrestling match or a hockey game that “our” team win to praying that our spouse overcomes that cancerous tumor. We pray that the estranged couple are able to save their marriage; we pray as we fall from our bike that we don’t break anything; we pray that the pesky stomach ailment go away; we pray that Dad’s dementia does not get any worse; we pray for successful treatment of the neighboring four-year-old’s leukemia. Very likely, no matter how deep our trust in God’s loving intentions in our regard, we still let the immediate need come to the fore.

Psalm 147 says that God not only calls each star by name but “heals the brokenhearted” (v. 3). God stands at the origin and support of the universe and at the same time listens to our sorrows and worries. Though some of our requests of God may seem pretty petty, who are we to put limits to God’s magnanimity or willingness to heal? Prayer is its own reward. Just the fact of praying is basic to any genuine Christian life. It changes us—now or later. How it works, what it does, etc. Ultimately, trust in God’s love will out!



Francis, Bishop of Rome: Over fifty years ago, John XXIII spoke of opening the windows to let some fresh air into the church; they were opened a bit but then someone must’ve felt a draft. The Bishop of Rome elected in 2013, Francis, seems interested not only in opening the windows but the doors also. “Catholic” after all means universal, all-embracing. In a now famous interview, Francis said: “This church with which we should be thinking is the home of all, not a small chapel that can hold only a small group of selected people.” Various adjectives have been used to describe Francis’s approach, but one that I really prefer is “down-to-earth.”

Not only is there room for many people, many types of people, in the words of Francis there is also room for mystery in regard to

the church's teachings, a recognition that every bit of teaching is not on the same level of importance or certainty. For example, he said: "The church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules. The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you." Echoing Vatican II, he underlines: "The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently." He says that otherwise we risk "losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel."¹⁸

"Fresh air and fragrance": no matter what time of the year, it feels like spring!



Several decades ago I was struck by hearing an elderly Benedictine, certainly no radical, say that *he regularly asked the prayers of his deceased mother*. Many of us are too hung-up on the process of canonization by which the Catholic Church formally declares someone a saint, a person of outstanding holiness. I think most of us live surrounded by saints! (What follows is heavy on parents and spouses, but there are many other categories.) Jesus put the requirements plainly: love God and love your neighbor. What about those parents who forego world travel to enable their college-age sons and daughters to study abroad? They stay at home and on the job—and together—while their offspring enjoy privileges they never were able to afford. Apart from parenthood, how many of us get up several times a night to take care of a sick child and then get up at 5:30 a.m. and drive to the office? And once there, we are expected to be alert, pleasant, energetic, prepared, even imaginative!

Laypeople don't have organized groups like the Benedictines, Jesuits, Salesians, any religious group in the Church to push the process of "canonization." The Home and School Association is

unlikely to do it for John and Kay. Often canonization seems more like a Hall of Fame for high-profile persons in the Church. And to require “miracles”? (One could, by the way, argue that, biblically speaking, miracles are not empirical matters to be verified by science and witnesses.) Aren’t there miracles in the perseverance and patience of such men and women—hospital and hospice workers, caregivers, social workers? In the sacrifice of time and comfort they make for others, often not simply for a paycheck but with love beyond the job description? Aren’t there miracles in faithfulness, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, hope, joy, loving care, perseverance, patience, gentleness, etc.? I feel that I am telling you the obvious. . . . Let’s celebrate and be grateful for these neighbors, family members, and friends!



Note on a restaurant menu: “Cell phones in use will be confiscated and turned into stew.”

Most of us learned with a little maturity and experience that doctors, clergy, teachers, public officials—that none of these should be immune from questioning. That, even though often idols of our childhood, they do have faults. But do we question technology, in practice an idol in our society?

So often it seems that if technology shows that something can be done, we take that as the final word. Much of what technology presents to us is driven at least in part by the desire of the manufacturer or inventor to make a living—or a bit more! In the last decades (it has been that fast!) we have been presented with gadget after gadget which, as one claim goes, makes it possible for us to take everything in our life with us in this little rectangular item. Do we ask ourselves whether that’s something we should do?

All this is often presented as an increase in communication. Communication? Yes, but *apparently with anyone but the people we are with at the moment.*

We know and we see people walking around wired, oblivious to those who are with them or whom they meet or pass. Anything, anyone, but the present, the here and now. How about turning the machine off to be present to the people we're with or who are in our presence?

That note on the restaurant menu was very apt: "Cell phones in use will be confiscated and turned into stew." The idea is that, for one thing, we should appreciate the food before us and, it is hoped, even more, value and enjoy the people we are with. Why come with Ted and Jill to dine and then spend our time talking to Bill or Angie in Shanghai, Madrid, or North Dakota?

And, further, what about enjoying some silence in our lives? Do our ears and minds have to be filled with talk or noise all the time? Rabbi Abraham Heschel writes that silence and prayer leave an opening for God to speak to us.



The writer and illustrator Maurice Sendak (*Where the Wild Things Are*) was interviewed a year before his death in 2012. At the time, he was in his early eighties. He spoke with emotion and candor about the sadness of seeing friends die before him; he said, "I cry a lot." In passing he said he had no belief in an afterlife, but a moment later said he still hoped to see his brother again. He went on: "I am in love with the world. . . . There are so many beautiful things in the world which I will have to leave." He ended with: "Live your life, live your life, live your life."¹⁹