



LIGHT & LIFE

VOICE OF THE ROSARY CENTER & CONFRATERNITY

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WINTER IS BUT A SEASON

Fr. Joseph Sergott, O.P.

Winter is the time of year when long nights linger and stretch into day. When fallen autumn leaves wane in beauty, decompose and return to the soil; when animals burrow deep into the earth for protection from the harsh elements of a bitter spell; when blizzards strike with frightening force, when ice and snow, with their bone-chilling cold, leave entire cities longing for warmth and the emergence of spring.

There are profound times when people too experience a “winter” in life, not just as a season, but as a spiritual journey that plunges them to levels of darkness, orphaned from hope and joy. Depression, serious illness, chronic pain, sin, struggles of faith, spiritual dryness, loneliness, marital strife, financial woes, broken relationships—all of these can bring on periods of desolation where we begin to doubt God’s plans for us, if he is with us—or even if God exists. Winter may be a season of the year, but it is also a part of human experience, and it can strike at any time.

—It is then that one asks, “Is there no God?” Or, “Has he forsaken us?”

But winter is just a season, and we must remember its proper place and its true meaning - though it may bring darkness, decay, and cold, it is also necessary to the cycle of life and is a part of God’s design! As the psalmist says, “It is God who set all the boundaries of the earth, who made both summer and winter.” (Ps 74:17) It is true that elements of the earth die and return to their origins, but it’s *in* the dying that new seeds of life are born. In the depths of winter, hidden beneath the frost and snow, lie the beginnings of spring and new life.

In a similar way, when we experience a long winter in life, it’s easy to begin to despair, whether our winter is because of our own choices, through sin, or from something entirely beyond our control that strikes with equal vigor. At these times, we must realize that God is near to us in the same way that he is present to the winter. Moreover, just as the decay of winter is the fertilizer for the spring, so the suffering we endure is the “stuff” of our spiritual renewal—even if we don’t always have the wisdom to embrace this.

If we reflect on the passion and death of Jesus, we can say that it was a voluntary winter brought about by human hands and yet under divine providence. And even as he in his human form died and was sent to the depths of the earth, we discover that in God’s plan, not only was he to conquer death and realize new life—but *save us* in the process.

If you, who read this, are experiencing a long, dark spiritual winter, do not lose hope, but find solace in the fact that winter is but a season that always passes into spring, and if you endure till the thawing of the ice and the retreating of the darkness, you will discover the light and warmth of new life as it stirs within you.

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so, will my word be which goes forth from my mouth; it will not return to me empty, without accomplishing what I desire. And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. For you will go out with joy and be led forth with peace; the mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.” (Isaiah 55:10-12)

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North Transept, Lourdes Basilica

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

Discipleship, Part 1, Follow Me:

The Counter-Cultural, Unnatural Life of the Disciple

By Fr. Michael Fones, O.P.

[Fr. Michael Fones, OP entered the Western Dominican Province in 1984 and was ordained to the presbyterate in 1992. He has served in campus ministry, parochial ministry, as co-director of the Catherine of Siena Institute, and as student master for the Western Province. He currently is the Socius and Vicar Provincial.]

I have just finished reading *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*, by Tara Isabella Burton.¹ It describes new movements in the U.S. that are replacing traditional religions, not only among the young, but among people of all ages who make up the “Nones”. These are the folks who consider themselves “spiritual, but not religious”, agnostic, or atheist. Yet most of these people, although rejecting traditional worship and religious institutions, still seek meaning, purpose, community and rituals that celebrate and express these basic human needs. Burton describes a whole set of replacements for religion designed by the individual and tailored to their felt needs with the following foundational tenets:²

“I am the only truth I know...To be my truest self I should follow my instincts. My body and my gut know more than my mind. An unjust and repressive society has held me back from becoming my best self. It has warped my faith in my own abilities and my relationship with others. I owe it to myself to practice self-care. I owe it to the world to perfect myself: physically, spiritually, and morally. There is no objective right or wrong.”

I saw examples of this when I was a pastor just a few years ago. If prayer to God failed to get a desired result, some people sought help from someone who dabbled in the occult, or who could sell them a potion. The Church’s liturgies for marriage or funerals were sometimes treated as obstacles to the unique way people wanted to express their love or their grief. When I would ask someone why they did not come to Mass, the reply often was, “I don’t get anything out of it.” The message permeating our society is that freedom is the ability to do *what* you want, *when* you want, and *how* you want. This message is warping our understanding of what it means to be a person of faith.

The Scriptures give a different message of freedom. We are fundamentally good, since we are created by a good God who loves us. But we are fallen, *slaves* St. Paul says, of sin³ – to attitudes and behaviors that undermine our own humanity and the humanity of others. The story of

the Fall in the third chapter of Genesis brilliantly exposes the root of sin. The serpent tempts Adam and Eve with an illusion of self-sufficiency: the promise to be like God and thus no longer be beholden to him. No self-help guru, juice cleanse, meditation app, or magic spell will save me from this delusion. Instead, they only reinforce it. The truth that the Scriptures reveal is summarized by St. Paul in his letter to the Romans: “all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God.”⁴ We all need a savior to free us and, thanks be to God, we have one in Jesus of Nazareth.

The Gospels make it very clear that the man, Jesus, also claims to be divine. He expects his teaching to supersede the Torah given by God (“You have heard it said...but I say...”). He forgives sins, which his enemies quickly point out is God’s prerogative alone. He raises the dead, and claims to be the Way, the Truth and the Life through whom we come to the Father. After healing a cripple on the Sabbath he justifies his actions to those who oppose him saying, “my Father is at work until now, so I am at work,” and his enemies try all the more to kill him “because he not only broke the sabbath but he also called God his own father, making himself equal to God.”⁵

One other way in which he claims divinity is more subtle. He invites men and women to follow him as disciples with the words, “follow me”. But accompanying this invitation is a demand that only God can make. “If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”⁶ Why is this a claim of divinity? Because the greatest and first commandment of the Jewish law was to “love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”⁷ The disciple who follows Jesus must realize that no attachment to family or even oneself can stand in the way of total commitment to him. Only God is worthy of this kind of single-minded devotion, not a human being, including oneself. The “new religions” of today are nothing more than a repackaging of the primordial temptation of Adam and Eve.

The strange, counter-cultural nature of discipleship is expressed graphically in the Gospel of Matthew immediately after Jesus claims that, “whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”⁸ With a sentence that would have horrified his listeners he continues, “whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me.”⁹ They were intimately familiar with the instrument of torture the Roman used to discourage rebellion. The image would hardly have encouraged his listeners to become disciples!

Please remember the Rosary Center in your will. By arranging a gift to the Rosary Center through your will, you can continue to support our apostolate of serving the Lord and his Mother into the future.



I have heard people my age or older refer to “their cross”. Often it is some unfortunate aspect of their life: an alcoholic child, a chronic illness, a difficult boss. Their cross is not something taken up willingly, as much as something imposed and endured. In the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus speak of his own cross very differently. “This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own.”¹⁰ The laying down of his life on the cross is the consequence of his obedience to the Father, and naturally follows from the daily crucifixion of his own will in order to do his Father’s will. In fact, throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus claims that he lives only to do the Father’s will.¹¹ In a world where, as St. Paul says, “no one is good,” and all live according to their own will in slavish imitation of the fallen Adam, the life of such a man would be not just a contradiction, but a conviction of the lives of sinners.

This is the heart of the difficulty of becoming a disciple. When Jesus, the light of the world draws near to us, we suddenly are convicted! His light reveals our sin - our shadow - and makes clear to us that we have to change. How do we respond to that? Are we like the rich man in the Gospel of Mark¹², and simply walk away sad, because we have become accustomed to the illusion of control? Do we justify our own behavior because we no longer recognize what is good and bad? After all, some in the crowd refused to believe Jesus was good! They dismissed him saying, “He is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners”¹³ and “by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he drives out demons.”¹⁴ Or are we like Zaccheus, the tax collector who recognizes his avarice and promises restitution to those he cheated, or Saul, the Pharisee whose worldview had to be reconsidered because of his encounter with the risen Lord?

We cannot be complacent and be content with part-time Christianity. The last three popes have emphasized the radical nature of the Christian life. Pope St. John Paul II wrote in his first encyclical, *The Mission of the Redeemer*, that “the proclamation of the Word of God has *Christian conversion*¹⁵ as its aim: a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and his Gospel through faith... Conversion means accepting, by a personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple.”¹⁶ This initial conversion, which is personal and intentional and a response to grace, is necessary before catechesis can have its full, or possibly *any*, effect. The same saintly Pope ruefully observed “A certain number of children baptized in infancy come for catechesis in the parish without receiving any other initiation into the faith and still without any explicit personal attachment to Jesus Christ; they only have the capacity to believe placed within them by Baptism and the presence of the Holy Spirit.” It requires consistent, creative evangelization for these children, and their parents, for that matter, to allow Jesus to be Lord over their lives in the midst of the cultural shift Ms. Burton observed in which they are urged instead to follow their [fallen] instincts.

Similarly, in his first encyclical, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI laid down a challenge. “Being a Christian,” he said, “is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”¹⁷ Contrary to the complaint of many post-moderns, Christianity is not simply a moral system or set of rules. It is a way of life based on a relationship with Jesus lived in the context of the community he established which is the Church, imperfect as it is. Our parishes – not just the priests but all the members – must continually proclaim this radical call to conversion and discipleship and encourage one another to pursue it with all their heart, mind and soul.

Finally, in Pope Francis’ first encyclical, *The Light of Faith*, he notes that St. John the Evangelist,

“brings out the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus for our faith by using various forms of the verb ‘to believe’. In addition to ‘believing that’ what Jesus tells us is true, John also speaks of ‘believing’ Jesus and ‘believing in’ Jesus. We ‘believe’ Jesus when we accept his word, his testimony, because he is truthful. We ‘believe in’ Jesus when we personally welcome him into our lives and journey towards him, clinging to him in love and following in his footsteps along the way.”¹⁸

This is the life of discipleship; a life of constant prayer for guidance, of checking our attitudes and actions against those of the saints, the disciples who have gone before us. We are not meant to be comfortable in this world. Rather, if we are a disciple, the Lord will be using us to change the world, beginning with ourselves, our colleagues at work, and the institutions to which we belong. Such a life is anything but natural. It is the supernatural life of grace in which like Mary, the first and greatest disciple, our whole being proclaims the greatness of the Lord. ■

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1. Public Affairs Publishing, New York, NY, 2020
 2. These movements include those focusing on “wellness” like Soul Cycle, Goop and the followers of *The Secret* and the prosperity Gospel; online gaming groups; fandoms surrounding the Harry Potter or Star Wars universe; New-Agers and their neo-pagan cousins; Wiccans, witches and other occultists; and two movements vying to become the new secular religion: anti-establishment social justice advocates and anti-authoritarian advocates of human perfection through cybertechnology.
 3. Romans 6:17-20
 4. Romans 3:10-12, 23
 5. John 5:17-18
 6. Luke 14:26
 7. Matthew 22:37; Deuteronomy 6:5
 8. Matthew 10:37
 9. Matthew 10:38
 10. John 10:17-18
 11. John 4:34, 5:30, 5:36, 6:38, 9:4, 17:4
 12. Mark 10:17-23
 13. Matthew 11:19
 14. Luke 11:15
 15. italics in the original text
 16. *Redemptoris Missio*, 46
 17. *Deus Caritas Est*, 1
 18. *Lumen Fidei*, 13

THE MESSAGE OF LOURDES

18TH FEBRUARY 1858: EXTRAORDINARY WORDS

During the third apparition, on 18th February, the Virgin spoke for the first time: “what I have to say to you does not have to be written down”. This means that Mary wished to communicate with Bernadette in a loving heart to heart way. From the very start, Bernadette was invited to open the depths of her heart to this message of Love.

Bernadette was overwhelmed by the second statement of the Virgin Mary: “Would you be so kind as to come here for fifteen days?” It is the first time that Bernadette was addressed in a formal way. She felt she was respected and loved, as a person in her own right. We are all worthy of respect in the eyes of God, because He loves each one of us.

The third statement of the Virgin was: “I do not promise to make you happy in this world but in the other.” When Jesus, in the Gospel, invites us to discover the Kingdom of Heaven, He invites us to discover the “another world” within our world as it is. Wherever there is love, God is present.

GOD IS LOVE

In spite of her poverty, her illness and her lack of education, Bernadette was always deeply happy. That is the Kingdom of God, the world of true Love. During the first seven apparitions, Bernadette’s face always radiated joy, happiness and light. However between the eight and twelfth apparitions, everything changed: Bernadette’s face became harsh, sad, and sorrowful, and above all she performed incomprehensible gestures... She moved on her knees to the back of the Grotto. She kissed the dirty repulsive ground of the Grotto. She ate some bitter plants. She scraped the ground three times trying to drink the muddy water at the back of the Grotto. She tried to drink a little and then throwing it away, she took mud in her hands and smeared it on her face. Then the young girl turned to the crowd. They all said: “She’s mad!” During these four Apparitions, Bernadette performed the same gestures. What did all this mean? Nobody understood! Nonetheless, here we are at the heart of the “Message of Lourdes”.

BIBLICAL DIMENSION OF THE APPARITIONS

These actions are biblical actions. Bernadette acts out the Incarnation, the Passion and the death of Christ. Moving on her knees to the back of the Grotto: this action recalls the Incarnation, God humbles himself to become human. Eating bitter herbs at the back of the Grotto recalls the Jewish tradition found in the ancient texts. Smearing her face with mud: when the prophet Isaiah speaks to us about Christ, he depicts Him as “the suffering servant”.

THE GROTTO HIDES

AN IMMEASURABLE TREASURE

During the ninth apparition, “the Lady” asked Bernadette to scrape the soil, saying to her: “Go to the spring, drink

of it and wash yourself there”. By these actions, the mystery of the heart of Jesus is revealed for us: “A soldier pierced his heart with his lance and there immediately flowed out blood and water.” The herbs and the mud represent the heart of man wounded by sin. However, in the deepest recesses of that heart, there lies the very life of God signified by the Spring. Bernadette is asked: “Did the ‘Lady’ say anything to you?” She replied: “Yes, from time to time, She said: “Penance, penance, penance. Pray for sinners”. By “Penance”, one must understand “conversion”. For the Church, conversion consists of turning one’s heart towards God and towards our brothers and sisters, as Christ taught us.

During the thirteenth Apparition, Mary said to Bernadette: “Go, tell the priests and that people should come here in procession and to build a chapel here.” “Come here in procession” means accompanying our brothers and sisters in this life. “Build a chapel here.” In Lourdes, chapels were built to accommodate the crowds of pilgrims. The chapel is the “Church” that we ought to build where we are.

The Lady gives her name: “*Que soy era Immaculada Counceptiou*”

On 25th March 1858, the day of the sixteenth apparition, Bernadette asked the “Lady” her name. The “Lady” replied in the local dialect: “*Que soy era Immaculada Counceptiou*”, which means “I am the Immaculate Conception”. The Immaculate Conception is “Mary conceived without sin, by the merits of the Cross of Christ” (definition of the dogma promulgated in 1854). Bernadette went to see the Parish priest straight away to give him the name of the “Lady”. He then realized it was the Mother of God who was appearing in the Grotto. Later, Msgr. Laurence, Bishop of Tarbes, authenticated this revelation.

WE ARE ALL CALLED TO BECOME IMMACULATE

The message is signed when the Lady gives her name after three weeks of apparitions and then three weeks of silence from 4 to 25th March. The 25 March is the day of the Annunciation, when Jesus is “conceived” in Mary’s womb. The Lady of the Grotto tells us her vocation: She is the mother of Jesus, her whole being is directed towards conceiving the Son of God, and She is entirely devoted to Him. For this reason, She is Immaculate, wholly inhabited by God. In this way, the Church and every Christian should allow themselves to be inhabited by God in order to become immaculate, wholly forgiven and pardoned so that they may, in turn, become witnesses of God. ■

(www.lourdes-france.org/en/message-lourdes)

Note from the Director

Dear faithful supporters of the Rosary Center & Confraternity, THANK-YOU to all who have already donated to help us. We cannot do this without you! We rely on your ongoing support. May God bless you for your generosity!

Fr. Joseph Sergott, O.P.