

## Over an Extended Period of Time

Recently or a few days before the celebration of Corpus Christi a friend of mine made a casual remark about how that liturgical event almost always occurs when the weather is warm. The larger context? Since so many such days are seasonal, you can't help but associate them with the weather. The two go hand-in-hand which is rather nice. Our conversation led to the observation that each of us have been through a little over half a century of liturgical celebrations as they occur in a given year. That time frame harkens back to our childhood or the pre-Vatican days, the turmoil that followed as well as a certain promise of renewal. All this was followed, of course, by a certain leveling out and decline in church attendance lasting right down to the present post-Covid 19 days. As for the current state of affairs, it's an odd mixture of the just mentioned overall decline coupled with a certain rebound in pre-VC II liturgical practices. It'll be interesting over the next fifty years to see how both pan out.

Getting back to Corpus Christi, my friend and I were somewhat bemused at the way those younger than us were gearing up for the celebration. They exhibited an enthusiasm the two of us simply couldn't muster. For us to do so would be acting artificially. Does this attitude on our part reflect a more mature, mellowed outlook? I'm not sure but can only hope so. We talked about that a bit and decided to take it up another time. One thing we decided upon which seems obvious but needs to be stated. As you get older you don't (rather, cannot) exhibit the same attitude you had when younger. It seems to have a lot with sorting out what is real and what is illusory, an insight that becomes clearer with the passage of time. That leads, of course, to pondering the end of your life.

I was grateful for this realization coming to the fore as it usually does through meaningful discussion. When taking a closer look at religious and spiritual matters, the potential exists of straying into an unduly critical attitude toward the faith. The next step along the line is drifting away from God only know to what or where. There's nothing sudden about this transition. I prefer to emphasize the experience of drifting. You don't do it at once but gradually.

As I recall, another factor influenced our chance conversation. We noted how this time around the weather got really hot and was going to be in the 90s for a few days. Indeed, weather is the Great Leveler. We both acknowledged it was weighing down upon us, wishing we could be somewhere else. We were aware that such an attitude could easily transfer to how we viewed Corpus Christi. In sum, it was easy to adopt an anywhere-

but-here syndrome. Suffering in the heat during a prolonged liturgical ceremony wasn't exactly appealing.

Right after our conversation I recalled that the Sunday before was in honor of the Blessed Trinity and before that, Pentecost. In other words, three Biggies with one more up ahead, the Sacred Heart. As for that celebration, it can be described as the most Catholic of all feast days and in a way has an alien quality about it or if not that, awkward. Now with all four in the rear view mirror, barely do we give them a thought even though each in its own way offered special insights. Yet beneath them all is some underlying unity which transcends our normal way of perceiving things. This becomes more evident through an accumulative effect which operates on a level I know is there but can't quite put my finger on.

Realizing this far from makes us come up empty. It's very presence has the capacity to make Jesus Christ manifest in a mysterious, hitherto unappreciated way that lies at the very heart of how we deal with yearly celebrations. The best part is it transcends these celebration as they occur year after year. The passage of time remains, of course, but is secondary. Then we hit upon a wonderful, unexpected complaint. When celebrating a given feast day, the time goes by too quickly. We wish it could linger. Yet should we be able to slow down time, we'd get stuck and not grow as we should. Perhaps that's why the Church early on had recognized the need for several octaves and liturgical seasons.

Another factor that contributed to this article was a mutual friend, one pretty much on the same wave length as the two of us described above. He's somewhat younger or in his early 60s, having had extensive training in medicine (actually very close to being a full-fledged Md). He admitted that quite recently he became an adult. I loved the way he came out and said this, so simple and direct. It made me drop everything and want to listen as attentively as I could.

Usually when someone comes off with a potentially embarrassing self-criticism it's accompanied with a lot of explaining, of getting it out of his or her mouth as quickly as possible. Not the case here. His words were not embellished which you don't come across often. In fact several days later I mentioned this to yet another friend, one of the most mature persons I know. She responded in an almost ho-hum, matter-of-fact manner, "Tell your friend congratulations. He's one of the few and far between." Then she turned away and went about her business leaving me pretty much stunned but pleasantly so.

All this input was bundled within the space of a few days which necessitated some unpacking, for the implications couldn't be appreciated all at once. It had to be spread out over time. Also I was pleased to be in the presence of such mature persons (even if one claimed to be a recent 'arrival') who have the distinct advantage of compensating for my admitted personal immaturity. Shortly afterwards I discovered that I could put this to personal advantage, something that will be discussed later, because it's attractive in a very unique way and keeps you on your feet. It turns out to be quite a comfortable, familiar space in which you can function never in isolation but always affecting other people in a manner you know is real but can't quite tap into. In a nutshell, it boils down to the unwitting cultivation of presence.

So if you're operating within a religious sphere, talk about various sorts of observance, etc., is bound to arise. Unlike other modes of living, this one has a strange way of making you a hypocrite. I guess it's because religious principles set a high standard of living from which it's easy to fall. Also religion can be summed up in a few basic principles anyone can learn. This basic knowledge enables you up to field questions that come your way where most of the time you're on the defensive even though you may give the air of being on the offensive. However, in the end you really don't know what the whole enterprise is about. That too contributed to part of our original discussion and which go this article going. I thought afterwards what it would be like if you could provide all the answers. The response is simple. Life would be as boring as all get-out.

Several days following these few discussions my friend and I happened to meet once more by chance. It seemed strange this happened because usually we don't meet so often. I got the impression that someone somehow wanted us to continue for our personal benefit which turned out to be the case. Often such encounters turn out to be more meaningful because they're not planned. You're living in the present which means you have a more immediate access to what you wish to say than if the meeting had been planned. This isn't always the case, of course, but the spontaneity enlivens the conversation. Similarly, there's no agenda, so what's at issue—what's always at issue—comes to the fore more easily. It's as though the matter has a life of its own and was using us as agents to get it out in the open.

This time we started off in the usual manner and developed it along the following lines. Each one of us goes along in life as usual, not being bothered by major interventions such as accidents, illnesses or the death of a loved one. They do occur but for the most of us at intervals we're able to handle. To live with one or more of them would overwhelm us in a short time. Unfortunately there are exceptions. We hear of people whose lives are

like Job...one affliction after another, almost a way of life. We'll leave that aside because it doesn't bear on the subject at hand.

Say, for example, we suffer a sudden misfortune, one that stymies us so much we wonder if we can recover. Without missing a beat we cry out to God for assistance. Whether or not he exists doesn't enter the picture. We're talking about a natural impulse done without reflection and doesn't take into account whether or not we'll receive an answer. Chances are we'd act similarly even if we're told that an answer isn't even in the cards. Such is the state of desperation that has befallen us along with the need to be delivered from it. Both in fact two sides of one coin.

The reason for looking at this more closely? The answer is so obvious that the question is barely worth posing. We all experience a spontaneous need for relief. Just as quickly as the affliction has descended upon us and has reduced us to groveling on the ground either figuratively or literally, it's back to business as usual once the danger passes. The same with God. Mission accomplished. He's put back to where he belongs, out there somewhere. However, we don't dismiss him in an outright fashion but keep him secured behind that glass you break in case of a fire. The image of this glass is apt because it represents both the distance and nearness we put between us and God.

The amazing thing about this phenomenon—and my friend and I remain at a loss how to articulate it in our own lives—is that we as others who know have had this experience. Without a doubt, a lot of questions arise. For example, not so much does God exist (that's the most common one), but is there such a thing as God? That, of course, leads to another question, what do we mean by this term? In the end or after having exhausted a whole bunch of ready-made explanations, we're at a loss as what to say. We look back at our recent crisis, of how we rushed into God's arms without asking him permission to do so, and left these very same arms wholly indifferent despite having been cared for in abundance. That's really a hard one to take the more you think of it. In other words, we treat God like some divine Sugar Daddy: present when we want him and dismissed readily when we're okay.

And so we find ourselves living in two different modes. The first consists of our daily life comprised of a bunch of essentially boring situations and events and the second when we're prostrate on the ground begging for divine intercession. Let's stand back from this to get a better view of what's going on. Obviously it's an anthropomorphic view of God, but why not go this route? So let's walk right up and pose him a question. "Don't you feel taken advantage of? People call on you only when they're in trouble. The

worse part is that they dismiss you as soon as they're finished with you." Should we look at biblical accounts of God dealing with Israel, we see plenty examples of this laid out right before our eyes.

So the more you ponder this disregard, the more embarrassed you become, wanting to slink into the nearest hole and never come out. Yet the profound difference in two types of awareness remains. You recall the times when you've been rescued and then move on with barely an acknowledgment of who just rescued you. The role of memory plays an important part here, how our minds recall things and let them go. Again, just take a look at Israel. It'd come as no surprise if this is the root cause of antisemitism. People see this within themselves when they'd rather look elsewhere.

The foundation of this lies in the distinction between the visible or palpable realm in which we operate and the transcendent one to which we flee when in trouble. Admittedly holding the two in awareness at one time is difficult. Some may argue it's impossible. There's some truth to this objection, given that we live in a high-stressed technological and secular culture. Yet the gap disappears at once when we're stressed out. That means we have the capacity to transcend our hum-drum lives albeit imperfectly or when we're at our wits end. The trouble is we don't think of it in such terms. If we did, we might be on the road to a higher degree of maturity.

The real issue, it seems, is that when we're rescued and forget from where it had come, we think in purely selfish terms. We're accustomed to take this as some automatic process which fortunately for us, always works. We take it for granted and that's that. Transfer this attitude to a close friend. He or she comes to our rescue which makes us profoundly grateful. While we're being rescued, we don't let this person out of our sight for a moment. If we have any humanity left in us, we want to remain close not for some selfish reason but out of a desire to establish a friendship that's beyond whether we're rescued or not.

Although Scripture is not explicit on this, it's full of divine praise of God in and by himself. However, only two verses seem to stand out all by themselves and have a certain relevance to what we're describing here. The first is Psalm 104.31: "May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works." The second is Baruch 3.34: "The stars shone in their watches and were glad; he called them, and they said, 'Here we are!' They shone with gladness for him who made them." Simple enough but quite loaded. Indeed, two verses represent a spontaneous way of demonstrating great delight in God as he is and for no other reason. It points to a way of living that is whole and complete in every way. Should we make even a

small step in the direction of adopting such an attitude, the question of running to (as well as from) God falls away all on its own.

To our immense delight we discover that somehow we've gotten one better over God without him knowing this. It's the gift of knowing how to get one better over someone so much greater than oneself. So when God looks around at everyone who ever has been alive or is alive right now, he doesn't find many people who delight in simply being with him. It doesn't mean being gifted with some higher powers. *Au contraire*, it's a recognition based on a pure, spontaneous desire to make friends across the widest gulf imaginable. The problem is that the object of this desire doesn't fall under the normal categories of friendship which makes you wonder if the whole enterprise is based on something real. Perhaps this is where faith comes in. If we have it and it doesn't pan out, so be it. If we have it and it does pan out, we're really lucky. Either way we come out with the full assurance we won't be destroyed.

A reason to wonder, indeed. However, we have to keep in mind the spirit of the two scriptural verses quoted above, of how they appeal to something deep within us that goes beyond even being concerned about our very lives. While we may be impressed initially and deeply so, the question of us running to God and promptly forgetting him raises its head yet again. Actually it seems to be our default position. Again, all one has to do is look at Israel's history which is why so many reject it as not being accurate. The exact opposite is true, right on target.

So if ever there was ever an original sin—a sin that we could term as original—it is right here. Indeed, we could claim that St. Paul is wrong when he said that “the last enemy to be destroyed is death”[1Cor 15.26]. The last enemy to be destroyed is the never ending cycle of forgetfulness → recollection → forgetfulness → recollection. Perhaps the Hindus were on to something when they talk about reincarnation. That is to say, they had the right insight into this ceaseless recall → forget → recall → forget but phrased it incorrectly.

We can be captivated by the wonderful two verses (Ps 104.31 and Bar 3.34), pondering them frequently. However, everyone acknowledges that they lose sight of them with an amazing rapidity and wonder why this is so. And so it fits right in with the topic under discussion. Actually the answer to this painful experience is close at hand, and despite our often being aware of it, we fail to learn the lesson presented to us. It's a question of sustaining our attention or since we're dealing with religious matters, it's a question of sustaining awareness. The seemingly endless number of things that bombard us during a given day are well known but left as such. That's

the problem. We do nothing about them while allowing them to bombard us.

It can be argued that trying to be aware of God's presence in a society like ours is not just impossible but absurd even to consider. Putting it mildly, the two are opposed to each other. We know that the world is real and that God...well...is somewhat questionable. Just about the only times we feel God is real apart from great distress is when we're in some kind of quiet zone. If you can remain in it a while, soon you realize that the noise or stuff around you is fleeting, no matter how intense it may get. It's a small step but an important one.

Then there's the more prosaic question of entertaining thoughts throughout a given day, thoughts which basically are harmless or neutral. Their quality is secondary whereas their mere presence is sufficient to wear you down gradually because they are random distractions. It's amazing to consider even just one minute, no more. Within that short span of time we're bombarded to no end yet at the end of a given minute, barely can recall the very first distraction.

No small wonder that to stop or seek to relieve oneself of this intense stream of thoughts people turn to the East. Can you blame them? While this isn't the place to delve into that can of worms, we have to acknowledge that the East does offer direct ways to handle such a situation that badgers everyone in our society. Seekers do get relief right off the bat, something Western religious practices should be jealous of and emulate but somehow do not. But to keep this real, we have to be on guard to stress that such practices mitigate...do not cure...the high pressure flow of (let's face it) junk emanating from within us. Indeed, we could say this is the biggest problem plaguing us today. When I mentioned this to a few friends, they agreed whole-heartedly. Their recommendation (and I've heard this a lot recently), turn off the news which is everywhere, every place, all the time. It helps but is only partial.

Keeping in mind this short essay's title, *Over an Extended Period of Time*, as you grow older the passage of time doesn't necessarily mitigate the problem of being plagued by thoughts. In fact, some remain just as strong in a person's youth right on to the threshold of the grave. So throughout much of one's life a temptation remains to use thoughts in an attempt to govern thoughts which doesn't alter the situation at all. It's a nice try but doesn't work. This can be aggravated further if you maintain in your older years the type of prayer learned when young. Nothing essentially wrong here, but it reveals a lack of know-how with regard to developing prayer

beyond one's early years. And as for prayer, it's too much a catch-all term. Meditation is slightly better, more neutral.

I've seen this stalemate when it comes to prayer echoed in many a conversation with priests and ministers. Quite a few have admitted that they're working on the kindergarten level when it comes to religious training. This applies even to highly educated people, children in the guise of grown-up bodies. And you question why there's not much interest in a call to ministry. After some years you tire of kindergarten work and want to move on...high school level, at least.

So the passage of an extended period of time can leave you with a gloomy outlook on human nature. No small wonder that some have taken the extreme stance that we're corrupt to the core. If not that as in some forms of Protestantism, then in some other ways. On the other hand, some practices of meditation are full of vague, even flashy, claims as to our innate divinity. Instead of allowing ourselves to be bewildered by such a variety, we can view them as kind of a choppiness as you see on the ocean. In the meanwhile we're on a boat trying to navigate through this mess. Dangers lurk on every side.

Being aware of these dangers is important, and if you look at it the right way, they are comforting. The comfort consists in knowing that we've been bounced around by this choppiness, even severely. Somehow we've managed to survive not by our own efforts but by something wholly other than this choppiness. Just the slightest acknowledgment of being tossed is a step in the right direction. Having the proper imagery in this is important which is why the boat image on a rough sea is a starter, one you find in many places including Jesus coming to his disciples over the waves.

With time you realize you're not the only one trying to navigate this choppiness. Other boats are out there which we may not have seen because we're focused on trying to keep our own ship afloat. Such an environment is reminiscent of a Jewish tradition where thirty-six people (men and/or women) are unknown to each other. As a quote from an article on the Internet has it (I forget the source), "The theory is that these people, via their *mere existence* (italics intentional) and the virtues they have, are enough to keep the world from going to hell in a hand basket." Such are the *tsadikim nistarim* or the hidden righteous ones. To be of this small band as set aside is no special honor even if think as such. A *tsadik* isn't aware of this or better, not interested. It ties in with the two biblical quotes noted earlier, Ps 104.31 and Bar 3.34. Their interest is on God being himself and enjoying himself, nothing more. It sounds fanciful and wishful thinking, but is it?

As the verbal root of *nistarim* has it, a *tsadik* is intent upon being hidden. To put it otherwise, a *tsadik* prefers to be identified with the essence of the two quotes more than anything else in the world. The quickness or spontaneity with one leans in that direction is a sure sign that one partakes in being *tsadikim nistarim*. All other issues fade away. They may not right away but do so more quickly than thought possible.

Such a venture isn't done totally in isolation. While that may seem an essential ingredient, it's sustained by contact with at least one person who sets you in this direction. From what I gather—and this may not be fully accurate—*tsadikim nistarim* aren't supposed to recognize each other. However, there are bound to be instances when two meet, albeit in passing. Recognition of each other is undeniable but again, it is of such a fleeting nature that in no way does it detract from their respective journeys. Each person fades away as quickly as he or she came on the scene. That's putting it in temporal and spacial terms which each *tsadik* acknowledges but doesn't buy into as having any ultimate reality. At the same time they recognize that some other force is at work which enables each *tsadik* to continue on his or her voyage on that choppy sea. They know what this force is all about but are reluctant to discuss it. That would detract from them being *nistarim*.

Returning to the two biblical quotes of Ps 104.31 and Bar 3.34, it's hard to imagine that anyone can be sustained by them over the long haul. They may be nice to entertain for a while, but that's it. That choppiness noted above is relentless. Never does it cease. Should we allow it to seep into our boat, quickly we'd flounder around helplessly. Indeed, such choppiness has to be kept outside, also away from tarnishing the two quotes. They assume paramount importance insofar as they go beyond imparting guidance to one's self-acknowledged weaknesses and deficiencies. Actually they set the stage for enabling such distasteful attributes to become garments essential to your disguise because they hide you not just from anyone but from those other *tsadikim nistarim*.

As for the Psalm and Baruch verses, you don't take the stance of incorporating them into your life. You may start off that way but shouldn't devolve into making them a practice however well-intentioned. At this point I'm tempted to say we focus on the spirit of the verses, but that's an easy way out. Rather, you may be in the habit of reading one or two or both in the spirit of *lectio divina* each day. Next over some time you drop them without pondering over them. A presence from the verses all its own comes over you as an all-encompassing cloud that tends to hang around. As the day progresses, that cloud regresses. It's the name of the game no matter how much you try to keep the two verses present to you. After a while a

reassurance grows that this disappearance, gradual as it is, doesn't forsake you. Once the heat of the day is past, the cloud again forms in the night air.

Could this be what these *tsadikim nistarim* are doing each day? It wouldn't surprise me if it were so. Also it'd come as no surprise that this practice being essential to how they comport themselves. They do it to keep in check a subterranean world they prefer to keep from prying eyes...even their own eyes...because the memories that live there are so painful. Always they are lurking just below the surface, waiting to spring up but are kept in check by the practice we're discussing.

So along with the invocation of the Psalm and Baruch verses, there emerges another practice, if you will, one we hadn't counted upon. You can go along quite fine with mediating on them for a while but shortly there emerges...and this happens with considerable force...a whole array of memories that had remained tucked away completely hidden from our sight. These memories are the source of considerable distress because many involve past public incidents. There's no other way to explain this phenomenon. One thing becomes clear, however. It's make-or-break time. All our disguises are cast off, many initially against our will but not long afterwards perceived as a relief. Although we feel less than desirable in the eyes of other persons, we find ourselves with the best of all disguises.

It's completely natural to feel uncomfortable because what's being presented here doesn't seem to have any precedent. Nevertheless, it is the way to go. You need to stick with your insight, however tiny it may be, knowing that something larger is at work which makes it easier for you to slide into this practice. After all, the memories that once had been your very life are reluctant to let you go. They had been a constant presence and don't go quietly in the night. So why not welcome them in? This time, however, they step across the threshold of your life not in the way they had been accustomed to, ready to hijack you, but as ready, unwitting agents. They turn out to be at the service of revealing the presence of something far greater than themselves as well as you, their host.

This, of course, is one of two sides of our lives. The other is the physical one which becomes more a burden as you get older. By this I mean you find yourselves rushing off to the nearest restroom to do your duty, either number one or number two...or both. Sometimes it comes upon you so quickly that you have no choice but to deal with it at once and I mean at once. A lot of people find this distressing as well as embarrassing. It takes up no small amount of one's day as well as energy. You ask if such basic functions tie in with the other stuff under discussion which appear so abstract and well...spiritual.

As for doing our duty, it's comprised of actions done in places God doesn't go, or so we've been conditioned to think. To a casual observer we're reduced to an existence slightly above the animal one or if not, as when we were infants. There's some truth to this but must remember that at this stage of life we have no choice but to run with what we have. In many ways this is new territory because we're living longer and are experiencing things that many in previous generations simply did not put up with over an extended period of time.

Such talk is a far cry from the usual kind about prayer, God's presence, temptation and the other things associated with the spiritual life. Actually the welcoming of elements we've thought as undesirable is what we're after. To put it more precisely, I prefer situating them within the context of the two biblical quotes noted above. Other quotes could be substituted, no question about it. However, the two singled out in this article seem well suited in the context being described here. Say you can't buy into this even if you've tried it out. No problem there. Always you will have your subterranean world walking around with you and needed to be dealt with. Either you take steps now or later. The choice is up to each one of us.

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