

Pastor's Pen: Being Okay with Being Uncomfortable

We live in a society that values comfort. We want our furniture to be comfortable. We want our beds to be comfortable. We want our clothes and shoes to be comfortable. We want our houses to be comfortable. We even talk about sugary, starchy, and greasy foods as being comfort food. We will spend lots of money for such comfort. We can want our relationships to be comfortable. We can want our faith to be comfortable. We can want religion to be comfortable.

Not Always a Good Thing

Some years back I injured my knee. I had to have physical therapy. I was pretty sure that the therapy was developed by medieval torturers. To get better necessitated my being uncomfortable. But that is life isn't it?

We know that for a muscle to develop it must be challenged. The muscle has to be torn in order to grow. That means soreness results. Any athlete knows this to be the case. We also know that when a muscle is rarely if ever challenged that it goes into atrophy. That produces a discomfort that is not good.

We know that in education, for a person to grow in knowledge involves stretching one's mind to comprehend new ideas. One cannot sit on a couch playing video games in lieu of studying and expect to get smarter. We have to allow the discomfort of studying to grow smarter. The lack of learning also produces its own discomfort as negotiating the world becomes harder.

In both the physical and mental realms, discomfort is going to happen. Either it comes in a good way by which we grow, become stronger, and become smarter. Or it comes in a bad form by which negotiating our world, either physically or mentally, becomes more difficult.

What is true...

What is true for our bodies and minds is also true for our souls. If we do not allow ourselves to be uncomfortable in the growing process of our relationship with God, we will suffer the discomfort of a broken relationship with God.

The Catholic faith is a faith of discomfort in so many ways. Most of that discomfort comes from one of two sources. It either comes from the normal growing pains of a developing relationship where we have to change our views to adjust to the truth of the relationship or it comes from our understanding of those times we fall short in the relationship. We know the latter kind as guilt, shame, or sorrow.

The first discomfort comes from a realization that I do not possess all the truth in and of myself. We live in a society where relativism is supreme. Relativism believes that the person themselves determines what is right and wrong or good and evil. It presumes there is no objective truth (truth that is true by its own merit) and that all truth is subjective (truth based on personal opinion or

observation). In Christianity, relativism leads to a morality that is suited to my comfort and justifiable to what I believe I want/need. The comfort is temporary. When challenges to my self-made morality are presented, great turmoil, anger, resentment, and angst result. I either have to shout down those who disagree with me or watch the world I put together fall apart.

As with the body and mind, I can have the positive discomfort that leads to growth or the negative discomfort that comes from atrophy.

The Challenge of Lent

Part of the practices of Lent lead to the positive discomfort that helps us grow. The discomfort comes through detachment. The three focuses of Lent: abstinence/fasting, alms-giving, and prayer, are meant to upset our lives a bit. They are meant to make us uncomfortable.

Abstinence and fasting have a way of making us more conscious of the hold food, drink, and entertainment have on our time, energy, and resources. In consciously re-ordering our use of these things by either cutting back or eliminating something, we re-order the use of our time, energy, and resources. We become more aware. The discomfort of abstinence and fasting can positively grow us into not a just a deeper appreciation for the good in our lives, but also to a deepening relationship with God and our neighbor. It is a sobering thought that what we do by choice in fasting and abstinence during Lent is merely a way of life for the poor and needy. The discomfort that comes from that also allows positive growth in that it helps open us up to see the needs of others and so re-order the use of our time, energy, and resources to help them in their struggle.

This leads to alms-giving. Nothing so feeds a morally relativistic personality as greed and gluttony. Alms-giving, as Christ reminds us in the Gospel of Matthew, is not just a matter of giving from our excess, but from our want. While alms-giving does include giving selflessly financially, it is not limited to that. Giving of our time and energy are also important. Engaging in the corporal and spiritual works of mercy also fall within this idea of alms-giving. Like fasting and abstinence, alms-giving helps us re-order what we have to the service of God and each other. It takes the focus off of me. The discomfort that brings is a positive and life-giving discomfort. Otherwise the weight of our greed and gluttony will press down upon us and those around us.

Prayer is that constant stream of conversation with God. It is a building up of our relationship with the ultimate Beloved. It is an understanding that without God's grace we cannot do the hard work that fasting, abstinence, and alms-giving can entail. Real prayer makes us uncomfortable for it opens us up to God. In true prayer, we open ourselves for God to see the entirety of who we are, where we need help, where we are strong, and where we have sinned. True prayer is true language of the humbled heart. It reminds us that our relativism is self-serving and must give way to the eternal truth that is Christ. This discomfort brings us the same freedom that physical discomfort from exercise brings (we are stronger and more flexible) and that mental discomfort from study brings (we are wiser and smarter). This discomfort makes us holier and loving. It makes us more His child.