

Pastor's Pen: A Lost Sheep Come Home

This is a continuation of the last 2 pastor's pens.

When we left off, I had started to return to the faith.

The Steep and Winding Trail

I remember the first time the thought crossed my mind that maybe I was actually called to priesthood all along. For a split second, I felt sucker-punched. No. I came back in a way I never had before. I was willing to engage in an eternal relationship with God. I would be a proper spokesman for Him, but on my terms. I was okay with there being a fire as long as I could direct its path. I would soon find out that fires purge and it would be painful.

I was drawing closer to the God that had so evaded me in my younger years. I suppose a better way of putting it, wasn't so much God evaded me, but I hid from Him. Either way, the closer I got, the more I became aware of what needed to change. Changing was not going to come easy.

When I finally consented in my head to at least looking at seminary again, I found it was going to be a steep uphill battle. I, who had wanted things on my own terms, was going to be put in a crucible. I hated it then. I see the absolute necessity for it now. All that I had accrued while working in the private sector eventually dissipated. The vocational director of the diocese remembered me from years past and hated me. He had no interest in my being a seminarian and actively fought it even after I was accepted in the seminary.

My old girlfriend was not one to give up either. Having that safety net under me made letting go all the easier when things became hard. One of the hardest purgings in my life was letting go of that safety net. God wanted my full attention. This time I couldn't run away from the current reality. This time I was going to have to stand my ground.

Holding On for Dear Life

During this part of my return, I started to feel a bit duped. The words of the prophet Jeremiah rang in my head, "You duped me Lord, and I allowed myself to be duped." Coming back to the faith, I believed, would be greeted with parades and open doors. Coming back to the seminary, this time with pure intent, I thought, would also garner endless praise.

The Church I had left had not purged itself of its angry god or fluffy god elements. I would still have to contend with them. The dysfunctions I had witnessed in the people and clergy of the Church had not dissipated either. I was reminded by my mentors and spiritual directors that I had no power to change these people. I did have the power to change me. I had to learn how to deal with all those I ran away from. This was not easy.

Allow me to make a long lesson short: I learned that every member of the Church here on earth is a human being. Like me, they had shortcomings, weaknesses, addictions, and sinfulness. They also had goodness, gifts, and the likeness of God imprinted on them. Somehow, in the midst of this group, I had to find my place...the place God wanted me to be.

From that time on, I realized I could curse the darkness or light a candle. If I was put off by the fluffy or angry gods, perhaps I should point to the real God. No institution has been reformed or renovated from the outside. Being part of the positive change can be difficult.

When the sexual scandals of 2002 broke (no surprise to me given what I saw in the 80's), I was scandalized as well. I knew abusers and the abused. I had to hold on for dear life in those dark days, reminding myself that the Gospel of Christ and His Church were bigger than those whose criminal and immoral behavior besmirched it. It was that Gospel that needed to be highlighted all the more. Nothing would be added to remedy the situation and darkness if I once again bolted. I was not going to abandon the flock to wolves. I was not going to abandon my relationship with God nor be cheated out of the sacraments once again.

Epilogue

Decades have passed since those days of my time in the desert. It is a lifetime ago. My relationship with God and His Church grows. However, I have not forgotten what those days in the wilderness felt like. I have not forgotten how I got there, what I did when I was there, and how I got out of there.

I know that not all stories, not even the majority of stories, end as mine did. I know there are still many young people, both men and women, who wander. They may not call it that. They might angrily deny they are; I would have. But we should never lose hope.

We are told that the Good Shepherd looks for his lost sheep. I was one of those lost sheep. He found me. That's why I dedicate the rest of my days looking for the lost sheep...even if they don't think they're lost.

God used what he could to get my attention. A few well-placed songs, my searching and restlessness, even my pain, to get mine back where it needed to be.

I end with this. I imagine that many wander for the same reason I did. They were presented a god, angry, fluffy, or otherwise, that bore little resemblance to God and balked at it. We have to do a much better job in our catechesis in presenting the fullness and truth of God. We want something we can believe in. We crave it. St. Augustine, another famous wanderer, put it best, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."