

## Turning

One of the very cool things about attending Maryknoll Seminary in the 1970's was the chance to meet some cutting edge priests and theologians from around the world.

One day at lunch, I found myself eating a tuna sandwich with a priest from Peru, Gustavo Gutierrez, the father of what's known as "liberation theology."

While small in stature, he had earth-shaking ideas.

His understanding of our faith helped turn the ship of the institutional church from one enamored with social acceptance and gold and power to one that focuses on the poor, the outcast, the marginalized.

And yet, Fr Gutierrez would be the first to say that he's actually not the father of anything.

He simply took seriously what the mother of us all, Mary, has to say in her profound ecstasy as she becomes the one chosen to bear the Son of God into this world.

She is taken up, almost in rapture, by the true nature of God.

This God who "scatters the proud in their conceit.

Who casts down the mighty from their thrones.

Who lifts up the lowly."

This God who "fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty."

This God who "remembers his promise of mercy."

This tension within the church, of wanting to fit in with the larger society, seeking the same power, prestige and privilege as the elites of this world; and the Church's call to be true to itself: to be the source of liberation from every enslavement, to be the voice of the voiceless, the witness of truth against those who profit from lies, is a tension that has been and likely will be, always with us..

This last Sunday in Advent is that clarion call to each of us to renew our sense of who and what we are, and who and what we are called to become.

We are not called to simply be fine upstanding citizens.

Nor are we called to be the Rotary Club at prayer.

We are called to recognize that we are creatures made in the image and likeness of God.

We are called to be, on this earth, co-creators with God!

With all of the care for each other, and for our environment, that those words imply.

The struggle to turn the ship of the institutional church away from its love affair with the way things are; aiming instead toward the distant star that beckons us to something new, continues to this day.

Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, has been a force in this effort.

For too many years, the Episcopal Church was known as the Republican Party at prayer.

Bishop Curry is one of many intent on returning us to our Gospel roots, as he observes that:

“being a Christian is not essentially about joining a church or being a nice person, but about following in the footsteps of Jesus.

Taking his teachings seriously.

Letting his Spirit take the lead in our lives.

For in so doing we help to change the world, from our nightmare, into God’s dream.”

Pope Francis is doing his best to change centuries of cobwebs and palace intrigue in Rome.

He too dreams the dream of a church enveloped in the radical, wonderful, deliciously upside down paradox of the Gospel of Christ.

He recognizes that while the: “great goals of our dreams and plans may only be achieved in part, ... those who love ... may be sure that none of our acts of love will be lost, nor any of our acts of sincere concern for others.

No single act of love for God will be lost.

No generous effort is meaningless.

No painful endurance is wasted.

All of these encircle our world like a life-force.” Fratelli tutti, 195.

As we come to the close of this Advent season, it’s not only the institutional church that struggles with the Siren call of fealty to the rich and powerful on the one hand and the Gospel invitation to sit with the least, the lost and the left behind, on the other hand.

We as individuals and local communities struggle with these things too.

Tribalism and nationalism and all kinds of "isms" keep us apart, fearful of one another.

Yet, "we can only love one another if we can see one another.

If we can truly listen to one another.

White suburbanites fear Black people from the city because they never encounter them.

Consumers who order online see the product that appears on their doorstep, but never the robotized humans at the Amazon warehouse.

Republicans and Democrats disagree because they get their 'alternate facts' from different ... sources." W. T. Cavanaugh, *Commonweal*, 12/20, 24.

Perhaps the blessing of this time of pandemic is that we are all of us forced to simply stop living our normal lives.

Whether it's Christmas parties or singing in church.

Whether it's traveling for vacation or simply seeing the grandkids.

All of our normal activities are suspended.

Leaving us with time for quiet reflection.

Soul searching.

Even wonder.

And perhaps what we come to see during these days of quiet and isolation is that turning toward the poor, the outcast, the vulnerable, is not only something we do on the outside.

It's an inside job too.

We ourselves need to turn toward that which is within ourselves, poor and outcast and vulnerable.

To turn away from our love affair with the bright lights, the ego stroking delights of power, passion and privilege.

Facing ourselves, not for the purpose of self-loathing, but for the purpose of healing.

It's been said that we shouldn't let go of a sin until it has taught us everything it can.

Meaning, I think, that the challenges in our lives, our failures, our succumbing to whatever the temptation may be, are not simply things to regret, but things that may, if we are willing, become our very best teachers.

As I face my impatience, fears, anxieties, what is slowly revealed are the causes of these, and of all of my defects of character.

If I face them, study them, sit with them, two things seem to occur.

First, the seemingly magical powers they had over my behavior begins to fade.

Second, I begin to see in them sources of strength and healing that can be used in my relationships with others — because if I can really listen to and accept my own defects, there comes a calmness, a peace, when facing similar defects in my neighbor.

It's the roadway into our very own "virgin point" — the last, irreducible, secret center of the heart.

The latent personality.

The deep sub-conscience.

The secret cell.

Walled up and hidden to every creature.

Which remains unformed — until visited by God.

To discover this 'virgin point' is to return to our origin.

It is the place where God alone has access.

The place where human and Divine meet.

It embodies the sacredness hidden in the depth of every human soul." K. Ware, *How Do We Enter The Heart?*, 3, modified.

"It is through openness and cooperation with God's spirit that allows this journey to this place." Shea, *Eating With The Bridegroom*, 36, modified.

And when we take it, we discover a God-granted ability to do things we once thought were impossible! Id.

Fr Gutierrez reached back some 2000 years to create his theology of liberation out of the song of an unwed teenage girl, a girl who was granted insight into the true nature of God.

As we come to the end of this, our Advent season, perhaps we too can re-dedicate ourselves to that same vision, to that same song.

Perhaps we can honor the poor among us, and the poverty within us.

Perhaps we can come to see in the least, the lost and the left behind, the very face of our Savior, who comes not to judge or condemn, but to heal, to raise up, to welcome every last one of us, home.

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