September Reflections, 2019

Many Christians today are struggling to find time for prayer in their busy, demanding lives. In this regard, I find enlightenment and inspiration in the good example of my longtime friend, Mary, who has effectively managed her busy and extremely challenging life by maintaining a deep, prayerful spirituality. Mary was born into a devout German Catholic family in Ottawa, Ohio, the youngest of five children. When she was three, her father was killed in a tragic automobile accident, leaving her with just family stories of a good man she never got to know. Her mother did all she could to support Mary and her siblings, doing odd jobs such as cleaning houses and taking in laundry. A good student, Mary attended a local Catholic school for twelve years. After graduating from high school, she could not afford to go to college, so she took a job in a nearby town, making good money. Shortly after, she fell in love with a fine man, divorced after a very brief marriage, who loved her deeply. However, she made a very difficult decision to break off the relationship, because she saw no way at the time to marry him in the Church and knew she could not be happy alienated from her Catholic faith.

Partly to get distance from this relationship and partly to satisfy her innate adventuresome spirit, she moved to California where she found a great job with a large insurance company that brought her a good deal of personal satisfaction. After a little over a year, she returned to Ohio for her brother’s graduation from college and, for various reasons, never returned to California. Back home, she joined the Air Force, hoping that it would enable her to travel and eventually provide the opportunity for a college education under the GI Bill. She did her basic training in San Antonio and was assigned to an airbase in Denver, where she fell in love with Kim, a combat veteran, who was raised Mormon but converted to Catholicism. About a year later they were married in the Catholic church in Ottawa. Ten months to the day after their wedding, Mary gave birth to twin boys and just over a year later brought another set of twin boys into the world, leaving her with four young children before her second wedding anniversary. She found strength for this demanding responsibility by maintaining her practice of participating in Sunday liturgy and her regular daily prayer routine.

At some point, Mary and her family moved to Bowling Green, Ohio, where Kim, with her full support and encouragement, attended classes at the local university, completed a degree and got a job teaching at a nearby high school, which he loved. During those years, they had three more children and formed an effective loving partnership in raising them in the Catholic faith and managing household affairs. They were very involved in their parish, both teaching CCD classes and Kim serving as a lector as well as sending their kids to the parish grade school.

It was about thirteen years into their happy marriage that Kim was killed in a tragic car accident. Strengthened by her Catholic faith, Mary buried her beloved husband and took on the challenge of raising seven young children by herself. Coping with her husband’s death was immensely challenging. She endured sleepless nights, uncontrollable emotions and frightening nightmares. At times she struggled just to make it through the day and remain sane. Attending Mass brought a measure of comfort, but also unleashed a flood of tears, usually after receiving communion. Through it all, she found comfort in the words Paul wrote to the Romans: “How incomprehensible are his judgments, and how unsearchable his ways, for who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor (11:32).”

With little time to grieve properly, she made a crucial decision to start taking classes at the university, partly to maintain her sanity and partly to prepare for a teaching career to support herself and her children. Utilizing her considerable organizational skills, she managed to care for her kids (the older ones became quite self-sufficient and helped with the younger ones), and in about five years she earned a degree and got a job teaching fourth grade in a local public school.

Soon after Kim’s death, Mary decided that she had to not only provide for herself financially, but also try to enrich her spiritual life. To this end, she participated in a course I was teaching on the German Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner. My initial encounter with Mary was very positive as I knew something of her challenging situation and recognized how serious was her pursuit of a spirituality that would enable her to function on a daily basis. She was very taken with Rahner’s emphasis on the incomprehensibility of God, who is beyond all our thoughts and images, and believed that accepting this limitation actually brings us closer to God. Rahner’s theology of death was also helpful to her, especially his notion that our deceased loved ones not only live with God but also continue to be with us and for us, which she applied to her husband Kim. She resonated with Rahner’s insight that calm acceptance is the key to spiritual growth and maturity, acceptance of blessings and disappointments, achievements and failures, joys and sorrows.

After Mary taught grade school for a number of years, she returned to do graduate studies at Bowling Green State University, earning a master’s degree in education with a specialty in reading, which enabled her to get a job in a public school helping youngsters develop their reading skills.

After twelve years of living as a widow, Mary found another loving partner, Marv, a practicing Presbyterian, a corporate executive and a former catcher in the Yankee farm system, who loved her, supported her, went to Mass with her, prayed at night with her, befriended her children, and enjoyed vacations and fun times with her. About thirty-five years into her happy second marriage, Mary had to deal with another devastating tragedy. Her second oldest son, one of the twins, was diagnosed with lung cancer and died shortly after. This was the most heart-wrenching cross she ever had to bear and only her Catholic faith enabled her to survive and carry on. Just months later, her husband Marv died a peaceful death. She not only grieved his passing but also, at the same time, grieved more thoroughly than ever before, the loss of her first husband, Kim. Once again it was her faith that enabled her to manage this mysterious combination of two deeply emotional marital losses.

It was about six years into her first marriage that Mary started keeping a journal, which gives glimpses of the spirituality that sustained her in good times and bad. Through her whole life, participating in the Eucharist has been the solid constant in her spirituality. Even in the worst of times, she never missed Sunday Mass. Somehow, she got seven kids to Mass every Sunday, even the Sunday after Kim died. During the most demanding times, the Sunday Eucharist provided nourishment for her soul, giving her motivation and energy for the week ahead. Receiving communion is the high point of the liturgy for her. Her devotion to Christ present in the Eucharist now issues in her weekly practice of spending an hour before the Blessed Sacrament in silent prayer of praise, gratitude and petition.

During her adulthood, Mary has engaged in what we can call situational prayer, short prayers addressed to God in the midst of busy days. When things went well with her kids, she said “Thank you Lord.” When faced with dark moments of tragedy, anxiety and worry, she asked “Lord, please give me strength.” When struggling to deal with her teenage boys, she sought guidance “Holy Spirit give me the right words.” When she was teaching, she prayed “Lord fill me with so much love for you that it will spill over to everyone I see today.”

Throughout her life, her prayer has focused on doing God’s will. In her journal she wrote: “Please Lord help me to pray. Help me to learn to know you better and to know your will, or to do your will even though I don’t understand it. Please Lord, help me.” We see here, her sense of the incomprehensibility of God which she found in Rahner’s theology. Mary was always interested in improving her prayer life. In her journal, she recalls reading Fr. Edward Farrell’s book, *Prayer is a Hunger,* which emphasized communing with God daily and personally writing about it, which she did in her journal. In an early entry, she responded to a question raised in the Rahner class about our primary positive intuition in life: ”Somehow I believe in a Real Power governing (not withstanding my own free will) my life. It is more than a belief, it is a sure knowledge arrived at from having seen it manifested so many times in my life.”

Mary’s journal reveals how deeply she thought about her Catholic faith. She saw the Sacrament of Penance not so much as confessing a list of sins but as assessing who we are and how God sees us “stripped of various masks.” At times, she thought how great it would be to join a contemplative order and “just read and pray and write,” but then she realized that human relationships, messy as they are, bring forth the best in us.

She developed a thirst for Scripture, anxious to read “every bit of the epistles and every word Jesus said in the gospels.” Reading the Acts of the Apostles reminded her that she is part of a long tradition going back to the early Church. For her, Christ was fully human like us in all things but sin, so that we can identify with him and try to imitate his good example. In one of her later entries, she wrote “I feel good about being a Catholic,” recalling how her faith strengthened her in difficult times. In retrospect, she thinks the theology of Karl Rahner gave her a solid base for continuing her lifelong quest to be a faithful disciple of Christ.

Later in her life, Mary recalled a number of what she called “Eureka moments,” times when God was especially present to her. Holding one of her newborn sons for the first time, she felt an awesome sense of “having a share in creation.” One winter day, she had a “breath-taking spiritual experience,” when “the trees were covered with hoarfrost and the bright sunshine turned them into jeweled giants.” Decades after the event, she still recalled a vivid memory of the first time she saw the Pacific Ocean, “magnificent in all its azure splendor,” with foamy whitecaps lapping the shore. While in Hawaii, she silently contemplated “the vast wonder” of Waimea Canyon, hoping none of her companions would break the silence. Fulfilling a life-long dream, Mary made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land “to walk the very paths that Our Lord had trod,” which proved to be a “rewarding experience,” but not quite up to what she had anticipated, and not striking enough to make it the Eureka list. Back home, however, during her weekly hour of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, she had a true Eureka moment, realizing that she did not have to travel across the ocean to find the Savior because he is right here, as he always was in all the challenges and joys of her life.

My friend Mary serves as an especially poignant example of the power of Catholic spirituality to meet the challenges of everyday life in our busy modern world. She developed what can be called a “structured-situational” spirituality that has enabled her to cope with tragedy and the challenges of her demanding life. Regular attendance at Sunday Mass has been her touchstone, her structured routine, that has nourished her soul and solidified her faith perspective on life. Her intuitive habit of saying short prayers throughout the day has provided meaning and energy for meeting the demands of everyday life. Her prayer life enabled her to survive tragedy, maintain hope and meet the individual needs of her family. Mary’s story encourages us to find our own form of a spirituality that includes a repeatable spiritual exercise (liturgy, scripture reading, meditation, examination of conscience) and encourages greater attention to God’s activity in our daily lives, leading to brief prayers of praise, gratitude and petition.