**March Reflections, 2020 Vol 42 No 7**

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In his 2018 Apostolic Exhortation, Ga*udete et Exultate* (*On the Call to Holiness in Today’s* *World*), Pope Francis insists that we find and follow our own unique path to holiness and a deeper more robust spirituality: “The important thing is that each believer discern his or her own path, that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts (*cf* 1 Cor 12:7), rather than hopelessly trying to imitate something not meant for them. We are called to be witnesses, but there many actual ways of bearing witness” (n 11).

In this regard, it is noteworthy that the influential Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, who wrote many beautiful prayers of his own, confessed his own misguided effort to imitate the prayer content of Saint Francis of Assisi. Aware that his own piety did not spontaneously appreciate the grandeur and beauty of nature, Rahner tried to make his own the marvelous *Canticle of Creation* by Francis, praising our “Brother Son” and “Sister Moon.” Unable to generate any authentic appreciation of the wonders of nature, however, Rahner concluded that we all do better following our own distinctive religious sentiments in developing our prayer life.

The hopeless, ineffective imitation identified by Francis can take many forms. Lay persons who compare themselves unfavorably to celibate priests and nuns can conclude they are not called to holiness. A couple who tried to pray together, on the advice of their pastor, found it caused more friction than good. Individuals who wanted to maintain their practice of frequent confession found that they made more spiritual progress by going less frequently but with greater meaning. Diocesan priests who tried to follow a monastic regimen of prayer could not do so because of the demands of parish ministry. A busy mother of three youngsters longed for the solitude enjoyed by her unmarried sister, but was totally consumed by the demands of motherhood. There are probably cases where imitation is spiritually fruitful, but the pope’s warning is well taken for most of us.

To illustrate the pope’s point, I want to share the story of a man I will call “Bill,” who found a path to inner peace and is willing to share a disguised version of his spiritual journey. Bill was born into an affluent nominally Catholic family, the first of two sons. At his mother’s initiative, he was baptized and made his First Communion, but after that seldom went to Mass and received very little formal religious education. His father was the dominant influence in the family, a college football player and a very successful corporate executive, a hard-driving no-nonsense man who put his job above his family. Growing up Bill idolized his father and was determined to win his approval. Working hard he got excellent grades in school and played high school football which pleased his father.

With some family help, he got accepted into the same elite business school where his father went. Again, he studied diligently and got good grades but was not big enough to play football at the collegiate level. The thought of going to church on campus never entered his mind, although he did go to midnight Mass on Christmas when home with his parents and younger brother. Periodically, he dated some women friends, but nothing serious developed. Earning a degree in business administration was a happy accomplishment for Bill, especially since his father joined his mother in congratulating him warmly. At his father’s urging, Bill went on to get a master’s degree in finance, which helped him get a good job with a well-known brokerage firm. Showing some of the same drive as his father, Bill worked his way up the corporate ladder, and in twelve years became a junior vice-president. Here he was in his late-thirties with his dream job, a sizeable income and the approval of his father, but he realized he was not happy. Paradoxically, his career success left him unsettled, conflicted and dissatisfied.

At this troubled point in his life, Bill met Emily, a devout Catholic about his age, unmarried, happily employed as a registered nurse in a local hospital. It was not love at first sight, but he found himself fascinated by her simple lifestyle and serene outlook so different from his own driven, competitive approach. From the beginning, he felt she knew something about life that he didn’t and was determined to learn more about it. They dated, talked seriously and started going to Mass together. It became clear to him that Emily was different from his other female friends: she liked going to church; she talked openly about God and her faith; she prayed a lot; she got enjoyment out of simple things; she did not need to win an argument; she was content with her job and she radiated an inner peace and joy. When he told Emily he was in love with her, he was amazed and thrilled that she shared his feelings. He also knew that he wanted her not just to be his lover but his mentor, who would help him gain the serenity she had. To do this, he was going to have to quit his job, to get out of the competitive rat race that had always dominated his life. Telling his father was the most difficult part of the process. It did not go well. His father thought he was crazy to leave a position which he worked so hard to achieve and had such potential for further advancement.

In getting married, Bill committed himself to being a good partner to Emily, which meant for him becoming a better Catholic with an authentic spirituality. His pastor, who gave good homilies, was especially helpful in recommending spiritual books for him to read. His initial efforts centered on understanding the Mass better and participating more actively. The idea of seeing the Eucharist as a gift exchange appealed to him so that at Mass he got in the habit of offering his efforts to grow spiritually to God through Christ and receiving communion as a nourishing gift from God. An article on prayer helped him realize he had to find, with God’s help, his own best way of praying and not try to imitate what Emily did. Over time, he found that it worked best if he spent about fifteen minutes at the beginning of his day and at the end talking to God in his own words, which included gratitude for a new opportunity in life and petitions to make the most of it.

Thanks to a suggestion from his pastor, Bill became a big fan of the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. He saw something of himself in Merton’s story of his conversion to Catholicism from a very secular way of life, recounted in *Seven Storey Mountain*. Merton’s on-going quest for inner peace reminded him of his own search for the kind of serenity that first attracted him to Emily. Merton’s notion that to try to pray is already an authentic act of prayer gave him hope that his struggling efforts were valuable in themselves. The Trappist monk’s poetic praise of leisure, silence and doing nothing suggested he had to learn to balance work and leisure in his own life. Merton’s book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* made Bill reflect on how little he had done to help others when he had a lot of money and how he had to find new ways to contribute to charity and work for justice. The monk’s striking prayer that starts “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me…nor do I really know myself” somehow comforted Bill and helped him accept his limited efforts to become a more spiritual person. Merton also taught him that directly seeking serenity would prove to be elusive and that he would find genuine peace only as a biproduct of trying to do God’s will. Furthermore, that he should not compare his spiritual journey with anyone else, including his wife.

Bill has continued his efforts to grow spiritually by actively participating in the life of his parish: functioning as a lector at Mass, which moves him to pay better attention to the Liturgy of the Word; serving on the parish finance council, which taps the skills developed in his previous life; contributing five percent of his modest income as the business manager of a local non-profit to the church, which is part of his effort to become a more generous person; and giving presentations with Emily in the marriage preparation program, which stimulates honest private conversation with her on the state of their own marriage. He is also looking for ways to participate in the parish justice and peace programs so that he is does not end up as a “guilty bystander.”

Bill’s story reminds us that it might not be easy to find our own unique path to holiness and that we should be open to making adjustments on our journey. Excessive efforts to please and impress others can lead us down destructive paths. Comparing our spiritual growth to others is dangerous since it is likely to lead to either pride or envy. It is only by staying open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit that we can keep a steady course on our unique path to greater spiritual maturity. 1554 words