

Recalling His Mercies

By Fr Charlie Goraieb

Forward

What follows is the story of my encounter with Jesus Christ and some of the ways in which that event has changed my life. I have two reasons for doing this. The first is to give glory and thanks to God for choosing me as a recipient of his love and forgiveness. It would also please me greatly if others reading this story should be inspired to allow God to do the same for them.

In telling the story I have selected those people and events that were most significant for me in this journey. There are many that I've omitted in order to move the narrative along. There were also some details that I have omitted because of good taste or because they were too painful to recount. But what follows is my story represented as accurately as my memory allows.

*Fr Charlie Goraieb
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Out of the Storm

*Unless the Lord build the house,
In vain do its builders labor. Psalm
127:1*

My story begins with a familiar conflict of youth—to find meaning for my life. I came of age in the late 1960's, when protesting the Vietnam War and participating in the cultural revolution were the rites of passage for my

generation. Growing up in Southern California, where every new and bizarre idea found a ready audience, added yet another dimension. I now suspect that every generation faces its own unique challenges, but the 60's and 70's set something of a gold standard for chaos.

The war radicalized many of us. The injustice and futility of the war was painfully clear. Besides, no one wanted to get drafted only to come back maimed or addicted to drugs-- that's if you made it back at all. If avoiding all that meant I had to storm the college administration building, attend the strange Marxist-Maoist cell meetings or cheer for the slightly insane Abbie Hoffman as he ranted on the campus mall that was fine.

By the time I was a senior, I sadly accepted that I was not cut out to be a soldier in the socialist revolution. I was certainly angry at our government and I understood the need for a wholesale change of our culture, but the constant strife and the talk of violence soon got old. And while I would never admit this openly, I was not convinced that Karl Marx had the answers. To keep my growing anxiety manageable, I had become increasingly dependent on marijuana, which only made things worse.

As graduation approached, I had to decide what my next step would be. I didn't want to throw away my education, but nor did I want to be a party to shouldering a corrupt system that was probably going to get demolished in the revolution. I could just drop out and move to San Francisco, but that didn't

seem right either. The movie *The Graduate* (Dustin Hoffman, 1967) pretty much summed up the dilemma that many of us faced.

One ray of hope came from reading Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, which painted the portrait of a serene, idyllic life of peaceful solitude. That seemed to hold the most promise. With my diploma carefully tucked away (no need to flaunt bourgeoisie values) I left LA for the mellow, college town of Santa Cruz, located on the coast about 100 miles South of San Francisco, where I hoped to find my *Walden*.

There are some things that can only be learned by life experiences. For instance, beautiful surroundings don't necessarily translate to inner peace. I did manage to find my way into a commune populated by other cultural runaways and lived among them in a tee-pee. From afar it seemed as if I had found the Rosetta stone—living amidst the majestic redwood trees and abiding by the dictates of *The Whole Earth Catalogue*, the hippie's bible. I had become a vegetarian, learned to sing to the moon inebriated on cheap wine, and fashioned myself to be an *avant garde*, cultural front-runner. I had sunk deeper into the drug culture, got my heart broken, and returned the favor to a few others. And I was still miserable.

My parents were both reasonably good Catholics, and provided us with a Catholic education. If I learned one thing from the nuns, it was to believe that there was order to universe. I repeatedly questioned myself as to why was I working so furiously to dismantle that order. At some point I resolved to find a new formula for living my life. I had a lot questions: just what were the principles of a harmonious life? Did it somehow include God? Was he even interested in the course of my life? The only way to answer these questions was to strike out on the journey.

The Journey

*As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
Psalm 42:1*

The idea of leaving one's home to pursue the prize—however one defined it—has always captured the imagination of people young and old. It is the story line for many literary classics such as *The Odyssey*, *Don Quixote*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Lord of the Rings* and many others. It is also the impetus for religious pilgrimages, promoted by all of the major religions. Believers set out for designated holy sites, hoping to come into closer proximity with the great Mystery.

In the 1960's and 70's, we dispensed with spiritual language and just called it "hitting the road". Everyone had their own reasons for truckin', but when you boiled it down, we all were searching for something deeper. Now inspired by another literary figure, Siddhartha (Herman Hesse) it was time to set my search in motion. When I left Santa Cruz in the summer of 1971 with all of my worldly possessions in a backpack, it was to find the meaning of my life.

My travels led me to more communes of getting-back-to-nature folks, musician-families, dreamy-high hedonists and a whole range of the spiritually motivated. Some of these groups grew their own food and limited themselves to bartering while others conceded to deal in the government's currency. Some were tightly organized around a clear leader while others were deliberately *laissez faire*; and in a couple of groups, all of the members lived exposed. Among the Spiritual groups, some were guided by Zen or the I-Ching or the Bible along with doses of Yoga or Transcendental Meditation. All were very stimulating

and interesting, but my search was not over.

Early on in my travels I had tossed in with a group of like-minded seekers. One of the group's members had access to a house on Vashon Island, an island in the Puget Sound near Seattle, which would become our winter headquarters. Several times a week we would take the ferry to Seattle, which often included a visit to the Love Family on Queen Anne's Hill. The Love Family, while in many ways typical of the numerous communes and associations of the time, was pretty unique. It was a tightly structured, biblically-based organization that also claimed to be *the* authentic expression of Christianity. Members were required to wear long flowing robes with rope cinctures for belts. Attached to those cinctures were bamboo tubes that contained their baptismal certificates. The newer members received Hebrew names like Hezekiah, Jonah, and Sarah. After a period of observation and testing, one received the name of the virtue that best described that person such as Patience, Meekness, and Prudence.

The men and women lived in separate quarters and were expected to be chaste and drug free, which was actually a help for those who had lost control of their lives. The only exception to this rule was for the leader of the group, Love Israel (hence the name, the Love Family). Because he declared himself to be sufficiently spiritually enlightened, he and his companion, Chastity, were able to enjoy the benefits of marital union. As if this cozy arrangement wasn't enough to get my antenna up, they required the men to sit to urinate (I never got a good explanation for this rule) and they used LSD as their "sacrament" of worship. Perhaps most troubling to me was "Love's" authoritarian style of leadership; his word was law. None of the members complained about it, but it still bothered me.

Despite these contradictions, I found something about Love very attractive. He was a charismatic figure and a persuasive talker who seemed completely convinced about Jesus and the Bible. During one of my conversations with Love, which usually ended up being debates on the merits of Christianity, he looked intently at me and challenged me to read the New Testament. He said that if I were to do so, he guaranteed that I would find the peace I was looking for. Something about his challenge convinced me that I needed to give it a try. Years later I discovered that Love, *aka* Paul Erdman, had been a used car salesman before starting his cult, which may have accounted for his glib tongue. But no matter—God can use anyone he wants!

In the New Testament letter to the Hebrews, it says that the word of God *cuts sharper than a two edged sword*. I was about to discover how true those words are. Provided with a pocket-sized, King James version of the New Testament, I began reading the Gospel of Matthew. It didn't take long to get drawn into the narrative. For some time now I had been reading the books of the acclaimed gurus and had listened attentively to numerous sages and would-be prophets. I even made it to the US visit of the new "messiah" (he was a 14-year old Indian lad who was chauffeured about in a limo and had an insatiable appetite for American ice cream). Except for the frauds and the madmen, most of them had at least something engaging to say, which accounted for their followings but before long their words would ring hollow. This time, with the Gospel of Matthew, something different was about to happen.

There were three related but distinct events that built on each other. First was my fascination with the astounding wisdom and the beauty of all that Jesus said. The Sermon on the Mount simply

stunned me. I recalled having heard it before in church but now, for the first time, I was reading this astounding discourse in context. His wisdom was amazing and irresistibly inspiring. But it wasn't just the ideas or the account of Jesus' miracles that captured me, it was Jesus *himself*. What emerged from the Gospel was an extraordinarily attractive figure whose manner and qualities were unlike anyone I had ever encountered.

One of the benefits of living as a pauper was that I had to depend on good luck and the generosity of others. Now, almost without realizing it, I started asking Jesus for help whenever I needed it. It wasn't so much a conscious decision on my part, but it just seemed to flow. More than once he made it clear that he was involved in taking care of me. An example was the evening that I was hitch hiking across town to catch the last ferry back to the island. After having little success I started to get desperate, thinking about being stranded in Seattle all night. I pulled out my New Testament and opened to Matthew chapter 6 where I read: *So do not worry, saying, 'what shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' ...your heavenly Father knows that you need them* (6:31-32). I had not yet been convinced that God had a fatherly concern for me so how could I know if these words were true? I decided to make a deal with God. "If you really have me covered, then help me catch a ride." Obviously, my story requires that I got a ride down to the pier, which I did. But what struck me even more was when the driver looked over at me, smiled and asked if I knew how much Jesus loved me. Hmmm. I may not have been ready to fully concede, but in any case, *thank you, Jesus*.

To describe the third consequence of reading the Bible, I must first quote the Gospel of St. John: *And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who*

has the Son has life... (5:11-12). If I had come across those words before then, they wouldn't have made sense. At best I would have seen them as lofty prose. But that would soon change.

In that culture, if you traveled and adventured with a group of people for a couple of months or more, they were your "family". My family and I had been together now for the winter months and we were all developing a case of cabin fever. Now with spring breaking, everyone was anxious to get on the road. Word reached us of a big gathering planned for any and all counter-culturalists in the Rocky Mountains. That was as good a destination as any, so we wasted no time packing up and getting on the road. The plan was to go to Eugene, Oregon, a popular meeting place for road warriors, and connect with others to caravan our way to Colorado. Like many small college towns throughout the country, Eugene was trendy and open. It was a West Coast cross-road for seekers and drop-outs. All one had to do was walk up and down Willamette Ave and you would soon run into old friends or quickly make new ones.

We had been in Eugene only a few days when I had my epiphany. Without warning or preparation, Jesus, the Son of God, *spoke* to me. I don't say this lightly or figuratively. I actually heard the voice of God addressed to me. There were others in the room when it happened, but no one else heard him. It would have been easy to dismiss it a chemically-induced illusion (and I was a veteran of a few of those), except that about a month before I had decided to purify my body and completely abstain from all drugs and alcohol. The voice was not audible, but words were spoken to me by another. The actual words were quite simple: *I love you and am your Lord*. No great revelation here, but that is not the point. Jesus, the Son of

God, had spoken these words to *me*, Charlie Goraieb, a self-willed, sinful and rebellious cast-about. For reasons that I may never understand, he chose me as one to whom he would reveal his Divine Presence.

The mystics would describe my experience as an inner locution. St. Theresa, the great mystical doctor of the Church, describes my experience to a tee: *Though perfectly formed, the words are not heard with the bodily ear. Yet they are understood much more clearly than if they were so heard, and, however determined one's resistance, it is impossible to fail to hear them.*"

The effect of my encounter with the Lord was to lift the cloud of doubt, anger, confusion and fear that had settled over me the last few years. Instead, I was now filled with joy and purpose. Like the song says, *I saw the light*. Almost immediately, my companions began to notice a difference. They said that my voice had a different tone and that I looked peaceful, which can give you an idea of my previous state. They too knew that no drugs were involved. They wanted to know what had happened and if they could somehow share in it? I am sure that my response sounded silly, but all I could say was what I had heard: Jesus is the Lord, *my* Lord, and that he loved me.

Because we tended to categorize people based on the fad that they were currently connected to, my friends settled the issue by calling me a "Jesus freak." I didn't like that label because it seemed to say too little. It also seemed dismissive. I wanted very much for them to somehow be a part of it. I was sad that I could not share my new-found riches and joy with the people that had journeyed with me in hopes of finding just this. But the very nature of those relationships was fleeting and hung together by the thinnest of threads and once that thread was broken, there was

little to do but move on. As we parted, I prayed that they too would meet the Lord.

The Old Man or the New?

Where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more.
Romans 5:20

Fast forward to 1975, three years after the epiphany. After traveling back and forth across the country I had settled down in the small town of Independence, Oregon. Named after the hardy immigrant group that walked to Oregon from Independence, Missouri, it was largely supported by the surrounding hop farms and the plywood mill. My goal was to build a lifestyle that combined the best of the hippie-countercultural world with Christianity as I understood it. By this time I had read the bible through more than once and was resolved to follow the Lord. I had gained some carpenter's skills and was holding my own as a contributing adult. That is not to say, however, that I had joined the establishment. My hair and my beard were still long, and I was not above the occasional use of marijuana.

The biggest contradiction of my life was the relationship I had begun with a young woman that I had met during one of my return visits to Santa Cruz. She wanted very much to change her chaotic lifestyle, so my commitment to Christ was to her like a lighthouse to a ship lost at sea. She was attractive and free-spirited, someone who seemed like a good companion for my mission (whatever that might be). So without a lot of forethought or planning, we began traveling together. The whole arrangement was really quite farcical. Because my intention was to "save" this woman, I could justify taking her as my common-law wife. And because we were both committed to each other, the relationship seemed to pass biblical standards--more or less. Really, the

only thing missing was the proverbial “piece of paper”, and there seemed no need to fuss over that.

We had now been together for over two years and it was becoming increasingly difficult to quell my doubts about the legitimacy of our relationship. I was constantly plagued by the conviction that I needed to leave, but I could not act. To do so would be to admit that we had been living in sin for the past two years, a conclusion I had carefully side-stepped. The other alternative, equally disagreeable, was to declare that she really was my “wife”, which meant that I couldn’t leave her. I wanted to leave but did not know how to go about it, while she was equally determined to keep me there. I was living a daily conflict that made me miserable and our relationship increasingly stormy.

Perhaps the worst thing of all for me was the distance I was now experiencing from the Lord. The anger and resentment was like a wall growing between me and God. I still believed that God loved me, but I could no longer sense his presence in my life. It is what worried me the most. At first I had experienced almost constant consolations from the Lord, but that had ended. I continued to pray daily and read the Bible, which did alleviate the dryness somewhat, but I could sense the distance continuing to grow. The sweetness of the Lord had become True North, the guiding reality of my life; To lose that was to lose everything that mattered. Once again, I could only wait on him to untangle the mess I had created.

The lifeboat

Some enterprising locals had started a co-op, which is the hippie version of benign capitalism. One day when I was working my shift, in walks a Catholic priest. I had been baptized Catholic and graduated from a Catholic High School,

but as soon as I got to college, my ties to the Church quickly dissolved. Like a lot of ex-Catholics, I was angry at the Church. For some in this situation, it is because a priest or nun either offended them or failed to serve them properly. In other cases their intellectual or spiritual journey took another direction. Another cause—perhaps the biggest—is the way that sin and rebellion fills the heart with guilt, and the church is a painful reminder of that.

When I saw the priest walk in, I sat up thinking, “Hmm, this should be interesting.” Fr Pat Brady, who has since died, was a gentle, soft-spoken man. After a brief introduction, I quickly began to challenge him about the faults and errors of the Catholic Church. Even though I came on pretty strong, he calmly but firmly held his ground. When he realized that it was time for him to go, he invited me over to visit him and continue the conversation. I was looking forward to taking him up on his offer.

It is clear that he understood what most good priests know—the people who put up the biggest fight are usually fighting God, and the church is a just visible target for their conflict. At our second visit we resumed our vigorous debate, with me supplying most of the vigor. As I was leaving the church, when I could hear my own thoughts again, it dawned on me just how patient and humble Fr Brady had been with me. He wasn’t trying to defeat or even convince me; he just wanted me to know how much he loved the Lord and the Church. I wondered where his strength came from.

About two miles from Independence is Monmouth, a small college town. Fr Brady was the chaplain for the Newman center at the college, and at 4:00pm he celebrated weekday Mass for the Students. The first time I attended, I slipped in the back door and sat at the back of the chapel, hoping to go

unnoticed. No such luck. The students wanted to welcome me and make me feel at home, the last thing I wanted. "No thanks, I will just sit back here if you don't mind." It took a few days, but eventually I did move closer to the front. Of course none of this meant that I was returning to the Church.

After a few weeks of going to daily Mass I decided that I would attend the upcoming Easter Sunday Mass at the parish in Independence, also served by Fr. Pat. I went to the second-hand store and bought a dress jacket and pants--all for \$3--shined my boots and went to my first Sunday Mass in over eight years. The Church seemed so full of light and looked so beautiful. With my long hair and beard, I am sure I looked a sight among all of those hardworking Oregon Catholics, but somehow, I felt very much a part of them that morning.

I hesitated when it was time to receive Holy Communion. I had been taught enough catechism to know that I needed to first go to confession, but at that moment I felt compelled to receive the host. Perhaps I had become so good at rationalizing God's Word that this was an easy maneuver. But I also believe that the Holy Spirit wanted me to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord. No matter who was responsible for that decision, I went forward.

In the afternoon I joined some friends for Easter dinner and then, exhausted, went to bed early. When I awoke on Easter Monday, it was crystal clear to me that I needed to leave my conflicted and compromised life in Oregon. That meant leaving my carpentry business and my tools and the home my lady-friend and I were buying. Most difficult of all, however would be leaving the relationship. I was not in love with her, but leaving her was a *de facto* admission that all this time I had been deceiving myself (It is no wonder that

the spiritual fathers name pride as the father of all sin).

I am convinced that the resolve I needed to finally leave came from the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ the Lord that I had received the day before. I was filled with clarity and courage, both of which had eluded me for some time. This time there would be no more compromising or equivocating; I settled a few affairs and prepared myself to leave the next day. The good-bye was painful, but at last that chapter of my life was about to come to an end. I simply put my belongings in my backpack, picked up my guitar and headed for the Interstate.

When we willfully reject or defy God, one of the biggest obstacles to repentance is the fear that he will not take us back. Maybe it's because that is how *we* usually react when someone hurts us. The difference, of course is that God's love for us doesn't change when we sin--we're the ones who change. God remains God--all loving, all merciful and all forgiving. His only requirement is that we turn back to him, willing to repent of our sins. This is not easy to grasp in the middle of the struggle, but something in our hearts wants very much to believe it is true. Maybe that is why the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) is a perennial favorite Gospel passage. It is the story of amazing grace.

Standing on the side of Interstate 5 that day, I too wondered whether God would forgive my sins and if I could somehow recapture some of the blessed union I had experienced three years before. As the car pulled over for me, I cut off my thoughts and quickly jumped in the back seat. It surprised me to see the two women up front--the middle-aged driver and her mother. It was an odd scene--a classic hippie, who is down and out, picked up by two older, very straight women. After a few miles my curiosity finally got the better of me. As tactfully

as I could I asked what prompted them to stop for me. The older of the two women turned around and with a sweet smile answered, "You just looked like a good person." All I could do was look at her; it was as if an angel had spoken to me. Could this be true? If despite all I had done to offend God two total strangers could somehow see a ray of goodness in me, then perhaps all was not lost. *Was the Father really waiting with arms open for my return?* I smiled and settled back for a nice, long ride.

"The Holy Spirit Will Come Upon You"

At Ephesus Paul found some disciples And asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" (Acts 19:2)

The years that I was away from the Catholic Church, 1967-75, were also some of the most tumultuous times in recent Church history. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) had inaugurated many needed changes, such as a renewal of the Liturgy, active involvement by the laity, and a vision for the role of the Church in the modern world. A long list of unintended negative effects also followed such as the emptying of the seminaries and convents, general confusion about what constituted sin and virtue, and foolish experiments with the formation of children that practically guaranteed their abandonment of the faith.

When I returned to Los Angeles from Oregon, I encountered one of the really good fruits of the post-conciliar church—the Charismatic Renewal. Like Marriage Encounter, the Cursillo, *Opus Dei*, *Comunione et Liberazione* and other movements, it was a way for average Catholics to deepen their spirituality in the midst of their ordinary lives. Everyone now agrees that these movements, which gathered members so quickly and impacted them so

profoundly, were initiated by the Holy Spirit.

The origins of the Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Church can be traced back to the beginnings of Pentecostalism in 1906. That year a small fundamentalist church in Los Angeles received a joyful surprise when the Holy Spirit descended upon all who were gathered. They began speaking in tongues, witnessing signs and wonders, prophesying and walking with a new intimacy and confidence in the Lord. Most Protestant groups, both fundamentalist and mainline, rejected their claims as unbiblical, but that did not deter the group from sharing their experience with all who would listen.

Since then, almost all of the mainline denominations like Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Methodists have seen a Pentecostal-type movement form within their churches. It would not redefine the basic theology of the denomination, but it found a place for itself. This happened too in the Catholic Church in 1967. That year a group of very committed young Catholics decided to make a retreat at Duquesne University. Their purpose was to ask the Lord to grant them the experience of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, much like they had seen take place among their Protestant friends. Books like *The Cross and the Switchblade* by David Wilkerson and *They Speak With Other Tongues* by John Sherrill convinced them that this was not a fringe phenomenon, but something very much connected to the event of Pentecost as described in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. Since the Catholic Church is the historical continuation of the early church represented in the Bible, those young people were certain that the new Pentecostal movement rightfully belonged to Catholics as well.

Encouraged by all of this and confident in the reliability of the words of Luke: *your Father in Heaven will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask* (11:13), they went in faith, trusting that the Lord would not let them down. The results were spectacular. The Holy Spirit descended upon them, giving them the gift of tongues (the concept less prayer language described in many places in the New Testament) and the promptings of prophetic utterances. That retreat would change their lives and ultimately, mine as well.

Within months there were Catholic Charismatic prayer groups in parishes from coast to coast, and it soon became an international movement within the Church. Many who had been only lukewarm Catholics were now going to daily Mass, reading the Bible and other spiritual books, speaking in tongues and praying with each other for miracles, often with stunning success. Most Catholic theologians were initially quite wary of all this commotion, but that did not slow anyone down. Led by solid lay people, the movement continued to pick up momentum.

Like most things that have happened in my life since my initial encounter with Jesus Christ, discovering the Charismatic Renewal was another one of God's gifts. I had only been back in Los Angeles a few weeks when I heard about the Renewal. By then I had gone to confession and had become a daily communicant, but was now looking for a way to really serve the Lord. I did some background reading which got me really excited to find out for myself what this was all about.

I was directed to the Wednesday night prayer meeting at Loyola Marymount University in Westchester, a beach-area suburb of Los Angeles. The LA version of the Renewal began here four years earlier and the University had become the Southern California headquarters. It

also hosted the largest weekly prayer meeting in the area, numbering in the hundreds. On my first visit, I misunderstood the starting time of the meeting and arrived one-half hour early. When I walked in, a group of about 60-70 people (which was the core service team) was already immersed in prayer and song. They had their arms raised, their eyes closed and they were fervently shouting (all at once!), telling God how much they loved him. It was just as it had been described in the literature I had read, but it was still unlike anything I had ever seen before. What most caught my attention was the obvious joy on the faces of those people.

Tom, a bearded man about my age, came over to welcome me and continued to sit with me when the prayer meeting began. At the conclusion of the meeting, he invited me to a short presentation he was about to give for newcomers.

He told us how he had left law school when he experienced this outpouring of God in his life and was now working full-time to help spread the movement. He also explained how we could all share in the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, which was the *sine qua non* of all that I had seen that evening. Unlike any Catholic I had ever encountered, Tom spoke with confidence and ease about the things of God. Without hesitation I signed up for the next initiation class (called Life in the Spirit Seminars) and looked forward to sharing more fully in the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The core team that I accidentally stumbled into my first night eventually evolved into a covenant community. It was one of numerous communities that grew out of the renewal, first in the US and eventually in all 5 continents. What made them distinct from the rest of the movement was the deeper commitments the members made to the pursuit of

virtue and to each other as brothers and sisters. In many ways they resembled religious orders with defined leadership and a rule of life. But because the communities were composed of married couples and singles, both men and women, there was far more variety in how these commitments were lived out than is normally true in the religious life. Some families lived alone, while others might have a few singles sharing in their household. There would be households for single men and others for the women, with different commitments depending on whether they were students or working. Most of the singles were planning on marrying while a few others felt called to live a life of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom. It was this last group that most attracted me. This new choice was a big departure from my earlier years, but I enjoyed the peace it gave me as well as the additional freedom to serve the Lord.

Over the next 11 years I lived in the most demanding of the men's households. We ate simply (forgoing meat and desserts throughout the week), slept on the floor and fasted twice weekly. We joined for prayer every morning, evening and before bedtime. And this was in addition to every one's personal prayer time. On Saturdays there were chores to be done and basketball games to play, but when the sun went down, it was time to inaugurate the Lord's Day with song and prayer and lots of sumptuous food and sweet wines. On Sundays after Mass, we studied Scripture, read and discussed books, sang songs, smoked cigars, napped and enjoyed each other's company. The pace was intense, but we all grew tremendously in our love for the Lord and in the knowledge of how to live as brothers.

Another feature of our life was evangelization. The community, known as *City of the Lord*, hosted open prayer meetings in the hopes of introducing

new people to Christ and to our way of life. Our evangelization efforts took us out to the crowded city streets, malls, airports and county fairs. It was a little awkward trying to explain to people that we were not a cult or Protestant evangelicals, but Catholics sharing about our love of God and the Church. We weren't systematic or very well prepared, but our sincerity and convictions did get us into a lot of good conversations. Only God knows how, if at all, our efforts helped the people we met, but it was definitely having an impact on me.

Say What?

*For who has known the mind of God,
or who has been his counselor?
Romans 11:34*

I can trace the beginnings of my serious interest in the priesthood to those evangelistic moments. Often times people we prayed with would talk about how much they had suffered and how they wanted to put that behind them and connect with God. Of course what they needed was to make a good confession that would lift so much of their burden, but it was not easy trying to explain this, much less getting them to see a priest. How wonderful, I thought to myself, if I could be the one to give them the gift of absolution.

I also became aware of how little I really knew of the Christian faith. Catholic theology is a vast body of wisdom, amassed over 20 centuries. I had read numerous books and listened to lots of talks, but I lacked a comprehensive understanding of how it all fit together. I wanted this not only for my own sake but also to be able to speak to others with authority and confidence that what I was saying was true. Here was another compelling reason for me to consider the priesthood.

And then there was Pope John Paul II. From the moment I finished his first encyclical, *The Redeemer of Man*, this certified genius who is also undoubtedly a saint, became my spiritual teacher. Over the years, as he led me and millions of others more deeply into the mind and heart of God, I saw myself as his son. In the seminary and well beyond, his writings and thoughts and priestly example inspired and guided me. When he died I was amazed to discover that my experience was not unique. Throughout the world, people expressed similar feelings, often with the same words: "I feel as if I have lost my father."

Was it possible that God was calling me, with all that I had lived through, to become a Catholic priest? This would no doubt be the most radical and unlikely choice of my life. But as I tested the idea in the light of my relationship with Jesus Christ, it made perfect sense. Well, maybe "sense" is not the right word, because up to that point, my life had not followed a sensible trajectory. But it was the Lord who was putting the pieces together and casting a vision for me to follow. If I was willing to step out of the boat and walk towards his outstretched hand, it was possible that I would be able to share in his priesthood and ministry. I was already living a life of celibacy, so that would not be a problem. In return, I would be able to speak for Him, make him present in the sacraments and absolve sins. Yes, this was starting to make a lot of sense.

In the Bible God says repeatedly and in different ways that he has a plan for

each of us and that his plan will bring us to our deepest fulfillment. It isn't difficult accepting this on an Intellectual level, but actually entrusting our lives to Him can be quite another thing. And yet who but God can see all of the pieces? Could anyone know us better or love us more than He does? From my days in college and through all of the twists and turns since then, God had confirmed His utterly reliable love for me in a thousand different ways. I had no reason to fear that this would be any different. In Ecclesiastes 11:1 it says to "*cast your bread upon the waters; after a long time you may find it again*". This Scripture passage correctly presents God's challenges to us as a gamble, one that I was ready to take.

My calculations went something like this: if I had heard him wrong and the priesthood was not for me that would become clear both to me and others at the seminary. The risk of loss was very low. But if I had gotten it right, it would mean unimaginable joy and the privilege of being consecrated for his service. I liked my chances.

And so began my next big journey, to the seminary to begin my studies for the priesthood. I often wondered what my old friends would have said about this new phase. One of them who did make it to my ordination said that I went to extremes like no one he had ever known. I smiled, knowing that what I really had done was take small, sequential steps led by the Master Guide.

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