

## THE JOURNEY OF OUR LIFE:

Life is a Journey  
A Long, Difficult and Unwinding Path  
The Shepherd guides us by His Staff  
The Journey can know Despair  
At other points we fly high with Joy  
We must fight to keep it going  
It will not end until the Journeys end

The Journey of Life is the journey of a soul, a relationship between the Lover and the Beloved. The journey knows many trials and difficulties, temporary diversions of the one path, but also many joys. In the end the Lover and the Beloved will be joined to an everlasting union. This is a union of the soul between the Lover who is Jesus and the Beloved who are each of us. It is a profound sharing, a speaking and listening of the inner heart, between Jesus our Lover and us His Beloved. It is a process of an open dialog to get to know each other's heart intimately with an outpouring of love taking place as we deeply touch one another.

Jesus, the Divine Shepherd initiated this first meeting of love, He who thirsted for us His little lambs, intensely more than we thirsted for Him. At the "hour" of His suffering on the Cross, Jesus expressed His thirst for us when He said, "I Thirst" (John 19: 28). It was a physical agony for sure but the worst agony for God made Flesh was His separation from us. All those who come, the Beloved, to Jesus, the divine Lover, answered His call, His profound thirst of our thirst.

Our journey began with the gifts of a Loving, Good, Father. Our Creation (Genesis chapter 1 and 2) and our Baptism (Matthew 28:18-19). They are an unmerited gift that was granted to us. We had a natural birth, and a spiritual birth when we were grafted into the new life of Christ made Flesh, Crucified and Risen in Glory (John 3:3 and 5 see also Romans 6:1-11). It is gift upon gift, reflecting the generosity of God Our Father. Oh, What goodness God has bestowed on us, so undeserving, Oh what praise fills my heart!

From eternity in Love God our Father had a thought of us and in that thought He issued us forth, by the power of his Word, a unique person who reflects, a facet of God. We read in Genesis (1: 27) that God "created each person in His image and likeness."

God created us to be in relationship with Him and to be in a perfect state without sin: without darkening of the mind that keeps us from seeing clearly, without weakness of will, without suffering, disease and death. The angel of darkness, who hates God and created humanity, came tempting Adam who was supposed to protect his wife, and Eve, our first descendants (see 2 and 3<sup>rd</sup> Chapters of Genesis). He told them that they could live independently from God, becoming like gods, if only they would disobey God.

In falling for Satan's lie and disobeying God, Adam and Eve lost their right relationship with God and the perfect state of blessedness they enjoyed when God in His Love created them. This placed them in a state of alienation from God, which caused disharmony among themselves and all creation, bringing ignorance, suffering, the attraction and ability to sin, hell and death into the world. Thus, they passed on this "original" wound or sin to all of us. These effects are quite obvious by looking at the world that surrounds us, or looking inside ourselves. God the Father, seeing our miserable state and desiring to restore man to His friendship, promised and sent His Son, who by His Life, Teaching, Death on a Cross and Resurrection restored us to our original friendship with Him (see Genesis 3:15). Mercy, the Lover met Misery, us the Beloved.

But we still suffer the effects of this original woundedness that is the susceptibility or ability to actually sin (see Romans 5:12-14). God gave all humanity the ability to reenter back into relationship with Him, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; receiving the power to become the Children of God (John 1:10-12). We share in this Divine Life of the Trinity, this Grace, through our Baptism into Christ. Through the Holy Spirit's action (Corinthians 1:22 and Ephesians 1:13-14) we become and are children of God by the virtues of faith, hope, love and gifts and fruits of the Spirit infused into us at Baptism (see Romans Chapters 5 and 6). As a result we have the life of the Trinity dwelling within us, in our very being, our very soul! Thus our humanity is restored to the dignity that was forfeited by our sins (see Parable of the Prodigal Son, Luke 15:11-32).

At Baptism Jesus chose us and placed us in covenant with our Father, we did not choose Him, which makes clear what God gives is a gift and we can only respond yes or no. God gave us a life giving seed but that seed needs our yes and the water and light of grace through prayer and sacrament. Then it can grow, bearing much fruit (see Gospel of John Chapter 15).

Sacraments are outward signs instituted by Jesus Christ to communicate His grace to us that He won for us by His Suffering, Death and Resurrection. In the Roman Catholic Church there are seven sacraments. These sacraments are Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation or Confession, Anointing of the Sick, Marriage and Holy Orders. Eucharist, Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick can be received repeatedly. The Sacraments are seven channels of grace that flow from the wounded side of Christ. For a more complete understanding of the Sacraments refer to the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

God in His providence and goodness presumes we would like the gift, the seed that we received at Baptism, when we realize we have it (Romans 6:1-3). It is the will of God that the powers of this gift are fully operating in our life, so we can gradually be transformed from the

decay of sin to the glory of Life. Like someone who has the gift to draw, that gift lies dormant in them until they discover and allow it to be developed in the use of it. The same applies to the gift of our Baptism, it remains dormant within us until it is discovered and developed through prayer, sacrament and in exercising, or use of the grace. Therefore, then it can be fully operating in our lives, bearing the fruit it was meant to, and giving us the gift that is the salvation coming from Christ's Sacrifice and Resurrection. It needs to be stirred into flame by our openness and actions. God gives the power of grace but we need to say yes.

We must keep in mind, again, that even though "in baptism we received the life of Christ's grace, our original sin is erased and man is turned back toward God, but the consequences for nature weakened and inclined to evil, persist in man and summon him to spiritual battle" (Catholic Catechism page 102 section 405, see also, section 406). Even though a true change took place at Baptism we always remain free to choose God or not in the battle, the struggle. God gave us grace, so that if we fell back into sin through weakness we could come back to Him, and in the battle to overcome sin we could freely choose God and persevere in that choice, being transformed ever more fully into His children.

Saint Paul the Apostle also experienced this battle with sin in his life and has expressed it in his letters. In his letter to the Philippians he urged them to continue to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling. For God is the one who, for His good purpose, works in you both to desire and to work" (Philippians 2:12 and 13).

When we are in battle with a particular sin in our life let us turn to God and ask him to give us the grace to desire ardently and to work with determination to say no to sin, which is vice, and habitually learn to practice the opposite virtue that leads to salvation. We would benefit from regular reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation or Confession where we meet the healing and strengthening Mercy who is Jesus (John 20: 19-20). He ministers through the priest, who acts in the person of Christ (John 20: 21-23, see also Luke 10: 16). We are meeting Jesus and He is forgiving us in the sacrament. Jesus who is God decided and expressly willed this. He provides for us a means to receive, once again, His gift of healing and forgiving grace when we lose it through mortal sin after Baptism. Mortal sin kills the life of God's grace in us, Venial sin weakens us, making us more likely to be open to mortal sin (1 John 5:16-17). This sacrament automatically exercises the virtue of humility that is essential in any spiritual life with God. It is important to note that we must confess our mortal sins but even if we are not in a state of mortal sin we would be strengthened to work on overcoming our venial sins and less likely to commit mortal sin by frequent confession of venial sin. Our goal is to continually die with Christ to sin and rise to newness of life in Him (see Romans 6:1-4).

This summon to battle, the pull of God and Satan toward their respective paths, one the true path and the other the false path, is something that I and others have experienced all through our relationship with Jesus. Most of the saints have experienced this constant battle of falling into sin and rising again and again with confidence in the grace of Jesus who ultimately led them to triumph.

As I reached maturity worries, anxieties, the lure of lust and riches (John 13:1-8 18-23)

obscured my hearing the voice of Jesus calling me to follow Him that led to a distortion of my thinking. This led me through the door of sin and in the process destroying childhood innocence but in no way destroying the imperishable seed planted at Baptism. It is like a mirror reflecting light that becomes dirty because of being exposed to the weather, it cannot reflect the light very well and must be cleaned off, but once cleaned reflects the light again. This is also true of our soul that becomes dirty as it is exposed to the weather of life and cannot reflect the Divine light within without being purified of the sin and the wounds that accumulate over time. Then the Divine light can radiate within bringing the water and light of grace needed for the seed to continue its growth.

Through all of the sidetracks we encounter as we mature, the Holy Spirit is there convicting us of sin and reminding us that Jesus is patiently waiting for us to remember and respond to His voice gently calling us to draw near to Him (1 Peter 2).

All we need to do to respond to the voice of Jesus is withdraw in prayer to the recesses of the heart where Jesus seeks us to seek Him, the place of encounter where we are fully known. This is the place where the power of the Spirit is awakened in us and we find ourselves found by our God, but most of all when the soul is touched by this Divine Lover we come to know a Love that surpasses all other loves.

No amount of material possessions, friends, sensual pleasures, worldly pursuits and other false gods can compare with what is gained by resting in the presence of the One that all human longing is fulfilled in. Throughout my childhood and into my early adulthood before I really sought Jesus in prayer, all my pursuits were a desperate attempt to find my Divine Lover who was faithfully pursuing me. I did not realize that the Love I needed could be found inside me where I meet Jesus. I was always looking on the outside to be fulfilled. Does this sound familiar when we look at the world around us and even into our own life?

Turning inside me I found the pearl of great price hidden because of ignorance and darkness, Jesus Christ. This stage of our relationship journey is our awakening to all that our Lover has brought to our lives, the courtship of us, the beloved, where we are initially attracted and the spark of our love ignites into flame.

The second stage of our relationship with the Divine Lover is the dialoging and meditative part of the journey, which is an essential stage before we can progress into the other stages. During this stage we talk with Jesus, sharing all of our experiences and what concerns us, the joys, the sadness, the suffering, the totality of who we are without hiding anything, as nothing truly is hidden from God.

As we do this Jesus shares himself with us, His thoughts, desires, and love. Everything that is important to us is important to Jesus and He knows us better than we know ourselves, but we also need to be able to listen to what is important to Jesus. Do we take the time to listen to Him? Through our time we spend with Jesus dialoging, we will hear Him speaking and communicating what is important to Him. He will speak through His Scriptures, through His Teachings and Authority of His Church, His Sacraments, through His creation, and through

music, movies or other media. He can also speak to us through others in our lives, through their kindness, love, or honesty and through our thoughts our qualities, and our desires. The goal of this dialoging stage of our journey is to become open to the voice of Jesus and thus coming to know our God and ourselves in a deeper way. This leads us more and more into thinking, loving, and acting like God taking on the qualities and the desires of God.

Without even realizing it we may during the process of dialoging with Jesus come to the third stage of prayer called the “love touch” or the gazing upon each other stage. This stage is the beginning of Infused Contemplation that God gives to the humble, open person. The goal of all the stages of prayer are to become the living presence of Jesus to others, to the world in which God placed us.

During this period, as in contrast to the others, where we may use words and thoughts, silence characterizes this stage, just sitting in God’s presence gazing on His face within us (2 Corinthians 3:18). It is an outpouring of love where God touches the soul and we touch God. It can involve the emotions in a profound way. The reason there are no words or thoughts is because we come to a point where no words or thoughts could possibly express the deep feelings and expressions of the heart. We freely surrender all of us and empty ourselves out in complete abandonment for the other so we can become absorbed in each other but remain distinct persons from one another, us His creatures Him our only God. We are transformed to a supernatural level of existence that does not bring us to surpass God’s glory but reflect His in a unique way. This supernatural way of living is the abundant life Jesus promised us. At this point we progress into a deeper awareness and knowledge of God, which can cause charismatic raptures and ecstasies as some of the Saints experienced, culminating into a deeper and more profound love union with Christ.

The fourth stage of our relationship is the period where we rest in the arms of our Lover and we the Beloved are held in the secure arms of God, without words, thoughts or feelings. We just are with each other. During this period it might seem like nothing is happening with our relationship with Jesus, but we are progressing even if it doesn’t fit our understanding or feeling.

The fifth period of our journey with God is the trial by ordeal stage. These are the times when our faith is shaken by suffering and difficulty. They can come in the form of loneliness, depression, disease, disability and the complications associated with this. It could also come about by our relationships with others when it’s as if there is no emotional satisfaction left or we sense that there are limits and that they don’t fit into our ideas, or expectations as they once did.

This can also happen in our relationship with God when we say we no longer sense His presence, as if there is an absence. This is what Spiritual writers like St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila call the dark night of the soul, which is the final and sixth stage of our journey.

We may ask God, are you there? I don’t understand what you are doing, Lord, why are you allowing this to happen or we may ask what did I do wrong when we have done nothing wrong? We may even be tempted to give up prayer. What we need to do when this happens is keep praying no matter how difficult it becomes. We need to be flexible enough to change the

way we pray when needed. God is calling us at these times in our journey with Him to unite our suffering with the suffering of Jesus His Son, conforming us to His one Sacrifice so that we can share in the “image and likeness” of His Resurrected Son.

We also need to discover the keen spiritual insight of St. James and St. Paul: “Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. And let perseverance be perfect, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2-4). When Paul prayed to Jesus to take away a particular suffering Jesus responded to him saying “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” And therefore Paul said, “I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me (2 Corinthians, 12:9).

It also might be, that in our relationship with others, when it is not the way we want it to be that God wants us to be attached to him alone and more detached from trying to receive from others only what God can give. Other people, experiences or things are gifts of God for our good but being attached to them instead of God are spiritual dangers that can harm our relationship with Him and it will harm our relationship with others. We need to willfully become detached or God will need to do it through the purifying fire of suffering.

It needs to be emphasized that these stages I am discussing are a process that can take all of our lives or only part of it, depending on God and our openness. We also might not experience these stages one at a time in a neat fashion but could progress to some stages and revisit those earlier or later stages many times as we grow. We could get to stage four and go back to stage two or we could go to stage five when we go through a trial and return back to stage one when we awaken to our Divine Lovers presence and experience a deeper attraction and love.

Each person is unique and progresses slower or faster. It also does not mean that we will even go through all of the stages, but that we progress at the pace we find ourselves going, trusting God.

We go through many levels of purification and deeper and deeper union with Jesus that never ends until our resurrection. As we go through our journey of life, and we continually turn to Jesus within our hearts, sharing our self and allowing Jesus to share Himself with us in prayer we will find ourselves totally immersed in Him. As this happens we will come to know who we are and what our life is about, a personal relationship with Jesus. Flowing from this essential relationship with Him comes a deeper relationship with our brothers and sisters of Humanity, as well as the Church Triumphant in Heaven and the Church suffering purification in Purgatory on their way to Heaven. As we ground ourselves in Him every day, the seed planted at our Baptism will grow and bear fruit, and the light of Jesus will radiate our whole being attracting others to the Light.

We will find no matter what we experience, the joy or the suffering, nothing compares with union with our Divine Lover that the Holy Spirit inspires in us, the Beloved of Christ. The Person of the Holy Spirit helps us to protect, cherish and work on this union until we hear the voice of Jesus call us by name at our dying day to enjoy forever our profound closeness formed in prayer and sacrament. Until that day we can live a dignified and transformed journey to eternity, day by day, knowing we are being created into the “image and likeness” of God within. Our journey is a long difficult one but a Shepherd is guiding us to a new horizon where true peace and serenity are found. ARE WE GOING TO TURN OUR BACKS ON OUR DESTINY?

Sources and Further Reading:

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