

Blessed be God!!

January Update

How do we “bless” God? Isn’t God the one who bestows the blessings? Yes! We were discussing this very topic in class this week. Fr. John Ignatius explained it to us this way: Throughout the Bible we see people “blessing” God (Psalm 103, 2 Corinthians 1:3, etc.). A priest is a person that blesses the people, and fathers of families should likewise bless their families as priests of their household. Now if there was a father who blessed his family each night with holy water, first his wife then his kids, imagine the heart of the father when one of the children looks up at him and asks, “Daddy, can I bless *you* now”? Of course his heart would melt and would love to be blessed by his child. That child has nothing to offer! Likewise we have nothing to offer God, except to reciprocate the love and blessings that He first gave us. So Blessed be God!

I am writing a little later than I would have liked. I have only been back in Denver for about 2 full weeks since Christmas vacation. I was at home in Phoenix for three weeks in December enjoying time with family and friends. I was also able to serve two of the Christmas Masses at St. James Parish in North Phoenix. Perhaps I have shared with you before that I was never an altar server prior to going into the seminary. How good God is for allowing me to serve at His altar for His greater glory. I was allowed to be the thurifer (incense carrier), and during the elevation of the Eucharist I got to “bless” God made present to us. I was also very blessed to be able to serve with Deacon Roy Drapeau who recently moved from St. Thomas More to St. James. It was also very good to see the people at St. Thomas More Parish and share with them my experience here in Denver. Being out of the snow and in 70 degree weather wasn’t too bad either! That was December in short, but what I am really writing for is to tell you about my poverty immersion trip in January.

Each year, the seminary sends the “Spirituality Year” guys on a poverty immersion trip. Throughout the year the seminarians in other years would not tell us a single thing about their experience, so that our own experience would be unique and without expectation. All we knew is that we would be getting a bus ticket and sent to a different city, two by two, to work with the poor for a month and that we couldn’t bring cell phones or our credit cards. That’s it. We didn’t know where we would be going until the day we were to leave. Once I found out where I was going I was on a bus five hours later, with little knowledge of what the month would hold.

In the weeks and days leading up the poverty immersion I was very excited. I did not have an ounce of apprehension and actually looked forward to the whole experience. I never pried the other seminarians to have them tell me their stories because I wanted it to be as authentic an experience as possible. When we walked into the classroom to get our assignments, I saw all of the possible locations and types of work written on the whiteboard. There were a number of locations that had soup kitchens which is more what I had expected, but then my eye caught: *Tulsa, St. Francis Hospital*. I instantly knew which location I did not want but I figured that the odds were in my favor and I could have accepted any of the other locations without much of an issue. I have always been uncomfortable with the prospect of hospital ministry. *How do I minister to the dying, and the families? What would I say? What if they asked me to pray? What if I can't think of the right words?* It was something I knew I would eventually have to do in my seminary experience...but not now. Sure enough, I learned that I and one other seminarian, Joel, would be heading to Tulsa to be hospital chaplains. Didn't see that one coming did you?

Greyhound definitely gave me an experience of economic poverty, but I also got to see the poverty of a simple lack of desire for life in many of the people we encountered. On one occasion I had a man approach me at the bus station in Amarillo who went by the name "Constantine Diablo". After telling us his life story of adventure and international crime and drug running, he offered me some of his cocaine. I had to forcefully refuse a few times before he finally backed off. I at once realized and thanked God for how little exposure I have had to drugs. After 20 hours on a bus we arrived in Tulsa.

The first few days included orientation and getting to know the chaplains. The first patient we saw was a "Code Blue" which means that the patient was having a heart attack. Joel, myself, and Lynne, one of the lay chaplains, went up to the room. Once there we saw a man that was intubated and lying on a bed covered in bruises with a flurry of activity all around him with nurses and doctors doing chest compressions. As chaplains we were simply a quiet presence. When the nurses got the man back to a somewhat regular heartbeat, we entered the room and prayed over the man. After that I knew it was going to be a long, hard, emotionally draining month.

On our second or third day at the hospital we experienced our first "Celestial Discharge", a euphemism for a death. Joel and I were with Lynne when we responded to a call to a room

where an elderly man was going to be extubated. I knew Lynne would be in charge here so I was not very apprehensive. By this point I had gotten used to the image of a patient on the bed while intubated and sedated. His wife was in the room and the patient was unconscious. We read the wife a few scripture passages but Lynne did most of the talking. When the patient began actively dying I recall more than anything the closeness between the patient and his wife. The wife was caressing her husband's head and was kissing him. I gave in to my natural response to kneel on the ground in prayer. The love between the two was so apparent, it was sad yet beautiful all at the same time. *Who am I to be invited into this room to share this intimate moment of loss? What do I do now? Do I just sit here and watch, should I be doing something, should I say something?* This was also not the only experience like this that first week. I was there with one other patient and his family while he was being extubated, and we prayed in the room of another man who had just passed.

Throughout the first two weeks Joel and I shadowed one of the chaplains. While I was fine going into the rooms with another chaplain, I was still uncomfortable knowing that we would eventually be visiting rooms by ourselves. Going into rooms with another chaplain, however, has its downsides that eventually helped lead me to a desire to go it alone. First thing was that when I went into a room with another chaplain I felt like a bump on a log while they and the patient discussed different topics, especially when it came to things that only locals would understand. I also began to feel voyeuristic, especially in the small rooms that were already very tight: *I am not doing anybody any good by being in here....They must think that I just want to look at their sickness....the family is looking at me and expecting me to do something, but I'm just an observer, or am I?* This was the flood of thoughts going through my mind with each visit.

Throughout the whole trip Joel and I were "on call" 24-7, having to wear pagers in case someone needed a pastoral care visit. This meant that we were responding to calls at all hours of the night. It was good to see and experience firsthand this more hidden aspect of the priesthood. About three weeks in, I received a page to go to a room where a man was requesting a pastoral care visit for his wife. For the first time I was not nervous and was actually excited to make the visit. The couple told me their story and I learned that she was a miracle case (The doctors told her that she was going to die and quite bluntly. The husband went to the chapel to pray and upon his return the doctor returned at a loss for words with news that she was recovering and could

probably go home in a couple days). The husband at one point mentioned the rosary and so I offered to lead them in praying a decade. We prayed one decade together and then I prayed a spontaneous prayer (something I have never really been comfortable with, but especially in a hospital where most of the patients were Protestant (Bible Belt!) and were likely judging this lowly Roman Catholic in a collar on his ability to pray out loud). I was not fully aware of what was said but it was mostly thanksgiving for having met these wonderful people and for the wife's continued recovery. Both of them were in tears. I must have said something right, and I give the credit to the Holy Spirit for what was truly the gift of prophecy. It was a beautiful visit and was truly a change in the way I approached the whole immersion experience.

For the last two weeks Joel and I were assigned floors which we would be visiting by ourselves. I was assigned a cardiac floor and a post-surgical/recovery floor. Each day while going into the rooms I met many wonderful people and had many great conversations. Any ounce of apprehension that I had before was gone. Though, knocking on the door, I never really knew what I was going to encounter. Most people were kind and I could stay and talk with them, while some others just stared like they were waiting for me to do some kind of trick. Every room was different. I got to pray with patients and their families, hold hands of those who could not speak or were lonely, and just be present and a listening ear to others. I got to experience poverty of health, of spirit and of strength and will to go on, and God willing, I was able to be Christ for them in those moments and bring some sense of peace and hope of God's mercy to them. I heard the confessions of some (obviously no absolution, but they would often start off with "I've never told anyone this but..."). Other times I received calls into the E.R. where a patient had just passed away and I got to pray with a family over their loved one. When I would return to the pastoral care office at the end of the day I would be asked how my day was and I was surprised myself when I would tell them that I actually had fun. Yes, fun. I learned that it is a ministry that is completely worth-while because it requires a pouring out of self.

Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche communities in France, explained that the poor are not simply objects of our goodness. This poverty immersion experience has helped me to learn that the poor help us to show the poverties in ourselves. I have come to learn that there is much more than just economic poverty, and that the richest man economically can be the most impoverished spiritually. This experience forced me to fully rely on the strength of God, and not

on my own abilities, and when I allowed Him to take charge in every situation, that even a poverty immersion experience can be enjoyable in spite of my own weaknesses.

At the end of one month, Joel and I were back on a Greyhound heading for Denver. The trip back was just as exhilarating as the trip to Tulsa was. It was great to see the other SY guys and hear their stories. Two groups even went to Phoenix. One was working with Maggie's Place and the other was with the Missionaries of Charity at their shelter/soup kitchen. The other groups went to: San Francisco (home for the dying), Cody (ranch for troubled boys), Omaha (homeless shelter), Gallup, NM (homeless shelter and soup kitchen), and St. Louis (homeless shelter). Each experience was unique, and three weeks later we are all still talking about it. It was truly a life changing experience that we will all be unpacking for the next several months.

Now several weeks into February, we are finally getting back into a regular schedule. We just started reading the collected works of St. John of the Cross in our Spiritual Life class. I also picked up a book on the life of St. Therese of Lisieux, which has been very enjoyable. (Both of these Saints are Carmelites, an order to which I have felt some closeness since I started wearing the Brown Scapular about seven years ago. It is essentially a miniature religious habit, made of two pieces of brown wool and worn around the neck. It is a Marian devotion given to Saint Simon Stock in the 13th Century by Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, as a sign of her favor for the Carmelites and the poor souls in Purgatory.) We also started discussing the documents of the Second Vatican Council. That will be an ongoing project for the rest of the year. In a couple weeks, during the beginning of Lent, we will be doing an in-house 5 day silent retreat, which will be in preparation for the 30 day silent retreat we will do in May in South Dakota. It is good to be back to a regular routine!

I want to thank all of you once again for all the support you have given me. As I have said before, this journey would be impossible without your prayers and moral support. Thank you also to those who have supported me financially. I am always praying for you and I would ask that you would continue to pray for me. Please share these letters with your children, or grandchildren, or any young person you might know. We need to be encouraging vocations! This doesn't mean that we further water down the faith and sentimentalize everything (there is nothing sentimental about the Cross!), because that has only chased away many vocations (it is no coincidence that churches with Eucharistic adoration and where confession is emphasized tend to have more young men and women responding to the call of religious life). We need to let

young people know that this is the One True Faith, founded by Jesus on the Rock of Peter, and that without vocations we will be deprived of the sacraments, especially from the Eucharist and Confession. I also encourage you to read about the faith, and never stop learning. We have a rich history of which we can be proud, but more importantly we have the fullness of Truth. Be excited about the Church, against which, Christ promised, the gates of Hell will never prevail. I highly recommend Scott Hahn's book: Rome Sweet Home.

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