



Finding the Pearl of Great Price

The World Is Not Enough

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My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. ... The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his Name” (Lk 1:46-47, 49).

Mine has been what one might call a charmed life. Everything was handed to me: good health, better friends, and a far more loving family than I deserve. “I drew them with human cords, with bands of love; I fostered them like those who raise an infant to their cheeks; I bent down to feed them.” (Hos 11:4).

The one thing I did not have turned out to be the most crucial of all: a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Sure, we attended Mass on Sundays. My parents even sacrificed non-existent funds to procure a Catholic education for my sister Marjorie and me. But like many cradle Catholics,

they—and we—were poorly catechized. In middle school, I began to rebel, and by college graduation, I had fully embraced every lie our society sells and sunk into a life of sin, thinking this would make me happy.

One thing my parents did inculcate in me was our Asian cultural values, which included excelling in school and making tons of money in order to help the family.

All went as planned. Almost without effort, I got into the school I wanted, interned at NASA, graduated early, and landed my dream job as a consultant with a Big Four accounting firm. My colleagues were “white-hat” (ethical) hackers, whom our clients, mostly Fortune 500 companies, hired to try to break into their information technology systems. They always succeeded.

The new job brought me home to Houston, and since it entailed spending eighty percent of the time traveling, it only made sense to live with the family. While we were in college, my father entreated us to return home when possible. In my parents’ native Philippines, sons and daughters traditionally fly the nest only upon marriage. Many couples linger long after that. My siblings and I grew up with all four grandparents in our home, which was an immense blessing for all of us.

In gratitude for our schooling, my sister Marjorie and I spent our signing bonuses on a bedroom set for our parents. But my employer paid so handsomely that plenty remained for a personal shopper, a trainer, and a white Mercedes-Benz for myself.

Little did I suspect the Lord was readying “the twitch upon the thread” (G.K. Chesterton, *The Innocence of Father Brown*). “Put no trust in princes, in children of Adam powerless to save. Who breathing his last, returns to the earth; that day all his planning comes to nothing” (Ps 146: 3-4).

Before long, our parish youth minister, Charles, invited me to volunteer with the new Life Teen program. Though I espoused

nothing of the Faith, it seemed like a good way to spend time with my younger brother Matt, who was starting middle school and consequently Edge, Life Teen's junior high curriculum.

The first "Edge night" was on the source and summit of our Faith: the Holy Eucharist. It was the first I had ever heard of the Real Presence! Here was Almighty God in the flesh, humbling Himself just to be with His beloved, unworthy creatures—with me.

I was hooked. The youth group kids and I read the Bible together. The Word of God came alive as one long love letter.

*God loves each of us
as if there were only
one of us.*

-Saint Augustine

Through the centuries, through different literary genres, through countless human authors, He who is Love reveals Himself always trying to draw near to His people: first in Eden, then in the Ark of the Covenant, and finally in the tiny white host that we receive into our very flesh. By this means, He plans to transfigure us from within and to

draw us into the eternal ecstasy that is His own divine life.

Eight years elapsed. I enjoyed my job, made great Catholic friends, and dated The World's Most Perfect Boyfriend. We never even fought. In time, we started seriously discerning marriage. After an evening of planning for the future, I found myself inexplicably sleepless. The next morning, I phoned Marjorie as soon as I knew she would be awake. She listened and remarked, "It sounds like you two are looking for different vocations." It was as if a burden had been lifted. Later that day, I went to see him. He had come to the same conclusion. Our mutual feeling was, "I love you so much. If the Lord has something better for you, I want you to have that."

So, the romance ended, more peacefully than I thought possible—his grandmother even continued to write me later

in the convent until she passed away. A chastity speaker I once heard claimed that breakups are more amicable in chaste relationships; now, I experienced it for myself. One reason unchaste breakups can be so messy is that, during the marital act, our brains release powerful bonding chemicals like oxytocin to keep husband and wife together for life. The human body is designed for monogamy.

IF YOU WANT TO MAKE GOD LAUGH, MAKE PLANS

After a year, I visited Marjorie and her new husband, Ken. A common refrain in vocation stories is, “I had everything I wanted, and it was not enough.” It was certainly the case here. Marj could tell I was restless, so as the oldest, she nagged me about dating, “putting yourself out there”, etc., etc. That did not sound appealing. Exasperated, she exclaimed, “I just do not understand why, if you know you are called to marriage, you aren’t doing something about it!” To which I retorted, “I do not know if I am called to marriage! I have never really discerned my vocation! I haven’t ruled out religious life...”

“Wait, you haven’t ruled out religious life?”

“Please. Who do we know who has even thought about it?”

“Hmph. We will fix that.”

And with that, she sat down at her laptop and signed me up for a diocesan discernment retreat.

Originally, I planned to cross religious life off the list directly upon arriving at the retreat. Lo and behold, the priests and religious there turned out to be normal human beings! To my chagrin, I could talk with them as I would with friends or family. What I did eliminate that weekend was remaining single forever: the Lord was calling me to commitment.

With that weekend, discernment commenced in earnest. When you want to know God’s will for your life, the most

important thing is, of course, to ask Him. Yet at first, my prayer went along the lines of, “Father, Thy will be done ...but please don’t ask me to do this...”

Six months later, I was in Adoration during my lunch break. Gazing at Him, I realized: “My God, I am so in love with You! It would be an honor to be Your bride...if You would have me.” Suddenly, everything changed.

My God, I am so in love with You! It would be an honor to be Your bride ... if You would have me.

The question thus became where God wanted me to live as His spouse and in which community. A helpful online article had given two “signs” for finding the right community: 1) the Lord will put it in your path, and 2) it will feel like home. After befriending wonderful Sisters in several communities, it still was not clear which was to be mine. On the two-and-a-half-hour drive home from one such convent in Victoria, Texas, I begged the Lord to show me.

Within an hour of my return, my friend Fiona, on sabbatical in Nicaragua, Google-chatted to suggest a community she had met six months before: the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist. Taking a leaf from Marj’s book, I immediately registered for their next discernment retreat, slated for February 2012.

The retreat was eye-opening. There was all-night Adoration, and the Sisters gave short conferences on, among other themes, God’s love, giving everything to Him, the Dominican charism, and praying for priests. With every talk, my heart burned within me (see Lk 24:32). It was not home per se; it was more like my soul was vibrating at a certain pitch and with the community struck a beautiful chord.

Elated, I met the Vocation Directress, Sister Joseph Andrew, applied for entrance, spent a week with twenty-plus others at the Motherhouse for pre-postulancy (a type of orientation), and was finally accepted to enter on August 28. Everything seemed perfect.

A SUDDEN CHANGE OF PLANS

During this period of preparation, Sister Joseph Andrew recommended we read the lives of the saints. The more I read, the more dissimilar their lives seemed to mine. They suffered immensely, all the while loving and praising God. I asked Him to make me love Him like that, to be more than a fair-weather friend...but then I got scared and told Him He could do it without making me suffer.

Well, He gave me my chance. On August 19, nine days before entrance, I was driving back to Victoria to witness the Final Vows of my friend Sister Louise Marie, IWBS. Road construction caused a half-hour delay, and I drove faster than I had ever driven in my life. Stupidly fast. Ten minutes from the convent, I encountered an overpass. Water had collected at the base from a brief shower earlier in the day. Upon reaching the puddle, the car began to hydroplane. Immediately I prayed, "Lord, I no longer have control over this vehicle. You just take it exactly where you want it to go." The car spun and crashed into the guardrail on the driver's side.

After the impact, I glanced down. My left hand was sliced open, my left hip in searing pain, and the same thigh horrendously disfigured. "That's going to take at least eight months of physical therapy," I thought. "So, You are telling me no convent next week. Okay." He may have been saying not now or not ever, and I trusted Him completely. "For I know well the plans I have in mind for you...plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope." (Jer 29:11).

Then the car flipped over the guardrail and proceeded to roll down the embankment. “People don’t always survive this,” I realized. Frantically I began calculating. My family had attended Mass the night before, and the day before that, I went to Confession. “Hey, I am golden,” I thought. “Even if I go to Purgatory, at least I’ll know where I’m ultimately headed. I might actually see Your face!” The prospect was exhilarating.

The car landed in a ditch, again on the driver’s side. To my surprise, I did not die. While listening to the CD I had playing (interestingly, the Sisters’ *Mater Eucharistiae*), I assessed the damage. A cursory scan in the rearview mirror revealed no obvious head trauma. My ribcage appeared intact, so probably no major organ injury. My toes wiggled just fine, so the spine seemed okay. Unsure whether anyone could see the car, I switched on the emergency flashers. The horn was already blowing. With my good hand, I felt around for my phone.

At this point you might think: Wow, that is some presence of mind. Anyone can tell you this is not normal for me. It must have been a special grace.

Meanwhile, the pain waxed intolerable. I began to pray aloud. At first, I tried the Our Father but could not remember the words. So I recited the Hail Mary over and over. She and the Holy Spirit felt particularly close. At no time did I feel the slightest fear.

“Lord, I no longer have control over this vehicle. You just take it exactly where you want it to go.”

After a few minutes, witnesses opened the rear passenger-side door. They hesitated to approach the vehicle, convinced that no one could have survived. An agile bystander named Tip clambered into the backseat and repeated the Hail Mary with me while we waited, first for the ambulance,

then for firefighters to extract me with the Jaws of Life.

I suddenly remembered that during pre-postulancy, Sister Joseph Andrew had described “zeal for souls” as a driving force in a Dominican. Everyone else had seemed to agree; but at the time of this accident, I did not feel very zealous towards the people who would be trying to help me. All I could think of was Christ, with little regard for anyone else.

The accident threw everything into sharp relief. Our time here is fleeting; what matters is eternity. And the Lord still felt so close. As the paramedics wheeled me into the emergency room, my soul longed to proclaim His goodness from the rooftops (see Mt 10:27)!

The year that followed was a joyful one, full of innumerable serendipities. There is no way I could ever count, much less repay, the kindnesses shown me and my family by so many people; the Lord must do that Himself.

Words fail. Certainly there was physical suffering: I had a cut and broken hand, a dislocated elbow, a snapped femur, and a smashed hip – all on the left side. Yet even the pain felt like a crucible, slowly burning away the dross of my faults. Whether I actually was more charitable or patient is for my family and my caregivers to decide.

The surgical team, led by Doctor Dickson, ultimately performed three operations to repair the damage. The second and most critical surgery, repairing the hip, occurred August 23, the feast of Saint Rose of Lima. By yet another grace, the anesthetist was a family friend. He saved my life.

The hip had shattered into more fragments than the doctors hoped. Consequently, they did quite a bit of scraping, and I lost a lot of blood (over the next three days, they replaced all but one unit of blood in my body!) My blood pressure dropped precipitously. The protocol in such cases is to dial back the anesthesia, lest the patient slip into a coma and die.

The first thing I sensed was the hip feeling open and cold. It was excruciating. I tried to scream, but couldn't move. So, I just rested on this insignificant splinter of Christ's cross. It was the most palpably intimate moment of my life, save of course Holy Communion.

Nobody knew I was conscious. During surgery, the team monitors the patient's brainwaves, but mine indicated no increase in activity. My sister's theory is that my brain stayed calm because it was praying.

As my body gradually recovered throughout the year, I could feel my faults return. It was as if a wave of grace had carried me along, and exhausted itself as it neared the shore.

Naturally, people inquired about my future. The initial plan was to focus first on physical recovery, then start the discernment process over again. Yet, as my body grew stronger, so too did the desire in my heart. So, I resolved, "Lord, as long as the door is open, with Your help I will walk through it."

The Sisters kept in touch. Sister Elizabeth Ann, Sister Mary Theresa, and Sister Maria even traveled three hours from Austin to visit me in the hospital for forty-five minutes before driving back! After a year, Doctor Dickson deemed me physically fit for the convent. Two years and nine days after the accident, on

the feast of Saint Augustine, August 28, 2014, I was among the fourteen happy postulants to join the community at long last. On July 27, 2017, we made first vows, and God willing, we will profess perpetual vows in 2022.

*"The greatness of our love
of God must be tested
by the desire we have of
suffering for His love."*

- Saint Philip Neri

LIFE ACCORDING TO HIS PLAN

Religious life is no panacea. While your husband is perfect, on this side of heaven, His family—including yourself—are not. The Church dubs religious life a

“state of perfection” not because those who live in it are already perfect, but because its plan of life offers all the helps necessary to attain Christian perfection over a lifetime. Woe to the Sister who squanders them!

When someone first joins a community or gets married, she labors to seem perfect, to live up to what she thinks is expected. Over time, living with another person reveals to her how selfish she really is. Yet she learns that, with God’s grace, the other person loves her and forgives her even with all of her flaws. This frees her to be herself, to be patient with herself and with the other, and to hope that in Christ they can overcome their weaknesses together. “This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35).

One difference that had concerned me was age: upon entering the community I was thirty-three, whereas the median age of all of the Sisters in the community was twenty-eight. At the February discernment retreat, I had felt out of place, a professional among teenagers. They were so pure; it pained me to recall my own wasted (as they seemed to me) years.

Religious life, however, ended up being a grand equalizer. Everything was so new, so different from our former ways of life, that we rarely felt the age gap. Virtually the only time it surfaces is when we discuss worldly matters. Such conversations become rarer the longer one is a Sister.

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”

-Ecclesiastes 3:1

Like any relationship among fallen creatures, community life takes work. Then again, how many deeds worth doing do not? Together we fumble toward eternity, and every night we join the Church in Our Lady's song:

Magnificat

My soul proclaims the
greatness of the Lord,

my spirit rejoices in God
my Savior

for he has looked with
favor on his lowly servant.

From this day all
generations will call me
blessed:

the Almighty has done
great things for me,

and holy is his Name.

He has mercy on those
who fear him

in every generation.

He has shown the strength
of his arm,

he has scattered the proud
in their conceit.

He has cast down the
mighty from their thrones,

and has lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry
with good things,

and the rich he has sent
away empty.

He has come to the help of
his servant Israel

for he has remembered his
promise of mercy,

the promise he made to
our fathers,

to Abraham and his
children forever.



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When I think of my vocation discernment, and the people that helped shape my love for the priesthood, immediately my parish priests and the Sisters come to mind. For me, the Sisters represented the image and love of Our Blessed Mother in their holiness, joy, caring, wisdom, intelligence, and passion in teaching and sharing the true faith. They could identify potential vocations and nurture those early signs. We are sorely missing them in the world today.

But religious women like the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist give me great joy and hope. I know these Sisters and visited their house of joy. Seeing young and happy Sisters attract others to the Faith. Our world needs their spiritual motherhood now more than ever.

-Father Paul Ugo Arinze

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