

OPENING CONFERENCE

SUBPRIORY OF OUR LADY OF LOURDES ANNUAL RETREAT

“MAKE ROOM FOR GOD: ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS”

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THIS EVENING, WE BEGIN OUR ANNUAL JOURNEY --- OUR MALVERN RETREAT. A JOURNEY THAT VERY LIKELY SAW US BEGIN THE DAY TRAPPED IN ALL THE ACTIVITY OF OUR DISTRACTION-FILLED LIVES, A JOURNEY THAT NOW, AT THIS MOMENT, HAS US ON THE THRESHOLD OF SETTING THOSE DISTRACTIONS ASIDE, A JOURNEY, WE PRAY, THAT WILL TEACH US, IN THE END, TO “MAKE ROOM FOR GOD”, AS ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS SO ELOQUENTLY PUT IT.

BUT ELOQUENT OR NOT, JOHN’S MESSAGE IS FREQUENTLY VIEWED AS A HARD ONE TO ACCEPT. THE PROBLEM IS THIS: WHAT HE SAW AS DISTRACTIONS FROM WHICH WE SHOULD DETACH OURSELVES, WE OFTEN SEE AS LEGITIMATE OBJECTS OF OUR DESIRES: WEALTH. POWER. INFLUENCE. PRIDE IN ACCOMPLISHMENT.

THE THINKING OF JOHN OF THE CROSS, IN THIS REGARD, IS OFTEN A CAUSE OF DISTRESS FOR MANY OF US.

AND, WE MIGHT VERY WELL RESPOND BY SAYING, “WHAT’S WRONG WITH LIVING A LIFE, WHOSE PURPOSE IS TO MAKE ME HAPPY, ABLE TO DO WHAT I WANT, FOCUSED ON MY OWN GOALS AND ASPIRATIONS – AS LONG AS I DON’T HURT ANYONE ELSE? WHAT’S WRONG WITH NOT WANTING TO FEEL WEAK, GUILTY OR FRAIL, BUT INSTEAD POWERFUL, DOMINANT, SUPERIOR?”

OR, WE MIGHT PROTEST, “I HAVE A RIGHT TO TAKE PRIDE IN MY ACCOMPLISHMENTS, I DID IT ON MY OWN. NO ONE GAVE ME WELFARE. NO ONE HELPED ME. I DID IT ALL BY MYSELF.

WELL, THINK ABOUT IT FOR A MOMENT...IS IT REALLY OK TO PURSUE SELFISH DISTRACTIONS SO LONG AS WE DON’T HURT EACH OTHER? THAT SEEMS LIKE A VERY LOW BAR, DOESN’T IT? AND, HONESTLY, DID WE REALLY STITCH TOGETHER OUR SUCCESSFUL, BY HUMAN STANDARDS ANYWAY, OUR SUCCESSFUL LIVES ALL BY OURSELVES?

AND, AFTER ALL, WHAT DO WE LIVE OUR LIVES FOR ANYWAY? IS IT FOR UNBRIDLED SELF-INDULGENCE? DOES A SINGLE-MINDED FOCUS ON OURSELVES TRULY BRING US HAPPINESS? DO WEALTH, POWER AND CONTROL LEAD US TO BLISS AND JOY?

WE KNOW FULL WELL THAT THE THINGS WE OFTEN COVET IN LIFE DO NOT BRING US HAPPINESS OR PEACE. ON THE CONTRARY. WE SEE PROOF OF THIS EVERYDAY, BUT ARE SEDUCED REPEATEDLY NONETHELESS.

JOHN OF THE CROSS POSES THESE QUESTIONS TO EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US, MINDFUL OF THE DIFFICULTIES OF LIVING A TRUE CHRISTIAN LIFE IN A SECULAR WORLD. BUT ALSO VERY AWARE THAT GENUINE HAPPINESS LIES IN DOING JUST THAT! IN LIVING A TRUE CHRISTIAN LIFE. A TRUE CHRISTIAN LIFE THAT COMES ABOUT THROUGH DETACHMENT FROM THOSE ERRANT THINGS VALUED SO MUCH BY SOCIETY AND ATTACHMENT TO THE LOVE OF GOD'S BEAUTIFUL CREATION AND CREATURES.

PERHAPS WE SHOULD STEP BACK AND ASK OURSELVES THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION: "WHY ARE WE HERE? ON THIS EARTH? AT THIS PARTICULAR TIME? IN THIS PAINFULLY SHORT LIFE?"

AND WE KNOW THE ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS.

WE HAVE BEEN PUT ON THIS EARTH TO RETURN TO GOD, OUR FATHER. AND TO DO SO, WE KNOW THAT WE MUST DO NOTHING LESS THAN IMITATE, WITH THE HELP OF GRACE AND TO THE BEST OF OUR ABILITY, THE LIFE OF CHRIST – WHICH IS THE VERY OPPOSITE OF THE SELF-CENTERED LIFE, THE VERY OPPOSITE OF A SMUG PRIDEFUL PRESENCE, THE VERY OPPOSITE OF AN INWARD FOCUS ON SELF-SATISFACTION.

IN THE END, IT MUST BE EVIDENT TO US THAT WE CANNOT RETURN TO THE FATHER FOLLOWING A ROAD THAT IS MARKED ONLY BY CONCERN AND CARE FOR OURSELVES.

GOOD AND FAITHFUL CATHOLICS THOUGH WE MAY BE, WE STILL CANNOT HELP BUT BE BOMBARDED WITH MESSAGES THAT PROMOTE A CULTURE OF EGOTISM AND SELFISHNESS.

AFTER ALL, WE HAVE ALL THE THINGS OUR SOCIETY SAYS WE SHOULD HAVE: SUCCESSFUL CAREERS, MONEY IN THE BANK, STANDING IN THE COMMUNITY. YET WE SUFFER FROM ANXIETY, DEPRESSION, INSECURITY AND FEAR. WHEN THE SCALES FINALLY FALL FROM OUR EYES, WE LASH OUT AT SOCIETY'S FALSE PROMISES WITH ANGER, SULLENNESS AND JEALOUSY. WE CARRY TALES ABOUT OTHERS POINTING OUT THEIR WEAKNESSES AND FAULTS, THINKING THAT, BY SO DOING, OUR OWN SHORTCOMINGS WILL BE LESS NOTICED.

WE ARE NOT AT PEACE, THOUGH WE MAY HAVE SINGLE-MINDEDLY PURSUED OUR OWN INTERESTS, AS IF THIS WOULD BRING US THE TRANQUILITY WE LONG FOR. WE ARE NOT AT PEACE, THOUGH WE MAY HAVE PERSISTENTLY GRASPED AT A MISGUIDED SELF-FULFILLMENT, AS IF IT WERE THE HOLY GRAIL. NO, WE ARE STILL NOT AT PEACE, THOUGH WE MAY HAVE FOLLOWED THE RULES AND LIVED THE WAY OUR CULTURE TELLS US TO LIVE.

MORE THAN EVER, CATHOLIC CHRISTIANS ARE RADICALS. WE ARE COUNTER-CULTURAL. WE REBEL AGAINST A CULTURE THAT PROMISES US PEACE AND JOY BY PURSUING OUR OWN, NARROW PRIVATE GOALS – NEITHER HARMING NOR HEEDING ANYONE ELSE. A CULTURE THAT PERMITS EVERYTHING AND BANS NOTHING -- UNLESS IT INFRINGES ON ANOTHER'S NOTION OF SELF. A CULTURE THAT TELLS US OUR VALUES BELONG INSIDE THE CHURCH AND NOT FOR DISCUSSION IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE.

IN THE COMING DAYS, ON THIS RETREAT, WE HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY, WITH THE AID OF A GREAT DESCENDING SILENCE, TO LOOK AT OUR LIVES AND EXAMINE THEM IN RELATIONSHIP TO CHRIST. IT IS ENTIRELY COUNTER-CULTURAL THAT WE TAKE STOCK OF OUR FAILURES AND WEAKNESSES, THAT WE ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR THOSE WEAKNESSES, AND THAT WE SEEK GOD'S MERCY AND THE PEACE OF CHRIST.

WE KNOW WHEN WE ARE AT PEACE AND WHEN WE ARE NOT. WE ARE NOT AT PEACE WHEN WE ARE ANXIOUS, NERVOUS OR WORRIED ABOUT OUR FAMILIES, OUR FINANCES, OUR JOBS, OR OUR HEALTH. IF PEACEFULNESS IS BEING OVERWHELMED BY ANXIETY IN OUR BEING, THEN IT MAY WELL BE THAT OUR FAITH IS FAILING US – OR AT LEAST FALTERING.

HOW MANY, MANY TIMES DID JESUS TRY TO CALM HIS FOLLOWERS, URGING THEM NOT TO BE ANXIOUS, NOT TO WORRY. REASSURING THEM THAT GOD PROVIDES FOR HIS CHILDREN. HE ANSWERS THEIR PRAYERS. HE CARES FOR THEM LIKE SO MANY HELPLESS SHEEP.

SEEN THROUGH THIS LENS, ONE MIGHT SAY THAT ANXIETY IS NOTHING MORE THAN A SUBTLE FORM OF ATHEISM. AND TO READY OURSELVES FOR PEACE AND FOR THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD IN CONTEMPLATION AND PRAYER, WE MUST BANISH THIS ANXIETY AND ALL THE DOUBTS IT SPAWNS. WE MUST DETACH OURSELVES FROM THE DESIRE AND NEED OF SECULAR VALUES AND GOALS. WE MUST, AS JOHN OF THE CROSS, SAYS, "MAKE ROOM FOR GOD."

FOR WE CANNOT FORGET, SAYS JOHN, THAT , IN LIFE, GOD APPROACHES US. GOD IS KNOCKING ON OUR DOORS. IT'S NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND. SO WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO? MAKE SPACE. MAKE SPACE FOR GOD IN OUR LIVES AND IN OUR HEARTS, AND HE WILL ENTER. THE MOST IMPORTANT ACTIVITY IN PRAYER BELONGS NOT TO US, BUT TO GOD.

NOW, HOW DO WE KNOW IF WE ARE PROGRESSING IN OUR PRAYER LIFE, THAT WE ARE MAKING ROOM FOR GOD? WELL, FIRST JOHN TELLS US WHAT SPIRITUAL PROGRESS IS NOT! IT IS NOT MEASURED BY THE AMOUNT OF GROUND WE COVER. THAT IS, THE NUMBER OF PRAYERS WE SAY OR NOVENAS WE RECITE. IT DOES NOT MEAN A DOUR, JOYLESS FOLLOWING OF THE RULES. IT IS NOT EVEN ABOUT PERFECTING OURSELVES.

FOR JOHN, SPIRITUAL PROGRESS IN LIFE IS MEASURED BY THE AMOUNT OF SPACE, THE AMOUNT OF ROOM, THAT WE GIVE GOD TO MANEUVER WITHIN OUR BEING. IT IS MEASURED BY THE EXTENT OF OUR OPENNESS TO THE INFLOWING OF GOD. IT MEANS

SEARCHING FOR THE ONE. ALLOWING MYSELF TO BE FOUND BY THE ONE WHO GIVES JOY TO MY LIFE.

YES, JOHN TALKS ABOUT DETACHMENT FROM SECULAR VALUES AND ASPIRATIONS, ABOUT THE ROLE OF SILENCE IN MAKING SPACE FOR GOD. BUT MAKE NO MISTAKE. FOR JOHN OF THE CROSS ALL GOD'S CREATION IS BEAUTIFUL. PEOPLE, ART, NATURE...HE IS NOT SO CONCERNED ABOUT THE PEOPLE OR THINGS THAT WE LOVE. HE IS MORE CONCERNED THAT WE HAVE LOVING HEARTS, FOR IT IS LOVING HEARTS THAT FREE THE WORLD FROM SLAVERY TO SECULAR VALUES AND THAT FREE THE WORLD FROM BONDAGE TO DISORDERED ATTACHMENTS.

SO WHEN JOHN TALKS ABOUT MAKING THE HEART READY, WITH SPACE, TO RECEIVE GOD IN CONTEMPLATION AND PRAYER, HE IS NOT TALKING ABOUT GIVING THINGS UP OR DENYING OURSELVES SOME PARTICULAR THING. BECAUSE, HE REMINDS US, THAT WE CAN GIVE THINGS UP, BUT IN OUR HEARTS AND SOULS WE CAN STILL BE CRAVING THEM. AND WITH THAT CONTINUED CRAVING, WE MAKE NO ROOM FOR GOD.

JOHN IS TELLING US NOT THAT THIS WORLD'S THINGS ARE BAD, BUT RATHER IT IS OUR RELATIONSHIP TO THOSE THINGS THAN CAN BE "OFF" OR DISTORTED. IN HIS WORD, DISORDERED.

TAKE FOR EXAMPLE THE LOVE BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE. JOHN POINTS OUT THAT THE DESIRE FOR ANOTHER CAN BECOME ENTIRELY DISORDERED, CHARACTERIZED BY POSSESSIVENESS, CONTROL OR JEALOUSY. WHEN A DESIRE IS OUT OF ORDER, IT CAUSES FATIGUE, ANXIETY, CONFUSION, GUILT – QUITE THE OPPOSITE OF THE PEACE GOD OFFERS US IN LOVE.

JOHN'S POINT IS THAT, IN THIS CASE, NEED HAS TAKEN OVER. DESIRE IS FILLING UP OUR WAKING HOURS. NEED AND DESIRE FOR PEOPLE, FOR OBJECTS, FOR HUMAN REGARD. AND ALL THIS TAKES UP SPACE, SPACE THAT CANNOT BE KEPT FREE FOR GOD.

AGAIN, THESE WORLDLY THINGS ARE NOT NECESSARILY BAD IN AND OF THEMSELVES. BUT WE BEGIN TO MAKE SPACE FOR GOD BY SAYING, "NO. I DON'T NEED THIS OR THAT THING. I NEED YOU, MY GOD. I DON'T NEED IT, NOT BECAUSE IT IS BAD IN AND OF ITSELF. BUT BECAUSE IT IS DISORDERED FOR THIS TO BE AT THE CENTER OF MY LIFE. I WANT YOU, MY GOD, AT THE CENTER OF MY LIFE."

SO JOHN IS NOT ARGUING THAT BODY, SENSES OR WORLDLY GOODS ARE INTRINSICALLY DISORDERED. NOT AT ALL. BODY AND EMOTIONS, THE BEAUTIFUL THINGS OF THE WORLD, ARE A RICH BLESSING, SAYS THE SAINT, WHEN THEY ARE DESIRED NOT SIDE BY SIDE WITH GOD, BUT WITHIN GOD. WHEN THINGS OF THE WORLD ARE SET EQUALLY ALONG SIDE GOD, THEY TEND TO TURN IMPERIALISTIC. THAT IS, THEY TEND TO DOMINATE OUR WHOLE PERSONS, ENSLAVING US AND CROWDING OUT SPACE FOR GOD.

WHEN I HAVE FREED MYSELF FROM THE NEED, THE DISORDERED DESIRE FOR THESE THINGS, WHEN I HAVE SHOWN MYSELF THAT IT IS REALLY GOD THAT I WANT....THEN I CAN RETURN TO OTHER PERSONS AND THINGS (MY RELATIONSHIPS, MY POSSESSIONS, ETC.,) FREE – NOT AS A SLAVE – BUT AS A FREE MAN OR WOMAN.

AND IN THIS WAY, WE CLEAR SPACE FOR GENUINE COMMUNION WITH GOD. IN THIS WAY, WE LIVE – NOT AS A CONSUMER, CONSTANTLY SEARCHING THE AISLES FOR THE NEXT NEW THING OR PERSON -- BUT AS A FREE PERSON AMONG PERSONS, FIT FOR COMMUNION, FOR THE NON-POSSESSIVE LOVE THAT CAN BE HELD OUT WITH OPEN HANDS TO OTHERS.

AND, BY TURNING INWARD IN SILENCE, WE COME TO REALIZE THAT THE PERSON OF CHRIST IS OUR ULTIMATE BASIS FOR ACTION. ONLY A GREAT SILENCE CAN QUIET THE ALLURING MUSIC OF WORLDLY THINGS THAT CROWD OUR SOULS AND LEAVE NO ROOM FOR GOD. ONLY A GREAT SILENCE LETS US SEE CLEARLY THAT THE MORE WE EMBRACE SOCIETY'S VALUES, THE MORE PEACE AND TRANQUILITY EVADE US. ONLY A GREAT SILENCE ALLOWS US TO RECOGNIZE THAT MAN'S SMALL, LITTLE WORLD CANNOT BE PLACED SIDE-BY-SIDE WITH THE FULLNESS OF DIVINITY, WITHOUT DISTORTING OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOD, PEOPLE AND THINGS.

BUT WHEN WE EMBRACE THAT GREAT SILENCE AND ENTER INTO IT, WE SEE THAT GOD HAS SPACE – FOR ALL OF US AND FOR EVERYTHING WE NEED.

HE CAN FIND US WHEN WE PRAY. WHEN WE TAKE HOLY COMMUNION. WHEN WE PAUSE IN FRONT OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT. HE – NOT THE WORLD OUTSIDE THE GREAT SILENCE – BUT HE, GUIDES OUR ACTIONS AND GOVERNS OUR BEINGS.

SO ON THIS RETREAT, HERE AT MALVERN, MAKE SPACE IN ORDER TO RECEIVE!

STEP FREE FROM ENSLAVEMENT!

LET A NEW LOVE INTO THE EQUATION!

PREPARE FOR THE GIFT!

ALL OF WHICH WILL COME, WITHOUT FAIL, FOR AS JOHN OF THE CROSS WROTE: WHO CAN FREE HIMSELF FROM HIS MEANNESS AND LIMITATIONS, IF YOU DO NOT LIFT HIM UP TO YOURSELF, MY GOD, IN PURITY OF LOVE? HOW WILL A PERSON, BROUGHT TO BIRTH AND NURTURED IN A WORLD OF SMALL HORIZONS, RISE UP TO YOU, LORD, IF YOU DO NOT RAISE HIM BY YOUR HAND WHICH MADE HIM?

AND HE WILL. HE WILL RAISE US UP BY THE HAND THAT MADE US. AS LONG AS WE MAKE SPACE FOR HIM.