

Spirituality of the Order of Malta

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Greetings and welcome. I've been asked to speak to you about the spirituality of Our Order, a request that I consider a great honor, as it is central to who we are and what we do, and something that many of us think about on a regular basis. So it is what we might call a "big topic". But it was also a request which I accepted with some trepidation and humility, because I am quite sure that many of you here today could address this theme with greater authority and from greater experience than I. But I take heart in the words of Isaiah: Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Who shall I send? And who shall go for us? And I said "Here I am. Send me". So here I am, a volunteer who begs your indulgence to offer a few words to guide us in this meditation on holiness and the works of the Order.

My preparation for today comes from some thirty years in the Order, almost all of it tied closely to Lourdes and its promise of God's mercy and protection. During these years I have been both a participant and an observer. Lourdes initiates a sustained meditation on the human condition: its strength and its frailty, its physical presence, its movement and its spiritual dimension.

A brief search for definition of "spirituality" brings up the following: the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things. When we recite the daily prayer of the Order, we begin with the following: Lord Jesus, Thou hast seen fit to enlist me for Thy service in the Order of St John of Jerusalem. How is it then that service directed to the bodily and the material needs of the sick and the poor open this gate to the spiritual, what we might call the Kingdom of God.

In the liturgy of this past Ash Wednesday we find these words in the first reading: The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.'" And in the 27th Psalm we hear: My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" / Your face Lord, I will seek. "

If it is holiness towards which we wish to draw near, if it is the face of God that we seek in our spiritual lives, the Order makes it possible for us to find it in the face and presence of the Other. For some of us it may mean hands on contact to provide works of corporal mercy, from gestures as simple as providing a meal, offering a glass of water, lighting a candle or escorting in procession, to more complex physical care such as feeding, bathing, dressing, changing bandages, or more. Sometimes it involves safe passage to medical centers or shrines. Sometimes the corporal works of mercy move into a different realm, so that we become administrators or managers, creating and supporting systems and programs that facilitate the care and protection of others, their feeding and clothing, creating hospice centers or disaster relief systems. The Lourdes pilgrimage is but one example of that: a complex structure that requires many different gifts, all contributing towards one spirit, for its successful undertaking.

One day I was reading about the first healing performed by Jesus at Capernaum. After many pilgrimages to Lourdes, I unexpectedly and suddenly saw something new. Here are the words of Luke's account:

"One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. ...And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

At the words "When he saw their faith..." my eyes were opened and suddenly I saw my brothers and sisters of the Order in this scene, standing by and attending to the needs of the sick at Lourdes, escorting them in procession, caring for them. They are the ones in this gospel passage who carried the paralyzed man and despite obstacles, lowered him through the tiles right in front of Jesus where he could be healed, As Fr. Dr. John Harvey, the first medical director of the Lourdes pilgrimage once said, "we get them there so that God's work can be done".

And now, I will take a side road in this meditation to tell you a story. It's a love story about a couple I knew for many years. It began as a fairy tale romance of a young woman in downtown Baltimore who grew up as a child born in America in the older Polish section of immigrant families. She could somewhat speak the old language but there was a longing in her heart for something more: part of her birthright that remained unfulfilled. She began a pen pal correspondence with a young man in Poland whom she found in a newspaper listing. He was a musician, she sang in the church choir at Holy Rosary in Baltimore, which houses the diocesan chapel of Divine Mercy. Correspondence deepened and she decided to visit him in Poland. They married and remained there for a while before returning to Baltimore where he worked as a software engineer and she began raising their three children. Then the first signs of rheumatoid arthritis began to slow her down. We would see each other at social events and I was a guest in their home from time to time. It was modest, adorned with religious statuary and devotional objects. It had a delicate atmosphere that I could feel when I crossed the threshold, as if I were entering memories of convents or my old parochial school, that feeling that there were still places of safety and sanctuary in this world. As her illness progressed and her disabilities increased, visible deformities of the illness and complications of her chronic medications set in. Daily medications and constant physical therapy were now followed by joint replacements, more operations, neck braces and a wheelchair. He remained at her side for all of it, providing much of the hands on care with grace and cheerfulness, even as the illness took its inevitable course for more than 25 years. Closer to the end, they joined our pilgrimage. A few years later, the disease had affected her upper spine and began compressing the brain stem, where swallowing and breathing mechanisms are located. And so she died one morning at home, in her own bed, with him at her side. He had never left it. A few years after her death he came to see me as a patient. As we remembered and spoke of her life, of our shared pilgrimage at Lourdes and the many years we had known each other, I reminded him of his saintly devotion. He paused, leaned forward and looked deeply into my eyes and said: "She taught me what it means to be a human being."

Twenty years ago I wrote the following words after my first twelve Lourdes pilgrimages. I'll read them to you now verbatim:

"The sick, with whom we travel to Lourdes, have already arrived at a special place before our journey together has even begun. Emily Dickinson had written that "Illness is a landscape into which each person must travel alone." It seems I find myself accompanying these people on their journey, whether in hospitals, on operating tables, or in pilgrimage. I need to accompany them. They are going on a special journey, preparing for what we all know about in part, but do not understand in full. I cannot follow them all the way. I can only stand by, until my turn comes. They have acquired an aura of sanctity. I want to be close to it, because there seems to be little of it in the everyday world, and when it is found, it is like the "Pearl of Great Price". I want to be close to this holiness, I hope that I may somehow be blessed by it. Yet the price to pay for such holiness is both great and terrifying. Somewhere there must be some source of strength to fortify me for the journey. What strength I have arises from their courage and their hope. It sustains me. When the ordinary matters of the everyday fall away like so much needless baggage carried for so long, the simplicity and the purity of the journey itself shine forth. Only the essence of the traveler remains. The pilgrim, now cleansed and bathed after the long journey, calls out to its creator, asking neither for erasure of the past, nor even restoration. It longs for acceptance. It longs for home. "The Lord is my light and my salvation," wrote the Psalmist: "Whom shall I fear?" Perhaps the sorrow and troubles of the temporal world dissolve before this kind of courage and hope. But what does it take to reach this level of understanding? "

You see, we do not just take the sick to Lourdes, they take us there, so that God's work can be done.

In his epistle, James wrote: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?"

"Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

"But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

"Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds."

In the spirituality of the Order, faith and deeds are inseparable, one sustains and nourishes the other, though we may not always be aware that our actions in the material world lead us into the spiritual dimension. But we should take heart from the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 6: "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray...go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you "

When we work alongside our brothers and sisters performing the works of the Order, we may begin to notice their goodness, their holiness, like those who lowered the paralytic man on his stretcher through the tiles at Capernaum where Jesus saw their faith. They too can inspire us, as our Lords the sick can do. They may not be conscious of what they are doing, as we may not be: our left hand unaware of what the right hand is doing. They may be inspiring us as we may be inspiring others without us even knowing it. As Maximilian Kolbe, Franciscan priest, writer, missionary and eventual martyr in the death camps at Auschwitz wrote:

"Only on judgment day shall we become aware of how many mysteries of grace took place around us and how many persons were "saved" by means of us without our having anyway dreamed of it. "

In participating in the the works of the Order, our deeds are the manifestations of our faith, and our faith grows through our deeds. Those who need us, those whom we serve, and those with whom we serve, lead us closer to holiness, closer to the Kingdom of God, where we can seek His face and follow His command: Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am Holy.

My dear brothers and sisters, I bid you a very warm welcome into the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta.