



Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time August 8, 2010 C

CONCRETE SUGGESTIONS FOR DEALING WITH FEAR AND OTHER INNER DEMONS

Today's Gospel begins with the exhortation: "Fear not, little flock." Elsewhere Jesus said: "Fear is useless, what is needed is trust."

Fear is a huge topic and I have much to learn about its nature, its extent, and how to deal with it in a constructive way. The following are some thoughts on fear. If you have additional insights on this universal emotion, I would love to hear from you.

Fear is the feeling of anxiety caused by the presence or pending presence of danger. The danger could be *physical* (e.g. fear of an abusive spouse or a health issue); *spiritual* (e.g. fear of losing God, fear of going to hell); *mental* (e.g. fear of losing one's mind); *emotional* (e.g. fear of losing a loved one); or *moral* (e.g. fear of getting caught for cheating, lying, etc.).

We fear all kinds of things: we fear losing our health, our job, a family member or a good friend. We fear living alone and dying alone. We fear rejection, failure, losing money. We may fear intimacy or being abandoned.

Many of our fears go unrecognized because, like other unpleasant emotions, we *repress* them. Sometimes we (especially men) *deny* our fears. It is not macho to feel fear. We may do well by sporting a shirt with a big **FEARLESS** sign scrolled across it to hide our fear.

Reflection question: Can you *name* your three strongest fears?

Fear—the enemy of growth, freedom and joy

Nothing hinders our spiritual and psychological growth as much as fear. Reluctance or resistance to take on new challenges or changes in our lives due to fear can keep us spiritually and emotionally immature. For instance, I believe that the main reason, among other excuses, why many men and women would not attend the Weekend Retreat is fear—fear of the unknown, fear of leaving their comfort zone, fear of sharing their thoughts and feelings, fear of feeling inadequate. Our fears hold us in bondage and prevent us from experiencing the freedom given to us as children of God. Fear also steals our joy.

It is hard to live happily and in peace if a bunch of fears are running havoc in our inner being.

Fear and anger

Fear is often connected to and confused with anger. A man loses his job and says: *I didn't feel fear when I lost my job. I was angry!* But fear is a natural reaction in such a situation due to the uncertainty of what will happen next.

Psychologist Dr. Michael Cavanaugh writes: *Most angry feelings rebound off feelings of fright. Most 'hostile' people are frightened people; most 'arrogant' people are frightened; most 'snobbish' people are frightened. When we can understand this, it opens up a new dimension of relating to ourselves and to others. If when I'm angry, I can ask myself; "Underneath my anger, what part of me is frightened by what just happened?" and "What just occurred that threatened my self-concept?" I will have more data with which to understand myself and to communicate this fear to the source of the threat. We will also relate differently with one another if we view the person as frightened rather than hostile. If we view a person as hostile, we often react with hostility, reinforcing his or her fears and generating more hostility. If people are relating on the anger level when the problem lies on the fear level, a successful resolution of the conflict is unlikely. This is not to say that all anger can be traced to fear, but a good deal of it can."*

Seven suggestions for dealing with fear

1. *Name the fear.* If the fear is not clear to you, take time to *name* what it is you are afraid of. Sometimes we feel fearful but we really don't know why. Taking time to *name* exactly what we are anxious or fearful about can be very helpful. We may discover that what is causing a lump in our stomach is nothing to be fearful about. Sometimes it is easy enough to pinpoint the reason why we are scared, but often many of our fears are related to traumatic childhood events. For example, fear about relationships may stem from bad and painful relational experiences during our younger years. Fear about God is nearly always related to our early religious formation. Some counselors, through hypnosis, can get their subject to remember past experiences that are buried deep within the subconscious mind.

2. *Own the fear.* All too often, we deny or repress our fears or minimize their presence. Acknowledging our fears is key to dealing with them. It is good and healthy to say out loud: *I feel scared about....—I am fearful of....—I am as mad as hell at....—I am jealous of....*

3. *Befriend or be present to your fears or other negative feelings.* Psychologists and spiritual guides encourage us to “befriend our shadow,” that dark side or part of us that we tend to deny or keep in the closet and never relate to. The more we deny or repress our dark side, the more power it will have in our lives. Whether we like it or not, undealt-with hurts and fears will impact in negative ways our personal relationships and other aspects of our lives. Fear, anger, hate, jealousy—all have a powerful ability to steal our joy, hold us back, and prevent us from living free and happy lives.

How do we befriend our shadow or fears? Firstly, by acknowledging their presence and, secondly, by being present to them. Counselors often encourage their subject *to sit with the fear*, to take time to feel the fear. Uncomfortable or unruly feelings and obsessions seek our attention much like a child who misbehaves to call a parent’s attention. When we make an effort to simply be present to our fears or to that part of us that we have a difficulty accepting, we have taken the first important step towards befriending the hostile emotions we harbor.

Journaling is said to be the best form of self-therapy—and it costs nothing. This simple exercise of writing down how we truly feel about things is an excellent way to befriend our fears and to come to terms with them. Some of you may have read my book *Prayer—A Handbook for Today’s Catholics*. On page 35, you will find a simple example of my own attempt to communicate with the feeling of anger. Developing the ability to tame the ugly beast in us that we tend to reject (which includes our body parts) will help us to move forward in our spiritual and psychological journey.

4. *Share your fear with a trusted friend.* The decision to share an uncomfortable feeling with a trusted friend can be very helpful. When we take this step, we bring our fears out into the light from the deep recesses of our hearts where we keep them hidden.

5. *Pray for and develop the virtues of courage and trust.* St. Augustine said: “Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you.” When faced with fear, we should pray for courage, and trust that all things work for the good for those who love the Lord. With that in mind, we will find it easier to plan our next steps.

Like many people, I have had to struggle with fear all of my life—fear of new experiences, fear of failure and rejection, fear of conflict and confrontation, fear of getting emotionally close to another, fear of abandonment, fear of God, etc.

The two virtues or dispositions which have helped me to deal with my fears are courage and trust. When I am confronted with fear, I am being called to flex my courage and trust muscles to:

- try new experiences;
- confront and deal with a difficult relationship or situation;
- write a column or preach a homily that I may feel fearful or timid about;
- share my inner thoughts and experiences with others;
- trust that God is in charge and nothing can destroy me, not even death.

Dealing with our fears on a daily basis offers us the opportunity to grow spiritually and psychologically. Someone said: *I have been terrified all my life, but that has not stopped me from doing everything I wanted to do.*

Many parishioners need to overcome their fear of joining the Weekend Retreat, and should make the commitment, however frightening it may be for them. The same goes for those who may have a talent to give a talk but are consumed by stage fright.

Reflection Question: Can you name a fear that is presently hindering your spiritual and psychological growth?

6. *Take action.* We can allow our fears to paralyze us or we can confront them. Taking action in the face of fear will help to build our courage. The choice is always ours. And the choice we make will determine whether we grow spiritually and psychologically, or stagnate.

Take, for example, the fear of water or fear of heights which many of us have. We can allow the fear to overpower us and rob us of the pleasure of swimming or mountain climbing (or other such activities), or we can confront our fear and take the necessary action to deal with it.

For those of us who suffer from aquaphobia or the fear of water, one thing to keep in mind is that water, by nature, will hold us up regardless of our weight or height. The first time we go into a swimming pool, we should get a buddy or a professional swimmer to coach us on how to approach our fear of the water with a view

to learning to swim. With faith and a lot of practice, we will conquer our fear and discover the fun of being in the water. What was previously an enemy has become our friend. The same is true as we work with failures, hurts and losses in our lives. We should face them and do whatever it takes to heal those wounds and facilitate our spiritual and psychological growth. Failure to confront our monsters can only worsen our already miserable situation. It has been well said that we are the sum total of our decisions. Daily, we make commitments and compromises that either help or hinder our growth physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually.

7. *Entrust your fears to the Lord.* There are a lot of potential and real fears that we have no control over—job and material security, sickness, accidents, relationships (family and friends), loss of loved ones, etc. We must pray and offer these fears to God, and at the same time, work at developing an attitude accepting that: *Yes, I may lose my job but who knows what doors will open up for me? or I may lose my spouse but many of my friends who have lost theirs seem to cope pretty well. I trust that God will get me through this loss just as he got me through past losses.* A well cultivated faith in God will help us to sit before him and let go of our fears to him. With a strong faith, we can say with the psalmist, “though I walk in the valley of darkness, I fear no evil for you are with me.”

Reflection questions: How do you generally deal with your fears? Is it your tendency to ignore and deny fear? Or do you tend to confront your fears and do what you can to deal with them in a constructive way?

Commenting on today’s Gospel, Patricia Sanchez writes: *Fully aware that fear is at the root of many human difficulties, Jesus counseled his followers to live unfettered by its grip. Fear of want can foster greed and instigate hoarding. Fear of the unknown can instill a cowardice that refuses to live freely and fully. Inordinate fear of God can stifle the ability to enter into a mature and personal relationship with him. Fear of enemies, more often than not, engenders more of them. Fear of the future relegates the frightened one to live in the past, finding false refuge in nostalgia. As a remedy for these crippling and twisted fears, Jesus recommended faith and trust in the God who loves each believer, sees to every need and wills only goodness and blessings.*

Living in the Great Depression and threatened by the Third Reich, Franklin D. Roosevelt, crippled by polio, had much to fear. Instead of being fearful, Roosevelt, in his Inaugural Address, said: “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Someone else reflecting on fear writes:

*Fear may be compared to a fungus
which grows in the dark,
but when exposed to the light,
dries up and disintegrates.
When we live fearfully, our pace slows,
and we expect to be injured.
We expect to find demons where there are none.
What we do not understand, we tend to fear.
What we fear we tend to devalue.
What we devalue soon becomes a devil.*

“Fears are educated into us, and can, if we wish, be educated out.” (Dr. Karl Menninger)

“Fear is a good counselor, and victory over fear is the first spiritual duty of man.” (Nikolai Berdyaev)

“Do not fear God, who wishes you no harm, but love him a great deal, who wishes you so much good.”
(St. Francis of Sales)

“Fear imprisons, faith liberates; fear paralyses, faith empowers; fear disheartens, faith encourages; fear sickens, faith heals; fear makes useless, faith makes serviceable—and, most of all, fear puts hopelessness at the heart of life, while faith rejoices in its God.”
(Harry Emerson Fosdick)

Exercise

Name one fear that you presently struggle with and would like to overcome. See if the steps suggested in this column can help you to deal with your fear. If you think not, consider going to a counselor or else come see me and we’ll try to work at it.

Reflection questions: What helps you the most to deal with your fears? Has anything *not* mentioned in this column helped you? If so, please share with me.

Have a great week,

Le Paron