



Fourth Sunday of Lent B March 11, 2018

- ◆ **The call to leave the darkness and move into the Light of Christ**
- ◆ **Annemarie Scobey shares why she is passionately Catholic even though she does not embrace all of the Church's teachings**

The following are some reflections on today's Gospel.

Are You A Twilight Christian? (by Fr. Flor McCarthy, SDB)

Some years ago when I was doing a course in London, I got involved in a small way in the work of the Simon Community. We would meet in the night shelter around eleven o'clock to prepare soup and sandwiches. On the stroke of twelve, we would take these and go in search of poor unfortunates who, for one reason or another, did not want to come to the shelter. They spent their nights mostly in derelict buildings.

The most important aid we took with us was a torch. Without this we would be lost, for there was no light in the haunts and hovels of the winos and meths drinkers. When you opened a door you never knew what to expect. Perhaps the room was empty, perhaps not. But there were two main reactions to the light when you shone it into a room where some of these people were gathered.

Some knew at once that we are from Simon, and they welcomed us as friends. To them the light meant hot soup, food, and friendly chat. It meant goodbye, at least for a while, to darkness and loneliness. Some of them would cling to us so that it was often difficult to get away from them.

But others did not want to know us. As soon as the light shone into the room where they were, they shouted at us to switch it off. Light was the last thing they wanted. They were fearful and suspicious, as they were on the run from the police. Generally, they refused our offer of soup and food, and told us to clear off in no uncertain terms.

There were those then who welcomed us and our offer of help, and those who refused to have anything to do with us. You could tell at once which group you were

dealing with by their reaction to the light. Though the last thing we intended was to judge them, yet in a sense the light did judge them. Confronted with the light they gave themselves away. The light revealed where they stood.

That's what St. John in his Gospel said about the coming of Christ. Christ came into the world as an envoy of the Father's love and mercy. He did not come to judge people but to save them—"to seek out and to save the lost," as he put it himself. He came bearing a light—the light of truth, goodness, love... Love comes more naturally with two basic reactions to his light.

There were those who longed for his light and who welcomed it with generosity and enthusiasm. These were the people who believed in him and who came to him. The Gospel is full of examples. Surprisingly, it was people who were living in darkness who welcomed him most warmly. Think of the tax collectors and sinners with whom he shared himself.

But others rejected him. His light was a threat to them. It was not only really evil people who didn't want to know him, but people who considered themselves holy, such as the Pharisees. His light proved a threat to these. It showed up the darkness of their pretense, self-righteousness and pride.

As for us: in a real way light and darkness (good and evil) are fighting for possession of our souls. We are divided within ourselves. There is darkness in each of us—the darkness of pride, selfishness, lust, anger... Evil exercises a hold over us. It has a certain fascination for us. We must not be afraid to confront the darkness within us. We must let the light of Christ shine into it and scatter it.

But there is goodness in us, too. We are also attracted to the light—the light of truth, goodness, love... Love comes more naturally to us than hate. We should trust this goodness and try to follow it. The light of Christ will help us to do so.

But perhaps the greatest danger facing us is that we might settle for some in-between state—a kind of twilight existence. Twilight has a certain attractiveness about it. It is a world of blurred edges. It guarantees us

anonymity, while at the same time, providing us with enough light to see.

In practice this means that we would try to have the best of both worlds. We would have a foot in either camp. We never decisively declare for the light. We never totally opt for the dark, but we do dabble in it. What are we left with? A mediocre person. Neither a great saint nor a great sinner. A person incapable of either great cowardice or great courage. Those who are in darkness may one day see the light and welcome it. But the twilighters? We can teach them the glory of the light,

At some stage in our following of Christ we must opt to follow his light fully and generously. If we do, we will find that our lives will be lit up by his grace, peace, love, and freedom. As a friend of mine who made such an option said: "The darkness lifted from my life."

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A final judgement that will lead to heaven or hell

In today's Gospel, Jesus says:

"This is the judgment: that the light came into the world but people preferred darkness to light...."

The Church's teaching on hell is twofold: it exists and we cannot say for certain if there's anyone in hell. During his public ministry, Jesus was very clear about the existence of hell (see Mark 9:43-48, Matthew 25:31-46). Jesus spoke about hell to warn people about the terrible consequences of rejecting him and his message. Hell is eternal life without God, which Jesus says is like living in an "unquenchable fire" (Mark 9:43).

Hell is not so much God punishing unbelievers and bad people; hell is the consequence of choosing to knowingly and deliberately live one's life without any reference to God. It is the deliberate choice to reject Jesus and his message, even though we know Jesus comes from God.

The great international statesman and Christian, Dag Hammarskjöld, once said:

"We die on the day when our lives cease to be illuminated by the steady radiance renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond reason."

GOD'S WORK OF ART

In our second reading today, Paul tells us that we are God's work of art. In other words, we are not a mistake. We are created in God's image and likeness. Before there was Original Sin, there was Original Goodness. As

the Marriage Encounter people say, "God doesn't make junk." The challenge for all of us is to believe in our hearts that we are as good as Paul tells us. How do we do this? I do not have any clear-cut technique. Perhaps when negative voices rise up within us we can counteract them with the wonderful affirmation given to us by Paul: We are God's Work of Art.

Annamarie Scobey shares why she is passionately Catholic even though she doesn't agree with everything the Church teaches

My friend recently asked me in an email conversation why I stay in the Catholic Church. "If that sounds confrontational, it's not," he wrote in his email. "At least not yet. I am genuinely curious."

My friend was raised Catholic but is not currently a practicing member of any religion. He credits the Jesuits with saving his life in high school, and he went to Georgetown University for undergrad and married a Catholic woman he met there. They now have four children. His wife is still a practicing Catholic and brings the younger kids to Mass and religious education. My husband Bill and I are godparents to their third child.

My friend's question is a fair one. He's not asking why I'm Christian or questioning my faith in God; he's asking me why I belong to a religion that has some elements with which he knows I disagree.

He knows, for example, that I believe the church should ordain married people of both genders, along with men and women who choose celibacy. He knows I believe the question of birth control and family planning is complex and should not be simplified into a one-size-fits-all teaching. He knows that because Bill and I have adopted from the U.S. foster care system, we have a depth of understanding of the ramifications of all types of child abuse. Yet we have chosen to stay with a church whose leaders failed to protect children from the most egregious of abuse. He knows I hold dear our gay friends and colleagues—that I believe they should be as welcome at the eucharistic table as they are at our own dining room table.

And yet I'm Catholic. Passionately Catholic. And I could no more change to another Christian religion than I could peel off my skin and exchange it for a different tone with a better hue.

Why am I Catholic? I may not embrace or even agree with all the teachings of the church, but I believe in all the sacraments. I believe in God's grace working through them. I've felt the grace; I've seen it.

When each one of my children was baptized, the grace washed over the whole family—connecting our new little child to us, as parents and their first teachers, back to their grandparents, and to the grace of their great grandparents. Baptism, our first gift of faith to our children, a tidal welcome into life eternal.

I've received communion and have been grateful for the grace that carried me through a difficult relationship. I know it was eucharistic grace that allowed me to be able to reach beyond the angry words I wanted to say to a difficult person, to the better words I needed to say to begin to heal the relationship.

I've felt the grace present in the sacrament of reconciliation. I've seen my children leave the church after going to reconciliation feeling more peaceful, acting more loving, trying harder to be who they are called to be. Not leaving the church perfect, by any means—none of us do—but coming out of the sacrament, still imperfect, but full of grace. I remember Liam running around the parking lot of the church when he was about 8, after his first reconciliation, yelling, "I feel so light!" I have felt that lightness, too. It is grace.

It is marriage where I've probably felt sacramental grace most strongly. Bill and I continue to turn to our vows, to our promise to God, to each other. I've seen the grace in my parents' 50-year marriage—two people with completely different personalities who bring out the best in one another. I see the same grace in the marriages of my friends. One friend, whose husband made a hurtful choice, responded by upping her prayer, turning to her husband, and recognizing not only her own pain, but his. She allowed his poor choice to propel them together more in search of God, rather than let his behavior be a reason to drift apart. I watched their grace, and it made me weep.

Some sacraments seem under-utilized. We do not need to reserve the sacrament of the sick for the dying. Any serious problem—mental, physical, emotional—can be a reason to receive the sacrament. I asked that my daughter Jamie be anointed when she was 1—not because she seemed sick, but because I knew of her past history before she came to us as a foster child. I knew healing was needed. I asked for it. I felt the grace. I feel it now. In 14-year-old Jamie's exuberant presence is God's grace.

And then there's ordination, God's profound grace. Some of the most influential, inspirational people Bill and I have ever had the pleasure of knowing and listening to are (or were) priests. These amazing people, in their homilies and in the way they live (or lived) their lives, inspired the decisions we have made and have deepened our own faith journey. Holy orders is a

beautiful, grace-filled sacrament. It's just not expansive enough—we could have even more grace-filled people leading our church.

And speaking of grace-filled leaders, what about those sisters? I'm Catholic because I stand in awe of the strong, independent, creative women so often at the helm of our Catholic schools, hospitals, and social service agencies. Yes, many of them are retired now, and fewer women are entering orders, mostly because Catholic women today have so many more options than young women did decades ago. These sisters were ahead of their time as leaders. In choosing to forego marriage and family, they were able to experience the greater world in a way uncommon to many women. And in doing so, they lifted us all.

I couldn't say all this to my friend in my email, because the email came in at work, and I didn't have time to respond. But I can say it now. I can explain that I stay in the Catholic Church because of God's grace present in the sacraments. I have seen how this has led to prayer, service, and goodness in the world. This grace is present in Catholic social teaching, a beautiful set of letters and documents about how we are called to serve our world in a very concrete and practical way.

I am part of the Catholic Church because I see God's people, nourished by the sacraments, anointed with oil, splashed with the water of baptism, serving God in great numbers. They teach in schools, work for change, bring about good in the public and private sector. They house refugees and give food and shelter to the needy. They bandage the hurt and the broken, give medicine to the ill, and visit those in prison. They speak out against injustice. I see them, and I strive to use my God-given grace as well as they do. That's why I'm Catholic.

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Reflection:

Why are you Catholic? I would love for you to share your answer with me.

Have a blessed week,

