

Father Joe

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As we reflect on our life, most of us fondly recall mentors that gave us a needed direction at a critical time in our lives. I have certainly been so blessed. I think of Dr. Marty Lowrey, PhD who inspired me to study for the sake of learning. William S. Cosentino was my great mentor in the business world. He showed me that business integrity was fully compatible with business success. Most of all, I am indebted to Fr. Joseph Finney, C.M.¹ who had a profound influence on my life in a very unexpected way and with very few words. In order to explain his unique role, I need to reminisce on events that led up to the time when I had reached the ripe old age of nineteen.

I grew up in a devout Christian home and received a solid Catholic education. In grammar school we used the Baltimore Catechism, which I memorized completely. This was the result of daily drilling by my mother and father, because they were told I would not be confirmed unless I knew my Catechism. I must confess, that at this stage my priority was on sports and friends, not classes and study. Athletic eligibility was my driving goal academically.

I inherited the religious identity of my family much like I inherited being a U.S. citizen. Religion was just a subject I studied. Attending Sunday Mass was something Catholics did. Becoming an altar server livened things up and made the Mass interesting. But my Christianity was on the periphery of my life. I suppose I was merely a cultural Catholic. By the time I reached high school, sports, my buddies and a girl friend were the important things! My relationship with God was distant, something in my head, but not my heart. I knew God loved me, because God loves everyone. It never occurred to me that God loved me very specifically.

Although I wanted to go to heaven, something I didn't think much about, it was because the alternative was too horrible to contemplate – not that I thought much about hell either. I knew keeping the commandments was the necessary requirement; something like two-a-day football practices in August in the heat and humidity of New Orleans. It was something we had to endure to make the team and play the game. I liked my life, but there was a nagging sense that something was missing.

A major shift occurred in my junior year of high school, when I entered a boarding school in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. It was a wonderful experience. The academics were challenging, so I actually began to seriously study. Best of all, it was a haven for sports lovers, as we played everything. The school also provided a solid spiritual structure of daily Mass, morning and night prayers, and other helpful spiritual exercises.

¹ C.M. stands for the Congregation of the Missions, a community of priests and brothers formed by St. Vincent De Paul. Popularly, the members of this community are called Vincentians after their founder.

Like ninety-five percent² of teenage boys I was grappling with chastity issues, so the spiritual formation was a great help.

Upon graduation, I moved on to a five-year college program. That's where I met Fr. Joe. His full name is Fr. Joseph Finney, C.M. Fr. Joe had been very sickly his whole life. The rumor was that at the time of his ordination he was given a used set of the Divine Office³, because his superiors didn't believe he would live very long. This recalls the proverb: "Man proposes, but God who disposes." Fr. Joe lived to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his ordination. I was nineteen when I was first assigned to serve Mass for Fr. Joe. He was quite feeble. His gate was slow and careful, he could not genuflect nor could he raise his arms very high during the elevations. His voice was raspy due to an unnamed medical problem.

Kneeling behind him at a small side altar in the parish church as he said Mass was electrifying. What started out as a broken, crippled man reciting the Mass prayers became a transforming angelic experience as the whole atmosphere around him seemed to become holy and sacred. When it came to the two times before and after the consecration when he offered his private prayers, I was transfixed as I listened intently as he poured out his love for God and asked the blessed Mother to help him love her Son better. He was totally unaware that his whispering could be overheard. I had never heard anyone speak about God with such an intense love. Up to that point, I don't recall that I ever told God that I loved him. Perhaps I thought these sentiments were too mundane for prayer. Listening to Fr. Joe voicing his great love for Jesus was so profoundly moving the tears flowed down my face. For the first time I made a prayer that I have repeated many times since: "Teach me to love your Son like that."

I only knew Fr. Joe a few years before his death. We never had a single conversation. My words were limited to, "Good morning, Father," when I met him in the sacristy and "You are welcome" when he thanked me at the end of Mass. Yet the memory of his passionate love for Jesus has never left me. He made me realize that true religion and active faith is about a deep transforming relationship. The memory of my experience serving Fr. Joe's Mass pulls me back on track when I seem to be veering away. In some way it is as if his example pulls me back to the right path.

The recollection of my experience at the age of nineteen is triggered by recent data that shows many Christians, Catholic and non-Catholic, would not be able to describe their lived relationship with God to this point in their life. Studies show that this is true even for many who are active in their parish or church. Evangelical non-Catholics use an expression that I like very much: "Accepting Jesus as one's Lord and Savior." It addresses a relationship that should animate every Christian. It bespeaks of a choice, the decision to become a disciple. In the language of Texas Hold'em, it says "I'm all in."

² The other five percent are lying!

³ Books that contain Psalms, other Scripture passages and prayers that priests say daily.

It's a commitment that must be lived on a daily basis. Studies also show that when a Christian does not have an intense personal love for Jesus, something is radically lacking. This passive and impotent Christianity is a reason Christians as a whole are not able to stem the tide of paganism that is sweeping the land. In contrast, my experience with Fr. Joe demonstrates the power of example that is captured in Edgar Guest's little poem, "The Sermon."

I'd rather see a sermon
Than hear one any day.
I'd rather one should walk with me,
Than merely show the way.
The eye's a better pupil
And more willing than the ear.
Fine council is confusing,
But example's always clear.

And the best of all the preachers,
Are the men who live their creeds.
For to see the good in action,
Is what everybody needs.
I can soon learn how to do it,
If you'll let me see it done.
I can watch your hands in action,
But your tongue too fast may run.

And the lecture you deliver
May be very wise and true,
But I'd rather get my lesson
By observing what you do.
For I may misunderstand you
And the high advice you give,
But there is no misunderstanding,
How you act and how you live.

Postscript

The more one studies the inspired text of the Bible, the more one discovers that the sacred pages portray the greatest love story ever written, God's amazing love for humans. The covenant, which is the marvelous theme weaving in and out of the book from Genesis to Revelation, depicts this relationship as a marriage. Hosea looks to the advent of the Messiah. "And in that day, says the Lord, you will call me, 'My husband,' and no longer will you call me, 'My Ba'al [master]'" (Hos 2:16). Isaiah also looked to the triumphant restoration of the Messiah. "Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be put to shame; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your

Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called" (Is 54:4-5). In the Song of Songs God inspired a beautiful love poem that captures his ecstatic love for us and his longing for union. It exemplifies the intimacy to which we are all called. In the New Testament, John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the Heavenly Husband (Jn 3:29), and the Book of Revelation depicts heaven as the eternally joyous "Marriage supper" of the Lamb (Rev 19:9). It's a tragedy that so many Christians never experience a closeness with the One who loves us.