

Chapter 15 - Parting Thoughts

I thought it best to end with a story – to talk about “getting down and dirty” in the Faith. Since graduating from college I have worked full-time as a school-based speech-language pathologist. About six years ago that gave me the opportunity to work in a summer program with high school students having severe to profound mental and physical handicaps.

I knew going in that I would be responsible for working on more than communication skills; like the rest of my colleagues on the team, I would be leading physical education activities, giving academic instruction, and even assisting with *toileting*. “Germ freak” that I am, that last element terrified me. I prayed that it would consist of no more than accompanying the students to the bathroom and offering reminders about washing their hands. God’s answer, though, was a resounding “No!” That became crystal when I found myself in a bathroom stall with a half-naked young man in the midst of gastro-intestinal problems.

His name was Joshua. He was fifteen, but in regards to size looked much more like an eight year-old. He was only able to express himself with a handful of words. Luckily, he was able to alert us to his need for the bathroom. I held his hand to help give him balance as we left class. By the time we reached the restroom he was already disrobing; I raced to the stall and ushered him inside. When I heard him starting to play in the water though, I knew I was in trouble. In I went, helping Josh to sit down and encouraging him to “take care of business.” Once he had, I realized that I would be the one “cleaning off” his backside. It was not a pretty job. Mind you this was happening in a high school restroom, and summer school students had started coming down to make their own pit-stops. So when Joshua looked up at me, eyes filled with gratitude for the help I was giving him, and the only words he could get out were, “I love you,” I was a bit panicked. Talk about the three words you don’t want to hear from another guy in a public restroom! And yet, by the look in his eyes, I knew they came from the depths of Joshua’s soul; and that in its own way that moment was holy. I have got to tell you though, it didn’t seem to matter when I found myself back in that stall with Josh the very next day!

“Lord, what are you doing? Why am I the one in this situation?” And the thought came back to me, “If not you, then who?” And the connec-

tions began to form: My student's name was Joshua; and that was the English equivalent of the Hebrew *Y'shua*, and the Greek *Jesus*. And as Jesus had already brought to my attention so often, "as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matt.25:40). I was taken aback, "So Lord...I cleaned...Your...backside? This is a new one for me; I don't remember this in the lives of the saints." Then the realization enveloped me: "Mary and Joseph – they cleaned Your backside! When You were a baby, they cleaned You off!" I had no idea when I was in that stall with Joshua what company I had begrudgingly entered – the Queen of Heaven²⁷⁶ and the Protector of the Universal Church!²⁷⁷

The two people who knew, loved, and *served* Jesus the best during His time on earth were not those who preached grandiose sermons or wrote beautiful works of theology, but those who embraced Him in His need. Mary and Joseph, the Church's two greatest models of holiness...cleaned Jesus' backside. How can you and I think we are above doing the same? If we want to draw close to Jesus, to touch Jesus, then we have to embrace the full scandal of His incarnation. We have to recognize and receive Him in the Eucharist, and we have to touch Him and serve Him in His People.

I write this at the end of one of the most difficult years of my life – my spouse was hospitalized following an already difficult pregnancy, home repairs, severe financial troubles, etc., etc. I am more convinced than ever though, that God is madly in love with us. Amidst all of the difficulties, I have witnessed Him provide for my family at least a hundred times. Sometimes it wasn't until the very last second, but He provided nonetheless – through His People.

What I hope to have driven home through this book is that there is no conflict between credal faith, or dogma, and a living, breathing relationship with God. Nor does there have to be this sharp distinction between a "personal" relationship with God and a "communal" one. All of these facets flow together and coalesce in the God Who *is Love*. As St. Irenaeus wrote

²⁷⁶ Mary hold this title as the Mother of the King (consider *Revelation* 12:1-2).

²⁷⁷ Joseph is esteemed as such because of the role he exercised within the Holy Family. Upon his entrance into glory he continued this role through his intense intercession for Jesus' Body, the Church.