

Fragments of Easter Bread

Brother Philip

The brothers have invited me to share some reflections flowing from my continuing experience of living with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). In our Winter 2007 Bulletin, an initial reflection was entitled "Together Into Life." Since that article, so many people have contacted me to express presence, prayer, and support. I wish I could write a personal letter to each of you, but this isn't possible. Together with my brothers, I am grateful for your kindness. We remember each of you, your loved ones, and your personal concerns in our daily prayer.



Life-giving Spirit of God, You who groan in labor for a new creation,
and who pray within us with sighs too deep for words:
lead us to pray with You,
crying *Abba, Father*, with the freedom of Christ Jesus.

As we know only too well, ours is a culture which prizes and promotes strength, success, accomplishment, productivity, and invulnerability. These social attitudes are inculcated in us from a very early age. They shape our perceptions, and function in our lives in unconscious and therefore powerful ways. Yet a deep encounter with human weakness can throw us off-balance. We are disturbed by this meeting with vulnerability and diminishment—our own or that of others—often experiencing anxiety, embarrassment or shame, a sense of failure in our well-organized vision of life. I am not alone in this reaction. How well we have been taught! But this is *not* the only path open for us. More than the “power of positive thinking,” we discover ourselves challenged to descend into the deeper, until-now-avoided places of our shared humanity. I am learning that there is nothing heroic, stoic, easy, or (I pray) melodramatic about this downward path. It is not an accomplishment to brag about, but always grace/gift. And as gift, it becomes a task for living. Here we are encountered by the stunning paradox of the good news—in Jesus, the living God meets us in *raw humanity*, and offers us our true identity. God has taken the downward path before us, and continues to do so. It is a gift which nevertheless *scandalizes* us. So, these written words are less a reflection than a *prayer*.

The invitation to take the downward path was intensified for me during our celebration of Holy Week and Easter. After the weeks of Lenten anticipation, we were at the threshold of being immersed *together* into the living waters of Jesus' self-giving for the life of the world—always the center of our communal journey of faith. This year, I was able to participate in our common prayer in our Stone Chapel. But the mountains of snow and ice

prevented me from making my way to the Barn Chapel for the principal liturgies of “the Great Three Days”, the Paschal Triduum. At those times I accompanied the brothers and our gathered guests in prayer from my room in the monastery.

HOLY THURSDAY: WATER, BASIN, AND TOWEL

*God’s love stoops at our feet to bathe our weary lives.
The One who is Lord is servant to each,
and we are friends, not slaves. ¹*

He is on the floor, a towel around his waist, kneeling behind a large basin of water. From this position, tenderly washing the feet of each of his disciples, Jesus can gaze into their faces only *from below*, and their hearts become focused on the act and symbols of his service. Jesus’ friends don’t know what to make of this, as he shows how deep his love really is. Then they discover that they are being called to do the same.

As my body changes and weakens, and the ways in which I need personal help seem to increase by the week, I am called to entrust myself more completely into my brothers’ hands—and so, into God’s hands. I am intensely aware of how much of the community’s time and energy are required. Yet the brothers are so unselfconsciously generous and loving in all the details of daily care. (Fr. Simon, a monk of Saint Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, who died from ALS, redefined the disease as “Always Lovingly Supported.”) Like the first disciples,

You are 
accepted,

ACCEPTED BY THAT WHICH
IS GREATER THAN YOU,
AND THE NAME OF WHICH
YOU DO NOT KNOW.

DO NOT SEEK FOR ANY
THING. DO NOT PERFORM
ANYTHING. *Simply*
accept the fact
that you are
accepted.

Paul Tillich

I find myself stunned. As I said to the brothers one morning, “Nothing is ever a ‘repeat performance.’ Every act of care is new, each time. How could anyone take this love for granted?” They are teaching me what gospel service really is, and I am inspired and challenged every day. Most of the things I “did” to contribute to our community life aren’t possible now, and I am conscious of *receiving so much*. Indeed, as Georges Bernanos so beautifully expressed it, “All is grace.” Each of my brothers is a sacrament of God’s fidelity through our faithfulness to one another. I often ask myself, “In what way can I serve and support my brothers?” Perhaps living out my particular form of vulnerability—trustingly, but not perfectly!—is the service I can offer. So I keep trying.

GOOD FRIDAY: LOVE WITHOUT CALCULATION

*Dying with Christ into a new life,
sharing the truth that creates a new heart,
dying to all that keeps our heart bound,
giving our life so that others may live.*²

As we reflect on the “downward path,” we cannot be reminded too often that the Gospel must not be abused in order to justify suffering or to promote a “cult of powerlessness.” In a world wracked by poverty, violence, and victimization, our faith obligates us to give our energies to bring this cruelty to an end. The “scandal of the cross” is found in the fathomless depths to which the living God will go to protest unjust suffering, identifying God’s self with those who have been reduced to “less than nothing”, to bring a new future where there are only endings.

Yet in addition to this unjust, inflicted suffering, we are left to face limitation, woundedness, bodies “going wrong,” loss, and death. There are no philosophies or theologies to *solve* the intractable puzzle of our vulnerability. So we are confronted with a choice: Will we fight these with all our might? Or will we accept the difficult invitation to uncover and receive a deeper source of meaning?

As the community celebrated the principal liturgy on Good Friday, I again accompanied the brothers from my room, reading Jesus’ “Farewell Discourse” in the Gospel of John. Reflecting on these richly profound texts, I realized that these were not a “discourse” at all, as though delivered *from above*. No, this is the same Jesus who moments before was on his knees washing the disciples’ feet. Now at table, he will not avoid his certain arrest and death, and all that this will mean. His heart aches. This young rabbi, who took the descending path all his life, shares the Freedom Meal with his closest companions—fully aware of his and their radical vulnerability. For Jesus, his vulnerability is an avenue to and from the heart, the “place” where he experiences most radically the *mutual indwelling* he shares with the God he names *Abba*. It is the wellspring of his compassion for every person. And in a paradox so characteristic of the Gospel of John, it is in Jesus’ trusting *vulnerability* that we see the *glory* of God.

Far from a “discourse,” John presents Jesus already feeling the pain of looming separation from those whom he cherishes most deeply (Jn. 13:1)—and yet finding the words to express the strength of his love. Giving thanks for his disciples, Jesus prays, “Abba, they are Yours, and they are Your gift to me. Protect them in Your name. May they be one as we are one” (Jn. 17: 6, 11). Not trapped by his anxiety and fear, he offers *them* peace, comfort, the new commandment to love, and the promise to *abide in them, and they in him*, through the gift of the Spirit— words to match the foot-washing! Jesus uncovered and received the meaning of his vulnerability, and so revealed the strength of God’s weakness. May we discover this meaning in *our* lives.

DAY OF THE RESURRECTION: EASTER IS NOT PAST

*Are you God’s friends and lovers?
Then this is the feast of feasts!
Cast off your fear. Rejoice and draw near.
Alleluia! ³*

For all of us, the gestures, symbols, and music of the Easter Vigil are almost etched into our bodies. The community moves seamlessly through this liturgy in which we receive once again the gift of our new identity: we are gathered together, by the outpoured Spirit, as the body of the Risen One in our history.

Being unable to physically participate in the Great Vigil proved to be the costliest moment during the holy days. Reflecting on the readings of the Vigil celebration, my prayer soon took the form of tears, deeply aware of loss and physical separation. Finally I simply prayed, “Come, and ‘easter’ in me!” The question surfaced, “If Easter is not true, is not real, here in this room, in this situation, what does our faith mean?” I was being invited once again to *sur-render*—not in the sense of “giving up”—but of actively *yielding*, entrusting my existence, without conditions, to the life-giving faithfulness of God.

For all of us, in prayer we open our lives in order to say our *Yes*— always *in response* to Holy Mystery’s unshakable *Yes* in which we are *already* held.⁴ After some moments, I felt as though an inner door was being unlocked. A gift of peace began to fill me, no longer feeling alone or separated, but in communion with the brothers and guests celebrating in the Barn Chapel. Following the Easter Vigil, the brothers came to my room with the eucharistic gifts, and we joyfully shared communion. Reflecting on this Easter morning experience, I recognized that my deepest question can’t be, “How does this disease change everything else?” but rather, “How will my baptism into the Christian community, and my monastic profession in this community of brothers, give shape to how I live my life with this illness?” It is a liberating challenge.

IN ORDER TO SEE LIFE AS GOD DOES

In his pastoral visit to the United States in April, Pope Benedict met with fifty disabled children and their families. His words, first addressed to these children, can be heard by all of us, each with his or her special forms of vulnerability:

*“God has blessed you with life, and with differing talents and gifts.
Through these you are able to serve him and society in various ways.
While some people’s contributions seem great and others’ more modest,
the witness value of our efforts is always a sign of hope for everyone.
Sometimes it is challenging to find a reason for
what appears only as a difficulty to be overcome or even pain to be endured.
Yet our faith helps us to break open the horizon beyond our own selves
in order to see life as God does.
God’s unconditional love, which bathes every human individual,
points to a meaning and purpose for all human life.
Through his Cross, Jesus in fact draws us into his saving love (cf. Jn. 12:32)
and in so doing shows us the way ahead—
the way of hope which transfigures us all,
so that we too, become bearers of that hope and charity for others.”⁵*



¹ Verse 3 of the song “Feast of Beauty,” from the recording *Pilgrimage of the Heart*, © 2007 The Benedictine Foundation of the State of Vermont, Inc.

² Verse 1 of the song “Let the Humble of the Earth,” from the recording *Pilgrimage of the Heart*, © 2007 The Benedictine Foundation of the State of Vermont, Inc.

³ Refrain of the song “Are You God’s Friends and Lovers?,” from the recording *Pilgrimage of the Heart*, © 2007 The Benedictine Foundation of the State of Vermont, Inc. The song was inspired by an Easter Sunday homily of Saint John Chrysostom.

⁴ In chapter 58 of his *Rule* (“The Procedure for Receiving New Brothers [Sisters]”), Benedict includes the following prayer, the *Suscipe*, in the liturgy of monastic profession: “Receive me, Lord, as You have promised, and I shall live; and do not disappoint me in my hope.” Taken from Psalm 119, it is prayed by the newly professed brother or sister and the entire monastic community, and is meant to accompany their entire committed life together.

Ignatius of Loyola offers the following prayer, also called the *Suscipe*: “Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will—all that I have and all that I am: it is Your gift to me. I now return it to You. I am all Yours, to serve You simply as you wish. Give me only Your love and Your grace: it is all I need.” This prayer too is meant to accompany the entire life of Jesus’ disciples.

Both prayers have become even more deeply significant during this season of my life.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, Dunwoodie Seminary, April 19, 2008.