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An Unknown Future with God

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Do we try to control too much?
Do we leave some space for God to work in our future?

Last Friday I was privileged to be part of a vocation panel at St. Mary Springs High School in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. The panel included a married couple who had both been through annulment processes from previous marriages, a married couple who had been together for 15 years, a married couple who had raised two children from ethnic backgrounds other than their own, two Sisters of St. Agnes (one who has been professed for sixty-six years!), myself, and a diocesan priest. Fr. Luke Strand, the diocesan priest, spoke last and said, “Isn’t it amazing that each person here has a life that didn’t exactly go according to their plan? We need to save some space in our future for God.”

This observation by Fr. Luke underscores the idea that the day by day continual relationship with God is what gives us hope for the future. When we are able to live with questions, we are growing in the spiritual life. This does not mean an avoidance of questions, it means living with the questions along with God. An example of this is Jesus’s insistence on not usually telling people exactly what to do for their future but rather stressing the current relationship, “follow me.”

I sometimes wonder about married couples who “grow old” together. This might be five years or it might be fifty years. The decisions they make are not so much entirely personal decisions, but because they have been involved with each other for so long, their way of sharing and consulting about the decisions becomes natural. I am sure they already have a good idea about how their spouse might respond, but because the relationship is dynamic and always growing, they still ask and they still listen. So rather than going to God abruptly mainly in the times when we need big answers, perhaps we could develop a history with God over time so that the sharing and decision making might come more naturally and with more wisdom. A person comes to know God more intimately over time and they have shared with God over time their own hopes, dreams, angers, desires, weaknesses, and beauty.

Vocation Update

God's hopes mainly revolve around love for you as well as a demanding love and concern for the outcast, the poor and the suffering. From the Book of Exodus we hear God, "I have witnessed their affliction . . . and have heard their cry."

This day by day relationship with God and a daily practice of personal reflection will reveal many "smaller" day by day decisions that involve "small" steps or risks such as, "Should I go and talk with that person I normally ignore?" or "Should I go ahead and talk to someone about my questions about a religious vocation?" or "Should I get a little more involved with outreach to the poor that is done through my parish or local community organizations?" (I hesitate to use the word "small" because these decisions start to define our character and reveal the relationships with people in our lives and with our loving God.) Day after day, these small risks bring a person step by step closer to some of the "bigger decisions." Consultation with others, awareness of the needs of the suffering in society, and this day by day relationship with God will slowly prepare a person to then take the "big risk" or the "big step" of a larger commitment. The trust that is built up in the past, the history of the relationship with God and others, is what helps to give a person the courage and hope necessary to step forward into God's possible invitations.

When I think of an open-ended future, I think of a parent who makes plans for the day, but makes them in an open-ended way because the concerns of their children might affect those plans. (Notice here that open-ended does not mean noncommitted. Instead, the parent has made such a strong commitment to the child that the parent has humbly given up some control of his or her future.) Someone in a religious order has made a similar strong commitment to the concerns of the Church, the other members of their religious community, and especially with the outcast, the stranger, and the suffering. If you talk to a religious sister, brother, or priest, they will likely express how they have been amazed and humbled at where and with whom God has led them. They have been led to real places with strong and fragile people - real suffering, real simplicity, and real beauty of the human spirit. It is a roller coaster of a ride into an unknown future, but Jesus never promised that following him would be predictable!

How does one begin to discern a religious vocation?

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