

MERCY FLOWS

Reflections of a Married Priest



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Introduction

A FEW years ago I was on retreat at the Abbey of the Genesee in upstate New York. The daily schedule there included a mid-morning lecture on the spiritual life presented by one of the monks. However, since attendance was optional, the first few days I opted for a walk in the fields instead of the lecture. I felt the walk would do me more good than the talk. However, one day I made the mistake of imagining a poor monk lecturing his heart out to a room full of empty chairs. The next thing I knew I was sitting in one of those chairs waiting for the lecture to begin. The monk announced that his topic for the day was the practice of *lectio divina* (sacred reading). This discipline is a regular part of the monks' daily schedule at Genesee. In fact, several hours are devoted to it each day.

Basically, *lectio divina* involves a slow, prayerful reading of the scriptures, or some other sacred writing, coupled with reflection on the particular words or concepts that capture one's attention as one reads. The insights gained in this reflection lead to the offering of a brief prayer and perhaps even to the silence of contemplation. The practice of *lectio divina* is taken up with the expectation that God will speak to the reader through the inspired texts. That *lectio divina* has been a popular form of prayer among Christians for as long as there have been Christians suggests that this expectation has been fulfilled quite often. Therefore, it is definitely something worth learning about.

However, since I was already well acquainted with the practice, I quickly concluded that I would have been better off pass-

ing up this lecture as I had all the others. But as I sat there wondering how I might make a graceful exit, the monk said something that captured my attention. With stark simplicity he declared, “Though *lectio divina* is indeed a wonderful form of prayer, it really does little good to learn to recognize God speaking in the sacred texts if one does not also learn to recognize God speaking in the text of one’s life.”

These words snapped me out of my escape-planning mode. Suddenly I found myself being addressed quite personally by someone other than the monk. It was that same someone who had spoken to a young woman long ago through an angel, telling her that her life would be the birthing place of something sacred, and that she should call that something sacred Jesus, for he would save his people from their sins. Now, that same someone was speaking to me, telling me that something sacred was being brought to birth in my life too, and that it was time I began paying attention to it. So along with the Scriptures, I began to practice *lectio divina* on the stuff of my life. As I called to mind my various life experiences, certain aspects of those experiences began to capture my attention. And sure enough, as I reflected on these things, I found myself being addressed by the God who had been with me through it all. The results have been immensely fruitful.

This book is intended to pass on to others what has been of benefit to me. The reflections offered here are the results of spiritual reflection on the stuff of my life. By sharing them I am hoping to show that this is something that can be done by anyone who is interested in spiritual growth. I am convinced that such modeling is important. For in my work with various groups within the Church over the years, I have found that while many people know a great deal about the Christian faith, not nearly so

many have any clear sense of how this faith relates to their everyday experiences. This is true of clergy and laity alike. Yet the Christian faith has mostly to do with the living of life. So it is essential to learn to integrate one's thinking about God with one's life experience. As the monk said, it does no good to learn to recognize God speaking in the sacred text of scripture if one does not also learn to recognize God speaking in the sacred text of one's life. Hopefully, as readers see how I have done this they will get a better sense of how they might take up this delightful work themselves.

I realize that my life is a little different from the lives of most. I am a married Roman Catholic priest, a former United Methodist minister ordained by special permission of the Holy Father. In this sense I am something of an oddball. But then who doesn't have some unusual quirk or circumstance that makes their life unique? My guess is that those who know me would tell you that my being a Catholic priest who is married with four children is not really the most distinctive feature of my life. There is something singular about all our lives. Yet the fact that we are human means that we have much in common. So we can learn from one another.

What I hope to teach through this collection of reflections is that *memories matter*, especially those memories that stick with us throughout our lives. Such memories stick because they mean something to us. And it is important to give them some attention. It is also important to pay heed to the various life circumstances that help shape who we are and what we do. Those *circumstances speak* and if we listen to them and to the One who accompanies us through them, we will come to a much greater sense of the meaning and purpose of our lives. It is also true that *surprises shake loose*. Things happen that are unexpected, that

open us up to new possibilities for life. In such surprises God speaks to us and if we are wise we will try to listen well. Thankfully God sends us various people in life who help us to listen and to learn. These *mentors nurture* us in ways we are often unaware of unless we take the time to reflect upon their significance for our lives. The memories, the circumstances, the surprises, and the mentors all hold treasures for us, various insights into life that will help us to grow as the people of God.

So I risk a little embarrassment in what follows to offer an example of how those treasures can be mined through such spiritual reflection. I must warn you that because it is the real stuff of life I have reflected on, as you read you may burst out laughing or crying from time to time. You may find yourself grunting or groaning on occasion. You may even find yourself letting loose with some expletive expressing surprise, disgust, or even delight. So it may be good for you to take this book to some out of the way place, where you can avoid disturbing others and at least for a little while remain undisturbed yourself. I think it is there that you will benefit most from what I have to share with you.

 “Golly!” 

I HAVE a certain memory from childhood that is admittedly a bit fuzzy. After all, I was only three years old when the experience that birthed it happened. But it’s an incident well remembered in the Damico family legend. And I remember enough of it myself to know that, as with most legends, there is some underlying truth to it.

As the story goes, I had accompanied my mother and my aunt to my parents’ bedroom. They were seeking out a bottle of whiskey that had been stashed away there for very special occasions. I can’t remember what the occasion was, but then it really doesn’t matter, since what happened in that room has been of far more enduring significance than whatever the celebration was that the whiskey was intended to enliven.

The bottle was found, to the great joy of the two sisters, though at the age of three, I really couldn’t understand what all the fuss was about. Then it happened. My Aunt Gloria (or, Aunt Glory as we always called her) got that impish grin on her face. It was a look with which I was quite familiar. Of all the people that surrounded us in our extended family during my growing up years, Aunt Glory was the one who laughed the most. (I think she is also the one who cried the most, but that’s a different story.) She was known to play little jokes on people from time to time. And that grin on her face signaled that she had just come up with a good one. She whispered something to my mother. At first, my mother hesitated. She was definitely the most serious minded of the Buzzelli clan. But her older sister Gloria always

seemed to have some strange power over her. She was able to convince mom to do things that would have been strongly rejected if suggested by another. So, after a few more whispers, my mother was smiling rather impishly too.

Having received the maternal nod of approval, Aunt Glory held up that bottle of whiskey in front of me and said, “Would you like to taste it?” Since she was one who loved things that tasted good and had often shared those good things with me, I immediately responded, “Yes!” Then she gave me a taste of the stuff. When that fiery liquid hit my throat, my eyes opened wide, I slapped my thigh and uttered the memorable word—“GOLLY!” In response, my mom and aunt laughed harder than I had ever seen anyone laugh before. And when I finally caught the joke of it, I started laughing too.

Of course, the rest of the family heard the commotion and wondered what in the world was going on up there. So the story had to be told. Then everyone laughed just about as hard as mom and Aunt Glory had. Because of my remarkable expression of amazement, whatever it was we had gathered to celebrate turned into an even greater celebration than anticipated. The ordinary had been transformed into the extraordinary, all because I had been surprised enough by a taste of whiskey to slap my leg and say, “GOLLY!”

Though this was probably not the first extraordinary experience to contribute something of enduring significance to my life, it is the first I can remember. Since then, like most everyone else, I have experienced many other astonishing events, and after moving beyond the influence of the Little Rascal’s Alfalfa, “golly” was replaced with “wow” or “holy cow” or other expressions that the reader has undoubtedly heard but are better left unprinted. The important thing is not the particular word used

to express it, but the experience of amazement itself. Such experiences add something to life that is immediately enriching and wonderfully suggestive of future possibilities.

One doesn't have to think too hard to remember these experiences either. As I sit here writing, the "golly" moments come to me as quickly and abundantly as the water that comes out of a faucet when you turn it on full force. Here are some random recollections of the "golly" moments of my life:

When I went to my first ball game at Cleveland Stadium with my dad and saw all my heroes play in person.

When I hit a home run for the first time.

When I first heard the roaring of Niagara Falls.

When I had my first personal encounter with God.

When I saw Mary (who is now my wife) for the first time.

When Mary first said, "I love you too."

When I sat in a professor's office at Yale for the first time.

When I saw the Rocky Mountains for the first time (and every time since).

When our first child was born.

When I read Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue* for the first time.

When I realized I had to leave the Methodist ministry to become a Roman Catholic.

When after months of searching, I was finally offered a job.

When I saw Yellowstone for the first time.