Reflections for our Discerners at the DeSales University’s Center for Discernment
by Dr. Stephen Loughlin

12.05.08: The Majesty of Our God

Of all the speakers that we have heard this semester, I was particularly affected and humbled by the presentation given by Fr. Mike Mullins, the vocation director for the Diocese of Allentown. Apart from his beautiful, honest child-like bearing, I was struck by the force of his witness that the brokenness and inadequacies of our lives can nonetheless work powerfully on behalf of the Kingdom of God.

Now, this is not an uncommon reflection in Christian circles. We know well the teaching that God takes the less-than-beautiful aspects of our lives and turns them to His purposes. We trust that God will carry us over the bad patches, will make up for what we lack, and will strengthen us when our hope and courage have failed. And yet, there was something different about the good priest’s presentation which did not, for me, resolve into these teachings. Let me explain.

I have labored much over the mistakes that I have made and the sins that I have committed. Such stand in my mind and heart as witnesses not only of my fallen nature, but of the capacity of our God to forgive. I feel quite closely the shame of such things (as would anyone), and wish that they had been otherwise, considering them, in my better moments, as good lessons of things to be avoided and a knowledge acquired the hard way. I regret my obstinacy, arrogance, self-centeredness and intemperance, all of which contributed to an adolescence and young adulthood of which I am less than proud. These things are made even more pointed by the gifts that God has given to me, especially in the person of my wife, Carol, and in the responsibilities that I bear as a professor at DeSales. Today, I am most happy and grateful for the reclamation of my life, am proud that I contribute to the Christian community of DeSales, and glad that I have been a faithful and loving husband. Never, however, had I considered that the refuse of my younger days could be seen as anything other than...well, refuse. But in light of Father Mullins’ talk, I began to see this refuse as fertilizer, as something that God had approached and had radically transformed, making it into something with which He could work, much as a gardener takes the scraps from his table and garden and generates the compost to be mixed in the late fall into the soil to foster new life to come in the spring once winter has passed. I have begun to see that God did not hesitate to get His hands dirty as he tilled the soil of my humanity, mixing the leavings that I had supplied so easily and so readily into the ground of my person. What I had done in my youthful excess had become a part of me, but not a part unto vice or death (and this is what really strikes me). It was into this ripe condition that He sowed the seeds that He had chosen carefully in light of what I had become, and these seeds have since grown and flowered into what I now am and enjoy, for which I am so thankful and by which I am humbled constantly. In my muck, then, God left me, but did not abandon me. He involved Himself in the mess of my life, and gave to me those things and people that were best according to the state that I was in, an involvement that has brought about all that I

1 about which I have written in the reflection dated 11.21.08.

2 I have often been asked whether these actions had been necessary for my growth as a Christian. I respond by reminding my interlocutors that one should not confuse the inevitable with the necessary, that is to say, consider such actions as necessary to one’s moral growth just because we find ourselves in a condition which necessarily brings with it error and sin. Thus, our good character and good morals are developed in spite of the mistakes and sins committed. For if this were not the case, then we would have a situation were our goodness and perfection are dependant upon the committing of evil acts.
now find myself to be, something I find to be quite humbling and even somewhat appalling. This last word demands a bit of an explanation.

I have written previously concerning the Good Samaritan as a model for all Christians in their imitation of Christ. Indeed, one must leave the comfort of one’s road to help those who lie in the ditch of their sin and degradation. But when I apply this to Christ Himself, I run into a problem. It is one thing to speak of the humility of our God in taking on our form in His Incarnation. However, it is quite another to have Him present to the malformations that I incarnate in my doing of evil, beholding them for what they are, watching as they become a part of my being, but then transforming them so that while they remain what they are (namely acts that I have committed for which I am responsible and can never undo), nonetheless become things with which God can work, can turn to His purposes, making those evils (which He Himself did not effect and which stand contrary to the very goodness that He is) into the occasion for great good but without eliminating the acts themselves or whatever followed from them. It is the last point that is often under-appreciated, namely that what one does has consequences, that the actions one takes determine not only a course of events, but also the lives and characters of all involved. Those who love us try to soften this reality, telling us that things will be fine and that the situation is not as serious as it appears. But when one considers that the whole course of the human race, the fallen state of our humanity, and the Incarnation, suffering, death and resurrection of Christ were occasioned by the seemingly simple act of disobedience on the part of our first parents Adam and Eve, one cannot escape the ultimate and ineradicable nature of our actions. Part of being created in God’s image and likeness is that we share, after a fashion, in God’s creative activity itself, especially when we act out of the fullness of our reason and free will. Thus, in all that we do, we birth our characters, our lives, and the lives of others, both now and in what is to come. When this is understood properly and fully (not an easy thing to do), the weight of it is hard to bear, and is softened properly through the love, mercy and forgiveness of God, although the weight of it is never wholly lifted. In this love, mercy and forgiveness, our acts and their consequences remain as they were but are now transformed into the opportunity for God to select and plant something good, a chance to take the evil we have done, and turn it to an even greater good than was available before.

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3 See the reflection dated 10.10.08.

4 Our form, although fallen, is of His creation, is good in itself, and thus does not seem to present any obvious difficulties in taking it on in the Incarnation.

5 At this point, I often think of any parent who watches his child going astray but can do nothing about it, and also of Christ at Matthew 23:27: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones to death those who have been sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were unwilling!”

6 For Aquinas’s views concerning the necessity of the Incarnation consequent upon the sin of our first parents, see his *Summa Theologiae* III. 1. 2-3.

7 but is certainly lightened. See my reflection dated 10.24.08 for the development of this thought.

8 and thus we have a way by which we can understand and appreciate that wonderful line in the Easter vigil’s *Exsultet*: “O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which has gained for us so great a Redeemer!”
A recent and most beautiful human example of this is found very close to home, namely the love, mercy and forgiveness extended by the families of the Amish community to a man who murdered their children on October 6, 2006 at a school house in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. When one reads the accounts of the Amish’s response, their consolation of the murderer’s widow and family, the inviting of the widow to their childrens’ funerals, their attendance at the murderer’s funeral, their lack of harsh and reproachful words, and other truly wondrous acts, one can begin to get a sense of the majesty of the King of kings who stoops down into the lives of all who are held in thrall to sin and death so that He might plant His good seeds in the dreck of our lives. I am floored by the fact that God takes the most defective of acts, the poorest of decisions, the least prudent of considerations, and the most heinous of acts as opportunities for the working of His grace in our lives, changing what was death into life, darkness into light, detritus into compost so that our lives might flower and flourish into what they could be. My problem, then, as well as my initial appallment both lie in what I mistakenly consider to be appropriate to the King of kings. The sight of the Amish and our Lord involving themselves in things that I myself would shudder to do, betrays to my own mind and heart how much I myself have to learn about that love, mercy, and forgiveness which animates all reality and constitutes the very person of God Himself. In the examples of Christ and the Amish, I find myself condemned repeatedly in the smallness of my views and the limited nature of my love, a condemnation which comes not from God but is the reaction that I myself experience in the face of the immensity of such a love which reveals the smallness of my own. Thus, as Peter does, I endeavor to put aside my false images of what I think God should be, and desire instead to emulate His love, mercy and forgiveness in all that I am and all that I do, to do God proud for the great gifts that this King has given to me His unworthy servant, to thank those greater than me in spirit, mind, heart and person for the witness that they give, and hopefully to arrive by all of this to a better, more authentic understanding of the person of God Himself. I pray that one and all may remain true to their witness. For in this is found an important way by which we might be made whole again, namely by beholding and imitating the beautiful examples of those who strive to behold the majesty of God as it truly is in all that they are and all that they do, honoring Him by the donation of the entirety of their lives.

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9 words that some of us would consider quite justified and perhaps even necessary for the grieving process.

10 As a side note, in light of all that has been said here, I consider that it is a great disservice to the Catholic community that the words to “Amazing Grace” have been changed in the latest editions of some hymnals (from “that saved a wretch like me” to “that saved and strengthened me”). Here is a perfect example, at least in my case, of a phrase that has stuck in my mind and heart, which was never understood until now in light of the presentation by Fr. Mullins, something that would have been denied me if I had not grown up with the original wording. Let this be a warning to those who, in a well-intentioned but foolish and haughty fashion, change the wording of hymns, Biblical texts, and the prayers at Mass to suit the sensibilities of current day human philosophies. By retaining this seemingly politically incorrect language, I was invited to deal with it on a spiritual and intellectual level over many years, and not have it dealt with for me in a meaningless fashion, robbing me of the opportunity to recognize the truths that this harsh language contains. In short, I am glad I grew up a wretch, and was not affirmed and compassioned to death.