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

12.26.08: Your Life is No Longer Your Own

One of the exhilarating yet terrifying aspects of a life lived in dedication to the things of God is that one never quite knows where one will end up from year to year. Take a small portion of my life as an example. You have already read how I came to philosophy (after having been forced to give up my aspirations at a music career) and the three glorious years I spent at St. Jerome’s University in Canada.\(^1\) Then, upon the advice of a friend, I found myself travelling to Rome to study philosophy at the Angelicum.\(^2\) Having realized that the school did not meet my needs (and that my money had begun to run out), I returned to Canada some six months later, married Carol a year after that, and then took up my masters and doctorate at the University of Toronto. Two years before the completion of my doctorate, I was teaching as an adjunct at both St. Jerome’s and Niagara University. Although I knew that at the completion of my studies I would have to look for work anywhere within the English speaking world, I nursed the hope that we would remain in Canada, even though the opportunities for work there were few and far between, particularly for a Catholic philosopher like myself. Before the defense of my thesis, I began to cast my bread upon the waters, sending my application all across North America, from the east coast all the way to Hawaii.\(^3\) I began with seminaries, figuring that this would be the best way to contribute my talents to the Church at large. I submitted my materials to every seminary in North America. Most of my overtures were ignored — the silence, as they say, was deafening. I did receive a few offers for adjunct work (insufficient to make the move to the USA), and even a rather nasty reply from a seminary in California which scolded me for sending my package to them in the first place. Apparently, the protocol was to remain in the darker regions of the basement where my wife and I were currently lodged until a glorious announcement shone forth from this seminary that they were accepting applications for a position, upon which I should then deluge them with my information.\(^4\) Having been unsuccessful in the donation of myself to my Church in this way, I figured the next best thing to do was to make application to universities and colleges, first to those which were

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1 See the reflection dated 10.17.08: “The Intellectual Pillar and the Search for Wisdom.”

2 which you can see in the sequel to the DaVinci Code currently in production (One question: why would one make a sequel to a bad film that didn’t do well in the theaters? Aren’t sequels made to milk a prior success? I smell an anti-Catholic conspiracy in the making. This should be confirmed if there is a sequel made to that horrible little film The Golden Compass which did badly at the box office as well. Frankly, the only character that I cared for in that film was the polar bear voiced by Patrick Stewart).

3 Even though I wasn’t qualified for the job in Hawaii, I thought to myself, “When would I ever get the chance again to apply for a job in Hawaii again?” Besides, I had heard the weather was nice there, not as harsh as Canada.

4 This seminary, not two months after their reprimand, advertised a position for a philosopher, but not in the place where they had told me to look. I am a quick study and had, by that time, identified all the places where such announcements might appear. Upon spotting it, I sent my application in with, of course, a copy of the rebuke that they had sent. It was my turn to chide them for their pusillanimous attitude towards my initial overture. I then proceeded to offer myself for their consideration. This time, the deafening silence greatly warmed my heart and brings a smile to my face to this very day.
Catholic, second Christian, and third secular. My department at the University of Toronto excelled in the preparation of its grads for this process, and shortly I found myself interviewing with several colleges at the American Philosophical Conference in Washington between Christmas and New Years’ in 1998. Several places were interested in me, but I cared only for DeSales University (then called Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales), since it had advertised itself as a college dedicated to all things Catholic in no uncertain terms. I liked its mission statement, its web site, the nature of the philosophy and theology department and its head (Fr. Dailey whom I had met a few months earlier in Denver at a conference on Science and Religion sponsored by the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars). When the opportunity came to interview at DeSales, the first thing my wife and I did was to drag out our atlas to determine where Pennsylvania was! How excited we were to find the school within driving distance (8 hours) of our home in Canada! Upon getting the job, my wife and I reserved a UHaul truck for the beginning of August. When we went to pick it up, the business had forgotten to reserve it. There was one available in Toronto if we wanted to drive there and get it. When we arrived 90 minutes later, we found the truck disabled.\footnote{UHaul has from that time forward become known to my wife and I as UHell.} Another company came to the rescue, but only partially. They had the size of truck we needed, but only in a standard, not automatic, configuration. Carol had not driven stick in many years and I had yet to learn.\footnote{I drive stick wonderfully now, much to the consternation of my wife who does not care for my exuberance behind the wheel.} So, she “sucked it up” as they say, and drove the truck part of the way to PA, crying all the way. I say “part of the way” since a friend of ours, Victor O’Brian, whom we had not seen in years, miraculously showed up out of nowhere and offered not only to drive us down, but to return the truck to Canada after we were finished with it! After an uneventful trip (except for the interrogation I received at the border where I was asked, among other thing, whether I was Thomist — I’m not kidding, you can’t make this stuff up — and getting lost on the final leg of our journey and ending up somewhere in Easton), we settled in a small apartment complex, Whispering Hills. The property manager took a liking to us and brought over some ice tea and salami sandwiches, an act of kindness and weirdness that we’ll never forget (we still keep in contact with her to this day). The residents of this complex were rather odd. We had a bipolar neighbor across the hall from us who would never leave us alone (to this day we remain friends). We had this guy who lived above us who was exceedingly amorous at all hours of the day and night. The guy beneath us would yell 24/7 at his kids, except for the rare occasion where he would go out into the street with his radio controlled model race car and live out his NASCAR fantasies to the displeasure of everyone within earshot. New Year’s Eve was most entertaining. It had just become the year 2000, and my wife and I watched from our bedroom window as people emptied out of their apartments and celebrated the new millennium by getting into their cars, driving around like fools, nearly smashing into one another, yelling at each other, fighting in the streets, and then returning peacefully to their apartments 20 minutes later. We changed apartments at some point (mainly to get away from the noise, if you will, of the Romeo above us), only to end up over a woman who had hearing problems and had to have the TV at top volume at all hours of the day and night. Finding our current home was a joy and gave great relief (apart from fighting with the renters from hell across the street, having them evicted after trying for 18 months, putting up with the drug dealers in the park, resurrecting the local crime-watch for the area, holding meetings at our house, picking up the constant trash in our neighborhood, scurrying indoors everyday from 3:15...
till 3:45 to avoid the roaming gangs of kids coming home from school, dodging the bullets from the occasional shoot-outs on 16th, and the ever present sub-woofers from passing cars — ah, city living). 7

Now, if someone had foretold that my wife and I would suffer these things while I was still at my undergraduate institution of St. Jerome’s, I surely would have disbelieved him. If, by some chance, I had believed, I seriously would have considered that at some point in the future I would lose my mind, especially if someone had forewarned me about the difficulties that we, as Canadians, would face becoming acclimatized to American culture. 8 Clearly, there is much I have left out here. I have not recounted, for example, the far more interesting life of my wife who emigrated from Scotland to Canada (first into the inner city of Hamilton, then out into the lonely country, and then back again to the city), left Canada to work with an order of nuns in Egypt, and after several years returned to Canada, married yours truly, and descended with him into the bowels of America. Nor have I recounted the days of my youth (something I do not plan to do). 9 Nevertheless, the stage is set for this reflection’s simple and rather common point. When we commit our lives to God, our lives no longer belong to us. For they have been put at the service of our Lord to dispose of as He sees fit. In this regard, I often think of that very touching scene between Peter and Jesus by the Sea of Tiberius after His resurrection (John 21:15-19):

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” He then said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” (Jesus) said to him, “Feed my sheep. Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when he had said this, he said to him, “Follow me.”

The prophecy is directed not just to Peter, but to all who love the Lord, have placed their lives in His hands, and are ready to take up His burden and His cross. Personally speaking, although my wife and I have left our country, home, family and friends in response to God’s call (something made even more poignant for us in this Christmas season alone in Allentown), we do not consider our situation and story to be extraordinary. We tell it in much the same spirit that Augustine relates his early life in his Confessions, namely, that it might give testimony to the work of God in our lives as Christians, and offer clues, perhaps, to the anatomy of Christian conversion and of living in the world. And so, if our lives are any indication of the character of the Christian journey, you can expect in your walk, especially as you discern your vocations, to be led where you do not want to go. You can expect no longer to do the things you used to do, to enjoy the things of your former days, or even to dress as you once did. You can expect to be called out of the familiar, and maybe even out of your own country, much as Abraham had been, and drawn into something unknown to you but has nonetheless been

7 Sorry for this run-on paragraph. I’ve been marking far too many student essays of late.

8 Indeed, the differences are great, something compounded by the fact that we speak the same language, which has the effect of lulling one into a false sense of complacency, ready to accept, among other things, the idea that a Canadian is little more than an American with health care and without a gun.

9 I have, however, expressed my regret for it in the reflection dated 12.05.08: “The Majesty of Our God.”
promised to and prepared for you. You can expect to be asked to become gift to others in what you say and in what you do. Your light, so beautifully kindled within you and admired longingly by you over the years will no longer be for you alone, will no longer be kept under a bushel but will be asked to shine for all to see. You need not worry about what you will say; our Lord will give you His words at that time. All that you need will be given to you, and even some of what you want will be granted. “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” You will never suffer the want, decay and abandonment that afflicts the irreligious, but will always be full, experiencing that joy particularly to the Christian that begins here and now, but awaits its consummation in the life to come. And so, when it comes time to consider grad school or to take up your first job, do not be dismayed that these situations are so far from your home, family and friends. Remember, we are called to leave these things so that we might take up that work that will further the kingdom of God. When you begin to teach religious education in our Catholic school system, do not despair over how few will listen to and act upon the Word for which you have sacrificed your entire life. Remember, you do not see the whole, nor do you see the full effect your words, actions, and life will have upon those whom you teach; it is not for you to harvest every seed that you plant. When it comes to taking up disciplines imposed upon you by DeSales, your major and the Center for Discernment, do not complain that they are hard, unfamiliar, unexciting, or not what you had thought they would be. Remember, the path our Lord sets for you is rarely what you want it to be. Take comfort in the fact that every Christian who has gone before you has experienced these things and have felt as you do. We have all been asked to abandon the familiar and have been led into a country unknown to us and not to our liking. But we trust in the promise that has been made to us, and in this spirit we seek for fruits of which we stand in such need. Despair and disobedience are simply not options that are available to us. Rather, we must go forth in hope and obedience with the knowledge that we shall find that for which we seek, and will spend our lives in ways most becoming to the love that defines us as Christians.

And so, as I sit here in my study on my saint’s day, I contemplate that fact that I have always lived my life not knowing where I will be next year. I have never set down roots, as the saying goes. For I am in this world, but not of it, and I find myself ever ready to shake the dust off my feet, take up my staff, don my cloak, and travel down the road to the next place to which God calls. There is but one land that I seek, one place that I call home, one Lord for whom I am ready to pour out all that I am in imitation of what He has done for me. My prayer is that you continue in this way. For in this is found the only life worth living.

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10 Luke 6:38. Again, to speak personally, you need only look at the lives and living situations of every person in my department to see this promise fulfilled.

11 Remember and cultivate an appreciation for the fact that you have reaped where you have not sown, particularly in all that you have received from your parents, friends, society, Church and university. Rejoice, then, in both situations as you take up your authentic and mature position within the kingdom of God.