

**My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

**This morning I'm taking a kind of leap of faith. That leap is that you are all reasonably intelligent, spiritually-seeking people of faith. Is that a fair assessment of who you are?**

**Well, I would like to introduce you to a person who has been described as possibly the most serious and disciplined philosophical theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, that includes people like Karl Rahner, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, Karol Wojtyla (now known as St. John Paul II), Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Emeritus Benedict XIV), and Jorge Mario Bergoglio (our present Pope Francis I). The man's name is Bernard Lonergan, a Canadian Jesuit, who taught systematic theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome for a generation, and in retirement continued teaching at Loyola College in Montreal, the University of Toronto, and Boston College.**

**I want you to know something about Fr. Lonergan because of something he said that relates to what I told you a few weeks ago when we began our reflections from the Gospel of St. Mark. I recommended, if you recall, that St. Mark's Gospel is the best place to get in touch with the person of Jesus, which is so vital to our faith experience.**

**At the end of their final oral exam for their doctorate in theology, Fr. Lonergan would advise his students, "When you get back home, forget what I taught you about Jesus' divinity. Just preach his humanity; that's the only part of Jesus your people will understand."**

**In saying this, Dr. Lonergan was not questioning or challenging the divinity of Jesus; nor was he denigrating our intelligence. Rather he was asserting that faith in Christ can only be achieved by entering into a personal relationship with him in our mutual humanity. It is not enough to know about Jesus to grow in faith. You have to encounter him as a fellow human being who knows and feels and understands what you know and feel and understand. Only then can you truly come to believe in Him.**

**St. Mark offers us a keen insight into the person of Jesus today. I don't know why Jesus decided, it appears all-of-a-sudden, to go home. He had been teaching, healing, comforting, even raising the dead to life, all over Capernaum. But he took the 40 mile trek home to Nazareth. Why? Perhaps to make peace with his family. Remember they had come out to see him and thought he had gone crazy and came to put him away.**

**He enters Nazareth with his disciples, I would guess, on a Wednesday, considering that the journey probably took four days, and they wouldn't have left Capernaum until after the Sabbath. I suspect everyone made nice, you know, like people do, when relatives come to visit. But I also suspect that the whispering, snide remarks, teasing, and occasional barbs started almost immediately and continued until the Sabbath, that began on Friday evening. Can't you hear them: "Hey, Jesus, make a miracle for us. Turn this rock into a loaf of**

bread”; or “Jesus, since you didn’t raise your Dad from the dead, how about getting back into the carpenter’s shop. We still need a carpenter in this town”; or behind his back, “Who’s he think he is, a rock star, running all over the country and not staying home taking care of his Mother and his family as he should.”

Then, comes the Sabbath. Known as a teacher of the law, the local rabbi, defers to him, and Jesus begins to teach. He teaches about a loving God rather than a punishing God. He teaches that the greatest attribute of God is mercy and forgiveness. He teaches that God’s Kingdom has already come. The Kingdom is here. The Kingdom is now. And the Kingdom is for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike.

They were astonished at what they heard. “Where did this man get all this? What kind of wisdom has been given him? What mighty deeds are wrought by his hands!”

“He’s nobody,” they said. “He’s nothing but a carpenter.” Others walked out, maybe shouting all kinds of epithets.

At the end of this episode, we hear Jesus’ own astonishment, and, perhaps, disappointment and hurt. He had taught these same lessons, spoke these same words, addressed the same concerns all over the countryside and crowds of people flocked to him. They believed in him. They knew he spoke the truth and they loved him for it. But not here; not now; not in his hometown, among his own family and those he thought were his friends.

“A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house.” St. Mark tells us, “He was amazed at their lack of faith.”

How did this happen? The Nazarenes fell into the trap of believing that since they knew about Jesus, they really knew him for who he is. They had seen him at home and at work; they had watched him grow up; they knew his family and they thought they knew him. Before he even came home, they had already made their minds up as to who he was. They couldn’t bring themselves to believe he was anything more than they had known him to be.

Isn’t it interesting that his neighbors didn’t ask about the truth or goodness of what he said and did, but rather where he got the knowledge, wisdom, and power to do it all. They knew his background and therefore they thought they knew his limits as well as they knew their own. Their problem was the scandal of the Incarnation. As long as God is far off and awesome, it’s easy to believe and still avoid the responsibility to become like God. But when God appears as one of us, the expectations for us to be more become too great. The Nazarenes faith was crippled by their limited expectations. Thus, St. Mark tells us, “So he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them.” Isn’t that an amazing, and kind of scary thought? God is powerless in the face of our faithlessness.

The scandal of the Incarnation is that God enters our history, speaks our language and can be constrained by our lack of faith. The most frightening and exciting truth about it is that God wants to work miracles in and through our own weakness.

St. Paul speaks to this reality in our Second Reading today. After speaking of the visions and mystical experiences he had, he tells us, “That I, Paul, might not become too elated, because of the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated.”

While many have attempted to figure out what this “thorn in the flesh”, “angel of Satan” may have been, suffice it to say that it must have been physically, and/or, mentally, and/or, emotionally, and/or, spiritually debilitating. Three times he begged the Lord to free him from this malady, but Christ’s response was, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Finally, Paul concludes, “For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Can we reflect on this a moment? Three times Paul “begged” Christ to remove “the thorn in the flesh”, whatever it was. He asked the Lord for what he wanted, what he needed, what would give him relief. Christ’s response, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness,” doesn’t sound anything like, “Ask and you shall receive!”

This prayer moment in the life of Paul drives home the point that prayer opens us to God’s Will. Genuine prayer is a path that leads us beyond ourselves. When we think of it that way, we realize that prayer is our lowly human way of addressing God whose plans are so much bigger than ours. In offering our wants, our needs, our desires, it is like the offering of bread and wine in the Eucharist—we bring what we have in order for it to be transformed. God is daring us, if you will, to believe that the raw ingredients of our lives—the good, the bad, and the ugly—contain the seeds of the Kingdom of God.

Are you all still with me? Are you ready now to do some heavy lifting? Are you up for some mental gymnastics? With your kind permission, I’d like to take a moment to return to the thought of Fr. Lonergan.

In his daunting book, *Insight: A Study Of Human Understanding*, he describes what we experience as a breakthrough on insight as situated within the dynamic structure of human knowledge: the recurring and cumulative processes of experiencing, understanding, and judging. That process of knowing is the same whether the knower is a brilliant scientist or a child learning how to walk and talk. The process regularly generates “aha” moments, not only on rare occasions in the minds of great geniuses, but in the minds of all of us in the course of our daily routines. As we go about our lives, we attend to the data of sense and experience. Our intelligence leads us to wonder and to formulate questions. Once we begin to wonder, though, we are off to the races, for insights, far from being rare occurrences, are as natural to human beings as breathing. For instance, the other day, after a pretty

wicked thunder and lightning storm, a beautiful rainbow lit up the sky. AHA! It made me joyful and happy and I thanked God for the wonder of His creation.

However, the quality of any insight depends on the quality of mind and material involved in this process. That simply means that not every bright idea that pops into your head is worth proclaiming to the world. Some insights are simply duds. So we have to reflect on our insights; sort them out; marshal the evidence; talk it over; test the new idea against what we know; investigate its presuppositions and implications; propose further questions for chance to arise; and ultimately we make a judgment whether to affirm or doubt the insight. These insights accumulate into viewpoints, patterned contexts for experiencing, understand, and judging. Most of us do this intuitively, almost automatically. But then comes the hard work, if you will, of assessing the value of the insight, or what St. Ignatius refers to as “discerning the Spirit”.

Over time, the recurrent, cumulative and potentially self-correcting processes of experiencing, wondering, understanding, critically evaluating, judging and choosing may enable us to overcome some of our own errors and biases, the errors and biases of our culture, and the errors and biases embedded in the data we received from those who have gone before us. According to Lonergan, the seed of intellectual curiosity has to grow into a rugged tree to hold its own against the desires and fears, appetites, drives, and interests, that inhabit the human heart.

As our insights accumulate and form patterns permitting a better integration of what we have learned, our horizon shifts. When we move to a higher viewpoint, we become aware of a certain rearrangement of all that we have ever known, a certain transformation of our very selves. Parts of the past assume a new relation to one another; feelings change; doors open in the mind and heart. Sometimes the change is so great that when we try to express what has occurred, we use words like conversion and redemption.

The Nazarenes of the Gospel could not get beyond their pre-conceived notions and biases and, therefore, could not see that God Himself dwelled amongst them in the person of Jesus, and God proved powerless to “perform any mighty deed there”.

Paul prayed to be healed, to be freed, to be strengthened, but when he understood that his weakness and brokenness was to serve God’s purpose, God became powerful in him and his preaching and teaching changed the world and made Christ known all the way to the seat of civilization at the time, the City of Rome.

Father Lonergan suggests that only in doing the hard work of sorting through the insights that have accumulated in our minds and hearts and souls, examining our pre-conceived notions and biases, choosing the good, and abandoning the duds, can “the seed of intellectual curiosity grow into a rugged tree to hold its own against the desires and fears,

**the appetites, drives, and interests, that inhabit our hearts. It is this hard work of discernment that brings about the necessary conversion that leads to redemption.**

**Therefore, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, may I suggest for your consideration that this Gospel encounter, the prayer and example of St. Paul, and the thinking of Father Lonergan present us with these challenges:**

- 1. Are we willing to move beyond simply knowing about Jesus and seek to know him personally through the Word he speaks to us personally and individually, as well as collectively, by making time to read the Bible, particularly the Gospels? That may mean that you have to overcome an age-old Catholic prejudice or bias, “that’s what Protestants do”. Or do you have to overcome your lethargy and come to some of our Catholic Adult Faith Enrichment programs or log on to “formed” to stir up the flame of faith within you that will bring you to truly love the Lord, as you feel yourself embraced in his already-forgiving, ever-merciful love.**
- 2. Will we offer God the raw ingredients of our lives—the good, the bad, and the ugly, in all our weakness and brokenness, and invite Him to transform us by his power?**

**Could that include the pain of divorce or the diagnosis of cancer or the lost job or the death of a loved one that may be the transformative “aha” moment through which God’s power is made manifest through you to lead others to Him.**

**Here I’m so mindful of my sister, Louise, a Mother of seven, who, at 76, recently, for the second time, suffered the death of a child, her son, Robert; and now caring for her husband, George, night and day, as he struggles with congestive heart failure, that has led to lung and kidney failure. Those around her marvel at her strength in the face of such painful and devastating loss and suffering. But she’s up every morning at five, drives George to dialysis, then goes to church, spends an hour in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, and stays for Mass every day that she can, goes to pick George up and takes him home where she cares for him the rest of the day, well into the night. And she does it all with such light-hearted cheerfulness and peace, and simply says when asked how she does it, “Well, it’s all in God’s hands. He gives me the strength to do what He wants me to do.” That’s the transformative, redemptive faith born of a loving relationship with the Lord that leads others to Him. Tired though she is, with Paul, in her weakness, she is strong.**

- 3. Finally, can we accept the scandal of the Incarnation in our own lives, believing that Christ has been born in us and lives in us, speaks to our hearts, and can be**

**constrained by our lack of faith? Dare we believe the most frightening and exciting truth of all –that God wants to work miracles in and through us, especially in our weakness and brokenness?**