

## The Road to Heaven is a Marathon, not a Sprint

It was a festive atmosphere just over a week ago on the first day of school. Emmett, the golden retriever who is kind enough to let me live in his home, along with me, went over to greet the school kids on Tuesday. The eighth graders were on hand to high-five and give a special welcome to the younger students, especially the kindergartners. Mrs. Kelly Roche, our principal, was there too to welcome students, and there were many smiles, new back packs, and proud parents seeing their kids off to the first day of the school year.

I have to admit, now 13 years removed from my last “back to school” September when I was in seminary, I do not mind not going back to school. In fact, in our first year of ordination, our class had a meal at Pittsburgh Blue at the exact time that the “back to seminary” meal was being held at the seminary to toast the fact that we weren’t back for another year but finally priests.

The thing of it is though is while we were ordained, and no longer in classes, the education towards being a saint goes on and on. As a priest, I also didn’t stop learning about the faith once ordained. Formation in seminary focused on academics, the spiritual, and the human. Spiritually I try to be formed through prayer; academically I do a lot of reading for homily preparation and about our faith and go to several formation day events over the year; and as a human I try to learn from my mistakes and get advice from people and grow as a person. But more important than my priestly formation is my formation as a human to learn how to become a saint.

The same is true for all of us. For students, there will be challenges ahead as they learn new things. But so, too for all of us, in our vocation, there are challenges too. It takes commitment in whatever it is we do, from pursuing our dreams in life to living out our vocations of marriage and holy orders to of course becoming a saint.

This is at the heart of the first reading this weekend. Last week in the Gospel Jesus challenged us that we have to love God above all else and that discipleship has a cost; this weeks first reading has Moses conversing with God. His delay though on the mountain leads the people to think Moses and God are somehow gone. And indeed, when you read through Exodus it seems every few lines the Israelites are complaining about something new. They get out of Egypt which amazes them, but it’s constant doubt: we can’t make it out, the Egyptians will capture us; we don’t have enough water; we don’t have enough food; we’re in the desert and will be doomed; the people who are occupying the promised land are much too strong for us to overcome. And so sometimes they look back, wanting to revert to slavery, because at least they had food back in Egypt. Yet God keeps on coming through for them as Moses keeps saying the same thing, trust in God, look at all He’s done for you, keep it up, you can do it!

Sometimes we can be just like that. It’s easier to not grow; to be a couch potato Christian as my predecessor Fr. Paul Jarvis might have put it. But we are not called to stay stuck in a rut. We are called to grow as people.

So with that in mind, as we think about this reading, may we challenge ourselves to truly grow. In our prayer life, it's worth looking at how we are doing. To think about our battle with sin; where we are at with our families and our vocations; to look at the things we are doing well but also to challenge ourselves to look at what we can do better. And also, to remind ourselves always that it really is a marathon on the road to heaven. Little by little, we take the steps through our prayers and actions of love and service toward one another. Little by little, as we deepen our relationship with God we grow as people like the younger son in the Gospel who finds his way (and hopefully the older brother who can move past anger).

Every day gives us the opportunity to grow as a person, so let's never think that school is done. It was a lovely steak dinner in September of 2007 we enjoyed as a class, but I know as a priest and as a Christian I've got a lot more classes to take in the school of sainthood. Thankfully we all have a great teacher in our God - so let's listen to Him, for school's in session and there will be a final exam, one we can pass with flying colors if we persevere in coming to know our God and how to follow Him.

God's blessings to you and your loved ones,

Fr. Paul