

Doubt as the Companion of Faith

As I've shared in this space before, "social distancing" is not a new term for me. Each year, I typically take a road trip alone with my camera. I may meet up with a photo guide for part of the journey, but I've gone alone on trips for the last decade or so.

For me, it's what you'd call a "mountaintop" experience. I often do go to the mountains, but in nature, I feel the incredible closeness of God. Northeastern Minnesota is another favorite spot. And even when it's not a longer trip, I try to get out once or twice a week for a bit and spend a couple of hours alone photographing birds. The birds are there, the mountains are there, but I also just can kind of feel the hand of the Divine. These places recharge my soul.

But this closeness of God is also felt in so many other ways too. As I type this article for instance, a large and furry golden retriever is having a post-walk nap on my lap, and looking into his eyes I also see a glimpse of the divine. And in my ministry as a priest, coming to know so many great people and see how they serve their parish and families so selflessly, I see God reflected in them too. God sometimes isn't that hard to see if you look a bit.

And yet, then again, sometimes God is a bit hard to see. We all go through valleys in life, and this current situation is one of the greatest valleys we've ever been in. Our Holy Week liturgies were as beautiful as they could be, and thanks to a great liturgy team and volunteers who made the broadcasts possible, we kept people connected. But it was surreal being in Easter and not seeing anyone in the pews, as it was tough seeing the Easter candle but not the glow of the candles of hundreds of others in the pews that night. Priesthood has brought me much closeness to God, but also moments from having a funeral for a 17 year old, and moments feeling isolated, gossiped about and even hated by people at times in parishes I've served, where God hasn't felt all that close.

This is true for all of us. So how do we make peace with the doubts?

As a starter, we remember there's a difference between doubt and despair. Despair is where we give up on God completely. Doubt is where we question. Thomas this week in the Gospel wasn't present when Jesus came the first time. But remember, the others doubted too until they saw the wounds and heard the words "peace." Thomas though then sees the wounds and touches the Lord and says "my Lord and my God." His eyes see a man; his heart knows God is there. What a profession of faith. Jesus surely must have experienced doubts too in the garden before His death. But He and Thomas trusted. Thomas wasn't there the first time Jesus came; maybe he left to ask God some questions in prayer. But he didn't keep on walking. He went back to the room; Jesus left the garden and picked up His cross. We need to remember there is more to the story than meets the eye when things are going bad, and trust that God has a plan and better days are ahead.

Second, remember faith isn't contingent upon feelings. Sometimes God feels very close. Think of holding your child for the first time if you're a parent, or having a tea party with your 4 year old little girl and her stuffed animals. Then think about getting a door slammed in your face and that same child being enraged with you for saying no you can't go to that party when they are 15. The point is the parent doesn't stop loving their child, even if the love in one situation might seem like it's not being returned. In our prayer life, sometimes God may feel far away. Or we may pray and not feel like we've gotten an answer. These feelings, or lack of them, can go on for a while. But in these moments, it's important to keep trusting. Silence does not mean God is refusing to act.

Third, trust. We don't know the big plan. And it can be hard to see past the short-term situation we may be in. I think of Saint Charles de Foucauld, the saint who ministered to the Muslims in Algeria. He once said something to the effect of it maybe just being his job to till the soil when he hadn't gotten any converts to Christianity. God is working things out, and with God all things are possible. Sometimes His timeline and ours differ, but ultimately things work out because God is in control.

Fourth, believe in God but also in yourself. God has put you and me here for a reason, and when we discern our mission, we have to remember it's a marathon, not a sprint. Trusting that God has a plan, and discerning what that is, it can be tempting at times to give up when things aren't going well. But as I said, Thomas came back to the room, and ultimately he died for the faith. While I've had some challenges as a priest, I've never doubted that this is what God asked me to do with my life for my vocation. Inevitably we may doubt at times how we do as a parent, a spouse, a priest, or whatever our vocation is. We may look back at our shortcomings and be frustrated when we make a mistake again. But inside all of us, as we heard during the Easter vigil reflecting on Genesis and creation, is such good. God sees this, and we need to as well, knowing He'll see us through but also that He believes in us.

And lastly, look to others. Thomas was not alone in that room; the others were with him, and helped him complete his mission. At times this virus situation has left me frustrated and scared. But I see how so many have stepped up to keep the parish going, and keep our connections going to the parish. We all need advice and counsel in our lives, so seek people out, especially if you are having doubts about God, the future, or yourself - people who will support but also listen to you, and help to run the marathon of life with you. Remember it was because of Mary of Magdala that Peter and John left the room the first time, and found the empty tomb. The same is true with others who lead us to Jesus when we are doubting and afraid.

Remember doubt is no sin. It means we have an engaged faith life, and are thinking. So make friends with the doubts and accept them, but don't let them take over. Because Jesus victory is ours too, and He will lead us to the finish line even if that line can be hard to see.

God's blessings to you!
Fr. Paul