

In the twelfth century, St. Bernard of Clairvaux once rescued a murderer being led to execution. When asked as to the wisdom of his decision, the saint replied, "I shall kill him myself." By that, Bernard meant that he would help destroy the false man the murderer had made himself out to be. With the death of this false self, the real man could emerge and thrive in peace in God's loving embrace.

St. Francis of Assisi was fond of reminding people that, "I have been all things unholy. If God can work through me, He can work through anyone."

Needless to say, in some people it can be very hard to see any evidence of their humanity, and Clayton Anthony Fountain could have been described as one of those people. But eventually through his own journey and a spiritual director who, like Saint Bernard, saw the potential within his soul for growth and a new man to emerge, this man went from embracing evil to embracing good.

Fountain was the son of a Korean and Vietnam War vet, and as the oldest child took care of his younger siblings and would cook, iron, serve and clean. At the age of 19, he enlisted, but in 1974, shortly after enlistment,

with a 12-gauge shotgun, he cut down an Army staff sergeant bent on Fountain's humiliation, if not destruction.

Fountain drew a sentence of life at hard labor to be served in the U.S. Disciplinary Barracks at Leavenworth. The military, however, could not control Fountain.

The federal prison system took a try. It failed: Fountain bloodied his hands further with four more murders. In separate incidents, he helped kill three fellow prisoners. Then, in 1983, Fountain stabbed three guards. One, Robert L. Hoffmann, died. C.O. Hoffmann left behind a wife. He was labeled the most dangerous prisoner in the federal system, and also given "no human contact" status in addition to life without parole.

As the law then stood, the federal death penalty did not reach Fountain's crimes. So the authorities consigned Fountain to a custom-built underground cell where he was to live out his days in utter isolation. It was made of steel and concrete and next to the criminally insane wing of the Federal Medical Center in Springfield, Missouri. Convinced that Clayton's punishment would ultimately be a complete mental breakdown, the key, in

effect, was thrown away—leaving Clayton in total isolation for the rest of his life. He'd be in that cell for 20 years. He was alone with his anger and hate; he was also a member of the Aryan Brotherhood.

That cell became a crucible. Initially, Fountain shed only his outward defiance. Then an unlikely angel set Fountain off on an interior pilgrimage. Eventually baptized into the Catholic Church, Fountain declared his 120-foot space was “no longer my burial place but an emptied tomb, for I had become a prisoner for Christ.” Replacing the slayer was a prayerful man of childlike faith. But it was a journey. One aided by a priest.

Fr. W. Paul Jones came into Fountain's life in 1998. A United Methodist minister he became a Trappist Brother in 1989 and a Catholic Priest in 1992. He says he was pulled into the vortex of Clayton's unfolding drama, functioning first as his unintended spiritual director and gradual companion and friend on a spiritual pilgrimage. Getting to know Fountain, he describes how his anger took over his life; he killed the seargeant, then therew as an escape involving a SWAT team and finally incarceration but he was getting more and more angry.

Fountain's transformation began in experiencing "love" through correspondence with a woman he never could meet. She was on her own spiritual quest, and encouraged Clayton to pursue one as well. And so he started asking religious questions. When she felt that his probing had gone beyond her ability to help, she encouraged him to seek a spiritual director, suggesting inquiry at a Trappist monastery that she had visited several times. That's how he got in touch with Fr. Jones. Clayton began finding a new kind of determination, earning a GED and then teaching himself to type so that he could begin earning funds to begin a college correspondence course.

This is where Fr. Jones entered, first in occasional sharing by letter, then in a deepening theological exchange. In time, the warden permitted a guard to hand a phone in to Clayton through his meal slot so that he might call Fr. Jones — a practice that eventually became weekly. During this time, he acquired his college degree with top honors. Finally Fr. Jones was permitted to visit him on occasion, passing through nine guarded gates — to converse through the meal slot in his double steel door. Clayton was baptized in shackles, making for a bizarre ceremony, and soon he began to feel a call to the priesthood. To this end he began correspondence work on

a PhD, at the time of his death (of a heart attack at 49) being well on his way with all “A’s.” In addition, he would have needed a special dispensation from the Pope, because murder bars a person from ordination.

Fr. Jones’ relationship with Clayton also assisted him on his own spiritual journey too. He says it forced him to ponder graphically the issue of the death penalty. Had the current federal law been in effect at the time, Clayton would long ago have been executed, sealing his life as the most deadly of murderers. Many in the federal system regretted not being able to execute this fate, for they were never convinced that what was happening to Clayton was anything more than “an amazing con job.” Fr. Jones too began as a skeptic, but as their relationship deepened, he became convinced that this ongoing conversion was authentic. Clayton Fountain was in fact becoming a gentle, caring person.

Though not ordained, Fountain was welcomed to join Jones as a “Family Brother” of Assumption. Fountain signed the “bond, ” which set out the rule under which he would live (attired in “the short habit with hood provided by the Abbey”). He died unexpectedly days before the abbot could return it

with his signature, but not before leaving a moving record of spiritual struggle.

Fr. Jones, who wrote a book about his relationship with Fountain called "A Different Kind of Cell" asks if Clayton's transformation was authentic, then is anyone beyond the mercy of God? His monastery eventually permitted him to bless Clayton's cell as a monastic hermitage and accepted him as a Family Brother. When he unexpectedly died under strange circumstance, a cross bearing his name was placed in their monastic cemetery, where one day Fr. Jones will be buried.

Inside the potential for all is evil, but also such good. And what this feast of the Epiphany reminds us of is of how our God has come for all peoples, and that the response to faith is one of a journey.

With respect to all people, sometimes we lose sight of the fact that God's love is equally distributed. As I said last weekend, Christmas is not meant to be a sentimental holiday. The Christian understanding is that we as people are broken, and God comes for us. We as humans though can sometimes notice the splinter in our brother's eye but not the wooden beam

in our own. We judge. We put down. We embrace “cancel culture” as it’s come to be called, thinking we are somehow enlightened about all that is right. There is however, on our own, no getting around original sin’s impacts. People might have looked at Clayton and seen someone who was awful; and indeed he did horrible things. But many would have also seen him, as Fr. Jones says, as just a con artist, forgetting that Christ died for Him too. So a good starting point is to always remember when we hear “this is my body, given up for you” at Mass is that the “you” applies to us all. We can judge actions. We can call evil for what it is. But we also must strive to see the potential in each person for a new person to emerge.

How that happens though is a journey. We see that in the Magi.

As a starting point, it comes to listening to God. The Gospel begins with describing the magi from the east arriving in Jerusalem. These are astronomers and astrologers, people who studied the skies but also believed you could determine a message from the stars sort of like we do with horoscopes. For Clayton, he obviously had a lot of time on his hands, but that conversation with the woman via letters, as close as he could get to human contact, got him to thinking. For us, it’s worth asking ourselves

how do we think of God. We are quite busy and going; but we also need to have time in our lives for silence, for meditation, for pondering - and listening to God. It's one of the reasons I'd like to see a chapel built here eventually that people can come and go from to be with our Lord. In silence, God speaks to us - and we need to listen to his voice.

Seeing the star, the magi act. Discerning God has called him to different things, Clayton acts - he starts bettering himself; asking questions about God; studying the faith and getting an education. Sensing God is telling him to be this man's spiritual director, Fr. Jones goes back to the prison time and time again over a period of years. None of this is easy though. When we say "yes" to following God's call, it takes work. Every parent, every spouse, every priest, or whatever our vocation, knows this. But are we willing to do the work to get to where we feel God has called us? It also takes work to learn the faith and to challenge ourselves. Many times we can struggle with some of what the faith teaches; even Fr. Jones struggled with the Church teachings on capital punishment. When we struggle, we need to think about the issue and pray about it; often the struggle continues over a lifetime, but by thinking about what the Church challenges us with on moral issues we can grow in our faith. The magi had to travel through

mountains across rivers and rugged terrain. They had to deal with risks along the way. But they made the journey. As my moral theology professor said to us, we said yes to seminary but also to the prayer, the tests, the meetings, the work in our teaching parishes which we drove to, and all these other things. God's call might be challenging, but it can bring such joy.

The magi though find that Herod is standing in their way of getting to Jesus. He pretends to be friendly so he can kill Jesus who he perceives a threat to his power. We have to remember too that there will be lots of obstacles in our way too when following God's will. Sometimes people will get in our way who want to lead us astray. For Fr. Jones, there were the naysayers, some even in his monastery, who said no, this man can't be saved, why bother. But he kept at it. These obstacles take many forms. It can be temptations to become lazy, such as focusing on video games more than homework. Sometimes it's alcohol or pornography or keeping secrets or bad things that that can cause harm in a marriage. It's other people who maybe lead us astray through temptation or being a bad influence or a perpetual naysayer. Other times it's our ego like for Herod; he was so focused on himself he got in his own way of welcoming a king who could

give him eternal life. And as we say in the Saint Michael the Archangel prayer, “O Prince of the heavenly hosts, by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls.” Sometimes there are supernatural forces, the demons and angels serving Satan who want to destroy us.

The magi overcome Herod though and make it to Jesus, giving him gold, frankincense and myrrh; traditionally symbolizing how Jesus is a king and divine but also how he’ll suffer. These are expensive, precious gifts. And at a deeper level, it invites us to think about what do we offer God? Clayton had nothing material, but he gave God something beautiful: his soul. He put everything into growing. So what are we giving God? Do we look at the faith as punching a clock or just giving half an effort? Or do we put everything into serving God and doing the mission He’s called us to do?

Lastly, there’s that detail that the magi return to their country by a different route. It may seem that they are just trying to avoid Herod, but at a deeper level as Bishop Fulton Sheen said when talking about this detail, once we give God everything, we are transformed; we are new creations. For Clayton and Fr. Jones, both men were transformed through how they

turned their lives over to God. Hopefully we see that in our lives too, and ask ourselves how has my experience with Jesus changed me as a person as I live out my life.

As Christmas winds down and we enter into the new year, a great thing to do is to just sit with this story and think about how our lives are going. When we look for God in our lives and meditate on His presence; when we have the courage to act on what He calls us to do; when we accept that sometimes others will be opposed to what we are doing; when we give everything to God, what we'll find is that we'll be changed people. God can do such amazing things, His love destroying the evil that has transformed a man into hate and breaking through. His love shines on all of us, and sometimes we can forget about that when we look at others, from the people who have wronged us, to people who are politically opposed to what the Church teaches, to people like Clayton who have done horrible things. God's love is so great, may it transform us and may God also use us, like he used Fr. Jones, to transform the world as we reach out to others to bring them closer to God, together traveling the road of life as changed people on the journey to heaven.