

Though all of us are looking for different things, I think most everyone would say what they want in life is happiness.

How though can one achieve this?

For the Christian, the answer is coming to know God, and letting God into every part of our lives. But sometimes, that can be something we avoid. For, in our lives, it can sometimes be easy as I talked about last week, to lose our way and to go down the wrong path. Or to think that which makes us happy in fact makes us more miserable; or to never find the path to happiness because life situations have made seeing that path so hard.

On the surface, Lou Torok, who died in 2000, for much of his life had many things going for him. He served in the US Naval Reserve from 1944 to 1946, serving in the South Pacific in World War II. After the war up through 1985, he worked as an advertising and marketing manager throughout the United States. But while he had jobs, he also had problems that would land him in prison.

However, in his life, he had been impacted by sin. Abandoned as a child, and suffering abuse, he made a series of poor choices that landed him in prison. He forged a priest's signature; he became a thief, and he even was convicted of a crime our society finds reprehensible involving a minor. I imagine, one would look up his name and come to the conclusion, based just on his crimes, that this was a horrible man.

But Lou was also a man who knew that he was lost and did not like what he had become. And so in prison again in the last decade of his life, he decided to write Mother Teresa for spiritual counsel. And, much to his surprise, she wrote back. And what began were a series of letters between Mother Teresa and Lou, many short, but of Mother Teresa inspiring him to surrender to God.

Torok had been orphaned as a child, was sexually abused, and had spent most of his life in and out of prison. Desperate to regain some kind of faith, he reached out to Mother Teresa, who responded.

Most of the letters are pretty short, but there is one statement from the collection where she says, 'Thank you for your letter and your prayers...

Now that you know how much God loves you, it is only natural that you spend your life radiating that love.”

And Torok did just that. Despite spending most of his final years in prison, he became known as the “Convict Writer,” and wrote for many mainstream and Catholic publications about committing crimes, justice and his faith.

In one of his later stories, he writes of his experience helping a young Hispanic man who came to prison scared and lost, but ultimately was someone Lou helped to transform. In Lou’s words:

The nineteen-year-old, baby-faced Hispanic youth had never been in jail before and he had no idea what to expect. Would he be robbed, assaulted, raped? The other prisoners looked at him with suspicion. They distrusted anyone who did not share their anger, paranoia, and mindless destructiveness.

Eliasar Salazar Zamora had reason to fear them. He was a simple boy from a small mountain town in Mexico who didn’t even speak English. After a few days passed and the terror in his eyes subsided, I approached him. I decided to teach Zamora enough English to survive in jail. He grinned

when he sensed that I was going to help him. I made flash cards of the alphabet out of toilet paper. He was an eager student and learned the entire alphabet in just two days. But he still didn't have any idea what the words he was learning meant.

A volunteer jail visitor brought me an English-Spanish dictionary that I gave to Zamora. With the help of me and the other men in the cell, Zamora soon learned English. He became our mascot and the little brother we all needed.

A Special Christmas Gift. Zamora asked me to help him learn to read the Bible. I selected the Christmas story in Luke. A week before Christmas, the volunteer church visitors were stunned and joyful as Zamora read the Christmas story in nearly perfect English. Many eyes filled with tears. My own eyes were damp. I was proud of Zamora. At that time it seemed as though I was looking into the innocent face of a young Jesus.

With Christmas a few days away, I wondered what I could give to Zamora to celebrate his new victory. My lawyer brought me a large color picture of Jesus. It was beautiful and even seemed to have Hispanic features. What better way to cement our friendship and celebrate his learning English than

to give him this picture? When I looked at the peaceful, beautiful face, I realized what a contrast it was to the fear, hurt, and loneliness we experience in jail.

Two days before Christmas, I surprised Zamora with the picture of Jesus. Tears filled his eyes as he accepted this special Christmas gift. It was at that moment that I realized that he had a family somewhere in Mexico wondering where he was. His family must have taught him to love Jesus. We hung the picture on the jailhouse wall, and all the prisoners seemed pleased.

Welcoming Jesus into Our Cell. The day before Christmas, the guards ordered all pictures taken down from the walls. I asked if the picture of Jesus could be left up through Christmas. The answer was "no," under the threat of additional punishment. Anger in our cell house rose in protest. In spite of the threat of punishment, we all agreed to keep the picture of Jesus on the wall. To our surprise, there was no objection from the guards.

It is typical that, as Christmas Eve arrives, emotions in a jail will run high and tensions will mount as prisoners—deprived of normal social interaction

with loved ones—strike out in anger and frustration at one another. Even though we still felt the tension, we also noticed a strange peace in our crowded cell. While fights broke out in other cells, there were none in ours.

Just before bedtime, I asked Zamora if he wanted to say the Lord's Prayer in his beautiful native Spanish. When he finished, I joined him in saying that beautiful healing prayer in English. There was no doubt that Christ was with us that night in jail.

On Christmas morning, the picture of Jesus still hung on our wall.

Somehow now it didn't even matter if they were to order it removed. After all, wasn't Jesus in our hearts and actions? We all had a new appreciation of the power of love that Jesus represented to us. "Feliz Navidad," I wished Zamora in my clumsy Spanish.

"Merry Christmas, Lou," he replied in nearly perfect English. It seemed a strange place for me to find peace on earth at Christmas— in a jail cell.

Peace is something we all want, and while most of us might not be in a jail cell, it can be tempting to look at someone like Lou and think "well at least I'm not that bad." In reality, he made very bad choices in life. But he also

recognized he needed to surrender to Christ, and let Him truly take over if he was going to find healing. And, once he did that, with Mother Teresa's help, he set about helping others.

So what about us? I'm not talking tonight to anyone who is in prison. But prisons come in many forms. The prison of addiction. The prison of shame. The prison of obsession over things we cannot fully control. The prison of fear of death. The prison of pride and image. The prison of habitual sin. Freedom isn't so much about being able to do what you want when you want. Freedom is about being free of the pains of sin and fear. And the way this happens is by truly letting Christ into not just part of our lives, but our entire life.

Bishop Robert Barron, the auxiliary bishop of LA and well known Catholic apologist, speaks of letting Christ into all of our lives, making Him King of every part of our lives. He makes an important point. If you just let Christ in half way or to part of your life, you won't be living as an authentic Christian and find the peace you look for. Being a Christian isn't about fulfilling an obligation to come to Mass; being a Christian is a way of life where Jesus is

with us always, but also someone we think about with respect to every aspect of our way of life.

The starting point is love. Christ was with Lou and Zamora in that jail cell. Both men had made bad choices. This upcoming Liturgical Year is that of Luke, a Gospel known for its emphasis on social justice. Come Palm Sunday, Luke's Gospel will tell us of one of the first saints - traditionally known as Saint Dismas - or the Good Thief, who asks for Jesus forgiveness. Note there is no "you've lived a horrible life" or look of shaming from our Lord; rather the look of mercy with the words "this day you will be with me in paradise." All of us do various things we are not proud of. All of us go through valleys in life. It's so important to remember those words we hear in our second reading - "...Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood." Nothing separates us from the love of God in Christ is what Paul reminds us of too, but sometimes we feel we are not deserving or worthy of that love. Christ is reaching out to us. So let us reach out to Him and be truly healed.

It's key though to, as Bishop Barron emphasizes, to let that love into all parts of our lives. So let's think about some of the key parts of our lives.

For one, there is the family life. We are all part of a family. Do we try to emulate the Trinity and love like the Father, Son and Spirit? Or in our family, do we use others to our advantage? Sometimes in a family authority can be misused or abused; in a family there can be manipulation to get our way; a parent can put undue pressure on a child to choose a certain vocation or do certain things; a family member can become expectant or have a sense of entitlement. And tragically in some families there is abuse as well. It's important to ask ourselves how we treat our spouses, our parents, our children - helping one another grow in life while respecting their uniqueness too. If Jesus is King of our lives, we see one another as He does, and truly love our families.

There is our sexual lives too; we are hard wired and attracted to one another. But as we all know, this can be misused. Everyone deals with temptation, which is normal. But we need to be honest if we are divorcing body and soul and objectifying the body, and be aware what kids deal with too. What's on the cell phone or computer or coming in on cable for instance. And for those married, how do you treat your spouses? Blessed Paul VI penned "On Human Life" in 1968, and many just jump to that

writing speaking against birth control or “the pill.” But it’s a beautiful document that stresses that the unitive act between a man and a woman can also have the danger of exploitation, even in a marriage. Rather it is a mutual gift between a man and a woman, and never can be a means to an end. Indeed the pope worried birth control could lead to a lowering of moral standards and a disrespect for womanhood; and in the 53 years since then we’ve seen that in society. When we let Christ into our lives, we can deal with temptation in a more healthy way with his help, and we can look at one another in the appropriate way, recognizing beauty but not letting lust take over our souls.

There is our professional life too. How do we have God in our workplaces? When Christ is King of our lives, we refrain from engaging in something immoral. But we can also bring our faith into our workplace by looking for opportunities to evangelize; not in an overbearing way, but by praying for a coworker, showing tolerance and patience, and helping to bring ethics into what our company does.

There is our community life too. When Christ is King of this component in our lives, we can see others as Christ sees them. For instance, if you just

had Lou Torok's rap sheet, what would you think of him? How do you view people in your heart who are politically opposite of you? How about people of different races or cultures? We can be so divided, and as I've said a million times, some division is OK. But inviting Christ into our community life helps us to be tolerant and respectful; it helps us to refrain from upping the ante with anger or nasty language or gossip; it helps us to identify where legitimate disagreement crosses over into hatred in our souls. Christ as King of our community life will also help us to become better evangelists as talk about our faith with others.

How about our personal lives? What are our hobbies and interests? As Bishop Barron says, would you be OK with Jesus next to you doing what you are doing? Think about your friendships - do your friends lift you up and help make you a better person and do you do the same for them?

How about the spiritual life? When Christ is our King, we find time for Him. Not just at Mass on weekend, but making a bit of time every day in our lives. We also celebrate the sacraments such as reconciliation; our parish service here will be in two weeks on Monday December 6th. We enter into Mass and try to let God speak to our hearts and encounter Him in the Word

and Holy Communion. Having Christ as King in our spiritual life means we maybe turn off the phone or TV or video game and spend some quiet time at night or early in the morning with Him so we can be more in tune to His Presence.

How about our minds? Sometimes we can't answer the most basic of questions about our faith. Faith formation shouldn't stop at confirmation. We should think about our faith by doing some good spiritual reading, from online articles to a good spiritual book; this helps us to know what we are talking about and know who God is at a deeper level.

And lastly our bodies. Admittedly I have a fondness for doughnuts, burgers and pizza. But I also try to exercise daily. Our bodies are a gift, and we want to be attentive to how much we eat and drink and practice that virtue of temperance. If our bodies are a mess, we need to be attentive to that because the healthier we are the better we can do Christ's mission.

As I said earlier, how many people in life think they are truly free but are really imprisoned. Maybe you find yourself in the abyss of sin, depression, life struggles or fear. Maybe you try to cover these things up with other

distractions or pleasures of life or pretend they aren't there. Others minimize these things and say "eh, no big deal." Maybe that's you. Instead, turn these things over to God and let Him liberate you by letting Him into every part of your soul. And then, heed the advice of Mother Teresa to Lou - help others to be set free too. All around us are people in pain and hurting; we need not look very far. From our kids to spouses or coworkers and others we meet, so many people battle things in private because they feel they can't talk about certain things. That's where you and I need to come in and help one another come to know the King. A King who came not to be served to but serve - so let Him serve you by opening the door and letting Him in.