

Entering Through the Narrow Gate Isn't Easy

If you were to read the resume of Michael Biasini, a special education teacher, his achievements would be pretty impressive. He has a degree in business, a Master's degree in education, has worked in sales and retail management and then as a loan officer. However, from the moment he came into this world, Michael has had to work extremely hard to get to achieve his dream.

He was born with multiple deformities. His eyes were nearly on the sides of his head, he only had holes where his nose was supposed to be. He had a club foot and was missing all but one toe, if you could call it that. Three of his fingers were missing on his right hand. A cleft palate had an opening in his top lip and extended all the way to the right eye. Unfortunately, even one leg was shorter than the other.

This hospital staff, he would later learn, thought that Michael had too many problems to survive. The doctors even refused to show him to his parents and gave them forms to have him "given up for science." However, Michael now says he can only thank God that his parents had other plans for his life. Michael belonged to them and to God, and his parents intended to love and accept Michael for who he was, despite acknowledging that it would be a very hard road ahead.

As an infant, at the age of 7 months, he began to undergo a long series of operations. The first 7 were failures, as the surgeons were apparently trying to do too much at once as Michael was a bit of a jig-saw puzzle that had to be put together again, one piece at a time. Successful surgeries did follow these, but his appearance was still far from normal. By the time he was in third grade, he had gone through 16 surgeries.

Many more surgeries followed; as did the other pains of bullying from other kids, but Mike and his parents never gave up. One day after his mom met with a principal, she emerged with a tear going down her cheek out of joy, the principal followed and put his hand on his shoulder and said "welcome to 3B young man." He kept going through the surgeries and setbacks thanks to his parents telling him to be thankful for his blessings and how they pointed out to him that other people even had greater challenges. Their words helped Michael as he grew up to seek out others in need, as he started volunteering as a teenager to work with kids who were mentally challenged. It was then that his dad planted an idea in his mind: that he consider one day becoming a special education teacher, for he knew what it was like as a special education child.

Trying some other jobs, and even marrying a special education teacher, he then went back to school, pursued a master's degree in education, and would teach in the same school district as his wife.

Michael has continued to endure surgeries. Many have brought pain, but he says the fact that he has survived them all only seems to reiterate to him that God has a purpose for his life, as well as for every other life.

So it is with us too. But the key is to respond as Michael did.

We encounter in the Gospel this week a man who asks Jesus if only a few will be saved. It's a legitimate question that many have thought about over the years. Some who had an unhealthy view imposed on them from family or society were continually terrified of the afterlife, thinking God was the harsh judge who was out to get you and was going to remember every single sin you did and that only a few would be saved. Others have taken the view that once you said "I believe in Jesus" that was it and there was nothing left to be done, thinking that hardly anyone would be in hell. Both views are incorrect. We don't want to be paranoid, but we also don't want to be indifferent, and our Lord in answering this question reminds us that daily, we have to challenge ourselves throughout life. So how to do this?

First, make sure you are focused on the right gate. In life, it's easy to get sidetracked and make sports, extra-curricular activities, downtime and personal interests or hobbies that which consume the most of our time. There's nothing wrong with being active and doing different things, but as we heard last week, we have to keep our eyes fixed on the goal of heaven. Doing that requires discipline, and remembering there's many things that make us better. As our second reading from Hebrews reminds us, "at the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained for it." This is also important for us to remember too as we teach others through the priorities we set; which is why it's so important for parents to prioritize the faith and living it out over the other things of life, and why in our lives we set aside time for prayer and growing closer to God.

Secondly, ask yourself if you are willing to change. To enter through the narrow gate of heaven requires change. It requires asking ourselves from time to time if we need to do things differently. In Michael's case, he had to do that when he looked at his career path and realized his vocation was to teach. So ask yourselves always how can I become a better son or daughter or parent or Catholic. Maybe you need to change your attitude. Maybe God is calling you to do something different in your life. Maybe there's sins you've struggled with and just dismiss. Or maybe there's hidden talent in you waiting to be discovered. Change has to be a part of life, and sometimes we can resist it.

Finally, ask questions and seek help. Michael in his story shares how important his parents were to him as they believed in him, and give him advice on how to handle difficult situations at school, and later when he married his wife in her work with special education children was such an inspiration to him. God created us to live in a community, and we are all connected to one another. Asking for help, whether you are trying to learn something in school, working on bettering yourself, or just trying to make a decision is important. Seeking out others to help us better ourselves is a sign of strength, and with help from others we can travel the road to heaven with much greater ease as others help us stay focused and on that road. And with that, let us not forget we too have the ability to help one another on the road to heaven too through our actions of love and mercy.

Being a Catholic isn't easy. We don't have an altar-call, and we don't point to one date in time when we were "saved." We should not for one moment doubt the love that God has for us, but when you love someone you don't just say it with your lips. You show it with your actions. Every time at Mass we commemorate what our Lord did for us. The gate to heaven has been opened because of our Lord's coming into this world and dying for us and redeeming us. But it's up to us to walk through that gate, which is possible when we turn to Him for help, turn to one another, and then look inside and strive to grow every day in holiness. It might be a long road, and sometimes the journey even continues after death as God's love helps us to further sort things out, but it's a road we need to stay on day in and day out. God never gives up on us; may we never give up on Him but using what He has given us for His glory.

God's blessings to you!

Fr. Paul