

On a fall day in 2003, I began my formal seminary journey through the 4 years that would focus on theology and learning the faith, but also learning how to think about it and articulate it.

It was on a September day where I had my first encounter with Fr. Jerome Dittberner, a man I heard different stories about through the grapevine; such as how he was hard and humorless or mean. Of course all of those proved to be quite untrue. In fact with a friend and classmate who is now a priest got to know him better one summer while working there, he snuck up on me one day in the refectory at the salad bar and said “so, do you still think I’m an ogre?” which was an indication to me that I needed to just perhaps relax a bit. That occurred the spring before I had him for class.

It was on that first day that he invited us to think more deeply about what we call faith; namely how God is our redeemer, not just a friend or a brother or teacher (something Bishop Robert Baron likes to touch on often), but also that we find knowledge of God in this world through the universe and world around us; and how seeing things like the stars, or the blue spruce tree as he was fond of referring to, can eventually lead us to a deeper faith. The faith isn’t something that is just a blind leap; but rather as he stressed

to us, it is something that requires thought and prayer; it's a journey that ideally grows deeper every day.

Kevin Vost, a doctor of psychology, was not on the seminary faculty nor was he ever a seminarian. But he made a journey of faith as well through science in his own life by cultivating the seeds that God planted. He'd go on to teach psychology at the University of Illinois in Springfield, and be on the Research Review Committee for American Mensa. He was also a former power lifter and weight lifting instructor, and in more recent years he'd give speeches and also write books about his return to the Catholic Church.

Vost grew up Catholic in Springfield, Illinois. His mother was an Irish Catholic. His father was a Methodist convert. Kevin and his siblings were enrolled in Saint Agnes Catholic School, where the Dominican sisters formed them in the Catholic faith, with reverence for Christ and the Church, a firm sense of right and wrong, and the conviction that we are to treat one another with love.

The Vost family went to Mass every Sunday, but, perhaps like the word that is like the seeds that have a hard time taking root, he recalls no outward

signs of Catholic devotion in their household. He said “Our family didn’t really talk about faith at home. We did not pray together, and when I had to have a Bible for high school religion class, my mom had to take me to the Marian Center to buy one.” Looking back, he described himself as “a Catholic-educated, Mass-going, altar-serving, nominal Catholic.”

During high school, several friends started attending a Bible-based Pentecostal church. Kevin tagged along and came to the conclusion that if everything he had learned about Jesus was true, he should try to follow in the footsteps of Christ. He read Christian books, watched evangelists on television, and enjoyed sharing spiritual insights with his “born again” friends, but he never felt any desire to leave the Catholic faith. In fact, during his freshman year in college, he talked with a seminarian about the possibility of becoming a priest.

That all changed though when he started reading atheist philosophers such as Nietzsche. By age 20, he came to believe that “existence exists,” but saw God as superfluous, unnecessary, self-contradictory and unreal. He says it wasn’t that he openly rejected God or the moral teachings of the Church,

but that he had simply been led to think that while I would have liked for God to exist, he could not in good conscience believe it.

Twenty-three years passed before he changed his mind. In the meantime, he got a masters and PhD in psychology. He married Kathy in 1984, and they had two sons. Because he valued the intellectual and moral training he got as a child, the decision was made to send the kids to the Catholic school. He'd even go to Mass on occasion, but at that point he said he believed the Catholic Church had many wonderful things, it's just God was not one of those things.

His rediscovery of faith was more of a process than an event. It started in 2003 when he started listening to a series of audio lectures on Greek and Roman Stoic philosophers. He enjoyed the series so much that he ordered a lecture on Aristotle that was taught by a priest; that priest piqued his interest and he ordered another lecture on natural law that introduced him to Thomas Aquinas.

He began to see the Stoics, Aristotle and Aquinas as interlocking keys to an authentic understanding of humanity. The Stoics understood how to

control emotions through the proper use of reason. Aristotle understood how the human mind functions and established a system of logic. Both the Stoics and Aristotle glorified the pursuit of virtue to achieve perfection and happiness.

In the writings of Aquinas though Kevin saw the ancient philosophers in the Christian context. The fact that these philosophers all believed in God intrigued him. For the first time, he began to see the inadequacies of the atheistic philosophers that he had followed earlier. Their arguments weren't as airtight as he originally thought. He remembers wondering if he had been "intellectually presumptuous" in insisting that there was no God.

Eventually though Aquinas he had an "aha" experience to the reality of God. He learned that back in 1879, Leo XIII said modern scientific-minded people would return to the Church through people like Aquinas, which is what happened to him. And so he was led to other Church fathers and saints like Augustine and dove into the Bible, appreciating its depth and beauty. He experienced the depth of God and returned to full communion with the Church.

He remembers being at peace, feeling like now he was no longer an outsider, but join again a 2,000 year old tradition rich in history, theology, philosophy, art, architecture, music and spiritual truth and charitable works. He could begin again a journey of growing in knowledge about the faith and learning it. He says now he thinks about God daily and tries to think, feel and act in accordance with the laws God established to bring us true happiness in this life and in the next.

His return wasn't without some bumps. Over the years he gained a reputation as an intellectual, and some friends and co-workers questioned his changing attitudes and behaviors; he attributes this to some modern media that seems to say brains and religion don't mix and people think you have to shut down part of your intellect and believe in science, but he knows that's not true. He tried his best to maintain friendships, but not engage in certain behaviors that might be contrary to the faith while cultivating new ones. He also got into writing, writing about Aquinas, the whole life including a book on a Christian approach working out, eating well and building your soul's fitness, and speaking. His office is also a testament to faith and reason as he has a Roman centurion's helmet, a brass model of the Colosseum, a bust of Poseidon, an authentic Roman coin, a set of

pens designed as Greek and Roman columns, a bust of Athena, and a Greek vase with scenes from the Illiad, along with a Thomas Aquinas statue, several crucifixes, and a portrait of the Virgin Mary holding Jesus and a baby lamb. He loves these because he says Aristotle and Aquinas taught him how we use our senses. In his words: "Even our knowledge of God begins with things in the world we can see, hear, taste, and touch. The things of the Church are absolutely beautiful. They are not something contrary or opposed to my Greek and Roman treasures. They are the completion and fruition."

Prayer, nonexistent for so long in his life, is now part of his daily life along with spiritual reading; spontaneous prayers; formal prayers; calm, meditative prayers and most importantly Mass. He says we need to let go and let the Holy Spirit guide us especially if we've wavered from the faith. Every day he says we need to seek to learn to love God with all your heart, mind and soul, and all works according to God's plan as long as we work with Him.

Such is the job on our part to cultivate the seeds that God plants in our souls. To go from just seeing the spruce tree if you will to seeing God in our world and in our lives. So how does one do that?

The starting point is the blue spruce if you will; or natural world. As we hear in the first reading from Isaiah, God's word is creative; we hear this at the start of Genesis. As God speaks, reality is changed; as such the earth is created, and light, and water, and you and me. And we see evidence of this in nature and the universe. Aquinas wrote of the proofs of God's existence such as there being a first mover to put everything in motion, and a first cause of things as we can't create ourselves; and that there is always existence of something, meaning people, animals, buildings all come and go, but if everything were like that then there would be a time when there was nothing at all. Scientists would make basic assumptions as they begin their work namely of an intelligible structure and pattern in the world. I feel this when I for instance gaze at the thousands of stars in the sky at night, or a small bird that weighs the same as a paper clip that flies from Costa Rica to Minnesota and back in the same year to create new life. Science and faith far from being opposed as some of Dr. Vost's friends and Dr. Vost thought a bit at first can actually co-exist; it's in part why the Vatican has a



science department and an observatory both in Rome and here in the United States in Arizona at Mount Graham.

God's words change reality which we then study, but we also need to think about how God's words change us. Dr. Vost got into the Bible and spiritual reading and was changed as a person. So how about us? It's why we have the Liturgy of the Word each week before the Eucharist; we think about the Word of God and hopefully it impacts us. And hopefully we make time for some spiritual reading during the week too. This is the Word of God which is the sower coming to us to help us ultimately grow. The growth then takes place over our lives; but just like Dr. Vost, sometimes things happen that inhibit that from growing. Christ is the sower, but we work with Christ to help the seeds bear fruit. God respects our free will. And Jesus invites us to think about how we take that word in.

Jesus first gives us the example of the seed sown on the path that the birds eat up. He likens this to the evil one stealing it away when a person does not understand the word. This was Dr. Vost's younger life; his family was going through the motions, but they were not letting the word of God take root by thinking about it. And inevitably other things took over in their lives.

When we put all of our energy on our careers, our ambitions, or things other than God, the Divine Word isn't planted in us properly. So we lack an understanding of it. It's what causes people to make bad moral choices, or to think the Church is out to diminish them or inhibit their freedom when the exact opposite is true; the Word of God and the Church are there to help them find true freedom. This is why it's so important to think about the word of God and apply it to our lives so we can do battle with the Devil when temptations come and we can also explain why our beliefs matter to those who do not understand them.

Jesus next then speaks about the seed on rocky ground; it's received with joy, but it has no root and lasts only for a time, and when a tribulation or persecution comes, the person hearing it immediately falls away. If we want something it's hard. It's hard to get in shape. It's hard to go through school. It's hard to be in a relationship. The luster will wear off. And when we are trying to grow spiritually, it's easy to fall back into old ways, to make excuses that it's no big deal, or I'll just always fall into this. But when we are trying to grow spiritually, we need to keep at it through prayer and perseverance. When we are called to a vocation, we can't cash in the chips when the going gets tough. When you live out the faith it's easy to fall back

into old ways; and it's also going to entail some persecution or challenges - think of Dr. Vost's friends saying you're getting too religious or this doesn't make sense and why do you believe this you're a smart man - but here is where cultivating the seed through prayer and listening to God and making good choices will help it to bear fruit.

Then Jesus says there is the seed among the thorns which is one who hears the word, but worldly anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit. Sometimes things can be distracting. We pay attention to the things of the world or the superficial things. Sometimes even a parish or priest may lose the understanding of it's mission which is salvation of souls, and say things people just want to hear or focus on fundraising only and various programs to entertain but not catechize. Our goal is not to stand before God and show him our bank account, or that we achieved a 0 handicap in golf, or that we won a trophy when we were in youth sports. So much in the world is great, but we must remember our final destination is heaven. Which is why it's important to always seek the deeper things and give our heart to God through truly getting to know Him and living our lives in accordance with His law and our faith.

Jesus then closes with the seed on the rich soil as the one who hears the word and understands it, and bears fruit. I'm reminded of this with so many funerals I celebrate. I meet with the family, and I ask them to tell me about their loved ones. And so often I hear about how that person believed in God, but sacrificed for their family, how they were there for their kids, how they volunteered, how they laughed and brought joy to people around them. That is evangelization. That is bearing fruit. That is hope: leaving this world a better place than you came into it.

Fr. Dittberner once mentioned to our class he went to Rome yearly to deepen his faith. And visiting there, you see the architecture and churches and you see how those who built them wanted to touch the soul and help the soul focus on God. I don't get there yearly, but it's part of the reason why I spend so much time in nature. On his tomb, he had written in Latin that "I will arise" stating his belief in Christ raising him up. It's a testament to his faith, because his goal in life was not to make a big name for himself, but to help people come to know God; and through his vocation, help men to think more deeply about their faith and how they understand and explain it. He knew his destination wasn't the Saint Paul Seminary, but the Eternal Kingdom, which is why he spent his life sowing the seeds in his soul, and

helping others to grow in their faith. May we strive to do the same, for when we get the words of Jesus at the end of that parable, how alive, generous and joyful will we be. God has great things for us all - on our part, let's open our hearts and souls to cooperate with it and together create a bountiful harvest in ourselves and in one another.