

Admittedly one of the household chores I've never been crazy about is dusting, but if one doesn't do it, little by little your furniture will be covered in it. The same is true with a computer or TV screen; the dust will cloud the picture unless you break out the glass cleaner. And, at a deeper level this is so true with our souls as well.

On the day of our baptism, God came to dwell with us. Most of us do not remember that day, but then as the years go by, ideally we come to prepare the house that is our soul; doing some spiritual cleaning if you will. Unfortunately, as we all know so well, it can be easy to let our spiritual house fall apart and ignore what needs to be done. God is still there with us, but sometimes the dust and dirt obscure us from seeing Him.

Such was the case for Aneel Aranha, a man who rediscovered his Catholic faith, but only after a lot of personal struggles and suffering.

In his story, he recalls being about 13 or 14 when he stopped believing in God. His disbelief in God was total. He did not exist, period.

As the years went by, he saw no reason to change his mind; if anything, he just grew increasingly certain that God was nothing more than an invention by people to explain the things they couldn't explain. The philosophers that he read only further reinforced that belief. And if intellectual curiosity weren't enough, his life itself seemed to bear witness to the non-existence of God.

Now an older man, he says if you had met him when he was younger, you would have seen a man who had just about everything a man could want. He had a beautiful wife and two great kids. he ran a successful business with offices in 3 countries. He had all the things that the world would say were the signs of success.

But more than this, he was a man to whom nothing bad ever seemed to happen. He got into fights, accidents, and other situations that should have seen him arrested, injured or even dead. But he walked out of each and every one of them without anything to show for them other than an increasing feeling of invincibility. He believed he was untouchable. He thought he could do anything he wanted. And for a long time, he could.

But then, one day, things started changing. He sold his business to an American dot com company, but rather than cash out completely, he hung onto a major part thinking he would make a lot more money in a couple of years. Hardly did he sell it and the dot com market crashed, and along with other companies, his went hurtling downward. He shrugged it off, believing as he always did that nothing bad could stick to him.

Sure enough, while the company continued to plunge, he got a job offer with a publishing company to edit one of their business titles and then the title of vice president thrown in for good measure. And everything would have been great, except that less than 3 months later, the company began going down the tubes. He couldn't believe it. People started quitting, but he hung on, sure that things would get better. For after all he reasoned, he was untouchable, wasn't he?

The company went bust.

He kept waiting for the old "magic" to work, but it seemed to have gone. Where once everything he touched turned to gold, it seemed like everything he touched now turned to dust. He got angry and turned inward.

One night as his life continued to collapse with great rapidity around him, he went out drinking with some friends of his. He wasn't an alcoholic but was a rather heavy drinker, and like most drinkers, he thought he had control over alcohol. He was to find out just how little control he had that night.

He doesn't remember returning home. he doesn't remember anything that followed other than a few hazy images until sometime in the morning, he found his bedroom filling with policemen, and he knew he had done something terrible. Within 15 minutes, he was in the police station. Five hours later, he was behind bars, locked up with rapists and drug pushers and murderers like an ordinary criminal.

He found out later what he had done. He had torn up his house, smashing some of those very symbols of prosperity he had been so proud of. He had hurt his wife so badly she had to be taken to the hospital. And he had pulled a knife on her threatening to kill her and his daughter who was 6 at the time. He admits he was not a good husband or a father, but he did love his family and he writes it seemed crazy that he would do something like

that to them, but in one of those rare moments of honesty that we are sometimes blessed with, he realized that in a rage - especially a drunken rage - he could have killed them all. The thought was horrific.

When he spoke to his wife later, he apologized but she was not interested in accepting his apology. She said she was going to take the children and leave him, and he knew she meant it because he could hear the fear in her voice and knew she was scared of him.

And, Aneel reflects, he knew his life was over. In less than 12 months, he had lost everything he had, and when you don't have anything, then what is the point of living? He knew that when they let him out of jail, he would go for a swim one day and keep on swimming. It was all over.

He sat down in the corridor as the cells were full, and wondered what happened to this man who thought he was invincible and how things had got to this point where death was the most appealing option. While brooding, he saw another man, in a cell reading a Bible; he recalls seeing a look of peace on his face, and envying the man, and realized that he himself had not known peace in the last 25 years. It seemed odd, for the jail

was loud, and when he asked him how he did it, the man smiled and said “Jesus.”

At that moment, Aneel whispered “Jesus, if you are real, help me get out of this mess.” He spoke to his wife and said he would do whatever it took to keep the family in tact; she didn’t quite believe him considering his antipathy in the past toward religion, so deep it was he didn’t even want his kids to be baptized or prayer in the house or have anything religious in the home, But she seemed prepared to give him a chance, and the first morning after he was released, he went to a church - July 14, 2002. The first time in 25 years. He participated in the Mass as best as he could, and met with the priest, Fr. John, saying he wanted to come back to God; the priest told him to spend some time in prayer at first in the church. Initially feeling slighted by the priest, he found a pew and gazed upon a gold and black mosaic of Our Lady in one corner. He admired it and heard the Blessed Mother say to him “Aneel, come to me.” He thought it was his imagination, but again he heard her speak to him to be not afraid. There were only a few people there, and he went to the mosaic and felt a wave of fire run through him as he prayed. It was at this moment he believed. As he puts it, it’s been said all you need do is take one step towards God and he

will cross miles to get to you, and that's what he saw in the church that day. He was a man wanting to get back home, but not able to find his way back. This was the first miracle. He went to the next Mass, received Communion, and again met with Fr. John, who this time didn't doubt Aneel's sincerity; he took him under his wing, and gave him instructions on the faith before Aneel made a confession.

As he prepared for that, he looked at his spiritual house and saw a lot of dust. He wrote down the sins on the computer, and realized there were many; many he didn't even think were sinful at the time. Making a confession, he was given a rosary as a penance, and at first he thought it too light, but Fr. John reminded him penance isn't punishment; rather his sins were forgiven because of what Jesus did on the Cross. In this moment, the full love of Jesus hit him, and he swore he would respond to that love of the Lord.

He continued the spiritual cleaning at home; he got rid of the occasions of sin; he worked on his anger which would still crop up but just for a few seconds. When he'd get angry, he'd get on his knees and pray the rosary and find peace. Through prayer and work, his temper waned. He went on a

retreat with his wife, where he learned how to do even more spiritual cleaning. The retreat center didn't allow smoking; he was 3 packs a day at that point, and he knew it was harming his health when a speaker spoke on the sanctity of life. Through prayer on the at retreat, he again heard Jesus telling him to give it up, and he threw out his Benson and Hedges that day. The next day at prayer, he had a mountaintop experience of God's love flowing through him; as he put it like the power that smashed the walls of Jericho. And he knew he would never be the same again.

A couple of years later, he founded the Holy Spirit Interactive Catholic lay apostolate, which is dedicated to strengthening the faith of Christians and spreading the Gospel around the world. Through it's ministries and activities, it includes Schools of Discipleship, retreats, seminars, publishing, radio, film TV and a website, they reach a few million people a year helping them to grow in their faith.

As we approach Christmas, there is a focus on the infant Jesus. But as He grows and begins His ministry, he will make demands on those who follow Him; there will be commandments; there will be blessings but also woes to others. Having Him in our life requires a response. This child who is born to



us is with us to save us from our sins. As Mary pondered these things in her heart, the answer to the question of the song from the American minister Mark Lowry, "Mary, Did You Know?" is yes; Mary did know, which is why she says "yes." Mary is without sin, and our Gospel scene gives us an image of the kind of house God wants to dwell in. God abandons the Temple for a time that is built because of sin, but the response is not total abandonment; rather the response is Jesus, because of Mary's "yes." God though wants us to respond, to open our hearts. God isn't automatic; there is freedom on our part, to not let God in, or to let things go so God is never seen.

And so as we end this Advent season and move into Christmas, let's strive to do 2 things:

First, is there room for God in our hearts? Aneel was living the good life, and all was well, but all really was not well. He focused on himself, he harmed himself and his family, he became greedy, overcome by addiction. But in this, God loved him, and reached out to him to give him comfort and peace. But he got introspective; he recognized he did not like the man he

had become. God never forces himself upon us, but we have to seriously look at our lives and what is going on and how to change it.

Second, we maintain it and go further. Anyone can say oh yes I believe in God and I'll get serious. It's kind of like changing your diet and exercising if trying to get your body in better shape. It's easy for a day. It's the third day and then the third week where it can be more of a challenge. Old habits die hard. So what in our lives do we need to change for good? What needs to go?

And lastly, do we go on the mission? The mission ahead for Mary was hard. The mission ahead for Aneel was hard. He had to apologize, but then had to go on a retreat, he had to listen to God's call to make things right with his family, and himself, and also give up the chain smoking and then change his life around and help others through the Catholic ministry he founded. But he did all of this through the power of God. The mission, to be a mom, a dad, a friend, a disciple - it will always take work. But when we say "yes" like Mary, what a difference we can make and we'll find the thing we long for like Aneel did in that jail: peace and happiness.

Christmas brings with it a lot of joy and happiness as it should; we should celebrate with gifts, a nice meal, being with family and friends. But let's not forget Christmas is also a challenge; not to look back with sentiment on the infant in the manger so much as to think seriously about what the birth of this infant means. A God who wants to dwell in our hearts, and work with us to clean house. Aneel's story is called "Epiphany in Jail," and while that day is 2 weeks out, I love the title because he had as they put it an Epiphany - he saw the star and journeyed to it. So like Mary, like Aneel, let us not be afraid to look at our lives which may at times be quite messy - and realize that working with God, we can prepare a worthy Temple for Him.