

An exhausted young mother dragged herself to the telephone when it rang, listening with relief to the kindly voice on the other end. "How are you sweetheart? How is your day going?"

"Oh, Mother," said the woman, "I'm having a horrible day. The baby won't eat, the washing machine broke down, the house is a disaster, we're having 2 couples over for dinner tonight and I haven't had a chance to go shopping yet. And to top it off, I just sprained my ankle and it's all swollen."

The mother was overwhelmed with sympathy. "Oh, honey," she said, "sit down, relax and just close your eyes. I'll be over in half an hour. I'll do the shopping, clean the house and cook your dinner. I'll feed the baby, and call a repairman to fix the washing machine. Now stop crying. I'll do everything. In fact, I'll even call Sean at the office and ask him to come home and help."

"Sean?" said the housewife. "Who's Sean?"

"Why, your husband, of course!"

"You mean Jim, don't you? You'll call Jim at the office."

"Isn't this Julie?"

"No, it's Lindy."

"Oh," said the caller, "I must have dialed the wrong number. I'm sorry."

There was a long silence. Then the desperate young homemaker asked, "Does this mean you're not coming?!" (HOMILETICS, Sept-Oct 2009, p. 44-45) HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY TO ALL OF YOU WHO KNOW THAT PRIVILEGE! We'll have a special blessing for you at the end of the mass.

In today's gospel, again part of that long section of John that is known as 'the farewell discourse,' Jesus predicts that He will leave the disciples, but this does not mean that He will desert them. He promises that God will give them 'another PARAKLETOS to be with you forever.' (Jn 14:16) PARAKLETOS is tough to translate into English, since it includes a range of meanings. Different Biblical translations call the Paraclete Advocate, as we just heard, or companion, helper, comforter, friend, or counselor.

However we translate it, parakletos means that God will never abandon us. He will stay close beside us, working for good in our lives.

Professor Gail O'Day points out that what this counselor does is not new, "But is a continuation of the work of Jesus." The Counselor is 'The Spirit of truth' (V. 17), which connects to Jesus being 'the way and the truth and the life' (v. 6). The counselor is one who 'lives with you and will be in you' (v. 17), which is exactly what Jesus promises He will do when He says, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." (V. 18) All 3 persons of the Trinity are present and active in our lives, even when we are feeling stressed and overwhelmed and ready to quit. All 3 are seen most clearly in the face of Jesus, who remains forever engaged with us, giving us His truth, life and love, and He invites us to remain connected to Him." (Adapted from HOMILETICS ONLINE, May 14, 2023, p. 2)

But I'd like to tease this out in light of the current reality of our world, and as a reminder to all of us that the PARAKLETOS is still operative and active in the church, bringing about the plan of God, whether we can see that or not. It is no secret that today we're witnessing a massive decline in church attendance, and

seemingly, a parallel loss of interest in religion. In an earlier age people in the church worried, sometimes obsessively, about sin, church-going, and heaven and hell. But this no longer holds sway for millions of people. As one parent, worried about the religious state of his children shared with me, "Our old religious concerns never ever darken their minds." What's to be said in the face of this?

Admittedly, I may not be the person best-suited to offer that advice. I'm almost 70 years old, a Catholic priest and pastor, a religious insider, who can be perceived as simply a salesman for religion and the churches.

But, despite that, and BECAUSE OF THE ONGOING PRESENCE OF THE SPIRIT, there are some suggestions that can be made on faith and religion for today's generation.

First: SEARCH HONESTLY. God's first concern is not whether we're going to church, but whether we are staying honest in our search for truth and meaning. When the Apostle Thomas doubted the reality of the resurrection, Jesus didn't scold him, but simply asked him to stretch out his hand and continue searching, trusting that if he searches honestly he will eventually find the truth. The same is true for us. All we have to do is to be honest, to not lie, to acknowledge truth as it meets us. In John's Gospel, Jesus sets out only one condition to come to God: BE HONEST AND NEVER REFUSE TO ACKNOWLEDGE WHAT'S TRUE, NO MATTER HOW INCONVENIENT. But the key is to be honest! If we're honest, we will eventually find meaning and that will lead us where we need to go – perhaps even to a church door somewhere. But even if it doesn't, God will find us. The mystery of Christ is bigger than we imagine, and God remains firmly in charge of the world He continues to create.

Second: LISTEN TO WHAT'S DEEPEST INSIDE YOU. Soul is a precious commodity. We need to make sure we honor ours. Honor the voice inside our soul, which is the parakletos. Deeper than the many enticing voices we hear in the world inviting us in every direction is a voice inside which, like an insatiable thirst, reminds us always of the truth of this prayer from St. Augustine: *You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.* We need to stay in touch with that voice. We will hear it in our restlessness and it will, in the words of Karl Rahner, teach us something that's initially hard to bear but eventually sets us free: *In the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable, we eventually learn that here in this life there is no finished symphony.*

Third: BEWARE THE CROWD! In the Gospels, the word 'crowd' is almost always pejorative. For good reason: Crowds don't have a mind -- and the energy of a crowd is often dangerous. So beware of what has been called 'the great march,' namely, the propensity to be led by ideology, group-think, the latest trend, the popular person or thing, the false feeling of being right because the majority of people feel that way, and the social pressures coming from both the right and the left. Be true to self. Be the lonely prophet who's not afraid to be on the outside. Dream. Be idealistic. Protect the soul. Don't give it away cheaply.

Fourth: DON'T CONFUSE FAITH WITH THE CHURCHES – BUT DON'T WRITE OFF THE CHURCHES TOO QUICKLY. When asked why folks are without religious affiliation today, often their response is "I just don't believe it anymore." But what's the 'it' which they no longer believe? What they don't believe anymore isn't in fact the truth about God, faith, and religion, but rather what they've heard about God, faith, and religion. Sort that out and we will find that we probably DO have faith. We shouldn't be lazy and take the easy way out. Figure it out – read something fresh and honest about God, faith, and church. Ronald Rolheiser's book, *THE HOLY LONGING*, would be my number one suggestion – it was written precisely to give an honest, respectful answer to many of the questions of our age. I've read it at least 3 times myself.

Coupled with this, don't write off the churches too quickly. They have real faults; people are not wrong about that. But they're still the best GPS available to help people find the way to meaning. They're a roadmap drawn up by millions of explorers who have walked the road before us. We can ignore them, but then be alert to God's gentle voice often saying: "Recalculating." God will get us home, but the churches can be a tremendous aid.

Fifth: DON'T FORGET THE POOR. When we touch the poor, we're touching God, and as Jesus says, at the judgment day we will be judged by how we have – or have not -- served the poor. We need to give ourselves away in some form of altruism, knowing, as Jesus puts it, that it's not those who say, "Lord, Lord," who go to heaven, but those who serve others. And as Dan Berrigan says, "No one gets into heaven without a letter of reference from the poor." (adapted from Rolheiser, posting of 16 September 2019, SOME COUNSELS ON FAITH AND RELIGION FOR OUR PRESENT GENERATION) In a world that says it's all about me, the poor remind us that there are others out there who are in need of our help – and then it's not all about what I don't have – but about what I can give.

Sixth: BE PATIENT WITH YOURSELF, AND PATIENT WITH THE JOURNEY. Life is difficult. Life can be terribly challenging. Following Christ and picking up a cross and trying to remain faithful to what God asks of us are life-time occupations. Remember that God created us in love, sustains us in love, and wants to join us to Himself at the end of our lives, in love. The parakletos reminds us of this. God is merciful. God is patient, and God is compassionate and understanding. He loves us as much when we stumble as when we get it right. Ask for His help. It is His PLEASURE to help us, lift us up and forgive us. Thank God. Amen.