

A Simon of Cyrene Opportunity:
Earning a Place in the Story

“... he that can endure
To follow with allegiance a fall'n lord
Does conquer him that did his master conquer
And earns a place i' the story.”

Antony and Cleopatra (III:13)

“Christians without a brain and poor priests without a conscience, scared at the idea that they will be treated like reactionaries, invite you to Christianize a world that, along with all its resources, is being deliberately and openly organized in such a way that it can do without Christ.” –
Georges Bernanos, 1953

As the date of the Bernanos quotation indicates, the cross that priests are asked to carry for Christ today was being prepared long before the current crisis. Henri de Lubac was prescient in this regard. Decades ago he wrote that:

Christians who *stick to their faith* have once more become “unbelievers” and “enemies of the human race,” as they were in the eyes of ancient paganism; they are accused of being “destroyers of solidarity.”¹

But we know what Simon of Cyrene did not. We know for Whom we carry this cross and in Whose story we can earn a place by doing so.

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¹ Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 173, italic emphasis added.

Your Eminence, your excellencies, shepherds of the Catholic flock and those of you preparing for that formidable task, thank you for letting this layman gather with you and reflect with you on the situation our Church faces today.

When I was first invited to speak to you today, I thought it might be a good idea to arrange to have an elephant in the middle of the room so we would have something not to talk about. Alas the elephants that no one wanted to talk about six months ago are today the only thing Catholics are talking about. The available elephants have – pardon the pun – all been spoken for.

Our Church is in a profound crisis. Centering as it does on the sins of morally corrupted and sexually confused priests, bishops, and curial officials – it is unspeakably shocking to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. In the last few decades, it has bankrupted 18 dioceses and cost the American Church more than 3 billion dollars. (3000 million). The moral costs have been far greater. It's long past time to clean the Aegean stables. But as horrific as this moral crisis is, a far greater one appears now to be unfolding at the doctrinal, governing, and magisterial level of the Church.

The diseases, disorders and delusions of the larger culture inevitably seep into the Church, where they can become all the more grotesque precisely because they appear inside the one institution that should be – and has the moral and intellectual wherewithal to be – resistant to these disorders. I want to touch on a couple of ways of understanding these cultural maladies and leave it to you to recognize their ecclesiastical ramifications. If I drift into the weeds now and again, consider it a compliment. This is – in more ways than one – an institution of higher learning and what follows is a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon strip compared to courses on Thomas Aquinas.

The gravity of the ecclesial crisis notwithstanding, we must not forget that divine providence has brought each of us to this moment in the Church's history. The present crisis presents an opportunity to bear witness to Christ and to serve Our

Lord and strive to purify his Church in ways that those living at less critical moments did not have.

You will suffer greatly from this crisis, more so than most, but you must remember that you are not on the front lines of the battle ahead. Your job, career, and ability to provide for those who rely on you for their material needs will not be put in jeopardy for publicly affirming the moral tenets of your faith. Those you serve in your priestly ministry *will* be facing these pressures. Your job is to help them realize the spiritual fruits of the sacrifices they will be obliged to make.

The psalmist says:

I will turn my mind to a parable,
with the harp I will solve my problem. (Ps. 49:4)

In rough approximation of the psalmist's procedure, I will approach our problem with a parable and conclude my remarks with a poem.

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. After a good meal and a bottle of wine they lay down for the night, and went to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes awoke and nudged his faithful friend.

'Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see.'

Watson replied, 'I see millions and millions of stars.'

'What do you deduce from that, Watson?' said Holmes.

Watson pondered for a minute. 'Astronomically, I deduce that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of suns. Astrologically, I deduce that Jupiter is in Capricorn. Chronologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, I deduce that God is all powerful and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I deduce that we will have fair weather tomorrow... What do you deduce, Holmes?'

Holmes was silent for a minute, then said: 'Watson, someone has stolen our tent.'

This little joke seems entirely too silly to serve as a framework for thinking seriously about the very grave crisis in our beloved Church today. But let me coax a few thoughts out of the joke's punchline.

Whatever the cause and effect relationship might be, there is no denying that the disappearance of the tent coincided with many discoveries, and Watson was quick to note them. Analogously, you and I might well appreciate, say, the political freedom and economic prosperity made possible by the Enlightenment principles inscribed in our nation's founding, or, say, the sundry forms of ecclesial revitalization encouraged by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. But it hardly requires a Sherlock Holmes to recognize that each of these blessings has come at a cost, that neither was exempt from the law of unintended consequences.

While Watson is thrilling to the discoveries made possible by the disappearance of the tent, Holmes is aware that – far from being either fortuitous or opportune – its disappearance was due to an act of malfeasance. Perhaps because Watson has extrapolated from the fact that the next day's weather looked to be quite optimal, he may have allowed himself to think that the days of inclement weather are a thing of the past, that all talk of storms, droughts, and flash floods are the grumblings of those on the wrong side of history. Maybe he has come to believe that tents are by their nature insufficiently inclusive, dividing, as they do, those enjoying some protection from the elements and those exposed to them.

Like the proverbial fox and hedgehog: Watson knows – or thinks he knows – many things, but Holmes knows one big thing. He knows, not only that something important – the tent – has been lost, but that it didn't just fall down or blow away. Someone stole it. Who and why? It would be in Holmes nature to want to investigate. So let's.

Of course, in our biblical lexicon the word "tent" has rich roots. The word appears, for instance, in the Book of Exodus 54 times – I took the trouble to

count them. The prologue to John's Gospel declares that the Word of God "pitched his tent among us" – the tent or tabernacle being the designated residence of God among his people in their pilgrimage through history.

And in the Sunday morning office we pray for our beloved Church:

"Let cries of joy and exultation ring out from its tents, to celebrate the wonder of Christ's resurrection."

And the psalmist declares:

"For there he keeps me safe in his tent
in the day of evil.

He hides me in the shelter of his tent,
on a rock he sets me safe.

And now my head shall be raised
above my foes who surround me,
and I shall offer within his tent
a sacrifice of joy." (Ps 27:5-6)

The word is cognate with the Tent of Meeting, the Ark of the Covenant, the Temple in Jerusalem, the new temple: the crucified and risen body of Christ. Whichever of these connotations you prefer, what happened to Holmes and Watson is something like what happened to the Israelites when the Philistines stole the Ark of the Covenant.

That tent is where we Catholics conduct our most solemn and serious business: the Eucharistic liturgy. It is where we gather to remember who we are and by Whom we have been sent. It is where we renew our resolve. It necessarily sets off the inside from the outside. It presupposes that something is sacred and that what is not sacred depends for its existence and health on what is. The tent and those blessed by the fellowship it serves to foster exists for those who remain for now outside the tent, but these separated brothers and sisters of ours would be

very poorly served were we to renounce the tent as insufficiently inclusive, as Dr. Watson, with his sunny disposition and rosy weather forecast might be tempted to do.

The Catholic theologian Douglas Farrow warns:

We do not live in an age from which evil is gradually disappearing, as many prefer to think. On the contrary, evil continues to grow by perverting the goods that belong to the church, often through clever and subtle parodies, like a virus mimicking the structure of healthy cells.²

The poet Edwin Muir sounds a similar note in his poem entitled *Antichrist*:

He's the false copy where each feature's wrong
His vast indulgence is so free and ample,
You well might think it universal love,
For all seems goodness, sweetness, harmony.³

“How is it,” asks Farrow, “that the preaching of Christ should produce Antichrist, the law of liberty the mystery of lawlessness?”

René Girard did not hesitate to speak of the Antichrist. He saw it manifested in political correctness, which he said, “comes from Christianity but *subverts it even more insidiously than open opposition.*”⁴

The West's political correctness is an effort by the enemies of the Church to declare themselves (without an explicit confessional reference of course) to be more “Christian” – that is to say, more generous, sensitive, forgiving, tolerant, inclusive – in other words more concerned with the plight of those on the social margins than are Christians, and, on the basis of this little inoculation, to evade

² Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology*, London: t & t clark, 2011), 96.

³ Edwin Muir, “Antichrist,” *Collected Poems*, (London: Farber and Farber, 1979), 226.

⁴ René Girard, *When These Things Begin*, 38, italic emphasis added.

the challenge that unadulterated Christian faith lays down. This amounts to an effort to steal, not our tent, but the moral patrimony of Christianity and to weaponize it in the war against the Church's anthropological realism.

Not only do we live in a culture preoccupied with protecting victims, but our culture distinguishes itself as the only one in history that endows victims with social preeminence. So advantageous is the victimary status that countless individuals and groups scramble to produce evidence for their claim to that distinction. Many educational institutions that once existed to grant diplomas exist today to certify plausible claims to victimary status – since such claims are often of greater advantage to one's career than would a degree in, say, the humanities or one of the social sciences.

The empathy for victims was awakened by the Judeo-Christian tradition generally and the Passion story specifically, and it has been an incomparable blessing for those cultures that fell under its influence. But when it breaks away from the Christian revelation from which it arose, anyone exhibiting non-normative behavior can claim to be the victim of those who insist on privileging the larger community's normative moral assessment, and, on the basis of this claim, assert a right – not only to behave in non-normative ways – but to have that behavior accorded normative, if not preferential, status.

So powerful is the underlying Christian concern for victims, even when politically hijacked, that those discomfited by its misuse often feel obliged to signal their virtue by saluting the principle and pretending not to notice how egregiously it has been inverted and politically exploited. After all, there are many social benefits to be had for playing along with this ruse and just as many costs to pay for refusing to do so.

Christian moral and social principles have been weaponized and turned against Christianity's moral patrimony and the natural law anthropology with which it is in conformance. In the twinkling of an eye, and backed by the power of the

secular State, the erstwhile antinomians have become fierce enforcers of the new inverted norms. And the determination with which they enforce those new norms is directly proportional to how at odds it is with natural law, commonsense, and long-standing cultural traditions.

Again, the great French theologian, Henri de Lubac, understood how inevitable it was that the Catholic Church would become the target. However confused many Catholics are, the enemies of the Church instinctively understand that the Roman Catholic Church is the last tent standing. De Lubac warned that only the Catholic Church is capable of providing the moral and social counterweight to tyranny.

“Without the support of their communion with Rome, Christian communities crumble away and are easily subjugated. Since it is no longer faced by a strong and organized spiritual power – strong pre-eminently in the deep-rooted and enthusiastic assent of the Catholic conscience – the State makes itself master of the whole of man and there is no longer any barrier left to the extremes of absolutism.”⁵

It must be noted – as recent events have shown – that the reassuring phrase “communion with Rome” entails more than a deference for the proclamations of the occupant of the Chair of Peter. All the more urgent is it that those charged with clarifying the normative nature of that communion and assuring its continuity with received magisterial tradition meet their responsibilities in a timely way.

De Lubac's sense of the importance of the communion with Rome bears some resemblance to Philip Rieff's insistence that the West was coming to “the end of its Protestant tether,” and that nothing short of what Rieff called a “renaissance of the catholic intellect” would prevent the cultural disasters Rieff saw so early and analyzed so well. Since Rieff – a brilliant Jewish sociologist who died in 2006

⁵ Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 195.

– has left us the analytical tools for better understanding our current predicament, I want to share some of his insights with you.

Cultural norms tend to weaken and calcify over time. The survival of a healthy culture depends on how it responds to that weakening. For Rieff the chief alternatives were: a charismatic renewal of normative moral codes, in deference to divine authority, or a therapeutic weakening of the culture's codes of conduct and the institutions that exist to enforce them in deference to fickle emotions of individuals and the mobs united by these emotions.

According to Rieff, a charismatic figure or charismatic institution is one that responds to the weakening of its creedal or moral standards by re-issuing, internalizing, and re-enshrining those codes of conduct – as Jesus did when he gave both new rigor and new depth to the law of Moses, and as Saint John Paul II did when – in his *Evangelium Vitae* and *Theology of the Body* – he gave new anthropological depth and moral meaning to St. Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae*; and as Joseph Ratzinger did in his *Introduction to Christianity* and, as pope, in his *Jesus of Nazareth* series and other books when he brought biblical exegesis back into alignment with the great tradition from which it had strayed.

A therapeutic culture, on the contrary, is one in which the transgressive act is itself privileged as noble and liberating, an indication of one's superior freedom and audacity in the face of antiquated norms regarded as oppressive which can and should be contravened with impunity.

Taking as his own the famous apocalyptic lines from Yeats' poem "Second Coming," Rieff gives it specificity: "The therapeutic is that terrible beast who has been slouching toward Bethlehem."⁶

⁶ Philip Rieff, *Charisma*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), 3.

All too often today, our liturgies, our sacraments, our moral traditions, and our catechesis have been adjusted in order to seem welcoming to our secular contemporaries. We too rarely or only meekly bring up teachings at odds with a decaying culture, and we too frequently join in the virtue-signaling that is the therapeutic substitute for virtue itself.

Today many in very prominent places in the Church think that the fault for any tension between the Church and secular modernity lies with the rigors of Church teaching, especially in the area of sexual morality and the Christian anthropology on which it is based. If only we were more accommodating on these matters, they argue, pretty soon the RCIA programs would be full of new recruits.

In the Catholic context, what Rieff calls the *therapeutic* is most likely to appear under the rubric of the otherwise marginally useful concept of *pastoral accompaniment*. Its spokesmen win kudos from the secular world for their compassion when they declare that the life of virtue and self-sacrifice to which Christ called us is unrealistically arduous for most people today. Alas, it is precisely the inspiring history of moral effort and evangelical courage that the young are today being taught to mock.

A word must therefore be said about the interrelated issues of forgetfulness and fatherlessness.

“Cultures are constituted by the union of the living and the dead in rituals of living memory,” Rieff wrote. “Never before ... has the authority of the past been sacrificed with a more conscious effort of forgetfulness. Forgetfulness is now the curricular form of our higher education.”⁷

Writes Cyril O'Regan:

⁷ Philip Rieff, *My Life among the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 106.

On behalf of modernity the Enlightenment presents the license to forget as essentially a matter of being human. The roots to be forgotten are endless and include the nation, ethnic group, community, physical place, social and gender roles. The Christian tradition is, of course, an object of such forgetting, indeed historically the prime one, since it represents an obstacle to the Enlightenment ethos in general and the imperative to forget in particular in the memory enacted in liturgy, in its customs and cults which bring the past to bear on the present, and its commitment to particular beliefs and values that appear to have timeless sanction.⁸

My friend, Thomas Bertonneau, is a college professor who knows whereof he speaks when he writes:

That there are no giants on whose shoulders one might stand and that fathers are wicked tyrants who deserve disownment are the only two lessons that American college freshmen carry with them out of their twelve-year indoctrination Those lessons are now also the *only* lessons taught in university humanities departments. The establishment's determination to drive Christianity out of the forum and out of existence altogether runs in parallel with the amnesia-induction of so-called public schooling.⁹

This public schooling is the intellectual, moral, and spiritual equivalent of the birth-control pill. It effectively prevents an encounter with what St. John Paul II – another dead, white male – called the Catholic Proposal.

The historian and literary critic, Ricardo Quinones brings out the link between forgetfulness and cultural fatherlessness, which is so salient a feature of the present cultural and spiritual crisis:

8 O'Regan, *The Anatomy of Misremembering*, 12.

9 Thomas F. Bertonneau, "Identity: The Future of a Paradox," *Orthosphere*, October 10, 2018.

After the French Revolution the way of brotherhood prevailed at the expense of the father. The father, containing the voice of the past, provided the frame for historical evolution, and thus became a barrier to radical change. In the Age of Revolution, where brotherhood was a great rallying cry, there was little room for the father. The contested figure was the father, whether God the Father, the king as father, or the patriarchal father.¹⁰

You men are now or soon will be called father. If ever that title was taken for granted, it should no longer be. You must strive to make the title descriptive. You must behave as fathers. Your fatherhood is a sacramental charism bestowed on you by Christ and the ministers of his Church. It is meant to be procreative – no less so than is natural fatherhood. You are to produce offspring for Christ. You are Christ's instrument for raising up children of Abraham from these stones. Your authority for carrying out this fatherly mission is your ordination.

In his book entitled "The Crisis of the Officer Class," Rieff lamented that "we have no guilt-provoking officer class." God knows we need more guilt in our world. Anyone who doesn't feel guilty is either not paying attention or is living a dangerously shallow existence. I urge you to bring back the days when people joked about Catholic guilt because it was conspicuously in evidence, unaware as the mockers were that the secret to Catholic guilt is healing balm of repentance, restitution, and remission. I urge you to bring back the days when Catholics were teased for their "hang-up" with chastity, and "hang-up" we should wear as a badge of honor. For, as Rieff insisted: "An officer class that does not attend to the realm of the flesh does not understand the realm of the spirit."¹¹

¹⁰ Richardo J. Quinones, *Foundation Sacrifice in Dante's Commedia*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 102.

¹¹ Philip Rieff, *The Crisis of the Officer Class*, ed: Kenneth S. Piver, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 117.

The Catholic fascination with a married priesthood or women priests is yet another capitulation to the spirit of the age, but it is a far graver one than most people realize. Again, Rieff – the Jew with the soul of a Catholic monk and the tenacity of Jeremiah – saw the situation clearly.

Writes Rieff:

... sexual abstinence becomes one tactic toward the achievement of inwardness. ... There is a definite link between the requirement of sexual abstinence and creedal organizations. Celibacy is the disciplinary enactment, intended to guarantee that an organization maintains a creedal character, that it remains near its charismatic resources.¹²

While I'm quoting a great Jewish sociologist, let me cite another of the Jewish prophets of our age, Leonard Cohen, whose life work was an exploration of the relationship between the realm of the flesh and the realm of the spirit. In his song, *The Future*, Cohen proved himself to be the poetic heir to the apocalyptic warnings of Yeats and Rieff:

Things are going to slide, slide in all directions
Won't be nothing
Nothing you can measure anymore
The blizzard, the blizzard of the world
has crossed the threshold
and it has OVERTURNED
THE ORDER OF THE SOUL
When they said REPENT REPENT
I wonder what they meant

¹² Philip Rieff, *Charisma*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), 31.

When they said REPENT REPENT
I wonder what they meant ...

* * *

It was inevitable that the normlessness of the age would “cross the threshold and overturn the order of the soul. Ours is a world of spiritual emaciation – moral anorexia – lurking beneath the hustle and bustle of our joylessly materialistic, hyper-sexualized, and functionally irreligious world. It is a world of weightlessness, of “the unbearable lightness of being,” a fragmented world characterized by what the French theologian Henri de Lubac brilliantly termed “the waning of ontological density.”

Here the great French theologian, the Jewish sociologist, and the beloved poet and song-writer are entirely in sync. When they said repent, I wonder what they meant. The attack on morality is, in Rieff's view, a stealth attack on inwardness, which requires renunciations of the sort that moral codes and principles elicit. So, Rieff insists: “the therapeutic education of children is a threat to their inner existence.”¹³

Souls are at stake, not just in the sense of eternal happiness vs. eternal despair, but in a more immediate sense of being consigned to a life of spiritual vacuity, which puts their eternal happiness in jeopardy.

Writes Rieff:

... any remaking of political distinctions will have to ask, first, whether there is in fact a discipline of inwardness, a mobilization for fresh renunciations of instinct; or whether there is only the discipline of outwardness, a mobilizing for fresh satisfactions of instinct. Such a distinction will divide contemporary men and movements more

¹³ Philip Rieff, *Charisma*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), 38-39.

accurately; then we shall find fashionable liberals and fascists on the same side, where they really belong.¹⁴

This is the message that those suffering from what de Lubac called the waning of ontological density are waiting to hear and in the secret recesses of their hearts eager to embrace. Do not be dissuaded by their initial resistance. Regard it as a symptom of a need they have been indoctrinated into repressing.

There is, however, no reason to doubt what centuries of Christian experience has shown: that in the heart of the unbelievers who despise the Church is a longing for what their pride resists and their shame detests. The rebukes and insults you receive are signs of a Simon of Cyrene opportunity that God has given you.

The counter-weight to any social reprobation you might suffer is precisely a charism made all the more potent by the mysterious source of its authenticity and authority. Philip Rieff – a man in so many ways more catholic than many Catholics – understood this.

He writes:

No inner discipline can operate without a charismatic institution, nor can such an institution survive without that supreme authority from a relation to whom self-confidence derives. Without an authority deeply installed, there is no foundation for individuality. Self-confidence thus expresses submission to supreme authority.¹⁵

That is a dense and immensely important statement. It merits careful scrutiny. A faithful Catholic is a person in whom the authority of a charismatic institution – the Catholic Church – is “deeply installed” and who, therefore, has the self-confidence of one who knows himself to be a branch of the Vine that is Christ.

¹⁴ Philip Rieff, *Charisma*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), 30-31.

¹⁵ Philip Rieff, *Charisma*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), 24.

Of such a person these words from the Book of Tobin are apt:

Acknowledge the Lord for he is good, and bless the King of the ages,
so that his tent may be rebuilt in you with joy. (Tobit 13:10)

To draw out what that might mean for you as pastors and fathers for Christ's people, let me share two beautiful tributes to how a man of the Church – a *vir ecclesiasticus* – comports himself – one from Henri de Lubac and the second from his friend and theological collaborator, Hans Urs von Balthasar.

For those of you fortunate enough to have known Fr. Arne Panula, each of these quotes will bring Fr. Arne quickly to mind. For those who did not have the opportunity to know Fr. Arne, Mary Eberstadt has come to your aid with a death-bed interview with him entitled, *The Last Homily*. Until you have a chance to get your hands on that book, the following two quotations will give you an idea of how marvelously Fr. Arne lived out his priesthood. He exemplified the ideal to which both de Lubac and von Balthasar allude.

Writes de Lubac:

I knew a man — a priest — who spoke in almost the same tone in his room, in a church, and in a lecture hall; who expressed himself in almost the same terms whether before little children or among philosophers; who said the same things to the infidels or our modern society, to pagans from the Far East, and to the faithful. In his discourse, which never attained eloquence, the machinery of proof was always reduced to a minimum; there was no debate; it was as free before strangers as in a group of intimate friends. His politeness — exquisite, by the way — ignored the conventional pleasantries. Never a man, in a sense, who was less

“adapted”. But this man was all things to all men, and of his plenitude everybody partook.¹⁶

My advice to both priests and seminarians is to read Chapter 7 of Henri de Lubac's *The Splendor of the Church* – from which the quotation was taken – once a year. I think you will find that it renews your commitment to the priestly vocation. De Lubac's tribute to the man of the Church is echoed and complemented by von Balthasar's description of the candor and forthrightness with which a man of the Church speaks. His words are redolent with the spirit of St. Paul's beautiful hymn in the 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians.

The bold venture of speaking openly concerns everything that must urgently be said in Church and State in order to restore the public atmosphere to health, as an aid for the wavering in spirit and for those who have been terrorized, disgusted, and desiccated by the silencing and repressing of the truth. It must be said without pathos or bitterness, without the will to wound or to take a secret revenge, without servile grumbling or supercilious gloating. Rather, it must be that specifically Christian way of speaking that is close to sacramental confession in its gravity and to a physician's advice in its objectivity and that finds its clean tone in the at once modest and proud competence of the baptized person who makes his home in the Church and there enjoys the full rights of citizenship.¹⁷

Each of these quotations is worthy of wall space in a priest's study.

16 Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, trans. Ernest Beaumont, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 49-50.

17 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Bernanos: An Ecclesial Existence*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 40.

Speaking of wall space, let me conclude by quoting a familiar poem which hung on my wall as a child.

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too ...
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools ...

These are, of course, lines from Rudyard Kipling's famous poem, "If."

The copy that hung on my wall as a child had belonged to my father, who was killed in the Battle of the Bulge four months after I was born. Kipling's poem took on iconic status in my childhood almost without me realizing it, not least perhaps because of its closing lines. The poet assures the intended recipient of his poetic advice that if the challenges that the poem enumerated were faced courageously then ...

Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

It was once taken for granted that a boy would grow into manhood in the natural course of things. That is no longer the case for some of the reasons I have mentioned, not least the therapeutic character of contemporary culture. Kipling strings together a number of challenges which, in his estimation, would have to be successfully met if a biological male is to achieve spiritual and cultural manhood.

So what makes a man? In my experience there are in the natural course of things two circumstances conducive to achieving manhood in the full sense: Having a

father and being one. Children need a father, and it is by fulfilling his fatherly responsibilities that the male of the species becomes a grownup, a man in the fullest sense.

Father substitutes can be found in cases where the biological father is absent, but a man cannot achieve full maturity without in one way or another becoming a father. It is not limited, of course, to biological fatherhood. In fact – as I know all too well – in the absence of a father, men with whom one has no biological connection can perform the fatherly function amazingly well.

From the secret hearts of countless people today – men, women, boys and girls – whatever their familial circumstances might have been – the question arises which Philip asked of Jesus: “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him: “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”

To have known the heavenly Father by virtue of an encounter with his incarnate Son is to have made contact with the very essence of fatherhood and to that extent to be available as a foster father to those who are to some degree fatherless, whether literally or emotionally. In the fulfillment of this role you will be weighed down, as Simon of Cyrene must surely have been, by the cross of social prejudice aroused by the current scandal involving untrustworthy priests. Try to see in the eyes of those angered by this scandal the pain of being betrayed by their ecclesial fathers – at every level of the Church’s hierarchical structure.

I was fatherless in the literal sense. I sought out father figures pretty much all my life. My last was René Girard, whom I was blessed to call my friend for 25 years until his death in 2015. My very first adopted father-figure labored (literally) under a deeply entrenched prejudice – as the first line of the poem I later wrote in his honor makes wincingly clear. Like Simon of Cyrene, however, he carried that cross of racial prejudice with a dignity and grace that gave his marginal

social circumstance a distinctively Christian aura. In conclusion I want to share the poem as a testimony to the moral power of grace under hardship and as a window into what the longing for a father figure looks like in its most innocent, naïve, and unselfconscious form, before it is covered over and calloused by compensatory strategies of one kind or another.

JAKE

He left Niggertown like it was Kingdom come
To make a living doing what needed done.
Before he knocked on doors, he took his hat
In those enormous hands, then turned and spat
Tobacco hard at yet another gutter.
Said: “Hello Miss Dixie” . . . my grandmother . . .
“Jake,” from behind the old screen door,
“It’s the yard needs mowing and a chore
Or two after that: cut the honeysuckle vine;
Lose your temper on it, Jake, and if there’s time
Trim the hedge, and keep this child outdoors,
He loves to watch, while I sweep and mop the floors.”
And so I’d spend an occasional summer day
Being Jake’s best friend who’d overheard hearsay
Yet knew that he was really brown, not black,
And good and kind and had a Negro knack
For fixing everything that needed fixed.
I never knew I loved him; I was six,
But hope he knew, though he’s been dead these many years,
What it meant when he took out those shears
To cut the hedge and gave me a man to see,
And let me run to fetch the ice and tea,
Sit next to him, and while he’d slowly quench

His measure of his worth: his thirst, I'd inch
A little closer: "It's hot Jake, huh?" I'd say.
He'd mumble: "God made it that-a'way;
It's up to us to love the way it's made;
He'll give us a little tea and ice and shade."
And when the tea was gone, I'd grab the rake,
Helping out again my old friend Jake.
I guess I was too busy to notice when
Months passed, Jake didn't come round again.
Grandmother Dixie O'Connor went away a died,
And some of those tears I finally cried
Were for the quiet old occasional friend
Who took Miss Dixie's place now and then:
He had even let me wear his smelly hat,
And though he rarely talked, I remember that
He'd pat me on the head and almost smile,
As to say: "Not now, I'll tell you afterwhile."
One summer he came to call me by my name.
I leapt alive the way the preachers claim
You're supposed to do when, despite the Fall,
God's big enough to love you after all.

Thank you and God bless you.