

I THINK THEY CALL IT HEAVEN

Some of you may remember that I was a guitarist, mostly for liturgical celebrations. I would read the scripture passages for a given Sunday and select songs along the theme presented. It would involve selecting the songs, assembling the binder for Mass and familiarizing myself with the melody. Of all these efforts, maybe three hours a week, practicing guitar received the least attention. I learned to play initially as a high school student, developing my ear for music listening to 1960's folk. Over the years I played primarily at Mass (over 30 years) and occasionally some secular venues as well. As time went on, I began to settle into my particular level of proficiency and to this day I still "reside" there. I seldom play anymore. Once a month at a Taizé prayer service and occasionally at home. While my skills have not diminished much (except for the callouses), they have no avenue to improve either. They just are what they are now. For many years I would lament "If only I was born with long slender fingers (instead of short stubby carpenter hands), then I could play like James Taylor or John Michael Talbot". Or "If I just had the time to learn how to read music or how to sing, I could learn more songs, and do them better". These "if only's" are the crack in my door of regret. What's the truth here? I was not willing to put the work into my art. I could have been much better, but I chose not to practice enough to truly improve. There is nothing I can blame this on besides the guy "in the mirror" who mocks me as I lament my missed opportunities. The metaphorical significance here for the spiritual life was not lost on me. Hopefully you as well.

I realize we can't do everything in life. We can't, as they say, "have it all". I've always said I don't want everything, just certain things I don't have. It's human nature. Especially in this country, most of us create lofty expectations in life. We set high bars for church, government, sports, financial institutions, schools, even nature. Before you scoff at this last one, how many times have you complained that the weather didn't cooperate with your outdoor plans? How often are you disappointed with an article of clothing that didn't fit just right or an automobile that didn't perform the way you wanted? Shoes that hurt when you first bought them, or gloves that were hard to get off and on till they were broke in? Whatever the "struggle" may be, people in the West (Europe and U.S.) seem so prone to disappointment. Nothing is ever up to our "standard". We expect our politicians to all be perfect, dedicated public servants...free of personality defects and securely rooted in virtue. The expectation for our clergy is even higher. I've often witnessed patrons in a restaurant treat servers rudely because the meal or service was not what they expected. How would this change if our hope was to simply *have* a "meal" or to not become sick from eating it? These are the "lofty" dreams in a large part of the world. I am increasingly concerned with the level of "perfection" we demand from practically every facet of our society, and the growing level of intolerance. Every facet... except ourselves. The mental violence we use to push our agendas is disturbing as well. It all reminds me of a story about a gardener who witnessed a rabbit eating some of the flowers in his garden. To rid himself of the varmint, he trampled the plants all around the flowers to get at the critter doing the damage. He succeeded in getting rid of his plant eating scourge, but at what cost. The surrounding landscape was decimated.

In our world we have seen issues such as "Me Too", "Black Lives Matter", Pro-life/Women's rights, Health care, politics, even global climate change all trample character values such as mutual respect, honesty, and basic human civility towards one another. All because "they" are the enemy. Please don't