

Ars moriendi

Of course, I must polish my shoes

Mario O. D'Souza, CSB

Father Mario Osbert D'Souza, C.S.B. was born in Karachi, Pakistan in 1956 and emigrated to Ireland in his late teens where he completed a Honours B.A. in Philosophy from University College, Dublin. He found his final home in Canada, arriving in Calgary in 1982 and completing an M.Ed. in the Philosophy of Education in 1984 from the University of Calgary. He joined the Basilian Fathers soon after, and while a member of that Roman Catholic order of teaching priests completed an M.Div. and Ph.D. in the Philosophy of Education, specializing in the thought of Jacques Maritain. His primary academic home was the University of St. Michael's College in Toronto, where he spent many years starting in 1991, except for short terms as Academic Dean of St. Joseph's College at the University of Alberta and President of Assumption University at the University of Windsor. He served as Dean of the Faculty of Theology of St. Michael's from 2009-14, and during that time published prodigiously, including an award winning and annotated edition of Maritain's writing and his most important work, "A Catholic Philosophy of Education: The Church and Two Philosophers," which juxtaposed the Philosophy of Education of Maritain and Bernard Lonergan with that of the Catholic Church, and with his own experiences as a student, scholar and priest. He died on September 26, 2017 surrounded by his Basilian confrères.

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I first found out that I have cancer, and the level of its severity and advanced stage, on the 11th of July, 2017. I had some symptoms like shortness of breath and fatigue, but I attributed them to a pill that I was taking, and which could produce similar side-effects. Subsequent visits to the doctors show that it is in its final stage.

Contrary to a message that was sent out some weeks ago, the cancer that I am suffering from is not lung cancer. It has certainly manifested itself in my lungs, but it is not lung cancer. Those who know, have declared it to be a carcinoma of unknown primary origin. In fact, the oncologist said that characteristics displayed

make it appear like breast cancer—not uncommon in men—but, on examination, she has ruled that out. It is an aggressive form of cancer. The doctors are not sure where it originated, and in its frenzy to conquer, it has lost its previous characteristics. And while it is seen in some organs, that is not where it originated. I went in for a biopsy on July 27. The results confirmed what I knew. The cancer is malignant, and if there is any treatment, it will prolong my life for a little while longer, weeks, months.

While grappling with this all during the first few days, I realized that my shoes needed polishing. At first, I thought, Why bother? On reflection, I realized that I must polish my shoes, and do what I can each day to keep with the routine of the day. The rhythm of life offers a consolation of its own; indeed, it helps move time along.

A few days into this news, I was asked by a visitor, after I had spoken about my faith and trust in God and the promise of eternal life, whether “I had time to process all of this.” I gave some polite reply. On reflection, however, I realize, that the question, well-meaning though it was, was strange. To process something, I would have thought, requires one to have some experience of what one is processing, an ability to see the implications of the information. Given what I face, the only meaningful lens that I have is the lens of faith and the comfort of God’s mercy and forgiveness and the reception of the Eucharist. All these sources of strength are a great comfort and consolation, but they do not process one’s thinking in the usual psychological way that we associate with that word.

St. Bernard says consolingly, “Sorrow for sin is indeed necessary, but it should not be an endless preoccupation. You must dwell also on the glad remembrance of God’s loving kindness; otherwise sadness will harden the heart and lead it more deeply into despair.”¹

I wasn’t filled with anxiety and dread when I was given the news about my health. Certainly, the world changed, but even that change didn’t involve slipping into some sentimental sadness that I was doing things, walking on the street, or speaking to friends in ways that I would not do again. The world changed, but that change now involved making my peace with God in a way that has a finality to it, an end that will come. How much I will experience of the end as the end, I don’t know. What I do know, as we all do, is I will be invited to pass through. That passing through I must, of course, do on my own, and what will happen as I pass through, I do not know; nobody does, but my faith and the faith of the Church tells me that that passing is a transformation, something quite beyond what the senses, memory, or the imagination can place before me. Its shape and form is veiled from us all, I suspect because of its blinding light; our human eyes would be rendered blind.

Of course, I go through moments of doubt. What if this life is all we have? What if the critics of religious belief, articulate atheists, and positivist science are right that the length of our earthly days is all we have? What if faith and religious

¹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermon on the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1971) 4: 70.

belief have only been a sugar coating to make palatable human anxiety and dread of the fear of nothingness? Any convincing solution to these questions is not possible because we want to find answers as embodied, sensory beings, and that won't do the trick. But the answer of faith and religious belief comes as a result of a very different way of looking at ourselves as we live in the world. First, the order and beauty of the universe could simply not come about on its own, pace all those who say it could. I am reminded of my undergraduate studies in philosophy in Dublin. Imagine, says the philosopher D. Z. Philips, that you are on a train from England to Wales. At the very point on reaching that border, you look out the window and see a set of stones that says, "Welcome to Wales." But the sceptic retorts saying that those stones weren't set there in a meaningful pattern, they merely fell into that pattern. Your look would surely be one of sheer incredulity. It is one thing to say that the stones fell into a pile, but that they fell into a pattern, and they fell into a pattern at the very border, and they fell into a pattern that communicates meaning and truth pertinent to that very location, and all this happened by sheer accident is far too much to accept.

Secondly, the meaning and value that human beings express through love, selflessness, forgiveness, mercy, caring for the poor and needy, none of these responses have a physical or material foundation to them, and by that I mean, you couldn't test forgiveness or mercy or love or caring for the poor under a microscope: a mother's love, bravery in the battlefield, serving the poor and the destitute, offering one's life to save another, the list goes on, are not materially verifiable.

Third, as the Church reminds us that being born into faith and being nurtured by faith and religious belief change how one looks at the world. We are steeped in the death and resurrection of the Lord. We bless ourselves with the sign of the cross several times each day, we spend three days every year exclusively contemplating the passion, death and the resurrection of the Lord. The world and how we see the world changes. All this enables us to understand the meaning and value of faith and religious belief. The critic would say you have not answered my question as to the existence of God and eternal life as mere human constructs. My reply, and one that is not persuasive from the outside, is that only by being nurtured in faith and religious belief, and struggling with what is entailed, and regularly asking for God's mercy and forgiveness for one's sins and failings does the encounter with the Risen Lord convey meaning and value. Looking at religious practice from outside the circle of faith and belief will rarely lead one to faith and belief.

And fourth, the religious sceptic will never be convinced about salvation in and through Jesus Christ. The sceptic will say that when we speak to God in prayer we are simply responding to the human emotion for understanding and explanation in the face of annihilation and nothingness. But when we hear God speak to us, we are in need of psychological help. As Christians, we have all heard God speak to us, and while that speaking takes different forms, the quiet convictions of our faith and the trust and belief that overcomes us every time we receive the Eucharist, we do hear God speaking to us.

And then there is that great question which has baffled and occupied the attention of philosophers and theologians alike down through the ages: God's freedom, and, more directly, the manifestations of God's freedom. Not only are we created freely and given the gift of freedom, but God creates the universe freely, and in that freedom, there is a certain inequality. Because of that freedom the order of creation is not equal. Human beings do not all move along a similar straight line, all growing to physical maturity in the same way, all blessed with the same gifts, all having the same opportunities, all facing the same diseases, and all reaching their final end in the same way, each living the same length of days. That is not a free world created by God; it is a terrifying world of science fiction. I fully accept that in this order of the freedom of creation, my days will be shorter than many. But then many have gone before me whose days were even shorter still. My third brother died in my mother's womb days before he was due in the world. As far as I understand it, the order of creation is marked by an intrinsic and necessary inequality as a result of being created in freedom, for anything different would render the freedom of creation to be meaningless. Similarly, all that is meant and entailed by human being would also be rendered meaningless. So, as part of that unequal order of the freedom of God's creation, my life has run its course. I was given a good innings; the rest I leave in God's hands.

Those who have gone before us in faith do not appear before us again to present the evidence of Eternal Life, for that would render faith meaningless. But the Empty Tomb and the renewed faith and zeal of those who witnessed the resurrected Jesus is what has sustained our faith and belief, in an uninterrupted fashion, since that Easter Resurrection.

And so, the journey of faith and belief is, ultimately, grappling and understanding with what is real. The reality of the external, material world is a gift given to us so that our transcendence through love, meaning and value has a firm foothold. But that is all it is, a foothold; we are given its security to move beyond it.

I am getting excellent care, and I think of the most of the world's poor and destitute who would be left in their poverty, suffering, and pain in a similar situation. This is another reason that I recall in preventing me from turning in on myself and feeling sorry for myself. The Christian, especially when facing death, either hands his or her life over to Christ or falls into the trap of despair and hopelessness

I also recall St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians: "Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory" (3:1-4). Herein lies the heart of my faith, and I pray God for His mercy and forgiveness that He will see me through with the strength of this faith to the end.

So now I must wait, not morbidly or with a sense of despondency, but it is waiting never the less, and a waiting that I have never experienced before. All the previous waiting had some expectation of being fulfilled in time and being verified

by my senses and memory, but this waiting is of a different order. In circumstances similar to mine, our society now sees no need for such waiting; it is seen as a pointless and an unnecessary prolongation of suffering, both physical and psychological. But Christian waiting involves a handing over; there is an active passivity in this waiting nourished by our faith and the Eucharist. It is a waiting though which I am being invited to see each day as a gift to encounter God's love, grace, and mercy. "Waiting," says W. H. Vanstone, in *The Stature of Waiting*, "can be the most intense and poignant of all human experiences—the experience which, above all others, strips us of affectation and self-deception and reveals to us the reality of our needs, our values, and ourselves."²

I decided to share this with you in one way to share my testimony of faith and belief in the Risen Lord Jesus. As I journey forward as a pilgrim, I don't know what the state of my mind will be—some may question my state of mind for a long time previous. I thought this reflection would be a small testimony in the ongoing mission of the Basilian Fathers mission to teach and evangelize.

I close with those memorable lines from the poet Minnie Louise Haskins, beautifully sung at the coronation of King George VI: "And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied: 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.' So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking day in the lone East."

² W.H. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982), 83.