

Joy from Sadness

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This is Macy's flagship store on State Street; you may remember it as Marshall Fields. I took this photo a few days after the civil disorder we experienced in the Loop and around the country in late May. I refrained from using other pictures of destruction; one is enough. When I first saw this massive building completely boarded up I recalled the generations who made an annual pilgrimage to see elaborate Christmas windows, and how this store has been such an integral part of Chicago's mercantile history. Soon something else hit me: seeing the store that covers a square block boarded up brought a wave of sadness. Any number of times in the past four months I've had other moments when in my heart: boom! I'm a little blue. Why?

The function of sadness is a signal within us that we need comfort, or that we need time to recoup after a loss of any kind. And just what have we lost in the last few months of protests and a destructive and deadly pandemic? A great deal! And what can we learn from all we've been given to live with? Even more than we've lost, I believe. I will not delineate what has been taken

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going. John 14:1-4

from us nor the reasons for such a disruptive period of life together. It's this sadness I've noticed occasionally in my heart that I want to write about because I am only one person among billions who have, I know, felt the same thing in many ways.

If sadness is an inner trigger telling us we need comfort, to whom or to what do we go to alleviate it? Drugs? Netflix? Sugar? Booze? Sex? Power? The Church? Anger? Shopping? Hate groups? A friend? God? Your spouse? The Eucharist? Gambling? The list of substitutes is probably very long. I find sadness one of the more fascinating aspects of being human. A constant source of mystery. How does sadness enter our hearts? Is it disappointment with unmet goals or the loss of love? Something someone says to us? How do we respond when our world is changed without our willingness to let that happen? Does sadness come from within or from without us?

Let's learn from Francis and Clare. We Franciscans celebrate two major feasts soon: **August 2, St. Mary of the Angels**, a day we remember the tiny chapel in the valley below Assisi that is the womb of the Order. **The Solemnity of St. Clare of Assisi is August 11.** We must celebrate both of them quietly this year because of all the limits of Covid 19. But both feasts bring to my mind many things we can learn from our founders.

When I left my family in 1962 to enter the high school seminary I was 13. Yup – a very different Church and different world, wasn't it? I clearly remember getting on an old train in West Quincy for Chicago. Back then the train left at 2:30 a.m. so it was dark. 25 guys from our parish went to St. Joseph Seminary in Oak Brook so there were lots of family members to say farewell. I boarded with excitement but once we got into the open prairies of Illinois in the middle of the night, I can remember being swallowed up by sadness. My Mom and Dad! My three brothers and sister! What had I done to myself? Who's going to take care of me until Christmas? Sad. I was really sad. I'd find out many years later that someone else left family and home in the middle of the night.

Both Francis and Clare of Assisi went through periods of conversion in very, very different ways and both spent years in prayer and

struggles. Francis was a prisoner of war in Perugia and Clare's noble family fled their home in Assisi because of war. Francis' father beat him more than once because his first born son broke with family business practices, gave away money and fabrics from the family store, was mocked publicly in town for his begging which brought shame upon the Bernadone household. Clare left the comforts of her family in the middle of the night. She sold her inheritance and lands, gave the proceeds to the poor which began the eventual demise of the Offreduccio family lineage forever. Physical discomforts plagued them both the rest of their lives. Francis battled inner demons like doubting God's forgiveness and his sexual self. Clare disagreed with the Church (and more than one pope!) as to how women religious should live in the 13th century. How could they possibly have lived through those experiences and many more even more powerful without having moments or periods of sadness?

In 2004 we premiered my oratorio, *Dialogue of Francis and Clare*, in Assisi in the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels, on the very spot where Clare was received by Francis and the friars in 1212 and where Francis embraced Sr. Death on October 3, 1226. It was one of the highlights of my life as a composer, especially since my siblings and our Mom and great friends were present. But aside from that, *Dialogue of Francis and Clare* is pertinent to this article because of one thing.

It is my contention, after years of research and study, that after Francis experienced the Stigmata in late 1224 he slipped into a period of dark sadness or depression. His body was wracked with pain from many physical maladies and the constantly bleeding wounds of the Stigmata. He'd relinquished leadership of his own fraternity in 1220 when he realized he was not adept at administration and the Order was being more and more institutionalized by Rome and the friars themselves. How can one not be sad through such heavy experiences in life? But he returned to Assisi and spent weeks near Clare beside the monastery of San Damiano. I believe it was Clare who pulled Francis out of his dark days so he could see the Light again. She healed him! It was in those weeks that he began work on his masterpiece, *Canticle of the Creatures*.

When Clare left her family in 1212 she was 17 and had already turned away marriage proposals. When her family found out the friars had taken her to a Benedictine convent in Bastia (in the valley not far from the Porziuncola chapel) men of her family charged the nuns' chapel on horseback, only to find Clare with a veil and hanging on the altar. They had to leave her there. The nuns didn't want her, so she moved to two other chapels temporarily before Francis led her to accept San Damiano where she lived till her death in 1253. She, too, was afflicted with physical frailties, a bed-ridden invalid the last 28 years of her life. The male Church leadership dictated a rule of life for her and her followers (the Rule of St. Benedict) but she knew what God wanted her to do and stood her ground. Finally, Alexander IV accepted the Rule of Life she wrote herself (first woman in Church history to do so) and – she died the next day. Sadness? Of course!

We often think of saints as having been superhuman, but the Church canonizes women and men like ourselves in every way who find light and happiness amid life experiences that bring pain and sadness. Clare and Francis nourished each other by supporting and affirming one another, by supplanting darkness with light, always centered on Christ Jesus. Always.



Clare chose to live a cloistered life but didn't view the cloister as escape from the world because her cloister was in her heart where she dwelt only with her Spouse and her sisters. She withdrew from interaction with the world yet the world knew Clare well before she died. The Italian Franciscan scholar, Marco Bartoli, wrote that Clare brought light and joy to the world by willingly becoming a model, a mirror of Christ's love for all. He further contends that Clare transcended the cloister by the way she and the sisters of San Damiano remained open to everyone and everything that came their way.

Francis found his joy becoming a mirror of Christ as preacher and mystic. He could laugh at the simple antics of Br. Giles, cry at the sight of a woman who had less than he, revel in the

Umbrian mountains and dance before Pope Innocent III. He found his happiness by emulating the Poor, crucified Christ. He did not seek out suffering or new ways to mistreat his body; rather, he accepted physical suffering and psychic hardships and allowed them to transfigure him into an image of Jesus Christ. His last known prayer before the experience of the Stigmata was that he could know two things before he died: the profound sufferings of Jesus in his own body, and the incredible joy of knowing the Lord's profound, indescribable love for the Holy One. He found both and lived for almost another two years, completely in the Light and at the apex of his mystical union with God.

What has all this to do with us? You should know after four months of the pandemic that we all experience darkness, surrounded daily with mind-numbing numbers of infection rates and deaths, arguments about everything, high anxiety levels and disregard from human life. Just going to a grocery store can seem to be a clip from an apocalyptic film like *Soylent Green*. This is our life on Earth that God created and we have turned into an ecological and moral mess. But.... Let's have some good news!

I would encourage you to look deep inside your heart to discover the Source of joy that helped Francis climb out of the pits of sadness, rejection and physical pain. He would spend days, even weeks at a time in seclusion, allowing God to permeate his heart with arrows of love. Clare is known to have wept with joy over the boundless care and divine love her Spouse poured into her life through her sisters and through her own brave and unabashedly strong faith. When they owned nothing they were free. And that freedom, that inner joy is for each of us to discover. Honestly! Even as a ponderous plague plows through our shared existence we can alleviate sadness.

I offer you suggestions to brighten even one part of your day. Go outside, even if it's hot, and appreciate the season of



Find a flower or listen to a bird's song and appreciate them as gifts. If you have to wait

in line at Trader Joe's, remember there are people who don't have access to all we have each day. Lift up in prayer someone you know who is in need of the Lord's healing. Read the life of a saint you've always admired. Call someone who is elderly or unable to get outside. Read an entire Gospel to see how the ministry of Jesus flows and how each of the four is so different. Pray for all the politicians with whom you disagree. (That could fill a day!) Offer to shop for another person or family who can't. Go to Mass instead of watching it on television. Nothin' like the real thing, you know, even with the restrictions we must live with right now in churches. Try to understand that masks are a concrete way of truly caring about one another in a very real way. Our country needs the healing power brought by God through St. Clare, my favorite healer.

I offer you these ideas because underneath them is an observation I've made in life, even before Covid 19 appeared among us. We, in our culture, do not allow ourselves to mourn. Death and burial are often so quick and even cosmetic that we don't have time to let the profound sacredness of death sink into our consciousness. When I saw Macy's, Target, Disney, 7-11, many restaurants, banks, jewelry stores, TJ Max and Burlington, Walgreens, all the theaters and on and on and on all boarded up or closed, that cloud of sadness hit me. So I walked all around the Loop to let the pain of it, the tragedy and anger, the cries of oppression sink in and truly affect me.

Then I went home and began writing a new piece for string quartet. (Creative outlets bring joy, you know, because we let ourselves share the very creativity of God.) I asked God to bring me and all of us lightness of being and rays of hope in between thousands of deaths around the world. We are God's children who have lived through countless wars, other plagues, and struggles for justice and peace for centuries. It is God alone who can and will lift our hearts and spirits – if we only allow God to do so. Remember the Lord's words to the disciples at the Last Supper: *"Amen I say to you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices; you will grieve, but your grief will become joy!"*

These days St. Peter's truly needs your support after being closed for months. You may contribute in many ways, so check our website for how to do that and see our daily hours for

Mass and confessions. May God fill your lives
with peace, joy and everything that is good.

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