Gospel Reflection

Sacred Illusions

It all really boils down to whether we believe the Lord is in our midst. A simple response of "yes" creates the seedbed for faith and paves the way for dismantling some of the illusions we desperately cling to. We harbor illusions that inhibit our pathways not only to God but to one another. Illusions of separateness, superiority, and self-sufficiency are but a few. We all too easily forget what water we need to drink, where to find God's presence, what we need to grow in faith, and how God acts in the lives of those he loves.

The illusions we cling to keep our eyes focused on the things of this world, causing us to believe that we are somehow responsible for our own happiness or independent contractors negotiating our way through life. These illusions, that veil the greater truth of who we are, cause us to live with dichotomies and separateness. We find ourselves falsely believing that God is here and not there, what is mine is not yours, that more is better than less, and that I have some kind of "earned" privilege over you. An illusion of arrogance makes us believe we are creators of our own destiny and better than others who may look and live differently than we do.

St. Augustine, having wrestled with his own "ego demons," states, "Sin is believing the lie that you are self-created, self-dependent, and self-sustained." When we are thirsty for some measure of well-being or satisfaction we tend to look for an earthly well out of which to draw water. There must be something we don't have and must get in order to satisfy this thirsty ache we feel deep within. And so, off we go looking for the latest pleasure, most immediate satisfaction, or place of refuge where our egos can get the boost they crave. Yet, we still thirst and the sin that convinces us that our own merits matter most continues to propel us to seek more earthly wells.

What we need is living water. If we listen carefully, as our Lenten season directs, we can easily discover that we are in want and need. We know our incompleteness and also know that loneliness, sadness, and distorted self-images can propel us outward in attempts to fill those gaps, those thirsts. We can become not only victims of our own prejudices but can find ourselves overly self-indulgent in things that can only satisfy for a short time if at all. It is no wonder that money and power are things that are so fervently sought after and defended. As long as we can keep a steady supply going, the illusion of fulfillment and satisfaction can falsely persuade us as craftily as a master magician's act. We live with illusions not truth.



St. Augustine is most correct in his assessment of the lie. Whether we admit it, the lies we believe and pursue will ultimately expose our superficiality. We need to learn how to listen more deeply to what God is echoing in our hearts.

As long as we continue to live in the boxes the illusion of separateness brings, we will never discover the life-giving water we truly need. God can be found in the most amazing and unsuspecting of places and in the least likely of people and circumstances. But, if we limit where we look to discover the truth of God and of who we are, we will miss many opportunities and moments of grace. It is easy to fall victim to the world's illusion that we can handle this human journey without God. This distorts our relationships and removes us from the true axis of our lives.

Only God can reveal the truth of our sinfulness, the superficiality of many of our pursuits and the illusions we hold so dear. Only Jesus can save us from ourselves and give us what we really need. St. John Paul II reminds us that, "The greatest deception and the deepest source of illusion is the illusion of finding joy by excluding God, of finding freedom by excluding moral truths and personal responsibility." Our technological world allows us access to a tremendous amount of information and stimulations, to possess and accumulate things, and to accomplish many tasks. We have become less the stewards God intended us to be and more the consumers we were warned not to be. It is difficult for us to face our illusions and dependencies. They are so engrained in daily life and held by many around us.

As human beings, we do not like change. But, when it's all said and done what is it we really want to achieve? Is it greater status, financial wealth and security, more popularity or power? Do we measure ourselves purely with an earthly yardstick or is something deeper seeking our attention in the midst of life's busyness? Do you want to stay with the status quo of life, or do you want to set sail into the wonderfulness of the surprises God has in store? Illusions keep us stuck and keep our eyes focused on what is below us.

When you are feeling unsettled, empty, a bit unfulfilled or frustrated, to what well do you journey to quench that thirst? Is it one constructed by human hands or by God's?

—Fr. Mark Suslenko