

Preparation “H”

A Reflection on Life as a Preparation for Heaven

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I've been teaching adolescent youth for about sixteen years now. Without a doubt, there have been many changes in the teaching environment since I first set foot in a classroom. I'd have to say that the changes have been, for the most part, positive. In some ways things are better than they were. On a few occasions I have found myself telling my young students that they are a great deal wiser than the generation of leaders who are currently running our country. From a moral point of view, our leaders have provided us with a very fragmented and inconsistent leadership.

But it hasn't been difficult teaching ethics to young people, as one would expect, growing up, as they have, within a post-modern environment. The difficulty in teaching ethics has been with the adult world, those of a previous generation who have already determined their moral identity by choices they have made as adults. But one of the things that young people should learn to be critical of is precisely our *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. This Charter is rooted in the framework of an Individualism that is inconsistent with what it means to be a Catholic; for this Charter fails to call attention to what the entire civil community as a whole has a right to expect from its citizens. The Charter seems to limit itself to the outline of individual rights, but mentions nothing of the obligations that individual persons have towards the civil community as a whole. That is why young people are generally surprised to discover that they have a debt towards their parents, a debt to society, and most importantly, a debt to God--debts that no individual can hope to fully repay.

On a number of occasions within recent years, I found myself taken aback by a rather small number of students who decided to take my philosophy course. It didn't take long to discover that these very students were unable to benefit from it; for they did not have the necessary work habits, self-discipline, and reading ability to do well. But what was particularly striking about these students was that they had set very lofty goals for themselves. Academically, their heads were only just barely above water, so to speak. One student in particular, who couldn't find it in himself to wear his uniform properly, who would come to class late, and who often fell asleep and thus failed to grasp some difficult concepts, had plans to go into Law. I was surprised to hear him tell me that he'd planned to be a lawyer. Other teachers have made similar remarks on this rather strange phenomenon of students with very low averages planning to become medical doctors, lawyers, or Speaker of the House of Commons, etc.

Most of us still wonder how it is that such students could have such a frail grasp on reality. And we wanted to ask them: "How is it that you plan to get into Law school?" Perhaps they thought that they had a right to whatever they choose, since that has been the message that has accompanied them all throughout their school years. "Are you preparing yourself for Law?" "Are you preparing yourself for Medicine?" "What are you doing to get into Medical school?" "What are you doing to get into Law school?" We wanted to ask them these questions, because we didn't see them doing much to prepare themselves for such programs. The ones preparing themselves were those who worked hard at their assignments, came to class regularly and on

time, who studied for their tests, asked questions, and came for extra help when offered. But the former would do no such things.

This is a fitting analogy for what is taking place on a wider scale. This very life is our only opportunity to prepare ourselves for eternity, and yet most people are very much like these students with low averages and little discipline and a very poor work ethic, who think that they are going to just mosey on in to the finest Medical schools in the country. “Do you think you are going to heaven?” “Yes,” most people will say. “What are you doing to prepare yourself for heaven?” And the answer is virtually always “nothing”. It is as if heaven is another one of those rights guaranteed by the *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

I remember many years ago lending a cassette tape to a colleague of mine, a talk given by Father Benedict Groeschel of the Archdiocese of New York. There was a very noticeable change in his character after the period during which he listened to the tape. He seemed to have had a genuine conversion experience. I can't recall all the positive things that he said about Groeschel's talk, but I do recall him saying: “I didn't realize that it was so difficult to get into heaven”. I wasn't sure what it was in the talk that gave my friend that impression. Perhaps it was Groeschel's comments on purgatory, comments to the effect that he expects to spend a great deal of time there, if he's lucky enough to make it. A Capuchin monk, who has given retreats for Mother Theresa and her sisters, and who has such a deep sense of his own sinfulness that he believes himself lucky should he make it to purgatory. This might have made an impression on my colleague. In any case, he was a changed man. And his demeanour was much more humane, for he began to pray, to really enter into prayer, to attend Mass, regular Confession, and to foster a devotion to the Blessed Mother.

We tell our children that kindergarten is a preparation for elementary school, and that elementary school is a preparation for high school, and high school a preparation for university, and university a preparation for the world, but we stop there and leave them ignorant about that for which life itself is a preparation. But our entire life here is really nothing other than a preparation for heaven. We are only just passing through. But there is a tendency in people to regard this life as if the grave is not something that is fast approaching or that we will eventually have to contend with. The way to prepare for eternity is, firstly, to keep in mind the fact that we are going to die. The next thing is to try to live the messages of the Blessed Mother that were given throughout the last two centuries during her apparitions: fasting, prayer, penance, regular confession, and Eucharist. We have to learn how to pray, since in heaven we'll be doing nothing else. Peggy Noonan, an editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, wrote: “But isn't it odd that in a world full of geniuses, no one has an answer [to the crisis in the Middle East]? Isn't it amazing that the whole highly sophisticated, technologically evolved, psychologically and historically astute world feels so at the mercy of this drama, so unable to help it or end it?” She goes on to argue, quite persuasively, that the only thing left for us to do is pray. “Prayer is the hardest thing,” she continues, “And no one congratulates you for doing it because no one knows you're doing it, and if things turn out well they likely won't thank God in any case. But I have a feeling that the hardest thing is what we all better be doing now, and that it's not only the best answer but the only one” (*The Hard Way*. April 12, 2002)

This is what Mary has been trying to tell the world for two centuries now. Pray. Fast, pray, and do penance.