



Arise

A reflection / letter to foster pastoral and spiritual growth
By Bob Traupman / *priest / writer*
AN *ARISE* REPRINT OF Vol. V / No. 9 / May 1994
On the occasion of the twenty fifth anniversary
of my ordination to the sacred priesthood

Celebrating God's Faithfulness

*Editors Note: As I prepare to reflect on forty years of my priesthood, half of which is documented in *Arise*, I offer this reflection written 15 years ago. I was in Baltimore at the time and had two celebrations – one for friends in Orlando and another at the Newman Center at Towson University in Baltimore. That same month I received my second Masters degree in Professional Writing. I am not quite sure what I'm going to write for my fortieth; that depends on my courage and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. I hope you will look for it later this May. Here's what I wrote in May 1994 . . .*

This is the story of God's faithfulness to one of his priests -- and to us all. It is true that God writes straight with crooked lines; God's faithfulness is full of paradox. Twenty five years ago this May 24th, I lay on the floor of the small, unassuming cathedral of my diocese and my bishop proclaimed the consecratory prayer that gave me and my three classmates portions of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. I was filled with enthusiasm in those days. The Spirit of God rushed upon me and I could not contain my joy. The grace of ordination lasted the first three years of my priesthood-- even though there were obstacles. My first pastor (God rest him) and I had conflicting theologies. He was conservative; I was quite liberal. Somehow, we managed to get along and to respect one another. I learned to restrain (and channel) some of my enthusiasm. And it worked. Though an odd couple, we were a team.

Then the bishop asked me to become the liturgy coordinator for the diocese. There, I found a great outlet for my creativity. And I also showed forth some of my

character defects -- my arrogance and impatience with brother priests who did not show the same enthusiasm for renewal in the Church. I butted heads with not a few pastors and made a few enemies. I had just turned 30 and was ready to take the world on my shoulders. I was too big for my own breeches.

When the bishop whom I loved and served devotedly was transferred to another diocese, I began to unravel. I had been working so hard that very early in my priesthood, I experienced a kind of burnout. I was confused about what was happening to me. I wasn't taking care of my own needs. I got so absorbed in my work that I began to lose my way.

I was then assigned to a huge parish whose people required lots of attention. The other associate priest there, a friend of mine, and I felt the effects of very demanding activity and being constantly on call. Even though I was doing work that I dearly loved, I ended up with a breakdown that hospitalized me. This cast me into a deep depression. I was ashamed and terribly fearful. Though it took some time for me to realize it, what was happening to me was that I couldn't control my own intense creative energy: I was diagnosed as a person with manic depressive illness. Persons with this disease have to learn to control immense amounts of energy and torrential consciousness on the one hand and complete lack of energy and long bouts of depression on the other.

I realized, though, that I could find meaning because I was bearing my own share of the Cross -- a share that brought the pain of embarrassment and rejection. Many people did not (or would not) understand that a priest could fall from grace and be all too human like the rest of folks. The result was, first of all, that I tried to drink my pain away as so many foolishly do. I fell even further.

I took a leave of absence from the priesthood. Not that I wanted to be something other than a priest, but I felt I was not worthy of being a priest in that state. Besides, I was dealing with feelings of confusion about my celibacy and sexuality. The second result was that I discovered that what I was experiencing was not all negative. I discovered that I was on a spiritual journey -- a journey deep within. When I found out that I was utterly defeated and could no longer help myself, I let go of my pride. I was finally willing to seek help. My bishop made it possible for me to receive the treatment I needed. I realized that God was faithful to me. Recovery was a long, arduous process. After I got out of treatment, I was not ready to return to active priestly ministry, though I discovered that the priesthood grew daily in my heart. I never stopped thinking as a priest, praying as a priest, even though I was not active as a priest.

I did secular work for a couple of years. The first job I had after getting out of treatment was as a housekeeper in a hotel -- making beds and scrubbing toilets. My ego was whittled away even further. And that was good; God was providing exactly what I needed.

I remember the spring -- eleven years ago -- when I wrote a long letter to my bishop telling him that I very much wanted to return to active priestly ministry. His reply was thoughtful, guardedly optimistic and compassionate. He told me he would think about my request.

I learned patience in those days. Lots of patience. I learned that God thinks in decades when we want things in minutes. A year later, I was granted permission to return to priestly ministry, though it seemed best that I do so in another diocese. I had to struggle to recover my skills for ministry. I continued to be quite depressed and to have bouts with mania. As it turned out, two years after my treatment, my recovery was only beginning. I had to struggle, for example to recover my preaching and interpersonal skills. The preaching got better after a year or two because I was constantly writing. The interpersonal skills are only now returning. And for that, I am deeply grateful.

In the seventh year after returning to the priesthood, I asked my bishop if I could go away to study so that I could develop my writing skills. He has been entirely supportive of that venture. I anticipate getting a second master's degree this May in Professional Writing. After I get my degree, I consider myself at this point a person with a dual career -- that of a priest / writer. I hope to continue this Newsletter and later to publish a book or two. My priesthood is very quiet these days. But God is there in the quietness: I am in transition. What the future holds in store for me -- only God knows.

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When I began thinking about this issue, I felt the only honest way to talk about the priesthood was to reflect upon my own experience. But there is risk because many of us don't like to think about the human foibles of our priests. We like stories of priests to be full of "sweetness and light."

But that is not the way it is. No priest's story is full of "sweetness and light." The Church, I think, does a disservice to itself by denying that priests, like all of us, have problems. The spiritual journey always begins by considering our dark side. The Church in its corps of priests and bishops has a collective dark side. We have seen that darkness emerge into the media in recent years.

*(Note that I wrote this in 1994.)*

Priests are fragile, as we all are fragile. God designed human life that way: "This treasure [our life and ministry] we possess in earthen vessels to make it clear that its surpassing power comes from God and not from us" (I Cor. 4:7). The spiritual guide is one who knows firsthand what it is like to deal with anger, arrogance, sexual temptation, fear, doubt, inadequacy and every other area of the spirit that needs to be tamed and ordered. I can assure you that every priest whom you regard as a good or excellent priest is one who has his own story to tell of the battle

between the forces of darkness and light. It just simply cannot be otherwise, for that is the nature of the spiritual quest -- to balance the light and the dark. And to follow this line of reasoning, the opposite is true. Thus, it is Jesus who needs to be the center of the priest's life -- Jesus, who in his own brokenness and fragility, is my Lord, my savior, my elder brother, my redeemer, my beloved. Oh, how tremendous is his faithfulness to me! In the midst of the darkness, he was there. In my preaching, he is there. In my writing, he is there. In my counseling, he is there. In my idle thoughts, he is there. Tears well up in my eyes as I consider the closeness I have to Jesus-- man to man. This is Jesus' priesthood I have the honor of sharing. And thank God -- in these latter days at least -- I always remember that -- though early on, I went tearing off in my own directions. Jesus is what it's all about. He has got to be the center of the priest's life and the life of us all. Otherwise we in ministry are like rats in a maze running around doing nothing. Jesus is everything to me. Jesus must be everything to the priest.

So I celebrate God's fidelity to me, his wandering priest, this May, 1994. I have a lot to celebrate. After all that has happened to me, I shouldn't be a priest anymore. Perhaps with all the things I have done, I shouldn't be on this planet anymore. How wonderful is God's faithfulness to me! How astonishing! You might think that I might want to celebrate my faithfulness to God. But that is nothing compared to God's end of the bargain. He has worked miracle after miracle in my life -- while at the same time keeping me as a fragile earthen vessel, constantly depending on God. That is the mystery of God's fidelity. God's fidelity to Jesus led to rejection and to the Cross. How can we expect God's fidelity to us to be otherwise? What we want, God often does not grant. What God wants is far more exciting, far more generous than what we would ever expect -- once we learn to live in God's categories, not in ours.

God's fidelity is full of paradox. We can only find light by going into our darkness. We can only find the straight path by getting lost. We can only know happiness by knowing sorrow. Isn't it wonderful? Give me a good paradox any day and I'm content. Life is a lot more interesting that way. And the spiritual life, the spiritual journey is more interesting, more exciting because we usually have to unlearn every teaching that we've ever had so that God can teach us anew in God's way.

So I invite you to celebrate with me. Trace the lines of God's fidelity in your life as I have done with mine. And be astonished and amazed at the miracles you find therein.

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Next month: My 40th Anniversary reflections.

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