

Reflections on Faith, Family, and Friends

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What I can say tonight, having just defended my dissertation on the biblical exegesis of Origen of Alexandria, represents only a very small drop compared to the ocean of joy and appreciation that I feel in my heart and all that is going through my mind. How can I express the depths of my gratitude to all of you here present and to those who were not able to make it but shared in my journey? How can I properly thank you for the great gift you have been in my life? How can I best describe this beautiful relationship and the many spiritual blessings we shared? To attempt to do so, there are five words that come to mind: faith, fun, family, friends, and forever.

Faith: I begin by thanking God for the gift of faith and all the blessings He has given me in my life because of it. Faith is sometimes misunderstood as an emotion. But in the Catholic tradition education has always been an important aspect of faith. How can we have faith if we do not know what we are believing in? How can we love a God whom we do not know? Or even worse how can we love a God who is a product of our own imagination or misinformation?

Wanting to know more about God through prayer and education has been a strong drive for me throughout my life. Education is a long and arduous process and some may have wished that I followed the advice of Robert Fulghum, who wrote a book called: *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (New York: Villard Books, 1988). However, I decided that there were a few more things worth studying.

Saint Paul speaks about this in his first letter to the Corinthians. He says: “For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood” (1 Cor. 13:9–13). Therefore, faith requires knowledge and without knowledge, the content of whatever faith we have is seriously compromised by our personal impressions and, even worse, our delusions.

Our faith needs to remain sharpened through knowledge and also through prayer and service. These are also the characteristics that Origen of Alexandria emphasized in his own life. The emeritus pope Benedict XVI summarizes this well when he says:

Notwithstanding all the theological richness of Origen’s thought, his is never a purely academic approach; it is always founded on the experience of prayer, of contact with God. Indeed, to his mind, knowledge of the Scriptures requires prayer and intimacy with Christ even more than study. He was convinced that the best way to become acquainted with God is through love and that there is no authentic ‘knowledge of Christ’ without falling in love with him. (*Great Christian Thinkers: From the Early Church Through the Middle Ages* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011], 22).

Let us always remind ourselves that faith, knowledge, prayer, and service are above all about falling deeper and deeper in love with God, and falling deeper and deeper in love with others because of our deeper love for God.

When I was in grade eight I went into a luxury car dealership with some friends. I saw a beautiful red Porsche. I thought to myself, if I am able to buy this car the week I get my driver’s license, people will love me. Everyone will want to be

my friend. Driving that Porsche will give me power. If I chose to follow the Porsche instead of faith, I would definitely not be here today. Most likely that Porsche is now in a scrap yard, yet my faith in God has led me to a fuller and happier life than I could have ever imagined.

Fun: How often is the Christian life portrayed as one of dreary drudgery and unhappy submission to tedious commands! But I had a very happy childhood. My parents always took us places and kept us very busy with many activities. After I became a priest, I tried to find a balance between being myself and not upsetting images people might have of a priest.

When I first came to Ottawa I started biking to the university year round. I bought some gloves, glove inserts, a helmet, waterproof pants, and away I went. Some people thought I was crazy, especially when I rode my bike in the winter. I took a different perspective. I was getting some daily exercise and when it snowed it felt like I was doing some off-road riding. I found that morning and evening ride to be very adventurous and fun. Some people even asked me, "Are you going to keep riding your bike after you get ordained?" I thought to myself, "I sure will unless after ordination the angels of heaven transport clergy from one place to another and help keep them fit."

I think people got used to the fact that I love the outdoors. Some even found out that I snowboarded. On one occasion when a friend joined me, he unfortunately had to be taken to the base of the mountain on a stretcher. Luckily he was OK, but he was wearing a shoulder strap for a few weeks. Of course everyone found out that he was with me when he fell and some people began to say "What is this? Abouna takes people snowboarding and they end up on a stretcher and in a cast?" Despite this, we are still friends and can laugh at the fun day we enjoyed on the mountain.

I think faith without fun is not really faith at all. That is why an aspect of fun has always been part of how I see the world and also how I see any ministry that I am in. If I cannot enjoy it and feel passionate about what I am doing, then there is definitely something seriously wrong.

Believe it or not, there were also many fun moments amidst the many dry ones in the process of writing my thesis.