

1. From My Daughter to the Blessed Mother

And I'll walk slow, I'll walk slow.
Take my hand, help me on my way.

—Mumford and Sons

One Sunday I was tucking in my then five-year-old daughter when she started talking about a boy in a wheelchair whom we had seen earlier in the day. It was obvious to her that the wheelchair was permanent rather than temporary, and she wanted to know why he was in that chair. I explained, as best I could, that the muscles in his arms and legs worked differently than hers and mine and, as a result, he could not walk on his own. He used the wheelchair to get around, and that's how his family was able to take him to the park by our house. My daughter thought for a second and then said that it must be hard for him not to be able to walk; I said that it probably was. Looking at the photo of St. Thérèse of Lisieux hanging next to her bed, I asked her if she wanted to ask St. Thérèse to pray for that boy. She said, “No. I want to pray *with* St. Thérèse for him.”

St. Thérèse found my daughter first. Sure, my wife and I gave her “Thérèse” as a middle name, but that didn't cause or guarantee the attraction. I think the photos started it—photos like the ones that now surround her bed. In every photo, Thérèse exudes a youthful exuberance mixed with mature confidence. Thérèse caught my daughter's eye as a small, small child because of the way Thérèse looked at her through those

photos. Thérèse has the look of someone who is free and who is brave, and those eyes captivated my daughter's young imagination. The look of that saint showed my daughter the kind of eyes she wanted to have: eyes that are alert, bold, compassionate, confident. That night was one of the many times I have been struck by my daughter's own eyes, how they are open to other people, how she is willing to see what they are going through, how she remembers them, and how she wants to respond, to do something for them.

Parents have moments like this, when the beauty of their own children surprises them, delights them, inspires them, and even intimidates them. There is a lot of pressure involved in raising kids—not just about doing all the little things right but, more grandly, about knowing if we are setting them on the right course for the long run. What I saw with my own eyes that night—and what I heard—was like a flash or a blast of clarity: *this* is what I want for my children; *this* is who they ought to be. They should see others and remember them; they should care about what others are going through; they should be bold in wanting to do something for others, know how to do it, and take the giant leap into *actually* making it happen. My children should be free, and they should be brave, and they should know what matters most. My daughter learned all that from looking at a saint looking at her, and I learned something fundamental about parenting in the light of that saint who shows me what I ought to want for my children.

A very wise teacher once taught me that we should “always begin with the end in mind.” As I have grown older, I have come to see that this is not really a revolutionary idea, but it is still absolutely fundamental. Expecting too little, aiming for the wrong goals, or having only a vague sense of what “completion” looks like will doom scientific experiments, business deals, and construction projects alike. It will also seriously hamper pastoral strategies or, even, the complex efforts of parenting, mentoring, and educating in faith. Prior to coming up with strategies or approaches, plans or proposals for how to form young people in faith, we must “always begin with the end in mind”—in other words: What are we preparing them for? What do we want them to become? Who

do we hope for them to be? In the most direct terms, the end to which all of Christian formation tends is the formation of saints. That is what matters most.

Saints are complete disciples: they have received the love of God in Christ to the extent that they live only in, from, and for that love. Saints are therefore defined by charity—they receive it and they give it; it is their lifeblood. They have been cured of sin—of selfishness—making them free to share the love of God with others. For a saint, there is no such thing as a “private” good because they consider the good of others as their own. As a parent, St. Thérèse shows me what the completion of my children’s formation looks like: to desire the good of another in Christ. As a theologian, the saints teach me how everything we learn about God must begin in prayer and return to prayer, guiding us into a life of charity, which is the only way that we can truly know the love of God in truth. Those who have mentored me in Christian discipleship over the years have taught me that mentoring others means guiding them toward what it means to be a saint: to be prayerful and charitable, to be humble and bold, and to set our hearts first of all on the love of God in Christ so we might become fully ourselves in him.

In my roles as parent, theologian, and mentor, the saints have shown me what matters most, and they reveal the end to which Christian formation aims. The life of the saint is the life of true freedom, and the journey of discipleship is about learning what it means to be free. In the chapters that follow, we will focus on some of the most prevalent obstacles to freedom in modern life while also reimagining how to form young people for the true freedom of a Christian. This means that we will be exploring the Church’s sacred duty of accompanying young people in faith and through vocational discernment—toward *who* they are called to be and, therefore, *what* they might do. In other words, we will explore how we empower young Catholics for life’s big decisions.

This all begins, though, with the love of God in Christ, who makes the saints who they are. While we will chart a course for forming young Catholics throughout this book, we first have to get our bearings—and those bearings come to us through the saints, through scripture, and

principally, in Jesus Christ. In this opening chapter, then, we will heed who Christ shows himself to be, in and through scripture, before focusing on the first disciple, who is also the mother of all the saints: Mary. From Christ through Mary, I will suggest that we can understand “the end” to which we form young people from discipleship into sainthood as making them ever more capable of both hearing for themselves and asking of others one simple question: “What are you going through?”

The Question at the End Is the Divine Question

“What are you going through?”¹ The whole mystery of the Christian life is wrapped up in this question. It is so important that we might as well orient all of our efforts in formation and education toward enabling each and every person to intently hear this question in his or her own life, to directly ask this question of others, and to personally commit to all the consequences of both listening to and speaking these words. Those who live in Christ are capable of considering and responding to this question time and again, and they delight in it. Christian maturity, then, is measured according to how fully we each allow this question to shape who we are becoming. This is not a measure that we invent on our own but, rather, one that we inherit because God asks us this question first.

Drawing near to two disciples as they walked seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the first morning of the Resurrection, Jesus asks the troubled travelers, *What are you discussing as you walk along?* (Lk 24:17). They are discussing what had happened in recent days, how the one to whom they had dedicated their lives had been put to death, how their hope died with him, how they were downcast and sorrowful, but also how they were strangely confused by the nonsensical news they received of an empty tomb and an angelic announcement of new life. The irony is remarkable as they tell their story to the only person who has absolutely no need of an account of the things that have taken place. But Jesus asks, and he listens.

Only after listening does Jesus tell them who the messiah really is—the one they were really hoping for, in the secret depths of their hearts and well beyond the limits of their imaginations. They thought they

knew the scriptures, but he himself is the light by which they can see what they were not capable of seeing before. And though Jesus is the one who knows fully, he still gives them yet another opportunity to speak; and they use that opportunity to invite him inside, to dine with them. It is there, inside their home, that he takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them, making himself known to them as the one they always desired but never fully knew. Their eyes had been prevented from seeing him because they were blinded by their own expectations, they had hoped in the wrong things, and their imaginations were too small to see what God had been doing in those days—and so they were doomed to suffer. But they came to know him, Jesus—their love, their hope—as the one who asked them what they were going through, who let them invite him in, who took their bread to bless and break and share as the gift of himself. It would not have been enough for Jesus to broadcast an announcement of the saving mysteries of those sacred days because the whole point is that he himself is the Word of God who asks humanity wounded by sin, “What are you going through?” And he listens by entering in; he heals by sharing in that pain; and he blesses by making that wounded old thing something new in his love.

This single episode is the Gospel, whole and entire. The Good News is that God asks us “What are you going through?”—and he listens, he understands, and he does something about it, *in person*. This does not mean, of course, that we always have the right idea about what we are going through—after all, the Word that created heaven and earth rightly exercises the authority to call us “foolish” from time to time (see Luke 24:25). But even then the Lord gives us the chance to speak, to put into our own words what we are going through. Apparently, it matters to God that we speak and, even more, God is willing to listen. On the authority of Jesus and all the scriptures that, as one, testify to who he is as God-with-us, we come to recognize that God *always* listens to what we are going through, *always* sympathizes with our weakness, and *always* acts on our behalf (see Hebrews 4:14–16).

The question “What are you going through?” contains the whole mystery of Christian life because, first and foremost, God asks this

question of us. We might very well ask “Why?” but the only response we will receive is something like, “This is simply who God is.” When God reveals his name to Moses in Exodus 3, he reveals himself to be the one who has *seen the affliction of my people* and who *heard their cry* and *knows their sufferings* and has *come down to deliver them*, to bring them to *a land flowing with milk and honey* (Ex 3:7–9; cf. 3:14–17, *Revised Standard Version*). When Moses hears the divine name of YHWH, what he hears is often translated as “I am who am” or, alternatively, “I will be who I will be,” which amounts to God saying, “What I do tells you who I am.”² The disciples traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus encountered the fulfillment of what the Israelites first glimpsed in the journey from Egypt to Canaan: God listens, God knows, God acts . . . *in person*. This is who Jesus is: the listening, sympathizing, active Word of God made flesh (see John 1:14).³

Love of God and Love of Neighbor

When Jesus himself responds to the question about what commandment is most important of all, it is worth bearing in mind just who God reveals himself to be when we hear Jesus say that *you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength* (Mk 12:30). Remembering who God shows himself to be tells us who we are loving when we love God: we are loving the one who listens to us, knows us, and acts for us. Loving God means loving the one who loves us, always.

But Jesus does not stop there. He was only asked which commandment was first of all, and yet he goes on to tie a second commandment to it: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself* (Mk 12:31a). In the first breath, Jesus instructs us to love the one who does nothing but love us, who shows us that this is simply who he is as God. In the second breath, though, we are commanded to love those who may very well *not* love us, who may even at times despise us, and who certainly are not as consistent or reliable in character as the God whom Jesus teaches us to call Father. Nothing, it seems, could be more sensible than loving God and nothing potentially more hazardous than loving our neighbor.

What binds these two commandments together as one is that single, central question: “What are you going through?” The one who loves God without reserve will know himself or herself as nothing other and nothing less than the one whom God cares for, fully and personally. It means to know Jesus for who he is, for who he is *for you*—the one who makes the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob into the one whose very name means “I am the one who saves you.”⁴ To love God wholeheartedly means to love the one who makes you whole, and if you are safe in the love of this God, what is there to fear?⁵ Seen from this perspective, the courage necessary to hazard the love of neighbor is born in the love of God.

This all suggests that love of neighbor is the fruit or consequence of the love of God—and this is not false—but there is more to say about this because love of God is not something that is first mastered before love of neighbor is attempted. This is because, first, when I encounter Jesus as the disciples on the road to Emmaus did—as the Word of God drawing near to ask “What are you going through?”—I am not encountering the Savior who comes to me alone. Rather, I am encountering the one who comes first to the *whole of humanity*, to the *whole human race*, to heal and sanctify *us*. Even on the individual level, the God who hears me, sympathizes with me, and acts for me is the same God who hears, sympathizes with, and acts for others. Loving God necessarily means recognizing “what God is doing in the lives of others.”⁶

Second, if we remember whom we love when we set out to love God, we recognize that loving God means allowing the *way* God loves to persuade us. God takes us seriously: what we say, how we suffer, what we need—all of that matters to God. The manner in which Jesus acts with the disciples on their way to Emmaus is characteristic of the divine way of love: “not to overwhelm with external power, but to give freedom, to offer and elicit love . . . to knock gently at the doors of our hearts and slowly open our eyes if we open our doors to him.”⁷

The hazardousness of loving our neighbor is itself already contained in the love of God for us—that is, God hazards *neighborly* love for us. The first part of the great commandment that Jesus announces in Mark

12 is the command for us to recognize the hazardousness of God's love for us and to be grateful, while the second part of that command is for us to *go and do likewise* by loving our neighbor as God loves us (see Luke 10:37). If we were to think of the Parable of the Good Samaritan in these terms, we would come to see that Jesus himself is the Good Samaritan first, the one who hazards the love of the wounded one and claims him as his neighbor in mercy. Only afterward and by that very love do we—who were first *half dead* when he found us (Lk 10:30)—receive the freedom as well as the duty to love others with the recklessness of those who are safe in the love of God.⁸ In short, we show our trust in God's providential care in and through our risk of love for others.⁹

St. Catherine of Siena understood the inextricable connection between Jesus' command to love God and love neighbor in her contemplation of Matthew 25:14–46. In the depth of her prayer, Catherine heard the Lord speak these words to her:

I love you without being loved. Whatever love you have for me you owe me, so you love me not gratuitously but only out of duty, while I love you not out of duty but gratuitously. So you cannot give me the kind of love I ask of you. This is why I have put you among your neighbors: so that you can do for them what you cannot do for me—that is, love them without any concern for thanks and without looking for any profit yourself. And whatever you do for them I will consider done for me.¹⁰

In the action of love of neighbor, we learn to live in the love of Christ because in Christ, God took us as *his* neighbor and accepted all the consequences of asking the question of compassion that turns strangers into neighbors: “What are you going through?”¹¹

I claim that this question—“What are you going through?”—presents the mystery of Christian life because in it, love of God links to love of neighbor. This union is realized in the person of Jesus Christ, and it is the harmoniousness of his charity that the saints enjoy. The call to discipleship that resounds first from the baptismal waters and bubbles up all the way to the completion of our communion with God and union

with one another in the heavenly kingdom echoes forth each time we allow this question to be spoken to us and each time we dare to speak it to others. We can measure progress in discipleship on the way to sanctity according to our willingness and capacity to listen to and speak this question of compassion.

Every Christian's distinctive vocation—that is, the particular shape his or her discipleship takes—is a personal expression of the concern for “the other” that this question captures in its eloquent terseness. The complete Christian—the saint—is the one who holds nothing back from the love of God, and in the freedom of that love gives everything for the good of one's neighbor. This is what St. Thérèse preached to my daughter through her eyes, the same beauty that I witnessed in my daughter—who saw, remembered and, in her small way, loved the young boy in the wheelchair who was heading to the park.

The Sweet Command of Christian Ministry

When God the Father says, “What are you going through?” in his only begotten Son—the Word made flesh—we are healed and made free. As we learn to say this to one another, we become holy as the Spirit makes us one in Christ. But as we are all too aware, we often fail to hear God's Word spoken to us and we fail to open our ears to hear what others are going through. This is not simply a lack of will, because there are all kinds of other obstacles that get in the way of hearing the Word of God and hearing our neighbors, and therefore of acting from God for love of our neighbors. We need to be skillful in recognizing what these obstacles are, especially in our modern world. We must think both faithfully and creatively about how to respond to these obstacles in favor of accompanying young people into the freedom of faith and the courage of missionary discipleship. The end we should have in mind is forming young people to be free and brave as saints, capable of asking that one, all-demanding question: “What are you going through?” And the way in which parents, educators, ministers, and mentors lead them toward that end is to mediate Jesus' simple command: *Be opened!* (Mk 7:34).

By the power of those words, Jesus allowed the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.

Those who accompany young people and maturing disciples are called to cooperate with Christ's work—we help them to be open. We carve out for them the time and space to hear, we form them in the dispositions to listen, and we nurture in them the abilities to respond. All of this is a matter of freedom: the task of freeing young people from what prevents their openness, the task of directing them in what it means to be free, and the task of preparing them to take responsibility for their freedom—that is, to empower them.

According to St. Luke, the disciples of Jesus *are those who hear the word of God and act on it* (Lk 8:21; cf. 11:28; Jn 15:14; Jas 1:22). A disciple is open, he listens, and he responds. It is the Word of God who takes the initiative, the same Word who perceives what is closed and deaf and listless and commands it to open up. Learning to live by this Word is the art of the Christian life.

The personal, particular shape this discipleship takes in the life of each Christian is his or her vocation, in the fullest sense of the term.¹² Every vocation is situated in a specific historical moment, amid certain preexisting conditions like abilities and limitations, opportunities and necessities, and even language and customs.¹³ More significantly, though, every authentic Christian vocation in every age and under every historical condition is ordered to Christ's own mission and identity, which he expresses in his prayer to the Father: *that they may all be one* (Jn 17:20, RSV). These words open up the meaning and mission of all human life: to seek communion with God and the unity of the entire human race—that we may share all things in common, by the love of God who has come to share all things with us (see Acts 2:44–47; 4:32–35).¹⁴ This means that every vocation is ordered to the life of the Church, a life *hidden with Christ in God* (Col 3:3).

As the sign and instrument of Christ's love in the world, the Church's responsibility in every age is to form the faithful in Christ's mission and identity. Like every generation before us, this responsibility faces its own distinct challenges in the different ways in which all of us—but perhaps