

## **For a Departing Brother: A Letter and Some Further Reflections**

*Dear 'Joe,'*

*Last weekend I was back in town for a school celebration. Naturally I had hoped I would get a chance to see you and have at least a brief visit to see how things were going for you. So when I inquired at table whether you might be around, I was disappointed to hear that you had decided to separate from the Society.*

*My disappointment, I admit, arises out of my own self-interest. Our enjoyable experiences together at community events in recent years had led me to hope that there would be many more as our paths crossed in the future. That, alas, is not to be.*

*My better, more disinterested self is focused on you and your future. I assume that you have had solid spiritual accompaniment in your discernment. So I have good reason to trust that you are at peace in your decision. My experience over the years with others who have 'left' the Society assures me that you will continue to pursue the Ignatian vision in whatever arena you eventually find yourself. For me that is far more important than canonical companionship. You may not walk the path within touching distance but we're still walking it together. As the unofficial motto of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps puts it, by your life with us you are "ruined forever!"*

*So thank you for the years of your valuable young life that you have given to sharing in our canonical company.*

*These first years of finding yourself once again as a lay person will have their own stresses. Especially in light of the financial burdens you will now have to bear in pursuit of your degree. Be assured of my prayer. The Lord who led you to the Society, and now leads you forth from it, remains faithful. Go easy on yourself.*

*Pray for me, that the Lord will hold me focused on our shared mission and not on 'perseverance in religious life.'*

*Peace, brother!  
George*

I would suspect that many religious might not write such a letter if they heard that someone with whom they had shared significant portions of life had 'left the community.'

As a matter of fact, at an earlier stage of my own life my reaction to such a piece of news would not have taken that form, either. That fact compels me to explore the attitudes reflected in the letter. And beyond the attitudes, some of the theology and spirituality it represents.

### *Attitudes*

In that earlier era soon after ‘*the Council*,’ when so many religious felt called to separate from their communities, the shock of hearing that someone had left, often resulted, for me, in anger. At times quite bitter. In the case of men who had become more than fellow Jesuits – life-long friends, really – it sometimes took me years to be able to be comfortable in their company.

Would my response be characterized as being rooted in a sense of *betrayal*? That’s a harsh word. It has overtones of dishonesty, of being actively misled by the overt signs that nothing was amiss and we could go off into the sunset together (the operative word being ‘together’). The realization of *separation* was there, for sure. Loss. But I don’t think I could bring myself to say that a friend who was leaving had actually been dishonest in not sharing with me his struggle. Still, honesty might suggest that the thought could have been down inside me, just too painful to name.

I now suspect that there was a certain component of fear at work in my reactions. What did his departure tell me about *my own* future? If that most admirable fellow couldn’t ‘persevere’ – more of that language later – how would I make it?

At this distance it’s clear to me that the whole complex bundle of feelings, whether acknowledged or not, was focused on me and what I was losing rather than on what ‘Joe’ was going through. In explanation (but not justification) I suppose that in the face of such a traumatic experience of loss the initial response would naturally be for us to want to crawl into a corner and lick our own pain. We’re animals, after all. The ability to forget ourselves – to die to self, as spiritual writing puts it – and stand within the skin of the other person develops very slowly for most of us. It comes only with a lot of care and attentiveness. And costly stretching. It is liberating eventually to see light, but it can also be difficult to let go of the self-justifying comfort of darkness.

### *The skin of the other*

The men and women who have peopled our religious lives for these past decades, who took the same step as we in entering religious life and then felt called to leave it, were people of integrity. They were following their highest spirits and ideals – indeed, *the Spirit*. After the fact, we learned that many had wrestled a long time with the decision to take another path, before coming to terms with what eventually became the right choice for them.

How difficult that process of separating from the community in which they had spent precious years of their lives was for them, I'm sure I can never fully appreciate. I do know that at the time of their departure that aspect of the whole story – *their* pain – was deep in the background of my radar, if not completely off the screen. And although the immediacy of my own discomfort explains much of that absence, I'm not sure it gives the whole answer. Institutional signals – the language of the system (think: 'leaving') and its protective practices (think: men being slipped out the back door when everyone would be in chapel, avoiding awkward scenes) – surely played their part. Religious communities share the characteristics of all organizations: they are inherently conservative. And therefore self-protective. They seem by their nature quite good at developing mechanisms that distance us from the personally painful. It's not a defect, I think; simply their nature as institutions. Still, we need to be aware of the reality. Being shielded from painful realities can stunt our personal growth. Confronting reality exacts a price but it can be the occasion for gaining new depth.

*Then there are the economic realities*

Of all the consequences that flow from a man or woman's decision to take a different fork in the road, the sheer economic realities must be close to the top of the list. In the letter to 'Joe' I try to empathize with him about the financial hurdle he faces. How well have we religious attended to that aspect of someone's departure? It could be instructive if someone were to research the practices of different communities when a member 'leaves' after contributing five, ten, twenty, or more years to the life and ministry of the group. What resources do communities provide when someone leaves? What does justice call for? Charity? Whatever may be the issues of equity at stake in the situation, I know that in the past I personally failed to appreciate the difficult economic consequences faced by fellow religious upon their separation.

Economics are one thing; gratitude, though, is another matter. If it was the responsibility of superiors to figure out equitable economic standards for the departing member, sheer thanks for what the man or woman had given us is surely incumbent on the rest of us as members. In order to share the life of the community 'Joe' left a lot of other goods on the table – perhaps for many years. He made an investment in us. No matter how we view what he is doing when he takes a different turn, he deserves our gratitude for all he shared along the way.

Unfortunately that apparently simple conclusion seems often to escape us. I know of at least one instance in which a fellow member wrote such a letter of thanks to one of his brothers when the man was leaving the community. Some years later the former member reported how much the simple gesture had meant to him. He had never forgotten it. It had all the more meaning for him since it had been the only one anyone in the community had written to him at that lonely time

### *'Leaving'*

From the letter and the quotation marks I have been using in reference to the reality of separation, the reader will conclude, rightly, that my experience suggests that we need better language to describe what is really occurring in many instances. To put the issue plainly: what are we saying when we say such a man or woman 'left' the community?

In my work over the years I have encountered a host of men and women we call 'former religious.' In most instances they prove to be admirable individuals still fully committed to the mission their community had called them to undertake. Whether married or single, they plug away at education or health care or social service – driven by a spirituality they absorbed from the community they had 'left.' The attitudinal and visionary imprinting they had received in the community is occasionally so strong that when we meet such a person it is easy to guess that he or she had once been a Benedictine or Franciscan, Dominican or Ignatian, etc. It shows up in subtle ways the person may not even be aware of. Just as one example: it is a rare former Maryknoller who isn't invested in some work or project of an international nature. The parish PTO may claim some of such people's time but by comparison with projects or issues overseas, it tends to rank low on their list of significant engagements. We are all shaped by the people we've knelt and prayed with.

Each of our religious communities challenges us to be committed to its particular embodiment of Christian mission. Isn't a bit strange, then, to say they 'left' when they are still engaged in that same mission, sometimes with an intensity of commitment that might embarrass some of us canonical religious? When we say Joe 'left' the community we can only be referring to his separation from a canonically recognized state. It would be arrogant if we were to conclude from that fact of his departure that he has lost his sense of commitment to the community's vision and mission. Our language should communicate only that he is being called to pursue it in a new form of life. A new way of embodying the mission.

### *Theological issues*

I suspect that some readers may be uneasy at my letter for other reasons, however. Reasons of a more theological or spiritual nature. Does it trivialize or relativize the seriousness of perpetual vows?

I don't think so. Note that at the moment when I am writing to Joe his decision to separate has already been made. If he were sharing with me an unresolved struggle to find the Lord's will for him and had not yet reached his decision, my answer would have been quite different. As it is, my letter doesn't encourage him to decide to leave, it begins from the fact that he is already in a new state. How he arrived at that choice is a sacred mystery, for sure, between him and the Lord. But his choice is now not just a possible option, it is a present reality. Before such a reality I can only remove my sandals; it is sacred ground. (One definition of sanctity describes saints as those who have the courage

to confront reality. Easy to say; excruciating to achieve.)

A close reader will not let me off that easily, however. What does my letter imply about our God – and God’s way of dealing with us? How is it possible to say that it was ‘God’s will’ to call a man or woman to perpetual commitment in a religious community – and then that it was God’s will for him or her to depart? That sounds either too easy, or even a contradiction.

It’s a serious question and deserves a serious answer. Here’s a fumbling effort:

Looking back after many years of prayer and study I have begun to wonder whether the traditional idea of permanency might need some further elaboration. Was it unconsciously based on the concept, not of the One whom Jesus called Father, but rather of the God of the Greek and Roman philosophers – unchanging and impassive and untouched by our story?

I begin to suspect that when we highlight the perpetual character of religious vows (or of marriage, for that matter), we are indeed naming a characteristic we hope and expect in the spirit of the human agent. But have we unconsciously fallen into an unwarranted conclusion about the Lord’s end of the relationship? Do we really believe we have the power to place limits on what God can do or ask? No matter how fervent is our intention at the moment of taking vows?

My evolving appreciation of the reality of the incarnation, and especially the resurrection of the Lord, leads me to a different perspective. If we take incarnation, enfleshment of divinity in the time-limited, localized body of Jesus, seriously, change is inevitably a significant piece of the puzzle. Jesus is constantly and unchangingly led by the Spirit, true. But that leading does not free him from decisions *in the moment* that are ‘right’ but still subject to re-assessment – under the guidance of the same Spirit – when he confronts changed circumstances. We eviscerate the reality of his humanity when we imagine his obedience to a divine ‘plan’ as some disincarnate, once-for-all act of acceptance of unyielding ‘reality.’ When he says his joy is to ‘do the will’ of his Father do we imagine him donning an a-temporal straitjacket? Does not full respect for the dignity of his human nature lead rather to a *moment-by-moment attitude* of openness to the mystery of the Father’s love as *manifested in the circumstances of a constantly evolving world*?

To speak of ‘perseverance in *religious life*’ could be a form of idolatry. As sinners we are beset by the eternal temptation to reify unfolding mystery, to turn God into a static ‘thing,’ instead of a person engaging us in a relationship. If there is to be anything ‘permanent’ in the life of a finite creature who is always in pilgrimage on this earth, it seems to me that it only be the here-and-now *re-commitment* we are empowered to make to a God who is disclosed in circumstances that may have changed drastically since yesterday, No matter our highest aspirations to unyielding fidelity, we remain historical agents engaged with a God whose love is not some etherealized abstraction but a passion

that uses constantly changing manifestations to draw us into an act of here-and-now free response.

Maybe the best image for what's going on is that of a dance. And Joe is still in the dance. The same dance as each of us who are still 'in the community'. With the same Lord.

Joe just happens to be doing it on a different floor.

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