

## Fr. Jean Corbon

"If our gaze is to liberate the hidden in all things, it must first be bathed with light in God whose gaze sends beauty streaming out. If our words are to express the symphony of the Word, they must first be immersed in the silence and harmony of the Word. If our hands are to fashion the icon of creation, we must allow ourselves to be fashioned by him who unites our flesh to the splendor of the Father."

# Faith Is Not What You Think

## A Benediction

A powerful force is unleashed in the land, and we are witnesses to it.

Go, find

where the Lion of God is already at work and

add

your voice and your passion and

return

here to mend your sorrows and

celebrate

your victories with us.

July 9, 2006

Terry Rayburn

## Our Condition

Hardship happens. Sorrow happens. How can we find refuge from the squall? When wind and wave and storm break upon us, where do we stand to endure, to persevere, even more, to triumph?

Faith is not what you think. It is NOT squinting into the twilight so that you can make yourself believe the irrational. Faith is the many, many tiny decisions you make and acts that you do to weave the threads of your life into a strong tapestry of vibrant colors.

We connect with the history of salvation. You know that one of my regular teaching themes is that ‘God works in history to reconcile the world’.

We connect with the living, vital and organic church.

Look around you. It is here.

We connect with the transcendent, the other, the mystery.

### ***The text from 2 Corinthians 12:2-10***

Remember that in Acts 18 when Paul’s mission efforts in Corinth are described, he has already tried in Athens to appeal to logic and the Greek philosophers and resolved to focus his story of the Good News on the Crucified Christ. So in Corinth, he starts first in the Jewish meeting place, the synagogue.

When after a long time that proves fruitless, he starts up a meeting at the home of a believing Greek next door.

The result is that ‘many persons’ begin to follow the Way. But here is the important

### **2 Corinthians 12:1-10**

1-5 You've forced me to talk this way, and I do it against my better judgment. But now that we're at it, I may as well bring up the matter of visions and revelations that God gave me. For instance, I know a man who, fourteen years ago, was seized by Christ and swept in ecstasy to the heights of heaven. I really don't know if this took place in the body or out of it; only God knows. I also know that this man was hijacked into paradise—again, whether in or out of the body, I don't know; God knows. There he heard the unspeakable spoken, but was forbidden to tell what he heard. This is the man I want to talk about. But about myself, I'm not saying another word apart from the humiliations.

6 If I had a mind to brag a little, I could probably do it without looking ridiculous, and I'd still be speaking plain truth all the way. But I'll spare you. I don't want anyone imagining me as anything other than the fool you'd encounter if you saw me on the street or heard me talk.

7-10 Because of the extravagance of those revelations, and so I wouldn't get a big head, I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! At first I didn't think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me,

My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.

Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.

part: the word in the Greek for ‘many persons’ is the word usual used for ‘the people’ when referring to the chosen people of Israel.

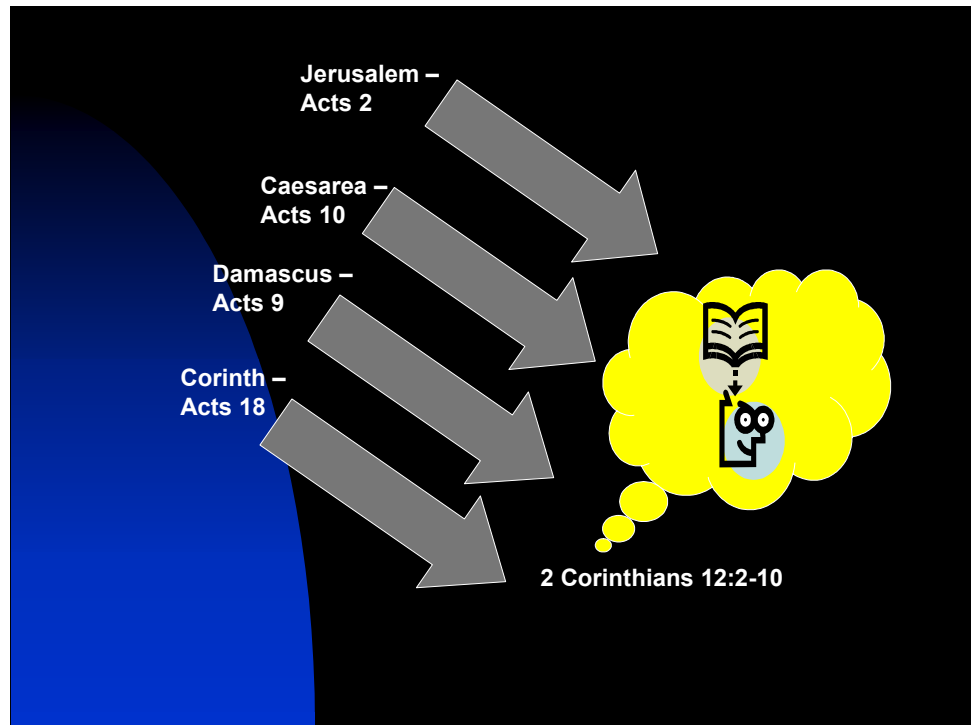
The band of followers at Corinth is the vanguard of a new chosen people, these are the ones Paul is addressing in this letter.

Paul begins by describing a rapturous experience that

makes 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians scratch their heads, wince and even grind their teeth.

The passage wanders through notions of exaltation and humility, satanic attack and ends on this unique observation: When I am weak, then am I strong. Ordinarily a sermon would latch onto only this last bit.

But I want to suggest to you today that this juxtaposition of ideas is no accident. When Paul is describing how he is sustained through the low times, he connects it to the spiritual practices of the community of faith. Those whom he knows report their ecstatic vision and he doesn’t need to know if it is physical or spiritual, literal or figurative. He throws it into his personal spiritual (and dare



I say figurative?) blender and extract its nectar, its juices and vitamins.

## The Way

I want to put some of this in context. Jesus taught sometime the early followers called “The Way” but Jesus calls it – I’ll translate it as living under the governance of God. The Way is pointedly apart from living under the civil authority of the Roman Emperor. But it is also suspicious of alignment with a religious institution that aligns itself too closely with the civil and social institutions.

## The Way Expands

I’m going to talk about the church a bit, but I think the term church may have too much to do with the institution born in the middle ages

that resulted in bishops vying with barons for the loyalty of the people, revenues from taxes and land ownership.

So I'm going to use the word *ecclesia*, the assembly.

The *ecclesia* was founded on the day that those following Jesus in seeking the governance of God had a profoundly mystical experience – we call it Pentecost, recorded in Acts 2.

The good news they began to preach goes like this: that same Jesus whom we knew in the flesh, is the source of peace and power for us now, to you tomorrow and will be visible to the whole world once again.

## **Transcending borders**

***Two events led to moving The Way beyond being a local Palestinian Jewish sect like the Essenes.***

Peter, in Jewish Joppa, has a vision that leads him to accept the Roman Centurion Cornelius in Caesarea. Read Acts 10 some time and note that Peter is in a trance, the Greek word is 'ecstasy'. He dialogues with God. When the trance is over, Peter hears the whispered prompt of the Holy Spirit telling him to go and meet the Roman Centurion and

## **Connect**

- With the history of redemption
- With the organic church
- With the transcendent

ultimately to accept the foreigner into communion.

At the same time, there is Saul, a Jewish fundamentalist and extremist. He incites mobs to assassinate those not following traditional teaching – meaning these followers of that Rabbi Jesus.

But, he has a mystical experience of the presence of Jesus on the road to Damascus, [Acts 9] and followers of the Way befriend him and he begins to redefine himself with the new Greek name Paul.

So you should notice that the reports of the birth of our faith tie it to same mystery that later institutionalizes into the doctrine of the Trinity. If you look at all these stories of the mystical experiences at the beginning, you see that they connect the whole of the Christian movement to God, to the Greek word *Deos*, the Hebrew word *YHWH*, the person of Jesus, the risen Christ, and the

comforting and prodding voice of the Holy Spirit. As I struggled to make sense of the Trinity while in seminary, I found this helped me: in my time of meditation and contemplation I began to step behind the rational and connect with these sources of this mystery. I recommend this to you as spiritual practice homework. All around you are resources to help you and join you.

Well, to do so, we need a rich stew of available images that transport us to somewhere just below the cognitive, below our thoughts. We create that nourishing broth by invoking and extending those images and stories, adding our own, rediscovering how to refract the ancient in a new light that illuminates our condition and our hope. And we need discipline to practice on our own and a spirit of charity to encourage each other.

## Powers

Today's sermon text marks the second time in recent weeks that a scripture passage presented in Eugene H. Peterson's *The Message* has spoken about 'being grabbed' or 'being seized'.

When we think about God, we confront reality in one important dimension, but you

## Concerning Evil

### Our observations

Have you ever observed officiousness that happens when an ordinary person like your next door neighbor steps behind a counter at the tax office to start their workday, or puts on a uniform of any kind? When whole groups of people assert they have it right and those who disagree must be excluded, suppressed and demeaned, disenfranchised, beaten, and exiled?

### A poverty of language

And when groups of people are urged to unleash their venom in murderous rampages in Rwanda or Cambodia or Sudan? What do you call that?

And when people are manipulated to support a systematic murder of Jews and gypsies and homosexuals in the holocaust?

What name do we give to generations of serial retribution between Jews and Muslims, Irish Catholics and Protestants, those Hutus and Tutsis, Turks and Armenians, between the "sons of slaves and the sons of former slave owners" in the words of Martin Luther King?

What special category is there for people who abduct women and children, sexually assault them and murder them on video tape for their own pleasure?

### Moral terms have a place

We want to remain alert to our language and not become petrified in short hand religious language that has no ordinary meaning. But I suggest that it is wholly appropriate for faith to address social culture with a language that includes the moral terms sin and evil.

know this truth already: a complete life has many dimensions.

What lurks out there and threatens to grab you? If we have learned anything from

Alcoholics Anonymous, it is the refusal to face and name the powers over us simply tightens their grip.

What power has you in its grip?

Alcohol? Pot? Methamphetamines? Video games? Internet pornography? Online chat and flirt rooms? Romance novels? Poker? Internet gaming? Sexual infidelity?

What power threatens to grab you?

For us to do our work, and to fulfill our calling, we have to confront our brokenness, our addictions, and know our spiritual enemies. Scripture reminds us that when we struggle, it is not with flesh and blood, but with powers and even institutional principalities.

### ***An aside on the problem of personal evil***

Paul is not reluctant to identify his tormentor as a messenger of Satan. *The Message* does us a service here by rendering the text closer to the Greek: angelos satana – an angel of Satan.

When you undertake to confront your addictions and your dark side, I've heard two contexts that people report as helpful. Some people tell me that the imagery of spiritual

*warfare* with an accuser outside oneself helps them.

Others have gotten the most healing through the recognition that the dark side is personal to them, it has all the characteristics of a person. I am a person, and it is part of me.

Healing is where you find it. Wherever you find it, be healed. Keep seeking to connect with the path of life, and recognize the dead ends for what they are. In the gospels, Jesus teaches us that life in the Way recognizes the God as the source of all healing and responds with an attitude of gratitude.

### **Acts of redemption flow from grabbing with Spiritual reality**

Many of you have gone on our mission trips to Guatemala and have participated in gathering financial resources to buying sewing machines and building a sewing center so that the women of the village do not have to spend the whole of every work week away from home in the big city to support their families and paradoxically destroy their family life

But have you thought about how that call to action came through Kathy Ralston's personal journey, most visible to us in her writing, her

historical contribution to us as a dancer and artist?

How it sprung to life through Bob Rockford's gritty coming of age as a Marine in Vietnam and a student of photography at the Art Institute, training as an addictions counselor and now student of theology at Central Seminary?

## **The place of the creative**

In order for us to get the most out our spiritual lives, we need a rich stew of images and stories. These feed our lives just below the cognitive. And they allow us to meet the needs of many people in different places at once, nurturing us when we come together and unleashing a passionate and dynamic worship.

Here is quote from Fr. Jean Corbon, Paris-born priest, a champion of a reinvigorated Catholic liturgy and author of *The Wellspring of Worship*. It is re-printed in the *Imago Dei* newsletter – a local organization about faith and art.

*"If our gaze is to liberate the hidden in all things, it must first be bathed with light in God whose gaze sends beauty streaming out. If our words are to express the*

*symphony of the Word, they must first be immersed in the silence and harmony of the Word. If our hands are to fashion the icon of creation, we must allow ourselves to be fashioned by him who unites our flesh to the splendor of the Father."*

## **Jesus**

In that vein, I want to suggest two pictures of the work of Jesus in bringing us victory over sin, death and the devil.

Jesus' victory can be seen in the New Testament letters like a Roman victory march: the battle is won, the warriors are returning on a long march behind the vanquishing leader, among cheering observers, and even with hardship along the way, treasures are assured, and a welcome entry into Rome awaits us.

A second image, one we frequently connect with is Jesus is The Source – a well spring [in German, die Quelle], which becomes a stream watering and bringing life to all the desert places through which it flows, becoming a mighty river as we add our tributaries to it. Our role is to contribute to it. To swim and splash in its abundance. To build irrigation trenches off of it.

## **Spiritual exercises**

Hardship happens. Sorrow happens. This is how we endure, persevere and triumph.

This is why we worship as we do. You have the task of connecting with your own spiritual condition day to day. And you have the task of making your contribution to moving the whole world from darkness to light. Every day.

But when we come together in worship we create an experience beyond our individual force. We become the Body of Christ – in Paul's words. Becoming the body of Christ is not a spectator event; it is an Audience Participation Reality Show. Where the body goes, so go the mind and spirit.

So we ask you to connect sensitively to the Holy Spirit and to each other. Should you kneel? Stand? Raise your hands? Sing? Clap? Dance? Meditate? Journal?

YES

Should you celebrate mystical communion with Jesus Christ by taking the bread and the cup from the hands of your brothers and sisters in this room and hear them become the voice of God to you in a spoken blessing?

YES

And this is why we sing the songs we sing and show the images we create and act in

drama and dance and read the poetry we've written and touch each other when we pray: so that you can take with you a piece of your experience here; a token of our connection with the whole history of people seeking God; a morsel contributed by flesh and blood people around you, ready to be the hands, arms, feet, eyes and smile of God who offers you nothing but strength when you are weak.