

[Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 31; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42]

In spite of many crosses and struggles throughout my life, our dear Lord has blessed me with two spiritual experiences that can only be described as intense, awesome, and totally Other. The first was on my seminary retreat, which I will share with you now. The other was on my ordination day, which I will share with you on my 35th anniversary weekend in May.

The first experience was the most powerful experience of the presence of God in my life and centers around what we have just experienced: the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ, and the “surprise ending” to the story which God delivered as an awesome “punchline!”

It was back in 1980, when I and my seminarian classmates were on a retreat prior to our ordination as transitional deacons in the Church. We had left the security of the seminary building to go to the motherhouse of the Divine Word Fathers outside the city. The building was cold and dark, its interior illuminated by a sparse line of bare light bulbs. At night, it looked like a prison, and the only light in the chapel was focused on the tabernacle.

One night, a group of us were in the chapel, praying in our own way and asking God to give some sign of confirmation for what we were about to do the following week. I looked with envy at those sitting around me who obviously were communing with God while I felt nothing inside. There was the “Budding Buddhist,” the fellow sitting in the Lotus Position, palms turned upward and a smile of utter bliss on his face. There was the “Headless Horseman,” the fellow with his head bowed so low that from the back, it seemed that his head disappeared above his shoulders.

I looked at the tabernacle and I asked, “Lord, what about ME? When am I going to experience you Up Close and Personal?” And then I received a shocking answer: “You want to experience me? Walk slowly to your room. I will let you experience me.” In an instant, the chapel became the Garden of Gethsemane. I could feel the cool spring breeze and hear the sounds of nighttime critters around me. I got up from my chair and left the chapel.

I headed back to my room. Only I wasn't walking in a dark hallway and staircase; I was walking to the home of the high priest Caiphas. The marble steps I ascended became the stairs of the Praetorium, and my room became my jail cell. I entered my room and closed my eyes.

The Spirit prompted me to lay on my back on the floor of my room. Somehow, I had fast-forwarded from Holy Thursday night right to Golgotha, to Calvary. I was stripped of my clothes and thrown onto the horizontal beam of my cross. I could feel the wood splinters enter my arms and my head ached tremendously from a crown of thorns. I looked up as a Roman Centurion reached for my right arm. I thought he was offering his hand to help me up, and when I reached for his hand, he grabbed my wrist, thrust it back onto the wooden plank, and smashed a railroad spike through my wrist.

The pain was indescribable. I looked into the eyes of the Roman Centurion with shock and surprise and absolute fear when I saw him reach for my left hand, and he smashed another railroad spike into my left wrist. I felt my body tacked onto the horizontal beam of my cross being lifted up, and what breath was still in my lungs blew out of them with a force. Hanging on the cross, I could see people below me, but I couldn't make out any faces. Just anonymous people walking past, some looking up and most looking away. Some crying.

When I could endure no more, I gave out a loud cry and bowed my head. Again, in an instant, I felt my soul descending lower and lower into what seemed to be a well. The area around me was pitch black, but it felt neither cold nor damp. Just totally dark. I had the sensation of falling lower and lower until my soul came to a gentle stop. I could see nothing, but all I could hear was a strong deep voice saying, "I am with you. I am with you. I am with you." A great peace filled my heart. The moment I understood the message given to me by my Jesus, my soul began to soar upward, as if I was on an express elevator. My soul returned to my body and I shook awake. When I opened my eyes, I realized that I was back in my room at the retreat center.

It was still night. A little over an hour had passed. And I smiled.

I took that divine message and had those four beautiful words inscribed at

the base of my chalice. So that each time I celebrate Mass, each time I lift up the cup of salvation, I see the words my God, my Jesus, spoke to me and still speaks to me: "I am with you... I am with you... I am with you..."

This is the message of Good Friday. Whatever cross we bear we do not bear alone. Whether that cross is the cross of physical, mental, emotional or spiritual distress. Whether that cross is one of rejection, isolation or loneliness. Whether that cross is one of doubt, anxiety or fear. Whether that cross is one of abuse, abandonment or addiction.

Take up that cross. Die on that cross. Be consumed by that cross. And let that cross bring you closer to the crucified Christ.

Bring that cross to the wood of the cross which we will adore in a few moments. Nail your cross to the Holy Cross of Jesus Christ.

And as you enter that dark and warm sacred place where you are totally alone with God, let God say a sacred and personal Word to you. And let your Jesus walk with you from that cross to the tomb and to the Resurrection which we will celebrate on Sunday.

We adore You O Christ, and we bless You,

Because by Your Holy Cross, You have redeemed the world... and me!

AMEN!