

Intro

When Pat Mudd contacted me about speaking at this retreat I wondered if I could do this ---I asked myself what I could possibly bring to this assembly of victims and survivors. In her very kind way she assured me that you would get something out of it. I hope she was right ---so it is with a certain amount of fear and trepidation that I am here---trusting that God will supply what is lacking, while at the same time being conscious of Socrates injunction to doctors - above all do no harm. I have been assured by those among you that I have met that if I stray into area of danger, they will alert me, indeed rescue me.

With that said --- Why did I choose the topic "Spirituality and the human condition"? Pat had mentioned to me that she took on this ministry with the background of someone who was versed in psychology but that she ~~soon~~ realized that spiritual help was also needed for victims/survivors. My area happened to be spirituality and so perhaps I could offer some insights.

So the first question is What is the human condition?

In the middle ages the idea was that happiness for the Christian was not to be found in this life. (Not a very satisfying position). Eventually the question became How do we find tranquility and contentment in this life? During the renaissance the question centered around the dignity of man. Which possibility was not open to all) Then in France the problem was seen as the human condition---the frustration and pain of people was due to the conditions of human existence and its limitations. (not so much physical as psychological and spiritual pain, dehumanizing pain). Interestingly St. Francis de Sales found great optimism in the human condition. His optimism was grounded in God's abundant love for humanity and for each individual in particular. He did see the human condition as wretched because human nature had a fundamental flaw which he attributed to original sin. BUT his optimism endured because, in spite of all - the human person was created in the image and likeness of God.

So our next question is - What can this say to us today as we continue to deal with the human condition?

Retreat for victims/survivors of sexual abuse

-Diocese of Arlington -Our Lady of Good Counsel Church - September 10, 2011

SPIRITUALITY AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

Why has God abandoned me ? So many of us, perhaps all of us, experience this feeling at different times in our lives. God seems to be hiding from us when we are endlessly searching for meaning in a cruel, chaotic, unjust situation. Yet the problem is not "finding" God, but how do we let ourselves be found by a hidden God. We are all looking for meaning but we find what we are looking for only by being looked for. We human beings are told who we are by others and if we say nothing about who we are and simply accept the judgment of others we become what others say we are. To get to know who you are, you have to tell your story to others and the best way to learn how to tell your story is to listen to the stories of other people. Our spiritual problems often stem from the fact that we continue to allow someone else to tell us our story. If we are to hear a story - in a way that will help us to discover our story we have to be open to the experience of what is different -- and for some people that is difficult. Honest openness to the different requires willingness to be caught off guard - to be somewhat off balance.

When all is said and done - one does not really choose; one is chosen. God chooses - we are chosen -- we are all looking for what we need -- but we find what we are looking for only by being sought out by God and then by giving a response to God's offer.

Our Spiritual life is essentially open-ended. Our Spirituality is boundless. As much as we might like to wrap things up, to lock spirituality in and hold it fast, it will forever escape our grasp. In the long story of spirituality, many images have been used in the effort to convey what it is and how it works. In modern times we tend to favor the metaphor of growth. Spiritual writings have thrived on this image, describing growth in biological terms, as a spontaneous and largely automatic process profoundly shaped by outside factors such as parents, teachers and peers. Lives can then be read like the rings of a tree, with events and experiences leaving their marks deeply and permanently imbedded in our psyche and these early aberrations can never be entirely undone.

The classic literature on spirituality, on the other hand, suggests a more ancient image for the spiritual life-- that of building, in which our life's time is occupied in the construction of a spiritual edifice, a kind of home. The rich metaphor of architecture offers several advantages. It invites thinking in terms of tools, materials and choices: which tools, which materials do we

choose in shaping our spiritual abode? Building also requires a plan— a plan of how and what one chooses to see – this makes a difference to the outcome. And finally, although the task of construction is laborious, mistakes can be undone, and what is learned from them can be used to improve the structure as a whole.

While these ideas of both growth and building add useful shades of meaning to the experience of spirituality, the spirituality that St. Francis De Sales teaches offers an alternative image for the spiritual life -- that of journey. In a letter to one of his spiritual advisees he says, " ...I don't mean that we shouldn't go in the direction of perfection but we shouldn't try to get there in a day... in order to journey steadily, we must apply ourselves to doing well on the stretch of road immediately before us... and not waste time wanting to do the last lap of the journey when we've barely begun the first... let's be resolved to serve God as best we can. Beyond that let's have no care about tomorrow... Let's not doubt that God will provide more for us tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and all the days of our pilgrimage."

OUR life is an experiential journey and the practice of story telling brings the metaphor of journey to life, for the narrative format of "what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now" suggests the particular kind of journey that is pilgrimage. The "plot" bestows on the storyteller the identity revealed by the story, the identity of the kind of journeyer who is a pilgrim.

The pilgrimage metaphor conveys spirituality's open-endedness by reinforcing the essential distinction between confident certainty and the mysteries of uncertainty. A pilgrimage does not involve a settled and determined lockstep march to a fixed point, but rather it is a winding turning, looping, crisscrossing, occasionally backtracking peregrination -- the ancient name for pilgrimage that conveys its wandering essence.

An example -- Bil Keane's Family Circus -In one cartoon, Billy, in all innocence arrives at his front door, schoolbooks in hand. His mother has a relieved but stern look on her face. Honest Mom, Billy says - I came straight home from school! Behind Billy the cartoonist has sketched out Billy's "straight" route -- a rambling circuit of loops and twists, zigzags and meanderings, as he tested every swing, picked up every errant ball, petted every dog, waded through every mud puddle. -- And yet Billy was telling the truth - he had come straight home in the sense that his goal was his home, and he had been moving toward it, never abandoning that goal despite all of the distractions that might have seemed to his mother intermediate destinations. Billy's mother, of course, is not alone in her inability to square "rambling" with "straight". In this age of modern airplane or superhighway travel, most of us have lost all sense of journey as open ended pilgrimage. The two extremes of modern travel - Are we there yet? -- and -"Who cares where we are?" are syndromes which fail to grasp the nature of the pilgrimage journey, which is neither a straight line trip nor mere meandering around. The word journey originally meant

the distance traveled in one day –from the French journee- a journey becomes a pilgrimage as we discover, day by day, that the distance traveled is less important than the experience gained. As Joseph Campbell expressed it - When you're on a journey and the end keeps getting further and further away, then you realize that the real end is the journey or as St. Francis De Sales says – perfection doesn't consist in becoming perfect - rather it consists in striving for perfection – it is in the struggle that we are saved!

So pilgrimage is the kind of journey that is characterized by vicissitudes, problems, annoyances - the struggle - this is a different attitude and emphasis than the more common metaphors of progress and growth. Vicissitude accentuates the agonizing process of falling down and getting up again and it accentuates the painful reality that identity is found rather than sought or grabbed. For just as we cannot capture spirituality we cannot seize an identity. Our identity captures us, overtaking us especially in moments of pain and anguish -- when we are lost and searching, stumbling and falling. And although the pain cannot be denied, the falls are never merely failures, because it is precisely the alternation between successes and failures that builds spiritual identity. This kind of journey necessarily involves uncertainty and incongruity, often taking us to places we never expected to go. Fighting to continue on this journey implies a commitment to flexibility and a willingness to recognize and accept the will of God. In this process, this journey, this pilgrimage you have to be careful not to give yourself any absolute regulations because that will lead you into conflicts and anxieties -- instead carefully probe what is at hand at each moment. Be aware and humble and demand an account of yourself each day. You should hold fast to the now.

In recognizing spirituality's fluid nature, we learn to be flexible and adaptable, thus protecting ourselves from the tendency to want to fix things "once and for all" -- Hold fast to the now -- live in the present moment -- we never know and we can't control where the vicissitudes, the struggles, of the pilgrimage that is our spiritual journey will take us.

The modern mind - so enthralled by technique, so oriented to efficient production and "bottom line" results, so obsessed with comfort and predictability - approaches the concept of pilgrimage with wariness and puzzlement. Why backtrack and sidestep when you can march straight ahead? The word vicissitudes with its promise of ups and downs, its suggestion of successes and failures, its reminder that we cannot march straight ahead, is unsettling and disorienting for those who equate progress with perfection as most of us tend to do.

Our destination is never a place, but rather a new way of looking at things. At the end of all of our exploring we will find ourselves at the spot where we began and we will know it really for the first time. The pilgrimage image suggests that the goal of this particular journey known as life is not to prove that we are perfect but to find some happiness, some joyful peace of mind in

the reality of our own imperfect human condition. Rather than thinking--If I'm not farther along than I was yesterday, something's wrong with me -- the pilgrim thinks - I'm in a different place than I was yesterday - What does it mean for me? What is God saying to me? You have to look forward from where you are no matter where that happens to be -- this is classically what we call hope -- hope is born while facing the unknown and realizing that one is not alone.

In the long history of spirituality, those recognized as somehow spiritually adept have consistently been called teacher -- they help others to learn, to become teachable. Real spiritual teachers who, by the way, never consider themselves to be experts do three things -- **first** and foremost they **listen**. **Second** they **ask questions**. **Third** they **tell stories**. Each of these practices reflects the acceptance of not having all the answers, and each teaches the essential truth that the spiritual life is not written in stone.

Eventually we learn that Spirituality is a reality that must touch all of one's life if it is to transform us. Spirituality's pervasiveness has two dimensions - the spiritual not only touches all of our surface - it penetrates to all of our depths. We must live it, think it, feel it and most important, act it in our own lives, for only if we do it, only if we practice it, will we come to understand WHAT IT IS!

So spirituality resides at our center, flowing into all that we are and do - it is at the very core of our being. We cannot borrow it, putting it on for an hour or a day, using it like a cloak to cover the hardness in our heart or the angry or jealous thoughts in our mind. Spirituality is not a pet project that we can take up for a month or two; it is never a hobby. It has to be pervasive - it is like the glue that holds all of the parts and dimensions of our life together. And if we expect God to enter into every aspect of our life we can hold nothing back - and holding nothing back means opening ourselves up to God - even to showing Him all of our imperfections - our defects of character - our shortcomings.

We have to be conscious of the fact that because we are imperfect we are not terrible people -- nor are we lost people -- but we have all fallen short of what we are called to be and we have to be able to own all that we are and to accept ourselves as flawed, imperfect, wounded, in order to be healed -- to be made whole and therefore to become holy. Often we are in denial concerning our shortcomings. If we deny our imperfection we are cutting ourselves off from the wholeness of one's self. And there is another level of denial -- hiding our imperfection or holding it back refuses to make it available for healing.

Now It is a good idea to tell stories about ourselves -- what we used to be like -- what has happened to us -- and what we are like now. This opens us up to wholeness by making our real identity available. It brings us face to face with who we are -- with how we act- it makes it

possible to accept the ambiguity - the confusion - the incongruous, fractured pieces of ourselves which make up the whole me. Francis tells us to love our abjection. (Abjection means everything from our mistakes, to our bad decisions, to our naivete, to our poor judgments, to our pride).

In a letter to St. Jane he says, "... If I do something stupid, or sinful it makes me realize how bad off I am. This is Good. I am disappointed with myself and get into a depressed mood and sometimes into a violent passion. I am grieved at the offense to God, but glad that this shows me to be abject and wretched. At the same time...although we may love the abjection that flows from the evil, because it gives us insight into our nature still we must not neglect to remedy the evil....The best abjections are those we have not chosen, those which just happen to us or are forced on us or... those of our vocation and profession."

Why does St. Francis de Sales tell us to love our abjection --- not because it is good in itself -- but because it leads us to depend on God. ---God who has created us, who loves us, and who takes care of us.

It is a truism of both therapy and spirituality that one must confront self-as-feared if one is ever to find self-as-is. What we fear is that we are so imperfect as to not be able to make the grade. But only when we FACE self-as-feared do we find self-as-is.

We live a day at a time because we have only this day - the future is ahead of us and we do not know what it contains, the past is behind us, only the present is here with us. But this day has meaning only insofar as it unites my past with my future. I can live this day only if I can understand it as part of my whole story -- the part that I can live this day, NOW.

-And so St. Francis DeSales says, "Live in the present moment!"

NOW What does that mean according to Francis? -- It means that this is How we **experience** our Spirituality.-how we make progress in our spiritual life

Spirituality actually involves experiencing life and all that life throws at us in a new way. Ultimately spirituality influences how we live by shaping what we experience.

The second session

Spirituality is first experienced as letting go - letting go of what holds us back. But letting go, although it involves a true freeing, is not the same as freedom. Letting go is an experience -- when we let the truth about ourselves be revealed then we experience it -- it is a type of openness.- it is discovery -- the chains falling away -- a light going on -- a weight lifted are some of the descriptions.

Letting go begins to happen when we lay aside the idea that we can plan or control our spiritual life --either for ourselves or for anyone else. Perhaps the greatest paradox is the mystical insight that we are able to experience this release only if we ourselves let go. This is the paradox of surrender. The experience of surrender involves the letting in of reality that becomes possible when we are ready to let go of our illusions and pretensions (our unreality).

What blocks release more than anything else is the refusal to "let go" that comes from the demand for security, for certainty, for assured results. Letting go requires risk.

The story is told of a guy who slipped off the edge of a cliff-- and as he felt himself falling he began to grab at anything that would stop his fall -- he finally grabbed on to a small branch sticking out from the rock and he was hanging there for dear life and so he decided that he had better pray and so he asked for help -- well nothing happened - so finally in desperation he yelled "Is anyone up there?" -- and to his surprise the answer came back -- "Yes -- do what I say -- Let go of the branch!" He thought for a minute then yelled -- "Is anyone ELSE up there?"

"Letting go" involves a breaking down of resistance to reality, a surrender of the demand for certitude. We wake up to discover that the locks on our chains have been removed, and realizing this we lift our arms and let the chains just drop away. But the chains cannot drop if we have become so attached to them that we fear being without them. While the chains may no longer be attached to us, we may still be attached to them. So long as we cling, we are bound. The deeper release then is of OUR attachment to the chains that bind us. Take for example an invalid who doesn't really want to be cured because he feels he won't be able to live up to the expectations put on him if he has no physical limitations. (My blind nephews)

Attachment in spirituality is usually depicted as a clinging to material objects, but for St. Francis DeSales material reality serves mainly as metaphor. Francis focused on spiritual rather than material poverty - his detachment involved the giving up of claims to rights and to his own will more than the surrender of material possessions.

Difficulties arise not because we have things, but when our relationship with our possessions becomes attachment -- when we make them into more than objects by interpreting them as in

some way an essential part of our very self --- When we define ourselves by our possessions.

In the same way Francis makes it clear that our wariness of attachment does not imply rejection of human relationships. Part of our human being involves a profound need for other human beings - thus spiritual teachers have always talked about community and our attachment to others. There is both a right way and a wrong way of joining oneself to what is. We have to be careful to become detached from material gain, from self-importance, and from the urge to dominate others and we have to let go of the NEED to be in control, the need to be effective, and the need to be right. This is essential to make spiritual progress.

NOW - Because letting go is a gift - a reality not earned, - there flows naturally from it the experience of gratitude. Gratitude can be defined as the response to something recognized as freely given. Gratitude is the vision - the way of seeing -- that recognizes "gift". Gratitude is the vision that sees gift and recognizes how gift-ed we are. This vision has always been recognized as a core experience of spirituality.

Within spirituality, the truly holy, like the truly wise, have never thought wisdom or sanctity to be rare. All of us can be saints - in the sense that all can gain this new vision of the world - God has offered it to us. But what does the vision of gratitude look like? It is the opposite of the stubborn conviction that sees all goods as winnings.

Consider, for example a teacher on the one hand a teacher could be filled with an arrogant sense of triumph-- "I hold this position because I am intelligent and by God I worked for it! and so I am here because I deserve to be here and don't you forget it!"

We have all met such individuals - if we are lucky - rarely. But then there are those teachers who think in these terms -- "How fortunate I am to be here, to be able to do what I love doing -- thinking and researching and sharing what I find. So many people went out of their way to help or encourage me. Without them I would not be here and the only way I have to say thank-you is to pass it on-- to give to my students as I have been given to by others."

All spiritual teachers have asked in one form or another -- What do you have that you have not received? -- Happiness flows from a vision of one's life as a reality received, a gift given freely and spontaneously. Such a vision removes self from the center, thus healing self-centeredness by revealing the folly of the illusion that I deserved it.

Spirituality is a gift of God. No one earns spirituality, no one can acquire it or possess it, for it is a reality freely and spontaneously given, and gratitude is the only possible response to that gift. In that gratitude, from that understanding of how much has been given us and how gift-ed

we are, we become able to see at work some reality that is higher, larger, greater than ourselves.

Which brings us to HUMILITY

When St. Bernard the great Abbot of the monastery of Clairveau was asked to list the four cardinal virtues, he answered--"Humility, humility, humility and humility.

St. Francis De Sales --spoke in a similar way of HUMILITY – On his deathbed in Dijon ---

In an era that fawns on the rich and famous and adopts as its rallying cry -- ME FIRST -- humility is a concept scorned or worse - neglected. We have unfavorable interpretations in which lowly calls to mind servility and self-abasement, meek is equated with cowardly submissiveness, and mildness is interpreted as blandness.

Each of these modern interpretations misses the essence of the virtue -- for humility signifies simply the acceptance of being human -- embracing in ourselves both the sinner and the saint, accepting the fact that we are human -- mixed -- and therefore sometimes mixed up. The fact that we are human is good enough - humility involves learning how to live with reality and take joy in that reality. SFDS says in the Introduction to the devout life(III,6) ...Humility is true knowledge and voluntary acknowledgment of our abjection. The chief point of such humility is not only in willingly admitting our abject state but in loving it and delighting in it. This must not be because of lack of courage and generosity but in order to exalt God's majesty all the more....."

As a spiritual experience, humility contains its own unique paradox: Those possessed by it do not realize that they are participating in it. And those who think they possess it most often have no idea of what "it" is. As a sufi saying suggests - A saint is a saint unless he knows that he is one.

Francis would have us understand that Humility is above all Honesty. True humility neither exaggerates nor minimizes but accepts. In response to modern narcissism's extolling of ME FIRST and NUMBER ONE, humility does not necessarily suggest an attitude of ME LAST. What humility does counsel is that such comparisons tend to be foolish - the problem with both FIRST and LAST as goals is that both are extremes.

Humility then, is the embrace of ordinariness. That is not to say that mediocrity is something to be sought after -- humility rather sees us as good enough even in our ordinariness.

When we come face to face with the reality of our own imperfection, we can either laugh or

cry. At certain moments in our lives, in fact, it seems that the most fundamental choice each of us has is between fighting ourselves and laughing at ourselves. (The holy virtue of Eutrepelia)

When confronting our own incongruities, humor is usually the healthier choice, as the wisdom of word origins hints. For the words human, humor, and humility as well as humiliation all have the same root - HUMUS.

Earth or down to earth.

Humor, humility, humanity -- we cannot work on one without working on the others -- we cannot have one without having the others. To attend to any one of the three begins the process of bringing us home - home to ourselves.

Home is the place where we can be ourselves and accept ourselves as both good and bad.
Home is the place where we can laugh and cry.

Home is where we can find some peace within all the chaos and confusion.

Home is where we are accepted and indeed cherished by others.

Home is that place where we belong, where we fit.

Humility allows us to find it in our own ordinariness.

But what happens if we fall short? That very awareness of falling short implies two related realities -- first we are trying and second we need to try again. There is no real failure here for spirituality involves a continual falling down and getting back up again - which is partly the definition of the Christian life. That is why humility - the knowledge of both our good points and our bad points - is so important and that is why we have this never ending adventure of coming to know ourselves, seeing ourselves clearly, learning to be at home with ourselves.

The great need is for balance -- when we are down we need to get up; and when we are up, we need to remember that we have been and will certainly be again - down. We have to put it all in perspective! Francis is the great teacher of balance and perspective! In a letter to one of his directees, St. Francis says, "...Dear imperfections...they force us to acknowledge our misery, give us practice in humility, selflessness, patience and watchfulness-- and yet God looks at us, sees what we are up against and sees that we are going in the right way..."

Seeing one's own defects is humility -- the fruit of that vision is TOLERANCE.(Charity)

Charity as tolerance is not a grudging putting-up-with but a loving identification with. This is the type of tolerance that leads to healing. When we accept ourselves in all our weakness, flaws and failings, we can begin to fulfill an even more challenging responsibility: accepting the

weakness and limitations of those we love and respect. Then, and only then, do we become able to accept the weakness, defects and shortcomings of those we find difficult to love.

Learning how to live with other human beings is one of the great, classic problems of being human. Most of us tolerate each other by identifying with and seeking out those with whom we share strengths; most of the time we ignore or avoid those whose strong points are not ours. So when we join groups, we usually do it on the basis of shared strengths. We all look for and socialize with those whose interests and skills make shared enthusiasms possible.

But human beings connect with each other most healingly, most healthily, not on the basis of common strengths, but in the very reality of their shared weaknesses -- the shared honesty of mutual vulnerability openly acknowledged. That's where we connect - at the most fundamental level of our human-ness, it is our weakness that makes us alike; it is our strengths that make us different. This sense of shared weakness creates what is truly a community. Participants in such a setting learn to appreciate rather than resent the strengths in others because they know that they are the same -- imperfect. Those who do not share weakness find other's strengths threatening. But those who recognize shared weakness see in other's strengths a hope - the hope that your strength might also support me.

So - The essence of the charity that is tolerance lies in its openness to difference

Life is unfair. It often hurts, but it is most often in the depth and agony of the hurt that we find our "way".

Of course, Life hurts -- Where is there growth without suffering? Pain is not without its reasons, for it serves the purpose of telling us that something is wrong. Pain stimulates us to move on in our pilgrimage - to seek new ways of fitting into our own being and into the community. Life hurts, but in the hurt there is the potential for healing.

Ultimately we have to be able to accept our own imperfect humanness.

Home is, ultimately, that place where we find the peace and harmony that comes from learning to live with the knowledge of our own imperfections and from learning to accept the imperfections of others. Such a place (home) can exist in various settings but its ultimate foundation rests jointly within self and within some group of trusted others. Wherever we attain that sense of being at home we experience a falling away of tensions, a degree of balance between the pushing and pulling forces of our lives. In such a place we can cease fighting - especially with ourselves - we find the space to be the imperfect beings that we are and we can love our own abjection and allow others to be themselves as well.

The message of all spirituality and especially of Salesian Spirituality is that in some mysterious way, we are all one -- that therefore the joy and sorrow of any one of us is the joy and sorrow

of all of us. Recognizing and living that reality is what Francis meant when he said "We have no bond but the bond of love which is the bond of perfection".

If we can accept the reality of our humanness of our human condition, we are taking solid steps on our pilgrimage that is spirituality and the defenses that deceive us will fall away, and we will see ourselves and others as we really are.

The spiritual life is not some theory – It is a reality and we have to live it.

May God Be Praised!

V + J