



## The Cathedral of St. Andrew - Honolulu

### Sermon: Year B – 18th Sunday in Pentecost – September 23, 2018 Retreat at the Cenacle

Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.

You notice in that line where the first action comes from, right? Not so much from God who we know, of course, is omnipresent and always near. But in order to achieve awareness of that gift, the first step comes from us.

But that can be a hard pill to swallow in the 21st-century day and age where many of us, I think, have become shopper spiritualists and consumer Christians, expecting God to make the first move and touch us, heal us, console us, before we deign to give God the reward of gratitude and relationship.

And maybe the state of the church today is that we are hitting our bottom and realizing that we can't buy the love of God.

At least that's the lesson I've learned.

As many of you know, I was on retreat for eight days over the past couple of weeks – in a serene and peaceful convent, the Cenacle House, in Quezon City in the Philippines, where I spent 23 hours a day in complete silence, and one hour a day and spiritual direction with a Cenacle sister, Sister Ana.

During my second session of spiritual direction I reported that on the first night I went into the small chapel called the Upper Room, the Cenacle (if you will) and I prayed by gazing upon a beautiful icon of the face of Jesus that had eyes that watched me. It felt a bit eerie and so I moved to another part of the small room and it felt as if the eyes were still watching me. And when I left and went to close the door, the eyes were still watching me. When I reported that, Sister Ana laughed and said, "Maybe you should watch him instead."



It was an invitation to enter into the life experience of Jesus Christ which is, after all, why we're all here, isn't it – to gaze upon Jesus sent to enter into the story of his life.

Sister Ana pointed out to me that that was why the Roman Catholics have such a deep relationship with Mary, the mother of Jesus. "Everything about Mary," she said, "points us to her son – the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Presentation, finding him in the temple, his baptism, his first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, he's being driven out of the synagogue, his Transfiguration, the Last Supper, the prophecy of Zechariah, losing him in Jerusalem at the age of 12, the scourging at the pillar, the crowning of thorns, the long walk to Calvary, his Crucifixion, his Resurrection, his Ascension, the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. All Mary does is point us to Christ, begging us to gaze upon his face and ponder his life through her eyes.

But how often do we really do that? Just gaze upon his face? Draw near to God?

*"Our beloved Church regards her children as having bodies as well as souls to be cared for, and sanctions the consecration of these and all that is beautiful in nature and art to the service of God." . . . Queen Emma.*

## 18th Sunday in Pentecost – September 23, 2018, cont'd.

For me, the hardest part is to ponder the sorrows. Sister Ana told me that the Tagalog word for sorrow *pig hati* means, etymologically, to divide the heart—to tear it in two.

And as we draw near to God and gaze upon the face of his son to ponder his mother's sorrows for him, we are invited to participate by blending our sorrows into his — our sufferings, our losses, our harshness and our meanness towards others, our sin. That can indeed divide the heart.

And then we're called to bury those sorrows in the tomb, let them die, and then resurrect into something new and fruitful for the God who longs for us to draw nearer. But do any of us really want to think of all of that stuff? Do any of us really want to go there?

Maybe it's easier to enter into the mundane—money wars, crumbling buildings, leadership issues, who pays for what, how much the staff makes, warped stain glass windows, hot worship spaces, aging organs, dead trees, programs, budgets, dwindling numbers.

Responsibilities, yes. The ends in and of themselves, no. We are called to draw to something much deeper than that. We're called to draw to something much bigger than that. We're called to draw to something much more important than that. We are called to draw near to God —maybe by burying our sorrows in the tomb, grieving them for a time, accepting our losses, and then letting them go.

While I was at the Cenacle House, I had an assignment – to write out the sorrows of my life from birth to age 12 (the same age as Jesus when we last hear of his childhood). I came up with 22 sorrows. And when I gazed upon the face of Jesus and placed them on the foot of the cross, it was as if he said my sorrows would die with him – if, if I was willing to forgive.

And then that face begged me to do so – to forgive. You know the cruelty of crucifixion isn't that you die, it's that they keep you breathing. That's why they put a platform for the feet of the condemned at the foot of the cross. When you hang in there, it suffocates you, unless you push up on your feet – the effort of which then makes your body writhe in pain. That's what Jesus endured – endured until he said the word, "Forgive." And then he breathed his last and let go.

I had to travel 5000 miles from home and spend eight days in seclusion in order to figure that out. I had to go into a convent and turn off my cell phone – no calls, no emails, no text messages, no Facebook, no CNN, no Star Advertiser, no calls home to my grandmother, no music, no talking. It was just me and God. That's what it took to figure that out.

But the good news is that now that I've told you all about it, you don't have to do all that. It would be nice, but you don't have to. All you have to do is draw near to God, and gaze upon the face of God's son, and make room for the Holy Spirit to help you get in touch with your sorrows, name them, put them at the foot of the cross, bury them in the tomb, grieve them, accept the loss, and move toward the light of hope made manifest in the resurrection of God's son.

Draw near.

The Cenacle House has a beautiful garden and at night they light up a life-size statue of Mary. I noticed that the mango trees had small capiz shell lanterns strung between them, but they weren't lit, probably to save electricity. I commented on that to Sister Ana and when I was set to work writing out what became my 22 sorrows, she also set to work and talked to the gardener.

I spent the day writing out my sorrows in visualized pounding them with anger into the foot of Jesus on the cross – and then came to tears.

## 18th Sunday in Pentecost – September 23, 2018, cont'd.

And then that night in the Cenacle garden Tony, the gardener, in what I'd like to call a wonderful moment of spiritual synchronicity, lit 22 lanterns, 22 sorrows turned into 22 lights for Christ, showing us that when we gaze upon the face of Jesus and enter into the story of Christ, the light of hope emerges from the grave of our sorrows and points us on a pathway to God.



My prayer is that that doesn't happen just for me—your pastor, your priest.

My prayer is that the light is there for you, for your families, for this worshipping Cathedral community, for our diocese, for our state, for our country, for our church, for our planet, for our galaxy, for the Cosmos, and for God who calls us to draw near.

Indeed, draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.

*Amen.*