

## **An Easter Manifesto 2009**

### **Rebuilding a Good Foundation**

**April 9, 2009**

Holy Week and Easter are the most important celebrations in the Liturgical Year, more so than Christmas, or any of the other Solemnities, important as they are. Holy Week is the most important week of the year. The Triduum of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil are the most important. And the Easter Vigil is the most important out of the three. The Easter Vigil is the summit of the Liturgical Year because it celebrates the joyous resurrection of Jesus from the dead after His death on the Cross. It is the ultimate proof that the way, the truth, and the life of death to the old self in order to find a whole new self in Christ is indeed, victorious over any obstacle we face in this world.

This is an interesting Easter at Little Portion Hermitage. While still joyful, our services are cut back from the usual extraordinary dressings and celebrations to a standard Catholic Holy Week. Nothing wrong with that! But it will be subdued from our normal celebrations. This is because we have no big Chapel or Common building. Space limitations demand that we celebrate small.

We also have the constant reminder of the new chapel and common center building project going on at the smack dab center of the Hermitage. While coming along, they have hit much more rock than anticipated, so the below-the-ground work is taking a longer time than expected. But it is most important. They are removing tons of rock, and carefully preparing the footings, foundation, and below the ground complex of electric and plumbing. For a building this size that is no small thing.

This has much to teach us at the Hermitage this year. It also has much to teach our Domestics and friends as we face the tough economy and environment this year. As Jesus says, we are called to build our house on rock and not on sand. This time of trouble can either be a time of discouragement, or a time of opportunity. Because of my belief in the resurrection power of Jesus I choose the latter.

We are all called to deepen our spiritual roots in the dying and rising of Jesus Christ by dying to our old self, and rising up a new person in Christ. This includes all that we are, body and soul, so that our spirit might be born again in the Spirit of Jesus. This is radically exemplified in Jesus' journey through Holy Week, and in His dying and rising in a special way. We realize this through daily common and private prayer, meditation, and the gift of contemplation. The Eucharist, when rightly celebrated, is the most powerful way to experience this in common. I would also like to outlay a sweeping view of some of the basic systematic social troubles that face us today. By the nature of this "sweep" I will overly generalize and inevitably leave some things out. Some will even be important. But I will at least give it a try. I apologize in advance. But maybe this will get some of us thinking more radically? This is a time for radical rethinking and change.

I will be restating some things that are more completely laid out in my book, "Simplicity." It will also resonate with those involved in the Catholic Land, and Catholic Homestead movements.

Don't get me wrong. I am a child of the modern west, and enjoy her many benefits. I like our comfortable living just like everyone else. But I also think that we have allowed ourselves to grow into a seriously unhealthy society that needs to radically change if we are to survive.

## **Simple Living**

1) Based on the community in Acts 2 and 4 we renew our call to simple living. We differentiate between our wants and our needs, because habitually indulging our wants kills the needy.

I believe that during Easter this year we are being called to really work on the foundations of our faith and way of life again. We are being called to "get back to basics." We are being called to really simplify. We are all learning to let go of many of things that we thought we needed, but only wanted. We are also learning how to do without some of our needs. We are learning that we can still live happy lives when we really look to the spiritual as the priority in our life.

Through the years we have also supported relief and development, and missionary work in the developing world. We have done this through the work of Mercy Corps, and our own Our Lady of the Angels Mission in Nicaragua. Catholic relief is also an excellent relief and development agency that is fully Catholic.

## **Economics**

2) Based on Jesus' call to renounce all possessions, and St. Francis' renunciation of money, we renew our call to avoid becoming addicted to an economy that is based less on real value, and more on the accumulation of mere digits on a computer screen, or money that is not worth the paper it is printed on. We learn how to barter justly with one another within our community. We learn how to trust in God for our future needs. Our economy is on just about everyone's mind nowadays. We are in the modern equivalent of the Great Depression of our parent's time. Ironically, the depression they swore they would never let happen again has occurred. The physical limitations and poverty our parents swore would never affect their children is happening to millions of us. Yet we hear of billions and even trillions of dollars in bailouts, deficits, and national debts. It all seems a bit mind boggling to most of us. But there are some things we can understand.

Of course, simple living just makes good sense. When we simplify, we need less. When we need less, we don't need to spend as much. This economic time of trouble is an ideal time to cut back to basics, and learn to really be happy with them. After all, this is the normal lot of the vast majority of the population of planet earth. Why should think ourselves "too good" for it?

Plus, our entire economic system is based on an illusion. Once upon a time money actually represented tangible material goods that were worth something. Precious metals

like silver and gold were the bedrock of our monetary system for many years. Real estate is also really worth something.

Before the time of St. Francis most people bartered, and augmented a transaction with money. During the time of St. Francis people began to use money as the primary means of trade. Coupled with the new mobility of the population along safer trade routes, and the growth of democracy to replace Feudalism, this revolutionized Europe and much of the world. It allowed the poor to rise up from their previously fixed lower classes and to make something of themselves. The Church was supportive since it helped the poor to obtain a better standard of living.

But Francis was skeptical. He saw that the revolution did not address the deeper issue of spiritual prosperity. So, he would not allow his brothers to even touch the very money that promised to liberate the poor. He showed the entire world that one could still work in bartered exchange for food, clothing, and shelter. His simpler way of life was the deeper answer that brought a spiritual soul back to the socio/economic and political revolution of the western world.

Today we use money exclusively for trade. But today money has largely become only digits on a computer screen, and is sometimes printed at will out of nothing. I once had a doctor of economics tell me that modern money only represents the optimism or pessimism of a people. He said that there was no longer any real material worth except the paper it was printed on. Think of it: We toil and work all our lives to accumulate money. But in the end it isn't worth the paper it is printed on!

## **Demographics and Environment**

3) Based on the divine ordination of humanity to "till the garden" in Genesis, we are called back to the knowledge of how to produce the basics of life on planet earth; food, clothing, and shelter. We are called back to our agrarian roots as a community, a nation, and as a human species. This occurs in our Little Portion Farm and Free Range Chicken outreach.

This also has environmental ramifications. From the time of Genesis until recently humanity was primarily agrarian. We were farmers. We also hunted. For most of history that has remained the case, but in the last one hundred years we have radically changed that demographic. Before World War I twenty-four out of twenty-five families lived on the farm. The average farm was small, around 100 or so acres. The family worked the farm together, and they grew a variety of crops and animals that allowed them to be largely self-sufficient. Cities were the place where specialized goods and needs were supplied for the populations in general. After WWII the figure reversed. Twenty-four out of every twenty-five families moved into the growing cities. In 1983 forty-nine out of fifty families lived in the city. Today they say that as many as 97 out of every 100 families is living in the city or the suburbs.

This means that the small minority is growing food for the vast majority. And this percentage is growing. One farm family now has to cultivate thousands of acres left vacant by the families who moved to the cities. In order for them to farm the thousands of acres they are almost forced to use artificial fertilizers and pesticides that are ultimately harmful to the soil they depend on, and the food they produce. Poultry growers have to use antibiotics and such to keep animals alive, who live their short and miserable lives in an artificial and cruel environment. Most farmers readily admit that this is a most unhealthy and harmful way to take care of the earth and our animals. But the demographic shift away from the farm has forced the farmers themselves into it.

This also means that we have to go thousands of miles to dinner every day. When the farms run by a single family have to grow thousands of acres, they tend to specialize on one main crop. To get a variety of food to us it has to be shipped hundreds and thousands of miles, and sometimes across entire oceans. This necessitates their being processed and artificially preserved to survive the time it takes to get it long to our local market. Artificially processed food has advantages under that system. But the better answer is to change the system itself to something more natural and in keeping with God's original plan for humanity and creation.

## **The City**

4) Based on Plato and Thomas Aquinas in the west, we are called back to cities where the basics of food, clothing, and shelter are produced from its own local area, and those in the cities produce the specialty products really needed. This also reduces the need for agribusiness and foods overly processed in order to transport them to market, and to prolong shelf life. It also warns us about our impersonal suburbs created by the high mobility of the automobile, and calls us back to a true neighborhood of personal relationships. This is found in the monastery as a village based on God for those of all states of life.

Plato and even St. Thomas Aquinas said that the majority of the population should be those who produce the basic food we need to live. They are rural farmers. The reason is simple: If we do not eat, we die. The city should have most of its needs produced locally from the farms in its immediate vicinity. Trade with other cities and towns is necessary, but should be kept to a minimum. Cities should be largely self-sufficient from the land around it. The result was to be a healthy and colorfully rich environment for everyone on the city and on the farm.

Today cities are a polluted grey sprawl of factories, warehouses, urban and suburban houses, and cookie cutter strip malls. Most of us produce a specialized service that we really don't need. Then we have to convince everyone else that we all NEED this specialized product. A friend of mine said that his city was a population of restaurant owners where everyone goes to another restaurant for dinner every night. Somehow this seems rather inane.

## **The Suburbs**

One of the greatest contributors to this overall breakdown is the growth of the suburbs. Sociologists often say that the sprawling suburbs grew because of the rise of the automobile. Where once city dwellers lived close to where they worked, and walked or rode public transportation to their job every day, now we live miles from our work, and ride isolated with our windows up in air conditioned cars on cobwebbed freeways every day. Where once we knew our neighbors because we rubbed shoulders with them on a daily basis, now we live next door to folks we rarely see "up close and personal." The suburb has lost all sense of real community as we go from house to car and car to house without ever really touching the lives of those who live all around us. Our dependency on the automobile has isolated us in our suburban houses, and has greatly contributed to the pollution of the environment that some say is irreversible.

### **Personal and Family Matters**

5) We renew our call to households that work their own farm or business, so that they can be closer to each other on a daily basis, and where mutual responsibility is fostered through shared work and a stake in the family business. This is done at the Hermitage through our mutual work for the common good, and in the entire family sharing the responsibility for the community.

This also has some immediate personal ramifications. Isn't a life free of the physical toil of the farm advantageous? Physically, it is less work. (I must admit that I am a lazy musician at heart!) But in some most important ways it is harmful. Without natural physical labor our bodies grow flabby and fat. Then we become sick and emotionally out of balance. Then the thoughts themselves are clouded by an out of balance way of life. This can have a negative effect on spirituality. A healthy body and mind pave the way to a healthy spirit.

Also, when most families do their work on the home farm, they are able to be close to their families when they work. This is most important for a sense of stability with the children. Plus, all the family members share in the work of the small farm. This means that children gain a sense of ownership for something that will be passed on to them when they become adults. This has huge positive effects on the fabric of the family, which is the building block of society in general.

### **War and Peace**

6) We renew our call to get to the causes of conflict and war from the unequal distribution of the world's resources through greed, and to willingly embrace a simple lifestyle. The demographic shift from the farm to the city has also resulted in the risk of a top-heavy society where most the population produces specialty products, and only a few know how to produce environmentally friendly food, clothing, and shelter. We do this through our common life and agrarian base at the Hermitage. We also try to uproot any violence in our heart, even towards our enemies.

The problem with our system is that it is highly vulnerable. When a society moves away from producing its own basic needs, it is in danger. Like a football player who is more vulnerable when their center of gravity is too high, so a society that economically moves away from producing its own basic needs is at risk of being toppled. One of the contributing factors in the fall of the Roman Empire was the rise of its slaves when they realized that the average Roman citizen could no longer produce their own basic needs. It was not long before the slaves rose up in revolt. We are in a similar situation in relation to the rest of the world.

We also consume most of the world's resources to live our out of balance way of life. Most of the world is poor by our standards, and are subsistence farmers. But they could use more. The few consume most of the world's resources, while the many use the little. St. Augustine said that what we use that we do not need we steal from the poor. When the few have the much and the many have the little, the many will ultimately rise up in revolt against the few. Usually the revolt will be bloody.

If we want to avoid war, and avoid risk of our own overthrow by the many of this world, we will seriously amend the basics of our current social system and demographics.

## **Health Care**

7) Based on the Divine Physician we renew our call to health care that is available to all, and integrates the best of the west and the east in providing remedies and cures. We do this through the use of western and alternative medicine available through local physicians, clinics, and state health care. Here at Little Portion we operate the Little Flower Clinic.

Time For Action

Our modern society is growing bankrupt. Our economy no longer works because the fabric of our society no longer works. We tend to be personally unfulfilled. Most of us are sick in body, soul, and spirit. Our environment is in serious trouble. Our industrial and technologically based lifestyle is a huge contributor to this imbalance. Imbalance causes more imbalance. There is an increase in war around the world, and we are directly or indirectly involved in many of them. Unless we do something to stop it, and do it soon, we are on a merry go round to self destruction.

Am I saying that all industry or technology is bad? Am I saying that the city is bad? Absolutely not! These are all good if used well, and in a balanced and healthy way. But I am saying that we have allowed the basics of our society to become imbalanced. This imbalance leads to all kinds of trouble. It leads to sickness of body, soul, and spirit. When sickness is left untreated it can lead to life long disabilities, and even death.

## **What We Can Do**

What do we do? That's a tough one. Most of us are so entrenched in our system that we cannot get free. Some would say that all that will really free us is an ultimate fall of our whole way of life. Maybe so, but I certainly hope not.

Most of can begin by simplifying our life. Do we need it, or just want it? This is a radical question if we ask it of ourselves seriously. Differentiating between wants and needs is enough to radically revolutionize our way of life. When we do that, then we will greatly appreciate and enjoy the little "wants" that God and others give us out of love.

We can also begin to grow a family garden. Some will start in their own backyard. Some will move to a house with an acre or so close to the city where they work. Some will move to small farms. Some might even join a community like The Brothers and Sisters of Charity who are committed to simple and natural living. Natural organic vegetables are much more healthy, and taste much better than the ones we find in supermarkets. Where possible we can raise some free-range chickens for eggs, and even meat. You will be surprised by the difference in taste and nutrition!

We can also save energy. Make your home energy efficient when the time for repairs and replacements comes around. Turn down your heat and air conditioning. Check out alternative energy for your home. Eat less, and eat smart. Eat natural and organic when you can. Drive a hybrid car next time you buy. Drive less, and use public transportation. Or ride a bike and walk. Use western and eastern medicine. Western medicine is often much more expensive, but eastern treatments are sometimes not covered by western insurance companies

Also, get the family involved. You would be surprised how much it builds family relationships to work together on a basic project like this. Yes, there will be initial complaints, and even some ongoing ones. But don't let that stop you if you are serious about it. The benefits far outweigh the sacrifices.

Regarding war; Root out any violence within your heart towards any others, even your enemies. This is the teaching of Jesus. No war can be just if such violence lives in the human heart, and all war can be stopped if it is replaced with a truly peaceful heart, mind, and spirit. This is done through communal and private meditation and prayer. One by one, person by person, such inner peace can put an end to war, in this world or the next. Without it even the next world will be one of conflict and strife.

## **Conclusion**

So this Holy Week and Easter do not let the bad news of the economy, the environment, and wars get you down. Take courage from the resurrection of Jesus and do something about it! Start small. But by taking one step at a time we can travel great distances in time. We can accomplish great changes for the better if we simply begin and work together. Be filled with the message of Easter hope!

This time of trouble can become a great opportunity to make some foundational changes in our entire way of life as individuals, families, and as a nation. It is radical, but it is not fanatical, and it is doable. Maybe it can be the opportunity of a lifetime, or even the opportunity of a century to do something beautiful for God. Do not give up hope. Have faith. Love God, and His entire creation, beginning with all human beings, especially those of the household of the Faith. And let your faith, hope, and charity lead to good deeds that change the world for the better! This is the challenge and the assurance of the Easter message of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In Jesus,

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