

JULY 31, 2022

In my youth, I was partly formed as a Catholic by a series of short stories centered on a parish priest in Italy's fertile Lombard plain, Don Camillo. Extremely enthusiastic and hard fisted, zealous and impulsive, quick tempered and deeply compassionate, Don Camillo was definitely on the side of the angels, even if the devil could sometimes lead him briefly astray. I found the stories delightful. Some centered on Don Camillo's relationship with the town's Communist mayor, as enthusiastic and hard fisted, zealous and impulsive, quick tempered and compassionate, as Don Camillo was. Given their personalities and rival loyalties, it was inevitable that two would clash, occasionally physically, but they did not hate each other. They were both, after all, citizens of the same town, Lombards, and Italians. The stories showed Don Camillo's personal relationship with Jesus Christ, Who had a sense of humor in these stories, and was quite willing to work with Don Camillo as he was, correcting him as needed, but not seeking to destroy and remake his personality. This was vastly consoling to my teenage self. Don Camillo reminded me a bit of me. I was much more bookish and intellectually inclined, but had something of a hard fist, could be impulsive, and was sometimes quick tempered. Many sermons seemed to suggest that I needed to undergo a sort of spiritual amputation, but the Don Camillo stories suggested that these were things the Lord Jesus could, and would, work with, offering corrections, but not demanding amputations.

I learned later that the author of the stories, Giovanni Guareschi, quit writing them in the early 1950s, in a mood nearly approaching despair. He had opposed Italy's absurd Fascist regime in the late 20s, 30s, and early 40s, and suffered for it. He did not, however, think that the New Italy was much of an improvement, and his criticism of the New Italy annoyed people. He felt himself a failure. I think that if his stories could help a teenager thousands of miles away and three and a half decades later deal with spiritual turmoil, he was not a failure. Still, that is how he felt in the early 50s, writing about how all hope for heroism had died in Italy, and that Faith was dying too. While Americans were dying in Korea to save the world from the Communist tyranny that his character, honest but foolish Mayor Peppone, mistakenly supported, all that New Italy was interested in, it seemed to him, was getting as rich as possible, as quickly as possible. Fascism had a warped notion of heroism, but is the answer to that really anti-heroism? Fascism had a warped version of patriotism, but is the answer to that really anti-patriotism? Fascism, above all, had a deeply twisted notion of Faith, expressed in the odiously stupid expression "Il Duce ha sempre ragione - the Leader is always right"; but is the answer to that really anti-Faith?

Is a life that is only about getting as rich as possible, as quickly as possible, really worth living?

In the Old Testament, the disillusioned Preacher of Ecclesiastes knew that it was not, even if he was unclear about just what would make life worth living. In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus is quite clear on the point that such a life would not be worth living. Unlike Ecclesiastes' disillusioned Preacher, the Lord Jesus knew exactly what would make life worth living. A good life, a life rich in what matters to God, is a life of Faith and Love. A good life, Jesus tells us, is a life of Faith in God, and under Him, Faith in our fellow Disciples. A good life, Jesus tells, is a life of Love of God, and, under Him, Love of our Neighbors. Now, Faith and Love mean

commitment, and commitment means sacrifice. A good life always has at least a touch of the heroic to it. Seeking, as the Lord Jesus did, to serve and not to be served, a good life can tolerate being rich, if that is what life throws our way, but a good life does not particularly seek wealth. A good life seeks to serve.

A good life, then, a life worth living, is a life of love and service, under God.

I dare to say that the goal of getting rich is a near occasion of sin. If someone does good work, and is very smart and a little lucky, that person might become rich without blame. Deliberately seeking wealth, however, slowly smothers love, and quickly smothers the spirit of service.

In today's Gospel from chapter 12 of St. Luke, the Lord Jesus is asked to judge a disputed inheritance. To the shock of the quarreling brother who asked for a judgment, the Lord Jesus absolutely refuses. In effect, the Lord Jesus says that both are sinning, failing in love. The one brother grabbed more of the inheritance that was his due, but the other brother publicly denounces his brother as a thief. The Lord Jesus seems to suggest that, indeed, the first brother had sinned, but that the second brother's response should have been something along the lines of "well, brother, if you think you need all of that, you are welcome to it, because I love you".

I once saw this Gospel passage unfold before my eyes. A man who had been quite successful in business died. When his will was read, his two sons were so angry with each other that they never again, as far as I know, could stand being in each other's company. Their mother told me once how sad she was that her sons could never be together with her, and that her grandchildren could never be all together. She wondered if her sons would have been so bitter if less money had been involved, and expressed regret that her husband had done so well financially.

The two brothers imagined themselves having significantly more money, and imagining that killed their love for each other, and damaged their love for their mother. Their desire for more wealth had made their lives significantly less happy.

Why couldn't they look down the road, and see the day when they would die? On that day, what would that extra money matter? That, of course, is the point of the Lord Jesus' parable in today's Gospel. Death will come to us, and on that day we need to be rich in what matters to God, rich in Faith, Love, and Service. There really are four last things, Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. Death will come to all of us. As my biggest Altar Boy back in Lander, now preparing for freshman year at Notre Dame, likes to say "None of us in on this space rock forever" When we leave this "space rock" (personally, I think of this earth as something much more homey than that, more a spacious and strange mansion than a space rock), we will be judged. That judgment will reveal the fundamental truth about our lives. Have we lived only for ourselves, or have we lived for God and Neighbor? The one life leads to hell, and the other to heaven.

The four last things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell.

I know two twins, young men with dual Italian and American citizenship. One has fallen in love with America (it warms my heart a lot that someone can still fall in love with America). The other has hope still for Italy (which also warms my heart a little). Teaching a catechism class somewhere in Italy's Lombard region, he told the children about the four Last Things, Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. The kids told their parents. The horrified parents angrily told the priest, who seems to have missed the opportunity to say something like "Yes - didn't you know?" The New Italy doesn't want to hear that there is more to life than "eat, drink and be merry". Those aren't bad things in themselves, but become bad when they are made life's purpose. Life's purpose is Love, the Love of God and, under Him, the Love of neighbor. Our lives will come to an end, and, as St. John of the Cross said, "In the evening of our lives, we will be judged on our love" For those who have loved, there is Heaven. For those who despised and rejected love, and refused to love, there is hell.

A good life is a life of loving service. A life of loving service on this "Space Rock" (or spacious, strange mansion) will lead us infinitely beyond this "Space Rock" (or spacious, strange mansion) into a share in Divine Life, into that Life that transcends time and space, which eye cannot see, nor ear hear, nor the human mind imagine, but which God has ready for those who love Him. . .

. . .
. . . for those who love Him; and, under Him, love their neighbor.

In the evening of our lives, we will be judged on our love.

And right now, at this moment, we might examine our conscience a little on our service.
Whom do we serve?

There are of course, many different forms of service, under the one Lord Who inspires them all. We serve in our families, in different ways (and from an early age children can learn to do service at home).

We serve our Nation, State and community in different ways (including voting, if we are adult citizens)

We serve our Church in different ways.

Some forms of serving the Church are liturgical. For Sunday evening, in particular, we need lectors and Eucharistic Ministers.

For all of our Masses we could use more Altar Servers. As a boy, I took great delight in being right at the Altar as the Unbloody Sacrifice (making present mystically the once and for all Sacrifice of our Lord on the Cross) was celebrated. Ever since my biggest Altar Boy from my last parish took time from his pre college Summer to stop by and have lunch (and to try and wrestle me into saying uncle, which he still can't do), this has been on my mind a little. Not only is this particular service appreciated by Priest and People at Mass, it also carries a sense of being up close and personal during the Celebration that the Second Vatican Council famously called the Source and Summit of Catholic life. I know that Deacon Steve had some training in the Spring. I would like to have a session in the Fall also for new servers, and another session

for the more experienced servers to take a look at serving at Funerals and Weddings, and to start talking about picking a “Lead Server” who could help direct other servers at complicated celebrations like Confirmation, Holy Thursday, and Easter Vigil.

That ex Altar Boy heading off to college reminds me of another form of service of the Church, helping with the Newman Center here. At the moment, we don't really have anything online, which is surely unacceptable. I know about John Henry Newman, but not that much about Newman Centers! With that kid the agenda was wrestling, lunch, and the great Russian Christian author Dostoyevski (I think the kid has much of BROTHERS KARAMAZOV memorized, and he had some wise observations about the “Grand Inquisitor” scene). This probably wouldn't work for normal Newman Center ministry, so we need both people and ideas. Under God's inspiration, please come forward!

Those, of course, are only two forms of service. In one way or another, we must all serve, in the Church, in the Community, and in our families. In one way or another we must all serve, because Service expresses Love, and Love is the wealth that matters most to God, the wealth on which we will be judged when our mortal lives end.

In the evening of our lives, we will be judged on our love.