

**Loving Beyond our Default Keys:
*Acedia and the Resistance to Love in Seminary Life***

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I have been asked to speak today on the resistance to love in priestly service. Before I talk about resistance I'd like to set a context for our conversation about love in the 21st century. In the opening lines of his encyclical, the Pope curiously but wisely locates the modern world's problem with love in language: how we speak about love, what words we use to generate and entice to love and, in essence, what is included in and what is excluded from our imagination, when we initiate the process of love in our lives. A crippled imagination, the Pope is suggesting, forecasts an impoverished love. And so, I want to begin with a description of the challenges to love that are characteristic and perhaps even distinctive of our age. They are the challenges that I believe will provoke our priesthood, whether baptismal or presbyteral, for the foreseeable future. After I set out the challenges, we'll explore the resistances.

The Challenges to Love at the Start of the 21st Century

As we begin to think about love in the world today, I want you to think about what will happen in the next hour. As the clock ticks and the minutes wind down, I want you to imagine what is going on as we sit here and meditate on our responsibilities and obligations to Christian love. For just a few minutes, I want you to think about children.

In just the time it takes for me to deliver this talk, fourteen hundred children will die from starvation and related causes.¹ Six thousand will die today, two hundred fifty in the next hour, from preventable water-borne diseases, diarrhea, acute respiratory infections, malaria and poor sanitation.² Over the time it takes to speak to you, eighty children under the age of 15 will become newly infected with the virus that causes AIDS and, as we speak, seventy children will die from the dreaded disease.³ During the next hour, eleven million children in Sub-Sahara Africa will struggle to find food and hope as they survive as orphans of AIDS.⁴ Two and a half million children will try to live with HIV/AIDS; less than 7% of them will have any access to anti-retroviral treatment.⁵

In the next 60 minutes, twenty-three children will become fatal targets in the ethnic and religious conflicts breaking out across the globe.⁶ In the last decade alone, 6 million children have been made homeless and 12 million have been injured or been maimed --as civilians, not combatants, have become the prime targets and 90% of the casualties of today's ethnic and religious wars.⁷

¹ "Statistics relating to the plight of children around the world," accessed: www.worldofchildren.org/Plight_of_children.htm

² "Water is Life," Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, WASH Facts and Figures, accessed: www.wsscc.org/load.cfm?ed_id=292; "Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World," *Human Development Report 2002*, accessed: www.undp.org/hdr2002.

³ "WHO: AIDS Epidemic Update 2003," accessed: www.who.int/hiv/pub/epidemiology/imagefile/en/index11.html

⁴ Carol Bellamy, "The State of the World's Children-2004," (New York: UNICEF, 2003), p. 50.

⁵ "WHO: AIDS Epidemic Update 2003," *op.cit.*

⁶ "Patterns in Conflict: Civilians are now the target," www.unicef.org/graca/patterns.htm, April 16, 2003.

⁷ Nick Danzinger, "Children and War," accessed: www.redcross.int/EN/mag/magazine2003_3/4-9.html.

As we sit here, three hundred thousand children are now forcibly conscripted into armies and militias, used for suicide missions, the strategic gang rape of enemies and numerous terrorist activities. They are the ones their adult commanders and child officers send out to the front lines of combat or into dangerous minefields ahead of other troops.⁸

Fifteen thousand people will flee their homelands today, trying to escape from the violence and the devastation in their country of origin; the majority of these refugees will be children.⁹ Children will be the most emotionally traumatized and physically abused among the 5.5 million people uprooted and displaced this year alone by the rising tide of religious intolerance and ethnic antagonisms across the globe.¹⁰ In the 1990's, one out of every 120 people on the planet, 50 million people, were forced to flee their homes because of war and civil strife.¹¹ Children will be the great percentage of the 3,000 people today (1.2 million children this year) who will be sold into slavery and forced prostitution,¹² sequestered in rape camps, victims of a new and deadly campaign to use sexual violence as a commodity and method of modern warfare.¹³

We know that over 600 million children worldwide live in absolute poverty, 50% of all children in developing countries are malnourished, 153 million children under the age of five will go to bed hungry tonight.¹⁴

My brothers, the Pope's opening insight about love today is absolutely correct. Our love often begins with a restricted imagination which leads to a crippled justice or impoverished charity. It is not simply a matter of the wrong definition. It is the clouding over of a true perception of what is standing in front of us. A restricted imagination means that when the moment of love challenges us to action, it is met with biases, narrative frames, horizons of expectation and frames of reference that already shape, condition and limit the extent and range of our effective freedom to serve as Christ would have us. In Lonergan's terms, even before our willfulness is engaged, our willingness is corrupted.

And the stakes are high. When it comes to the poor and vulnerable of this world, we are beginning to suspect that our minds and hearts are often preconditioned and confined to a love that is too local, too individual, and too narrow to capture the height, breadth and depth of God's love for the world. You are the generation that can testify that God's love is global!

In the 19th and 20th centuries, priests and religious opened their hearts and built an amazing Catholic ethos in America. Through incredible generosity and heroic acts of courage, they translated their

⁸ "Stolen Children: Abduction and Recruitment in Northern Uganda," (Human Rights Watch) March 2003, Vol 15: No. 7 A; "How to Fight and Kill: Child Soldiers in Liberia," (Human Rights Watch) February 2004, Vol. 16: No. 2 A.

⁹ "World Refugee Survey 2003," (USCR, 2003) accessed: www.uscr.org.

¹⁰ "World Refugee Survey 2003," (USCR, 2003) www.uscr.org.

¹¹ United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Human Development Report 2000*; Annemarie Kelly, et al., *Champions of Peace: The Role of CRS in Times of Violent Conflict* (Baltimore: Catholic Relief Services, 2000.)

¹² Francis Bok, *Escape From Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003).

¹³ International Labour Office, *A Future without Child Labour* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2002) p. 32; Elizabeth Mary Knorr, "Sexual Violence as Weapon of War: Communities Confronting Rape," (Geneva: The School for International Training) December 1, 2003; LaShawn R. Jefferson, "In War as in Peace: Sexual Violence and Women's Status," *Human Rights Watch World Report 2004* (January 2004).

¹⁴ "State of Food Insecurity in the World 2002," *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*. Accessed: www.fao.org/docrep/005/y735e/y7352e00.htm; "Attacking Poverty: Opportunity, Empowerment and Security," accessed: www.worldbank.org/poverty/wdrpoverty/report/overview.pdf.

pastoral love into the largest and most successful private school system the world had ever known. They built the largest and most effective private health care network the world had ever seen. They found homes for immigrants and through the intricate network of ethnic parishes, they built strong neighborhoods where Catholics prided themselves on their industry and commitment to the common good, even when they felt alienated and despised by their largely Protestant neighbors. They built what I have called a powerful “parochial culture” that demonstrated Christ’s love with amazing ingenuity and creativity across the street and down the road in neighborhood schools, local hospitals, nearby food pantries, and parish chapters of St. Vincent de Paul and the Knights of Columbus. All of these were efforts to bring Christ’s pastoral love home and make it local.

What is becoming clear to me is this – we face a different challenge as we begin the 21st century. God’s Spirit is stretching us beyond our derived capacities and inherited capabilities. Religious communities, parish communities and diocesan churches must now take the global suffering I began with seriously. The borders that once kept the interests of others foreign are opening up. The poor of this world are knocking at our collective door. They are tugging at the hem of our consciences. The boundaries that kept our attention almost exclusively on national concerns are flattening, as Thomas Friedman rightly notes. The globalization of communications makes us newly aware of the needs of the world. Only, a renewed pastoral charity can make us attentive. We have a choice to make between the “globalization of compassion” and the increased “globalization of violence, despair, and misery.”

The ethnic privacy and cultural norms that once conditioned the development of Irish parishes, German parishes and French Canadian parishes up and down the East Coast is diversifying. The Catholic Church in America is revealing itself as a rich and varied tapestry of hopes and dreams. We are changing in complexion and complexity. But, our structures and our theological projects and, indeed our pastoral imagination, lag behind. We still see the world from the narrow perspectives of the local, when the global issues threaten the very integrity of our Christian love before God. Our challenge is to develop our testimony to the international compassion of Christ. The parochial Christ must be revealed as the global Christ, the one whose love breaks down barriers and crosses borders to bring all the prodigals of the world home to the all-compassionate Father.

At some level, we know that it is the world *in extremis*, the world of immense suffering, that must become the new center of our concern, for it is there that God will be lovingly revealed or loudly denied in the 21st century. It is in the origins and trajectories of global suffering where the authenticity of God’s goodness and mercy will be validated.

The Ideological Resistance to Love Today

In his encyclical, the Pope says that the first great resistance to love is *ideological*. The modern world doesn’t know whether or not love is real or just an illusion. Sebastian Moore, the English Benedictine, says that there are three questions at the root of every life project – “*Am I wanted by that which I want? Am I desired by that which I desire? Am I loved by that which I love?*” All of human and spiritual development is predicated on the quest for a response, a personal answer, to this query about love, acceptance and affirmation. From the earliest moments of our lives, in fact, in the gaze between mother and child, the human drama revolves around the search and the securing of love. Does this face want, desire and love me? The future of our psychological health hangs in the balance. The spiritual life

begins in earnest when we pose the “joyfully dangerous” question to the universe – does that which made the moon, the stars and the other planets, want me, desire me, love me?

Tragically, you and I live in the cultural wasteland that answers that question with a blunt negative. Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Sartre and Freud have conspired and convinced millions of men and women around the world that love is nothing more and nothing less than an illusion. We are not loved, in any ultimate sense, they would have us believe, and we cannot love others, either. We can only *use* them in our Sisyphean struggle for self-promotion and self-actualization in what Thomas Hobbes tragically calls “the war of all against all.” The resistance to love here is, as Pope Benedict rightly notes, *ideological*. It is the powerful antithesis to everything Christian.

Our social and cultural context profoundly denies the possibility of altruism. It rejects the value of a God-driven self-sacrifice. Freud, for all his technical brilliance in the ways of human motivation, cannot and will not promise us love. In his mechanistic anthropology, where the soul derives its energy only from the combustion of instincts meeting social conventions, the ego cannot muster the gift of self. Freud will promise us nothing more in life and nothing higher in time than a tolerable level of human misery. Oh happy day!

If the first resistance to love is ideological, then the first antidote to it is doctrinal. We must be absolutely convinced and convicted of the central dogma of the Catholic faith. The Pope is prophetic in beginning where he does. “God is Love” and the “one who abides in love abides in God.” Love is real. Love is possible. And this is so because God is real and God is pure Act that brings all things to their fulfillment and to their proper end. Every day is an unfolding of God’s creative act to love. Every flower that blooms, every bird that sings, every drop of rain that falls is a narrative text of generative discourse announcing the metaphysical truth of God’s consciousness as absolute and infinite interpersonal love. Every dawn is witness and testament of humanity’s destiny for interpersonal love, reaching down to the most insignificant of creatures and reaching up all the way to the very inner life of God.

The God behind the moon, the stars and other planets is not some unfeeling force or uncaring anonymity holding the levers of fate and directing the mechanisms of a material universe. Our God is personal and historical, a God who hears the cries of the widow and orphans, a God who enters time and liberates the people from every tyranny and oppression that evil can cook up. The love that we offer the world is personal, in fact it is triune and interpersonal, a love that rescues and redeems, that liberates and saves, not in a solipsistic bath of self-actualization, but in an overflowing and historical outreach to every neighbor who falls by the wayside and every victim tossed into history’s ditch by dictators who deliver the depressing message that love cannot be real and it cannot be realized in such a sorry and lonely world as ours.

We hold to a higher and richer vision that can break through the ideological depression gripping our world. It is the belief that holds that God is Love and, therefore, God is Trinity. My working definition of the Trinity is this – “a free communion of persons without domination or deprivation.” This perichoretic understanding of the Trinity dismantles every dictatorial regime that would deliver social cohesion and appease the common good by the treacheries of domination or deprivation. If God achieves unity without domination or deprivation, so must humankind. All attempts to do otherwise are

not simply an affront to human dignity and human rights, they are an assault on the very reputation of a triune God.

As priests, our first task is to resist the resistance to love. We must proclaim the good news that love is our origin; it is our destiny. We were made for love and, contra Pelagius, it enters us. We do not enter it. The problem with Pelagius is that he opens up and justified a chasm not only between God and humankind but between every husband and wife, every mother and child, every brother and sister. And that space is filled by every petty dictator and money grubbing politician with a soul depriving substitute like power and profit. The space that Pelagius created is a vacuum that will be and must be filled. In its modern incarnation, the psychic space created by Pelagian effort becomes empty space stripped of transcendence and communion. And, in that vacuum, entrepreneurs replace our transcendent desire for God with an infinity of commercial desires. Without the prior entrance of God into us, effort replaces *recognitio* as the dynamic of love in the world. And so, we will constantly have to do more, have more, consume more, spend more in order to scale the treacherous heights of competitive love in the world today. That's why Pelagianism is such an insidious doctrine and a powerful heresy that lives on today.

What Pelagius left to the likes of Adam Smith and Thomas Hobbes was a doctrine of God who is ultimately stingy and reticent. It is a God who will not and maybe cannot provide us with what we need. And so, we must scrounge around in this too-limited world, competing against one another for the scarce resources of this earth. He leaves us as deprived victims of a cosmic ruse devised by a God more like the pitiful Wizard of Oz than the fountain fullness of St. Bonaventure, an inept and mischievous wizard that those without brains, courage, or heart meet to their peril as they fight the wicked witches of the universe.

We resist the Pelagian doctrine in history and in its modern iterations, because Love enters us. We don't enter it. This is true of life. This is true of liturgy. While the liturgy expects the "active participation of the people," this does not signify that this is our drama. We did not create the theme of this enterprise. We did not script this revelation. "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard what God has in store for those who love God."

The economy of salvation, the mystery of love, is ultimately a drama between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We enter that scene. We come upon that mystery by the invitation of grace and mercy. The liturgy enters us before we enter the liturgy. This is true about all of love. Love meets us at every intersection of life. Love encounters us in every tragedy and ecstasy that the world provides. It is the nature of love to be ecstatic. Because it meets us and "visits us from on high," the only true response is a non-resisting wonder, awe and generosity. Love, true love, is always gift and must be treated as special delivery from the One who lives in unapproachable light.

There is a bit of the Pelagian in all of us, a touch of the heretic who believes that love must be earned to be true love. It must be built of self-actualizing effort to be real love. We must pick ourselves up by our bootstraps to be deserving of graciousness. The beggar must look like a "worthy beggar" before we give. Aren't we all a bit like the older brother in the Prodigal Son who counts all his kisses and measures all his embraces? This is the ideological resistance to love that Pope Benedict implies in his compressed treatment of modernity's dilemma.

But, that is not our most significant resistance.

For those of us already transplanted and graciously received into the “beloved community” of the Lord, St. Thomas Aquinas reveals another kind of resistance. He calls it, in the tradition of the Church, “sloth” or, in Greek, *acedia*, one of the seven capital vices of the world. It is a special kind of resistance to love reserved for the religiously minded.

Sloth/Acedia

When I hear the word, “sloth,” I think immediately of laziness and have an image of a priest or religious who is simply just too lazy to love anyone or anything more than himself. This is the priest who doesn’t get close enough to anyone to make a difference. He allows no one to get close enough to him to upset his established routine. This is the priest or seminarian who doesn’t take anything seriously enough, except his creature comforts. Those comforts may be hidden by a whole host of rationalizations and intellectualizations about the need for contemplation and a resistance to priestly activism. Slothful people will even point to busy people as the source of all problems. They’ll tell us that we need to relax more, take it easy and stop worrying so much about the world’s problems. We should put everything in God’s hands. But, the long and short of it is simple enough to identify, this individual has joined religion for “three meals a day and no heavy lifting.”

During the summer workshop on human resource management in parishes, Joe Wisniewski asked Dr. Carol Fowler a perceptive question. He asked, ‘how do we seminarians avoid becoming grumpy old priests.’ Without missing a beat, she answered – “don’t become a grumpy, young priest.” To extend that a bit, how can you avoid become lonely and passionless old priests? And you and I have seen them along the way.

While we have seen amazing acts of priestly kindness and courage, we have also witnessed in our time stunning acts of self-serving ambition and mind-numbing pettiness.

I remember a priest who exhibited more passion when the cook burned his toast than he did when a fire ravaged through a row of townhouses just blocks from the rectory. And, how many more stories need we hear of priests who terrorize secretaries, demean parishioners, steal collections and do the bare minimum of work, all the while demanding the absolute maximum of privilege and entitlement?

Can we learn the mechanisms of resistance early and correct them sooner rather than later, so that men and women can hear the good news preached authentically and integrally to them?

How do the religiously minded resist love and thereby corrupt their pastoral service? Thomas Aquinas speaks about “sloth.” To understand him, we are going to have to make some philosophical distinctions.

In traditional Catholic asceticism, sloth has a lazy component to it. But, St. Thomas Aquinas astutely reminds us that sloth is a “spiritual vice,” not simply a “carnal vice.” St. Thomas defines sloth or *acedia* as “*an aversion to the divine good in us.*” Let me give you an example.¹⁵

¹⁵ I thank Rebecca DeYoung for this example.

Take the situation of a husband and wife who generally have a good relationship of real love and friendship. When they quarrel over dinner, however, she heads to her corner of the house and he goes off to his favorite room for the rest of the night. It is easier for them to maintain their chilly distance and alienation from one another than it is to do the hard work of apology and forgiveness. Learning to live together after an argument requires giving up one's anger, the need to have one's own way, and the stubborn stance of only seeing the world from one's own perspective. Asking for forgiveness and apologizing for one's mistakes takes effort. But, it's not simply the effort of walking from one end of the house to the other. It's not simply the effort of finding the right words to speak. The resistance is specifically to the demands that love imposes.

Do these two individuals want a relationship? Yes. They actually do love one another and they are in the relationship for the long haul. But, the question is this: are they willing to do what it takes to *stay* in the relationship and to make that relationship grow? Will they learn the tasks and steps that it takes to get from flying solo in the world to actually seeing and acting in the world as a couple?

In the example I gave you, sloth is the justification we give ourselves to stay away from each other, that says, "Maybe tomorrow; tonight, I want to wallow in my selfish misery."

This is the problem with most of our relationships, whether it's with our family, our friends, or our seminary community. We want the love; we want the friendships. But, we don't want the discipline it takes and the hard work that must be invested to build relationships. It's not just the physical accommodations that we refuse to engage. Rebecca DeYoung, who writes on Thomistic ethics, says that true love takes "accommodations of identity." Being in a relationship requires thinking about myself differently. It means putting my understanding of myself into question. Love changes me and costs me; it requires me to restructure my priorities; it compromises my plans and demands sacrifices. Being in a relationship, whether it's with God, friends or fellow seminarians challenges the pattern of my thoughts and desires. Relationships fail when individuals cannot go from the narrative bias that begins and ends with "what's good for me" to the one that starts with "what's good for us."¹⁶ And, in priesthood, that means what's good for the people of God.

Sadly, there are priests who demand that the people of God orbit around their needs and wants, their fears and their anxieties. Real priestly love means serving them, not them serving us.

When Thomas Aquinas says that *acedia* is "an aversion to the divine good in us," what he is getting at is this. We want to be in relationship with God; we want the benefits that accrue from the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts. But, we don't like and we won't accept the process that God is using to bring us to our conversion.

Pride rejects the need for conversion. Sloth rejects the means of conversion God has chosen.

So, sloth is not just a rejection of effort. It's the rejection of a specific kind of effort. In the example of the married couple who had the fight, the husband and wife are not necessarily lazy people. In fact, after a spat, one of them today is more than likely going to work it all off at the gym in an intensely

¹⁶ Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, "Resistance to the Demands of Love: Aquinas on the Vice of Acedia," *The Thomist* 68 (2004), 173-204.

grueling workout. What they reject are the specific demands of love that reprioritize one's plans and reconfigure one's identity.

Acedia is an "aversion to our relationship to God because of the transforming demands of his love."¹⁷

The battle here is not between the body and the soul. It is the struggle that St. Paul speaks of in the fifth Chapter of Galatians. It is the struggle between the "old self" and the "new self." The closer you get to God, the clearer it becomes that your "old self" has to die and your "new self" has to be born. And the new self of faith doesn't come into this world without labor pains.

The hardest part about religious life and seminary life is not the effort it takes to get to class. It's not the annoying effort to get to the bathroom at the end of the hall in the middle of the night. It's not all the other little annoyances that make seminary so memorable. It's giving up my "old self," for a new self that I cannot see and cannot know yet. It's about trusting God's love and the process God is using for my conversion.

At this point, you may be missing your house or apartment. You may be missing some of your free time. You may be missing the opportunity just to get away from all these people making demands on your time. You may be missing your dog or your favorite restaurant. That's natural and normal.

But, when you start resenting the demands God's people place on you, when you start resenting the effort it takes to pray, to study, to be in ministry, then we are in a more serious situation. The "old self" (with its hopes, expectations and fantasies) is refusing to die and the "new self" that Christ is trying to build in you is in distress.

A Personal Example

Let me give you an example. During my last year of doctoral studies in Rome, I was appointed the first psychologist in residence at the North American College. I was thirty-three years old, when I was asked to teach pastoral courses and help the faculty process their concerns. At the end of that year, while beginning work on my dissertation, my Provincial called me home to prepare to take over as director of formation in my community. Things were not going well in the program and he wanted me home immediately to analyze the situation, even though I hadn't finished my dissertation. I did as he requested.

He was right. The formation program was in chaos. I could see the problems and I had some ideas on what to do about them when I became director of formation. That was the plan. I had been sent to Rome to study so that I could come back and take over as director of formation.

After six months, the Province held a Chapter and, to almost everyone's surprise, a new Provincial was elected. One of the first decisions he made was *not* to appoint me as director of formation. Despite my years of intense studying and despite the fact that I had come home early to prepare, he decided that he did not want me as director. When I went to see him, it was clear that he didn't have a good reason for

¹⁷ Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, "Resistance to the Demands of Love: A Reflection on the Vice of Sloth," accessed: www.calvin.edu/publications/spark/2005/spring/sloth.htm.

his decision and, when I asked him what I would do now, he didn't really have a job for me. He put me in a friary with a very menial job to do for almost a year.

I did not take it well. On the outside, I was obedient and serene. On the inside, I was humiliated, angry and frustrated. I remember complaining to God and my spiritual director that this was totally unfair, incredibly stupid, and downright unjust.

My brothers, I was in a "slothful" state of mind. I refused to admit that God may have had another plan for my life and that plan was for His glory and my ultimate good. I wanted and I insisted that God play by the rules, my rules, and to accommodate to the priorities that fit my goals.

I know now what I did not know then. God didn't want me on the previous path. God didn't want me to stop with the clinical psychology and spirituality training that I received at the Gregorian University. God wanted me on a different ministry track, to serve God's people in a very different way. He wanted me to launch out into and even create a whole new field of study in religious life. In the boredom of my exile in Garrison, NY and in my desperation, I enrolled in a post graduate program in the application of psychoanalytic concepts to organizational development in New York City.

That led me to open up an international organizational consultation ministry. I went around the world for almost 15 years helping dioceses, parishes and religious orders manage change and deal with their personnel and management problems. It gave me the skills, tools, and insights to come here and do formation work, when God wanted it done.

I was "slothful," because I wanted conversion on my terms. I wanted to determine how God was supposed to change me. What I was resisting was God's ways of working my salvation out. It was a struggle about who was going to control my life – God or me. It was going to be a fight to the death, the death of my "old self."

Acedia and Seminary Life

You are here in this seminary because you love God and you know that God loves you. You know that God has called you to discernment and you believe that He is calling you to the priesthood of Jesus Christ. That is all good.

But, are you open to the process that God is laying out for you? Are you still willing to give up your "old self" to take on the "new self" that Christ has in mind for you? This is not only a question for guys in pre-T or 1T who are just beginning here. It is just as profound a question for those who have been here for several years and who know the ropes and routines of seminary life.

You're pretty comfortable with your "old self." (Maybe it's even hard for you to believe that, at the tender age of 25 or 26, you even have an "old self." But, that's what Scripture says. You have been building your "old self" and fashioning it for 25 or more years. It's familiar. It has its routines and habits, from the food you like to the music you listen to, to the kind of politics you favor and the kind of church you are convinced that brings you and everyone else closer to God.

Remember how Paul had to give up his "old self" and how sure he was as a young zealot that he was absolutely right and righteous before God. He struggled. Remember St. Augustine and how hard he

fought to keep his “old self” alive and well. I love his line—“Lord, make me chaste, but not yet.” It’s the prayer of the slothful in all of us.

Living Your Love by Default Keys

Bishop Gordon Bennett recently suggested that we all have “default keys” in our head and heart that we automatically use to make sense of our lives. They’re immediate responses that tell others what we like or don’t like, what we will tolerate and what we won’t. Bishop Bennett says that they are a convenient but dangerous way for Catholics to live. He wrote recently –

Living life by employing life’s default keys (limits critical thinking and analysis and allows (individuals) to simply dismiss persons and ideas they habitually avoid or are afraid of, or to make unreservedly positive judgments about those... they like or are naturally drawn to. (People) who do not disable their default capabilities run the risk that a legitimate avenue to the truth gets reduced to ‘what I choose to pay attention to.’

Seminary is a time to look at your default keys and begin to disable them.

Those keys may be set on old family wounds or childhood injuries that make you self-protective and hesitant to trust anyone over thirty or believe anyone under 70. It may be automatically calibrated to a mindset that despises liberals or blames conservatives for all the troubles of the world.

Those keys may be set on a conviction of inferiority, that no one should expect excellence from you because you are just an “average sort of guy.” It may be the default that afflicts a lot of seminarians and deacons, when they’re just starting out. It’s called the “Imposter Syndrome.”¹⁸ When afflicted, you are absolutely convinced that you were accepted into the seminary or graduate school or even ordained a deacon (or become academic dean) by some terrible mistake.

The admission board didn’t really know you. The vocation director didn’t quite understand who you were. The bishop must have been looking the other way, when he imposed hands.

In any case, it’s just a matter of time before everyone realizes (what you know) that you are in fact completely unqualified to be here. So, you try to slink around the seminary trying to stay unnoticed, trying not to hold your head above the crowd, unable to shoot for excellence lest you be unmasked as the imposter you are.

When this “Imposter Syndrome” moves from a temporary episode to a chronic condition, we consistently underestimate our potentials. We believe our own self-disparaging comments. We undervalue our worth and underplay our strengths. Aquinas calls this “smallness of soul” and its main effect is inaction.

If you are sure you can never achieve anything worthwhile, why even try? And so, we don’t. Our ministry becomes ho-hum. The people of God are cheated; we are cheated. And God is robbed of the glory that God deserves. And it all starts from the false premise that God doesn’t know what God is doing and God cannot possibly use the weak to shame the strong of this world.

¹⁸ Once again, I thank Rebecca DeYoung for this insight.

Whatever your default keys are, let me assure you, we all have them; this is the time to disable them by the holy operations of God's Spirit overshadowing you in prayer, in direction, in mentoring and in the daily asceticisms of our life together.

What's at stake here is an acknowledged dependence on God. It's not a matter of whether you have weaknesses or not. We all have them. The faculty has their weaknesses, God knows. And so do you. The question revolves around what we do with our weaknesses and how those weaknesses build our relationship with Christ and the Church.

The primary difference between Aristotle's definition of sloth and that of Thomas Aquinas has to do with their different notions of "heroics." Aristotle believed that sloth was conquered by effort, superior effort. St. Thomas believes that the journey to God happens by way of humility, the absolute dependence on God. Aristotle and the modern world would caution us not to reveal our weaknesses, not to demonstrate our fears and anxieties, not to show that we are afraid. Thomas, with all of the saints, reminds us that there is no other way to glory than by way of the cross, no other path to majesty than by way of humility. But, we are not alone, Christ has traveled that path before us and so have the saints of God.

Conclusion

In one of my favorite lines from *Method in Theology*, Bernard Lonergan states that "a man has to learn for himself that he has to decide for himself what he is to make of himself."

This morning you get to decide what you are to make of yourself; you get to choose between love and its resistance, between the God of scarcity and the Lord of abundance.

It is not a choice between strength and weakness but one between a life of isolation and competition and a Catholic life of utter dependence on a good and gracious God.

The hour is up. The poor and hungry children of the world await your response!