

## **Hidden Motives, Pure Blessings**

I visited my family just after the Feast of Dormition. My mother, at 93 years of age, has grown frail, sickly, and forgetful. During my visit, there were times when she was very lucid, and our conversation was limited only by her strength. At other times she did not know who I was. At one point, she asked me, "Are you the priest?"

At first, I did not know how to respond. I was a bit confused because my attire at that moment was not clerical. Was she asking me if I was her parish priest, or was her question a bit more pointed? Perhaps she was sharper than I had imagined; she might have even been broaching the topic that had changed our relationship.

You see, my mother and I had had a major and long-standing quarrel when I decided to enter seminary. In her motherly way, she tried to protect me from what she considered a life of hardship. Many painful tears were shed in those days.

At one point during that difficult time, she determined to ferret out "the culprit" who had encouraged me to go to seminary. She interrogated me: "Who put the thought of going to seminary into your head?" She was not amused with my truthful answer: "You did, Ma."

You see, my mother was a faithful woman of the Church, and I had witnessed her great compassion for the poor and suffering. Certainly, if anything had influenced my decision, it was her unwitting witness to Christ. I eventually won that tug-of-war with my mother, and eventually she accepted, and even took pride in, the fact that I had become a priest.

Looking back at that time in utter honesty, however, I have to admit some ulterior motives for wanting to attend seminary. Without question, I had a deepening desire to serve the Lord, but studying at the seminary also provided me a way (albeit, semi-consciously), to separate from my mother, to become independent of her. My latter motivation was conveniently shrouded and hidden by the former. In a sense, God, who always "trumped" my mother, had come in handy, miraculously killing two birds with one stone.

Some time would pass before I could accept the fuller truth of my motivations, which finally were brought to full consciousness by a friend, in

a quite unexpected venue. Fr. John Breck, noted author and former faculty member at St. Vladimir's, had been invited to speak here during Orientation Week. In one of his talks he made a startling statement—one that brought tears to my eyes. He said that most people enroll in seminary for the wrong reasons. The reasons vary, but they may include such things as: an unhealthy ambition, the allure of authority and power, feelings of insecurity in or fear of the secular world, an addiction to God or to religiosity, a convenient cover for one's sexual passions, or the desire to run away. His list went on and on, and suddenly, I could identify my own "wrong reason" for going off to study theology and be ordained as a priest.

What Fr. John went on to say, however, redeemed my vocation, and the calling of many seminarians, I would guess. He said that Christ could take the wrong reasons and transform them for His purposes.

The Gospel confirms this truth. For instance, the motives of the Twelve who responded to our Lord's call were far from pure. Some had political ambitions; they followed Him because they thought that He would free Israel from Roman domination. Some were allured by power and prestige; they asked (through their mother) to sit at His right and left hand when He assumed the throne of Israel. Others were convinced that following Him would not require His Cross or their own; they wanted sweet wine without a bitter cup.

Notably, our Lord was not hindered or put off by His disciples' less-than-pure motives. Instead, His patience, and most importantly His Father's sending of the Holy Spirit through His Cross, Resurrection, and Ascension, changed the disciples into powerful instruments of His grace.

That same Spirit is working in you and in me. He is working to form us into capable instruments and effective ambassadors, broken though we are. Over time, our Lord will reveal to us our inadequacies and weaknesses. If we have had hidden motives, those too will come to light. But whatever revelations arise, they will not destroy us or undercut our ministry. Instead, they will unite us to Him more profoundly, because He has not only chosen us but also has forgiven us, and continues to form us.

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