



My Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In South America during the period after Vatican II, there was great division and tension in religion and politics. This division manifested itself among the Jesuit community, where some wanted to remain focused on a more traditional spirituality and continue their role as educators of the leading families. Others, responding to the call to renewal of the council, especially those seeking to make the elimination of poverty a priority of the church, wanted a more outward focused spirituality. This group wanted to work with the poor not only spiritually, but also to work for their liberation from unjust economic, political and oppressive social conditions.

It was during this period that a 36 year-old future Pope Francis was made superior of all the Jesuits in Argentina and neighboring Uruguay. It was the height of the Cold War; death squads roamed the streets of Buenos Aires targeting their political adversaries. Francis found it difficult to maintain a middle ground and eventually began to suppress those Jesuits who stood with the poor and were working for a change in the economic order.

In his first interview as pope he admitted, "I had to deal with difficult situations and I made my decisions abruptly and by myself. My authoritarian and quick manner of making decisions led to serious problems and many accused me of being ultra-conservative."

After his term as superior expired, he was appointed to the seminary and he continued to be a divisive force in the Jesuit community, rallying some to his side and undermining the authority of his successor. By 1990 the Jesuit leadership in Rome decided to strip him of all his leadership responsibilities and placed him under sanction to live in Cordoba about 480 miles from Buenos Aires. His exile came with some severe restrictions. Among them was the order that he was not to communicate with other Jesuits, even those he was living with in community. He was not allowed to make phone calls and his mail was censored. However, what Francis was allowed to do was to hear confessions and the majority of people who came for the sacrament were poor people.

During his time in Cordoba his priorities began to shift and this conversion happened when he was immersed in the lives of the poor. He realized that the most important aspect of God's relationship with humanity was mercy. It was the poor that had brought him to realize this and that he too was in need of God's mercy in his own life. One of the most powerful statements of his papacy to date is "Who am I to judge" and it spoke volumes of who Francis has become; someone who had deeply and personally experienced God's mercy in his life.

To be sought and to be found is a recurring theme that runs through the entire story of the bible. Pope Francis was sought and found at a dark time in his life. Through sharing in the life of those who were most vulnerable, and in growing in his awareness of God's mercy for them, he was transformed. "I am a sinner" is a phrase he used to describe himself and it speaks about the type of person he has become—one who admits that he made mistakes in his life and still experienced the unconditional love of a merciful God. Based on his experience, he has made mercy and the joy that comes from it central to his life and his ministry.

Another perfect example of this is the story of Mary Magdalene, the first human being to encounter the Risen Lord. Jesus sought a profound relationship with Mary Magdalene. Her story reveals true dedication and unbroken faithfulness and thus she became the apostle to the apostles.

Mary's response to the gardener: "tell me where they have placed him" reveals that she was seeking a God who is limited by suffering and death. This is what needed to change. Her seeking had to be purified, corrected and above all expanded; she was never going to find God in a dead body. Through the gardener and in responding to the call to discipleship, she was able to discover not only the presence of the Risen Lord but a love that transcends sin, suffering and death.

An important lesson we can learn from her life is that the Risen Lord is present in our lives, constantly offering us mercy and forgiveness. The spiritual presence never withdraws from us when we encounter difficult or challenging times.

In fact, each one of us is being sought by God but not all of us are willing to be found. This is often not a conscious decision. Spiritual identity is the most important aspect of our lives yet it is the easiest to overlook. Ignoring it can be gradual, almost imperceptible at times, but nonetheless a fatal erosion. Modern life serves up so many distractions and temptations that it can be easy to lose connection with what is most important, the Risen Lord.

However, the central message of Easter is that it is never too late because the faithfulness of our God is endless and he wants us to experience his mercy, healing and joy in our lives. This is true at all times and in all places. Just look at the change it has brought to Pope Francis and look at the positive change he is bringing into the world today. This is what the Risen Lord wants of each of us; to make a difference in other people's lives and in the world by opening ourselves to a merciful God who is always seeking relationship with us. He is calling us to join in discipleship to positively impact the world together and build the Kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven.

Wishing you a share in the joy of the Risen Lord this Easter,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. John Trout". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Fr. John Trout