

## **A Jesus Experience**

The truth of Jesus resonates in our souls. As we learn the truth, we quite naturally begin to love it and desire to live it. Often men who are called to become priests can remember a certain moment when God became very real to them. I call this a “Jesus Experience.” As I hear the vocation stories of seminarians, I am amazed at the extraordinary Jesus Experiences that they have had. Usually one of the three transcendentals touches a man’s soul: the good, the true, or the beautiful. Sometimes it is the love of Christ that he experiences, or especially if he is mired in sin, Christ’s great mercy and forgiveness.

My first memorable Jesus Experience happened in eighth grade. Our pastor took five altar boys to spend the weekend at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit, a Trappist Monastery in Conyers, Georgia. I did not really want to go. I would have preferred to stay home and play with my friends. But my mother informed my brother and me that we were going! It was the first time I had ever witnessed monastic life and I was very impressed. I will always remember being in the church in the early morning singing the Psalms with the monks. I was struck by their impressive-looking habits, their bald heads and long beards, and their kindness. On Saturday night, after supper, I went back into the church to spend a few minutes in prayer. It was empty. The monks had gone to bed since they would be up again for 4:00 a.m. matins. I wanted to pretend to be a monk, to try it on for size, and I went up into the choir stalls to sit where they sit. I can remember feeling a sense of deep peace and, though fully awake, I simply sat in the presence of Jesus without saying a word. Very solemnly, I felt that God loved me greatly and that he had made me to do a special work for his Kingdom. I could feel Jesus, the truth, filling my whole being. Time passed without my realizing it, and when I looked at my watch, two hours had gone by! I had never prayed for two hours straight in my life. That night I realized that not only did God love me deeply, but also that I loved him deeply.

He had given me a tiny glimpse of his goodness and I was captivated. I did not yet know my vocation but I did say to the Lord before I left the church, “Okay, Jesus. Whatever it is that you want, I’m in.”

Whether you have a dramatic “Jesus Experience” like this or just gradually come to know him and his love for you, it is essential to develop a personal, loving relationship with Christ, as you progress in discerning your vocation. The purpose of a priest is to bring people to Jesus and Jesus to people. As we often say in the seminary, “*Nemo dat quod non habet*” (One cannot give what one does not have). A priest cannot bring Jesus to others if he does not know him.

I have seen young people go on a retreat and come back totally transformed. They tell me with great excitement how God made himself real to them and they experienced his love and goodness. I can remember some of our high school students spending a summer serving in the Bronx with the Missionaries of Charity. They would spend their summer helping the sisters run a day camp for inner-city children. There was no air conditioning and it was a rough part of town. The youth would always come back from that experience and say, “That was the hardest thing that I have ever done—and the greatest experience of my life. I met Jesus!”

It seems to me that these Jesus Experiences most often happen when a person has given up a weekend or a significant amount of time specifically to try to grow closer to Jesus. It most often happens on a retreat, pilgrimage, or mission trip. God is never outdone in generosity, but he won’t force his way into your life. He must be invited.

I am not suggesting that everyone must have an emotional, cathartic spiritual experience in order to have a personal relationship with Jesus, even though quite a few do begin this way. Many men simply develop this relationship over time and gradually come to have a deeper love and commitment to the Lord. Their