

Love your
neighbor as
yourself

-Jesus



I want to
accustom
all the
inhabitants
...to look on me
as their brother

-Br. Charles de
Foucauld

June, 2008

To my brothers and sisters in Christ,

I hope that this newsletter finds you in peace and holiness! As I type this, the Mississippi Gulf Coast is heating up—the temperature and humidity are high, and tourists are lying out on the beach in the middle of the day while the sea birds rest in the shade. For me, the heat is a cross to endure in order to live on the coast, so I follow the guidance of the sea birds—stay out of sun during the day, come out in the evening.

In March, I visited Tokyo with my friend Jason. We had a phenomenal trip, and it was great to see just how amazing the Japanese are. It made such an impression that I used the trip experiences to write this newsletter's meditation. It is a meditation that I pray is useful for everyone, no matter what their spiritual background.

When you think your life is difficult and you feel overwhelmed, I want you to remember the following two stories. They are real situations that I encountered yesterday at the parish St. Vincent de Paul charity. A young woman, almost 19, is a single mother with two small children and lives in an apartment nearby. She makes \$9.80 per hour as a housekeeper, and is \$1700 behind on her rent. A relative who was staying with her has not helped with her rent, and she is facing eviction. The other, a morbidly obese woman, is living in a FEMA trailer with her morbidly obese son. They are being evicted in the next few weeks due to the closure of the FEMA trailer parks. Now, some would say that these two people are getting their due for their decisions in life. These same people tend to accredit their success to their own superior living. However, think about all of the bad decisions you have made that, for whatever reason, did not bear their full consequences. Is our success really our own or, mysteriously, have we been spared by forces outside of our control? It is humbling, isn't it?

In peace and love,

Matthew

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Prayers are needed and appreciated!
(no postal fee required)



meditation

june, 2008

During my visit to Japan, the one thing that impressed me more than any other is the way the Japanese are courteous and professional. In every interaction, whether at a convenience store, restaurant, bar, or on the street, I never encountered the least trace of discourteousness.

Imagine my shock when, fresh off of the plane, I was ignored by a convenience store clerk. The clerk did not bother to look up from her cell phone conversation, but simply rang up my purchase as though she were an automaton. Contrast this with the same experience in Tokyo—upon entering the store, the staff greets you verbally. When you are making your purchase, which is expertly wrapped and bagged, the clerk smiles, graciously accepts your money, and focuses all of her attention on you.

Now, it has been argued that the Japanese are a more ancient culture and they are steeped in a greater sense of conformity. This line of thought, common in these times, explains away behavior by attributing it to environment, as if there is no real act of the will in deciding to treat someone rudely or genially. This thinking denigrates people's dignity and strips them of their freedom to choose their behaviors and actions. I, for one, am dismayed at the differences in behavior, and I am embarrassed for the behavior of many Americans, myself included.

Perhaps we Americans have thrown out the baby with the bathwater. In seeking independence above all other concerns, have we forgotten that our actions can bring shame upon our society? I am reminded of a poll that was taken early in the 20th century in London. A London newspaper was canvassing the opinions of the leading British thinkers of the time, seeking their answers to the question, "What is wrong with the world today?" A prominent Catholic writer, G.K. Chesterton, replied, "I am."

I am. My actions are my own, and they mold the world and people around me. My experiences, culture, and nation have molded me, but I am not a passive expression of these things. Who is responsible for changing things? I am.

Every moment of every day, I choose my behaviors. I choose how to respond to the events around me. As John Milton wrote in *Paradise Lost*, "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven."