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Letting God Make the Most of a Broken Past

Part 3

Mario St. Francis

Hi, I'm Mario St. Francis. Thanks for joining us for this next part in *Letting God Make the Most of a Broken Past*. Now, let us begin in prayer.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Oh Lord, inspire us, feed our hearts, mind, body, and souls in this time, on this retreat. Whether it's through listening or visually, whether it is during a live presentation or this is a replay in the future, we ask that all listeners, to all the speakers, and those who this is shared with around the world, receive a special grace. That You guide all those who are taking part in this retreat, all of the organizers and those behind the scenes, the family and friends of those of us who are watching. You know the needs of those around us. We hold them in our hearts, and we present them to You, Lord, and we ask that You do make the most of our past for healing and for the health of our mind, body, and souls, and for our holiness. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So let's continue, and I was sharing with you that I am a witness, and I have experienced the faith and the grace of God. And I don't know what it is that you're dealing with, or what you're struggling with, but I have gone through so many of the crosses that many of us don't even like to talk about in my life. And now I want to share with you not just about finding God, but then I found this love. After that honeymoon phase, after my conversion and reversion, I found love, and it was a storybook Catholic romance. It involved the streets of Rome, going on pilgrimage, prayer, signs and signs, and wonders, and God incidences. And I was, again, walking on clouds and just had a total confidence that the grace of my conversion was now showing itself through a vocation, and I followed a call that I felt into the vocation to be married. And in a short period of time, what was joy-filled and so awesome in so many ways, in feelings and in thoughts and in sort of this spiritual sense of life came crashing and burning down.

Now, I can't exactly explain why, what went wrong, and what is to blame. Was it all human? Was it partially spiritual? All I know is that I was passionate about the Lord, prayed, and was a man of pro-life work, of evangelization, and in producing Christian films. And one might say "Well, if you want to do any good in the world and anything great, that you will be attacked." And while I believe that that's true,

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I think there is also human responsibility that we have, both in our discernment and in our actions taken. While I can't explain why, I can tell you what. And what was for me a marriage in the church crashed and burned and became the greatest trial and test and mess of my life.

And while I wish I could tell you "Oh, it lasted a couple of weeks, a couple of days, a couple of months, and I was totally trusting and faith-filled and, you know, this pie in the sky, pious, saintly attitude, and the books will be written about me." It didn't turn out that way. It was a messy, painful, lonely world. I sought out counseling to resolve the situation, I looked for interventions without success. I even went on pilgrimage to miraculous shrines, and touched relics, and took pictures and photos, and even a wedding ring, and touched it to holy places, and asked special clerics to intercede and to bless, and almost got into almost this Catholic cult of, like I said, relics and shrines, and dipping in the bathwaters of Lourdes, seeking for miracles. And when I wouldn't get the miracles that I would expect, I was really challenged in my faith.

I stormed heaven and earth. I wanted answers, I wanted help and support, I wanted something to change in my mind, which was to restore the situation back to what was, in my mind, a sacrament. And I entered into such a lonely, painful, confusing experience that I call it being basically hard knocks. CrossFit, but, like, literally being fitted with a cross that seemed way too heavy. You know, when you think about CrossFit, you think about "Man, that's intense workout. I don't know. Sure, their bodies change, they lose weight, they gain muscles and they look amazing, but I'm not willing to put myself through the intense physical training that they do." That's what was happening to my body, and I didn't want it. I didn't sign up for this. It was this school of hard knocks.

We're reminded in the scriptures, in Matthew it says: ***Whoever wants to be My disciple***, Jesus says, ***must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me***. Well, that's a great teacher, and a great bumper sticker. But does it feel good? Absolutely not. What I did learn was that following Jesus Christ isn't an easy road, but it's the only road worth following.

I don't know how things will always turn out, but I knew in not having God in my life, I knew that in having rejected and become that black sheep and that prodigal child who left, that from all the philosophies, and all of the different religious kind of angles and traditions that I could follow, there's something unique about the incarnation, about the Eucharist, about the sacraments, about the presence of God presently on earth, and how I could receive forgiveness in the Alter Christus, of a man who has given himself to Christ, who has become another Christ through the imposition of hands that were received on him, that came from somebody else who

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had hands laid on them, that came from somebody else who could ultimately trace their imposition of hands to one of the apostles, that Jesus imposed the Holy Spirit upon them. That the Eucharist is truly the body and blood, soul and divinity of the Son of God, of God Himself on earth, and that we could receive Him physically and spiritually.

No matter how tough things got – I might want to get into some sort of Christian meditation, I might want to get into some sort of visualization exercises, I might get into being in nature – but regardless of kind of a different way of going about things, I knew that I could never abandon, I could never find wholeness, holiness, and godliness, God Himself, outside of the church. That one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

But it wasn't always easy. I, in this period of time, became this anxious rodeo. I know in the scriptures it says, you know, ***Do not let your hearts be troubled.*** Or, you know, “Don't be anxious about what you're going to wear, what you're going to eat. Aren't the lilies or the field, you know, dressed more glorious than King Solomon in all of his glory.” I was anxious for sure, and perhaps you've experienced that yourself. It was a rodeo for me. It was no more honeymoon. This was sometimes a daily or even hourly, sometimes even like every half hour that I would have to just breathe in and renew my hope, renew my faith again. Because I was losing it. Almost panic attacks of “How come I can't have a solution? Why aren't I experiencing a priest or a bishop?” I even met cardinals who I would talk to about my situations, and they couldn't fix the issue.

This, when you're kind of connected in the church, when you're, you know, into the prayers and the novenas, and Saint Jude and Saint Anthony and, you know, the Benedictine medal and the Benedictine crucifix, and confessions, and Liturgy of the Hours, and you go to prayer, you know, intercessory, charismatic groups and, you know, retreats of the Holy Spirit, and so many things, and your situation doesn't change? I call it the anxious rodeo. And I think that's just what I went through, and I know that people go through that as well.

And I'm not going to tell you “Oh, it's all going to be over tomorrow.” This is simply like a... just hold on. Hold on to that bucking bronco. That rodeo isn't... it's possible that it's not going to end. I mean, for me it didn't end for months. It took years, years for that bucking bronco to at least calm down, and it's still a bronco, or it's still a challenge that I have to continually monitor in a sense, like weeds growing in a garden. You can pull them out, but oftentimes we leave a little bit of the seed back in there.

So, I don't want to get ahead of myself, but not having answers, and trials being unclear, this is what I would say is when it all gets real. The real faith journey. I

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asked “Why me?” And that might be what you ask yourself. “Why? Why, God? Why is this happening to me?” Nobody is signing up to carry baggage, or to have a scarlet letter embroidered on their chest or on their forehead. Nobody really wakes up in the morning saying “Gosh, I really look forward to my friends and family losing credibility in me,” or that “I’m stigmatized. I’m outside of the good graces of the church, or my friends, or the sacramental life, the liturgical life.”

And how do you not let your heart get hardened? I don’t have that strict, universal line, but I can tell you it’s a temptation. And it’s something that I had to work on, teetering back between hatred, heartache. Healing, hatred, heartache, and constantly asking and saying “Well, I went to confession. I went to a healing retreat. I felt fine, but why is there still these kind of roots deep down inside?” Rumors, slander, feeling, you know, stupid and stunned, and selected by God to go through trials and tribulations is not a fun journey. Low self-esteem, depression, all of these things can face any of us.

You know, there is this quote that I always kind of struggled with that a priest and priests in general would say on retreats and as I would travel about. I think it was about Saint Augustine looking at a man who was in the gutters, drunk, and I think just... I think he might have known him and just had this, you know, kind of a sinful life, and he said “But for the grace of God, there go I.” He looked at this sinful man and said “If it wasn’t for God’s grace, I would be in this man’s shoes.” And that’s one of the gifts of the sufferings that I experienced and went through in my own life, is that now I was in other people’s shoes, and I didn’t want to be in their shoes.

But this contradiction of our faith, of the bloodied Christ on the crucifix, while I have spent time in other communities of faith that really believed of not having a crucified corpus on the cross, I have come to fall in love with, and it was through my experience – not theory, but through tests, trials, and tribulations, and the experience of that unique aspect of our faith, and how we express it through the crucified Christ. For it is in experiencing a trial that we become, and we have the opportunity to become more united with Christ.

When we see that that’s the love that the Father had for us, when we realize and see that He who had no sin made Himself sin for us, who took on the life of the human, of man, and His beard was plucked, He was beaten and spit upon, and He felt all of these things that the human experience has. He did that, and He took on Himself our burden so that He could then take us to His life, that life in Christ, that grace-filled life. It can be instant, it can be immediate, and I hope that that’s your experience. I can only pray that I’m the only one who has struggled.

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This is to weave into part 3 that got caught off. I can only pray that I'm the only one who has gone through these struggles, that I'm the only one who has carried this cross, and that somehow the scriptures can be fulfilled in other people's lives of carrying their cross, and it's just... it's not like this. It doesn't involve challenging the esteem, the mind, the body, the humiliation and suffering. But I have my experience where I'm not the only one. I have seen it, I have heard it, I've got that wild notion that there's at least 2 or 3 of us. Maybe you. I know there's thousands of us as a matter of fact. As a matter of fact, I think it's all of us, but only some of us are willing to talk about it.

And in sharing, there is great healing that we can receive. Some of us share just to chit chat about it, and to... what do they say, right? Where, you know, misery loves company. But in carrying this cross, in living the life of faith, the human life, but with faith, we can endure. I know that it is a special grace that we have in our faith to embrace and to deal with the challenges of life and of suffering. I pray that in some way, shape, or form it can be alleviated for you. But more importantly, that the grace can be infused into your life to take that cross on, that fitness, that cross-fitness, to give it to God, and let God make the most of a difficult or challenging, broken past. Stay tuned as we continue on this wonderful and blessed retreat to strengthen ourselves, and to do great good for the glory of God. Now let us bow our heads in prayer.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as we wrap up this session. Almighty God, I offer You these words, this time, the reflection points to guide us in our journey here. Alleviate, yet strengthen us. Fill us with grace to carry not only the burdens that we have, but more, that we may turn these into something good, something great for Your glory and for our sanctification. I offer You all those, especially those in most need of Your mercy throughout the world, in our lives, and us, for ourselves, oh Lord. I ask for all the graces of heaven, through the intercession of Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.