

Homily 1-18-15 (Foreground vs Background) Lindsay

This past week I was at a retreat. The retreat master was a good friend of St Peter's, Abbot Jerome of Subiaco. The retreat was excellent. It was so good that I have stolen an idea from the abbot that I'm going to share with you. The idea is this: each one of us lives our life on a dual plane, that is, with a foreground and a background. This isn't about time, with the foreground being what's in the future and the background is what is in the past. It is a little more complicated than that. Our foreground is immediate life. What are we having for dinner? The kids have get to practice for football or baseball or volleyball. I have to pay the bills. What is the weather going to be like tomorrow? I've got to file my taxes. Grocery shopping. And so forth.

Background on the other hand is more permanent. Your faith. Your prayer life. Going to a museum. Reading a good book. Learning a foreign language. Even seeing a classic movie could be background. Going on a pilgrimage is background. Attending a class is definitely background. Developing an appreciation of music is background.

Foreground stuff cannot be avoided, it must be dealt with. You can't say, 'I'm not going to worry about dinner tonight, I'm working on my background.' That's silly. Even though that does sound nice. No, the kids have to be gotten

ready to go to school, meals have to be prepared, we have to go to work, life has to be lived. Very, very few of us have the luxury of renouncing all our foreground and devoting ourselves exclusively to background. We just celebrated the feast day of St Anthony of the Desert. He's one of the few people that I've ever read of that had a life almost exclusively background with hardly any foreground. He devoted himself almost 100% to a life of prayer with hardly a thought for anything else. They say St Anthony had a mind that allowed him to hear things and then refer to them later in his mind like a book. So, he could go to Mass and then remember the readings and then quote them later. But even St Anthony had to eat. And eating is definitely foreground.

Our struggle is to look for ways to shrink our foreground and expand our background. This is the path to growth and maturity. There are many people whose existence is almost 100% foreground with no background at all. Their entire focus is on merely surviving, just getting through the day without getting in trouble with a boss or a spouse or a bill collector. So life is reduced to a nightmare of simply putting out fires every day, managing one crisis after another. The rock group Pink Floyd put it very well many years ago, 'Hanging on in quiet desperation'. Without an interior life, a life of inner resources existence can become a drag, purposeless. And it is exhausting. In later life

when foreground is blessedly reduced there is opportunity to expand background. But if there never has been the habit of trying to expand background then there can be a frantic panic of trying to fill the empty hours. This can lead to gossip and meddling and endless TV watching.

The answer is, of course, to expand our background and try to shrink our foreground. Now, I am very sensitive to people who would reply to me, 'That's fine and good for you, Father. You're a priest. No kids, no mortgage. Maybe you can afford to live a life of contemplation and thinking deep thoughts, but I can't. I have to live in the real world.' The point is well taken. One of the many blessings of being a priest is that many of my foreground things are also background things. When I write a homily, for example. I'm not saying have NO foreground and ONLY have background. But I am saying each of us need SOME background and we need to reduce the foreground. The broader and more varied our background, the happier we will be. Each of us needs time for ourselves to nurture our background in order to be a happier, more well rounded, more mature person. Take some time to develop the habit of reading. Read something that is a little above you, something that makes you stretch. Spend a little more time in prayer. Be curious about the Faith. Just don't come to Mass because it's a sin not to. Come to Mass to listen to the readings. Actually listen closely to Mass. Actually concentrate on the Creed.

Ask yourself this question: aside from it being a sin to miss Mass, what would I be missing if I missed Mass? If the answer is 'nothing' then there is a problem. The problem is probably too much foreground and not enough background.

Remember, it is never a waste of time to learn and grow. I think God gave us a mind to use. He gave us a world, and indeed a whole universe to explore and delight in and wonder about. Asking questions about our faith, other people's faith, the world and everything in it should be a joy. Finding the answers or searching for the answers should be a large part of our lives.