People with Plates

“Hey folks, how are we doing tonight? Can I start you off with something to drink?”

It was the same every time I went to a restaurant: the same greeting, the same server. I avoided conversation because it made me feel uncomfortable, and outside of a “thanks,” I never took time to fill out any surveys or write any notes that reflected my experience at the restaurant, let alone my experience with the server, because, well, what was her name again?

I didn’t engage with waiters and waitresses, partially because it was awkward, but mostly because I was apathetic. Names didn’t matter when all I wanted was a cheeseburger. But this all changed when I became the waitress. When I started working in restaurants four years ago I did it merely as a summer job, but the experience opened my eyes to the world behind the swinging doors. Far from being nameless people who can only say “Welcome to Ruby Tuesday!” waiters are as diverse (and colorful) as their tattoos; they have very real hopes, fears, sufferings, and joys. I shared a schedule with and found friends in drop-outs, single mothers, drug addicts, and MMA fighters. As I began to feel what Tara felt, and to see what Dan saw, I was able to know them as more than just people who could bring me my third iced tea. Before, I hadn’t treated them as people at all. They were simply a means to an end, a channel by which I got what I wanted, some sort of genie of fettuccine alfredo. But this Italian-food-fairy is raising two sons on her own, and that chocolate-cake-channel wants nothing more than to go to college.

“Well, they chose to do this,” some think. “I don’t know them, and I’m not here to be their friend.” Fair enough, but the simple acknowledgement of their humanity is meaningful. Since being on the other side of the table, I’ve come to know both the joy of a simple smile and the embarrassment of disregard—things which waiters don’t merit just because they bring extra breadsticks, but because they are people, too. They have thoughts and feelings, even if all I can think about and feel is how much my stomach hurts.

When I go to a restaurant, I probably won’t fill out anything that reads, “How was your service? We strive for fives!” And I’m not going to give the girl a 50% tip because she put up with grating that much cheese onto my plate. Christian charity isn’t about extravagant tips or heart-to-hearts with your waitress; it starts with a recognition of the other person’s dignity and taking a moment to look beyond ourselves. Just because I remember Jenna’s name doesn’t mean she’s going to have a great shift. All the same, I will give her a genuine smile and look her in the eyes when I thank her.

Emily Hurd
An Encounter with Christ

“I belong to Communion and Liberation (CL) – it’s a movement in the Catholic Church.” After I share this important fact about myself with someone, I usually get a hesitant “OK...” accompanied by a confused look, even from Catholics. There seems to be a general lack of awareness about the meaning and purpose of modern ecclesial movements, though they are growing quickly in number and size. Now with Opus Dei, Focolare, Neocatechumenal Way, Regnum Christi, and many others, I find that it is important to understand what a movement is and why it matters. Theoretical explanations are easy to google (and I encourage you to do so), but here I would like to share a bit of my own experience.

CL finds its origins in a providential encounter between the Holy Spirit and now Servant of God, Fr. Luigi Guussani, when he ran into some high school students on a train. He realized that they knew the catechism but had no awareness of faith’s relevance to life. Guussani, therefore, gave up a prestigious job at the best seminary in Italy and went to teach high school religion. From there, students began to congregate around him, and the movement was born. Interestingly, CL also reached me when I was in high school. I was studying the Creed and the Catechism, and I had many questions which amounted to, basically, “How do I know that what I say I believe is true?” A few months later I was invited to a CL retreat for high schoolers entitled, “The Journey to Truth is an Experience.” I was blown away by the title alone, which proposed that the only way to come to certainty is through the experience of an encounter with the Truth, and not through a discourse or a doctrinal argument. Immediately I knew that I belonged with these people who spoke of Christ and faith in a way that completely corresponded to my questions.

What attracted me and thousands of people around the world to follow Christ and the Church through CL? Fr. Guussani emphasized certain truths in a way that fascinated us. He taught that to have faith is the apex, not the negation, of reason, and that faith is the fulfillment of my human heart with all of its desires, needs, and brokenness. He showed that Jesus of Nazareth is a concrete event, present now in the unity of a people – the Church and, for me, the friendship of the movement. He argued that only in encountering Christ can I be truly human and truly live. Of course, Guussani didn’t make these things up. Rather he re-proposed the tradition of the Church in a way that spoke to me and the modern world, much like St. Francis or St. Dominic did for the medieval world.

Why is it important that I belong to a movement? First of all, I didn’t decide to be part of CL. Rather, Christ chose to meet me through the movement. Therefore, to follow Him and the Church, I follow CL. He has reached other people through different movements or simply through their parishes. In this I see that the incarnation is a real phenomenon – Christ takes flesh in a place. Guussani said that a movement, or a “charism,” is “a particular way in which the fact of Jesus Christ, the God-man, reaches me, and through me can reach others.” This does not contradict other methods of following the Church. As Pope Francis said when he met with the ecclesial movements, if “we let ourselves be guided by the Spirit, richness, variety and diversity never become a source of conflict, because he impels us to experience variety within the communion of the Church.”

I am so grateful that I belong to Communion and Liberation. It is true that the Christian event, lived in communion, is the foundation of man’s authentic liberation.

Annie Thompson

CLU (Communion and Liberation at the University) is present at UST. CLU is primarily a community of friends that follows CL. We help each other face all the circumstances of our daily lives as students. We work, we study, we eat, we feel excited, we feel depressed, we do stupid things, we do great things, and we sleep. What does it mean, in our banal, daily existence, to give our life to Jesus? How does Christ make himself present in our homework, our personalities, or our free time? Together we strive to answer these questions.
About a month ago, I attended the first Catholic Edge of the school year, a get-together sponsored by Catholic Studies meant to stimulate conversation and intellectual consideration of an “edgy” issue. The first Edge’s theme was that of Art and the Media. One of the questions considered was, “As Catholics, should we watch movies which contain objectionable content, such as nudity or cursing?”

This question came to mind recently when I watched Good Will Hunting (1997) and Silver Linings Playbook (2012), two R-rated movies. Both films contain a great deal of swearing (including taking the Lord’s name in vain multiple times), some disturbing violence, and sexual encounters and references. However, both films also serve to chronicle the pain of a life devoid of forgiveness, real love and redemption. Both movies follow their differently-gifted protagonists as they undergo counseling and gain some self-knowledge and healing. I would argue that the journeys are valuable viewing material, despite the explicit content. I’ll focus in on my favorite of the two, Good Will Hunting.

It’s kind of shocking I had never seen Good Will Hunting before this past month; it had always been on my “to-watch” list, but had somehow never reached the point of check-off. I was interrupted the first time I attempted to watch it, left with maybe the last thirty minutes unseen. If you watch the movie, I recommend you view it in its entirety.

Here’s a quick summary: Will Hunting (actor Matt Damon), is a genius working as a janitor at M.I.T. He spends his non-janitorial hours cruising through Boston and hitting up bars with his dissolute pals (including Ben Affleck’s character, Chuckie Sullivan). When Prof. Gerald Lambeau (Stellan Skarsgård) discovers Will’s gifts, he decides to back him, no matter the cost. It turns out that the cost involves some probation, math work, and counseling. As Will begins a relationship with Skylar (Minnie Driver), and attends counseling with Sean Maguire (Robin Williams), he faces serious life questions he can no longer avoid.

I’m not a fan of spoiling plotlines, and definitely not the end of any film. So, with the Catholic Edge discussion in mind, I would like to offer the top 10 positive things I saw in the movie. You can watch it for yourself and see if you agree:

1) The swearing and violence are largely presented as disordered, not as behavior to emulate.
2) Sex is often presented as something that is cheaply underrated when used casually and something that is truly beautiful in marriage.
3) It’s intriguing to see Will consider why he is so gifted and what his gifts are for.
4) Will and his friends, while their friendship doesn’t seem to be based on much initially, do have a camaraderie and an ultimate willing of the other’s good. Also, Prof. Lambeau and Sean’s friendship is important to consider, as well as Will and Skylar’s dating relationship.
5) The movie offers a positive and realistic portrait of counseling. It is presented in all its difficulties and awkwardness (it’s not easy to put your life history on the table), but as a fruitful experience if entered with trust.
6) God is acknowledged in a positive way a couple of notable times.
7) Both plagiarism and lies are dismissed as being harmful and not worthwhile.
8) The lake scene. Watch it, you’ll know what I mean.
9) Some of the most poignant and meaningful moments of the film involved discussing what a good marriage is. Beautiful.
10) I think the most worthwhile movies are ones in which we see characters grow and thereby grow with them. This is one of those movies.

As a disclaimer, this is by no means a perfect film. There are things I wish hadn’t been included, which came across as intense, crude or simply unnecessary. However, I also think there is a great deal of good to be gained by thinking through the depth of its themes and lessons. To take a cue from the title, it can literally take a hunt to find that good will, but one that I think is more than worthwhile.

Lisa Weir

O us from this same fate deliver

Aesop tells a story of a canine proud,  
His understanding blinded by a lusting shroud,  
Who didst his dinner to a shadow forfeit.  
O us from this same fate deliver!

There is a girl with many a-gift endowed, Whom,  
though tasting life, shadows likewise becloud.  
Having what she has, she is the greater culprit.  
O us from this same fate deliver!

Is there a cure for those whose deafness be thus loud?  
Tell me, do the heavens pity this straying crowd,  
Who, in fleeing light, run toward the lands frostbit?  
O us from this same fate deliver!

O Prince who didst, to save, bare sins upon the gibbet,  
Us from this same fate deliver!

Hannah Polsky

The Signature is a student publication that strives to engage the University of St. Thomas community in a critical exploration of issues of faith and everyday life. While it is sponsored by the Department of Catholic Studies, the content and opinions of this newsletter do not purport to represent the views of faculty or a majority of students in this department. Comments, questions, and editorial responses are accepted and appreciated and should be directed to the student editor.

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