

My friends in Christ, there is a rather odd temptation to which I feel I must confess. Not in the sacramental sense, of course! Or else, I would certainly not be sharing any of this with you right now! But all the same...a very strange (yet certainly very troubling!) temptation...the temptation of being absolutely *convinced*...that nothing matters. And there is an *ism* for that: nihilism – that is, the *ism* that believes in *nothing*. There is *nothing* after this life; this life is *all* there is; this life is as good as it gets. And therefore, I have no reason whatsoever to be committed to any cause, or to believe in *anything*, or to believe that anything matters, or to have *any* confidence that there are such things as good and evil, right and wrong.... And so, if nothing matters, and if my actions do not matter, and there is no consequence at all to any of my actions (good *or* evil, right *or* wrong) because there truly is *nothing* after *this* life...then why should I bother? Why should I care? Like Qoheleth in the Book of Ecclesiastes, I, too, am sometimes very tempted to believe that everything is just so much vanity and a chasing after the wind...pointless...useless...utterly without meaning....

The end. Please rise for the Creed! (Just kidding, of course!)

Let me pause right there for a moment, and I will return later on to my crisis of faith. If we would reflect upon the grand scheme of things, then we would realize that there are only two things in the end: *God*...or *not-God*; Heaven...or *not-Heaven*; life everlasting...or *not-life* everlasting; or as Frank Sinatra once famously crooned, “all or nothing at all.” And for all of the manifold gradations of things (and these days, it seems that even *gender* can be laid out on a graded slope!)...for all of the various degrees in which we can find ourselves, like the infinity of colors in the light spectrum...for all of our gray areas (and evidently, there are fifty shades of gray)...as I say, in the end, there remain only these two possibilities: God or *not-God*. And *this* is the challenge, that we want so desperately to choose God...and yet, for *me* anyway at times, how *frighteningly* easy it is to be tempted to choose *not-God*.

Yet so it goes; for the last half a year or so, I have at times found myself faced with that very strange and insidious temptation to choose the *not*-God option; I have been tempted by nihilism.

Last year when Peter was with us, we had an evening with the Bishop along with priests and seminarians for Family Faith Formation to have a panel discussion about seminary and the vocation to the priesthood. It was a great night. One of the questions asked of us during the Q&A was what some of our favorite activities and hobbies are. And Peter said, “Well it may be hard to believe, but I am a marathon runner.” And the room erupted with laughter, mostly from Peter, who went on to say, “Actually, the only time I stand up to move is so that I can sit down somewhere *else!*” Now *that* is funny, I think...but looking back at that now, and given my temptation to nihilism, I now start to wonder, what if that were *true*? What if I only do things so as to do *other* things? I work my job just to make money, and I make money just to buy things to consume and then they are consumed, pay for things that amuse me for the moment and then they end. And do I do *that*? And what if I only do *anything*...just to numb myself? Just to distract myself from the utterly horrifying finality of the great and all-devouring *nothing* that awaits us all and, in the end, claims us all (along with everything else besides)? Because in the end, what if *nothing* is all there is? Void!

How many people there are who live their lives this way, doing only what they *have* to do (as *minimally* as possible) so as to *maximize* time and resources to do what they *want* to do; and what they *want* to do is nothing more than eat, drink, and be merry – for tomorrow, we die. Because I can eat, drink, and party right *here*...or I can spend a couple thousand dollars and fly down to Bermuda so as to eat, drink, and party *there* instead! Again, as Qoheleth would say, this is vanity, a chasing after the wind...meaningless...pointless...nothing...void.

And again, it has been frighteningly easy for me to be tempted to this; as I say, this is such a strange and insidious temptation because unlike just about every other temptation that asserts itself

against our fallen, broken human condition, *this* one gives me no pleasure. *Zero*. In fact – quite the opposite: it only fills me with horror and despair.

This is the *not-God* option.

Fortunately, there is also the God option. God weeps with us when we are tempted by the *not-God* option of nihilism because God has already given us all that we could ever *need*, all that we could ever *want*, to help us to be confident in choosing the God option, and yet the temptation for otherwise remains so strong...and God *knows* it and weeps.

What *has* God given us? What *have* we been given that we can be confident in choosing the God option? Well, for one, we have all kinds of proofs for the existence of God. I shall offer only two proofs for our consideration.

The first: the argument from causality. This comes to us from Saint Thomas Aquinas, and it goes like this.... I am here. But *why* am I here right now? What is it that *caused* me to be here? I woke up this morning. Why? Because I slept last night. Why? Because I was tired. Why? Well, because I worked all day yesterday. Why? Because that is what priests do.

But why am I a priest at all? Because I was ordained a priest. Why? Because I was called to be a priest and I discerned, and the Church agreed with me that I am called. Why? Because when I was born, God had a plan for me, for my life.

But why was I born? Because when a man and a woman love each other very much.... But why were *they* born? And where did *their* parents come from? And where did the *first* humans come from? And where did the *world* come from? And where did the *galaxy* come from? And where did the *universe* come from? And where did the Big Bang come from?

And so on. The two-year-old's classic barrage of questions "why" reflects the yearning that *all* of us have to know what caused it all. Why is there *something*...instead of *nothing*? What can only be the ultimate answer to these questions "why" is this: there *had* to be – *has* to be – an "Uncaused

Cause,” something that started it all which itself did not need starting – a cause which itself did not need a cause. And this Uncaused Cause: *that* is what we call “God.”

The second proof for the existence of God: the teleological argument. This is put forward by Father Robert Spitzer, former president of Gonzaga University.

The teleological argument for God’s existence is a fascinating account of how the values of the physical constants of the universe (gravity, the strong nuclear force, the weak nuclear force, and the electromagnetic force) are *very* fine-tuned to allow the universe to exist as it does (galaxies rather than black holes). These constants are set *perfectly* so that the production of our universe along with our life could even be possible. And the smallest change with any *one* of them would be enough to prevent life, the universe, and everything from ever *possibly* developing in the first place. And these constants *have* never changed, nor *will* they ever change. They do not evolve; they are truly *constant*.

And now here is the crux of the matter. The atheistic arguments would have us believe that all of this came about purely by *chance*. But the probability of those constants being set *just exactly* to what they needed to be in order to support life, the universe, and everything as we know it...that is, the utterly staggering odds that all of this just *happened* to come about *by chance*.... Astrophysics have calculated those odds, and the mathematics of it all concludes that the odds are (approximately) ten raised to the tenth power raised to the thirtieth power.... Now *that* is a *gigantic* number! And if that number were printed, each zero typed in twelve-point font...then the entire expanse of the known universe would not be large enough to contain that number. Conclusion: it is *far* more reasonable and *far* more probable that everything came to be because God made it, *not* because of *chance*.

But perhaps that is all so much high theology, confusing philosophy, and tricky math. So be it; then look no further than the written testimony of answered prayers, posted on our parish prayer boards; and look no further than your *own* personal experience of answered prayers; look no further than the fruits of the Holy Spirit manifested in those whom we know to be strong and confident in

their faith in God; look no further than miracles witnessed, miracles experienced, miracles that defy the laws of physics and everything that we know about medical science.

To that end, look no further than blind Bartimaeus in our Gospel text from Saint Mark. He was blind, but then God the Son came along so that *now* he could see. A medical miracle! But does anyone actually think that Bartimaeus came out of that experience – having been blind but now can see – and after that was ever tempted by *nihilism*? Did he ever wonder if God may not actually exist after all? Of course not! God was *there*! God healed him!

In conclusion then.... There *are* times of darkness, doubt, and despair when we are tempted to think that God is not real...tempted by nihilism (the *not*-God option). And there *is* a remedy for such times, a medicine to soothe that suffering to help us get by until our faith is strong again. It is not a *proof*, like what we considered earlier...but it *does* help; it *is* a remedy (for *me*, anyway); and this remedy is called “Pascal’s Wager.” Either God or *not*-God; and either we believe or *not* believe. If we believe, yet God does *not* exist...oh well; what did we really *lose* for believing? And yet, if God *does* exist, then we will have *gained*...*everything*.... If we do *not* believe and God does *not* exist...well, what did we really *gain* for *not* believing? But if God *does* exist...then we will have *lost*...*everything*!

And so given the options presented to us in Pascal’s Wager: which do we choose? I hope that what we choose is faith; for faith is a noun *and* a verb (like love). Faith the noun: the content of what we believe. And faith the verb: *to* believe (the *will* and the *choice* to believe). And *I* for one *choose* faith; I *choose* to believe in one God; I *choose* the God option. Thus I hope and pray for us all.