**NOVENA OF GRACE. March 3, 2022 St. Ignatius**

Novena Theme: **Trust in the slow work of God; God’s love never fails.**

**DT. 30:15-20:** **Chose life,** **then, that you and your descendants may live. LK 9:22-25: Save your life, lose your life. Lose your life, save your life.**

**1.Beginnings:**

At one time in my life, I directed a Street Drop In Center, Nativity House, in the then-skid row of Tacoma. We had a big Sunday morning breakfast, our guests seated in the run-down chairs. After breakfast, I celebrated Mass, all invited to stay, just no smoking during Mass.

During what I thought was one of my more brilliant homilies a young street guy stood up in the middle of it all, folded his arms r, and asked, “So, what’s the point, Father?” I told him I was getting to the point, just be patient. And then I started laughing because I thought of how many times I’ve wanted to stand up in the middle of some loser homily and ask the same question.” What is the point?

In case anyone is tempted this morning: here is the point. We are, in the words of Moses in the first reading in the part of the process of **“Choosing Life.”** The Novena is a time a time in the midst of our lives to choose life, choosing to grow again trusting in the slow **work of God’s grace**. That long reach of God’s grace has brought us to this point. There comes a time when one must take oneself into one’s arms and the point of the Novena is we are taking ourselves into our own arms before God, choosing that which is life, and doing so because we know that over the years God has continued to call us to grow, to choose life.

**2. The Living Bridges**.

The Novena a moment of growth in the long process of growth and trust. It takes time, this business of life. We come into a Novena with a history and our purpose of being here and our prayers for ourselves and others is part of the long process of growth.

This process of growth, of God working God’s love in us reminds of me of the **living root bridges** of northeast India, deep in the rain forest. During the rainy season the rivers and streams to become furious and destructive, impossible to cross by foot. Bridges were perennially washed out. Inhabitants tried to devise ways to overcome the issues of crossing such speedy rivers and streams, of building bridges that might endure. Then, elders devised a plan of building living root bridges. They began to guide the aerial roots of rubber trees on either side of the river-- Aerial roots are **roots that grow on the above-ground parts of a plant** and function as anchors, affixing the plant to supporting structures—they began to guide these roots across the river until their ends would meet somewhere in the middle. The roots gradually grew longer and stronger, intertwining together in a manner that provided stability for a walkable bridge. Depending on the distance, the bridges take 15 to 30 years to grow. These living root bridges grow stronger with time.

**3. We are living bridges**. The Living Bridges are a metaphor for the slow growth of our lives, millions of moments when we are choosing life. Moments of the slow work of God **in**:

our life before God,

*in our relationships with people who help us to grow*,

and in our commitments in serving God through one another.

**A. Our living bridge is the story of God in my Life**:

Dorothy Day, the great Catholic activist, reflecting on her adult conversion to Catholicism, said that she always **“had a sense of being followed, of being desired; a sense of hope and expectation**.” When we think back on our history with God, our history beats in us like a second heart, reminding us of the moments we had a sense of God’s presence, of God following us, of desiring us. Going south on Interstate 5, just after crossing over from Oregon to California, one begins to see the flanks of Mt. Shasta, and then, coming around a bend, we see the Mountain in all its beauty. Our life is like that with God, gradually knowing God, conscious of the One who desires us. Even now. Sometimes this occurs when we in front of the ocean, sometimes watching people come back from communion. Sometimes in the silent hours before dawn. In it all God makes God’s self present. We do not come to grace; grace comes to us. We sense and trust that *God’s will is devoted to the growth of our individual human spirit*. Like now. The Psalmist says:

***It was you who created my inmost self,***

***And put me together in my mother’s womb.***

***For all these mysteries I thank you.***

***For the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works****.* (PS.139)

**B. Our Living bridge is the story of God’s gift of people in my life.**

The Living bridge of life is built too with God’s gift of people in our lives. People who have been with us, formed us, loved us, helped build our bridge to grow strong. Recently I received a book from a longtime friend; beyond a friend, who once worked with me as the Jesuit Volunteer on the streets. I officiated at her wedding. We are close. She wrote: “I am sending this book to you just because I love you.” One grows in that kind of enduring love shared over the years. I was once visited in a refugee camp by the local Ugandan Bishop; we had been friends since my earlier arrival in northern Uganda. I was sick with malaria. He sat next to my bed, held my hand, and consoled me, telling me how much the people I served loved me. One grows in the presence of that kind of enduring love. He helped build the Living Bridge of my life. Africans use the word, Ubuntu, a Zulu word, which is about the universal bond of people: *I am because you are, you are because I am.* The living bridge of our lives is built in part by ubuntu. In the presence of others, we learn to trust the beauty of our lives as they increase in life and love.

**C. Our Living Bridge is the story of our commitments to service.** Jesus said: **In so far as you have done it to the least of my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me*.*** (MT.25***)*** It is in the service of others that we unleash the slow growth of God’s love and presence. We have found that we, like the Good Samaritan, are the hands and head and heart of God in bringing truth and love and goodness and justice and mercy to others. Our very existence depends upon jumping into the ditch with the wounded man, like the Good Samaritan. Our living bridge is built by commitments of service. Others teach us this. Once, I was a community organizer with a team of Jesuits, in poor east and west Oakland. We organized neighborhoods to fight everything from slum landlords to a corrupt city administration. The person who influenced me the most, was a neighborhood woman named Lucille Holloway, she was like a sister and a mother and mentor for me. She was a leader of her poor East Oakland neighborhood. One day she, with a group of angry neighborhood people, and myself, went to San Francisco and confronted the speculating owner of several vacant, rat and roach-filled houses in her East Oakland neighborhood. It was against the law to leave vacant housing unattended. Lucille challenged the man and, in her anger, told him that the protesting neighborhood would be at his office, at his church, at his residence until he did either removed or fixed up the vacant housing. I stood there, shaking in the new knowledge of what righteous indignation looked like. Her heart became a gift from God, becoming one of the great roots of the living bridge of my life, a root that helped me understand injustice and the neglect of the poor. In serving the people Lucille, was a force of goodness and truth telling. Her fierce belief in service help me understand that God calls us to become living bridges for others. Bridges to understand that:

(It is) ***Better to be generous rather than to be selfish.***

***Better to be Compassionate rather than self-absorbed.***

***Better to be just rather than unjust.***

***Better to love without cost rather than to play life safe.***

***Better to walk our talk rather than to whine from the sidelines.***

**4. Conclusion:**

The point of this Novena is to take ourselves into our own arms and place our heart before God. It is a time to recognize the interior bridge of our lives built through the slow work of God **in our hearts**, and **in the gifts of people**, **and in the call to serve**.

We are not perfect. We are sinners. Our bridge is, in some spots, craggy, aged and gnarly, but it is built over time and therefore has **its own singular beauty.** We are a work of love, loved to life over time. Our hope is that this Novena will be a moment in the time of growth where our love affair with God is grows more intimately. Paul had this same hope when he wrote to the Ephesians:

***"This, then, is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every family, in heaven or on earth, takes its name, may God give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, with all God's saints you will have the strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; so that, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond knowledge, you may be filled with the utter fullness of God. Glory be to God whose power working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Amen*** *(EPH. 3:14-21Bottom of Form*