

THE BVM

As I have shared with you before, I was born right in Boston and spent my entire youth in a solidly middle class, aspirational suburb just on the edge of the city. My Father was a World War II veteran and an insurance salesman, and my Mother was a transplant from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. They were quietly and diligently hopeful, and they were steadily working on some kind of modest respectability, upward mobility, good education, and social formation for my brother, my sister, and me. And like many such suburbs then (and no doubt now), the all-white town was essentially segregated, not so much along racial lines (since there were no races to segregate in that all-white town) but along religious lines. There was clearly a “Protestant” side of town and there was clearly a “Catholic” side of town, though of course that was never overtly stated or so named. On the one hand, there were gigantic and bursting Episcopal, Lutheran, and Methodist parishes, and on the other hand there were two even more massive and more fully jammed Catholic churches. Lastly, tucked down by Route 128 there was a so-called “Jewish Neighborhood” to round out the ecclesiastical apartheid then firmly in place.

Though we all crossed paths in the public schools I attended, in many other ways the various twains rarely if ever met. There were the Masons and there were the Knights of Columbus and there was Hillel. There was DeMolay and there was the CYO, especially prominent in youth sports. There was The Junior League and there was the Ladies Sodality and there was Hadassah. All did good work, in their own limited way, with their own audience if you will, but rarely if ever did we intersect or interact. And quite frankly, it being the mid-1960s or thereabouts, no one seemed to think much about it.

One of my enduring memories from that boyhood and from that town was the strange, almost secretive language that we used, as a kind of mockery or as an identifier. I won't go into

all of that here, parts of which are so disgraceful and shameful and evil in retrospect that it is breathtaking even to think about. But there was also one enduring, physical symbol which shaped me forever and which, as I will get to in a moment, very much shapes me to this day: Quite frequently, in and around the so-called 'Catholic neighborhoods', there would be a small garden or mini grotto, or perhaps just a stand-alone statue. You've seen them. They were extremely common in metropolitan Boston back then and perhaps still are now - white statues or statuettes of the Virgin Mary, protected or covered by a kind of arch or apse, almost always light blue in color, and almost always, in some way, lit up at night or even during the day. In our most sneering and derisive way, we kids (and not a few parents) referred to these as "Mary on the Half Shell." We snickered a lot, and thought ourselves clever and superior, but in the end, it was, and it is Mary who had and who still has the last laugh.

And then there came the great, exciting, and to my parents' generation unnerving "ecumenical movement." Old walls slowly fell, old barriers slowly decayed, ancient and abiding prejudices got chipped away at. Local political offices changed, economic mobility made for neighborhood movement. Town Meeting and the Selectmen faced questions that were more complex, diverse, confusing at the time, and yet clearly reflecting a changing world. Vatican II had opened the Catholic Church to new liturgies, vernacular language, folk masses and acoustic music. The Episcopal Church faced the long overdue reality of fully including women. The Jewish Community were regularly and periodically brought into focus due to wars and conflict in the Middle East, the struggles of Israel, and the kids missing from school on High Holy Days such as Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. And while our prejudice and language and unspoken biases and foolish superstitions still reared their immature heads, there was no turning back. Whatever demonization of 'The Other', whatever false sense of superiority or chosenness, whatever unspoken bastions remained such as at the Tennis Club or The DAR, God was stirring a rich,

sumptuous, and ultimately delicious melting pot. And all of us were together now in the celestial kitchen.

To jump ahead, all of this came fully and widely and greatly to the fore when I finally left for seminary in the mid 1980s. And it was there that so much of this was not only studied but, much more importantly, it was lived. I went to a non-denominational divinity school and one of my singular joys during that often hard time was to arrive at class, in a new semester, a class on just about any subject, and to find myself sitting among other seekers and students and dreamers – not just Protestants of all stripes, but Catholics too. And Muslims, Jews, Pentecostals, hard core Evangelicals and millennialists. Charismatics, and tongue speakers, and Latin scholars, and Southern Baptists of every shape. Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Universalists, Christian Science. The whole of God's creation was there, and so was I. And one of the great, though mostly unspoken challenges, was to let go of any sense that my upbringing and my "churchmanship" (to use the old term) and my theology was somehow more right or better or more triumphant than anyone else's. It was a great, life changing time of both self-discovery and self-affirmation. It was here, of all unlikely places, that I explored my relationship with Jesus more deeply and more truly and more honestly than ever before, not least with the help of those whose experience and views were different from mine. It was precisely because I was in a complex world, a place where Christianity was not taken for granted or assumed to be the only answer, that I too had to let go of what I took for granted and to dig deeper in to what I could own, hold, trust, believe in, defend, and love. By myself and alone, I was always an expert; in and among the beautiful tapestry of others and of a wider world, a place where I was and am but one of 7 billion human beings, the unexamined life could not support, sustain, or save me.

Ultimately, in all of this, there was a winnowing. Yes, sometimes it felt like the fiery furnace of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. At other times I felt like Jonah, running from the

call of God. And still other times, I felt a surreal, otherworldly comfort in coming to terms with God's love and care for me, and with the truth that my path and my walk was just that – mine, alongside others. Always personal and yet never alone. Always with God, even when I tried my hardest not to let God into my life. But who did I come back to, over and over again? Yes, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and to one other person – yup, you've guessed it by now: I came back to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Why was that?

And so the question remains: To what was I returning? To whom? Was I running toward something or was I running away from something? And if so, from what? What was going on here?

All questions, yet to be reflected upon, soon enough.

~ Amen.

~ End of Part 1 ~